Brighter Days

by theshyauthor

Summary

It’s okay.

This is okay.

Jungkook feels soft next to him and Taehyung can smell his shampoo. The younger boy’s breath tickles his neck and somehow Taehyung finds comfort in all of it.

or: Taehyung has to sell his body for sex to survive on the streets of Seoul. That all changes when a client hears him sing in the shower one night and introduces him to none other than the CEO of BigHit Entertainment. As crazy as it sounds, Taehyung is now set to debut with a band called Bangtan Sonyeondan. Between being a trainee, learning to trust his new band members and trying to forget his old life, Taehyung thinks that he finally starts to understand what happiness is and how it feels.

Notes

For a Russian translation of this fic, go to https://ficbook.net/readfic/8222284
I've been working on this for quite a while now and I'm so excited to finally share it. First time writing for BTS, so that makes me quite nervous. Hope you enjoy. :) x
Chapter 1

Taehyung shivers, but that’s no surprise. It’s January, the coldest month of the year in Seoul, and the clothes he is wearing are really not appropriate enough to keep him warm. He’s just lucky that it’s not snowing today and that the wind isn’t too harsh, because nothing is more unpleasant than the stinging in his eyes, the burning of his ears and the prickling feeling under his skin when it warms up again after hours spent outside.

He’s not alone at his corner today. A woman too skinny and with too much make-up on her face is leaning against the streetlamp as well. Who is Taehyung to judge her appearance though? He’s also mostly skin and bones, ribs clearly visible even on days when he gets to eat plenty, and his eyes are heavily rimmed by eyeliner. She’s just as him, a lost soul waiting; for a car to get into, or maybe for a better life. Taehyung has given up all hope on the latter by now, and by the looks of it the woman near him has done so as well. But she had smiled at him when he approached and she’s no competition for him when it comes to his clients, so Taehyung allows her to stay. Besides, she’s good company when he ignores the symptoms of withdrawal she shows, talking to him about such trivial things as her favourite childhood movies. Taehyung has had those as well – favourite childhood movies – but his childhood is not something that he remembers fondly, so instead of answering he just listens and makes appropriate noises at the right time. It’s not often that he finds another prostitute that’s not hostile in this part of the city. Everyone here is fending for themselves, everyone is competition. Taehyung hopes that maybe she’ll stick around for a while. Maybe they could start looking out for each other. But when she shifts once, he sees the top she’s wearing slip up, revealing a gang tattoo just above the left side of her hips, and Taehyung recognizes it to be from one of the biggest gangs in Seoul. Between the gang and the drugs, he knows that she won’t be living much longer. He never got sucked into the gang life or the sweet relief of drugs, which means that for him there’s still a slither of hope to someday escape from this life. The woman, however, never stood a chance. But who’s he kidding? Although he likes to daydream about it some days, he knows that he doesn’t stand a chance either.

A black SUV with tinted glasses comes to a stop next to them. Taehyung knows who he will see inside before the window on the passenger’s side even rolls down. He recognizes that number plate by now, and the tension that’s been building up in his shoulders all night slowly starts to drain. Mr. Kim is a regular of his. He has a slimy grin, but he always takes Taehyung to nice hotel rooms – a luxury for a low-price prostitute like him – and treats him right. The bruises he leaves are few compared to some of Taehyung’s other regulars, and he takes his time for prepping. Taehyung’s job is a literal pain in the ass, but he knows that with this man he’ll get a nice tip if he puts enough effort into it and he’ll get treated somewhat gently.

The woman is starting to make her way over to the car, but Taehyung places a hand on her shoulder – ignores her slight flinch – and smiles at her apologetically as he says, “Sorry darling, but this one likes dick, or else he would be at home with his wife and two children.”

He gives her a final wave and moves over to the car. With this client there’s no negotiating necessary anymore. There’s no such thing as trust in this industry, Taehyung always has to have his guard up, but he knows Mr. Kim well enough to know that he’ll pay. And if he’s particularly nice and not in a rush, he might even let him use the shower in the hotel room after they’ve fucked.

“V,” the man greets him, “how have you been?”

Small talk, it’s something that Taehyung hates more than anything. Most of his clients do it out of nerves, but sometimes he thinks that this one genuinely cares about his week. That makes it even
worse. But Taehyung bites his tongue and turns to him, forces himself to smile widely. He lets his hand rest on the older man’s thigh, close to his crotch, and squeezes there lightly.

“So much better now that you’re here.” He keeps his voice low and sultry, because he knows this one doesn’t want him to play the innocent young boy. He might be young at the age of seventeen, but he’s anything but innocent.

His client laughs and Taehyung can see the way his trousers start to bulge.

“You know that flattery will get you anywhere.”

Taehyung laughs as well, but it sounds hollow to his ears. It always does.

They drive for half an hour to a better part of the city, and Taehyung keeps his hand on the other man’s crotch, has him squirming by the time they drive into the garage of the nice hotel his client has booked them in this time.

“I assume you still know the terms?” Taehyung asks lazily, and the man agrees while he hands him a long coat to cover up his clothes. It’s not entirely socially accepted to parade a prostitute through a hotel like this. Taehyung thinks to himself begrudgingly that he could have handed him the coat when he got into the car in the first place. He had been freezing after all and it hasn’t been too warm in here either.

“We’re on the twelfth floor, got a really nice view this time.”

Taehyung couldn’t care less, but he fakes enthusiasm anyway. He knows that this one likes when he pretends to care about the nice things he offers him, like the chocolate-covered strawberries that he knows will be waiting for him once he enters the hotel room. There are always chocolate-covered strawberries waiting, but to be honest Taehyung would prefer a steak with fries. Or maybe just fries. Anything really as long as he’d stop being hungry. Some pieces of fruit covered in chocolate just don’t do that job anymore. It’s cute though, the little crush that Mr. Kim harbours for him. Taehyung likes that he tries to impress him. It’s honestly flattering – or at least it would be if he wouldn’t pay Taehyung to fuck him ever so often. This isn’t ‘Pretty Woman’ after all and Mr. Kim won’t come up the emergency staircase with some flowers in his hand to sweep Taehyung off his feet. This is real life, and once they have fucked, Mr. Kim will return back to his fancy home with his fancy family, and Taehyung will return back to his small room with a shabby mattress and a dripping faucet. At least he has a room, doesn’t have to sleep in dark alleys anymore, hidden away behind trash containers and hoping that he’ll go unnoticed for the night. Prostitution is shitty, but at least it has given Taehyung the money to afford a somewhat safe place to stay.

He shrugs off his shirt as soon as he enters the room, and plops a cherry into his mouth as soon as he spots them displayed on a glass table. No strawberries this time then, Mr. Kim is getting more creative. Taehyung won’t lie, he enjoys the variation.

Knowing the routine by now, he makes his way over to the bathroom after he’s spit the pip into a trashcan. He’s going to take a shower now, and Mr. Kim will join him and prepare him, or maybe he’ll let Taehyung prepare himself and just watch. They’ll then move over to the bedroom. Mr. Kim is always very creative when it comes to fucking, so maybe he’ll spread him out on the bed, or the table, or maybe even the floor. He’s mentioned the view before, something that Taehyung hasn’t even noticed upon entering, so maybe he’ll bend him over with his hands pressed against the window glass and fuck him from behind while Taehyung can look outside. He thinks he’d like that, seeing the world from above for a while, the cars moving like toys and the people walking around like tin soldiers.
“Is this the reason why you weren’t at your corner three days ago, V?” Mr. Kim asks, and Taehyung has almost forgotten he’s in the same room as the man for a second, too caught up in his thoughts. Only almost, though, because Taehyung can’t afford to let his guard down like that. Never.

There’s a soft touch to his left shoulder blade, and Taehyung shrugs it off. He knows how his back looks like, has seen it in the broken mirror in his room. Angry rashes, purple bruises. It took him three days to recover enough to be able to move without the desire to scream. Three days of work that he has missed, of money that he desperately needs.

“What happened?” Mr. Kim prods, and Taehyung hates the sincerity in his voice that makes it sound like he actually cares.

“Nothing you need to be worried about,” he assures the CEO and gives him one of his bright smiles. His cheeks hurt with insincerity.

“We won’t have you lie on your back then today.” Mr. Kim is considerate. He’s an old man with an unhealthy crush on Taehyung, but at least he makes sure to take care of him. That’s more than Taehyung can say about every other person he knows.

He sheds the rest of his clothes and steps into the shower first. The temperature of the water is adjusted in seconds and he relishes in the feeling of warm droplets on his skin only for seconds. They sting on his back, but the small moment of pleasure is worth the pain. He takes a deep breath and closes his eyes, and for a moment he feels almost blissfully calm. That feeling is gone, however, when he feels two large palms settle on his hips, and he opens his eyes to watch droplets make their way down the white-tiled wall, trying not to shudder as he feels warm breath fan out against his neck.

Taehyung aches, but it’s okay. As expected, Mr. Kim didn’t treat him too harshly. At one point he even got on his knees to suck Taehyung off. Taehyung appreciates the gesture, but he fucking hates it. The only negative thing about this client is that he always wants Taehyung to come at least once as well, when Taehyung just wants to finish his job and be left in peace. It’s tiring, really. He doesn’t mind pretending that he enjoys whatever he’s doing, some clients even pay extra for that, but to force himself to actually enjoy it? Honestly there’s nothing that turns Taehyung on less than sex for money. Or sex at all, if he’s honest.

He’s been in the shower for a good ten minutes now. Mr. Kim said he could use it, that he doesn’t have to leave in a hurry, and Taehyung isn’t in a position to turn this offer down. The joke of a shower in his apartment only rarely offers warm water, and there’s no water pressure either. Besides, the generic soap and hair shampoo these fancy hotels provide smell ten times better than the cheap one Taehyung buys, and he likes to clean himself after a job. It’s not like he’ll ever actually feel clean again, just less dirty.

The hot water eases his muscles and he washes his hair twice with a big dollop of shampoo, blows the bubbles from the palm of his hands and watches them fall to the floor before being washed away into the drain. There’s a song stuck in his head that’s been on the radio when they were driving to the hotel. He starts humming it quietly, before raising his voice and belting out the lyrics. It’s kind of sad how something as simple as a hot shower in a clean bathroom can lift his mood enough to actually make him sing.

Another nice thing about bathrooms in a hotel are the towels. They are soft and fluffy, and Taehyung likes to wrap himself up in them like a burrito. The one he has in his room is old and falling apart at the seams, and he never really uses it, because it’s not really soaking up the water
from his skin, just spreading it. After blow-drying his hair and slipping on his clothes again, he
walks back into the bedroom and stretches himself, a pleased sound slipping over his lips. It’s more
for show for Mr. Kim, to show him that Taehyung is happy and content with their arrangement.
When he looks at his client though, there’s not appreciation for him reflected in his eyes like
usually, but a certain interest that makes Taehyung feel uncomfortable. Mr. Kim is dressed in his
expensive suite again, sitting on one of the two chairs by the glass table, the one that he hadn’t
fucked Taehyung on just earlier. Taehyung’s used to being looked at as if he’s a piece of meat, but
the gleaming look in his client’s eyes is different from what he’s used to, and he takes an uncertain
step back.

“You have a beautiful singing voice, V,” Mr. Kim says, and he sounds all business, so different
from the way he talked when he fucked into him just minutes ago.

“Thank you,” Taehyung replies, unsure of where this conversation is headed. He’s used to people
telling him that the way he moans is melodic, but his singing? People used to say he has a nice
voice, but it’s been so long since someone has heard him sing, let alone complimented him on
something that didn’t have to do with his profession.

“This might sound a bit strange, but there’s someone I want you to meet,” Mr. Kim says, his eyes
raking up and down Taehyung’s body in a way they never have before. Not hungry with lust, but
calculating in a different way that he can’t entirely put his finger on, “A friend of mine. A possible
future job for you.”

Taehyung wants to shoot the offer down. It sounds ominous, and he prefers to pick up his clients
himself. He’s about to deny the offer, because Mr. Kim’s change in manners really unsettles him,
when he hears the next words. „If you agree, I’ll double your price next time.”

Clamping his mouth shut, Taehyung curses mentally. That’s a lot of money, money that he could
really use. He could stash some of it away, or maybe treat himself to a proper meal. Money is what
makes Taehyung’s world spin round, so he really can’t shoot this offer down.

“Alright, I’ll meet your friend, but only if you tell me what this is all about.”
Taehyung still thinks that someone’s playing a joke on him. A very elaborate joke, but still a joke nonetheless. The expensive white dress shirt that hugs his upper body feels like heaven compared to the scratchy cheap clothes he usually wears, and although it fits him just well it feels too tight. Constricting. When he swallows he becomes aware of the collar, like a noose around his neck ready to pull tight at any moment. The pants he’s wearing are new and clean and they fit entirely right - his butt looks amazing in them - but they aren’t ripped and he’s not used to pants that aren’t tight enough to leave nothing to someone’s imagination. When he looks into the mirror, Taehyung can’t help but think that it’s not him he’s looking at. The person in the mirror must be someone else, with hair that’s perfectly styled and a golden bracelet around his left wrist. He looks like a pristine doll. The mirror image is a lie. He’s not even wearing that expensive coat yet that Mr. Kim has bought him and he already feels overdressed. He’s slowly starting to think that this might have been a very bad idea, but then he remembers the promise of money again. He really needs that money.

"You look incredible," Mr. Kim muses. He hasn’t been able to take his eyes off Taehyung ever since the young male changed into his new clothes, has been eyeing him like a hungry shark looks at its prey. He keeps his distance, however. It’s irritating and Taehyung doesn’t really know how to handle the presence of the older man in the room when he’s not supposed to please him.

Taehyung is supposed to meet Bang Si-hyuk tonight, the founder of Big Hit Entertainment. When Mr. Kim first told him about this, Taehyung had laughed, and for the first time in a while it had almost sounded genuine. Him meeting the founder of a record label? He knew that his voice wasn’t entirely bad, but it wasn’t that good either. The entire arrangement was suspicious. Even if he did meet this man and sing for him, what good would it do him? He’d be more likely to get a job in that company if he slipped on his knees and blew him under the dinner table, and Taehyung’s pretty sure that this is what’s going to happen tonight anyway. Mr. Kim probably just wants to impress this man, wants to garner a favour with him by presenting a whore that can somewhat sing. Taehyung is sure that the way his voice sounds when he sings wouldn’t be of importance tonight, the only thing that would count is the way he would moan.

_Do it for the money_, he reminds himself as he tugs on his shirt a final time before shrugging on the jacket while Mr. Kim reminds him to hurry up or else they’ll be late.
The meeting will take place at the restaurant of the hotel that Mr. Kim had brought Taehyung to to get ready for the meeting. It’s a high-class hotel, even fancier than all the other hotels Mr. Kim takes him to when they fuck. It makes him feel out of place, but he squares his shoulders and stares down anyone that dares to look at him for longer than a second. He’s not going to show that he feels intimidated by his surroundings. Weakness only gets one killed in this job.

A hostess takes Taehyung and Mr. Kim to a private room, and Taehyung’s stomach sinks. He was hoping to actually get a decent dinner out of this before having to get back to work, but he knows all too well how the private rooms at restaurants work. First, he’ll watch as the two men eat and talk, and then he’ll be presented as dessert.

Mr. Kim sits next to him, one hand resting on Taehyung’s thigh – too close to his crotch for comfort – and leans closer to whisper into his ear, such an unnecessary thing to do considering they are the only two people in the room. Taehyung knows that he’s just doing it to get closer to him, and has to suppress a shudder of disgust.

"My friend doesn’t exactly know your profession, so I’d be grateful if you keep it to yourself for now."

Taehyung hears those words, but he doesn’t really understand them. Is he supposed to be a surprise for the man then? He wants to ask, but before he has the chance to the door opens, revealing a man that looks to be in his early forties. He’s dressed in an expensive suite and wears a watch on his left wrist that looks like it costs more than all the things Taehyung possess at once. There’s a friendly smile on his face, which catches Taehyung off guard.

Taehyung bows deeply upon his entrance as Mr. Kim takes care of the introductions, introducing him as V. Of course he does, Taehyung never told him his real name. He’s not stupid enough to disclose that kind of information, never to a client.

"It’s a pleasure to meet you, V-ssi. I have heard a lot of good things about you from my dear friend."

Taehyung would love to give a sarcastic answer to that, but he bites his tongue. If Bang Si-hyuk doesn’t know about his profession, then Mr. Kim can’t have told him about how good Taehyung feels around someone’s cock or how skillful he is with his mouth. So instead he settles for a smile that he hopes looks bashful.

To Taehyung’s delight, he does get food. He gets to choose whatever he likes best from the menu, and once his eyes settle on the price he almost reconsiders eating anything. He’s never seen food priced so expensive before.

"Don’t be shy, order whatever you like. It will be my treat tonight," the boss of BigHit entertainment says when Taehyung stutters when ordering, and Mr. Kim looks delighted when he hears this.

When the food arrives, Taehyung almost feels guilty for eating it. Couldn’t he just ask the man to give him the money instead of paying for his meal? The amount of instant ramen he could buy with it would last him for a month. But it tastes delicious, better than anything Taehyung has eaten in a long time, and he can’t help but sigh with content. Blissful, that’s how he’s feeling right now. He’s so used to greasy cheap food that this truly tastes like heaven.

The two men converse with each other during dinner, while Taehyung mostly listens. He occasionally answers a question or adds his opinion if it’s a topic that he understands, but other than that he mostly stays quiet and wonders if he’ll get to eat dessert as well or if he’ll be the only
dessert tonight.

He gets his answer soon enough.

"Before we have dessert, we should do business," Bang Si-hyuk says and Taehyung grimaces when he thinks neither of the men are looking at him. Maybe he shouldn’t have eaten that much. Sex is easier on an empty stomach, and he doesn’t really like deep-throating someone when he has just eaten either.

"Definitely," Mr. Kim agrees. He looks at Taehyung with greed, and the teen has to remind himself why he’s here again. He’ll get twice as much money as usual. Money that he needs. He has to play nice, no matter what happens next - and something strange has to happen, because why else would Mr. Kim double his normal fee?

“What do you want me to do?” he asks. His voice is a bit lower now. More sultry. After all it’s V that the men want right now, not Taehyung. It’s a role he manages to slip into easily by now.

Bang Si-hyuk laughs, and it catches Taehyung off guard, before he remembers that apparently the man doesn’t know his profession. Mr. Kim also chuckles and Taehyung really doesn’t get it. He’s missed the joke. Maybe he’s the punchline?

“He’s a funny one," the company owner says to Mr. Kim, who agrees whole-heartedly, before turning back to Taehyung. “I want you to sing for me. What else would I want you to do?”

Taehyung blushes. He can feel the heat rise to his cheeks. Singing? Is he really here just to sing? The idea is so absurd that he doesn’t know how to respond to it. But two pairs of eyes are watching him intently, and it’s obvious that this is all they want from him - for now.

He’s shy about it, and it’s ridiculous. Taehyung isn’t coy, there’s no such thing as shyness in his profession. And yet he sits here and feels trepidation at the thought of singing for two strangers.

He clears his throat and then he does as he’s told, avoiding looking at the older men, looking intently at the table instead. His voice is quiet and unsure, and he sings the first song that comes to his mind, stumbles over the lyrics because he doesn’t really know them all too well. It’s bad. It’s actually terrible. And yet, when he looks up again, Bang Si-hyuk is looking at him with goddamn stars in his eyes and Mr. Kim looks pleased.

"It’s not perfect, but there’s definitely something here that we can work with”, the man says and Taehyung gets more confused by the second. "Are you free on Monday? I want you to stop by at my company. There’s some people I’d like you to meet."

"I don’t really understand..." Taehyung trails off. No, he doesn’t understand anything that’s going on right now. Nothing makes sense.

The boss of BigHit laughs again. "Mr. Kim told you nothing, did he? We are currently working on debuting a group named Bangtan Sonyeondan but we feel like we’re still missing some people. The trainees we have right now all lack something. Mr. Kim suggested that you fit right in after hearing you sing, and I do agree with his opinion. Your voice is obviously not trained, but it’s good. You’d have to become a trainee first and we’ll have to evaluate whether or not you have the skills to become part of the group, but with your looks and your voice I think that you have a fair chance compared to the other trainees at our company right now. But let’s not get into details for now, we can do that on Monday. How about we order dessert?"

Taehyung’s in a daze, there’s no other way to describe the way he feels right now. Him, in a K-pop
group? But he’s never professionally sang before. And he’s never really danced before. And he’s a prostitute, so how could he be of any help to other members other than offering stress relief? Or maybe he’s supposed to become just that, a thing to hand out for pleasure to help the sales numbers? Now more than ever he has the feeling that this is an elaborate prank.

After dinner, Mr. Kim takes Taehyung up to his room and almost rips the expensive clothes from his body. He keeps his word and pays him twice the amount, even though Taehyung’s not really into it at all. His thoughts are far away, dreaming of a life in which he actually makes it out of this business alive. And when he feels Mr. Kim on top of him, all wandering hands and rough thrusts, it’s the first time that he doesn’t feel indifferent about this man but actually despises him along with Bang Si-hyuk, for planting a seed of hope into his heart after so long. And it’s such a ridiculous one as well. He’s not cut out for the idol life. There has to be something more sinister behind this offer, because no boss of a record label would ever be desperate enough to invite a random boy to the office when thousands of people would die for just the chance of auditioning there. Taehyung can’t afford to dream about a better future for himself, because dreaming is only one of the many things in this industry that can get him killed.

Chapter End Notes

Come talk to me on tumblr. :)
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Thank you all so much for the lovely comments and the support this fic received. I really appreciate it a lot. Also I'm trying to use Korean honorifics as accurately as I can. I'm sorry if something's incorrect, please let me know! Hope you enjoy this next chapter. x

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Taehyung’s fingers are shaking. He tries to still them by making fists and hiding them in the too-long sleeves of his sweater, but it doesn’t really work.

He’s intimidated.

The building that houses BigHit Entertainment looms over him like a threat. Technically it’s nothing special. It looks like all the other buildings in the street, a little bit run down with a cladding that he supposes used to be white one day, but now is grayish. Nothing gives away that this is the home of the record label, except for a small sign next to the entrance door that displays the logo of the company.

Taehyung doesn’t even know why he’s so nervous about entering. He walks into buildings he’s never been in before all the time with confidence, ready to do his job. But this right now is out of his comfort zone. He’s still not sure how serious Bang Si-hyuk was with his offer. Him, a K-pop idol? After only hearing him sing for a minute or two? It’s too good to be true. He was lying awake on his mattress for hours the past few days, looking at the ceiling and mulling the possibility of it over in his head.

Taking a deep breath, Taehyung enters the building and walks over to the small reception. A few people are mingling in the foyer, and some music is playing in the background.

The receptionist looks up at him with a smile on her lips. “How can I help you?”

“I have a meeting with Bang Si-hyuk-nim”, Taehyung offers. At least his voice isn’t shaking. He can feign confidence, he’s good at that.

“Are you V-ssi?” the receptionist asks after typing something on the computer keyboard and looking at the desktop.

Taehyung wants to cringe as she addresses him by the name he gives his clients, but he bites his tongue and forces himself to smile instead as he confirms her question.

“Go to the elevators at the back and up on the fifth floor. You’ll find Bang PD-nim’s office there. Just talk to his secretary and she’ll let you in."

Taehyung bows his head slightly as he thanks her. She replies with a soft smile.

He shares the elevator with two other boys. One of them looks incredibly young and his cheeks are coloured red as the older looking one drapes an arm around his shoulder as he talks to him. Taehyung can’t help but think that once puberty hits the younger one, he’ll probably look stunning.
The older has a long face, but he’s also really pretty in an unconventional way. Taehyung would bet his shabby apartment on the fact that these two are trainees at the company. When they notice him staring, the older one smiles at him while the younger one averts his eyes quickly. Taehyung stumbles out of the elevator on the fifth floor before the doors are even completely open, embarrassed that they’ve noticed him observing them.

His heart is racing ridiculously fast in his chest when he searches for the secretary that he was referred to, and when he finds her office he almost decides to not knock, but turn around and leave the building instead. He’s about to do it, he really is, when he hears the voice of Bang Si-hyuk down the corridor and he freezes. Before he has the chance to hide, the man comes around the corner, followed by a boy that can’t be much older that Taehyung.

As soon as the older man spots him, he smiles and waves him over.

“Namjoon, this is the boy I was telling you about,” he says to the other as Taehyung approaches and bows before them, the other guy at the older man’s side doing the same. “His stage name is V and-“ he halts abruptly and looks at Taehyung, ‘I’m sorry, I never caught your real name at dinner, did I?’“

“Kim Taehyung, sir.“ The words taste bitter on his tongue. He hates sharing his name with people. His body doesn’t belong to him anymore, so at least he had his name to hold on to up until now. Maybe he should have never come.

Bang Si-hyuk nods at that. “Kim Taehyung-ssi, this is Kim Namjoon, but he’s better known under the name Rap Monster.“

Taehyung perks up at that. He’s pretty sure he’s heard that name before somewhere, like a distant memory at the back of his mind.

“He’s the leader of Bangtan Sonyeondan.“ The older man turns back to Namjoon. “I’ll see you later, okay?“

And then they’re left alone in the hallway.

Bang Si-hyuk steps closer and Taehyung’s not entirely surprised when he feels a hand press against his lower back. The only thing that catches him off guard is that the man approaches him so openly in the hallway and doesn’t wait until they’re in his office. He’s even more caught off guard when it turns out that he’s not led to the man’s office but to a recording studio instead to meet some producers.

When he stands in a recording booth and is ordered to sing, Taehyung has to pinch himself to make sure that this is not a dream. It certainly feels like one. But no one’s touched him inappropriately so far, and the two producers he’s met compliment him on his voice a lot, although they say the same thing that Bang Si-hyuk has said the night of the dinner: that Taehyung’s voice is a diamond in the rough.

As if his day couldn’t get any weirder, Taehyung then gets sent to a dance class. He’s told by Bang PD-nim, as the older man had offered Taehyung to call him at one point, that he’ll pick him up again in two hours. He’s introduced to the dance instructor and notices the way the other trainees look at him, some with curiosity, some with distaste. He also recognizes Namjoon to be one of them, but when he smiles at Namjoon, the boy just turns his head away and talks to the other boy he’s with, who looks almost ridiculously handsome.

Taehyung can dance. He knows how to control his body, a skill that’s important for a prostitute like him. He’s not the quickest at memorizing the choreography they get taught, but he thinks that
considering this is the first dance class he’s ever had he’s doing fine. Or at least he’s doing better than Namjoon and the guy he’s with.

Two hours later, Taehyung is sweaty and the trainees are told that dance class is over for today. Bang PD-nim still hasn’t come to pick Taehyung up so he’s kind of lost when it comes to what he’s supposed to do now. He decides to stick to a corner of the dance studio and watch as other trainees gather to talk and start leaving the studio.

“You’re Taehyung-ssi, right?”

Taehyung startles, not having noticed that the boy that was with Namjoon had approached him, the rapper standing behind him with a slight scowl.

“I’m Kim Seokjin,” the boy introduces himself, and he’s even more beautiful up close. It’s not fair. “I’m the visual of Bangtan Sonyeondan and also a vocal.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” Taehyung replies, but he can’t really focus on the boy that smiles at him kindly, more focused on Namjoon who shoots daggers at him for no reason.

“I’m sorry, but have I done something to you?” Taehyung asks the rapper with genuine curiosity.

“I was just wondering how many dicks you sucked to get into the company so easily.”

Taehyung’s shoulders drop even faster than the smile from Seokjin’s face.

“Namjoon!” the boy scolds him and pushes his shoulder gently, “have you lost your mind?”

“Come on, hyung, it’s not like we’ve all been thinking the same thing.”

Meanwhile Taehyung tries to find the words to say that he’s not sucked any dicks to come here, at least not if he doesn’t count Mr. Kim’s. And he doesn’t count Mr. Kim’s, because the man doesn’t work at BigHit. And technically Taehyung didn’t suck his dick to get here. It was more of an accident really. But his mouth’s too dry to say the words, and before he can, Namjoon has grabbed his bag and stormed out of the dance studio, some of the few trainees that are still in the studio looking after him in confusion.

“You have to apologize him, he’s been under a lot of pressure lately,” Seokjin says with an apologetic expression.

“I haven’t-“

“Of course, I know that. He knows that too. It’s just that he’s been training for years and Bangtan just seems to have troubles when it comes to debuting. It used to be a hip-hop group and now we’ve turned into K-pop idols. He doesn’t know how to handle it, and the role of the leader seems to trouble him as well. Please don’t take it personally, I promise he’s a nice guy - at least most of the time. But when PD-nim told us about the newest possible addition of the group being a boy that he randomly picked up from the streets, we just found it weird. And you’re not even a trainee yet, which means that should you really debut with Bangtan, it will take at least another few months for us to debut.“

Bang PD-nim chooses that moment to enter the dance studio. “Is everything okay? I saw Namjoon in the hallway and he did not look happy.”

Taehyung never has a chance to reply to Seokjin, but to be honest he wouldn’t even know what to say. It’s okay? He understands where Namjoon is coming from? Because honestly he doesn’t and
he’s really not sure that should Bang PD-nim really offer him to become a BigHit trainee with the prospect of joining Bangtan Sonyeondan, if he would want to take the chance. Would it be better to sell his body on the street or work with someone who has no respect for him? At least his clients show him some respect, or at least some of them.

And also Namjoon knows. He must know what Taehyung is, why else would he have asked how many dicks Taehyung has sucked to get here? And if Namjoon knows then Bang PD-nim knows, because who else would have told him? And if Bang PD-nim knows, then Taehyung is most likely here not because of his talented voice, but his talented mouth. Whore him out to the CEO’s of music shows and radio stations, maybe that could help Bangtan Sonyeondan to some appearances. But then Taehyung would not even get to choose anymore who he agrees to sleep with or not, he’d lose the last of his free will, and is he really willing to give that up?

Bang PD-nim takes him to his office, and on their way there he tells Taehyung that he’s heard that he did really well for someone who hasn’t danced before.

It doesn’t surprise Taehyung as much as he thought it would when he gets the offer to join BigHit as a trainee, set to debut with BTS once they enter the producer’s office.

“Of course it’s not set in stone yet, but we think you would work well together with the other boys and you’d fit into the image we want for this band.“

The contract is long, and Taehyung vows not to even consider signing anything before he hasn’t read every single word on it and made sure that he knows exactly what everything means.

“Since you’re a minor we’ll need your parents to sign it as well.“

He almost falls off the stool from shock when he hears those words.

“My parents?“

“Yes, is that a problem?“

Taehyung laughs bitterly and shakes his head. He’s tired and hungry and has to work later tonight, and he’s honestly sick of playing this game by now.

“Bang PD-nim,“ he says with a sigh, “let’s stop acting like we both don’t know that I’m a prostitute. My parents are dead to me.“

And it is that moment that Taehyung realizes that the man in front of him genuinely had no idea, as he freezes, looking at Taehyung in disbelief.

“This is no joke, kid.“

“I’m not joking. How did you think I met Mr. Kim? He’s my client.“

“But I’ve known him since I was at high school,“ Bang PD-nim trails off. He looks lost in thought, but he looks less shocked about finding out that his friend bangs underage prostitutes than Taehyung thinks is normal. The idea that Taehyung is a prostitute, however, he doesn’t seem to be able to wrap his head around.

But if the man really didn’t know, does that mean he genuinely considered Taehyung to be able to become a K-pop idol? Does he really have a shot at getting out of the misery that is his life?

“I’m sorry, but this changes everything.“
And this is the moment Taehyung’s hope bursts like a bubble.

The elevator ride down feels twice as long as when Taehyung went up this morning. He doesn’t really hear the chirpy music in the foyer anymore. Bang PD-nim has promised to call Taehyung after retracting the contract, has said that there are a few things he has to think through before he can let Taehyung sign it.

Taehyung knows that he’ll never hear from the older man again.

In the lobby he almost misses when someone calls his name, but then Seokjin stands in front of him, and he smiles again that gentle smile he had before. A group of four other boys is looking over at them. Taehyung recognizes Namjoon and the two boys he stood in the elevator with this morning. The fourth one is pale, and looks at Taehyung curiously.

“Taehyung-ssi, how did it go with PD-nim?”

Taehyung can’t look him in the eyes, because he knows once he does, he won’t be able to stop the tears pricking at the corners of his from rolling down his cheeks.

“It was nice meeting you, Seokjin-ssi,” he replies after swallowing once, twice, to get a grip of his emotions again. He bows slightly before sidestepping the older and leaving the building.

He doesn’t go to his corner that night, but stays on the mattress in his run-down room instead, soaks his pillow with tears. Taehyung has had a real chance to escape, life has given him a chance, and he was the one that had destroyed it. Why hadn’t he shut his large mouth? Why wasn’t he capable of trusting Bang PD-nim even a little when the older man had only treated him with respect and shown genuine interest in his voice? This was his one shot at freedom, and Taehyung has thrown it away. He knows that the call will never come.

That night he thinks of Seokjin, who’s too pretty for his own good and seemed so kind. He thinks of Namjoon, who has a dream that he’s so desperate for that he’s become impatient and desperate. He wonders if the other three guys they were standing with are also part of Bangtan Sonyeondan. How would he fit into the group? Would they have become friends? Taehyung hasn’t had friends for so long. On the streets, everyone’s your enemy.

He’ll never find out, and he’s the only one to blame for that. A prostitute would make a terrible K-pop idol.

Chapter End Notes

This will be the last update for two weeks, as I'll leave for the US tomorrow morning. I'll be back early August though, unless I get spooked to death in Chicago's most haunted hotel. It's not like it was my choice to stay there...

You can find me on tumblr, in case you're curious about whether or not I'll meet a ghost in my hotel room. :)
Chapter 4

It's been a bit longer than 2 weeks, sorry about that. Thank you for your kind comments and enthusiasm about this fic. Also is anyone else low-key dying about the Love Yourself Highlight Reels? The aesthetic is on point. Hope you enjoy. :) x

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It’s cold. So cold that Taehyung’s body feels numb. His fingers have stopped shaking a while ago and he can barely feel them anymore. The thin sweater he’s wearing doesn’t do anything to protect him from the temperature. The heater in his crappy small flat is broken. A bright pink scarf is wrapped around his neck that smells of smoke and vanilla. It’s a gift from the girl that sometimes works the same corner as he does. She looks worse with every passing day and Taehyung thinks that soon the scarf will be all that’s left of her.

For once Taehyung is glad about the cold, because it means he doesn’t feel the ache in his body. His last client was a tad bit too rough, left bruises behind in the shape of fingerprints around his throat and on his hips. It’s why the girl gifted him the scarf, to cover the evidence. It’s not nice to look into the mirror and be reminded of how the bruises got there. Taehyung wears the bright pink scarf with frayed edges like a shield to protect himself from the onslaught of memories.

His stomach grumbles loudly and he places a hand on top of it, as if that could help soothe it. It’s been a while since he’s properly eaten.

Taehyung shuffles around on his shabby mattress, before pushing himself up. He’s been inside all day, and the sun is already setting. He’ll have to get ready for work soon, so he most definitely needs to get some food into his stomach before that. Not eating makes him feel weak, and weak is the last thing he wants to feel whenever he’s with a client.

Although if he’s completely honest with himself, he doesn’t want to see any clients today.

Or ever again, for that matter.

But life’s not a picnic and Taehyung doesn’t have a choice.

He goes to the nearby supermarket, grabs a tuna sandwich and some water. After some consideration he grabs a second tuna sandwich before paying.

The first sandwich he eats while getting ready for work, putting on heavy eyeliner and squeezing into ripped jeans that are too tight. He wraps the pink scarf back around his neck once he’s ready, before grabbing the second sandwich, his keys, phone and the black wallet that’s already falling apart, and making his way to his corner, focusing on his breath becoming visible in the cold air on his way there.

She’s there again, the other prostitute, with a black eye but a smile on her lips. Taehyung offers her the sandwich without a word, and she takes it with a quiet “Thank you”. While she eats, she tells him about the dog her family used to have. Taehyung also had two dogs when he was a child, but he’d rather not think about that. Instead he listens and makes humming noises when appropriate to
show that he’s still following her words.

The girl gets picked up first tonight, and Taehyung watches with tired eyes as she gets into a car. Only minutes later, he gets into a car as well. While he blows the client, his eyes stinging with tears as he’s forced down on his dick with violent fingers in his hair, he can feel his phone start to vibrate in his pocket.

Taehyung startles and starts to cough around the guy, trying to pull away from his grip to get some air again.

No one ever calls him, his phone ringing maybe once a month, and every time it does, it fills Taehyung with anxiety.

His client is quick to pull Taehyung back down again before he even has a chance to think about what to do, and while his lips are wrapped around a stranger’s dick, the phone stops vibrating in Taehyung’s pocket.

When he’s back at the corner, the girl isn’t there yet, or maybe she’s already gone again. Taehyung doesn’t care all that much at the moment.

He pulls his phone out of his pocket with shaking fingers. The screen’s cracked, has been for the longest time, but Taehyung doesn’t really have the money to fix that. Technically it’s not even his phone to begin with. He found it on a park bench, and at first he wanted to give it back, he really did, but then he got a new number and just kept it. It’s not like he stole it. Finders keepers and all that stuff.

The number is unknown to Taehyung, but that’s no surprise. There’s only one number in his phone, and that’s the one of his landlord. But he never calls Taehyung, always prefers to stop by personally to make his life a living hell.

Sometimes companies call to ask him some questions, but Taehyung hangs up on them rather quickly and they never call during nighttime. The hospital gives him a ring when his results are back for the tests that he does ever so often to make sure he hasn’t gotten any illnesses from clients, but Taehyung hasn’t had a check up lately.

When he presses the call button, Taehyung’s heartbeat spikes. He listens to the dial tone with bated breath, and when the person at the other end of the line picks up and a voice asks “Taehyung-ssi?“, he thinks that his heart must have skipped a beat or two.

It’s none other than Bang Si-hyuk, and Taehyung almost drops his phone in surprise.

“This is Bang Si-hyuk. I’m sorry for the late disturbance. I hope I’m not interrupting anything?“

“No,“ Taehyung croaks out, lost for words. His voice is scratchy, so he clears his throat and repeats himself, “no, of course you’re not interrupting anything.“

It’s been two weeks since Taehyung had been to Big Hit Entertainment, and this is the call he thought he’d never receive.

“This is all very sudden, but I was wondering if you would be able to make it to my office tomorrow morning? I don’t want to give you too many details over the phone, but I do have an offer for you.“

“Your office? Tomorrow? I- yes, of course. I can do that. Definitely.“
Taehyung stumbles over his words and he can hear the older man chuckle. “Is ten good for you?”

“Ten is perfect for me, sir.”

The conversation ends rather quickly after that. After they’ve hung up, Taehyung stands there frozen, but this time it’s most definitely not from the cold. He stares at his phone in disbelief. Has he really just been asked to return to Big Hit?

Taehyung goes home after that. He doesn’t think that he’ll be able to see another client tonight, doesn’t want his good mood to be ruined. Instead he stops by a gas station on his way home and treats himself to a chocolate bar, and smiles the brightest smile at the cashier that he can muster, the first genuine smile he’s shown in a while.

The chocolate bar tastes like hope, even on his shabby mattress in his cold flat. Taehyung’s so excited, he can barely fall asleep.

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Namjoon comes as a surprise to Taehyung when he enters the office of Bang PD-nim. The older boy sits in one of the two seats in front of the big desk that faces the owner of Big Hit, and glares at Taehyung. There’s really no other way to describe the way he’s looking at him right now.

“Taehyung-ssi, come in and have a seat.”

At least Bang PD-nim sounds happy to see him, Taehyung thinks to himself as he steps inside and closes the door behind him, before sitting down in one of the comfy chairs.

He’s not wearing the pink scarf, because he wants to make a good impression and he’s not entirely sure how good of an impression wearing a pink scarf can make. But as he notices that both men’s gazes fall onto his throat immediately upon seeing him, he wishes he had worn it anyway. Fuck good impressions.

At least neither of them mentions the bruises that have turned from dark to an ugly greenish yellowish colour.

“I hope you’ve been well these past days,” the boss of Big Hit starts to say and Taehyung wants to laugh, because do these bruises he’s been so openly staring at seconds ago not tell him just how Taehyung’s been?

“And I’m sorry that it took me some time to get back to you, but there were things we had to consider. I have been consulting various people, Namjoon being one of them-“

Taehyung’s eyes dart to the older boy in panic.

“He knows?” he interrupts, not even considering how rude that is.

“I know,” Namjoon confirms.

“And he has to know as the leader of Bangtan Sonyeondan,” Bang PD says. “It’s as much his decision as it is mine to give you a chance. But he will be the only one of the boys knowing about it.“

Taehyung doesn’t miss the stern look that the oldest in the room directs at Namjoon and he’s surprised to learn that Namjoon had also agreed to have him back. He looks anything but thrilled about Taehyung’s presence.
“We want to offer you a deal, Taehyung. A trial, so to say. You have talent, and I’m still convinced that you would be a good fit for the group. Start as a trainee at Big Hit with the goal in mind to debut with the boys. For now we’ll keep you out of the official line-up though. You’ll be moving into one of our dorms and receive a monthly salary. It’s not much, but it’s enough to get you by. Should you debut, we will have to talk about what to do about your past and the fact that you’re technically a minor working for us without your parents permission. If for any reason we think you will not debut with Bangtan, your contract as a trainee with Big Hit will end. How does that sound to you?”

Taehyung doesn’t realize there’s tears in his eyes until he notices that the office looks blurry. “That sounds perfect.”

“There’s one more condition though,” Bang PD-nim says, and Taehyung nods. Anything. He’ll do anything to get this chance.

“In order for you to become a trainee with us, you’ll need to give up your current profession.”

It’s a mixture of a laugh and a sob that escapes Taehyung when he hears those words, and he wipes away the tears running down his cheeks in embarrassment.

“I will gladly do that.”

Bang PD nods, and then he slides a few papers along with a pen across the desk to Taehyung and instructs him to sign the contract.

Taehyung’s timid to ask if he can read it first. He doesn’t want to sign anything he hasn’t read. This is still too good to be true. He has to make sure there’s not a paragraph in there binding him legally to give out sexual favours in return for the chance to become a trainee. If there’s a catch in there, Taehyung has to find it. But even if there’s a catch in there, Taehyung will probably sign it anyway. Anything to get away from the life he’s leading now.

They leave him to read through the contract while quietly talking to each other. Taehyung reads it once, reads it twice. There’s no catch. So he grabs the pen with shaking hands and signs on the dotted line.

“Welcome to Big Hit Entertainment, Taehyung-ssi” Bang PD-nim says once Taehyung lays the pen back down, and his words fill the boy with warmth, “Namjoon will be taking you to meet your hopefully future bandmates now.”

Chapter End Notes

Come talk to me on tumblr. :)
If you think this chapter is surprisingly way better written than the previous chapters, then that’s only because I found a beta in EreriShip, who's doing an incredible job at it. :)

Hope you enjoy this chapter. :) x

Their footsteps echo through the hallway as Taehyung and Namjoon make their way to introduce the rest of Bangtan Sonyeondan to the younger boy. The soles of Taehyung’s shoes squeak on the grey linoleum floor with every step he takes.

It’s quiet, and Taehyung can feel the awkwardness linger between them, the air thick enough to be cut with a butterknife. Neither tries to make conversation, which is probably for the better because Taehyung’s sure that if Namjoon had something to say to him, it wouldn’t be nice. How goes that one quote his grandma used to teach Taehyung when he was still a child and hadn’t a single care in the world? If you can’t say something nice, don’t say nothing at all.

“You should probably come up with an explanation for the marks on your neck,” Namjoon says when they round a corner, and Taehyung’s left hand shoots up, his fingers tracing the ugly looking bruises delicately.

The memories accompanying them make his stomach churn. How they got where they are is a conversation he’d rather not have with anyone. He’s painfully aware of the way the other boy has studied his immediate reaction.

Namjoon opens the door to a room and turns on the lights. They flicker to life, and Taehyung finds himself in a small studio that has a funny smell to it that he can’t quite identify, but he supposes the empty pizza boxes stacked on the couch are to blame.

He’s surprised when Namjoon throws a black jumper at him and tells him to put it on. As Taehyung pulls it over his head - it surprisingly smells like detergent -, he realizes that it’s a turtleneck.

“Thank you,“ he whispers, but doesn’t dare make eye contact with Namjoon.

“We didn’t have the best start, but I’m your hyung now, and I intend to be a good one; even if I mess up sometimes.“

Taehyung’s honestly taken aback by the words. He doesn’t remember the last time he's addressed someone as hyung. There are sometimes clients that get off on being called oppa, but a hyung? Someone to look out for him? Taehyung’s been fighting for himself for so long now, the idea of another person taking care of him is a foreign concept.

“Don’t you hate me?“ he can’t help but ask. He still remembers how Namjoon had accused him of coming into the company by sucking someone’s dick. Technically it was even true. He wouldn’t
be here if it wasn’t for Mr. Kim.

Taehyung realizes that he hasn’t seen his client ever since the day he first met Bang PD-nim.

“I wouldn’t have agreed to have you on the team if I hated you. However, I’m not thrilled by the fact that you’re a total newcomer. It means that it’s going to be many more months before we’ll be able to debut, and I’m just sick of waiting. It’s been three years since I’ve become a trainee.”

And Taehyung understands what Namjoon means. He doesn’t want to be a bother to them, doesn’t want to hold them back from debuting. He bows to Namjoon. “I promise I will train hard as to not hold you back.”

“What are you doing, kid? There’s no need to bow. You seemed honest enough when you said that you want to be a part of this, so I’ll trust your words until you prove me wrong. Come on, let’s go to the dance studio. That’s where the rest of the boys are.”

Taehyung trails behind Namjoon with his head held a little higher than before. The turtleneck sweater is way too big on his thin frame and it probably makes him look hideous, but it hides the bruises and it feels oddly comforting. He wonders if it’s Namjoon’s sweater – he doesn’t look like the kind of guy who would wear a turtleneck.

He’s calm until he hears a couple of voices screaming over music and each other behind a closed door, and then he’s suddenly not. Taehyung doesn’t really know how to talk to people anymore, let alone befriend them and make a good first impression. He’s good at charming people out of their pants, but that’s hopefully not a trait he’ll have to use on his - what are they? Colleagues? Future bandmates?

“They’re quite a handful,” Namjoon remarks as he opens the door, and that’s all the warning Taehyung gets before he’s pulled into a dance studio and surrounded by four other boys with vaguely familiar faces. He recognizes Seokjin, who he’s met before at dance practice, and the other three boys who’d been standing in the lobby of Big Hit Entertainment with him the last time Taehyung had left the building.

There are too many questions hurled at him at once, too many people too close all of a sudden.

“Guys,” Namjoon shouts over them, and Taehyung takes a deep breath when they finally step back from him. He feels genuinely anxious surrounded by so many people.

Namjoon’s the one introducing them one by one. He’s not doing the most thorough job with it, but it’s more than sufficient. Too many details at once would only confuse Taehyung at this point anyway.

“You know Jin already,” Namjoon says, gesturing to the one in the group that Taehyung recognizes best. He’s still as ridiculously handsome as he was the first time they met. He’s also wearing a welcoming smile. Taehyung thinks he has kind eyes.

“And that’s Min Yoongi. He’s a rapper. Don’t let his grumpy face scare you, he’s a real softy behind that cold exterior,” Namjoon remarks. The small guy huffs at his words, and he eyes Taehyung warily, smiling at him nonetheless.

Namjoon moves on to introduce the next in line, Jung Hoseok, who’s apparently an incredible dancer. He nods at Taehyung and when he smiles, seems to radiate light.

“These are your hyungs. Treat them with respect, and in return they’ll take good care of you.”
Then he points towards the last one in the room, the youngest looking that’s been eyeing Taehyung with the most curious eyes the entire time.

“That’s Jungkook. He’s our maknae. He’s a bit shy,” Namjoon teases as he pinches one of the boy’s cheeks. The youngest blushes as he pulls away. He can’t be more than fifteen years old, still has the looks of a child etched into the features of his face.

Taehyung bows and introduces himself, and is surprised when he feels fingers card through his hair. It’s a touch that he associates with fucking and rough blowjobs in dark alleys, and he has to take a deep breath to stop himself from jolting back.

As he looks up, he finds that it is Jin. “There’s nothing wrong with being formal, but you don’t have to be too formal with us. No need to bow to us.”

It’s Namjoon that claps his hands to get everyone’s attention. “We’ve had enough of a break for now. You can talk to Taehyung more during dinner, so let’s get back to practice. Why don’t we show him what Bangtan style means?”

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Bangtan style apparently means that Taehyung’s going to die. The choreographies the band is working on are insane. Absolutely mind-blowing. By tomorrow he knows that every muscle in his body will ache, including those of whose existence he wasn’t even aware of.

Sometimes in the evening someone stops by to bring them food, a short break in which Jungkook and Hoseok ask him questions about his life that Taehyung skilfully dodges by redirecting the topic. After that, there is more practice.

It’s currently nine o’clock, and Taehyung is lying on the floor, breath heavy and body feeling as if it’s been filled with lead. It helps his pride that Jin, who had been the fourth official member to join the band as Taehyung had learned, is also lying on the floor with a red face, and Namjoon’s grey shirt is drenched in sweat.

Taehyung suffers the most though, because he’s still wearing that turtleneck sweater. When asked why he hadn’t taken it off yet, he had said that he’s not wearing a shirt underneath. Upon Hoseok’s insistence that he doesn’t have to be shy around them, Namjoon had stepped in and told him to leave Taehyung alone, for which the boy was incredible thankful.

“Tomorrow you better show up with clothes that are fit for dancing,” Namjoon addresses him when they leave the building together to go to the garage, quiet enough so only Taehyung can hear him.

“Is Taehyung going to stay in the dorm with us tonight?” Jungkook asks. He hasn’t said much at all, but he always looks at his hyungs with awe.

As Taehyung has learned he really is only fifteen years old, half a child still, and unlike Taehyung at that age he still seems to look at the world around him in wonder. “He’ll be moving in with us during the next few days,” Namjoon explains, before turning to Taehyung. “It would be great if you could bring some stuff with you every day. It makes moving easier than having to carry everything all at once.”

Except for Jin, everyone climbs into a white van against which a driver that greets the boys with familiarity has been leaning, waiting for them.

“Are you not going with them?” Taehyung asks.
As an answer, Jin dangles a bunch of keys in front of his face. “My parents live near Seoul, so I'll still live with them until we officially make our debut. Where do you live? I can give you a ride if you want."

Taehyung tries to dodge the offer, he really does, but Jin just ushers him into his car and asks him for his address.

Here's the thing: Taehyung’s flat is in a bad part of the city. A really bad part. It's the kind of place where you can expect to find prostitutes openly waiting at street corners at night. At least Taehyung doesn't have to commute to get to work.

It takes a while to get there, because traffic in Seoul just is that way and it’s not like Taehyung lives close to the record label’s headquarter.

Seokjin has the radio on, familiar and foreign songs playing that he hums along to every so often. They make small talk, and Taehyung is thankful for that. There are no prying questions about his past, or his family. It’s just about the weather (really cold, but that’s no surprise as it is February), the music (Jin lets him know about his opinion on every song that plays), and the band members (he sounds ridiculously fond about them, and Taehyung wonders if one day he'll sound like that talking about him too).

When they arrive at Taehyung’s apartment complex, Jin does a double take. Taehyung’s been almost too embarrassed to point him over to the parking spots. He's noticed the way Jin eyes the neighbourhood with trepidation. It’s obviously not the part of town he’s used to walking around in.

"Are you sure you don’t want to stay at the dorm with the other boys? I can stay there as well and we can have a sleepover to get to know each other better,“ Jin suggests.

“That’s really kind of you, but there are a couple of things I have to do today. Anyway, thanks for the ride!"

“It’s no problem. I can pick you up tomorrow as well.“ Again Taehyung tries to deny the offer, but just like the first time, Jin insists on it.

Taehyung pretends not to notice that Jin doesn’t leave his parking spot before he has entered his complex safely. It makes him feel this weird tingly feeling in his chest that he'd gotten earlier that day when Namjoon handed him the sweater. Taehyung realizes in embarrassment, that he’s still wearing it now. He’ll have to give it back to the rapper tomorrow, definitely wash it before that.

Feeling tired, he slips out of the clothes he's wearing and changes into a new set - his work clothes. As he trades jeans for too tight leather pants, he remembers the moment he signed the contract and Bang PD-nim’s demand to stop his night-time work. Taehyung wishes it was that easy to stop, but it’s not that easy. For one, Taehyung only owns the essentials. Work clothes, another two sets of jeans and four shirts, as well as two pairs of shoes, socks and underwear. One old coat and two jumpers make up his winter wardrobe. He doesn’t own a bag to put everything in, he doesn’t even own a closet. All of his clothes lie neatly folded on the floor of his room.

But Taehyung needs new clothes now, clothes to practice dancing in. And a bag, so he can bring the little clothes he has to the dorm. And for buying both of these, he needs money.

There’s only one way Taehyung knows how to make money quick. So he makes his way to his corner and waits, and picks up every clients he can. And after two hours of sleep, he stumbles out of bed with bleary eyes and makes his way to the shops with a fresh stack of cash in his pocket, his muscles sore from both the dancing and the events of the previous night.
When Jin comes around in his car the next day, Taehyung waits for him outside his apartment complex, with the newly bought bag at his side filled with clothes and wearing a fresh set of training clothes hidden under his old black coat. They still smell a bit like the store he bought them from this morning, and he’s sure that at the end of the day his new training shoes will have left behind painful blisters, but he’s excited nonetheless.

Jin waves at him through the window and points at the trunk, indicating that Taehyung put his bag there. He’s quick to follow the order, before slipping into the warm car and making himself comfortable on the passenger seat.

“You only brought one bag with you today? When Jungkook came from Busan without even knowing if he’d get into the band for sure, he already brought his entire wardrobe with him,” Jin laughs, reminiscing about the past.

The good mood that Taehyung has been in since waking up despite the rough night he’d had disappears, bursts like a balloon that Jin has pricked with a needle.

“This is my wardrobe,” he murmurs under his breath. He’s not entirely sure if he wants Seokjin to hear it or not, but he can tell by the way the older boy looks at him, with his lips shaped into a silent o and his eyes widening, that he has heard him just fine.

“Too many clothes are a hassle anyway. There’s so much to wash and it’s so tiring to always have to pick out ones outfit. Living a minimalistic lifestyle is good,” Jin begins to ramble, but Taehyung tunes his words out and only hums at what he thinks are appropriate moments.

When they arrive at Big Hit, Jin leads him to the practice room they’d been in yesterday. Yoongi is still missing, but Hoseok is quick to wrap an arm around Taehyung’s shoulder (that he really wants to shrug off) and pulls him into a conversation about a movie that they had watched last night at the dorm. Jungkook is next to them, quiet, but listening intently and offering his opinion on the movie when asked to.

Taehyung pretends to listen, but he’s too aware of two things to actually lose himself in the conversation: Firstly, Hoseok’s arm around his shoulders makes him nervous because Taehyung doesn’t like to be touched outside of his night-time work, thank you very much; and secondly, he doesn’t miss the way Seokjin trails over to Namjoon who’s warming up his muscles near the mirrored wall of the dance studio and starts talking to him in a low voice. Taehyung also doesn’t miss the way both of them look over to him, Seokjin with a slightly worried expression and Namjoon with his eyebrows drawn together.

Suddenly the new clothes he’s wearing and the shiny new bag don’t make Taehyung feel good at all. Instead, they make him feel dirtier than he already is.

Chapter End Notes

I just wanted to thank you guys for reading, leaving kudos, bookmarking and subscribing, and especially those people that have left a comment at the end of last chapter. You might not believe it, but a few kind words go a really long way for a writer, and I really appreciated reading your feedback. x

Tumblr
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Taehyung feels like a puzzle piece that really doesn't fit.

Chapter Notes

Honestly the love you guys give this fic is blowing me away. Thank you! I appreciate all your kind words and support.~

Also I'm returning back to uni and work soon, which means time to write will be scarce, but I'll try to pre-write a few chapters so the wait hopefully won't be too long. Please be patient with me if I make you wait a little longer, I promise it won't be because I've abandoned this story, but because I still somewhat care about my grades.

Taehyung is sweaty. Really sweaty. His clothes are drenched. His muscles are sore. He thinks that he's given everything he possibly could, that his body can’t be pushed any further than this, but he still knows that he's lacking. Hoseok pats him on the back and tells him that practice is the key to success. Taehyung really needs to succeed.

In the afternoon, the scenery changes from a dancing studio with two walls mirrored walls to a recording booth with only one, and his cold reflection stares back at him. It’s the first time he actually hears the other’s voices except for the occasional times that Jungkook or Jin sang absentmindedly along with the music they had danced to.

And wow, Taehyung feels so out of place it’s almost ridiculous. He learns that Namjoon’s stage name Rap Monster wasn't just picked from thin air, and that he enjoys to write lyrics just like Yoongi does. Though secretly, he prefers Yoongi’s, because while Namjoon’s are poetic and sound beautiful, Yoongi’s are rough and honest and portray life the way it actually is. Hoseok is good at rapping too, especially considering that he came to Big Hit as a dancer. Taehyung's surprised to find that he can also sing quite well.

When it comes to Jin and Jungkook, Taehyung really doesn’t know how his voice could even hold a candle to theirs. It hurts his ego even more when it turns out that Jungkook can not only sing (although he’s incredibly shy about it) and dance, but can also rap. It’s unfair how some people just get all the talent at once. Hoseok ruffles the youngest boy’s hair and coos how he’s their golden maknae, at which Jungkook blushes.

Taehyung really doesn’t know how he’s ever going to catch up to these boys. He can sing to a certain degree and he's not a stranger to moving his body, but that neither makes him a singer nor a dancer, and he can’t rap for shit (though sometimes he wishes he could, because rappers are just so cool). Thinking about how Bang PD-nim asked him to catch up to the boys makes him feel sick to the stomach, because he doesn’t know how he’s ever supposed to do that.
They take him to their dorm that night, and Jin comes over as well. A 'bonding activity' they called it. It’s past nine in the evening when Taehyung first sets foot in what is to be his home in the near future and just thinking about it makes him want to wretch his guts onto the floor. To say he’s nervous about it, nervous about living together with four complete strangers for the first time in his life, is an understatement. The last time he lived with someone else was when he still was with his family - and that didn’t end all too well.

Namjoon gives him a tour. It’s small, but Taehyung didn’t expect anything better. It’s also dirty, but that’s to be a given with a bunch of preoccupied boys that are too busy to arrange proper meals, let alone clean a whole dorm because they are busy chasing their dreams. A kitchen, a living room and a bedroom that they all share, that’s it. But it’s dry, and the walls are painted white but it’s an upgrade to Taehyung’s previous flat nonetheless.

“Kookie made some space for you in the closet,” Namjoon says and Taehyung follows the soft-spoken boy with his one meager bag that, suspiciously enough, no one had mentioned for the rest of the day.

Taehyung thanks Jungkook after being shown the allocated space for his clothes. It’s way too much, but he doesn’t say anything about it.

“It’s not a problem, hyung,” Jungkook answers before scurrying away. Taehyung doesn’t remember the last time that someone actually called him hyung, and his heart stutters for just a moment.

They watch a movie together, after everyone’s showered and it doesn’t escape Taehyung's attention how Jungkook goes last, insists that all the others go before him.

He completely ignores the movie, too aware of the five other boys surrounding him. They pass popcorn around in a green plastic bowl, but he refuses any offers of it. Whenever one of them shifts, Taehyung watches. He thinks he’s being inconspicuous, until his eyes meet Yoongi’s, who’s raising an eyebrow in question. After that, Taehyung doesn’t dare take his eyes off the television.

It’s just that he has a really hard time reading these five people around him. Are they okay with him being here? Would they rather have him leave again? So far they’ve only been treating him kindly, but he doesn’t trust that it’s going to stay that way. He might be lacking social skills to a certain extent, but he still knows that new additions to an already formed unit are outsiders that will get into trouble sooner or later. Taehyung is just trying to figure out who the person causing him trouble in the future will be.

Jin decides to stay over at the dorm for the night around midnight, as they will return to the studio by eight in the morning, and one after the other the members go to sleep. By the time Namjoon leaves, it’s only Taehyung and Hoseok in the living room, the latter also getting up to go to bed.

“You should go to bed soon as well, so you won’t be tired tomorrow,” Hoseok advises him and Taehyung knows he doesn’t mean it that way (or at least he hopes so), but he still hears out of those words that he needs the energy to improve.

The bathroom is still steamy from the showers they all have taken and the mirror is fogged up. Whoever was in there before Taehyung had forgotten to turn off the lights. Five toothbrushes are in a plastic cup, each of them in a different colour and with a name scrawled on in black ink. There’s only one toothpaste on the sink, that all of them apparently share. Taehyung isn’t familiar with the brand, but it looks fancier than any he's ever owned.

Taehyung takes his toothbrush out of his toiletry bag, and after considering it for a moment, he
grabs their toothpaste and puts a bit of it on his brush.

The taste is strong. It’s cinnamon, and it reminds him of winter and his grandmother’s house, when she would bake cinnamon cookies for him that where star-shaped and heart-shaped. She always made them for him when he visited during the cold months, and even though his cheek would sting from a slap and his eyes would sting with tears, her cookies would always make him smile.

He spits the toothpaste into the sink immediately as memories come back to haunt him, and rinses his mouth thoroughly with water before using his own cheap toothpaste. It tastes artificial, but he’ll take that over the taste of cinnamon anytime.

Despite the fact that he has a bunkbed now (and it’s his alone so far, he gets to choose whether he wants to sleep at the top or bottom), Taehyung sleeps on the couch that night. He stands at the doorframe of the room they all sleep in for minutes and just looks at the other boys, visible only by the moonlight and the artificial lights streaming in from the street four floors below. Seokjin shifts a little in his sleep and one of them snores lightly. They all look peaceful, relaxed after a long day of practice, but he still can’t bring himself to walk over to his bed. The couch is comfy as well, way comfier than his old mattress. He still has to quit the contract for his previous flat with his landlord, but he’s scared that he might be sent back any day because he’s not good enough, and then he’ll be homeless.

It’s Namjoon that stirs him awake the next morning, and Taehyung’s not used to being woken up by the touch of someone else, so he shies away from the hand on his shoulder, before realizing with cloudy eyes who it is that’s standing next to him.

“Why did you not go to bed?” Namjoon asks him later over a cup of coffee, while Jin is busy ushering Jungkook around the flat and urging him to hurry up.

“I fell asleep on the couch before I had the chance to go there,” Taehyung responds. The older boy doesn’t look like he believes him.

Today is different. Jin and Jungkook won’t be going with them for training. Instead the younger will go to school and the older to university, and Taehyung will go to Big Hit with the rappers, where he’ll apparently meet someone that’ll give him vocal lessons.

By the time Jin and Jungkook leave the flat, the older of the two is fretting over how Jungkook might be late for class. Jungkook doesn’t seem to care all that much about it, stifling a yawn as he stumbles out of the flat with his shoelaces still untied.

Yoongi is the last to rise, while Namjoon is already set to leave and Hoseok is still in the bathroom. He gets handed a cup of coffee from Namjoon as soon as he enters the kitchen (completely black), and doesn’t acknowledge any of the others until he’s downed half of it.

“Are you awake, hyung?” Namjoon asks with a teasing smile and Taehyung watches as Yoongi glares at him over the rim of the cup, before taking another sip. Hoseok joins them at that moment and throws an arm over Yoongi’s shoulder, wishes him a good morning as well. It’s an easy relationship the three have between them. Even though the two younger rappers talk to Yoongi somewhat formally still, it’s easy to observe that they are all close to each other. Taehyung doesn’t really see how he could ever fit into that picture.

At the studio, Taehyung’s vocal coach turns out to be a middle-aged woman that looks somewhat strict, but shows to have patience with him as the hours of the day progress. He’s left alone with her in a small conference room, and the first thing she does with him are breathing exercises.
“There’s definitely incredible talent in there,” she tells him, "And I’m sure that I can pull it out of you in no time.”

Taehyung eats lunch on his own before his voice lessons continue. Sometime around the late afternoon, Jin and Jungkook come to the building as well and they all meet at one of the dance studios. He completely blows the choreography over and over again, forgets parts that he had already remembered, and both Hoseok’s patience and the dance instructor's seems to wear thin.

After the sun has already set, they make their way to the van. Taehyung keeps his eyes on the ground as he walks behind the five boys that are leading a quiet conversation about someone whose name isn’t familiar to him. When they enter the elevator, Taehyung hesitates.

“Are you coming?” Jin asks him, but it’s Jungkook’s curious gaze that Taehyung’s most aware of.

“Actually, would it be okay if I stayed a little longer to practice? I wasn’t really satisfied with myself today. I can walk back to the dorm afterwards.”

He means it when he says that, because the dorm is only about forty minutes walking distance from the office.

And that’s how Taehyung finds himself on his own in the Big Hit building. Most of the employees have already left, and only the occasional coaches and trainees are lingering around along with a few strangling members of security. Jin had told him to stay safe on the way home as the elevator doors closed, and Taehyung had rolled his eyes as soon as the others had been out of sight. There had been a time when he had not known how to take care of himself, but it had long passed.

He makes his way back to the dance studio that they had been coming from, when he hears the music coming from the second of the three studios in the building, the smallest of them all. It’s an upbeat song with a catchy melody that he recognizes, probably has heard it on the radio in passing. Maybe in a client’s car. That’s where he had heard most music during the last few years.

With his interest peaked, Taehyung approaches the door of the music’s origin and looks through the small window. Inside he sees a boy with black hair and dark clothes dancing in front of the mirror. His cheeks are round, and his body moves languidly to the music. It seems to be no effort for him at all to move his muscles to the beat, shape his body in ways that Taehyung is sure he’d stumble over if he ever attempted them.

It’s hypnotizing to watch him, and before he even knows it, Taehyung is opening the door to the studio and enters. If the boy notices him, he doesn’t show it until the song ends. Only then, when Taehyung starts to clap, does he turn around, slightly flustered and obviously out of breath, but with a smile on his face.

“That was amazing,” Taehyung starts, and he means it. He’s never seen someone dance like this before. When Hoseok dances it looks as if the music is part of his body, but this boy moved to the melody like it was the one thing that actually made his body work.

“Thank you,” he says somewhat shyly, before taking a closer look at Taehyung and adding, “Hey, aren’t you the new trainee for Bangtan?”

Taehyung’s taken aback by the fact that this stranger knows him, and the boy starts laughing.

“Trainees like to gossip a lot. It’s what we do most of the time when we’re not busy practicing. But since you’re the unofficial sixth Bangtan member, I’m sure your dancing skills are awesome as well.“
“They’re really not,” Taehyung insists, and it’s the truth. It’s why he’s still at the building after all, to hopefully somehow improve his skills. “Some of the moves you just did- I honestly have no idea how I could possibly make my body move like that.“

The boy laughs again. It’s loud and sounds sincere, and Taehyung finds himself liking it.

“I’m not the best instructor, but if you want me to, I can try and help you learn a thing or two. My name’s Jimin, by the way.“

And Taehyung gratefully accepts the offer and tells him his name, and when they find out that they’ve been born in the same year, Jimin grins at him excitedly and tells him that it must have been fate that’s made them meet in this particular dance studio.

It’s cheesy and a joke and they both laugh about it, but secretly Taehyung thinks to himself that maybe fate has really been good to him for once. Because when he looks at Jimin, sweat-drenched and serious-looking as he tries to teach Taehyung some of his basic moves, but also patient and bright and incredibly kind towards him, he feels like for the first time in a long time he might have found someone he can call his friend.

Chapter End Notes

If you want to, come talk to me on Tumblr.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Who's still shook by the comeback? Me. I'm still shook by the comeback. 'Mic Drop' slays.

Thank you guys for the comments! I'm glad you're liking this story and are happy that Jimin finally popped up as well. It was about time, wasn't it? ;)

Hope you enjoy this new chapter. :) x

See the end of the chapter for more notes

At 1 a.m., when Taehyung's too exhausted to continue practice and even Jimin complains about the aching bones in his body, the other boy treats him to ice cream. Taehyung gets a scoop of vanilla and one of chocolate (Jimin teasingly calls him boring for that and chooses watermelon and skittles) and it tastes like heaven. Even though the air is cold and his old coat isn't particularly suited for fending it off, the ice cream is delicious. Maybe that’s because Taehyung hasn’t had any in so long. Had ice cream always been this creamy?

They find a bench under a tree facing the street. The traffic isn’t all that bad at this time of day and only few cars pass by. It feels odd to sit and watch them with the knowledge that Taehyung won’t have to get in any tonight.

“I’m really curious, so I hope you don’t mind me asking, but how exactly did you get into BTS? They’ve been trying to find trainees that might be a good fit for such a long time now and you came along from out of nowhere.” It’s a question Jimin asks after a few minutes of comfortable silence, both of them sitting beside each other and just watching, observing their surroundings.

“Someone who knows Bang PD-nim heard me sing and decided that I just might be what they need,” Taehyung supplies. It’s not exactly a lie, just selective honesty; Mr. Kim really did hear him sing and introduced him to the head of the company.

“Lucky you,” Jimin whistles. “You must be really talented then. Being part of Bangtan must be amazing. The other guys seem so cool. I don’t talk to them all that much, but they have this aura that’s just really impressive, know what I mean?”

Intimidating is what Taehyung would call it, but he doesn’t comment.

“So you tried for a spot on the team as well?”

Jimin shakes his head, his eyes widening as if the mere thought was ridiculous.

“Oh no, I’m really not that good. I came to Big Hit to hopefully grow as an artist, but I doubt I have the talent to debut anytime soon, let alone with a group like yours.”

“I’m not an official member either,” Taehyung murmurs. “It’s more like a trial. If I fit, I’m in, and if I don’t, then I’ll leave the company again.”

Speaking the truth makes his ice cream only taste half as sweet.
“That’s really odd. Why don’t you stay a trainee at Big Hit if it doesn’t work out?”

Taehyung shrugs his shoulders. Because he’s not good enough to be a normal trainee, maybe. He just fits the type of concept Bangtan Sonyeondan goes for, the rough around the edges hip-hop theme.

“I entered the agency easily, so I can be rejected just as easily,“ he muses. The thought fills him with dread, ”Easy come, easy go."

“That sucks."

Taehyung can only agree to that.

They finish their ice cream in mostly silence, but this time around, an awkward tension hangs in the air. Taehyung’s itching to find a topic to talk about so he can get his mind off of all the thoughts inside his head, but their conversation just about always falls flat after they exchange only a few words.

Shortly after 3 a.m. Jimin takes his leave, with the excuse of school the next day. When he finds out that no, Taehyung does not in fact go to school, he grumbles about how some people have all the luck in the world.

Taehyung would love to correct him, but he bites his tongue. They exchange numbers and promises to repeat this night sometime soon before Jimin leaves Taehyung behind, on a bench on a cold February night.

Although he should go back to the dorm soon because it’s already late and he has to practice again tomorrow, Taehyung stays on that bench for another half hour, his mind racing with thoughts. They circle around the members of Bangtan Sonyeondan and Jimin, and occasionally when he sees a car that resembles one of his regular client’s, he’ll think about prostitution as well. It’s still all too much to take in, the knowledge that he might not have to return back to the street corner anymore.

Only when he stops feeling his ears anymore from the cold does Taehyung start to make his way back to the dorm. He catches a glimpse of himself in the display of a store. His nose is red (another casualty to the cold) and there’s a smudge of dry chocolate ice cream in the corner of his lips. Taehyung licks it away absentmindedly.

He slips into the dorm as quietly as he can, and finds that the others are all already sleeping - which doesn’t come as a surprise. After taking a shower and brushing his teeth (with his own toothpaste, because Taehyung never makes the same mistake twice) he beelines to the couch. He grabs for the brown fuzzy blanket and makes himself comfortable.

“We have a perfectly good bed just in the next room, you know?”

Taehyung almost falls from the couch. He hadn’t heard anyone approach, but when he looks around, he sees Yoongi leaning against the doorframe to the kitchen, an almost empty glass of milk in his hand.

“I didn’t want to wake anyone up,“ Taehyung answers. It’s a lie. He just can’t bring himself to sleep in the same room as four other boys; when he sleeps, he’s at his most vulnerable.

To be honest he doesn’t even know if he would be able to fall asleep sharing a room with the others, because to sleep means to let his guard down and he doesn’t think he can do that.

He snorts, “All of them sleep like rocks, waking them up is almost impossible.“ Yoongi empties
the glass with three more gulps, and retreats to the kitchen. Taehyung can hear him place his glass on the counter, before he returns, turns off the light behind him and dictates Taehyung with a nod in the direction of the bedroom.

Taehyung doesn’t really have a choice. He’s not sure how he could tell Yoongi that he’d rather sleep on the couch, so he follows with drooping shoulders and heavy footsteps.

“Goodnight,“ Yoongi whispers to him, before the boy watches Yoongi climb into the bottom of a bunk that has Hoseok on top. There are three bunkbeds and one mattress on the floor. Namjoon has the second bottom bunk and Taehyung knows that when Jin sleeps there, he usually takes the top one. Jungkook uses the mattress on the floor. There’s a blanket and a few pillows and it looks actually rather cozy in that corner of the room.

That leaves the third bunkbed for Taehyung with the choice to make on whether he would want to sleep top or bottom. It’s not a hard decision really, and he struggles to get up on the top bunk in the dark.

When he’s made it up and wrapped himself up tight in the blanket that smells like detergent (good, but really foreign to him) he doesn’t dare move anymore, let alone breathe too deeply to risk someone else hearing him.

With bated breath he listens to the sounds of the others. There’s some rustling and light snoring. He falls asleep eventually - when his body and mind are too exhausted to keep alert anymore - but when he gets woken up the next morning, he still feels like he hasn’t slept at all.

Furthermore, most of his muscles hurt. Every step is agonizing since Taehyung is just not used to the dancing and stretching and exercise. Hoseok assures him that it will get better with time.

Because they have mercy on him, Taehyung gets sent to another vocal lesson while the others are herded into a studio. He can’t concentrate at all on his lessons though, because as he had been shooed away from the rest, he had heard the words “meeting right now“ fleetingly. Is this the moment they are going to decide that he’s not good enough for the group? He hasn’t even managed to be with them for an entire week. Is he really already going to be kicked out? Why else would there be a meeting about Bangtan Sonyeondan that doesn’t include him, even if he’s not a fixture in the group yet?

Taehyung eats a late lunch on his own again today, because he has no idea where the other boys are, until he’s suddenly not alone at the table anymore. He’s in the middle of biting into a sandwich when Jimin plops down next to him.

“I’m glad to see you eating something, you’re scarily thin."

“It’s nice to see you too,“ Taehyung mutters, wiping away at a bit of mayonnaise at the corner of his mouth with the tip of his thumb. He sounds sarcastic, but he means it. He’s been the only person occupying a table on his own, and of course he’s always been aware of the eyes on him.

What was it that Jimin had said last night? All that trainees ever do is train and gossip… or something like that. He can feel the hostility some of them harbour against him for not only slipping into the company but also into an idol group from the sidelines.

Now with Jimin by his side, he feels like he has a shield to protect him from harsh stares. Jimin’s just come from school straight to the company for English classes in the late afternoon. He’s munching on an apple as he tells Taehyung about his day.
“English classes?” Taehyung asks. Why would the company make Jimin learn English?

“You really got thrown into the deep end.” Jimin says in astonishment. “English, Chinese and Japanese classes, they're mandatory for trainees that want to debut. So you can somewhat communicate with your fans.”

“Oh,” is all that Taehyung can think of to answer, because he didn’t know about that. He actually knows pretty much nothing. Everyone’s kept him in the dark on everything so far. He suspects that it’s because he’s not an official trainee. Still, it hurts to not be included like that. He feels stupid whenever Jimin has to explain something to him about being a trainee that he’s obviously supposed to know.

“You should be happy they don’t make you take them. They’re boring and you don’t learn much really.”

Taehyung would love to take classes on languages though. He likes languages. English was his favourite subject in school... back when he still went to school. He wasn’t good at it, but he liked it nonetheless. It’s been so long since he's had the chance to actually learn something.

Jimin changes the topic from school and classes to his pet dog, because his mother had sent him a picture earlier this day. He shows it to Taehyung and gushes about the ball of fur pictured in it.

“My family and my dog are the only two things I miss about Busan,” he sighs, before finishing off the apple he’d been eating and wraps the core into a napkin to throw away later.

Taehyung hums, but he can’t relate. There’s nothing he misses about Daegu, at least not anymore. He used to wish himself back to his grandmother’s house when he first ran away to Seoul, shortly after she passed away, but those thoughts lie in the past. Nothing about Daegu seems remotely attractive to him nowadays.

He spots Namjoon at the entrance to the dining room, and as soon as their eyes meet, the older male comes over. He greets Jimin with a nod, before turning to Taehyung.

“Are you almost done eating? I wanted to ask if you could join me in the studio for a talk.“

Taehyung wasn’t actually done eating, but he’s sure that he won’t be able to swallow what’s left of his sandwich now.

A talk. After the meeting. This can’t be good.

“I’m done,” Taehyung assures him. He takes the napkin-wrapped apple core from Jimin. It’s going to land in the trash with the three bites of the sandwich left. It hurts Taehyung to have to throw perfectly good food away, but there’s no way he could finish now.

“If you want to practice again tonight, you know where to find me!” Jimin offers and Taehyung acknowledges it with a nod. If he’s still a trainee under Big Hit Entertainment after this talk, he’ll definitely stop by.

Before they’re out of the cafeteria, Namjoon throws a final glance back at Jimin.

“Did you make a friend?” he asks conversationally, but Taehyung can tell that there’s a deeper meaning hidden behind these five words.

“I guess I did.“
Come talk to me on tumblr. :)
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Between being sick and hauling around boxes for days because I was moving, I'm not really sure how I had the time to actually write this. But here it is! Thanks for all the nice words you guys left behind, I'm really glad you're enjoying the story. Hope you enjoy the new chapter! :) x

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“You look like you’ve seen a ghost,” Namjoon remarks as they enter a studio. It’s the one from which Namjoon retrieved the turtleneck sweater on Taehyung’s first day only now there’re no empty pizza boxes lying around and someone finally opened a window. Taehyung can’t breathe properly regardless.

“I see ghosts all the time,” Taehyung wants to say. The ghost of his dead grandmother that he imagines close to him when he feels in danger, there to protect him from any and all harm in this world. The ghost of his father, who’s still very much alive, hiding away behind alcohol bottles and ugly-looking bruises. The ghost of his mother, who left this dysfunctional family of theirs behind when he was too young to remember, because she found a better man than his father, someone who had money and no need for a child.

Namjoon gestures for Taehyung to sit on a couch against one of the walls, and for himself picks one of the two desk chairs. Behind him is a desk with a computer and some technical equipment that Taehyung presumes is for producing. Any other time, he would have been curious about it, but right now he couldn’t care less.

He wonders if Namjoon will deliver the news of his departure the way one removes a band-aid - quickly so that it only stings once - but Taehyung still can’t assess his character all that well. He’s seen Namjoon’s caring side, but he’s also seen the opposite on his very first day at the company. For Namjoon, Bangtan Sonyeondan is what’s most important. If Taehyung’s no longer a member, he’s not important anymore. He supposes that Namjoon will in fact break the news band-aid style and not wrap him in cotton before breaking him. Taehyung morosely thinks of the money he spent on the bag and training clothes. He could have saved it for so many better things, like two or three decent meals.

“Seriously, what’s up with that sour look on your face? Did something happen?” Namjoon asks. He’s fiddling with a pen in his hand. A sign of unease. Or maybe he’s just bored and needs something to play with. Taehyung really can’t tell since Namjoon’s hard to read, much like the rest of Bangtan save for Seokjin and Jungkook.

Seokjin is genuinely a nice guy. Taehyung believes that there’s not many people like him left in this world. He really showed concern for Taehyung, which is something that hasn't happened to him in a while. Jungkook is shy, but he seems like a good kid, wide-eyed and still believing in the good in the world. He’s too young for this business, Taehyung thinks. But Taehyung wasn’t much older than him when he started work, so who’s he to judge?

Hoseok’s niceness and excitement come across as fake most of the time. When the smile drops from his face, the corners of his mouth go down. Taehyung doesn’t want to be at the receiving end
of his bad mood. And Yoongi doesn’t even try to look cheerful half the time. He scowls and he swears. He’s determined.

He’s small, but Taehyung thinks that he’s the most dangerous. His penetrative stare reminds Taehyung of the way his father used to look at him, seconds before his fist made contact with Taehyung’s skin. Taehyung wouldn’t be surprised if Yoongi was to use fists instead of words too.

“Nothing happened,” Taehyung says. The words feel heavy on his tongue. “What did you want to talk about?”

“Yoongi hyung came to me this morning, because he wanted to talk about you.”

“Yoongi-ssi did? Why? Did I do something wrong?”

Namjoon’s eyebrows shoot up as he hears how Taehyung addresses his senior formally, but he doesn't mention it.

“You did nothing wrong, Taehyung. In fact, he was coming to me because he was concerned about you.”

“He was concerned…about me?” Taehyung repeats the words the way a parrot would, mechanically and full of disbelief. The both of them had only exchanged few words with each other, and Taehyung had never felt Yoongi was anything but indifferent towards him.

“He’s got a hard shell but a soft core. He told me that he found you sleeping on the couch again last night.”

"I didn't want to wake anyone up by sneaking into the room," Taehyung murmurs.

"You also slept on the couch the previous night," Namjoon points out.

"Because I fell asleep on the couch," Taehyung tries but he knows he's falling flat.

"You fell asleep on the couch after you went to the bathroom? I heard you there, Taehyung. And I heard that you went back to the couch after getting ready for bed in there."

Taehyung ducks his head, not being able to withstand Namjoon's stare any longer. There's no point in lying if Namjoon knows that he'd deliberately returned to the couch instead of going to the bedroom.

"If there's anything that's bothering you, you need to tell me. The other members have voiced their concerns as well. They say you're very distant. Hoseok's been wondering if you even want to be a part of this band."

Taehyung's heart beats irritably fast. Are they kicking him out because he's been keeping his distance instead of trying to get to know the others better? But trust is a foreign concept to Taehyung, so how could he possibly open up to a couple of strangers within a number of days?

"We think that it's teamwork that will get us somewhere. In order for this - for us - to succeed, we have to pull together. This includes you just as much as anyone else."

"I'm sorry," Taehyung whispers and bows slightly as Namjoon's sighs.

"You don't need to apologize. Just try to somewhat get to know the team, okay? They're good guys, and they're your members as much as you're their member now. I was actually surprised you
managed to befriend another trainee."

"Jimin," Taehyung supplies as Namjoon trails off, before his head shoots back up as he realizes what the older boy just said. "Does that mean you're not kicking me out?"

Namjoon snorts.

"Why would we kick you out? We'd be stupid to do that. You show effort and your voice really fits well with the group. All I'm asking you to do is to give us a chance, much like we've given you one. And Taehyung? If anything bothers you, come talk to me. Anything at all. I mean it."

Pretending like he did not hear the last few sentences, Taehyung breathes out loudly, the tension in his shoulders almost disappearing all at once. The cheerful mask he wasn't able to hold upwards due to nervousness returns again.

"That was seriously anti-climatic. I really thought you were going to kick me out. But why should Bang PD-nim have been at this meeting as well if all that you were going to tell me was this?"

Namjoon turned around on his chair and leaned over to retrieve a couple of papers from the desk.

"He was supposed to give you the guidelines for your trainee life. We've been going easy on you so far, believe it or not. Restricted use of mobile phones, an unofficial dating ban, language classes - I wish he was the one that told you all of this, because now I'm going to be the evil one delivering the bad news."

Namjoon sighs once again and looks over the papers, muttering to himself where he should possibly start.

—

They put him in a language class that same afternoon. Japanese. And he doesn't speak a word of it, or even know their alphabet. Jungkook is sitting next to him, in a room with nine other trainees.

Taehyung's excited. Absolutely thrilled. Jungkook looks at him oddly and shakes his head, commenting on how he can definitely not share Taehyung's enthusiasm about something as boring as studying at all.

The only words he knows are 'sayōnara' and 'konnichiwa,' so the teacher starts off by ordering him to learn the first ten hiragana signs. Jungkook sighs next to him and mumbles something about how lucky he is, before he hands in homework and gets a text to translate.

"I can’t believe you don’t know the typical anime stuff," the younger boy says under his breath while the teacher is occupied with another trainees halfway through class. "Even I picked some of that up."

"I never really watched anime," Taehyung whispers back. Jungkook looks at him with wide eyes, as if he’s genuinely shocked about that confession.

"But you’ve seen Fullmetal Alchemist: Brotherhood, right?"

Taehyung shakes his head.

"Fruit Basket?"

"No."
“Please tell me you’ve at least seen Death Note? Everyone’s seen Death Note,” Jungkook whispers, and he sounds almost furious now. As if it was a sin that Taehyung had never seen any of these shows before.

“I haven’t,” Taehyung negates.

Jungkook sighs dramatically.

“Hyung,” he whines, and Taehyung has that warm weird tingly feeling in his chest that he feels when being addressed like this, “We’ll have to have at least one anime night now, just to see if you like it. And if you do, I’ll make you watch all the classics. We can watch them together. I can’t believe you know none of the good stuff. Your life must have been miserable up until now.”

Taehyung would love to point out that his life was, in fact, miserable until now, but that bitter thought disappears as soon as it came. Instead he’s just amused by Jungkook’s grandiose reaction.

“We’ll have an anime night soon,” he promises, before turning back to his piece of paper and trying to remember how the hiragana sign for ‘ka’ looked like after his eyes meet the admonishing ones of the teacher for disrupting class.

When Taehyung finds Jimin in the dance studio, he’s out of breath and sweating. Music is blasting from the speakers loud enough that Jimin doesn’t even hear Taehyung enter, only spots him through the mirror on the wall and smiles, but doesn’t stop the routine he’s been practicing.

“I can’t stay for long today,” Taehyung apologizes. The Japanese teacher has asked him to learn the hiragana ‘s’ and ‘t’ line, along with the ‘a’ and ‘k’ line that he’s been taught today, for the following class next week. Taehyung’s determined to do just that. When Taehyung had beamed in excitement upon receiving homework, Jungkook had shook his head in disbelief, before a look of devastation crossed his features when he learned he had to write an essay on his hometown.

“The hyungs should be taking this class as well, but they like to skip it,” he had shared with Taehyung in frustration when they had returned back to the studio, where the other members were working. “They blame it on something along the lines of how focusing on music is more important. But I’m young, so they like telling me to go and study. It’s really unfair. Jin hyung always tries to justify me going by saying that he owes it to my parents to make sure I get a good education or some crap.”

Jimin wipes the sweat from his forehead with a white towel.

“That’s okay. I’m almost done today, anyways. I’m dead tired. Do you want to show me that move that I tried to teach you yesterday? Did you have time to practice?”

Taehyung returns to the dorm at around 10, only an hour after the other members left. It smells like someone burned whatever they were trying to make, and when he enters through the door, he’s met with a cacophony of voices.

“Welcome back,” Hoseok greets him, who’s sitting in the small living room and playing Mario Kart with Jungkook. “Yoongi hyung’s currently in the bathroom. Jungkook has dibs on it after him.”

Taehyung nods in acknowledgement.
“But hyung can take a shower before me,“ the younger boy is quick to offer, and he looks up from
the TV to Taehyung, not realizing that his character just fell off the road. When he turns back
again, his forehead wrinkles in frustration and a cute pout finds its way to his lips.

“That’s okay. You’ve got dibs, you go first. I don’t mind the wait.“

He finds Namjoon in the kitchen, the cause of the burnt food smell that lingers in the air.

“I can’t wait until Jin hyung moves in with us. He’s so much better at cooking,“ he complains.

Taehyung leans over the pan. He can cook to some extent, a necessary evil that he once needed to
survive by himself. He’s got a talent to make something at least somewhat edible out of the scraps
he’d been provided with, so he thinks he might have a chance at saving whatever Namjoon has
been trying to make. One look into the pan though tells him that any chance of salvaging
Namjoon’s wreck has already slipped through his fingers.

“I’ll be going to the bedroom to study Japanese,“ Taehyung says, and Namjoon hums
absentmindedly as he eyes his food in frustration. “You seem more determined to learn a language
than anyone else here.“

“I haven’t had the opportunity to study something in a long time,“ Taehyung supplies. He’s not
sure why he shares that fact with Namjoon. The other boy hasn’t asked, and Taehyung’s usually
not one to overshare. But it piques Namjoon’s interest, and he finally tears his eyes away from the
pan to offer Taehyung a smile.

“I’m glad you’re enjoying it then. My Japanese isn’t half as good as my English, but let me know
if you need anything.“

“Actually, I do need something. Could you give me some pen and paper? To practice hiragana?“

After getting the supplies needed from Namjoon and his worksheets, he climbs the top bunk and
spreads everything out before him. It’s the only place in the tiny dorm that he can think of is
somewhat quiet at the moment. He can still hear Hoseok swearing at Jungkook through the walls
whenever the younger boy beats him at a game, but he can tune the noises out.

Writing out these different signs feels foreign, but it fills Taehyung with satisfaction whenever he
in Taehyung’s life is new, and it’s good, and it’s exciting.

Yoongi comes into the room after he’s done in the bathroom. His hair is still wet and he’s wearing
comfortable clothing.

“You don’t mind if I listen to some music here?” he asks, gesturing to his headphones, and
Taehyung tells him to go ahead.

So Yoongi lies down on his bed with his headphones on, and Taehyung sits on his own and tries to
remember hiragana.

Later Jungkook slips into the room and tells Taehyung that the bathroom is free, and after he’s
done showering, Namjoon asks if he wants to be tested on his hiragana.

Taehyung agrees.

They make themselves comfortable on the bottom bunks, Namjoon on his own mattress and
Taehyung on the unoccupied one below his own bunk bed.
The senior boy will ask him to draw one of the hiragana that he has (tried to) learn today, and Taehyung will comply. And sometimes Namjoon will write one and ask Taehyung what it means; that's the agreement.

When they're done, Namjoon tells him that he worked hard and that he’s really impressed by his enthusiasm.

“Namjoon-ssi?” Taehyung asks.

Like earlier that day, Namjoon gives him a funny look at being addressed formally, but doesn’t mention it.

“Thank you.“

“Don’t be ridiculous, Taehyung. You don’t have to thank me for anything,“ Namjoon scolds him softly.

It’s easier for Taehyung to fall asleep on his bunk bed that night.

Chapter End Notes

Come talk to me on tumblr.
Someone has pointed out to me on tumblr that since this story currently plays in early 2011, Jungkook can’t possibly have seen Attack On Titan yet, because the anime didn’t come out until 2013. So maybe I might have made a mistake in the last chapter. Or maybe Jungkook’s actually a time traveler that only uses his power to watch anime. Who knows.

On a more serious note, thank you all again for leaving such kind comments behind. It makes me happy to know you’re enjoying the story. I’m sorry it took a while to update, but I’m finally back again. :) I hope you’re all having a wonderful October and that you’ll enjoy this next chapter. :) x

March 9th is Yoongi’s birthday. Taehyung doesn’t find out about it until midnight, because no one really thought to tell him. It’s nothing special. Everyone congratulates him. Jin calls, and relatively soon after, they go to sleep; early the next morning they’ll be back at the company.

“I’m sorry we couldn’t buy you anything,“ he overhears Namjoon saying to Yoongi over coffee, while they’re in the kitchen with Hoseok. Taehyung’s probably not meant to hear this conversation.

“You know that I don’t mind. I don’t need any presents. The one thing I wish for can’t be bought with money, and you know that."

“To debut,“ Hoseok sighs, “isn’t that all our birthday wishes?“

“Maybe by next year it’ll already have come true,“ Namjoon says. Taehyung notices how he tries to sound hopeful, but there’s bitterness in his voice that makes him swallow.

Jin brings a cake to the studio, and when Yoongi blows out the one candle on top of it with his eyes closed, Taehyung knows exactly what he wishes for at that moment.

It had never occurred to Taehyung that the other boys might not have much money either. Since the company provides them with necessities like food and the dorm, it’s a topic that doesn’t really come up. Jin might be the exception, considering he owns an actual car.

He wonders how much of an allowance the company gives the other boys per month. He knows that with the money he gets and the little savings he has, he won’t be able to pay for the rent of his shabby room much longer.

It’s a decision he soon has to make, whether he should take the risk and quit the contract. He’s not quite sure if he’s confident enough to believe that he won’t get kicked out of the company again. It’s one thing to be a prostitute with a home, but it’s an entirely different thing to be a prostitute without one. Taehyung knows that. He’s been there before for the first two months after he ran away.

“What’s going on in your pretty little head?“ Hoseok asks.
Taehyung blinks as he comes back to his surroundings, not having realized that he drifted off into his mind.

He doesn’t like that Hoseok called him pretty. He knows it’s just a set phrase, but the only people that have ever called him pretty were his clients, and Taehyung really doesn’t want to be reminded of them.

“Oh, nothing really,” he replies, having the urge to walk away from this conversation. But then he remembers what Namjoon told him -- he doesn’t interact enough with the other members -- and he can’t be a part of Bangtan Sonyeondan if he doesn’t have at least somewhat of a pretense of friendship with them.

“Actually I was thinking about that one dance move we learned the other day. I think I still don’t get it right.”

Taehyung knows for a fact that he gets it right, but he shows Hoseok an altered version of it that’s deliberately wrong. Hoseok seems ecstatic to help him work on it.

If there’s one thing that Taehyung knows, it’s that Hoseok can dance. He’s so ridiculously good at it, that it’s not even fair.

Seokjin envies him. He’s not shy about mentioning the way he wishes he could move like Hoseok does, but according to him his muscles just don’t work the way they are supposed to.

Jungkook looks up to him. He tries to imitate his moves and frowns when he gets it wrong.

Taehyung envies him as well. He’s the main dancer of the team. He’s got no real competition. He’s got a fixed space in the band. They need him in it just as much as he needs them to debut. His rap is still mediocre. Hoseok knows that, and everyone else knows it too.

And just like Hoseok’s rap, Taehyung is mediocre as well. But compared to Hoseok, who excels in at least one thing, Taehyung can’t even hold a candle to him. His singing is good but nothing outstanding, his rapping is non-existent, and his dancing - well, he tries hard, but sometimes trying isn’t enough.

But Namjoon said that for now effort counts, and Taehyung will be damned if he doesn’t at least pretend to try and work up a stable relationship with his band members.

Just as soon as Yoongi’s birthday comes, it goes away again. Seokjin makes seaweed soup at the dorm in the evening and stays the night. Nothing special really happens, but it isn’t hard to notice how the other members are more focused on Yoongi than on any other day. Hoseok even goes as far as offering to switch his bedsheets when Yoongi complains that he hasn’t properly washed his face the previous night and has make-up stains on his pillow now.

It’s weird to witness this familiarity between the five men. They all wished Yoongi a happy birthday as if he was a brother to them. Taehyung did so more distantly, like one would a coworker.

The days with the band continue on after that as nothing special. With March, the cold days are chased away along the snow, and the first flowers start blooming along the streets, the trees dressing up in pretty shades of green.

Taehyung makes an effort with Japanese, and he feels as if it pays off. He’s determined to be good at it, and even the teacher seems impressed. His dancing improves as well. He wasn’t particularly bad before, but he slowly gets a hang of how the muscles in his body move and what he has to do in order to make them move the way he wants them to. His vocal teacher is still convinced that she
can draw the best out of him, and at one point it's decided that he definitely does not have to rap.

Thankfully.

That’s what Namjoon and Yoongi are for, as well as Jungkook and Hoseok. Taehyung knows that Jungkook practices at all times, but he doesn’t realize just how concerning all of this is, until he stumbles upon him in the middle of the night practicing in the living room, long after everyone else has gone to sleep already (including Taehyung, he really just wanted to get a glass of water because he was thirsty).

Life is- well, it’s actually okay for Taehyung right now. And that’s definitely a first for him to admit. He doesn’t have to sell his body anymore, so how could it not be okay?

But of course where there are ups, there are downs as well. Adapting to living with five other men is hard. One time Yoongi tried to grab a glass while Taehyung was preparing breakfast for himself. Instead of asking Taehyung to move to the side, Yoongi decided to just reach around him to get a glass out of the cupboard. His front pressed against Taehyung’s back, and although there was nothing sexual in the gesture at all, Taehyung froze. He can’t help it. The knife he’d been holding clattered onto the cutting board and he inhaled sharply.

Yoongi realised that something is wrong quickly and apologised. Taehyung still felt unsettled for the rest of the day. And he knows that Yoongi noticed that something is up, and he’s sure that Yoongi went to talk to Namjoon about it judging by the way the leader looks at him.

It’s been approximately a month since Taehyung has become an unofficial part of the band, and with each day he learns something new. Like the fact that the band wasn’t supposed to be an idol group at all. That people have left it before it even debuted, and that Namjoon and Yoongi still struggle with the idea to debut as idols. He can see it in the way Namjoon’s jaw clenches during dance practice, and how disinterested Yoongi appears when they receive training regarding how to handle future fans. It can’t be easy to suddenly have to become someone that you can’t identify with. Taehyung thinks he knows how that feels.

His members, however, don’t learn much about him at all, except that they picked up rather quickly that Taehyung is not a fan of skinship. When in the beginning Jin would stroke the nape of his neck when Taehyung was upset, he would now just try to encourage him by whispering soft words, after the younger boy has shied away from the contact one too many times.

When Jungkook falls asleep on the short car ride from the Big Hit building to the dorm, he no longer leans on Taehyung, after he has pushed Jungkook away gently when falling asleep on him twice.

But it’s not like Taehyung doesn’t like skinship at all. He’s envious when he watches Hoseok and Jungkook watching a movie together and sharing a blanket, looking cozy and content. He too wants someone to lean on his shoulder like Jin does with Namjoon. It’s just not that easy for him to accept that kind of closeness, not after selling his body for so long.

Nowadays, he associates being touched with having to perform sexual favours. Would you've asked him two years ago, those sexual favours would have been pain and bruises. It’s not Taehyung’s fault that he reacts the way he does when someone approaches him, not when abuse is all he’s ever known to identify with the touch of someone else.

He really doesn’t know whether he’s glad or not that the other members accept his boundaries.

Jimin is an entirely different story. He’s started calling Taehyung “Tae” or even “Taetae” at times.
He likes to throw his arm around Taehyung’s shoulder and keep it there, even after Taehyung’s initial flinching. He doesn’t try to pull away from Jimin’s touch anymore, not unless he’s approached from behind.

They spend long nights in the dance studios, but they aren’t always practicing. Sometimes they’re studying. Sometimes they’re goofing around. Those days, Taehyung’s stomach will hurt from laughter, a feeling that’s still very foreign to him.

They’re currently in front of the mirror, stretching after Jimin had complained that he couldn’t dance any longer. He’s rambling away about how his day has been, when Taehyung spots it in the mirror, a figure looking in through the little window in the door that leads into the dance studio. The hallway outside is dark, however, so the face is in shadows, only recognizable because the light from the dance studio is filtering out the window. It’s not unusual that people walk past, even this late into the night, but usually no one lingers. Taehyung feels like the person standing there is looking directly at him, but when he turns around to look at the door directly, there’s no one there.

It’s strange, but maybe he’s just imagining it. Jimin doesn’t seem to have noticed anything, as he’s still telling Taehyung a story of how one of his classmates decided to bring water bombs to class and the following chaos that ensued.

They say their goodbye’s and Taehyung walks back to the dorm with his bag strapped over his shoulder. It’s finally warm enough to not need a hat anymore, and the trees are already budding. When he leaves the dorm in the morning, Taehyung can hear birds happily chirping their little songs these days. Spring is his favourite season.

When Taehyung arrives at the dorm, he finds that Namjoon, Yoongi and Hoseok have gone out. Jungkook is lying on the couch, wrapped into a blanket and watching some anime. He hasn’t been feeling too well the past few days, with a runny nose and some headache. Jin’s been worrying about the younger boy getting a fever if he doesn’t get enough rest.

“You’re home earlier than I thought, hyung,” Jungkook says. His voice is a bit scratchy. There’s an empty bowl in front of him that Taehyung suspects once held chicken noodle soup, the one that Jin brought to the studio from home this morning for Jungkook.

“Jimin was really tired today. What are you watching?”

“It’s called Spirited Away. It’s a Studio Ghibli movie. It only just started.”

“Mind if I join?”

Jungkook nods eagerly and shuffles around on the couch to make some space for Taehyung. He starts the movie from the beginning, although Taehyung insists that he doesn’t have to see the first few minutes to understand what’s going on.

It only takes Taehyung minutes to become really invested into this strange movie, and Jungkook half an hour to fall asleep. He falls against Taehyung with his eyes closed, the side of his body pressed against his and head resting on his shoulder. It feels strangely intimate, but Taehyung doesn’t push Jungkook away. It’s okay. He’s okay. Jungkook is just a boy who’s tired. He doesn’t mean him any harm.

So Taehyung continues to watch the movie, and Jungkook snores lightly next to him, courtesy of his blocked nose. When the three rappers come home somewhere near the end of the movie, they immediately quiet down when they spot Jungkook sleeping. Hoseok coos over how precious their youngest member looks. Namjoon catches Taehyung’s eyes and smiles. Taehyung smiles back,
before straightening the blanket that has slipped off Jungkook’s shoulder and returning his attention back to the movie.

Chapter End Notes

Come talk to me on tumblr. ;)


Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Thanks so much for all your lovely comments. I noticed that you guys especially pointed out that you like the pace and character development. I'm glad to hear that!

This next chapter's longer than the others, and for some reason it's my favourite. I had such a good time writing it. My beta said as well that it's the best one so far. I really don't know what it is about it, but I hope you'll enjoy it as well. :) x

See the end of the chapter for more notes

With the end of March, the last remains of cold air are outshone by the sun, and the cherry trees are swung into full bloom. It’s a beautiful sight.

Anime nights with Jungkook and the rest of the members are a weekly thing now. Taehyung explores parts of Seoul that he’s never been to before, mostly by the cheapest public transport he can find, with one of the members by his side, or even Jimin if both their schedules allow it. And if he can’t see Jimin during the day, he’ll talk to him at night, the display of his mobile phone the only source of light in his shared bedroom besides the window. Those are the times Taehyung has to muffle his laugh into his pillow as to not wake the others.

He’s handed in the notice concerning his shabby old room. Three more months, and then it will no longer be his. It’s not that these days Taehyung is incredibly confident in the fact that he’ll stay a member of Bangtan Sonyeondan, become an official one at that, but he’s doing his best to try. Namjoon said that his vocals have improved. Hoseok praises his dancing and claims the same. He’s making an effort, and if that’s not going to be enough to help him debut with the other boys, then Taehyung wants to at least say that it’s not like he didn’t fight to stay with them.

They’re talking a lot about concepts these days, and although Taehyung feels like he doesn’t have a say in this, they still ask his opinion. They’ve also mentioned a Twitter account - possibly a shared one for the entire band to show a sense of unity - and filming logs.

Bang PD-nim tells them to calm down at some point and to keep the most important thing in mind, which is music…and apparently fanservice. Hugging, and touches that look accidental or natural but are well intended. Kinda like skinship, only more intimate and specifically for the fans. Taehyung’s stomach churns when he hears about these things for the first time. It’s not the fact that he’s expected to do this kind of stuff with the other boys that makes him feel nauseous. It’s the idea that, again, his body is in a way touched by someone else against his will for the pleasure of strangers.

“You okay there?” Hoseok asks, who must have noticed the way all colour drained from Taehyung’s face upon hearing about this for the first time. He places a soft hand on Taehyung’s elbow as he sits right next to him and squeezes lightly in a way that Taehyung figures is supposed to be reassuring. “It’s just what the fans like to see. Tough image or not, we’re still going to be an idol group.”

“And if you tell us that you’re uncomfortable with something, we’ll of course take that into consideration as well,” Namjoon adds, who’s noticed the small interaction between them. “It
seriously sounds a lot worse than it is. We’re just living in the strange age were many fans would rather see their favourite idols with each other than with themselves."

The next afternoon, Taehyung’s roaming the hallways of BigHit with Jin, because they’ve got nothing better to do and Yoongi told them to fuck off as he was currently busy with a new song. Namjoon was in a meeting with some producers too and Hoseok and Jungkook were currently learning a dance, as they were chosen to be background dancers for another one of BigHit’s idols.

Jin is actually supposed to be studying, as he told Taehyung, but can’t bring himself to leave Taehyung bored and on his own for the afternoon, which is why he’s staying with him and they’re walking around aimlessly.

It’s when they come to the end of a hallway that parts left and right that Taehyung freezes.

“What’s wrong?” Jin wants to know, and Taehyung almost shushes him. He can hold himself back from doing that just barely. Gesturing for Jin to be quiet, he listens intently, but that’s hard to do over the sound of his heart beating so fast that he can hear it thumping.

He thought he’d heard a voice that he’s all too familiar with from a former client, a laugh that he’s heard one too many times in the past but can’t pin a face to it, too shocked to even process it. But now that he’s standing still and holding his breath, which is really hard to do when anxiety is coursing through his body in waves so loud he can’t hear it anymore.

Taehyung shudders, and then his body seems to thaw and he stumbles forward, looks left and right down the two corridors only to find them empty.

“You’re kind of scaring me,” Jin says. He’s trying to sound nonchalant, but Taehyung can hear the worry in his voice. Another incident that he’s sure Namjoon will hear about before the day ends. It seems to be kind of a thing between the boys to come to Namjoon and tell him about every single time that Taehyung acts weird. He knows because Namjoon is always the one to come to him and ask if he’s okay, mentioning offhandedly that he’s heard that something hasn’t seemed quite alright that day.

Namjoon’s a terrible actor. Taehyung can see right through the older boy approaching him every time one of the other members have ratted him out again.

“I just thought I heard someone,” Taehyung says. It’s the truth, isn’t it?

Jin looks at him with a raised brow, but then he shrugs his shoulders and drops the subject, instead continuing the conversation they’d been having about one of his university classes.

The voice haunts him through the rest of the day. Though surely it was just his imagination, right? Because why would a former client of his be here? At BigHit? Taehyung can only guess that he’s slept with people that are influential in the music scene. But what are the odds of one of them showing up here? Maybe because he’s looking for Taehyung? But Bang PD-nim doesn’t want him to be in the prostitution business anymore, so why would he bring a client here? No really, it’s just his mind playing tricks on him. There’s no way…

Except for if maybe he does plan on using Taehyung for his favours.

No.

Surely that’s not the case. Taehyung shouldn’t think like that anymore. All the others are hardworking and earnest in what they are doing. Bang PD-nim would never destroy their hard work for a chance to debut by renting Taehyung out to garner them favours.
Taehyung wonders what the boys would think about that. He can’t imagine that Namjoon would be in favor of it no matter how desperate he is to debut, and Jin either. He doesn’t know about Jungkook though. And with Yoongi and Hoseok he’s not all that sure. But if it helped them secure a place in music shows and have journalists report on them, to make the dream of Bangtan Sonyeondan reality, would Taehyung do it willingly?

Again, no.

He doesn’t want to go back to that. He doesn’t want to sell his boy again. Not even for the happiness of the others.

Surely the voice was just a product of sleep deprivation plus his screwed imagination. Still he can’t help but feel on edge that day, anxiety thrumming in his bloodstream.

It doesn’t help that he wakes up in the middle of the night, to hear the sound of someone masturbating in their shared bedroom. Whoever it is, Taehyung really can’t tell, tries to be as quiet as possible, probably presuming that all the others are asleep. But the sounds are too obvious and Taehyung squeezes his eyes shut, body lightly trembling against his will.

Of course he assumed that they masturbate. They’re all young men with needs after all, and masturbation is a form of stress relief, something that all of them need since they live the hectic life of a trainee. But knowing that they do it and hearing them do it himself are two entirely different things.

Taehyung’s not a prude. He masturbates too, sometimes in the shower, not because he feels horny but because it helps relax his muscles and sometimes he just feels the need to. It’s always a quick act however, not focusing on his pleasure but on a quick release. But now that he has his body to himself, the idea of sexual acts, no matter whom they are performed by, repulses him.

He doesn’t want to hear it. He doesn’t want to think about it. His body is his own now and he wants to keep it that way. He doesn’t want anyone to touch him, even though the memories remain, and the fear that this won’t last is so deeply ingrained into his brain that his body can’t help but react to the sound of one of his members seeking pleasure.

It continues for a while, before all Taehyung can hear is a muffled groan, before some shuffling occurs. After that it’s quiet again.

Taehyung can’t fall back asleep, his heartbeat not slowing down for a long time.

—

“Are you excited? You must be super excited. This is so exciting.” Jimin bounces around the dance studio with way too much energy. “Getting your stage name is super important. It needs to be something cool and mysterious.”

“Like Rap Monster?” Taehyung asks and they both laugh, because really what kind of stage name is Rap Monster? It’s cool and everything, but really it teeters on the edge of falling down the cliff that is awkwardness.

Tomorrow, Taehyung and Namjoon are going to see Bang PD-nim to pick out his stage name. It’s still not an official step for him to join the band, but they need to refer to him somehow when introducing the band to the important people behind the scenes. Taehyung’s ridiculously giddy about the prospect of it.

“Do you have any ideas?” Jimin wants to know.
“I don’t think that I actually get to choose.”

“From tomorrow on I’m only going to refer to you by your stage name.”

Taehyung pulls a face at that. He’d rather have Jimin continue to call him Tae, something that Hoseok has picked up on and sometimes does as well. Taehyung minds it a little bit, because it’s Jimin’s name for him. It’s something between the two of them and he feels strangely protective of it.

“Even if I have a stage name, I continue to be Taehyung though.”

Jimin laughs and pinches his cheek lightly. It’s a gesture that Taehyung has come to know by now. He doesn’t mind it all that much.

“Of course you’ll always be my Tae, even when you’re a big star and I’m still a BigHit trainee.”

Jimin invites him to join him and a few other trainees for bowling that evening, but Taehyung declines the offer. He’s already having a hard enough time befriending his own band members. The dancer pouts at that and makes Taehyung promise that he join them another time. The younger is hell-bent on making sure that this so called other time is never. There’s only so much social contact he can hold upright at once.

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Taehyung’s at a loss for words. Really. He notices the way Namjoon tenses next to him as well after Bang PD-nim had spoken.

“You want his stage name to be V?” Namjoon asks again for clarification. Taehyung is glad he does. He would have asked as well if he had found the words to. But there are no words left in him. It’s like someone punched him in the face and he lost his glasses, and now he can’t find them anymore.

Bang PD-nim confirms the question. Namjoon draws his eyebrows together and looks mightily confused. At least one of them reacts appropriately to this conversation, Taehyung thinks. He’s not entirely sure how to make the muscles in his face function anymore, how to turn the blank face he’s currently sporting into a frown to show his distaste.

“I’m sorry, but this doesn’t make any sense. First you tell him not to return to prostitution again under any circumstances as long as he’s a BigHit trainee, and then you decide that his stage name should literally be the same name he used when selling his body?”

Rumor has it that Namjoon is really smart. Like a whole new level of smart that Taehyung can’t even imagine. Jungkook had told him so once and Jin had mentioned once in passing too. Taehyung thinks that they might be right about this, because Namjoon’s argument has good backing.

“The V is supposed to stand for victory. He’s overcome his past and won over it.”

That sounds plausible. It still sounds like something that Taehyung doesn’t want to do though.

“You’re going to all this trouble to try and erase Taehyung’s past, just to turn around and literally brand him with it?”

Maybe Taehyung should pay proper attention to this part of the conversation. He doesn’t know anything about his past being erased. This is news to him. And he also has no idea what that means. But again, yes, Namjoon brings a good argument to the table. Taehyung thinks that Bang
PD-nim looks a bit surprised. Maybe he’s not used to one of his sheep standing up to him. At this very moment Taehyung doesn’t even realize how much Namjoon speaks up for him, but once he has a clear head again he’ll come to appreciate it.

“All I ask you to do is think about it,“ Bang PD-nim says, addressing Taehyung now. The younger boy nods. What else can he do? He doesn’t have the right to talk back to the CEO of BigHit. He’s not a prodigy rapper that’ll become the leader of an idol group. He’s just a prostitute that’s been given a once-in-a-lifetime chance.

Namjoon takes him to the cafeteria afterwards. All the dance studios are occupied and Yoongi is currently in their tiny studio. Since there’s not much going on in there anyway, besides a few people sating their coffee addiction, Taehyung thinks it's a perfect spot.

“Are you okay? I really don’t know who came up with a stupid idea like that.“ He seems angry. Angry at Taehyung? Taehyung recoils at the thought, because anger brings pain. But Namjoon notices and his facial features soften, and that’s when Taehyung realizes that he is angry for him.

Huh. That’s something entirely new.

“Bang PD-nim really seems to want me to take that name.“

They’re the first words he’s said since the suggestion was made. His voice is a bit shaky.

“Just because they want you to take that name doesn’t mean that you’ll have to. Jungkook’s name was meant to be Seagull, before he decided that he’d rather stick to his real name. You’ve got a chance to choose.“

“I just don’t get it.“

“Me neither,“ Namjoon replies, before leaning forward and looking directly into Taehyung’s eyes. “Remember though that you have a choice.“

He puts a lot of emphasis on the word “choice“ and Taehyung finds it weird. He also notices how Namjoon is about to put his hand on Taehyung’s knee, before redrawing again. If he wasn’t so preoccupied with loathing the stage name BigHit wanted him to take on, he’d have put some thoughts into Namjoon’s actions and what they mean.

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“V is so mysterious,“ Jimin is of course full of excitement about this. “What does it mean?“

“It means victory,“ Taehyung says.

It means despair, is what Taehyung wants to say.

“That’s so cool. You’re guaranteed to win all the awards then.“

Taehyung doesn’t have the heart to tell him that he really doesn’t want this name for himself.

“You can be the member that no one knows anything about, but is surrounded by a thousand ridiculous rumors that no one believes. Like there’s J-Hope and Rap Monster, and then there’s V. And everyone will ask about V, because that’s such a good name it’ll make people curious, y’know?“

Jimin’s going on a mile a minute about this ‘incredible stage name’, as he dubbed it. Taehyung
wants to say that if he likes it so much, he should just take it for himself. He bites his tongue.

The other members have mixed reactions to the name. Jin says that he likes it, and Hoseok seems rather indifferent, although he mentions that there could be worse names. Jungkook’s ecstatic about it. He seems to share the same opinion as Jimin, that it’s super mysterious and that makes it really cool.

“They wanted to name me after a bird,” he admits with a dry voice. “Because seagulls are a thing in Busan. I love Busan, but I really don’t want to have a bird name. But V for victory, that’s awesome.”

Yoongi tells him that it’s a good name in his opinion, but that it’s Taehyung’s choice whether to take it or not, as the stage name is something he’ll be stuck with. It’s strangely similar to the wording that Namjoon used but he shrugs it off.

It all hits Taehyung when he's brushing his teeth that night, before going to bed. He’d been looking at the mirror a second too long, looking at himself and wondering why he should again be stuck with a name that depicted two terrible years of his life. He was supposed to have moved away from this all when he joined the band.

A new life. A new Taehyung. Not the child that suffered abuse at his father’s hand, not the teenager that ran away out of desperation, only to become homeless and end up a prostitute on the streets. He’s supposed to be a new him, so why does this name come back to haunt him?

Tears spring into his eyes, and sobs burst out of him violently. He tries to muffle them, but he really can’t. Presses the back of his hand against his lips, but the sounds come out regardless and the tears keep flowing.

There’s a knock on the door.

“Taehyung?”

Yoongi.

The only reply he receives is another sob.

“Are you okay? What’s wrong?”

The door handle goes down and only now does Taehyung realize in a panic that he hasn’t actually locked it. His eyes meet Yoongi’s, both of them looking at another in surprise, before Taehyung’s body wracks with another sob. He turns away to try and hide from Yoongi, feeling pathetic that he can’t control his own feelings.

“Can I come in? Is it okay if I join you?”

Taehyung doesn’t answer, only a whine that he can't keep in rises in his throat. He hears movements and the door closes again, then there’s a hand on his shoulder that he shies away at first, but that hand guides him to sit down on the closed toilet lid and pale fingers begin to gently dab his tear tracks with toilet paper.

“It’s okay. Whatever’s bothering you, it’s okay. You need to breathe, Taehyung. Take deep breaths for hyung,okay?”

He tries to follow the orders, because his lungs are burning at this point, and he's gasping for air. Yoongi breaths with him, tries to set an example pattern for Taehyung to follow.
“Hyung,” Taehyung whimpers in a raspy voice, when the violent sobs have finally subsided and all that’s left behind are quiet sobs. He doesn’t even realize the word slipping from his lips, and he also doesn’t realize the look of pain on Yoongi’s face.

“Everything’s alright, Taehyung. Hyung’s here. Hyung’s got you now.\“

Namjoon finds them like that a few minutes later, Taehyung sitting on the closed toilet lid with swollen, red eyes, and Yoongi crouching in front of him, trying to calm the younger down again. He doesn’t ask questions but is quick to help Yoongi bring Taehyung to bed.

“I’m sorry,” Taehyung whispers when the both of them tell him to get some sleep.

“You don’t have to be sorry,\“ Yoongi says. “You’re not the first one to be in the bathroom with a panic attack. We’ve all been there.\“

Namjoon turns off the lights in the room as he’s the last to leave.

“Taehyung?\“

“Hm?\“ The sound is quiet. Taehyung’s eyes burn, and he’s so exhausted that he can barely keep them open anymore.

“Remember that you have a choice, okay?\“

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The aftermath of the disaster that is the possibility of Taehyung’s stage name being V isn’t all that rosy. Namjoon promises to talk to Bang PD-nim again about it, and he keeps his promise. Before the talk he seems really optimistic in being able to change the CEO’s opinion. However, he comes back with a grave expression on his face and tells Taehyung that Bang PD-nim is really set on giving him that name and that it’s going to be hard to persuade him otherwise.

It’s a bitter pill for him to swallow after all the talk about choices just twenty-four hours earlier.

Taehyung’s willing to swallow it nonetheless, if that’s what it takes to become an official member of Bangtan Sonyeondan.

Chapter End Notes

Have a happy Halloween. I'll see you with the next chapter in November.

Come talk to me on tumblr. :)
Chapter Notes

AMA’S? ELLEN? KIMMEL?? WHAAAAAT???

Thanks for all your kind words. Winter's coming soon, so I'm preparing winter-themed fics next to doing NaNoWriMo and trying to keep up with this fic. November's busy, but it's going well. Hope you enjoy this next chapter. :) x

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It’s weird how living with someone long enough can turn a stranger into a friend. Can Taehyung call the other members his friends? It’s complicated.

There’s been a weird shift since that night Yoongi found Taehyung in the bathroom. The younger boy doesn’t really know what it is, but something has definitely changed. It’s hard to describe, but it’s suddenly like Yoongi has become protective in a way? When they all eat together, Yoongi makes sure that Taehyung’s got enough food on his plate before eating himself. He asks him how he slept every morning, and when Taehyung’s talking to one of the managers, Yoongi will question the nature of their conversation.

Namjoon’s different as well. He always asks Taehyung for his opinion now, always gives him a bloody choice. It’s come to a point where it’s almost annoying: does he want orange juice or apple juice; would he prefer beef or chicken; what flavour does he want for his ramen? They're things that Taehyung doesn’t even care about, but he thinks that Namjoon feels guilty about promising Taehyung a choice in choosing his stage name, when that really wasn't the case. Bang PD-nim stuck with V. He’s insisting on it, and no one can tell him why he’s so obsessed with it. No one except for Namjoon maybe, who starts acting really weird whenever Taehyung brings it up.

So Taehyung doesn’t have a choice but to get used to V again. He asks the other members to call him by his name unless necessary, and asks Jimin to do so as well.

Friends…

Jimin’s a friend. That much Taehyung is sure of. Namjoon? Maybe. He’s definitely more than just an acquaintance, but he’s also the leader and that’s what makes Taehyung hesitant in calling him as such. He’s sure that if push came to shove, Namjoon would have no trouble throwing him under the bus.

He can definitely call Jungkook a friend. They often watch anime together way into the night, when both of them can barely keep their eyes open. For some weird reason, Jungkook seems to admire him a lot. It’s stupid, because Taehyung hasn’t done anything admirable. But Jungkook looks at him wide-eyed, and whatever Taehyung says, the younger boy agrees.

Hoseok likes to say, “He’s the best maknae there is,” Maybe that’s true. Taehyung’s lacking the social skills to judge whether a maknae really looks up to his hyungs the way Jungkook does.

Hoseok’s a different story. He still feels like a stranger to Taehyung. They talk, and he’s a great dance teacher, but somehow they don’t click. Seokjin, on the other hand, is someone Taehyung
gets along with easily. He’s funny and caring, and he reminds Taehyung of his grandmother. Maybe that’s because she was the only person that’d ever cared for him before. In a weird way, Taehyung could almost say that he feels fond of the man.

And then there’s Yoongi.

Hyung. That’s what Taehyung called him once, and although he hasn’t spoken the word out loud again, he does refer to Yoongi this way in his head. He used to intimidate Taehyung the most, the serious look on his face, his no-nonsense attitude. But after he’d calmed him down in the bathroom, Taehyung sees him in an entirely different light. It’s not like there’s a glowing halo above his head, but he seems kinder. More approachable. Even with the look on his face that says back the fuck off.

Somehow, Taehyung feels like he’s slowly becoming a genuine part of Bangtan Sonyeondan.

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Seokjin’s taking Jungkook out to the Han river on a sunny day in June. They’re planning to go biking along the river and then going to grab some food. It sounds like a nice way to spend the day, so when Seokjin asks if Taehyung wants to join them, the boy doesn’t hesitate to agree. There’s something so normal about this, the kind of normalcy that Taehyung never really experienced in his childhood. Of course he used to have friends and did fun things with them from time to time, but whenever he dared to go out, the reminder of his father possibly waiting for him to come home in anger, lingered at the back of his mind and dampened the joy.

“I think it’s important to take Jungkook out when we can on our days off,” Seokjin says to Taehyung as he’s busy packing some sandwiches into a backpack. “He’s still so young and I promised his parents that I’d take good care of him when he came to Seoul. It’d probably benefit him more to make some friends outside of the company, but since he’s lacking time to do that, it’s up to me to take him out.”

The doorbell rings, interrupting Jin in adding bottles to the backpack.

“Can you get that? It’s probably Jimin.”

Taehyung’s not entirely sure how it happened, but somehow they had ended up inviting Jimin to join them as well. It was Seokjin’s suggestion, and Taehyung had gotten ridiculously excited about the idea.

So Taehyung lets Jimin in, and since it’s the boy’s first time at their dorm, he gives him a short tour while Seokjin finishes packing their backpack and Jungkook gets ready to leave.

“Your dorm’s nicer than mine,” Jimin notes.

“It’s a dump.”

“It’s still a nicer dump than my place. Way more spacious.”

Taehyung thinks that it’s hard to imagine because their dorm is already ridiculously small for the five people sharing it, which must mean Jimin lives in an actual shoebox.

It’s been years since Taehyung last sat on a bike, a hazy memory of the street that his grandmother’s house stood in, bloody knees and tear-streaked cheeks from falling one too many times. His grandma had put colourful plasters on the wounds and given him chocolate pudding, and two hours later all pain had been forgotten and he had tried at it again, until he finally was able to ride a bike without faltering.
Since it’s been so long, it’s a wobbly affair. He constantly feels like he’s going to fall, but the other boys are patient with him and give him some time to try it out and get used to it again. He only crashes twice, and soon enough he’s getting the hang of it again. They’re going at a slower pace for Taehyung’s benefit, and Taehyung really doesn’t mind.

The wind is in his hair, the warm sun rays in his face. He looks to the river, to the people walking and laughing and having a good time. He’s listening to the conversation the others are having, but never really replies, too preoccupied with taking all his surroundings in.

Around noon, they spread out a blanket on a patch of grass and eat the sandwiches Seokjin packed, before the oldest pulls out a frisbee and they start playing. Taehyung is the first to exit the game; he doesn’t have the stamina that the other’s have yet, although he’s gained weight by now, he’s still skinnier than all of them. But at least he can’t count his ribs in the mirror anymore, and his cheeks have also filled out a bit. But when dance practice runs late, he feels dizzy and it’s hard to catch his breath on days when his condition is bad. He still gets tired faster than the rest of the boys too.

Seokjin is second to join him.

“It’s because hyung is old,“ Jungkook teases with a wide smile.

The older boy complains vociferously about the disrespect shown to him, while plopping down on the blanket next to Taehyung.

“Not all of us can be children still, and no one called you old when you left the game,“ Jin mutters.

“It’s a universal rule to pick on the oldest.“

Jin wants to reply, but then they hear Jimin scream and both look over to the boys playing, only to see Jungkook stumbling as he tries to catch the frisbee, falling and rolling onto the grass, before pushing himself on his knees, both arms stretched away, in one hand the green frisbee and a proud smile on his face.

Jimin is doubling over from laughing as he tries to clap, and Taehyung can’t stop himself from laughing as well when he sees Jungkook’s nose scrunch up in that way that let’s him know that Jungkook is about to burst into laughter as well.

“That was amazing! We should’ve filmed that,“ Jin calls over to them, and by now they’ve made enough of a commotion that some of the people surrounding them look over to see what is going on.

Once he has control over himself again, Jimin wipes the tears from the corners of his eyes, and Taehyung places his hand on his flat stomach, taking deep breaths to calm down as well. The two others pick up their game again, and Jin looks at Taehyung with a smile. Taehyung doesn’t dare to think that way, but it looks almost fond.

“I’ve never seen you laugh like that, you’re always so serious. It looks good on you though.“

Feeling a blush rising in his cheeks, Taehyung looks away, unsure how to answer.

“Namjoon told me that when you joined us, you had a lot of problems, which is why it was hard for you to open up. He didn’t tell me the specifics, but he was worried about you not being able to fit in. I think it’s safe to say that his worry is no longer a valid concern.“

They’re both looking over the Han river now, watching the sunlight reflect on the surface and
make the water look as if it’s glistening.

“Not all of my problems are resolved yet,” Taehyung answers. It feels weird to admit that to someone else, someone who doesn’t actually know his worries. No one really does. The only person Taehyung ever talked to about anything was his grandma. Since her death, there hasn’t been anyone he’s ever opened up to.

“That’s okay. You have us now. Once you feel comfortable enough to share them with us, we can solve your problems together.”

Taehyung really hopes that Jin isn’t looking over, because there are tears welling up in his eyes that he’s desperately trying to blink away without anyone noticing.

“Thank you,” he murmurs, and half a second later, as if he adds it as an afterthought, “hyung.”

The day shapes up to be one of Taehyung’s favourite days ever. They bike some more and go for dinner - it’s Jin’s treat - and after that, they decide to watch a movie in theatre, because why the hell not.

“Green Lantern” is the movie they go to see, and Jungkook’s really excited about it, because he loves superheroes. Because Taehyung doesn’t know anything about them at all, Jungkook and Jimin try to give him a crash course, but in the end they’re throwing around so many names and talking about so many different universes that Taehyung ends up even more confused than before. They get popcorn and sweets and sit in the second to last row, and Taehyung really enjoys the movie. He doesn’t admit to any of them that it was his first time in the theatre.

When Taehyung and Jungkook pile into the dorm at night - Jin had driven them back with his car after dropping off Jimin - only Namjoon is still awake. He’s sitting on the couch wearing glasses, a few papers in his hands.

“You two look like you’ve had too much sugar,” he observes as they giggle together over something that he doesn’t even try to understand. “Did you have a good time?”

“The best,” Jungkook says, and Taehyung agrees with him wholeheartedly. “We were lucky with the weather when we were at the river. There’s tons of clouds in the sky now. I think we’re going to get a storm tonight.”

“What are you looking over?” Jungkook inquires then, “Or are you writing a song...“

All of a sudden Namjoon shuffles the papers in his hands into a single pile and presses them against his chest. Almost as if they are not supposed to see them.

“Some boring company stuff,” he says. His voice quivers just slightly. Maybe Jungkook doesn’t notice it, but Taehyung can recognize a lie from a mile away when he hears it. He’s heard them all his life, so he doesn’t miss the way Namjoon’s eyes flit to him right when Jungkook asks, before going back to the younger. There’s something in Namjoon’s hands that the two aren’t supposed to know about, and it only piques Taehyung’s interest the more to read what’s on it.

But he doesn’t press it.

After all, Taehyung knows best what it’s like to keep a secret or two that no one’s supposed to know.
That's the end of chapter 11. I hope you enjoyed it and would love to know your thoughts on it. The next chapter is almost finished, so the next update won't be too long in the future.

Come talk to me on tumblr. :)


Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for your kind words on the last chapter. :) I don't know if you know how uplifting and motivating your lovely comments actually are. I'm sorry this took a while. It's unbeta'd. I tried to iron out all the mistakes, but I'm not a native speaker so there's only so much I can do. Hope that you enjoy nonetheless. :) x

EDIT: This chapter is beta'd now. :)
before in his life.

So yes, Namjoon’s obviously trying to hide something from Jungkook and himself. Taehyung
doesn’t know if he hides it from the other members as well, but either way it’s unfair. What
happened to the group sticking together and all that stuff he spouted when Taehyung first joined
them? Not that Taehyung can claim that he’s the most honest person of them all.

But that’s something entirely different.

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A thunderstorm keeps Taehyung awake at night. They are more common at this time of the year,
when summer’s still young. They often show up so quickly that it’s hard to be fast enough to seek
shelter in buildings. The blue sky tricks innocent people into thinking that they’re safe in keeping
their umbrellas at home, before sneaking up on them with rain.

Taehyung hates thunderstorms. He’s never liked loud noises, not since his father decided to shatter
an empty beer bottle close to his head. These sounds make him anxious. Rationally he knows that
thunderstorms can’t hurt him, or that the sound of broken glass isn’t painful, or that a car that honks
won’t mean him any harm, but it’s still hard to stop the trembling of his hands once he’s startled by
things like these.

And it’s so hard to fall asleep when the anxiety’s thrumming through his veins.

Taehyung almost misses the whimper after a particularly loud thunder. It’s worse in cities, the way
the thunder resounds between the tall buildings. But the whimper is loud enough for him to pick
up, and for a second Taehyung freezes because please, not again. He doesn’t think he’d be able to
handle the sound of someone masturbating and thunder all at once. There’s only so much he can
take.

But then there’s no other sound and Taehyung thinks that maybe it was just his imagination, before
the next roll of thunder crashes through the room, followed by another faint noise.

And oh. That’s not the sound of someone who enjoys pleasure. Taehyung’s most certainly sure that
it’s the sound of fear.

He’s been lying on his back and staring at the ceiling while waiting for the storm to pass so he can
finally fall asleep, but now Taehyung’s pushing himself up to look around the room. He only sees
silhouettes illuminated by the artificial light coming in from a street lamp outside. No moonlight
today, because the sky’s hung with clouds.

Taehyung knows for a fact that it’s not Namjoon he’s heard, because even though he can’t see his
face he can hear him snore. And Hoseok and Yoongi both have their eyes closed as well and seem
to be peacefully sleeping.

That leaves Jungkook. But that’s ridiculous, because Jungkook’s not scared of anything. He plays
with spiders like they’re his pets before setting them free and he laughs at jump-scares the loudest.

It’s just not possible, but Taehyung has to make sure. Instead of saying something in fear of waking
up any of the others, he climbs down from his bunk bed as quietly as he can. Lightning illuminates
the room for a second once his bare feet touch the ground, being quickly succeeded by thunder that
makes Taehyung shiver. His eyes are on the mattress that Jungkook is lying on, and he watches
how the boy shifts under his blanket. Jungkook’s one to never use his blanket, not since the days
have been getting warmer, and Taehyung’s heart aches when he realises that Jungkook might be
hiding beneath it out of fear, the way that he used to hide under his blanket back at home when he
was still a child.

He walks over to Jungkook’s mattress quietly and kneels down beside it.

“Kookie?”

Keeping his voice quiet as to not wake the others, Taehyung lays a hand on what he thinks might be Jungkook’s shoulder under the blanket.

The younger boy startles and his head peaks out. His black hair is tousled, and tear tracks are on his cheeks.

“Oh Kookie,” Taehyung sighs. Without thinking he lets his fingers run through the boy’s hair, a touch that he hopes spends comfort.

More thunder, and Jungkook squeezes his eyes shut, and before Taehyung can comprehend what’s happening, Jungkook has shifted to rest his head on Taehyung’s lap, pressed his face into Taehyung’s stomach. Taehyung can feel his t-shirt dampening where Jungkook’s cheeks are pressed against it, and the unease he’s felt from the loud noise disappears, because Jungkook’s in distress and Taehyung needs to protect.

He’s patting the younger boy’s back. At first it’s awkward, but then it starts to feel natural. He hopes the soft touch gives Jungkook some reassurance that everything’s okay.

“Thunder can’t hurt you, you know? I used to be scared of it as well, but it’s only the sound that air makes when it expands after a lightning bolt.”

“You were scared of thunder as well?” Jungkook asks with a meek voice. There might be a hint of embarrassment in there, but Taehyung’s not going to stoop so low as to tease Jungkook about something he’s afraid of.

“I still am sometimes. The loud noise startles me. And many other people are scared of thunder as well. It’s nothing to be embarrassed about.”

With the thunderstorm disappearing over the course of the next half an hour, Jungkook’s unease disappears as well. He’s still snuffling a little, but he’s finally latched off Taehyung and his cheeks aren’t wet anymore. Taehyung’s glad about that. He doesn’t want to see Jungkook cry ever again, that’s a sight that really pains him.

“You should get some sleep, you’ve got school tomorrow,” Taehyung whispers as he ruffles the boy’s hair. He can’t help the fondness in his voice.

Jungkook groans and lets his head fall back down on his pillow. Taehyung’s about to get up, when suddenly Jungkook’s hand wraps around his wrist, and Taehyung has to hold himself back from actually ripping it out of his grip.

“Stay?”

The question is asked so quietly that Taehyung could choose to ignore it if he wanted to. And for a second he considers doing that. But then Jungkook’s looking up at him with hopeful eyes. He’s a person that needs physical contact to calm down. Taehyung’s seen it in the way Jin hugs him and Hoseok rubs his shoulders and even Yoongi, who doesn’t seem all that thrilled about skinship either, lets the youngest of the band cuddle up to him on the couch as well sometimes.

“Scoot over,” Taehyung says and Jungkook happily complies to the demand.
It’s weird to lie next to someone on a mattress, and all of Taehyung’s instincts tell him to get off again as quickly as he can, but then Jungkook shuffles closer and rests his head on Taehyung’s shoulder, whispers a “thank you” into the crook of his neck and Taehyung’s muscles start to relax.

It’s okay.

This is okay.

Jungkook feels soft next to him and Taehyung can smell his shampoo. The younger boy’s breath tickles his neck and somehow Taehyung finds comfort in all of it.

———

They’re at the dance studio and Taehyung, which doesn’t really come as a surprise to anyone, is drenched in sweat again. Hoseok’s praising him though, so it’s okay, and Jungkook’s also completely soaked. However, the younger one’s not having trouble keeping up with the dance routine. Taehyung’s always a beat behind.

Namjoon’s entering the room. He’s been gone for about two hours for some important meeting. Talks about sponsors and whatnot. Taehyung hasn’t been listening closely, too focused on finally getting the choreography right.

“Tae, can you come with me real quick?” he asks.

Taehyung’s just opened a bottle of water.

“I’ll be with you in a second.”

He guzzles almost half the water down at once, because he’s so thirsty he feels like he’s drying up from the inside. From experience he knows that he’ll regret this a minute later, when the water sloshes around in his empty stomach uncomfortably while dancing, but he can’t quite bring himself to care right now.

“Taehyung-ah, right now,” Namjoon says, and there’s an urgency in his voice that Taehyung’s never heard before. Namjoon’s looking down the hallway as if he’s expecting someone to come. He’s acting weird is what he’s doing.

Really weird.

“I told you I’ll be with you in a second,” Taehyung repeats as he screws the bottle shut again. By now Hoseok and Jungkook are also paying attention to the both of them, and when Taehyung catches Jungkook’s eyes the younger boy raises an eyebrow as if to say “See, I told you he’s been acting weird.”

“What’s the hurry about?” Hoseok intercepts, obviously not liking the strange mood that’s now in the dance studio.

Namjoon looks like he’s about to start talking, but then his head whips back again to look down the hallway and although Taehyung can’t hear it, he can see the way Namjoon’s lips shape into a tirade of swearwords.

And then voices coming from the hallway. Multiple voices? No, just two. Taehyung can’t identify them though.

So Namjoon comes into the studio and he heads straight for Taehyung. The younger boy’s
confused when suddenly Namjoon grabs him by the shoulders and searches for eye contact with him.

“Whatever happens, you need to stay calm. Okay? Don’t let anyone notice anything.”

Notice what, Taehyung wants to ask. He’s so confused. But then Namjoon has let go and stands next to Taehyung, one arm draped over his shoulder and facing the door, where two men are entering.

It’s Bang PD-nim, and Taehyung doesn’t miss the look the CEO is shooting Namjoon after his eyes dart to Taehyung. Why does he get the feeling that the two of them wanted to have Taehyung out of the room?

Taehyung fails to catch the glance that Namjoon sends in return, because suddenly Bang PD-nim steps aside and all the air is punched out of Taehyung’s lungs at once as he sees the second person standing behind him. He feels like he’s crumbling, Namjoon’s hand squeezing his shoulder tightly as if to hold him up.

Mr. Kim.

In the flesh.

In the dance studio.

Their eyes meet and Taehyung is frozen. But then Mr. Kim looks at Hoseok and he looks at Jungkook, and Taehyung wants to scratch the man’s eyes out because how dare he look at the people Taehyung cares about? He has no right to look at them, even less to touch them in any way with his filthy hands.

Taehyung wants to scream when his bandmates start bowing to the older man, as Bang PD-nim introduces him as an old friend interested in sponsoring the band, enthralled by their concept. And then he realizes that maybe he’s not been paranoid at all. The shadowy person looking at him when he was at the dance studio with Jimin, the voice he heard when walking down the hallway with Jin. And by the way that Namjoon is gripping his shoulder, as if hoping to provide an anchor for Taehyung, he realizes all at once that Namjoon knew all along. And his stage name. V. It all makes sense now.

Every inch of his skin itches, and he wants to scream at the other two band members present in the room that look at Mr. Kim with adoration now. A possible sponsor. That’s a huge deal. Taehyung wants to scream at them to run away from this man as fast as they can.

Taehyung blanks out completely on anything else that Bang PD-nim says, too occupied with his own thoughts, the panic that’s building up inside his chest. He only starts to tune in again after Bang PD-nim introduced each of them by name and said that they’ll be leaving now.

“Hoseok-ssi, Jungkook-ssi, Taehyung-ssi, it was a pleasure meeting you,” Mr. Kim says, and maybe it’s only Taehyung’s mind playing tricks on him, but when the man used Taehyung’s name - his real name, for fucks sake, the one and last thing he had always protected from his clients - a shark-like grin adorned his face that sent shivers down Taehyung’s spine.

Jungkook, Namjoon and Hoseok bow again. Taehyung’s still frozen, and he remains that way even after the door closes behind both older men. Namjoon lets go of his shoulder, and suddenly Taehyung feels like he can move again. He slumps into himself, drops to the floor and rakes his fingers through his hair, gasping for air like a fish out of water.
Voices surround him and he can see shoes through his blurry vision, feels hands on his shoulders that he tries to shrug off.

Not Mr. Kim. Not here. Not now. Taehyung’s supposed to be done with that life. He’s supposed to be free of it. Mr Kim’s not supposed to be in his life anymore. Taehyung knows what he’s done with his filthy hands, the way he likes to touch underage boys for his own pleasure. Oh god, Jungkook and Jimin. They can’t be in the same building as this despicable man. They can’t. It’s not safe. What if Taehyung’s not what he wants anymore and he goes after the others? Taehyung needs to protect them. Keep them safe.

Taehyung flinches as water pours over his head, and he looks up, his thoughts as hazy as his vision.

“Are you back with us?”

Namjoon, crouching next to him, looking worried. Hoseok, with a bottle that’s now empty in his hand, looking confused. Jungkook, standing further away and watching with wide eyes at the scene unfolding.

“You need to pull yourself together,” Namjoon says. The words sound harsh, but that’s not the intention behind them. Taehyung understands. It helps, those direct words instead of coddling. Breathing becomes easier again. Slowly.

“Hoseok, can you and Kookie give us some space?”

Namjoon’s request is granted. Taehyung is glad. He doesn’t want Jungkook to see him like that. Hoseok neither, but Jungkook’s still so young. But at the same time he’s full of fear thinking about the two roaming the hallways of the building with the knowledge that Mr. Kim could be behind any corner. Waiting. Preying.

“You knew,” Taehyung croaks out. “You knew the entire time, didn’t you?”

“I’m sorry, Tae.”

Taehyung slaps away the hand that settled on his shoulder, the touch searing hot on his skin.

“How could you?” He spits out the words, and they taste like venom on his tongue. Namjoon had known the entire time, and never said a word. No warning. Nothing.

“I wanted to tell you, but I didn’t know how.”

It’s hard to keep the tears of frustration in, especially when Namjoon’s voice is wavering like that, and his face showing remorse.

“I’m sorry,” he repeats and Taehyung believes that he means it, but that doesn’t make the pain any better.

“So he’s a sponsor then? What’s he want in return? Me? Am I going to be handed over to him to make some dough for us?”

“You know I would never-“

“Cut the crap. You kept it a secret from me that a former client was going to sponsor us. The former client that got me into BigHit in the first place.” Taehyung cuts Namjoon off harshly. He doesn’t want to hear excuses. It hurts. The fear isn’t so bad, the pain is worse. In a way, Taehyung feels betrayed by Namjoon. “What happened to being a team? To sticking together, having each
other’s back? Because right now it feels more like you’ve backstabbed me than anything else.”

The leader’s just staring at Taehyung now, mouth open but not responding. Speechless? That’s what he looks like.

Taehyung pushes himself up from the floor. His legs feel wobbly, like they’re made out of jelly. Namjoon reaches out to him to steady him, but Taehyung takes a step back.

“Don’t touch me.”

Namjoon drops his hand.

“It’s not what you think, Taehyung-ah,” he says. Taehyung shakes his head, not wanting to hear anything else.

“Honestly right now I don’t know what to think.”

Taehyung doesn’t wait for Namjoon to answer. He needs to get out. Away. As far away as he can. This was supposed to be his safe space. The dance studio with the mirrored wall had become Taehyung’s sanctuary. BigHit had become his sanctuary. And now it’s not anymore, because there’s a monster roaming the hallways, and Taehyung just knows that it’s not a coincidence that Mr. Kim is here. That Mr. Kim wants to become a sponsor for Bangtan Sonyeondan. He’s just not sure if it’s been planned all along, but Taehyung knows that Mr. Kim is here for him. And he knows that he doesn’t want to pay the price for what the other is willing to give in return.

He runs out of the studio, ignoring the way Namjoon calls after him. So maybe he almost runs into a few people in the hallways, but who cares. And maybe he leaves behind his bag and his phone and everything else as he runs out of the building and onto the streets of Seoul. Taehyung can’t seem to stop himself anymore. He doesn’t know where he’s going, but his feet are taking him further and further, and his lungs ache from running for too long.

Maybe it’s a coincidence that brings Taehyung to the place he ends up in, or maybe it’s his subconscious. He doesn’t know. But the next time he’s actually aware of his surroundings, he’s standing in an all too familiar spot that he’s only ever occupied at night-time. The street corner that he used to wait at for hours, for months, in the hopes of cars stopping by to provide him enough money for food for the next day.

It looks different during the day time. The mystery of darkness isn’t present in every corner. The street and the walls are visibly dirty. More cars drive past. Taehyung leans against the wall that he used to lean against so many times, with one foot propped up and acting like he didn’t have a care in the world.Acting like he didn’t mind standing there and waiting for his next client. Acting like he’d had his life figured out when really he had always been falling apart on the inside. This time, Taehyung can’t manage to stand upright. He slides down the wall with his back against rough bricks until his ass hits the sidewalk. He doesn’t think about the disgusting grime that he’s sitting on. He doesn’t really think about anything. There’s not even tears prickling in his eyes, and the only reason his breathing is so heavy is because he’s still out of breath from running.

Taehyung’s numb, and he’s not moving for hours, not even when the sun hides behind buildings and the lamps turn on. People walk past and don’t notice him, and some walk past and do notice him, but when he doesn’t respond to them they walk away.

There’s a car coming to a stop at the curb. Taehyung ignores it. He doesn’t even care to find out who it is. Maybe a former client. Maybe a new client. If they want him, they have to come and get Taehyung. He’s not going to move. He’s not an offer anymore, at least not on the street. But maybe
at BigHit. Isn’t it ridiculous, how this used to be his biggest fear?

He hears a car door open and close again.

He’d always wondered if they’d rent him out to garner favours. But that thought had been so absurd when he had seen how hard-working these other boys were. How passionate they were about what they did. But then why is Mr. Kim there? He’s always had a crush on Taehyung. It’s never been a secret. He’s not going to invest money into them without getting anything out of it in return.

Anything. It’s more than nothing. Does that mean Taehyung’s not a nothing? He’s something? But if he’s something, that must mean he’s worth something as well. Does Hoseok-hyung think so? And Namjoon-hyung? Or is he worthless to them if he doesn’t bring success? Yoongi-hyung and Jin-hyung, would they be okay with handing him over to a sleazy old man for success?

He hears footsteps coming closer.

And does Jungkook know? No, not Jungkook! Taehyung doesn’t want Jungkook to know. He’s too young. Too innocent. He doesn’t want for Jungkook to stop looking at him the way he does, with respect and adoration. He doesn’t want Jungkook to think bad of him.

“Taehyung-ah!”

The voice is familiar, and there are hands on his shoulders. Why are there always hands touching him without his consent? He doesn’t want anyone to touch him.

“We’ve all been so worried. Jin-hyung was ready to call the police and report you missing.”

Is that Yoongi? But it can’t be. How would Yoongi have found him? But then Taehyung raises his head, and he’s looking at the car standing there, and he recognizes it as Jin’s and he sees Jin in the front seat, and Yoongi’s pulling on his elbow.

Taehyung wants to ask how they found him, but no words come over his lips. Yoongi’s shepherding him into the backseat of Jin’s car. They are both talking, but Taehyung doesn’t listen. Then the engine starts and the car drives off. He wonders where they are going to take him. To Namjoon, the traitor? To Mr. Kim, as a present? Taehyung doesn’t know, but he doesn’t want to know either. He just closes his eyes and lets himself get dragged along like a lifeless doll.

Lifeless. That’s how he feels.

Chapter End Notes

So...

the calm before the storm. I literally threw in two storm references, so don't say I didn't warn you.

If you want to read a more humorous attempt at angst that's Sope, you can check out my new story Cycles.

If you want to scream at me in all caps, please do so in the comments or on my tumblr where I actually reply and take responsibility for this mess. (Not really though.)
Of all places, they bring him to a motel. It’s run-down, the kind of motel shown in crime shows, the ones they always find the victims in. Taehyung’s sure of his fate when Yoongi and Jin lead him to one of the rooms after Jin goes to the reception. He’s sure that once they open the door, Mr. Kim is going to come into view, sitting on the bed most likely, not naked yet. He’s never naked. He loves it too much having Taehyung watch him undress. To have Taehyung undress him.

The door opens with a squeaking sound, after Jin had struggled to open it with the key they were given. Upon first glance it’s empty, just a plain grey room. Maybe he’s in the bathroom. Or maybe he’ll join them later. Maybe this is the moment they’ll be giving Taehyung the talk on why he has to sleep with Mr. Kim again. For their advantage. For their success.

“I don’t think he’s listening to us.”

No, Taehyung’s not listening, so it’s ironic that he catches at least those words. He’s being guided into the room. The curtains are drawn. They turn on the light. It flickers into a dull glow. The room smells of mold. Disgusting. The bedspread is full of suspicious stains, but the couch looks just as uninviting.

“You need to tell me what’s really going on, Yoongi.”

Taehyung’s pushed down on the couch. Jin to his left. Yoongi to his right. They talk around him, but Yoongi’s palm rests on Taehyung’s knee and his thumb strokes soft circles into his skin. He’s still only wearing dance shorts and a t-shirt. He feels exposed, wishes he could cover his legs with something so Yoongi doesn’t touch his skin. Every noise that he hears outside makes him anticipate the door opening. It’s got to happen eventually. He’d rather have it sooner or later. Get it over with so he can return to the dorm and lie in bed, and never get out again.

Disgusting.

“Taehyung-ah, can you listen to hyung?” That’s Yoongi talking to him. Asking something of him. “This is not like you think, okay? Namjoon was trying to protect you. He didn’t want to- fuck, Tae, he tried to get you out so you wouldn’t have to see him. Namjoon tried to keep you away from him, do you understand? There’s more to all of this than you know. Joonie should be the one telling you about this, but you have to believe me that none of us want you to… I don’t know what you’re thinking, but I can only guess, and it’s really not like that.”

Yoongi’s rumbling. Taehyung's never heard him do that before.

Then Jin starts talking, when Yoongi trails off, obviously lost for words.
“I don’t know what’s going on, but you know that we care about you. Jungkook and Hobi are worried sick, and so is Jimin. Namjoon’s beating himself up in the studio. He’s refusing to leave it.”

A misunderstanding? Taehyung wants to laugh about that. They should stop talking bullshit. He doesn’t believe in misunderstandings. It’s no coincidence that Mr. Kim is there. That he’s sponsoring them. He wants Taehyung. And what he wants, he gets, because he’s a rich, influential man and Taehyung is nothing but- what is he? He’s not much of a prostitute anymore. A glorified one, maybe?

“Stop lying.” The words are unstable. His voice is scratchy and too quiet, but they hear him just fine. He feels like crying at this point, but there are no tears in his eyes. Maybe Taehyung’s cried too much all his life. Maybe he’s finally run out of them.

“I’m not.” Yoongi says, “but you need to give Namjoon a chance to explain everything.”

“So you’re saying you didn’t bring me here so Mr. Kim could fuck me senseless.”

Jin inhales sharply, and Yoongi hisses.

“Of course not, you idiot. We brought you here because I didn’t think you’d want to return to the dorm right now and face the others.” Yoongi sounds calm about it.

“Why would we do that?” Jin doesn’t sound calm at all. It’s so obvious that one of them knows and the other doesn’t. His voice is higher than usual, panicky.

For the first time, Taehyung looks up and he sees a genuine look of distress written all over Jin’s face. The way he stares at him wide-eyed, his cheeks coloured red. It’s not a lie. If Mr. Kim was to show up here, Jin wouldn’t know anything about it.

Then Taehyung turns to Yoongi, who looks at him calculatingly. He’s got his emotions masked behind a face of indifference, but in his eyes Taehyung thinks he can see sadness.

“You knew.” It’s not a question, but a statement.

“Namjoon’s strong, but he needs someone to confide in from time to time, or else he’ll break under everything that he’s expected to deal with. He asked my advice about you joining the band after you told PD-nim.”

“You knew what, Yoongi?” Jin asks and he sounds completely unsettled.

It’s Taehyung that answers.

“That I’m a prostitute.”

“Was a prostitute. Past tense, Taehyung-ah,” Yoongi says softly now.

Jin pales at those words.

“You’re kidding.” It sounds like a plea and Taehyung shakes his head, because now with the way that Jin is looking at him, tears gathering in the corners of his eyes, his bottom lip trembles.

“Don’t make me cry.” He tries to laugh about it and dabs the tears threatening to spill.

Jin looks up at the ceiling and blinks a few times, obviously trying to force the tears away as well.
“You thought we’d pimp you out.”

Taehyung’s almost forgotten that Yoongi is next to him as well, and when he turns to the other boy, he’s shocked to see that out of the three of them, Yoongi’s the one openly displaying his tears. He looks genuinely upset about what he just said, especially when he catches Taehyung lower his head in shame.

“I thought that might have been the plan to garner us favours.”

“You’re an idiot,” Yoongi says, and then he pulls Taehyung into a hug that Jin's quick in joining as well, and Taehyung relishes in the comfort that being held gives him. “We need to call Namjoon, because he’s the next idiot probably crying all by himself in the studio right now. And Jimin, Jungkook and Hoseok. They need to know you’re okay.”

Suddenly a new wave of panic grips Taehyung and he pulls out of the hug.

“You can’t tell them,” he pleads and grabs on to Yoongi’s arm. “Please don’t tell them. I don’t want them to know. I don’t want them to--” He breaks off, takes a deep breath because his words start to tremble. “I don’t want them to think differently of me.”

Yoongi doesn’t look happy about it, but he nods.

“We’re going to tell them that we found you and that you’re fine. And then we’re going to call Namjoon and bring him over, and then the four of us are going to have a talk.”

Yoongi first calls Jungkook, Hoseok and Jimin, who have all apparently been staying at BigHit together to wait for news. Taehyung feels bad about that, because it’s already late by now. Then he has to talk to them on speaker and promise that he’s alright as he can be, before they are satisfied and wish him a good night. He knows that they’re going to ask questions tomorrow, so Taehyung’ll have to come up with a good explanation about what happened until tomorrow.

Then Yoongi calls Namjoon, and Jin leaves to pick him up and bring him over.

“I can’t believe you thought we’d sell you out,” Yoongi mutters and shakes his head in disbelief once they’re alone. “I thought you were building a good relationship with all of us, but apparently you don’t trust us at all, do you?”

“I do trust you,” Taehyung trails off. He sounds unsure and he knows it. It’s not a lie though. When Yoongi looks at him with a raised eyebrow, he adds dejectedly “At least to a certain extent.”

Yoongi hums and looks at the artwork hanging above the headrest of the bed, a painting of flowers in a vase. Red, yellow, purple. It looks like there are three layers of dust settled over it already.

“I should have told you that I’ve known all along,” Yoongi says as the silence between them becomes unbearable. “Namjoon and I…we’re closer than anyone else I know. He’s a brother to me. We met when I was poor enough to have to choose between buying a bus ticket back home or food for the day. There’s nothing we don’t tell each other. And he was so torn about letting you on the team. PD-nim was leaning towards rejecting you, but Namjoon fought to have him give you a chance, because for some reason he saw something in you that he thought was exactly what we needed. I never told him what to do, but I listened to him contemplate what the right decision maybe hours into the night.”

“It’s okay,” Taehyung answers because he doesn’t know what else to say.

“But it’s not. It’s your secret, and you should have the decision on whom to share it with. I just
want you to know that the way I see you isn’t in any way influenced by your past. You’re not a prostitute to me. You’re just Taehyung. A bit too skinny, a bit too quiet, but a gem with a golden heart.”

“I appreciate that, hyung. Thank you.” And although his voice sounds cold and detached from emotions, Taehyung means it. That’s what he always wanted, isn’t it? For someone to accept him the way he is, no matter his past. And if Yoongi can do that, then maybe the others can as well.

“But it really hurts me to think that you feared we could sell you out again.”

“Can we maybe not talk about this now? I’ll have to talk again once Seokjin returns with Namjoon, and I’d rather just talk about it once then twice.”

Yoongi doesn’t say anything after that, but he’s obviously uncomfortable. Taehyung, weirdly enough, feels entirely at ease. There’s no avoiding the conversation that’s about to follow, so why fret about it? It’s just interesting to see calm and collected Yoongi lose his mind over all of this.

When Jin returns, he does so with Namjoon in tow and two white bags.

“I brought dinner,” he says as he unceremoniously dumps them on the small table in the room. “Figured we might need some comfort food.”

“I don’t think I can eat anything,” Taehyung says, and he means it. His stomach would rebel right now if he tried to force something down.

Namjoon stands quietly by the entrance door as Jin spreads the plastic containers of food on the table and hands everyone chopsticks.

“You don’t have to stand over there like a statue,” he says to Namjoon, who finally finds the courage to come closer, his eyes locked on Taehyung.

“Tae,” he starts, but Taehyung interrupts him.

“I’m sorry.”

Obviously none of the other three had expected those words from the younger boy, because Taehyung’s met with three sets of raised eyebrows and curious gazes.

“Shouldn’t that be my phrase?” Namjoon asks somewhat jokingly.

“I came to a conclusion without hearing you out in the studio. I thought-“ he shakes his head, trying to lock these thoughts away in the back of his mind again. “I should’ve listened when you wanted to explain. I’m not sure yet why he’s at BigHit or what’s going on, but I should’ve trusted you enough to hear you out after seeing him.”

Namjoon looks like he’s going to burst into tears any second now, and Taehyung hates it. He’s seen enough tears for today.

They all gather around the table eventually, Taehyung and Yoongi still on the couch, Namjoon and Jin on the floor. Jin’s the first to start eating, looking between Namjoon and Taehyung with stuffed cheeks.

“You should probably explain now what’s going on,” he eventually says to Namjoon once he has swallowed, before eating again.
“You’re right,” Namjoon says. He’s pushing some of the food around with his chopsticks, much like the other three boys do. “This man, he’s a former client of yours, right?”

“He’s the one that got me into BigHit,” Taehyung clarifies, and he looks at Jin in concern as the oldest starts coughing, maybe because he’s surprised, or maybe because he remembers what Namjoon said to Taehyung in the dance studio when they had met for the first time.

_I was just wondering how many dicks you sucked to get into the company so easily._

Namjoon pats Jin’s back in sympathy and assures him that it’s not like that.

“He only set up Taehyung with PD-nim,” Namjoon explains. Yoongi’s face remains emotionless as he listens to the conversation and slowly chews a piece of meat. He’s obviously been aware of all of this already.

“Anyways, he was friends with PD-nim. I’d like to emphasize the word was, because now he’s started blackmailing the company. He’s been doing it for two months now. Threatened, that he’d leak pictures of the two of you together if he doesn’t get what he wants, which is being involved with the band.”

“The stage name,” Taehyung murmurs, and Namjoon nods.

“That was his doing as well.”

“But there aren’t any pictures. There can’t be any. We’ve never- I never allowed taping.”

Taehyung’s heart plummets into his stomach when he sees how Namjoon grimaces.

“You’ve seen them,” he whispers.

“I’m sorry.”

Taehyung swallows harshly and nods. He feels ashamed about Namjoon having seen them. Dirty.

“We’ve been trying to figure out how to get him off our backs. We’ve been considering the police, but if this case goes public…”

Namjoon trails off, but he doesn’t need to say the words out loud for Taehyung to know what he means. If this goes public, there’s no way that Taehyung can debut with Bangtan Sonyeondan. It’s a miracle they’ve kept him through all this trouble anyway. They must really think that he’s a perfect fit for the band, or otherwise it would have been way easier to get rid of him a long time ago.

“Thank you,” Taehyung says with a heavy sigh. “For trying to protect me.”

“I shouldn’t have kept it from you from the beginning, but you were finally starting to open up to us and I was scared that if you knew, you’d shut down again.”

It’s a reasonable thought, probably the truth.

Jin clears his throat.

“If this is not too much to ask, can you- can I ask how you got into prostitution?”
Taehyung bites his lips. He’s apprehensive about sharing details, it's already enough that the three people present know about this messy part of his life and he struggles to answer the question. He doesn’t really want them to know that Taehyung’s life has always been a struggle, that he ran away from home after his grandma died since nothing held him back anymore from fleeing his abusive parents. But they don’t need to know everything, do they? A watered-down version will be sufficient enough.

“I ran away from home, ended up homeless in Seoul and realized that quick sex makes good money.”

The words are blunt, and he’s careful not to show any emotions. In a way what he said is true. He just left out the unpleasant details, like the night he lost his virginity in a dirty alley as he begged for mercy, tears in his eyes and his nose blocked enough to prevent him from for help because he needed to breathe. Breath. That treacherous habit that’s kept him alive through times in which he wished he wasn’t.

They’re all quiet after that. Maybe thinking about what Taehyung said. Maybe about something else. Jin looks the most shaken, which is understandable considering that he’s the only one that didn’t know.

“Can we- I mean I know it’s a lot to ask, but can you guys maybe keep this a secret from the others? I don’t want…”

Trailing off because he doesn’t know how to finish, the words hang in the air between them.

“They shouldn’t be burdened by this,” is what he settles on in the end.

Hoseok and Jungkook, and also Jimin. None of them need to know about this. It shouldn’t concern them. Worry them. Taehyung doesn’t want them to look differently at him now. Act differently. What if the admiration that Jungkook’s always held for him leaves his eyes? If Hoseok’s disgusted by him and refuses to teach him dance? If Jimin doesn’t want to be his friend anymore when he finds out how dirty Taehyung is?

“I don’t know if that’s a good idea,” Namjoon ponders. “Regarding the blackmailing, it does concern the entire band. And if they find out sometime in the future and realize that we’ve kept it from them, they’ll be upset.”

To Taehyung’s surprise, Jin punches Namjoon’s arm, looking at him as if he’s lost his mind, before turning to the youngest in the room.

“Of course we’ll keep it a secret. It’s your decision to choose who knows about this and who doesn’t. But Namjoon’s right, when the others find out, they won’t be happy about having been left out.”

Taehyung’s heart sinks as Jin uses the word when instead of if, as if it’s a given that they’ll know about it soon.

Namjoon and Jin leave the run-down hotel room around midnight. Yoongi and Taehyung stay behind, because right now Taehyung needs some comforting and the room has already been paid for the night.

“It’s worse than you tried to make us believe, isn’t it?” Yoongi asks as soon as the door closes behind the other two members. “It sounded like you just decided one day to up and leave your parents and then just slipped into prostitution as if by accident. You realize that none of us believe
that it was just a breezy thing, right? We’ve known you for a few months now, Taehyung-ah. We’ve seen how you behaved in the beginning. How you still behave now at times.”

Yoongi shakes his head with a sombre look on his face and Taehyung pales, because why can’t they just be as gullible as he wants them to be?

“I just hope that one day you’ll open up to us about it. We’re not here to judge, we’re here to support you.”

“It’s nothing,” Taehyung says, his voice cold. “There’s nothing else to open up about. If you’ll excuse me, I’ll go take a shower now.”

He leaves for the bathroom and doesn’t come out for an hour. Once he does leave it, Yoongi has already fallen asleep on the ratty couch, mouth slightly agape and snuffling. Taehyung doesn’t spare him a second glance. Instead he slips under the covers on the bed and closes his eyes in hopes of falling asleep soon.

In his dreams, the voice and hands of Mr. Kim haunt him. If Yoongi notices the dark circles under Taehyung’s eyes the next morning that tell the tale of a restless night, he doesn’t mention it.
Jungkook rushes to Taehyung the second the older boy returns to the company building with Yoongi.

“You’re back!” he exclaims happily, and Taehyung thinks there might be some relief hidden in his words as well. He doesn’t know what to make out of that feeling. Why would Jungkook be relieved to see him?

Hoseok comes strolling after the youngest of the team, a bright smile on his lips. He wraps an arm around Taehyung and tells him that it’s good to see him again and that he hopes whatever happened yesterday has been resolved.

“We’ve been worried,” Hoseok says and Jungkook nods too.

Taehyung can see the questions they are ready to shoot off but are holding back from actually voicing out loud. It’s in their eyes, the way they trace over his features as if maybe they could read the answers on his face. He suspects that them not asking has something to do with Namjoon’s order to hold back. Taehyung appreciates that, because he’s not sure what he could tell them.

“If you’re being annoying he might just leave again,” Yoongi mutters before trailing off. Taehyung’s not entirely sure where he’s going, but he suspects it’s the dingy studio the rappers share.

Jungkook’s eyes widen at that.

“You won’t leave, right?” he asks.

“Of course I won’t,” Taehyung puts the youngest member’s mind at rest. “Don’t be ridiculous. You know hyung is being sarcastic.”

The youngest member breathes out a sigh of relief, but Taehyung feels Hoseok tense at his words. It’s an odd reaction, but Taehyung doesn’t have time to think it over, his attention already demanded by the other two boys again.

“Yes Jungkook, you know that you have to take most things Yoongi hyung says with a grain of salt,” Hoseok agrees, and if he puts a weird emphasize on the word “hyung”, neither of the younger boys mention it.

“You should go see if Jimin hyung’s around somewhere, he was worried sick yesterday,” Jungkook chirps, and Hoseok’s arm slips off Taehyung’s shoulders.

He’s honestly really glad for that. His skin itches slightly. Not that it really does, but ever since he laid eyes on Mr. Kim again, it felt tingly. Tingly in a bad way. Phantom touches that he’s not quite
The relief only lasts a second because then Jungkook grabs his arm and pulls him down corridors in pursuit of Jimin. With every corner that they have to take, Taehyung’s heart starts racing anew, scared of who he might find behind it. His stomach churns with fear and even though they don’t run, he’s out of breath.

“We can just text him,” Taehyung urges after they haven’t been able to find Jimin. “He might be at school.”

“It’s a Sunday, hyung. Jimin hyung will definitely be somewhere around here. He’s always around practicing.”

They don’t find Jimin, but they do bump into Namjoon, who looks equally as startled as them when they rush around the corner.

“Are you trying to kill people?” he asks, the words directed at Jungkook, the obvious culprit between the duo. “Don’t run down the hallways like that. If you run over people, you’re going to give a bad impression to others.”

“I’m sorry,” Jungkook answers, head ducked and cheeks red. “We were just trying to find Jimin hyung since he was so worried about Tae hyung yesterday.”

“Actually,” Taehyung says as he turns to Jungkook and tries to pry the younger boy’s fingers off his arm, “can you maybe search for Jimin and bring him back to us? There’s something I have to discuss with Namjoon hyung.”

Jungkook’s eyes flit between the two of them, and it’s obvious that he’s wondering and dying to ask what they want to talk about. Jungkook’s assertive. After all, he did say before that he thinks Namjoon is acting strange. He listens to Taehyung’s request, however, and steps away from the two of them. Taehyung watches him walk away with worry, because he doesn’t know what monster might be hiding down the next hallway.

“Why do I have the feeling that whatever we’re going to talk about is something that I really don’t want to?” Namjoon asks, observing Taehyung’s worried glance towards the youngest. “He’s not in the building today, I think. He’s only been here a handful of times.”

“I want to see the pictures.”

Namjoon sighs and shakes his head.

“I knew it.” There’s pain in his eyes as he now tries to avoid Taehyung’s stare. “But I think it’s a stupid fucking idea.”

“I have a right to see them.”

The leader grimaces, because he knows that Taehyung is right. There’s no good argument that Namjoon can make against his request. After all, the pictures are of Taehyung. If anything, he’s the only one, if anyone, to have the right to see them.

“Right now?” Namjoon asks, hoping to stall.

“The sooner the better.”
There’s no way around it, so Namjoon nods with a resigned look and leads Taehyung to the small studio the rappers share.

“I don’t have a physical copy of them,” Namjoon says after closing the door behind them.

He then he retrieves a key from his pocket that’s hanging on a silver chain attached to a belt loop of his jeans. There are a few drawers in the room that can be locked, each of them labelled with one of the three rapper’s name. Namjoon opens one of them and takes out a gray USB stick. It looks harmless, but Taehyung knows that it holds his biggest secret, and just seeing the small object forces bile into his throat.

“Are you sure you want to see these?” Namjoon asks one last time. He’s holding the USB stick delicately, as if it’s a bomb that could set off any moment.

“I need to know.” Taehyung says. He doesn’t say what he needs to know, because there’s too many things to mention: what kind of pictures they are; how much is visible in these photos; and most importantly what Namjoon has seen. And how he can still look Taehyung in the eyes without any pity when he knows so much of the truth.

Namjoon plugs in the USB stick and the connection to the computer is announced with a sound that makes Taehyung jump.

He’s never owned a computer before in his life and has barely had the opportunity to tinker around with one, so he doesn’t really know what exactly Namjoon is doing. He does know, however, that the folder Namjoon has just opened must contain the files of the pictures - Taehyung counts six of them -, because Namjoon hovers over one of them as he glances up at Taehyung uncertainly.

“Open it,” Taehyung demands with impatience, but his voice breaks at the last syllable.

Namjoon follows the order and as Taehyung sees the picture that comes up on the screen, his mouth goes dry.

There he is. On a soft bed. Naked. On his hands and knees. His face screwed up, it’s hard to tell whether from pain or pleasure. He knows it’s not the latter, but someone else might mistake it. A body behind his, hands on his hips. The face can’t be seen.

Taehyung recognizes that hotel room just fine. It’s the hotel they stayed at the night they met PD-nim for the first time. Mr. Kim, that bastard, must have planned this all along.

“Apparently there’s a video as well, but he’s keeping that to himself,” Namjoon says. His eyes are on the screen.

“Don’t look at it,” Taehyung snaps, embarrassment prickling the skin at his nape. He knows that Namjoon has seen the pictures before, but he doesn’t want him to look. It’s not his right to look at Taehyung’s naked body like that.

Namjoon quickly averts his eyes and mutters an apology. He closes the window on the screen and unplugs the USB stick, not giving Taehyung the option to look at any of the other pictures. A message pops up on screen that the stick hasn’t been removed the right way, but Namjoon ignores it. He puts the stick back where he took it from and locks the drawer.

“I don’t understand how you can still look at me without disgust,” Taehyung murmurs. “Especially now that you’ve seen-“

“I’m not going to judge you for trying to survive, Tae,” Namjoon says softly. “And it’s not your
fault that someone’s blackmailing you now. If anything, I admire your strength.”

Taehyung doesn’t know how to reply to this, but he doesn’t have to anyway, because the door to the studio flies open, making both of the boys inside flinch.

“Tae”, Jimin screams as he stumbles in, followed by Jungkook, and wraps his arms around the boy in question, “I was worried, you damn idiot. You could have at least sent me a text.”

His touch, usually so welcome, makes Taehyung’s skin burn, but he doesn’t try to escape the hug. He hears Namjoon scold both of them for coming in without knocking, and Taehyung’s heart skips a beat at the thought of what would have happened if Namjoon hadn’t already closed the picture on the computer screen.

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“You’re acting all distant again”, Yoongi says. It’s not even a question. They are back at the dorm for the night and Taehyung is tired. Exhausted. He doesn’t want to talk to anyone, let alone see anyone. That’s hard to accomplish, however, living with four other boys.

He’s got half a mind to ask Yoongi how Seokjin and him had found Taehyung the other night at his usual street corner, but when he thinks about it he doesn’t want to know at all. It’s shameful enough that they’d found him where he sold his body countless nights in exchange for money.

Taehyung doesn’t answer. Instead he locks himself into the bathroom and showers for half an hour, until the hot water has turned ice cold and raises goosebumps on his skin. He’s forgotten that Jungkook hasn’t showered yet, and feels guilty once he remembers when stepping out of the bathroom and spotting the younger still in his training clothes.

He’s the first one in bed that night, but never falls asleep. Hoseok slips into the bedroom second, and Yoongi third. He doesn’t think that Namjoon’s home from the company yet, but he also doesn’t want to know what the other boy is doing there. Taehyung again feels guilty when he hears the shower start, and he knows that it can’t have been a pleasant one for Jungkook, because it lasts only about two minutes. The younger boy usually likes to take his time.

Taehyung can hear him pad into the bedroom.

“I’m sorry for taking up all the hot water,” he whispers into the darkness of the room and the sound of footsteps on the floor comes to a halt.

“You’re still awake, hyung?” Jungkook asks in surprise.

“I didn’t mean for you to have a cold shower. I wasn’t thinking. I’m sorry for being selfish.”

There’s quiet and then there’s more footsteps, and Taehyung’s surprised when he hears Jungkook climb up the ladder to his mattress and slip under his covers.

“It’s okay, hyung. You’re having a hard time. If a warm shower is what makes you feel better, I don’t mind a cold one every once in a while.”

Taehyung’s back is turned to Jungkook. He tries not to flinch as an arm is carefully wrapped around him from the back and he feels the younger boy’s face nuzzle into the nape of his neck, his breath tickling the hair there.

He’s thankful for the darkness and that his back is facing Jungkook, because that way the younger boy can’t see the tears that run down and puddle on Taehyung’s pillow. Taehyung’s not even sure
what he’s crying for. It might be any reason: the pain in his chest from the past days’ events, the picture that Namjoon had shown him etched into his mind, the discomfort he feels from the careful way that Jungkook’s holding him, or maybe the considerate words the youngest has whispered into the darkness of the night in hopes of comforting Taehyung.

Taehyung feels like he's falling. It’s only a matter of time until he’ll hit the ground and shatter into a thousand pieces.

Chapter End Notes

Come talk to me on tumblr.
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Happy New Year, friends! May 2018 be a good one for all of you. :) And thank you again for your kind words on the last chapter, your support is what keeps my writing machine well-oiled. (Let's forget I said that, okay?). But honestly, thanks for all the support you guys give this fic. There's now more than 500 of you who receive a mail every time I update, which is a bit intimidating. Thanks for finding the fic interesting enough to want to be informed by mail whenever the next chapter's out. And of course the ones that regularly leave comments, I appreciate you guys the most for taking the time out of your day to tell me how you feel about this story. Feedback is the best payment a fic writer can receive.

On that sappy note, I'm going to throw this next chapter out here, get myself another coffee and retreat back into my cave for studying, because exam's are at the end of the month and this term I don't want to be one of those university students that don't sleep for an entire week because they've neglected to study during the term. So I'm out now, but I hope you enjoy this next chapter. :) x

Taehyung’s ducking away from the arm that Jungkook has thrown over his shoulder as they are bowed over a monitor, taking a look at the outcome of the photoshoot they’re having.

"It’s a concept photoshoot to try some stuff out," Namjoon had explained. "To see how we look in certain clothes and styles and for us to practice handling a camera."

Taehyung had hated the camera up in his face and capturing his every angle. The black jeans he’s wearing are ridiculously tight and the black t-shirt with a golden pattern around the neck too baggy. Matched with the heavy chains around his neck and the ridiculously large but cheap-looking rings on his fingers, he looks like an absolute idiot.

"You look good in every picture, hyung," Jungkook says in awe, and Namjoon, who has been trying to catch a glimpse at the monitor over their shoulders as well, agrees.

"You're really photogenic."

Taehyung turns around and stares daggers at Namjoon, whose hair has turned to a disaster under the stylists, before walking away from the monitor. Is that Namjoon’s opinion of Taehyung’s blackmail pictures as well, that Taehyung looks photogenic in them?

Jin is currently smoldering at the camera. He looks good in the clothes he’s been given, and Taehyung has noticed that some of the female assistants on set have a hard time taking their eyes off him.

Taehyung’s stomach is growling. It’s already evening, and the only thing he has eaten so far today is a banana and two apples, so his face wouldn’t look bloated in the pictures. Yoongi urged him to eat some more, because he’s still on the thinner side, but since the rest of the band had skipped breakfast and lunch as well for today, Taehyung wasn’t going to eat on his own.
Besides, he hasn’t been particularly hungry lately. His stomach feels constantly queasy with dread, and most times he’s playing around with his food more than actually eating it.

Taehyung walks to the adjoined room that was turned into a makeshift dressing room. Hoseok’s in a chair, a woman toying around with his hair. She pulls and tugs, but Taehyung doesn’t see any difference in any of the adjustments she makes. Hoseok’s hair is styled upwards. It suits him a lot, actually. The bags under his eyes are concealed by make-up. Taehyung knows they are there, because Hoseok had been pacing around their living room all night after an argument with Namjoon that Taehyung wasn’t able to catch the topic of, as they had mostly communicated in whispers.

"Are you done already?" Hoseok asks eventually, after Taehyung stands next to him and silently watches for a minute.

"Yes. They said my pictures turned out good enough."

"With a face like yours it’s no surprise," Hoseok murmurs, and when he gets told that his hair is finished, he gets out of the chair and leaves without another word. Taehyung watches him leave quietly.

The quietness in the room is disrupted again soon after, when Yoongi comes into the room furiously rubbing at his face, followed by Jin who looks at him sympathetically.

"I fucking hate make up," Yoongi seethes. "We’re supposed to be a Hip Hop group, why do we need so much of it?"

"First and foremost we’re still idols," Jin gently reminds him, but closes his mouth as Yoongi shoots him a dark look, before turning to Taehyung and rolling his eyes.

Taehyung doesn’t know why, but the mood between all the members is dangerously bad today. One wrong word, he thinks, and someone’s bound to boil over. It’s nothing new that Taehyung’s in a bad mood, but for the others it’s untypical. Even Jungkook, shy and polite Kookie, snapped at Namjoon today, before ducking his head and apologizing quickly after.

Maybe it’s the hunger that’s making them all act like this. PD-nim has promised them dinner back at the company. It’s just cheap take-out chicken again because that’s all the company can afford, but it’s better than nothing. Taehyung wonders how the company could possibly pay off Mr. Kim if they can’t even afford to take their trainees for a dinner outing, but he doesn’t want to dwell on it for too long.

Thinking will only take him places in his mind that Taehyung doesn’t want to visit, so he prefers to keep his mind blank as much as he can these days. Namjoon’s looking at him unhappily again, glancing over every so often, the way he did when Taehyung first joined the band and avoided the other members.

Maybe that’s because Taehyung’s avoiding all of them again. He’s also trying to not bump into Jimin. His laugh and his carefree attitude are the last things that Taehyung needs right now. He knows that his behaviour wounds Jimin and Jungkook and Yoongi and Seokjin and Namjoon, and maybe even Hoseok, who he still sees as an acquaintance more than anything else because that boy is just too cheerful. However, when he’s not loud and jovial, he’s quiet and brooding, and Taehyung just never knows how to approach him if it’s not to ask for dancing advice.

The six of them pile into the van without exchanging words. Jungkook falls asleep before he’s even fully settled into his seat, and his head lolls to the side and finds a cushion in Jin’s shoulder.
Jin's eyes fall closed shortly after. Hoseok’s listening to music, and Namjoon's furiously typing away on his phone. Maybe he's texting someone, or maybe he's writing some lyrics down. For all Taehyung knows, he could also be playing some random game. Beside him, Yoongi’s listening to music and bobbing his head along to the beat. Taehyung settles for aimlessly staring out of the window and letting the world pass by him in one giant blurry mess.

When they arrive at the company, Jungkook’s barely awake enough to walk, leaning heavily on Namjoon as they all gather in the meeting room in which the promised dinner waits for them. The clock on the wall reads shortly after 11 o’clock and the room smells deliciously like chicken. Bang PD-nim is there to greet them. He too looks tired, Taehyung thinks.

He asks them about their experience at the first shooting, if there had been any difficulties and if they’ve enjoyed it. Only Namjoon really answers, as the others are too busy opening bags and taking out the desired food containers, hunger written all over their faces. Even Jungkook’s awake enough to squabble with Jin over mushy french fries.

Taehyung doesn't even notice that one of them is trying to leave with his food, until Yoongi speaks up: "Hoseok, where are you going?"

All eyes are on the dancer.

"I want to eat in peace," comes the cold answer.

"We're a team, we should be eating as a team after our first photoshoot," Namjoon says, and really that’s just such a Namjoon thing to say, Taehyung thinks to himself. He’s so preoccupied with musing over those words that he almost misses Hoseok's reply.

"Well, you shouldn’t be lecturing me about team-spirit."

And then the door falls shut behind him.

First there’s quiet, and then there’s a huge commotion in the room.

"Can someone explain to me what's going on?" Bang PD-nim asks, while Jungkook looks at Taehyung wide-eyed and says: "Why was he looking at you like that, hyung? I don't get it."

Taehyung can’t really focus on what the others are saying at the same time. He stares at his cold chicken and stays silent, wondering what exactly he has done to Hoseok to have the older boy react towards him this way.

He only tunes back into the conversation as PD-nim asks him to come to his office after dinner, before telling all of them to enjoy their well-earned food and leaving.

There’s silence in the room once he leaves, the food forgotten completely.

"I really don’t know what Hobi hyung’s problem is," Jungkook speaks up, but he only whispers as if afraid of saying something wrong.

The looks that Namjoon and Yoongi share tell Taehyung that they have an idea.

All feeling of hunger has left Taehyung, and he can only stomach one piece of chicken and three of the mushy french fries that Jungkook and Jin fought over just minutes ago.

"You can just drive home after dinner. Don’t wait for me. I’m going to walk. Besides, Jungkook needs a bed and Yoongi a shower to get rid of the make-up residue."
It’s an attempt at a joke that falls flat, and Taehyung leaves the other members behind with a heavy heart. The hallways are mostly dark, as all staff has already left. Down in the dance studios, Taehyung suspects that some trainees are still practicing or gossiping like he and Jimin do at times, but other than that the Big Hit facilities are empty.

After knocking on the door to PD-nim’s office thrice, Taehyung enters with his head bowed.

He’s offered one of the seats he used to sit in the very first time he came to Big Hit, when he was still convinced that the offer to become a trainee had been a ploy.

"Do you want to tell me what Hoseok’s outburst had been about?" Taehyung gets asked.

"I don’t know," is what he responds, and he’s not even lying.

"So you haven’t been distancing yourself from your members again after you found out about the blackmailing?"

That is- is that what Hoseok’s words were about? About Taehyung trying to stay away from the rest of the members again, because he is scared? Scared that something could happen to him that he doesn’t want. Scared that something could happen to them if he is too close.

"There’s a reason we didn’t want to tell you about the blackmailing, and this is exactly it."

"Do you expect me to act like nothing happened? Like there’s not a man roaming these hallways and wanting to sponsor our band, who’s had sex with me multiple times? He’s blackmailing me, how am I supposed to act normal?"

The words come out irritated, and PD-nim’s face darkens as Taehyung talks to him like that.

"Yes, that’s exactly what you should do. We are investing a lot of time and thought into how we can properly deal with this situation, because we really want you to be a part of Bangtan. So you have two options: One, act normal and put your trust in us. Don’t avoid your members, and stop spacing out at practice and classes. Believe it or not, I do get regular updates on all my trainees, and especially one of your dance instructors and your vocal coach had negative things to say about you the past two weeks. However, if you don’t think you can do that, there’s always option two for you. Leave Bangtan."

Taehyung gasps. That can’t be it. He must have misheard.

"Trust me, it also pains me to say this. You’re a nice kid with a lot of potential, Taehyung. I believe that you’ve simply been dealt the wrong cards in life so far, but we’re here to help. Go home now and sleep over all of this, and then decide if you’re ready to trust us when I say that we want to swap your bad cards with aces. And talk to Hoseok."

If he’s entirely honest, Taehyung doesn’t remember anything from his walk from the company building to the dorm. He must have crossed a dozen crosswalks, but did he wait for the light to turn green at any of them?

Two options: trust or leave. But Taehyung had never been able to trust anyone entirely, so how’s he supposed to do it now?

Every breath he takes hurts physically, and every beat of his heart makes him feel as if his ribs are about to break.

Trust or leave.
When Taehyung kicks off his shoes in the entrance, he can hear the sound of the TV from the living room and finds Yoongi sprawled out on the couch while a car is exploding on the screen.

"Jungkook’s sleeping and Namjoon stayed behind at the studio. Hoseok’s in the kitchen." The look he gives Taehyung before turning back to the TV lets Taehyung know that he’s expected to go to the kitchen.

When he enters, Hoseok’s doing the dishes. The soapy water reaches halfway to his elbows, and he’s humming an unfamiliar melody and swinging his hips to the rhythm. He obviously hasn’t been aware of Taehyung entering. Either that or he’s incredibly good at ignoring people.

Taehyung wants to just talk, he really does. But then he remembers that Hoseok has thrown him under the bus in front of the CEO for no apparent reason, and that Hoseok’s actually the reason that Taehyung’s facing this situation.

Trust or leave.

"What the fuck was that back at the company?" Taehyung asks. He’s angry is what he is.

Hoseok turns around startled. There’s a glass in his hands, the soapy water running down its surface and dripping on the floor.

"Why'd you say I'm acting like I’m not a part of the team? You could have talked to me."

Jin had once confided in him that one can tell if Hoseok is angry by the way the corners of his lips drop and his mouth turns the shape of a triangle, so different from the heart-shaped smile he shares with the world when happy.

"He looks like that when I’m really slow in learning a choreography. It’s scary," Jin had said, before sneaking away as Hoseok had been searching for him for dance practice.

Now Taehyung thinks he knows what Jin meant when he said it’s scary.

"You know exactly what I meant," Hoseok says. His voice is lower and louder than Taehyung is used to, and he takes an involuntary step back. From the living room, he can still hear the sound of Yoongi’s action movie on TV.

"I don’t know who you think you are, but I’m sick of your games. You only ever talk to people if you feel like it, and obviously you pick favourites. Namjoon’s losing sleep over you."

"I have no idea what you’re talking about," Taehyung replies. The volume of his voice rises too in defence.

"Don’t act all innocent. You’re honestly more trouble than good."

Taehyung sucks in a breath at that, because those words seriously stung. Almost as much as PD-nim’s threat that he’ll have to leave the band.

"Honestly, what’s your problem?" Taehyung asks now, his voice shaking with anger. He really doesn’t understand.

"My problem is you!" Hoseok screams those words, and they are accompanied by a grand gesture with his arms.

The glass in his hands slips out of his fingers. Taehyung later realizes that it was an accident, but at
that moment he thinks it's deliberate. Both he and Hoseok watch frozen as the glass flies through the air towards Taehyung and shatters only centimeters before his feet.

And suddenly the room smells of sweat and stale beer, and Taehyung's ears are ringing from the sound of broken glass. It's not Hoseok screaming, but his father, and it's not a glass but an empty beer bottle lying in front of his sock-clad feet.

It's hard to breathe.

Trust or leave.

"What the fuck is going on in here?" Yoongi asks as he comes into the kitchen, and that's all it takes to make Taehyung take action.

Leave.

He pushes past Yoongi as he heaves and almost throws the other boy on the ground in his haste.

His keys are left behind on the key rack and he only just remembers to put on his shoes before he throws the entrance door closed behind him and runs down the steps.

He misses one and almost falls down half a staircase.

What's he running from? Hoseok? The conflict? His father, or the memory of him that haunts Taehyung, one more time? Taehyung doesn't know anymore.

The tears only blur his eyes once he's outside. It's a warm and humid night in Seoul, and after five minutes of running - and really Taehyung doesn't even know where he's running - he's entirely drenched in sweat. He stops when his knees are buckling from exhaustion, and that's when Taehyung becomes aware of his surroundings.

That he's in Seoul. That he's safe from the monster that calls himself Father. That Hoseok didn't throw a glass at him on purpose. That he's alone and can't go back. That he's lonely and sad that the upturn his life has taken all of a sudden is threatening to disappear again.

That he can't do this, whatever this is, by himself.

With shaking hands Taehyung pulls his phone from the back pocket of his jeans. He ignores the stares that passers-by are giving him and wipes the snot away with his wrist, brushing it all off on his jeans.

The dialing tone rings four times before the person at the other end finally picks up.

"Taehyung? Do you know what time it is?"

Taehyung bites back a sob and takes a deep breath.

"Jimin, I'm sorry. Please. I'm- I need- I can't do this on my own."

Chapter End Notes

Come talk to me on tumblr.
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

I can't even find the words to thank you all for your kind words. Thank you! Seriously. Hope you enjoy. :) x

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jimin’s dorm is in a run-down building exactly seventeen minutes and twenty-three seconds away from where Taehyung stands as Jimin picks up the phone.

Just from looking at it from the outside, Taehyung can understand why Jimin described it as a, quote, “shoebox-sized hellhole”, but he doesn’t have a mind to think about that now.

Jimin opens the door for him and it crosses his mind that it looks as if it could be falling off its hinges any second. He’s on the sixth floor of a fourteen story building, and the lights in the elevator had flickered dangerously enough for Taehyung to decide that the stairs were a safer option.

He’s not crying anymore; hasn’t been since he hung up the phone on Jimin. The tears on his cheeks are dried by now. Instead of the anger and the fear he’d been fuelled by before, he now just feels a numbing sadness.

“Let’s go up to the top floor. Some of the other trainees are still up and in the shared kitchen, and others are sleeping, so there’s nowhere we can talk in there.” He jerks his head towards the inside of his dorm, where Taehyung suspects a pile of sleeping inmates.

Jimin takes Taehyung's hand and starts pulling him up the stairs, not trusting the elevator either.

“I like to come up here to think, because there’s usually no one to bother you.”

The ground in the highest floor is just as dirty as on the sixth, but Jimin doesn’t seem to care. He sits down on the gray linoleum floor and pats the space next to him invitingly, his back pressed against the white wall and his legs stretched out. He looks as sleepy as Taehyung feels and Taehyung feels guilty for having dragged him out of bed.

“I don’t think there's anyone living in these flats — at least I’ve never seen or heard anyone in them,” Jimin says as he notices the way Taehyung eyes the four apartment doors suspiciously.

“C’mon, sit down and tell me what’s wrong. You sounded devastated earlier.”

Taehyung does sit down next to Jimin and copies his posture, back against the wall and feet stretched out, but now that he’s actually here he doesn’t know what to tell Jimin. After all, Jimin can’t know about it. Isn’t allowed to know about it. Not happy-go-lucky Jimin, who’s such a perfectionist in everything he does. Taehyung’s messy life doesn’t have a place in Jimin’s life. It would only mess his friend up. There’s no negativity in Jimin’s life, and Jimin deserves for it to stay that way.

And yet, Taehyung is dying to talk. It hurts him not to. The words want to burst right out of him, because this is Jimin and Jimin is his friend. His first friend in years, and he does trust Jimin. He just wants to share the burden he’s been carrying on his shoulders with someone. And the fight
with Hoseok and the shattered glass has made him feel so vulnerable that he doesn’t know how to hold the words back from spilling out of him anymore.

“They’re going to kick me out of the company.”

And that’s not what Taehyung thought would be the first thing slipping from his lips, and yet it is. And it’s with surprise that Taehyung realizes that this is what hurts him the most.

Jimin sputters next to him.

“You can’t be serious.”

Taehyung nods, and there’s tears in his eyes again. Stupid traitorous tears. Hasn’t he cried himself empty yet?

“Oh Tae,” Jimin murmurs softly and wraps an arm around his friend’s shoulders when he spots the tears in his friend’s eyes.

And that little sign of affection, when Taehyung thought that the world had collectively turned against him, is all it takes for him to entirely break down.

He pulls his legs close to his chest and hides his face in the sanctuary that his body has formed to preserve his sense of dignity.

Jimin shouldn’t see him cry like that. No one should ever see him cry like that.

“Shit Tae, it’s okay. It’s all going to work out, you’ll see. Please don’t cry like that, you’re going to make me cry.”

Jimin tries to comfort him as best as he can, awkwardly hugs him from the side and lets his fingers run through Taehyung’s hair.

He’s good at comforting, as if he knows exactly what to do to calm someone. As if he’s done this a lot of times before.

“Why would you start crying?” Taehyung rasps out once the sobs subside and allow him to use his voice again instead. He’s still hiding his face in the alcove that is his folded body.

“Because it hurts me to see you cry like that,” Jimin says. “Once you’ve calmed down, will you tell me what’s been going on with you lately? Is this why you’ve been avoiding everyone?”

And that’s another punch for Taehyung’s conscience. He really has been avoiding all of them. Jimin the most, because it’s easier to avoid someone he’s not actually rooming and working with.

Taehyung wets his dry lips with the tip of his tongue.

“I guess so,” he says and then looks up at Jimin for the first time. “I’m sorry.”

Jimin, with his nestled black hair and sleep-swollen eyes, purses his lips at that.

“You don’t have to apologize for anything,” he whisperers and wipes Taehyung’s cheek with the side his thumb. Taehyung flinches, but otherwise forces himself to stay still. “No offense, but you look like a mess. There’s eyeliner all over your face.”

Taehyung snorts at the unexpected remark and Jimin gently smiles at him.
“We had our first photo-shoot today,” Taehyung says.

Jimin hums at that.

“I remember you telling me about that.”

“And I had a fight with Hoseok.”

Jimin looks genuinely surprised at that.

“Hobi-hyung? How’d that happen?”

“I don’t even know,” Taehyung admits. “It just kind of did, and next thing I know he smashed a glass in the kitchen and I just started running.”

“He smashed a glass?”

“I think it was an accident.”

Jimin looks mildly alarmed at that.

“You think? Why would he throw a glass at you, Tae? Of course it must have been an accident! How could you even think that it wasn’t?”

Taehyung shrugs. He wipes his wet cheeks in hopes of drying them, but he only ends up smearing the mascara more.

“My dad...” he starts, but trails off again.

It’s obvious that Jimin can’t follow the conversation anymore. He looks at Taehyung questioningly, his hand now resting on the other boy’s upper arm, thumb drawing calming circles into his skin.

“...When he did it, it wasn’t an accident.”

It takes Jimin a second too long to piece together what Taehyung has just confessed, but once it clicks his grip unconsciously tightens around Taehyung’s arm before becoming slack again.

“Shit,” he breaths out.

“Yeah,” Taehyung replies, and then neither of them knows what to say anymore.

“I’m sorry that happened to you,” Jimin eventually offers, but Taehyung just shrugs it off.

It’s okay. It’s over now. His father can’t hurt him anymore, and besides there’s more important things to worry about. It’s just that this particular action, the breaking of the glass right in front of him, had triggered memories that he had almost forgotten because he was so preoccupied with worrying about everything else.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Jimin offers.

“Maybe another time, but not now. Thank you though. And please don’t tell the others. They don’t know.”

Jimin nods and promises that he won’t. Then he rests his head on Taehyung’s shoulder, his thumb still rubbing circles into Taehyung’s skin, and no more words are exchanged. Taehyung doesn’t
need any anyway, the silent comfort is enough for now.

Except for that the silence doesn’t stay for long, because then Jimin remembers what has brought on the flood of tears in the first place.

“You still haven’t told me why you think they’re going to kick you out of the company. Which, by the way, I don’t believe at all.”

Taehyung takes a shuddery breath, willing himself not to start crying again when thinking about it.

“I’ve been distancing myself from everyone, and PD-nim said that if that doesn’t change he will kick me out. I suppose that’s also why Hoseok got mad at me. He said I’m picking favourites in the band and that I’m more trouble than good.” He bites his bottom lip, because it’s trembling again, when he recalls those hurtful words.

“You’ve never been as close with Hobi-hyung as with the others,” Jimin says and nods understandingly.

Taehyung looks at Jimin wide-eyed at that claim, but Jimin just sheepishly shrugs his shoulders and says that he’s just speaking the truth. And maybe he’s right. Taehyung’s had trouble with all the members in the beginning, but now he can comfortably watch anime with Jungkook and talk to Namjoon about his troubles with English and laugh with Jin over some stupid joke and trust that Yoongi’s looking out for his well-being.

But with Hoseok, there are no such memories that Taehyung can recall. He’s an amazing dancer and Taehyung is impressed by the fact that Hoseok had only learned rapping since becoming a Big Hit trainee, but that’s about it. He’s not someone that Taehyung would seek out of his own accord, but he doesn’t even know why that is. It’s just that they never clicked.

“You think that’s the reason he got mad at me?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. But why have you been distancing yourself from everyone?”

Until now, Jimin’s head had still rested on Taehyung’s shoulder, and now that he has moved away to actually look at Taehyung, the other boy already misses the warmth and weight of it on his shoulder.

Now that’s a can of worms that Taehyung definitely doesn’t want to open, and besides he’s been oversharing with Jimin anyway today.

“It’s got to do with my past,” he says. So maybe he’s making himself sound more unsure and vulnerable than necessary, and lowers his eyes to the ground to avoid his friend’s probing gaze.

Jimin hesitates.

“Oh,” is all he says, and the hand he’s had on Taehyung’s arm now falls away as well. He’s going to assume now that it’s got something to do with Taehyung’s father, and that’s exactly what Taehyung wants him to believe. At least it’s better than the truth.

Next thing Taehyung knows, Jimin stifles a yawn and Taehyung feels guilty again, because the bags under Jimin’s eyes are no joke and for all he knows, the other boy might have to get up for school in a few hours.

“You should go to sleep,” Taehyung murmurs and starts to rise from the floor. He dusts off his trousers and Jimin mirrors his actions. “I’m sorry I kept you awake.”
“Never apologize for needing to talk to someone, idiot,” Jimin chides and adds a heavily exaggerated sigh at the end of his sentence, ruffling Taehyung’s hair, as if to emphasize just how ridiculous apologizing for something like that is.

“Are you staying for the night?”

Taehyung stiffens at that. Is he staying for the night? In a dorm he’s unfamiliar with, together with other boys that are strangers to him except for when he randomly bumps into them in the hallways, or has dancing classes and language classes with them at the company? How many are there? And where’s he supposed to sleep? He could lie on the floor, but Taehyung’s not sure if he’d be able to actually fall asleep in that surrounding at all.

But what other option does he have?

Return to the dorm? No way. Not yet. He doesn’t want to-no, he can’t face Hoseok yet. Not when he’s still so shaken up by the incident.

“You can share my mattress.”

Something on his face must have given his discomfort away when Jimin spoke, because his friend immediately backpedals.

“Of course you don’t have to, if that makes you uncomfortable. I was just thinking- Actually, maybe I wasn’t thinking. We have a couch. It’s not the comfiest and it has some stains in it that you shouldn’t think too hard about, but other than that it’s perfectly fine for one night if you don’t mind a sore back the next morning.”

Jimin rambling like that is new, and it doesn’t take a genius to realize why he’s acting like that. Taehyung feels disappointed.

“Jimin,” he interrupts the other boy. “Shut the fuck up. If you start treating me differently now that you know about my father, I’m going to be really fucking pissed at you.”

It somewhat satisfies Taehyung to see the gobsmacked expression on Jimin’s face, before he looks apologetic.

“Your mattress is fine as long as you don’t mind.” Taehyung would never admit it, but as he says those words he swears his heart is beating in his throat. “Thanks for the offer. I should probably text one of the guys to let them know that I’m okay.”

He’s not surprised to hear Jimin sheepishly answer that he had texted Namjoon the second they’d hung up when Taehyung first called him. He’s grateful for that, because quite frankly Taehyung has no idea what to tell the others.

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To no one’s surprise, Taehyung doesn’t get much sleep on Jimin’s mattress. It’s like being back at the dorm with his bandmates for the first few nights. Even if he doesn’t want to pay attention to it, he can’t tune out the noises around him, the breathing and the rustling of blankets. Jimin sleeps peacefully beside him. His black hair is a mess and his lips are slightly parted.

Jimin falls asleep on his side of the mattress, but over night creeps closer to Taehyung, and eventually one of his legs is thrown over Taehyung’s, and his arm is draped over Taehyung’s abdomen while his face is squished into his shoulder.
Taehyung doesn’t move. He’s rigid and he hates every second of it, but he doesn’t want to risk waking Jimin, not when he’s kept him awake for so long already.

It’s a fucking terrible night is what it is. When Jimin wakes up in the morning, Taehyung closes his eyes and pretends to be asleep. It’s a relief when Jimin stops being draped over him like a second blanket and no longer unconsciously pins him down.

They make their way to the company together with the other trainees. Taehyung’s not surprised at all when Namjoon shadow awaits him in the lobby upon their arrival, and he suspects that Jimin texting on his phone earlier has something to do with this peculiarly well-timed meeting.

Namjoon looks anything but happy.

“Go to the studio, Taehyung, and wait for me there. And then I’m going to bring Hoseok, and I swear if you guys don’t iron out whatever the fuck happened last night, I’ll kick your asses so hard you’ll fly all the way to the US.” He narrows his eyes, "both of you. Do you know how fucking worried I was when Yoongi-hyung texted me that you had run away without your keys or ID?"

He sounds downright venomous, and Taehyung takes an unconscious step back at the threat of violence. He knows that Namjoon doesn’t mean it, that Namjoon wouldn’t hurt him-but then again he doesn’t know. And basically that’s what this whole fucking disaster is based on anyway, him not being sure. He wants to believe that he knows, but how can he? He’s never seen Namjoon this angry before. What goes against the possibility of him lashing out and becoming violent?

Absolutely nothing.

Taehyung scurries past him to the studio. He doesn’t even turn back to Jimin to say goodbye, he’s too intimidated by the angry leader. And the thought that Namjoon’s going to bring Hoseok to the studio as well, the next person that’s obviously not a big fan of him, doesn’t calm his already flustered nerves from yesterday’s events and the sleepless night either.

He’s not aware of his friends watching him walk down the hallway with his head hung low until he’s past the corner, before Jimin turns to Namjoon with a worried look on his face that he’s been trying to not let Taehyung catch on to since his confession last night.

“I know you’re angry, hyung, and I get it, but you should go easy on him,” Jimin says. “Tae, he’s fragile. And I can’t get into details, because he’s confided in me and I promised not to tell, but what happened last night at your dorm shook him up because of his past. That’s why he rushed out. It’s not his fault. He was just scared.”

Namjoon looks at Jimin in surprise.

“You know about his past? I can’t believe he told you. He wanted no one else to know.”

“So he told you about his dad as well?”

Jimin looks equally surprised at that revelation.

Namjoon’s close to blurring out “His Dad?” in confusion, but he bites his tongue. If he doesn’t, he’ll give away that that’s actually not what he knows and that Jimin has given away Taehyung’s secret without even knowing. “Yeah, something like that.” He tries to sound nonchalant when he says it, but on the inside Namjoon’s mind is reeling to catch up with that new piece of information as an uncomfortable feeling settles in the pit of his stomach.
“He hasn’t told me much, but from what he’s said I can deduce that it’s been bad. It’s sad that things like this happen. No one should suffer from abuse,” Jimin says and stares at the wall for a few seconds absentmindedly, before turning back to Namjoon. “I’ll have to leave now, or else I’ll be late for my dance lessons. I’ll see you later, hyung. And please don’t be too hard on Tae.”

When Jimin has left, Namjoon remains standing in the same spot as his brain still tries to comprehend the new piece of information given. Had Taehyung’s father really been abusive, like Jimin had insinuated? Namjoon knows that he can’t share this with anyone. Jimin wasn’t supposed to tell. Taehyung must really trust him in the first place to share his past with his friend, a kind of trust Namjoon is sure he doesn’t have in his bandmates.

If he was to find out that Jimin has shared his secret, surely that trust would break as well. Namjoon can’t have that. He needs for Taehyung to have someone to rely on, especially now that he knows that Taehyung apparently couldn’t even rely on his own father.

He’s going to keep this a secret, but he’s going to observe Taehyung more closely. Even closer than before. That poor boy. How much bad luck could one kid have in his life?

But that’s something he’ll have to worry about later. First, there’s a conflict he needs to help solve. Namjoon has the dreadful feeling that this conversation between Taehyung and Hoseok won’t be easy. Although Hobi had shown guilt yesterday, he had refused to tell what exactly his problem with Taehyung was and why he blew up like that on the younger boy all of a sudden. And if Taehyung running away has something to do with fear — a possible flashback to his angry father maybe? — then he sure as hell won’t be opening up about the issue either.

Namjoon sighs as he finally makes his way to the dance studio to find Hobi. It’s not easy to be a leader, and they haven’t even debuted yet. And who knows if they ever will. Sometimes, or more like most of the time, he wonders if the trouble is really worth it.

Chapter End Notes

This fic is running on a schedule for now, so the next update will be January 24th. :)

Come talk to me on tumblr. :)

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**Chapter 3:**

Namjoon...
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

I've prewritten this fic up to chapter 20 now for the purpose of regular updates, and it makes it even more exciting for me to share the new chapters with you guys and read your opinions on what's going on when I already know what happens next. Thank you for your kind words, really. I know I say this every chapter, but right now my life's kind of tumbling apart, and this story is a silverlining. I write scenes on my phone during the toughest times to get away from reality for a bit. It's past the point of 'just a story' for me. It's a world that I can escape to, and I'm glad that you guys seem to like this world as well. Hope you enjoy. :) x

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The studio is small, but somehow Taehyung has the feeling that today the walls have crept in more than usual. The walls are too close, too constricting. The screen of the computer is lit up, and mocking him with the knowledge that it's showed all the pictures that Namjoon possesses of him with Mr. Kim before. Empty Styrofoam cups are sprawled across the small table, the only indication of the coffee they once held being the brown stains engraved on the rim.

There’s a clock on the wall. It announces every second with a tick. Taehyung counts them to force himself to focus on something, anything, to keep his mind from panicking. He stops counting after five hundred, when he hears footsteps, but they always pass by the door, never stop to enter.

Has Namjoon forgotten about him?

Impossible.

Is he making Taehyung sit and wait to make him suffer, a form of screwed up punishment for deciding to run away?

That might actually be possible.

At least to Taehyung waiting feels like a punishment. It’s the worst punishment of them all, the dreadful anticipation that something bad is about to happen any second, but there’s no way to say when. His dad had liked playing that game with him. Loved it, even. Loved raising his hand and watching his son flinch away and wait for the impact, and wait and wait, before Taehyung would finally look up in confusion when he felt no pain, only to then be met with a heavy blow.

Taehyung takes a shuddering breath.

It’s alright, Namjoon’s not making him wait to punish him. He’s just searching for Hoseok. And the more Taehyung thinks about it, the more he realizes that it’s a good thing for him to wait longer. Waiting means no confrontation, and a confrontation is something he really doesn’t think he can handle right now. Not with Hoseok. Not after he was so angry at him last night.

And the broken glass. It was an accident. It was. Jimin said so. And it had looked like an accident as well, not a deliberate act. Hoseok had looked equally shocked once he had realized the glass had escaped his grip and flown in Taehyung’s direction.
Looking back at it now, it almost seems like a false memory. Everything had slowed down, Hoseok’s eyes had widened dramatically and Taehyung’s breath had stopped once he’d realized what was happening, the glass spinning in the air before clattering to the ground and shattering into pieces. Taehyung’s memory of those few seconds is ridiculously detailed, when everything else surrounding it seems blurry. Hoseok wouldn’t have looked so surprised either if he’d thrown it at Taehyung deliberately. Or maybe he’d just been surprised at himself for actually doing it.

The room’s too small, and the walls are closing in further, although he knows they actually don’t, and then Taehyung hears two pairs of footsteps stop in front of the studio, and he watches the door handle slide down and he knows that this is it. The panic he’s feeling is irrational, and he knows that as well, but there’s just nothing he can do about it.

Namjoon enters first, and Hoseok shuffles in right afterwards.

Taehyung can’t read Namjoon’s face at all. He keeps it deliberately blank and it drives Taehyung crazy. He hates not being able to tell how someone feels, because how’s he expected to know what’s coming his way if he can’t read the other person?

Hoseok’s making it easier for him. He looks somewhat guilty, shoulders slumped and head ducked. Taehyung wonders if he actually feels bad for what transpired last night.

“I think it’s time to talk about what the fuck happened, and to apologise.” Namjoon says when neither Taehyung nor Hoseok talk.

Namjoon’s right. It’s time to apologise. Not that apologising has ever improved any situation that Taehyung's been in, but it’s still the right thing to do. He’s caused trouble, the least he can do is own up to it. Maybe then Hoseok, who’s still very much studying the floor and deliberately avoiding either of the other two teens’ gazes, will forgive him.

“I’m sorry,” Taehyung says, voice a dry whisper. It’s too quiet, he knows that, but he can’t bring himself to talk louder in the tiny studio, not when he still sees the walls crawling in on him with every second, a feeling that isn’t improved with the company of two other people in the room with him.

It’s the first thing that causes Hoseok to look up from the floor, and he looks stunned.

“Why are you apologizing?” Namjoon asks after a short silence. The blank look on his face is replaced with surprise and scepticism.

Taehyung shrinks into himself as much as he can with all the attention being directed at him all of a sudden. He wishes the small, black, uncomfortable couch he’s sitting on could swallow him whole.

“Because I caused Hoseok to feel angry, hyung,” Taehyung answers eventually, turned to Namjoon. He tries to ignore the way Hoseok’s gaze bores into him from the side, and when he’s done speaking Hoseok huffs out a breath, sounding annoyed. Taehyung pretends not to hear it, but Namjoon shoots Hoseok an exasperated look.

“Hyung,” Hoseok says, and now Taehyung too looks over at him and swallows around the knot in his throat, because Hoseok’s mouth is doing that thing again, where the corners of his mouth drop the way they did shortly before the glass came flying at Taehyung. “Why do you call everyone hyung, but I’m always just Hoseok? It’s not that I have a problem with you, but that you obviously have a problem with me. Seriously, what did I do to you that after months of knowing you, you still act like I’m a stranger?”
“Hobi-” Namjoon starts.

“Don’t Hobi me, Namjoon. You know it’s true. You said yourself that Taehyung’s been distancing himself from all of you again. Well, he can’t distance himself from me, because he’s never even tried to give a fuck about me in the first place.”

With every word Hoseok’s getting louder, and Taehyung’s curling into himself more, and Namjoon’s helplessly standing between them and watching as the situation threatens to escalate again. It feels like a punch to his gut when he hears Taehyung whisper that he’s sorry, words that are completely ignored by Hoseok.

“You always preach about team-spirit, so what’s he even doing with us if he doesn’t give a fuck about establishing a good relationship with all of us?”

“Have you ever thought for a second that it’s not as easy to make friends for people as it is for you?” Namjoon finally snaps. “Even Yoongi-hyung made an effort to become closer to Taehyung when he realized that Taehyung has issues opening up to others! You’re blowing up on him because what? You’re jealous? Don’t be ridiculous.”

Taehyung’s raised his arms by now as he’s curled up on the couch, in a way that suggests that he’s trying to shield his head. Maybe to block out the screaming, maybe to soften blows that he fears might come. He can’t help it; he hates when people raise their voices. It’s always been him that had to deal with the pain that other people’s anger brought, and right now it’s no different. But then he hears Namjoon stand up for him, and he hates that even more, because he doesn’t want to be the reason for these two fighting.

He gasps when Namjoon suddenly pushes Hoseok away by the shoulders, who moved closer to him with a red face. They are both so angry, and Taehyung can’t stand it, but he can stand the thought of someone getting hurt in front of his eyes because of him even less. His body works on autopilot as he jumps up from the couch and stumbles over to the two of them. Namjoon’s raised his arms one more time, maybe to push Hoseok back from him a second time, maybe to strike out. Taehyung doesn’t know, but he knows that he has to stop him.

“Don’t!” he screams, and then he shoves his body between the two of them and feels Namjoon’s palms on him, pushing against him, and he almost falls over until another pair of arms catches him.

“Don’t hurt him,” Taehyung presses out once more. His eyes are closed, his heart is racing, and again he’s crying, because this can’t be. This shouldn’t be. He’s the one that they should be mad at. The one that fucks everything up. It’s his fault they’re fighting. They shouldn’t be fighting.

“Taehyung, what the fuck?” Hoseok asks, as he tries to steady the younger boy again. It’s fruitless. Taehyung’s body is a dead weight in his arms, unable to stand on his own anymore with shivers running through his body.

“I wasn’t going to hurt him,” Namjoon says, and he sounds absolutely disgusted by the mere idea of that. “Are you okay? I didn’t mean to push you. Taehyung-ah?”

Taehyung doesn’t listen. Can’t focus. He’s just trying not to collapse and trying to breathe. He doesn’t hear Hoseok telling Namjoon that Taehyung’s weird behaviour makes him wonder if there’s something deeper going on, and he misses the way Namjoon looks at Hoseok in a way that confirms his suspicions and turns his attention to Taehyung in his arms, wondering just what exactly it is that had Taehyung set off like that.

He feels guilty now, because the younger boy is obviously distraught. Almost as guilty as he felt
when Taehyung had fled the kitchen.

“We should sit him down,” Namjoon suggests, and together they manoeuver him back to the couch, both trying to ignore every time Taehyung recoils from their touches. On the couch, he curls back up again, the way he did before, and rocks back and forth. He seems completely out of it.

“This is such a fucking mess.” The leader buries his face in the palms of his hands and sighs loudly, and now Hoseok feels bad about Namjoon being stressed about this situation, when he already has enough to deal with without Hoseok acting jealous.

However, he can’t help it. At first he had thought that Taehyung was just bratty, because he didn’t make an effort to get to know any of them. But then he had started becoming closer to Namjoon, and Jin, and started hanging out with Jungkook in his free time and even wrapped Min Yoongi around his finger, who’s notoriously known for not really caring about people all that much if he’s not ridiculously close to them. But Taehyung’s never really talked to him, not if it wasn’t about dance practice.

And that hurts. He calls them all his hyungs now, Namjoon and Jin and Yoongi. So what did Hoseok do that Taehyung decided him unworthy to be his hyung?

Was Namjoon right? Is he overreacting? He hates to admit it, but honestly Hoseok’s just scared. If Taehyung’s friends with everyone but him, what if eventually he’s going to be the outsider in his group of friends? What if they deem Taehyung more important than him? What if Taehyung’s a better asset to BTS than he is? If they decide they don’t want him in the group anymore, that they don’t need him anymore.

“You’re thinking too much,” Namjoon says. Hoseok hadn’t noticed that he’d been staring. One of his hands is on Taehyung’s back, trying to calm him by gently rubbing up and down.

“I’m sorry,” Hoseok offers. He means it. “I didn’t want this to happen.”

“I’m sorry for pushing you.”

Hoseok accepts the apology by nodding, then tilts his head in Taehyung’s direction, silently asking what they’re supposed to do with the stoic teen now.

“We should get Yoongi. He’s brought Tae out of a panic attack once already.”

And now Hoseok feels even more like shit, because he had no idea that Taehyung suffers from panic attacks. He’s seen him act weird after they had first met the man that would become a possible sponsor, but he hadn’t questioned it all that much. Whatever it is that troubles Taehyung, it must be worse than Hoseok had expected.

He’s an asshole, isn’t he?

Yoongi, whom he finds in an empty conference room, bowed over a notebook furiously scribbling away, immediately lays down the pen upon hearing that Taehyung has a panic attack and that Namjoon needs help.

“You all seriously need to get your shit together,” he murmurs to himself as he picks up his notebook and pen and pushes away from the table. Hoseok watches him leave the room, and then sags into the nearest chair with a heavy sigh.

Yoongi’s wrong, not all of them need to get their shit together, but what Hoseok has realized is that he definitely has to.
Jin takes Hoseok grocery shopping in the evening, while Jungkook stares after them longingly, wishing to leave the company building as well. He’s not allowed to though, because his grades at school are seriously lacking and Namjoon has ordered him to do his homework while watching him with hawk-eyes. Yoongi and Taehyung aren’t anywhere to be seen. Hoseok supposes that they might still be at the studio, or maybe they’ve returned to the dorm. Who knows? Hoseok’s glad that he doesn’t have to see Taehyung now, because if he’d felt guilty before, he feels even worse now.

“Why do I have to join you, hyung?” he whines, because if there’s one thing Hoseok really doesn’t enjoy, it’s grocery shopping. It’s just so mundane and boring.

“Because you and I are going to cook dinner at the dorm today. Mainly you, as an apology for making Taehyung cry, and there’s no better way to make someone forgive you than by feeding them good food.”

Word within BTS travels fast. Even Jungkook knew within half an hour of Hoseok getting Yoongi for help that Hoseok had made his friend cry, and he had been judgementally glaring at Hoseok ever since. It sucks to be the bad guy and have everyone be mad at you. So maybe it’s not Taehyung that’s the reason the others might distance themselves from him. He might have brought this on by himself.

When they arrive home with too many bags of groceries, there’s still no trace of Namjoon and Jungkook. Yoongi and Taehyung, however, are on the couch and watching TV.

“Tae, how are you?” Jin asks when he spots them. Taehyung looks at him, but he doesn’t really respond. Yoongi pulls a face next to him, that Hoseok thinks means nothing good.

“Hoseok and I have gone grocery shopping. We’re cooking dinner for you and the others tonight. Does that sound good?”

There’s still no response from Taehyung, but Yoongi perks up. Jin’s cooking is pretty good, and it’s a welcome change to takeout or the basic stuff he knows to make without burning down the dorm.

Jungkook and Namjoon arrive minutes before dinner is ready, and eating is a silent affair. They try to keep the conversation flowing, but Taehyung only sits quietly and chews on his food more thoroughly than necessary. They are cramped together on the living room floor around the coffee table. Namjoon’s knee digs into Yoongi’s side, and Jungkook constantly bumps elbows with Jin.

When he’s finished with dinner, Taehyung sets down his bowl and chopsticks.

“Thank you for dinner,” he says. His voice is monotonous. He looks first at Hoseok and then at Jin, before getting up from the floor and leaving for the bedroom.

Hoseok watches him leave with a heavy heart. Namjoon squeezes his shoulder supportively and Jin smiles encouragingly. The rest of dinner is an even quieter affair, as no one knows what to say.

Taehyung sips his herbal tea while he’s sitting on the couch. He fell asleep right after dinner last night, which caused him to wake up way too early. Everyone else is still asleep, and he appreciates that. There’s a lot he has to think about, and constantly being surrounded by people the way he was yesterday had prohibited him from doing that.
Truth be told, he had been terrified yesterday when Namjoon had started to become violent. Had he been violent? It’s hard to tell. Hoseok had been in his face and loud, so maybe he had just tried to defend himself. Taehyung doesn’t know where to search for the difference between these two things in yesterday’s situation. Anyways, Namjoon’s behaviour had scared him. And so had Hoseok’s screaming. And if he’s entirely honest, there’s not much he remembers after that until Yoongi was with him in the studio, and gently talking to him, reminding him to take deep regular breaths. Blacking out is a thing he had done at times back when he had still been living at home, and sometimes also with clients. His mind would just shut down, until a threatening situation would be over again.

Yoongi had looked genuinely worried, and neither Hoseok nor Namjoon had been in the studio anymore when he had come to himself again.

But there’s bits and pieces Taehyung remembers. Like Hoseok asking what he has to do for Taehyung to call him hyung. Namjoon standing up for Taehyung.

To Taehyung’s surprise, the door to their bedroom opens and Jungkook stumbles out. His eyes are still almost glued shut with sleep and for a moment he looks like he’s not entirely sure where he is.

“What are you doing up?” Taehyung asks, keeping his voice quiet. The white half-empty mug clutched between his hands is almost cold now, a sign that his tea is cold by now as well.

“Namjoon-hyung coughed in his sleep and it woke me up,” Jungkook grumbles. He’s hard to wake up, so Taehyung’s genuinely impressed that he’s up now. Usually it takes either of them minutes to manage to wrangle him out of bed. At the same time, he wishes Jungkook wasn’t up now, so he could further try to sort out his thoughts.

Jungkook comes to the couch and blobs down next to Taehyung, resting his head on Taehyung’s shoulder. He’s pouting and then he’s yawning, and Taehyung coos at him jokingly, because he knows that the younger teen doesn’t like that.

“Are you feeling better today, hyung?” Jungkook asks. Taehyung’s not sure how much the others have told him. There’s a weird unspoken agreement between all of them to not let Jungkook in on any drama. He’s just a kid with enough worries about becoming an idol already, he doesn’t need to be burdened with anything more.

“I’m good,” Taehyung answers.

Jungkook moves his head to look at him with a frown.

“Liar,” he murmurs, and then he steals the white mug from Taehyung’s grip and gets up from the couch.

“What are you doing?” Taehyung asks. “Get your own tea!”

But Jungkook doesn’t say anything. He opens one of the drawers they keep some stationary in and rummages through it, before taking out a black permanent marker. He uncaps it with his teeth and Taehyung watches with confused interest as he starts drawing smileys all around the mug. Small ones, big ones, some smiling with teeth, the mouth of others just a simple line. Then he writes something on it that Taehyung can’t see. He’s too preoccupied with being worried that Jungkook will spill tea on the floor with the way he’s tilting the mug anyway to try to pay attention to what the younger teen is writing.

When Jungkook looks satisfied with his work, he puts the black marker back where it belongs and
returns to the couch, pressing the mug back into Taehyung’s hands. Taehyung turns it around to take a good look at it, and his breath catches when he reads what Jungkook wrote: “Please always be happy,” he repeats the words quietly to himself.

“It’s going to be your happy mug. Whenever you drink from it, I want you to feel better,” Jungkook explains, and he seems so earnest about every word he says that Taehyung truly feels touched by it.

Taehyung takes a sip. As he’s expected, the tea is already cold. He makes eye-contact with Jungkook, who looks at him expectantly, and then smiles at him. A genuine smile.

“I think, Jungkookie, that it works.”

Chapter End Notes

Next update February 3rd.

Come talk to me on tumblr. :)
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

Well, it's technically the 2nd still on my side of the world, but it's the 3rd for some of you already I suppose and you guys have been so kind and lovely with your feedback on the last chapter that I just want to give this to you a bit earlier. Seriously, thank you so so much. Your comments were so heart-warming and nice and they just really made me happy. I mean, first and foremost I write for myself. I only write stories that I enjoy writing and I write them because I want to write them. I wouldn't write this if I didn't personally enjoy it. You can say I'm kind of selfish in that way when it comes to writing. But it also really brings me joy to share the things I write and to know that there are others out there that like my story as well. So thank you. And hope you enjoy. :) x

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Things are awkward for a long time, and awkward is still a nice way to put it. Taehyung is sure that he’s not the only one seeing the situation this way after what had happened.

The incident. That’s what Taehyung calls it in his mind. The word ‘incident’ has four definitions in a dictionary:

1: Something dependent on or subordinate to something else of greater or principal importance

2: a. an occurrence of an action or situation that is a separate unit of experience

b. an accompanying minor occurrence or condition

3: an action likely to lead to grave consequences especially in diplomatic matters

‘Incident’ is a fitting word. In a way, it describes Taehyung’s entire stay at Big Hit so far. Whatever had happened to him in the latest months of his life had always been in direct correlation with the company. Him getting another shot at life. Him making friends. Him being blackmailed by a former client.

What happened that day in the studio was just another incident, following an incident, that is based on an even bigger incident.

Taehyung’s thoughts are digressing. They always do when he starts thinking about the way tension hangs in the air when Bangtan Sonyeondan is together nowadays. Maybe it’s just so that he doesn’t have to deal with the fact that he’s the reason for it, for ruining a group that, according to Namjoon, had worked like cogs in clockwork before he had joined.

Namjoon. He’s apologizing for everything. Really, everything. Taehyung knows he still feels guilty for pushing him that day, and Taehyung can’t really do anything to make him feel less guilty. It’s not his fault that he still flinches now, when Namjoon raises his hand. He tries, but he can’t help it. And he knows that the leader’s not lashing out at him, but still he can’t stop. So Namjoon looks at him heartbroken half the time, and when he doesn’t he’s constantly saying sorry for the most ridiculous things.
It’s annoying.

Jungkook, Yoongi and Jin are kind of caught in the middle, although Jungkook has obviously taken Taehyung’s side of the matter, even if he doesn’t say it out loud; it’s visible in the way he sticks to him, especially whenever Hoseok enters the room. Jin and Yoongi play at being Switzerland. They don’t take sides, and they treat everyone the way they did before. That’s good. Faux normalcy is better than none at all.

And Hoseok. Well, he’s an entirely different story. It’s not hard to tell that he’s avoiding Taehyung now, even though Taehyung tries – he really, really tries – to talk to him, get to know him the way Hoseok had wanted, to become comfortable enough with him to confidently call Hoseok his hyung. But he can’t do that if Hoseok always flees the room whenever he sees Taehyung and isn’t required to be present. It’s frustrating, and it’s definitely not helping to fulfil PD-nim’s ultimatum:

Trust or leave.

Taehyung really tries to trust. Otherwise, he wouldn’t try to comfortably sit next to Namjoon at dinner and act like nothing happened. Or smile at Jungkook every time the younger catches him drinking from his happy mug.

It’s an unspoken rule by now that no one but Taehyung is allowed to drink from that mug. And if all the others are already dirty, still no one dares touch it. And to Taehyung it’s so precious that he refuses to let anyone else wash it, because they might accidentally wash off the design. As Taehyung had learned when washing the mug for the first time, even waterproof black marker is not entirely waterproof on the surface of a polished mug.

So yes, things are weird and they’ve been that way for two weeks now. Bang PD-nim hasn’t called Taehyung back into his office yet, which Taehyung supposes means that the threat of his removal isn’t as immediate as it was.

Still he thinks that he should sort things out with Hoseok, for the sake of his own fate. That’s exactly why he follows Hoseok to the male’s bathroom at the company one sweltering afternoon. He’s trying to be as quiet as possible when he enters the lavatory and leans against the wall while waiting for Hoseok to come out of the stall.

Once he does eventually come out, Hoseok doesn’t notice him at first. He could either spot him from the corner of his eyes, or when looking at the mirror. However, Hoseok’s gaze is fixed on the sink and only after he washes his hands does he look up. Taehyung observes as Hoseok looks at himself. Taehyung cocks his head, and that small movement is all it takes to get Hoseok’s attention. The older man jumps in surprise and curses.

Taehyung feels almost bad. Almost.

“You know, there’s no way to get closer to each other if you constantly try to avoid me,” Taehyung states.

They stare at each other through the mirror, and the water of the automatic sink stops.

“I’m not avoiding you.”

“Mhm. Next thing you’re going to tell me is that you’re not a liar.”

The corners of Hoseok’s mouth quirk up at that.

“Guess you caught me.”
Hoseok turns around and leans against the sink after wiping his hands on his trousers. He purses his lips.

“But I don’t understand why.” Taehyung’s almost whining now. Maybe he sounds slightly childish. “Your issue was that we weren’t close, and I’m trying. But now you’re the one that’s avoiding me, so how is that supposed to work out?”

“I guess it’s my way of dealing with the guilt I feel towards you. Whenever I see you...” Hoseok trails off, contemplating what to say, and then his mouth catches up with his mind again. “When I got angry at you, I guess I did want to hurt you emotionally. Does that make sense? It sounds terrible when I say it out loud, but I’m sure you’ve had that feeling before.”

Taehyung hadn’t, but he stays quiet and continues to listen.

“So I wanted to make you feel my pain as well. It’s not just that you refuse to call me hyung while readily accepting everyone else. I was scared you’d take up my place in the group and make me the outsider. But the way you looked in the kitchen, and how you broke down in the studio- I never meant to hurt you like that. But whenever I see you now, I remember how you couldn’t even stand, because you were shaking so hard. I had to hold you up. And for that I hate myself.”

It’s an answer so honest that it catches Taehyung off guard. He had expected something, but he had never thought that Hoseok would come right out with the full-blown truth. And he does understand where Hoseok’s coming from, he really does. He knows the feeling of being scared of not belonging. It’s one that still haunts him daily, because as soon as someone realizes that he’s not made for Bangtan Sonyeondan, he’ll return back to the street. He’d be scared too if someone was to threaten his position within the band.

“You do realize that you’re irreplaceable, right? I mean, who else would be the main dancer? Jin hyung?”

Hoseok snorts and Taehyung can’t help but smile as well, but then he soberes up, because this is something he shouldn’t joke about. The situation is drearier than that.

“Listen, feel guilty as much as you want, but don’t avoid me. I want this to work out as well. I want us to be friends. Teamwork makes the dream work, isn’t that what Namjoon hyung always says? And Bang PD-nim, I don’t know if you know, but he ordered me to his office after you stormed out, and he made it very clear that a good relationship in the band is very important. So I want this to work, but I need you to work with me here.” And after a second too long, he tags the word “hyung” at the back of his speech.

Hoseok nods, and that’s all that Taehyung needs for now. He knows that it’s still going to be awkward between them for a while. That’s completely normal. They’re not going to be best buds all of a sudden, but at least he hopes that Hoseok means it when he promises to not avoid Taehyung anymore. It’s a start. A new beginning. And hopefully Bang PD-nim will see that he tries really fucking hard to follow his order. Even if it’s hard to trust, it would hit Taehyung a thousand times harder if he’d had to leave.

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Yoongi has offered to take him shopping. It’s still a foreign feeling to Taehyung to buy whatever he desires. Not like he has much money to spend – BigHit’s allowance is small —, but he has money that is entirely his and that he can blow out on whatever he wants. Logically he knows that he should save all of it for emergencies, but he can’t not indulge in a bit of spending when Yoongi drags him to a cheap clothes store and tells him what shirts he thinks would look good on
Taehyung.

It’s not only that he has money that he can spend without fearing he might not be able to pay the electricity bill for the next month, but Taehyung has now the luxury to buy clothes that he wants to wear. He doesn’t have to go shopping with the thought in mind that he’ll have to buy something appealing for customers. Sometimes he still unconsciously grabs for clothes that make him uncomfortable just looking at, but then he remembers and he puts them back on the rack and it’s a beautiful feeling.

Yoongi, Taehyung has observed, is very thrifty. He looks at price tags for a long time when he considers whether he should buy something or not. It’s a familiar feeling to Taehyung, the uncertainty of whether or not making a purchase is a good idea.

“There was a time I couldn’t afford both dinner and a bus ticket,” Yoongi offers when he notices Taehyung observing him with interest. “I know what it’s like to be poor. I spend my money wisely.”

He reciprocates Taehyung’s stare, as if waiting for Taehyung to give a piece of information in return, but the younger one eventually just turns away. He can’t shake the feeling that Yoongi was waiting for a reply on that topic to do with Taehyung’s past. Maybe he was waiting for Taehyung to admit that he was poor as well? Searching for a reason as to why Taehyung chose prostitution? If he thinks that Taehyung will open up to him and share his sob story in the middle of a damn clothing store, he’s damn wrong.

Yoongi eventually changes the topic by handing Taehyung another shirt and saying that it would suit him really well.

In the end, Taehyung leaves the store with three shirts and a pair of new jeans, clothes he’s giddy to put into his closet. It’s a great feeling to possess clothes, let alone ones that he can feel entirely comfortable in.

“So Hoseok and you, you guys are good again?” Yoongi asks as they are walking back to the dorm, and Taehyung slowly starts to get suspicious of him. Did Namjoon set Yoongi up to talk to him? He still seems to hold his distance after the incident in the studio. Taehyung can’t remember a single time that Namjoon has initiated a touch between them ever since it happened. He wouldn’t be surprised if this outing is a result of Namjoon brooding over how he can check up with Taehyung on whether things are okay with him.

“We’re okay,” Taehyung shrugs. “Not good, but I guess we’ll get there eventually.”

“Good,” Yoongi mutters, “that’s good.”

Definitely Namjoon’s doing. Yoongi seems out of his depth, and that’s the end of their conversation about Hoseok. He should have sent Jin instead, because he at least knows how to talk with people about their feelings.

Speaking of Jin, the oldest member has apparently made it his mission now to have everyone feel equally included in the band by doing obligatory bonding activities, which is why they sometimes have to gather around a board game after a long day of practice and play together. Yoongi usually doesn’t give a damn and falls asleep straight away. The others try to keep their eyes open, but when even Jungkook and Namjoon have fallen asleep, Hoseok, Jin and Taehyung have to admit defeat, because you can’t play a game with six people when half of them sleep. So board games are sometimes exchanged for movie nights, and movie nights for outings for ice cream, and one time they even go to the Han river and play soccer there. Taehyung enjoys the time spent with
them. There’s sometimes arguing and often bickering, and most times at the end of their bonding
time Taehyung’s stomach hurts from laughing. His relationship with Hoseok is still rocky, and
Namjoon still feels guilty, and Jungkook still holds a grudge against Hoseok, but they’re slowly
getting better.

His bonding time with the band members, however, requires a lot of his free time. So much, in fact,
that he rarely gets to see Jimin.

So when Taehyung bumps into him in the corridor when he’s walking to the vending machine
together with Jin, and Jimin suggests that they hang out this evening, Taehyung wants to say yes
more than anything. He misses Jimin. He’s barely had the opportunity to talk to him since the fight
with Hoseok. A few minutes here and there in the dance studio or the cafeteria, but that’s it. And
it’s not even like he’s avoiding Jimin. He wants to talk to his friend, but they’re both just insanely
busy.

Before Taehyung can say yes, however, Jin shifts next to him and clears his throat.

“I’m sorry, Jimin, but we’re having a game night today. I’m sure you two can find another time
soon though.”

Taehyung watches the smile drop from Jimin’s lips and be replaced by a frown, and he too is
disappointed, but he doesn’t dare speak against Jin. He knows how important it is to the oldest
member, and to the group in general. It’s supposed to help them get comfortable with each other.
But he can see that Jimin feels let down, and when he apologizes he means it sincerely.

“Sometime soon, okay?” he promises his friend.

After that encounter, he likes bonding time just a little less. To skip one of them so he could hang
out with Jimin instead, whom he hasn’t been able to catch up with for over a week now, surely
wouldn’t have been such a big deal, right?

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Taehyung’s tucked away in a corner of the company. A Japanese textbook is on his knees and he’s
trying to read through one of the texts. It’s a slow process, but he has a dictionary at his side and
he’s progressing.

It’s relatively late already, and the sweltering hot August air slowly starts to cool down. The shirt
he’s wearing is clinging to his sweaty back and the water bottle he’s brought with him is almost
completely empty by now. The only noise he can hear is the steady ticking of a clock above the
doors of the room and the sound of the cars rushing by on the street below.

He’s concentrating hard, absentmindedly gnawing at the back of his pencil as he does so. He’ll
need to sharpen it again soon.

Then there’s footsteps in the hallway outside. One pair. Urgently walking down the hall. Doors are
being opened and closed again, as if that someone is frantically searching for something.

Taehyung’s heart speeds up and he freezes, back of the pencil still trapped between his teeth.

It’s not rational, he knows it’s not, but walking the corridors of BigHit –
he still fears Mr. Kim behind every corner. Waiting for him.

Searching for him.
The footsteps come closer. And closer.

Taehyung knows that he shouldn’t have anything to fear. Namjoon had promised him that he’d let him know whenever Mr. Kim was in the house, and Taehyung believes his words. But still he can’t shake that dreadful feeling settling in his stomach, because what if Namjoon just doesn’t know? He can’t tell him if he’s not aware of it.

Or what if he’s tried to tell him, but couldn’t reach him? Taehyung’s left his phone in the studio with the other boys when he had sneaked off to start studying. Namjoon could have tried to warn him.

He can’t help it when his hand starts shaking slightly. Taehyung looks down at it disappointedly. What a traitor. There’s no reason to be scared. He’s not here. He’s not bursting into every room in his search for Taehyung. That’s ridiculous.

But what if-

Taehyung flinches when he hears the door of the neighbouring room close again. He knows his door will be next.

He doesn’t want to look, but he can’t not look. And maybe he’s also holding his breath. It’s hard to tell. That might explain the dizzy feeling in his head.

The door to the room he is in flew open, the handle almost crashing against the wall until a hand reaches out to stop it.

Taehyung’s eyes widen, not expecting who he sees standing there. Jungkook, red in the face and out of breath.

Something terrible must have happened.

“Heung,” Jungkook rasps out, and doubles over to catch his breath. He’s resting his hands on his knees and looks up at Taehyung. “It’s Namjoon hyung.”

A thousand possibilities run through Taehyung’s mind at those words. Accident. Sick. Hurt. Dead. But they always circle back around to Mr. Kim.

“He had a meeting with PD-nim, and then-“

Taehyung wants to get up and to shake Jungkook to talk faster. To spit it out. But then he wishes that Jungkook would never speak again, because Taehyung doesn’t know. Not Namjoon. He doesn’t want anything to ever happen to Namjoon, who looked at him without prejudice after learning what he was. Who gave him a chance in life. The perfect leader.

A friend.

“Heung, he says that PD-nim liked the demo of the song we recorded. ‘No More Dream’. Remember? He likes it so much that he wants it to be our debut song.”

Chapter End Notes

Next update: February 13 (*!!)
Two things: Firstly, I'm doing the Bangtan Underappreciated Fictropes something something Bingo (I forgot the name and I might be too lazy to look it up now). If you want to vote on which four tropes I should write fics on (because I can't decide), go here.

(*!!) Secondly, (and this is low-key important): I'm actually traveling when the next chapter is supposed to be posted, and apparently the place I'm going to won't have WIFI (a true 21st century horror story). I will try to pre save the chapter on ao3 and try to find WIFI on that day to publish it. However, the chapter is queued up on my tumblr, so it will be published there on the 13th. I promise I'll try my best to publish it here as well, but if it's not online by the end of the 13th, you'll definitely find it here.
Thank you all! Throwing this out there before the WiFi cuts off again. Hope you enjoy. :) x

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Namjoon is the first person Taehyung spots when Jungkook drags him back to the studio, Japanese textbook forgotten in a corner of the room. His eyes are red-rimmed and wet with tears as he brings Taehyung in for a hug without even thinking. It’s the best thing to come out of the amazing news, because for once he doesn’t seem to remember his guilt.

“You know what this means, right?” he asks Taehyung, and Taehyung nods against his shoulder while Namjoon squeezes him even tighter.

A debut song. It’s the most important thing about debuting. It doesn’t mean that they know when or how, but it means that they are definitely set to go out there now. Namjoon has worked so hard for this moment for the past few years. They all have. And now their dream is finally a step closer than it was before.

It makes it all the more special that Namjoon, Yoongi and Hoseok have been contributing to the production of the song.

“Even Yoongi hyung cried,” Jungkook chirps happily, “when Namjoon first told him. You should have seen it!”

Yoongi scowls and gets Jungkook into a headlock, the younger one squealing and all the others laughing. They’re elated, all of them. Their good mood hangs in the air like electricity. Taehyung’s never seen Namjoon smile this engagingly before.

“We need to celebrate,” Jin says.

“Bangtan style,” Jungkook chimes in, who finally wrestled himself out of Yoongi’s grip again.

“How do you celebrate Bangtan style?” Taehyung asks, and when everyone grimaces he realizes that there’s an inside joke he’s missing out on. He’s been with them for almost half a year, and there’s still so much he doesn’t know.

“By practicing,” Hoseok says. “Bangtan style is working hard.”

Namjoon, one arm now slung across Taehyung’s shoulder - Taehyung wonders if Namjoon even realizes it’s still there -, shakes his head.

“For tonight Bangtan style shall mean good food and a great time.”

Taehyung’s Japanese textbook lays forgotten where he left it as they all start to file on a plan that they hope will loop Bang PD-nim into buying them a celebratory dinner.

“I know the company doesn’t have much money, but we deserve this,” Yoongi stresses.
“You go tell him that, hyung,” Namjoon answers. “And then see if he still wants to let us debut.”

They get the dinner they ask for. It’s an easy tactic, really. Quite manipulative and unfair, exactly how Yoongi suggested would turn out best. Taehyung likes his way of thinking. They push Jungkook forward when Bang PD-nim stops by a final time to check up on them before making his way home.

Wide-eyed and innocent, Jungkook struggles to find words, but Taehyung can see that he’s just desperate to turn around and tell his hyungs to go fuck themselves. He’d never actually say it though. Too polite.

Bang PD-nim sees right through them, sighs, and asks what they want.

And so they get the kind of dinner they haven’t had for a long time. The kind of indulgence that Taehyung only remembers from staying at his grandma’s house, and for a moment he wonders if she can see him right now, happier than he's been in years. He hopes she does. He hopes she knows, even if she's gone, that Taehyung for once in his life has found a good place to stay with people he can rely on.

—-

Word travels fast within a small company. Before Taehyung has the opportunity to tell Jimin about the happy news - granted he did forget to do so the same night he learned about it, too occupied with happiness to think of anyone else -, Jimin already sends him an urgent text asking if it’s true. Taehyung’s dying to let Jimin listen to the song, their song if nothing goes wrong, but Namjoon has briefed them very thoroughly on the fact that no one uninvolved with production is allowed to listen.

Jimin seems dejected when Taehyung tells him so, and Taehyung feels bad about it. Jimin is his friend. He wants him to also be part of the experience, but he can’t risk breaking the rules. For all he knows, Bang PD-nim could still decide to kick him out of the group any second, and he can’t risk that. Jimin will just have to wait like the rest of the world to hear.

Now that the debut song is picked, everyone and everything around them finally seems to spring into motion. There’s all kinds of meetings that Taehyung barely listens to, and measurements and concept ideas being worked on. All of them are set on a diet that mostly consists chicken breast, grilled not fried. Work-out schedules are being worked-out and recordings in the studio are being taken more serious now. B-side songs are being considered.

There’s choreography for ‘No More Dream’. It’s exhausting and not entirely finished yet. Hoseok has a bit of a say in it as well, so he often meets with choreographers.

They start shooting videos to appeal for sponsors in front of a wall that strongly resembles the one Yoongi auditioned in front of. Taehyung knows what that wall looks like, because Jungkook got his hands on the video file somehow, and they had giggled over the green shirt and hair and a much younger, fiercer Yoongi spitting rhymes, on the couch of their dorm when they should have long gone to sleep already.

“Do I really have to sing?” Jungkook asks and scrunches his nose. He looks uncomfortable in front of the camera.

“How else do you want to show people that you’re worth investing in?” Namjoon asks exasperatedly. The bags under his eyes are more prominent these days, although concealed by make-up at the moment. His job as leader isn’t easy now. Taehyung wonders how much worse it’s
going to get once they debut. He also wonders how much he’s contributed to the rings under Namjoon’s eyes regarding the blackmailing situation. Neither Namjoon nor anyone else is willing to share anything about that with him at all.

“We’re going to tell you if something important happens,” Namjoon always says.

Getting Jungkook to sing in front of a camera is a struggle, and Taehyung can hear one of the managers sarcastically mutter that it’s a good thing that they’ll only be lip-synching at music shows. Taehyung’s blood boils at that. It’s not Jungkook’s fault that he’s shy in front of the camera, or shy in general. He’s still a kid for fucks sake, these adults should cut him some slack.

When it’s Taehyung’s turn, he introduces himself with as much charm as he can muster up; an instruction from the producer. He smiles as widely as he can and he sings with as much feeling as possible, and then he makes a cringy heart with his hands above his head while beaming at the camera that makes Yoongi crack up in the background.

Taehyung laughs twice as loud when Yoongi is ordered to do aegyo in front of the camera and looks absolutely miserable. Hoseok films the occasion with his phone, and as soon as Yoongi is done, the dancer dashes out of the room, chased by Yoongi who’s screaming threats after him should he not delete the video.

The first thing Taehyung does after the shooting is wrapped-up is find Jimin. They haven’t talked all that much lately. Still. He supposes it’s because they’re both insanely busy, even more so than before their debut song was selected, as Jimin doesn’t text him back as often as he used to and rarely has time to actually meet up. But Taehyung knows for a fact that Jimin’s at the company right now because he spotted him briefly walking down a hallway about half an hour ago, but didn’t have the time to call out to him.

As expected, Jimin is in one of the dance studios. He’s bent over his bag, throwing a towel and a half-empty water bottle inside.

“Are you leaving already?” Taehyung asks.

Jimin must not have noticed him enter, because he startles and the bottle falls out of his hand and hits the floor instead, rolling away languidly.

“You surprised me,” Jimin says. His voice sounds hoarse.

“Are you okay?” Taehyung asks as he draws nearer, and he can hear Jimin sniffle as the other teen nods.

When he finally makes eye contact with Jimin, he sees that his friend’s eyes are rimmed red.

“What happened?” Taehyung panics but he tries not to show it. A thousand thoughts race through his head of what could possibly have happened. Of course they all end with Mr. Kim.

“Nothing. I’m just having an allergic reaction to something.”

Jimin smiles, but it’s not convincing. Neither are his words, but Taehyung’s not going to pry if his friend doesn’t want to talk. It just surprises him that Jimin, cheerful Jimin who’s always there for others, always smiling, is crying.

Jimin reaches for the bottle that had escaped his grip and throws it into his bag before closing the zip.
“I’m sorry, but I need to go. We’ll catch up another time, okay?”

He doesn’t wait for a reply from Taehyung, but walks out of the dance studio without another word.

Taehyung stares after him helplessly. He wants to run to catch up with him, but he stays where he’s at. He’ll have to text Jimin later today to make sure everything’s okay. Or tomorrow the latest. And he hopes that it’s nothing urgent. Homesickness maybe. Not that homesickness isn’t anything grave. Then again Taehyung doesn’t know. It’s not like he’s ever experienced homesickness before. He’ll text Jimin later today and ask him if they should meet for ice cream. He’ll pay for his friend if that cheers Jimin up, even if he orders one of the disgusting flavours that he prefers.

Taehyung just really hopes that Jimin’s okay.

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Jimin assures him that he’s fine on Kakaotalk. He doesn’t blame his red eyes on allergies anymore but says that it just had been one of those days on which it all got too much, and he couldn’t stop the tears anymore when the dance instructor scolded him. That’s all Taehyung hears from him for the rest of the night.

Jungkook, who he’s sitting on the couch with, tells him that there’s no need to worry. It’s a trainee thing to break into tears every now again, he claims. It’s because of all the pressure on you. It’s kind of therapeutic to just cry every once in a while. Taehyung can’t imagine how breaking into tears from stress can be a good thing, but Jungkook has been a trainee for longer than him, so he must know better.

They watch six episodes of an anime together before Namjoon stumbles out of the bedroom and scolds them for still being up so late when they have to go to the studio again the next morning.

___

“We’re going to attend a meeting,” Namjoon declares.

“A meeting?” Jungkook echoes the words curiously.

A meeting? Taehyung thinks to himself. It must be different from all the other meetings they had to attend lately if Namjoon announces it like that.

Namjoon’s standing in the middle of the dance studio, the rest of the five boys sitting around him in various positions and looking up at their leader.

“Yes, a meeting with potential sponsors. And sponsors that have already signed a contract.”

Namjoon’s eyes meet Taehyung’s one second too long and the younger teen freezes because he knows exactly what that means. Jin, who must have caught on to the implication as well, rests a hand on Taehyung’s lower back.

Taehyung anticipates the touch that is meant to be comforting, but he has to take a deep breath as to not flinch away. On some days it’s easier to allow the comfort than on others. Today is the other, and the news makes it even less welcome.

“Tomorrow at three in the afternoon. Wine and dine them, is what PD-nim said. Convince them that we’re worth it. Remember what we’ve learned about talking to sponsors and possible ones. Don’t say something unnecessary. Make them curious. Make them want to learn more about us.”
Taehyung shudders. It’s only slightly, but he knows that Jin notices, as his hand now starts gently rubbing up and down.

Wine and dine. Make them curious. Taehyung knows a trick or two about making men and women want more. And he also knows that Mr. Kim will be at the event as well. He wonders what it will take for Namjoon to excuse him from the meeting. Maybe if he gets into a car accident and has to stay at the hospital for a day or two?

When all is said and done, Namjoon dismisses them, Jin’s hand still doesn’t leave Taehyung’s back. Taehyung just wishes he would take it away again.

He wishes to disappear. An evening in the same room as Mr. Kim has never ended pleasantly for Taehyung before.

Namjoon comes over to them once Jungkook and Hoseok have gained enough distance, and Jin pulls him up to stand. Taehyung’s knees almost buckle.

“Sponsors,” Taehyung says, and the word tastes bitter on his tongue.

“I’m sorry. We have to. But I promise that we won’t leave you alone for one second. You’ll be fine. And we’ll try to engage him as much as we can so that he has as little time with you as possible.”

“Promise me something?” Taehyung asks. He’s forcing his voice not to shake. He’s strong. He can do this. And he has the others at his side.

“What do you want?” Namjoon asks.

“Keep him far away from Jungkook.”

Taehyung doesn’t miss the worried glances Namjoon and Jin exchange.

Back at the dorm that night, Yoongi catches him in the kitchen on his own.

“You okay?” he inquires. “You know we’ll look after you, right?”

Taehyung hums.

“Hyung, just how much do you want to debut?” Taehyung asks as he washes the foam from his happy mug. The black ink on it started fading slightly by now.

“It’s the only thing I can think about,” Yoongi says earnestly.

“I could seduce a potential sponsor or two tomorrow, you know? That might help us debut faster,” Taehyung murmurs. “I know how to do it.”

At first Yoongi looks at him absolutely stunned, but when Taehyung can’t hold back his laugh anymore he turns beet red.

“You should have seen your face,” Taehyung wheezes as he puts his mug on the draining board.

Yoongi affectionately punches his shoulder. It’s a light touch. More like a nudge than anything else.

“Ya, you punk. I’m all for you making jokes, but at least make funny ones,” he complains before leaving the kitchen while shaking his head.
Taehyung traces one of the smileys on his mugs that are now upside down while the mug is draining, but the smile that has previously graced his lips drops as soon as Yoongi is out of the kitchen.

He can’t deny that behind that carefully constructed facade he’s currently trying to keep up in front of the others, his heart is beating anxiously fast in his chest.

Chapter End Notes

Next update: February 24
Chapter 20

Thanks for the comments guys! I'm back home from traveling, and this is the last prewritten chapter I have, meaning from now on we'll be back to surprise updates for a bit, until I manage to churn out a few chapters in advance again. Also this was supposed to be two chapters originally (it's really easy to find the cliffhanger if you go looking for it), but I think it's actually better to read as one. Hope you enjoy! :) x

Taehyung is still in bed, although he knows that he’ll have to get up soon. He can hear the others bustling around outside already, and Hoseok has come back two or three times to try and drag Jungkook out of bed. The first two times, the younger teen had whined and swatted Hoseok’s prodding hands away, but now he’s finally sitting upright on his mattress and scratching the back of his head while yawning. When he opens his eyes again, Jungkook catches Taehyung staring from the top of his bunk bed and cocks his head.

He gets up from his mattress and climbs up the ladder to Taehyung’s. “You’re still in bed, hyung?” Jungkook murmurs. He’s not wearing a shirt, because it’s the end of August and the weather’s still hot, even in the early hours of the morning. None of the boys wear shirts at night except for Taehyung. His white shirt is a bit too big and has a toothpaste stain just above the right nipple.

“I’m faster at getting ready than all of you,” Taehyung answers. Inwardly he sighs as Jungkook settles against him, but he shifts around and moves his left arm so Jungkook can scoot up and rest his head comfortably on it.

Jungkook, however, deems Taehyung’s chest more comfortable than his arm and settles his head above Taehyung’s heart.

The real reason why Taehyung’s still in bed is that he’s trying to avoid starting the day. Today. The meeting with the sponsors. Potential sponsors. Mr. Kim. If he doesn’t get out of bed, he doesn’t have to acknowledge that the day has already begun, and pretend for a few more minutes that everything’s okay when really it isn’t.

Taehyung’s scared. He’s scared shitless. He doesn’t even know what he’s so scared about. Namjoon has promised him that he won’t be on his own with the sponsors — with Mr. Kim — and it’s not like the man will abduct him when one of his members are chaperoning at all times. But he’s still scared.

It’s funny is what it is, because he’d never been scared of Mr. Kim before he came to BigHit. Quite the opposite, actually. He knew that Mr. Kim was a good customer. One that treated him well. A little bit too well at times, but better than most of his clients nonetheless. And now he’s the one orchestrating Taehyung’s nightmares.

“Your heart is beating really fast,” Jungkook says. He sounds half asleep again, his words slightly lulling.

“It’s because you’re so close to me, Jungkookie,” Taehyung teases. He can’t see Jungkook’s face, only the black mop of hair on the back of his head, but he knows that the teen is blushing.
“Don’t say embarrassing stuff like that, hyung,” the younger one whines and Taehyung laughs while allowing his fingers to run through the strands of shiny black hair.

“But really, why’s your heart beating so fast? Are you nervous about today?”

“Are you nervous?” Taehyung asks back instead of answering. Dodging the question. He’s fucking nervous, but Jungkook doesn’t need to know that.

Jungkook nods and then he shifts and rests his head on Taehyung’s arm. Taehyung rolls his head to the side to look at the younger teen.

“What’s making you so nervous?” he asks and reaches for one of Jungkook’s hands to play with his fingers, giving Jungkook some time to think of how to answer the question.

“I think- they’re sponsors, y’know? Or potential ones. They want to invest in us, but we need to persuade them first. What if one of them will asks me to sing? You know that I can’t…” Jungkook trails off, his eyes now too lingering on their intertwined fingers.

It always surprises Taehyung anew just how uncomfortable Jungkook is about singing in front of people he doesn’t know, especially for someone who wants to become an idol. He wonders if Jungkook has always been this shy about it, or if his reluctance to sing in front of strangers had only started once he became a part of the harsh business that is the entertainment industry.

“Who’s the person you feel most comfortable singing in front of?” Taehyung asks. He feels for the younger boy. He’s overheard him talk to Jin about it before, but only caught pieces of the conversation. And he remembers the sarcastic muttering about playback from the staff back when they shot the promo videos. Jungkook’s just a kid, and a soft-hearted one at that. Taehyung fears that in this industry, the younger might get ripped to shreds if it wasn’t for the other members by his side. It must really nag on him.

“My mum,” comes the quiet answer.

“When someone asks you to sing for them today, why don’t you try closing your eyes and imagining singing to your mother instead? Don’t look at me like that! It really works.”

Jungkook shrugs, but Taehyung can tell from the look on his face that he’s not at all convinced.

“It’ll be alright, you’ll see. And it’s not like you’ll be in there alone. If someone asks you to sing, I’ll sweep in and start singing for you instead.”

Taehyung gets the smile he’s been meaning to draw out of the younger boy. His nose scrunches up and it’s adorable.

“Who’s the person you’re most comfortable singing in front of, hyung?”

There’s a short pause.

“My grandma,” Taehyung admits. “It was always my grandma.”

Jungkook seems to perk up at that, all traces of sleep now forgotten. Taehyung knows that Jungkook’s curious, because he’s always successfully ditched the family conversation with pretty much all the boys before. Although he knows that they suspect stuff. He’s not sure what exactly Jungkook and Hoseok think, but the other hyungs are probably smart enough to figure out on their own that Taehyung’s family situation isn’t particularly splendid considering the circumstances he found himself in only at the beginning of the year.
“She’s passed?” Jungkook asks carefully.

“Cancer. She died at the beginning of 2010, a few days after my birthday.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, hyung,” Jungkook says, and he sounds so sincere that it warms Taehyung’s heart.

He reaches up to ruffles Jungkook hair.

“It’s okay. I’m over it now, though I still terribly miss her. She was my best friend and it still hurts, but that’s just life.”

It’s not a lie. He’s learned to deal with it by now, but he did a terrible job of handling it back then. Packed a bag in the late stages of spring that same year and made his way to Seoul. A bruised and terrified scrawny child without any knowledge of the world, yet a witness to too much of its cruelty already. Sometimes he thinks it’s a miracle that he’s survived at all.

The door to the other room flies open just then, and in stumbles Yoongi.

“Jungkook, didn’t Hobi tell you three times to get out of bed now? I swear to god if you don’t get your ass out right now-” He stops midsentence upon seeing that Jungkook’s mattress is empty, before spotting two heads peeking down at him from the top of Taehyung’s bunk bed.

“Stop nesting, you two lovebirds, and get fucking dressed. Namjoon’s having a nervous breakdown about the meeting today, we’re now supposed to have a meeting before the meeting and Hoseok’s looking like the next person to have a nervous breakdown.”

He’s out of the room before either of them has a chance to reply, but they can both clearly hear him murmur to himself that he’s going to be the next one with a nervous breakdown if he’s the only one in this band who has his shit together.

Taehyung’s make-up is done and his hair is done, and he’s wearing those weird clothes again that he had to wear for that test photoshoot. He’s really not a fan of the clothes, but at least he doesn’t have to wear those ridiculous fake golden chains around his neck like Namjoon or Yoongi, because those look even more stupid than the clothes.

All of them have piled into the room the meeting will be held in approximately five minutes ago, and now they’re just waiting for the even to start. There’s food and drinks, but the food isn’t meant for them and the only thing they get is water and orange juice.

“Are you okay?” Jin asks. There’s too much make-up around his eyes for Taehyung’s liking. He looks weird. Different. They all do. It doesn’t suit them nearly as much as the comfy training clothes they wear for dance practice. “You know there’s nothing to be worried about, right? We’ll look after you.”

“I’m more worried about Jungkook than me, to be honest. He’s super nervous.”

“I’ve noticed, but he’ll be fine as well. He’s not alone in this either.”

Taehyung nods and leans his head against Jin’s shoulder with a heavy sigh.

“It’s just going to be weird to pretend.”

“Pretend what?” Jin asks, and Taehyung has the weird urge to coo over that innocent remark.
“Pretend that I haven’t had sex with Mr. Kim,” Taehyung says matter-of-factly, and he can’t help but chuckle when Jin sputters and becomes completely red in the face.

“Why are you blushing like a virgin?” Taehyung asks teasingly. Jin gently shoves him away at that remark.

“Who’s a virgin?” Hoseok asks as he comes over to them, and Taehyung catches Jin face-palming from the corner of his eyes.

“Jin-hyung is,” Taehyung laughs.

“And Taehyung is going to starve later if he doesn’t stop this right now,” Jin threatens light-heartedly. Immediately Taehyung clings to his arm and whines, “Hyung, you can’t do this to me.”

Hoseok just watches them and shakes his head, before walking away and mumbling “Kids” under his breath.

Namjoon stops their bickering when he calls them over to line up, because the sponsors are on their way. Taehyung’s heart skips in his chest when he hears that. He can see that they’re all nervous to some extent, although Yoongi and Hoseok apparently not as much as the others. Namjoon is bouncing, Jin squares his shoulders and tries to look confident but Taehyung can obviously tell it’s just a pretence, and Jungkook- Jungkook shakes next to him with nerves, eyes wide and pupils snapping around the room.

Without thinking, Taehyung grabs one of his hands. It’s warm and sweaty, but he doesn’t mind. He squeezes and once he has Jungkook’s attention, he smiles at him in a way that he hopes conveys encouragement.

“You’ll be fine,” he says. “Think of your mum. She’s going to be so proud of you.”

Jungkook swallows, but then he nods quietly, takes a deep breath and juts out his chin, looking determined and a little more confident. He must have picked up that chin jutting out thing from Namjoon somewhere along the way. While it looks kind of ridiculous on Namjoon, it looks cute on Jungkook. Ridiculous, but cute.

Taehyung spots Mr. Kim as soon as the group of people, not more than thirty he thinks but Taehyung isn’t entirely sure, enter the room. He doesn’t feel comfort in the fact that Mr. Kim’s eyes immediately search him out as well, and when Namjoon counts them in for their introduction, Taehyung works on autopilot. He knows that there are a lot of eyes on him right now, but he’s only aware of one set.

PD-nim introduces them individually to the people present, and after a few minutes and some lines they have rehearsed, the official introduction is done and PD-nim encourages the potential sponsors to mingle with and get to know his idols.

It’s okay. It’s not as bad as Taehyung thought it might be. Just like they’ve promised him, there’s always someone at Taehyung’s side. He’s not alone for one second, and it looks like Yoongi is particularly set on engrossing Mr. Kim in conversation.

What Taehyung is more worried about is Jungkook, and he watches him with hawk-eyes. Whenever it looks like the younger one feels uncomfortable, Taehyung will walk over, wrap his arm around him, put on a blinding smile and charm the sponsor, and each time he feels Jungkook’s shoulders drop in relief under the weight of his arm.

It goes so far that his protection squad eventually stops sticking to his side, because Taehyung’s so
set on helping out Jungkook that he doesn’t need any help himself. Instead they assign themselves to diverting Mr. Kim’s attention off him. By the end of the event, Taehyung hasn’t even exchanged a single word with him.

It was rather… anticlimactic. In his head this meeting had been a terrible monster that he had been afraid of, but in the end it was nothing. Damn it, he hadn’t even had to talk to the man. He was aware of the stares that he had received, but that’d been the end of it. Taehyung feels relieved, but also somewhat disappointed. It’s weird. But there was all this build-up, and then there was nothing. It was almost too easy.

They’re about to leave the building hours after the event ended and sweaty from dance practice, when Taehyung gets stopped by one of the staff.

“Can you come back with me real quick?”

Taehyung looks over to Namjoon who promises that he’ll wait for him, and Jin offers to drive the rest of them home with his car. Jungkook cheers, because that means no public transport which makes it faster. He looks absolutely exhausted. Yoongi tags along to make them a trio. Hoseok offers to also stay behind with Namjoon.

“We’ll be waiting in our studio, okay?” Namjoon asks, and then Taehyung gets led away by the staff member.

“Do you know what this is about?” he asks as he trails behind the other man, but he only receives a shrug.

“I’ve just been instructed to bring you back. No details given.”

The man gestures to the room Taehyung’s supposed to go in, and by now Taehyung should have realized that all of this is odd. It’s a meeting room. Normally, if staff needs to talk to him, they do it wherever they bump into him. If PD-nim needs to talk to him, he does it in his office. No one ever has lured him into a meeting room before. But Taehyung’s too absorbed in the fact that this day went so well that his defences are lowered. It’s his biggest mistake. His most stupid mistake. He should have known better than this.

He walks into the room and closes the door behind him. The lights are on, and someone’s sitting on one of the chairs around the table.

Taehyung freezes as his eyes fall on the figure, and all the mistakes he’s made hit him like a train.

Mr. Kim is sitting there, a smile on his face and gesturing invitingly to the chair opposite of his.

“Taehyung-ssi, it’s so good to see you. Please do take a seat.”

Taehyung hesitates. He’s not so stupid as to take a seat opposite his former client. Even he can tell that’s one hell of a bad idea.

“I don’t think you’re in the position to deny my request,” Mr. Kim says, looking smug as he speaks, brow raised as he looks at Taehyung mock-questioningly. “Or else the company might get a nice video of you. Or I could show your beautiful pictures to your bandmates; do they know about your filthy past? I know some do. Bet that cute kid you stuck to all afternoon doesn’t though.”

“Leave Jungkook out of this,” Taehyung snaps, and Mr. Kim laughs at him.
“Follow my orders and I will.”

Taehyung clenches his teeth, but he does as he’s told. He doesn’t want to do it, but he knows who has the upper hand in this situation. He pulls out the chair and hopes that Mr. Kim doesn’t realize his hands are shaking.

It’s ridiculous. He’s never been afraid of Mr. Kim when he was his client. He’d looked forward to their sessions even, at least compared to all his other clients. Mr. Kim had been nice to him. But now he’s more scared of him than anything else, because Mr. Kim has the power to destroy his dream, to take away everything that he’s never dared to dream of, but worked so hard for in the past couple of months. He’s got the power to take away Taehyung’s friends, too. That would possibly even hurt a lot more than losing his job as a trainee. He’d miss them. He likes them. He’d be absolutely devastated if he’d have to leave them again.

“What do you want?” Taehyung asks. He hides his hands below the table and tries to keep eye contact. They’ve had lessons on this, on how to fake confidence, because that’s important in the world of idols in order to prove yourself apparently. It’s hard though, when Mr. Kim stares him down. “Are you here because you want to fuck me? Because I’m not a prostitute anymore. You can’t pay me to take your dick anymore. If you try something now, it’s sexual assault.”

“Stop playing all confident,” Mr. Kim says, and Taehyung deflates. It was worth a try, but the older man must see right through him. “I’m not an idiot, Taehyung. Do you really think I’d be so stupid as to touch you now? Although I do think you could have shown me a bit of gratitude for getting you into the company.”

Taehyung shudders at the smile on Mr. Kim’s face. It speaks of dirty thoughts and it creeps him out.

“Why do you think none of the pictures I’ve sent in show my face? Do you really believe I’m so stupid as to hand you evidence against me? Fucking an underage prostitute in a hotel room is not something anyone wants to get themselves associated with.”

“Then why are you here?” Taehyung asks. He’s exasperated. And he really doesn’t need the bullshit Mr. Kim is sprouting. And whenever he mentions Taehyung’s name, Taehyung just wants to scream. That one thing that had always been his, so ruthlessly abused by a former client now. His hands are clenched into fists under the table.

“Because I like you. And you know I like you, Taehyung. I’ve always had a soft spot for you. And I’ve enjoyed our good times together. I brought you here. You’d still be out on that street corner, whoring your ass to strangers, if it wasn’t for me. Aren’t you grateful? I’m just making sure that you don’t forget about me.”

He’s talking slowly, a zany twinkle in his eyes, and when he says the word ‘whoring’, his mouth twists into an ugly grin that reminds Taehyung of one of those nightmarish masks decorating his grandma’s walls. He used to be so scared of them. He’s just as scared of Mr. Kim.

“That is fucked up,” Taehyung says. He watches the man’s face darken at his words and swallows harshly. “You’re fucked up, and you realise that, right?”

“You little shit,” Mr. Kim grimaces and stands from his chair to lean over the table. He barely reaches the collar of Taehyung’s shirt, but he tugs at it harshly, yanking Taehyung forward. The fabric almost tears.

Taehyung’s face is close to Mr. Kim’s, too close. He can see the first hints of wrinkles there, and
the few gray hairs swimming between the black. His breath reeks of garlic and the smell makes Taehyung want to retch.

“I made you, don’t you forget that. You’ve been V, and you will *always* be V.” Spittle jump from his lips, and a droplet lands on Taehyung’s chin. He’s too scared to wipe it away. “I’ve taken care of that. And if you don’t start showing some respect to me, I will make sure that those pretty pictures of yours will find their way to the press once you’ve debuted. I have made you, and you better fucking listen to me.”

Mr. Kim lets go of Taehyung’s shirt and sits back down again. His face is red. Taehyung’s collapsing onto the table once released. He’s shaking. He’s shaking hard, and he feels the tears sting in his eyes. He can’t exactly pinpoint if he’s shaking from fear or from anger. He doesn’t know. He doesn’t know anything.

And yet he understands all too well the sick game Mr. Kim is playing with him. He’s always had a kink for power play. They’ve done it enough times, Taehyung had to obey to Mr. Kim’s every command, pretending to be a helpless damsel and dependent on the older man. Only that this time they’re not playing pretend. This time it is real, and Taehyung knows that it arouses him. Has seen it in his eyes when Mr. Kim had grabbed him by the collar.

He’s quietly crying, his breath fanning out on the top of the table and tears staining it as well.

“I believe that is all for now,” Mr. Kim says. Taehyung can hear him stand up, can hear his chair scrape against the linoleum floor. “Remember what I told you. You’re playing by my rules now. Stick to them, or say goodbye to the nice life you think you’re leading. I’m the one who brought you here, and I’m the one who can throw you back on the street. It was nice seeing you again, V.”

As soon as he hears the door close behind the older man, he can’t stop sobbing. He’s shaking so hard that it hurts. His body hurts. His jaw hurts. Why?

Why? Why? Why?

For once he thought he’d got a shot at a good life, and it’d already been taken away from him. Doesn’t he deserve happiness? Doesn’t he deserve it after all these years of suffering?

His heart hurts too. It beats so fast in his chest that he fears it might burst. He’s scared. He’s sad. He’s in so much pain. Why does he always have to be in so much pain?

He hears the door open again after what feels like minutes. It’s not. It’s been over half an hour that he’d collapsed with his head on the table. Sometimes crying. Sometimes loathing himself and his life. Sometimes even doing both at once.

So when the door opens, he fears that Mr. Kim has come back again. Maybe he’s changed his mind. Maybe he does want to have a sexual favour. After all, Taehyung has to play by his rules now. What can he do? Deny him? He’ll only lose, because if he says no, the pictures will get out. But Taehyung doesn’t want to do that anymore. He doesn’t want to feel the pain of sex. Another form of pain. And he doesn’t want to have to taste it on his tongue, the heavy taste of sweat and arousal. He gags at the thought of it as old memories surface. He doesn’t want this.

“Taehyung?”

It’s not Mr. Kim. It’s Hoseok. Taehyung can’t tell if that’s better or worse. He doesn’t want Hoseok to see him like this. He doesn’t want anyone to see him like this.

“Oh god, what happened?”
There’s a hand on his shoulder and Taehyung shrieks. He tries to shake it off desperately, but once it’s gone there’s another one on his head, turning it, forcing it. He can only see Hoseok through blurry tears. Tries to swat his hands away desperately.


“Are you injured? Hurt? Is something hurting you? Did someone hurt you?”

If he wasn’t so out of his mind, Taehyung would have been surprised at that specific question.

Did someone hurt you? That’s not the first question you ask a friend you find crying alone in a meeting room. It’s too specific. But then again, Hoseok’s a smart guy. Talented and smart. Has seen him cower away when he accidentally dropped that glass, has seen him break down when Namjoon accidentally pushed him. Honestly it takes an idiot to not put two and two together at this point.

Hoseok knows. Or at least he must have a suspicion.

“It was Mr. Kim, right? Fuck, Taehyung, what happened?”

Taehyung whines when Hoseok says that, and he chokes on a sob, starts coughing, starts dry-heaving. The hands are still touching him.

How could Hoseok know?

But then Taehyung remembers that Hoseok was there back then, back when Taehyung saw Mr. Kim for the first time at BigHit. And Hoseok witnessed his freak out back then, how he ran away for the first time.

Hoseok knows.

“What did that fucker do?” Hoseok asks. It sounds so angry. So violent. Taehyung flinches, but then there’s a comforting hand running through his hair and Hoseok talks to him again, voice sweet and soft all of a sudden. “Hey, it’s okay. Everything’s okay, Tae. You don’t have to be scared. I’m not going to hurt you, okay?”

Taehyung’s being shifted, and he’s too tired to fight at this point. Hoseok lifts his upper body from the table and settles him back in his seat. It sucks, because now he can’t hide his face anymore.

“Does Namjoon know, Taehyung? Can he help? Is it okay if I bring him?”

Hoseok’s crouching in front of Taehyung, but he’s already halfway up before he’s finished the last question. Taehyung’s hand shoots out and his fingers dig into the older teen’s t-shirt, much like Mr. Kim’s did in his own and yet so different. Clinging on desperately.

“Hyung,” Taehyung whimpers, and he hangs his head. He doesn’t want Hoseok to leave. Hoseok can’t leave. What if Mr. Kim is coming back and Hoseok’s not there anymore?

Hoseok looks confused, but then he seems to understand and crouches back down in front of Taehyung.

“Okay, I’m staying. It’s okay. But you need to calm down, yeah? And then we’ll find Namjoon.”

Taehyung nods and he sobs and he feels so pathetic. It’s worse that Hoseok has to witness the way he loses his composure.
It takes minutes for Taehyung to stop sobbing, but even then his body hasn’t stopped shaking. Maybe it’s the adrenaline? Is that a thing? He doesn’t know, but he does know that his knees just won’t cooperate. Hoseok has to support him and together they stumble through the hallways, Taehyung’s heartbeat spiking up with every corner they take.

“Namjoon was also searching for you. I don’t know if you had noticed, but I texted him when I found you,” Hoseok says. His voice sounds strained. “He had received a text from PD-nim and completely freaked out. I’m assuming it was about Mr. Kim? You guys have a past, don’t you?”

Taehyung whimpers at the word ‘past’, and Hoseok looks away, guilty.

“I knew that something was going on, but I have the feeling that this is so much worse than I expected it to be.” At this point Hoseok’s not even expecting an answer. He’s just voicing his thoughts. “Jin-hyung and Yoongi-hyung know about it, right? What about Jungkook? Does he know, or is he just smitten with you? I can’t deny that I’m kind of disappointed that I don’t know, but I guess that’s my own fault. What did Namjoon say back in the studio? I never tried to be your friend? Then it’s really my own fault.”

Taehyung’s only partly listening. There are too many thoughts in his head to properly pay attention to what Hoseok is saying, but he does pay attention when Hoseok’s voice drops lower.

“I’m sorry that I wasn’t able to be there for you.”

“It’s not your fault,” Taehyung answers. His voice shakes just as much as his body does, and his mouth feels dry. “Didn’t want you to know. Didn’t want anyone to know, really.”

Taehyung’s head is bowed so much forward now that his hair is a veil in front of his eyes. He can’t see anything anymore, besides the grey linoleum floor beneath his feet. He trusts Hoseok won’t walk him into any walls.

“But we’re a team, Tae. We’re supposed to look out for each other.”

“Kookie can’t know. You shouldn’t either. None of you should.”

Hoseok sighs, but he stops arguing. It’s pointless.

Namjoon is pale when he meets them in the small room they call their studio. It’s a déjà-vu thing, Taehyung, Hoseok and Namjoon in this place. And again Taehyung’s knees are trembling so much that he can barely hold himself upright on his own, so when Hoseok leads him to the black sofa, he falls into it in defeat.

“I’m sorry, Tae. I’m so so sorry. I didn’t know he was still here. No one did. PD-nim texted me that he saw him exiting the building. I wouldn’t have let you leave if I knew. I promise I wouldn’t.”

Namjoon’s tripping over his words, his eyes frantically looking Taehyung up and down. Looking for an injury maybe? Making sure that all his clothes are in place the way they are supposed to be?

Taehyung shrugs his shoulders. Now that the panic has subsided he feels- how does he feel? He still feels scared, but mostly he’s numb. He’s trying to wrap his head around what happened. What he said. He barely notices that Namjoon is fretting over him.

“He was completely out of it when I found him,” he hears Hoseok say. “And he was on his own.”

Namjoon’s kneeling before him, one hand on his cheek, trying to wipe away the tears and the
Taehyung knows that his request confuses the others, but Hoseok already pulls his phone out and calls Jin’s number.

It takes about twenty minutes for Jin to arrive. Ten minutes of Namjoon pestering Taehyung to tell him what happened, whether he’s hurt, what Mr. Kim said. Ten minutes of silence once Namjoon has given up, and none of them exchanging a word until Hoseok’s phone rings and he informs them that Jin’s waiting in front of the building.

“What happened?” Jin asks as soon as he spots them and takes note of Taehyung’s puffy eyes, of Namjoon looking pale and the distress that’s written on the faces of the three of them.

No one answers, because Namjoon and Hoseok don’t know and Taehyung just doesn’t want to tell.

“I want to go with Jin-hyung only,” Taehyung says when he sees Namjoon open the car door.

“I’ll drop the two of them off at the dorm, and then we can go wherever you want to, okay?”

Jin notices soon enough that none of them are going to have an actual conversation, so he cranks up the volume of the radio.

Once Namjoon and Hoseok have said their goodbyes and gotten out of the car, Taehyung turns to Jin. His hands have finally stopped shaking. It’s easier to breathe again.

“Remember the corner you found me at when you went searching for me with Yoongi-hyung?” Taehyung asks. “I need you to take me there.”

Jin asks too many questions; and the only ones Taehyung answers concern directions. Regarding anything else, he keeps his lips pressed tight and turns his head to look out of the window. It’s rude and he knows it, but Taehyung doesn’t feel like talking.

“Is this about Mr. Kim?” Jin eventually asks. At this point he’s obviously not expecting an answer anymore. He looks straight ahead instead of stealing glances at Taehyung like he was doing when still waiting for a response, and he talks so quietly that he’s hard to understand. Taehyung understands him nonetheless, and his head whips back around, and Jin almost jerks the wheel in surprise.

“So this is about Mr. Kim,” Jin says when all Taehyung does is stare at him intently, lips still pressed together tightly.

“But he didn’t.” Jin falters, takes a deep breath. “He didn’t touch you or anything?”

“Apparently he’s too smart for that,” Taehyung replies bitterly.
Jin’s forehead wrinkles as he pulls his eyebrows together, obviously mulling over that statement and trying to figure out what it could possibly mean. Taehyung can’t blame him for that. He, too, has troubles wrapping his mind around all of this. Up until this point he had always been so worried about the man hurting him in any way that he had never even considered that if Mr. Kim would hurt him, Taehyung could go seek help. But Taehyung also knows that if he would go seek help, he would have to say goodbye to BTS. An idol entangled in a scandal like that? Some have lost their career because of far less, which is why it still baffles Taehyung at times that he even has the chance to train, even though people involved know what he is. What he was. Past, not present.

“Could you elaborate?” Jin asks.

Taehyung could, but he doesn’t want to. He’s tired and emotionally drained and quite honestly, if he’d close his eyes for more than five seconds right now, he’d fall asleep right away.

“We’re almost there,” he says instead, when the buildings and streets around him become familiar. The Laundromat where he always washed his clothes and that place with the lousy coffee that he used to frequent, because although it tasted bad it was cheap. “Can you please park somewhere around here?”

Jin looks uncomfortable at the thought of having to park his car in an area like this. That’s understandable, but unless he prefers to drop Taehyung off and leave him on his own, that’s Jin’s only option. Taehyung tells him that, and Jin assures him that he’s definitely not going to leave him on his own in this place. As if Taehyung wouldn’t be fine around here. He’d have a higher chance of survival in this part of Seoul than Jin. After all, he’d already survived here once.

When they get out, Jin puts on a black facemask and looks around sceptically. Taehyung doesn’t spare him a second glance. Instead he gets going the second he’s out of the car. He only knows that Jin’s following him when he hears hurried footsteps catching up to him.

“Where are we going?” Jin asks. His voice is quiet, as if he’s scared someone might hear them.

“It’s only a five minute walk,” Taehyung answers. He can hear Jin huff in frustration when he dodges his question, but he doesn’t want to explain. Jin will have to wait and find out once they get there.

It’s already dark by now and streetlamps light up the area. Not many people are outside in this part of the city for no reason after the sun has set. Taehyung slows down their steps. He knows it might raise suspicion if they walk too fast. People won’t pay them any attention if they look like they have nothing to fear, but if they make the impression that they want to disappear from this place fast, others might suspect they have valuable goods they try to bring to safety.

“Don’t stop or people might mistake you for a prostitute, and don’t make eye contact with anyone,” Taehyung says to Jin, whose eyes are flitting around nervously. Once he hears Taehyung’s instruction, his eyes instantly snap to the dirty pavement and stick to it like chewing gum.

They pass Taehyung’s old corner. It’s empty, and Taehyung briefly wonders what happened to the girl he used to share it with some nights. Dead by now, probably. There’s no way she got a second chance like Taehyung did, not with that tattoo on her skin. The mafia doesn’t give second chances.

Occasionally a car slows down next to them, window rolled down, the driver offering money in exchange for sex. Jin shivers every time it happens. Taehyung simply flips the offenders off.
He freezes and falters in his step, however, when one of the drivers calls out to him.

“Hey V, long time no see. People around here thought you’re dead! Are you free? I missed your ass.”

Taehyung can hear Jin choke on his spit and cough silently.

“Fuck off, can’t you see I’m not working?” Taehyung calls back once he recovers.

He’s met with a string of curse words, but then the former client of his drives on. He was one of his regulars. Not as regular as Mr. Kim, but showed up once or twice every month with a stack of money and a hungry glint in his eyes that always let Taehyung know his jaw would be aching the next day.

“I’m sorry,” Taehyung murmurs to Jin. “You shouldn’t have to hear any of this, hyung.”

Jin doesn’t reply, but he rests his hand on Taehyung’s shoulder and Taehyung wavers under the touch. It’s all too much, everything that happened in the past two hours, this place, and his hyung’s gentle touch that he doesn’t think he deserves.

After crossing one more street, Taehyung takes a turn to the left and stops in front of a run-down building. The doorbell doesn’t work. It never has since the first time Taehyung came here, so he just opens the front door, which is never locked, and lets them in. They climb up to the second floor and stop in front of a dirty white door there. Taehyung raises his fist and knocks against the wood in a familiar pattern, the one he always uses when knocking against this particular door. Not that he knocks here much. It hurts too much to stop by most days, but sometimes he just needs a break from life, and this is where he’ll find it.

He can feel Jin behind him to his right, as if he’s hiding behind Taehyung because he’s unsure of what’s to come.

There’s quiet for a few seconds, and then the barking starts. Taehyung’s unfazed by it, but he can hear Jin stumble back in surprise. Taehyung counts five dogs barking, and then he raises his hand one more time to knock again.

A bit more time passes, before the door opens to reveal an old lady and five dogs.

“Eomma’s not the fastest anymore, Taehungie, you have to give me some time,” the woman says, but the only one paying attention to her is Jin.

Taehyung is already on his knees, his face pressed into white fur as one of the dogs excitedly licks his chin, his cheek, his ear, his neck, and everything else it can reach. Taehyung can’t help it. As soon as his fingers come in contact with soft white fur, the tears start coming along with the sobs.

“Oh dear,” the old lady says as she looks down at the crumpled form with a sad smile, “Soonshim has also missed you a lot.” She then looks up at Jin, whom two of the remaining four dogs curiously sniff at and who looks out of depth at what is happening. “Well, how about some tea?”
Taehyung rouses from sleep slowly. His eyes are still closed and he considers succumbing to the drowsiness he’s feeling in his bones. He feels discomfort in his left shoulder though, which makes it hard to fall back asleep. The surface beneath him is uncomfortable, and he wonders just where he dozed off. It’s definitely not his bed.

The next thing he notices is that there’s something warm and soft lying next to him that he has his arm thrown over. His first instinct is to think that Jungkook cuddled up to him again. He likes doing that, pressing close to others when he seeks comfort to fall asleep. At first it had been weird to Taehyung, but he’s used to it by now. Sometimes it’s even nice to have someone to cuddle with in the morning. The surface is so uncomfortable though that Jungkook’s probably going to bitch about his sore back for the rest of the day. But the younger one next to him feels weird. Hairier, somehow, which Jungkook is anything but.

Taehyung startles when a tongue licks his cheek and opens his eyes, heart beating fast.

“Soonshim?” he asks confused, and then it takes a few seconds before the memories come rushing back to him. Memories of Mr. Kim and Jin driving him, and him crying into Soonshim’s fur the second he spotted the dog. He must have cried himself to sleep, because that’s the last thing he remembers. His eyes feel puffy and his face swollen.

“You’re awake.”

Taehyung whirls around and spots Jin folded on the floor next to a small table. There’s a dark blue mug in front of him that’s chipped at the rim, and a look of concern on his face.

“Where’s-”

“Eomma? She left for a walk with the other dogs a while ago.”

Taehyung nods and sits up. His body hurts from sleeping on the floor, and Soonshim is still licking away at his cheek and chin. Taehyung doesn’t stop him.

“I have a few questions,” Jin says. He’s looking at Taehyung expectantly. The younger teen would love to tell Jin that he won’t promise to answer them all, but Jin continues talking: “You’ve got a dog? That’s what you always invest your allowance in when we ask you how much you’ve left at the end of the month?”

“Soonshim”, Taehyung murmurs as he scratches the white-furred dog behind his ears, knowing that’s where he likes it best next to belly rubs. “Technically he was my grandma’s.”

“How come you’ve told no one about him? You’ve been with us for months now, and you never
even mentioned having a dog.”

Taehyung shrugs his shoulders.

“It’s not like I’ve been particularly open with you about my past,” he counters and Jin frowns at him.

Taehyung heaves a big sigh. His head’s hurting and he still feels tired. The last thing he needs right now is a confrontation with Jin. He just wants his peace and quiet, and he doesn’t want to have to regret taking the oldest member with him.

“I don’t visit him often, okay? I only stop by when I’m really down. I took him with me to Seoul when I-” Taehyung falters, swallows, licks his lips, then picks the sentence back up again. “When I came to Seoul, I had Soonshim and few other belongings. But he’s the only thing I have left reminding me of my grandma, and I couldn’t leave him behind in Daegu. Eomma – everyone calls her that and it’s how she refers to herself – found us both when I was still relatively new to Seoul, and she saw that I was struggling to feed us both. She offered to give him shelter and proper care in exchange for money. It’s what she does, find kids having a tough time with companions and offer them to take care of their dogs if they provide money. And I accepted. Soonshim was scrawny and dirty.”

“You were also scrawny and dirty when I found you sleeping in an alley.” Both Taehyung and Jin slightly jump, as they both haven’t noticed the old woman returning. She lets the four dogs from their leashes and watches them scatter off before resuming, “if I remember correctly, you wolfed down the food I gave you just as much as Soonshim did. It was hard to tell apart who was human and who was animal.”

Taehyung blushes. “You really didn’t have to tell him that, Eomma.” That’s really a piece of information that Jin has no business knowing about. Especially the part of Taehyung living in the streets. The younger can tell how Jin seems to soak in the information like a sponge. No doubt he’s going to tell Namjoon about this. It’s this fun little game the boys seem to play, trying to reconstruct Taehyung’s previous life.

“Come to think of it, you look better than ever before. It’s been months since I last saw you. Was it- I think it was February. Dropped off the face of the earth one day and never returned to this corner of the city. But whatever you’re doing now, it seems to be doing you good.”

She looks between Taehyung and Jin, but doesn’t actually ask where Taehyung has been. This is something that he really appreciates about this part of the city. No one asks questions that aren’t their business. His band members still have a lot to learn.

“You got my letters?” Taehyung changes the topic.

“Darling, if I didn’t get the money you sent me, you wouldn’t have found Soonshim here. I got them just fine. I even took him to the vet for a check-up the other week. He’s getting old, but he’s doing good.”

“Good. That’s good,” Taehyung says and then falls silent. He pulls Soonshim closer again and buries his face in the white soft fur.

They leave about half an hour later, making their way back to Jin’s car with their heads ducked. Jin offers Taehyung his mask this time, but Taehyung declines. So what if a former client stops again to make lewd offers? Now that it’s happened once, it won’t throw Taehyung out of the loop a second time.
“Why don’t you visit Soonshim often?” Jin asks two blocks away from his car. “You obviously care for him.”

Taehyung’s not sure how he can answer the question in order to make Jin understand. He doesn’t think that Jin is familiar with the type of emotions that Taehyung connects to the dog.

“Soonshim is the last thing to remind me of my grandma. I love him, and I have many good memories with him. But it’s also painful to see him. It’s bittersweet. It hurts. But he’s also the best cure to my sadness. So I only ever stop by when I think I’ve hit rock bottom.”

“That day Yoongi and I found you here-”

“I didn’t visit him then. I was too… confused? Shook up? I don’t know. It wasn’t hitting rock bottom, more like losing faith in everything. I’m really not good at explaining this stuff.”

“No, I get it. At least I think I do. But what happened today that made you hit rock bottom?”

Taehyung hesitates and bites his lip. They’re back at this cursed question again, but then they spot Jin’s car and he’s able to avoid it again, because now Jin lets out a huge sigh of relief and quickly ushers him in.

On the way back, they only talk a little. Taehyung texts Namjoon that he’s going to be at the dorm soon, and then he texts Jimin to ask how he’s doing.

When they’ve arrived back, Taehyung thanks Jin for the ride and slips out. Jin wishes him a good night. After Taehyung’s already closed the door, Jin rolls down the window and calls out to him once more.

“Taehyung?”

Taehyung ducks down to make eye contact with his band member. He’s really tired now, and he just wants to take a tablet against the headache, a long shower and then crawl into bed.

“You know; it would be really good if you could open up to at least one of us fully. About everything. It’s not good to keep it all locked inside. And we’d understand. We’re your friends, and there’s nothing to be ashamed of. You should consider it.”

He doesn’t give Taehyung time to process his words, let alone to answer. He rolls the window up again, waves one final time and then becomes one with the flow of the traffic. Taehyung stands glued to the pavement and watches him disappear into the distance, mulling over what Jin has just said. The idea is absolutely ridiculous.

It’s long after midnight, but Hoseok, Namjoon and Yoongi are still awake when Taehyung returns back home. They’re all curled up on the couch, each of them clutching a mug, all of them filled to various degrees. Coffee. They’re not randomly awake. They meant to stay awake to wait for his return.

Taehyung looks warily at Hoseok, who’s too busy taking a sip from his mug to notice.

“We didn’t tell him,” Yoongi says when catching the look, and Taehyung blushes for being called out. “But he suspects things, and right now he knows more than Namjoon and I do because he found you. What the fuck happened, Tae?”

“I don’t want to talk about it and I’m really hungry,” Taehyung deflects and tries to make a beeline to the kitchen.
Yoongi’s obviously not having any of it.

“I don’t care if you want to or not. This is for your safety, Taehyung. You expect Namjoon to tell you about anything going on. It’s not fair to keep things to yourself then. And it makes Namjoon’s and everyone else’s life who’s trying to get you out of this mess a hell of a lot easier.”

Taehyung grits his teeth, looks back at Hoseok, who’s watching the verbal exchange with barely concealed interest.

“You don’t want me to know,” Hoseok eventually says, after keeping eye contact and taking a prolonged sip from his mug. “But I know what’s going on. Not the details, but enough. Mr. Kim, right? You have a past. I’m assuming he hurt you. Or he told you something really upsetting. Blackmailing, maybe? But then it’s got to be something really bad to make you crumble like that.”

“Like beingblackmailed after having sex with him in exchange for money?” Taehyung asks, voice rid of all emotions.

Hoseok snaps his fingers and then points at Taehyung, and agrees that it would have to be something exactly like that, then shakes his head as he proclaims that the thought is too ridiculous. Taehyung looks at him wordlessly. Namjoon sighs and buries his face in his hands, and Yoongi’s eyes dart between Hoseok and Taehyung nervously, as if Taehyung was a wild animal ready to pounce at his prey any second. No one says anything, and Hoseok senses the sudden mood shift in the room, how it is even more tense than before.

“What?”, he asks and looks at the three others in confusion, before his facial features move from confusion to shock to pure terror. “You’re fucking kidding me!”

“It wasn’t just Mr. Kim. I fucked others as well for money. But don’t worry, it’s only Mr. Kim that blackmails the company to keep control over me. After all, he’s the one that got me into the company. Sucked his dick, got a meeting with Bang PD-nim. It’s a great story, really,” Taehyung says bitterly, voice cold as ice.


“I’m just saying how it is,” the youngest in the room defends himself and crosses his arms in front of his chest. “He wanted to know, and now he knows.”

Hoseok looks like he’s seen a ghost. He’s pale and he’s looking at Yoongi pleadingly, as if hoping that his hyung would tell him that he’s been pranked. Really badly pranked, but pranked nonetheless. Yoongi just shakes his head sadly, and Taehyung can see how Hoseok swallows hard, Adam’s apple bobbing in his throat.

“You all knew?” he asks directed at Yoongi. It pisses Taehyung off that Hoseok doesn’t even look at him, but at the same time he’s relieved. He just wants his peace. Crawl under his blanket and sleep, not wake up for a long time. After a shower though. He feels dirty. Used.

“Namjoon knew from the beginning. He told me because he didn’t know whether to give Taehyung a chance given the complications this might bring for us if his past came out. Jin found out when Taehyung learned about Mr. Kim being our sponsor.”

“I didn’t want any of you to know,” Taehyung murmurs. Hoseok’s eyes flit over to him briefly, but he looks away again immediately.

“If people find out,” Hoseok says.
“We’re working on that,” Namjoon jumps in.

Taehyung’s stomach drops. That’s the question. What happens if people find out. They’ll be ruined. They’ll meet their end before they’ve even begun. Hoseok has a right to ask that question. He has a right to demand Taehyung be kicked out of the band.

“Jungkook?”

“He can’t know,” Taehyung blurts out, and that’s what gets Hoseok to finally look at him. “Please. He’s too young. I don’t want him to know. None of you should have known, but you all do. At least give me the dignity to have him look at me without pity.”

“We don’t look at you with pity,” Namjoon tries to assure him, but Taehyung knows it’s a lie. There’s the glances they exchange; the way they treat him like a glass vase that could break when being touched by a gentle gust of wind.

“I have so many questions,” Hoseok says at the same time. Yoongi snorts: “Get in line. He doesn’t answer any of them.”

“But he’s going to tell us what happened between him and Mr. Kim today,” Namjoon demands, and the way he says it leaves no room for argument.

Taehyung cracks. What’s the point of it anyway? He sits down on the floor cross-legged and looks up at them, and answers any question about the night that Namjoon throws at him. He thinks there might be relieve on Yoongi’s face when he tells them that Mr. Kim said he’s not going to touch him, and his stomach coils whenever he can’t make eye contact with Hoseok.

Eventually Namjoon lets him go, and Taehyung all but flees into the bathroom, scrubs his skin too hard under cold water. When he comes out again, the others are still on the couch and talking with each other quietly. They hush immediately.

“I know that you’re talking behind my back either way, so there’s no need to keep quiet in front of me,” he mutters tiredly as he makes his way past them into the bedroom.

Jungkook’s curled up on his mattress, and for half a second Taehyung considers slipping under his blanket, but tonight instead of comfort that thought fills him with dread and he climbs up the ladder to the top of his bunk bed.

He tries to fall asleep, he really does, but too many thoughts are racing through his head and he ends up staring at the ceiling instead of closing his eyes. There are a few minutes of silence, before Jungkook starts shuffling around restlessly, tossing and turning. Taehyung looks down after a while, but only glances Jungkook turning to face the wall before finally settling down again. As Taehyung’s head hits the pillow, he wonders if Jungkook’s having a bad dream.
September morphs into October and nothing much changes except for the colours of the leaves on
the branches of the trees. There’s practice and then there’s more practice, recording and training.
They’ve been put on a diet now, all of them, and it’s quite ridiculous to Taehyung because none of
them look like they need a diet. Everyone sticks to it though, but occasionally they sneak Jungkook
chocolate when the youngest looks beyond exhausted.

Actually they all look beyond exhausted most of the days now for all kinds of reasons. Too much
practice, too little food, too many worries about a possible debut. Except for Jungkook, everyone is
very much aware of the fact that even though they now have a debut song, their actual debut is still
far out of reach, and everyone is also very much aware of the fact that the reason for this can be
attributed to Taehyung.

Hoseok tries not to act different towards him, Taehyung can see that he really does try, but he’s not
succeeding. There’s worry etched on his features that can almost rival Namjoon’s, but it’s less
worry for Taehyung and more worry for the group. Jungkook, on the other hand, clings to
Taehyung more than ever before. He’s assertive enough to notice the tension between all of them,
and although he doesn’t understand it or why it’s there, he’s on Taehyung’s side. Taehyung likes
spending time with Jungkook most, because he’s the only one who treats him normal. No worried
glances towards him, no conversations about him behind his back. Taehyung doesn’t want to pick
favourites, but right now he really prefers spending time with Jungkook more than spending time
with everyone else.

And then there’s Jimin, whom he still barely manages to see, although he tries scheduling meetings
with him. Jimin will either ditch him right away or last minute – it has both happened by now – and
when he does spend time with Taehyung he seems lacklustre, as if spending time with Taehyung is
a bother. Taehyung doesn’t want to admit it, but that hurts. He likes Jimin. He trusts him. Jimin is
the only person he confided in because he actually wanted to, not because he was forced to. Being
dropped like a hot potato by Jimin, the first actual friend he had made at BigHit and in life really,
feels like a punch in the gut. An unpleasant one. But if Jimin doesn’t want to spend time with him,
then Taehyung doesn’t want to be a bother, so eventually he stops texting him.

Namjoon returns back to the dorm later than usual one night, and the other five boys are gathered
in the living room, waiting for him anxiously. Jungkook’s head is lying on Taehyung’s lap, and
Taehyung plays with the boy’s black hair absentmindedly. Even Jin stayed over, and he’s currently
trying to pass time by playing a game on his phone. But time just doesn’t seem to move on.

“This is ridiculous,” Yoongi huffs. Everyone agrees, but no one actually answers. “They’re
supposed to listen to one song, so why does it take them two hours?”

One song. ‘No More Dream’. Their debut song. They finished recording for it a week ago, after
being called back to the studio over and over again to sing and rap the song differently a hundred
times. And then it had gone into mixing, and the final product- well, the final product was finished
earlier today, and Namjoon is in a meeting with Bang PD-nim to get it sanctioned. If this is it, if PD-nim agrees to this being good, that means that they can set their debut date. That it won’t be far off anymore. Maybe even in 2012 still. Anything can happen. Everyone’s hopeful. Everyone’s waiting for Namjoon with bated breath.

And everyone knows that the song wasn’t approved the moment Namjoon steps into their dorm. His body language screams disappointment. Shoulders drooping low, no smile on his face. He kicks off his shoes with more force than necessary.

“‘You’re kidding?’” Hoseok asks with a pleading voice when Namjoon just shakes his head at them. But it’s not a joke. It would be too cruel. Namjoon is not the kind of person to break someone’s heart before bringing the good news. He’s too kind for that.

He relies to them what Bang PD told him. That something’s missing. That it’s off. The song is good, but it’s not perfect. And if they want to debut, perfect is what they need.

“So what now?” Jungkook inquires. He seems to take the news better than the rest of them, but to Taehyung it’s easy to tell that he’s just putting on a mask. The disappointment is so obvious in that small crease between his eyebrows and the slight wobbling of his bottom lip.

“Now it’s time to figure out what’s missing.”

There’s a collective sigh, and the mood throughout the rest of the night is tense. They put on a movie, but no one really pays attention to it, and eventually Namjoon and Yoongi slink off to the kitchen, where they have a quiet conversation that can’t be heard over the noises of the TV.

Taehyung’s thirsty. The bottle of Fanta they’ve been sharing is empty now and his throat is scratchy. He gets up from the couch, trying not to jostle Hoseok too much who has fallen asleep next to him, and makes his way to the kitchen. The closer he comes, the clearer he can hear the conversation that Namjoon and Yoongi share. He doesn’t pay all that much attention to it, until he suddenly picks up Namjoon’s words.

“I wish the song was the only problem. That’s something we can fix. But Taehyung’s situation… Remember how Jin said a former client stopped him on the street?”

“The risk is too big. We can’t debut like that.”

Taehyung freezes, not because he wants to listen in, but because he simply forgets how his body functions upon hearing the words. His fault. It’s his fault. He’s at fault that they can’t debut. He’s holding them back. It’s already happening. It’s fucking over.

“Tae?” Jin asks, having noticed that the younger teen stopped moving towards the kitchen.

Taehyung shakes his head. Act natural. He’s got to act natural. He fakes a cough, loud enough for the voices in the kitchen to mute, and enters the next room.

Namjoon and Yoongi are both leaning against the counter. Yoongi looks over at Taehyung lazily, but there’s guilt written all over Namjoon’s face.

“Do we have another bottle of Fanta left?” Taehyung asks, forcing himself to act nonchalant.

“No, but we’ve got Pepsi,” Yoongi answers and moves to get it out of the fridge. “Which you shouldn’t drink, because you know we’re on a diet.”

Such an innocent scene, and yet all of its participants know that it’s not as peaceful as it seems. It’s
fucking over for Taehyung. He’s been lying to himself for too long, thinking that maybe somehow this might actually work. But now the seeds of doubt in the others minds have finally started to sprout, and that’s the end for him. They’re going to ask him to leave. And Taehyung can’t even blame them. He knows how much they want this, want to debut. And if he’s what’s in the way, then they have to get rid of him. Eliminate the threat. It’s fucking over. He might as well just pack his bag, the one he bought for moving in. Search for a cheap flat. Count his blessings and hope that this time around, he might find a better job. A less degrading one. It’s fucking over.

Trust or leave. When Bang PD had given him the ultimatum, he should have chosen to leave. It would have saved him a shit ton of pain.

It’s over, and when Taehyung sits back down on the couch, he can’t concentrate on the movie at all anymore. Instead his eyes wander to the people present in the room. Jin, who’s again playing on his phone, Hoseok asleep next to him, and Jungkook, who’s the only one watching the screen with wide eyes. Taehyung can’t tear his gaze away from the youngest member. His mouth is slightly agape and even though the room is only lit up by the TV screen, Taehyung can still make out the scar on his cheekbone below his left eye. It’s fucking over, and Taehyung’s heart lurches in his chest as he takes in the profile of the younger teen and wonders just how far Jungkook will go in life. A hell of a lot farther if Taehyung’s not in the picture, that’s for certain.

Jungkook must sense the staring, because he turns to him and cocks his head.

“Is something wrong, hyung?” he asks.

Yes, Taehyung wants to say.

“No,” Taehyung answers.

He is rewarded with a smile by Jungkook that makes his nose scrunch up, and then the youngest member turns back to the movie, but not before shifting around and resting himself against Taehyung’s side.

Taehyung has felt a lot of pain in his life, but the one he feels right now is new. Unfamiliar. It’s different from the physical pain his father dealt out, or the pain he experienced in the alley he non-consensually lost his virginity in, the pain he received by clients. It’s also different from the mental pain he had experienced in these situations, but it somewhat resembles the one he felt the day his grandma passed away. It’s not entirely the same though, but it’s hard to say if it hurts more or less. He doesn’t know what to make out of this new sensation.

The next day, he finds Jimin in the dance studio. He’s lost some weight, and he’s sweating heavily. Taehyung watches from the window in the door. He wants to enter, but he doesn’t find the courage. He longs to talk to Jimin, but he knows that the other teen doesn’t want to see him anymore. Still, he wants to enter. He tries to encourage himself silently as he watches Jimin work on a routine, but then the song is over and Jimin doubles over and screams in frustration before kicking his water bottle to the other side of the studio, and Taehyung lets go of the door handle and walks away. It’s not like Jimin can help him with this in any way. It’s fucking over, and it is time to detach from the people he learned to care about. But Namjoon doesn’t talk to Taehyung about the issue of him having to leave, and as much as he’s trying to extinguish it, a tiny flame of hope still flickers in Taehyung’s heart.

It gets blown out two days later, when Bang PD claims that he has found the missing piece of their song. And once the solution gets introduced, Taehyung knows that his days at BigHit really are over. He might as well go back to the dorm right away to pack his bag.
“I know that some of you are good friends with him and after putting a lot of thought into it, I have come to the conclusion that he has what Bangtan Sonyeondan is still missing. I know that this is on a short notice, and if you have objections I welcome you to come to my office so we can discuss them thoroughly. But I have talked to Namjoon, and he too thinks that this is a good decision, which is why I want to introduce you to the newest member of Bangtan Sonyeondan: Supreme Boi.”

Shin Donghyuk. A trainee at BigHit, rapper and producer. He’s good friends with Namjoon, Hoseok and Yoongi. Taehyung knows that Jin and Jungkook like him as well. He’s never really talked to the other teen and he doubts that he’ll be talking to him a lot in the future. The second he lays eyes on him, Taehyung knows that this is going to be his replacement. A trainee with no dark past. No blackmailing incident. Ready to debut as soon as he’s recorded the song and learned the choreography. If he learns fast, they still may be able to debut in 2012. And Taehyung will become a part of Bangtan’s story that will never be told.
Chapter 23

Donghyuk is scheduled to move in with them the same day he is announced as the newest addition to the band. For teambuilding, Bang PD tells them. Taehyung just wishes he would tell him to leave right away. He’s built enough relationships over the past months to destroy him when he has to eventually cut them and he really doesn’t need to add one more. Besides, it’s cruel to make him suffer like that. He feels like a mouse thrown into a snake terrarium, waiting for the beast to get hungry and attack with no chance to escape. Jin immediately offers to drive to Donghyuk’s dorm and help him move, and everyone is eager to agree.

It hurts to see them all so enthusiastic about the newest member. Taehyung can’t blame Jungkook, because Jungkook doesn’t know anything, but he’s sure that all the other members know why Donghyuk is here. Why he is really here. That Donghyuk is going to replace Taehyung. It hurts to see them accept him with open arms, as if Taehyung’s place in this band has never been relevant after all.

Donghyuk, as it turns out, shares a dorm with Jimin. Shared a dorm with Jimin. It just so happens that Jimin is present when the seven of them turn up to collect Donghyuk’s stuff, and it upsets Taehyung that his same-aged friend – is he even allowed to call him a friend now? – only spares them a short glance before leaving to the kitchen.

“Is he still acting weird?” Jin asks Taehyung with furrowed brows.

Taehyung shrugs. He wants to pretend that he doesn’t care, and he puts on a good act until they load the last box into the van and are ready to leave for their dorm.

“Is it okay if I come back later? There’s something I need to talk about with Jimin.”

Namjoon doesn’t look happy, considering that they have scheduled an impromptu bonding night tonight, but Taehyung promises that it won’t take long. He’s not sure if he’s actually willing to keep that promise. He has no intention to bond with anyone anymore.

He takes up the stairs, because the elevator still looks too intimidating to him, and knocks at the front door furiously. It’s not Jimin who opens, but as soon as the guy spots Taehyung he calls out for him.

Jimin looks anything but thrilled when he sees Taehyung in his doorway, and Taehyung can’t help it. He’s absolutely unable to not tear up at the cold look Jimin gives him, but at least he has enough dignity to keep the tears at bay. It makes him look just slightly less pathetic than having them roll down his cheeks.
“What do you want?” Jimin asks and crosses his arms in front of his chest.

“Can we- actually no, fuck it. We need to talk. Please.”

Jimin makes a hand gesture that tells him to go on and waits, but Taehyung looks at him pointedly. “Somewhere private, Jimin.”

Their ascent to the top floor is quiet, and when they arrive neither of them sits down. They just stand there, more space than necessary between their bodies, and Taehyung looks at Jimin while Jimin inspects his nails, looking as if he doesn’t care the slightest about what’s happening. He’s so different from the boy Taehyung first met only months ago.

“I don’t know why you’re acting like this, as if I did something wrong. Frankly, I’ve come to the point where I don’t care.” It’s a lie, but no one has to know that.

And finally Jimin decides to look at Taehyung, and Taehyung looks back and can’t ignore the rings under Jimin’s eyes. The way his cheeks have sunken in a bit from weight loss. The tiredness in his eyes. He looks dejected. Hopeless.

“I’m really just here to say goodbye. I- well, I don’t know when I’m leaving BTS, but I know that it will happen soon. They haven’t told me yet, but Donghyuk will be my replacement. Should have known all along really, it was only a matter of time before they realized that I come with too much baggage. At least now the boys can debut without fearing for their careers every minute of the day.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Jimin asks, eyebrows drawn together.

“Don’t make me repeat myself, please. It hurts enough to think about.”

Jimin shakes his head violently.

“Tae, Donghyuk is a rapper. Why would they replace a singer with a rapper? Why would they replace you in the first place? They’d be stupid to lose a voice and visuals like yours. Don’t be ridiculous. You’re perfect for the idol life.”

Taehyung scoffs at that. He’s anything but perfect for idol life. He’s not a natural at dancing the way Jimin is. His voice can’t reach as high as Jimin’s does. He doesn’t have the charisma. The outgoing persona. If anything, it’s Jimin who’s the perfect person to become an idol, and Taehyung doesn’t hesitate to tell him that. He notices that it must have been the wrong thing to say as Jimin’s expression darkens even more.

“And yet you’re the one in a band while I’m still training. Did you know that my birthday is next week? It’s going to be another one on which everyone will ask when I will finally debut, and for another year I have to tell them that I don’t know. I train and I train, and I get absolutely nothing out of it.”

And then it clicks for Taehyung.

“That’s why you’ve been avoiding me? Because- what, you’re mad you’re not set to debut yet? Jealous that you’re not in a group? Namjoon has been in this position for four years and he still doesn’t know when he’ll debut either, but at least he’s not given up yet.”

Jimin seems downright furious now.

“I haven’t given up yet either,” he bites, and Taehyung takes a step back at the harsh tone, alarm
bells ringing in his mind. He knows that he should stop, but his emotions are running too high and
he feels too vulnerable and he can’t stop the words he’s saying next.

“You sure sound like it.”

Jimin looks stunned, but then he pushes past Taehyung to get to the stairway. Before he disappears
downstairs, he turns back one more time, angry flames dancing in his eyes.

“At least I’m not the drama queen crying every other month that I’m going to get kicked out of the
band.”

And with that, Jimin is gone.

Taehyung listens to his footsteps until he can’t hear them any longer. He’s not going to cry. He’s
not. His eyes are burning, but he won’t give in to that urge. It’s good like this. It’s easier like this. It
hurts, but at least Jimin won’t miss him much.

Eventually the tears subside and the pain gives way to numbness, and that’s when Taehyung
makes his way home. Not home. The dorm. Temporary home. Who knows for how much longer?

When he steps in, all his members are gathered in the living room. Not his members anymore. The
members. They don’t even notice him at first, and Taehyung has time to observe them. Donghyuk
fits right in with them. It doesn’t look like anyone’s missing looking at them from afar, even if
Taehyung’s not in their midst. Like they are meant to be this way. They’re laughing and talking
while playing Poker Dice. Jungkook eventually spots Taehyung and waves him over. All the others
turn to him as well and beckon him to join them, but Taehyung just shakes his head at them
wordlessly before slinking off to the bedroom. He can feel their curious gazes on his back, and can
hear the hushed conversations once he has closed the door, although he can’t make out their exact
words.

Taehyung’s not surprised that the door to the bedroom opens again a few minutes after he entered.
He pulls his blanket over his head and squeezes his eyes closed tightly, willing the tears in his eyes
to finally subside. Why’s he tearing up again in the first place?

“Taehyung-ah, what happened?” It’s Jin. He’s climbing up the ladder and settles down next to
Taehyung on the mattress. Taehyung’s glad that he’s not trying to pry the blanket away from him.
Instead, Jin pets what he thinks is the shape of Taehyung’s shoulder hidden under the blanket. “Did
you have a fight with Jimin?”

“He hates me.” It sounds like a whine, and Jin’s hand stills shortly before picking up the careful
calming touches again. They are both equally surprised at how desperate Taehyung sounds.
Broken.

“I’m sure he doesn’t,” Jin answers. “Will you tell me what happened?”

Taehyung doesn’t tell him. He doesn’t want to influence Jin, doesn’t want him to possibly pick a
side in this messy fight or whatever this situation is even supposed to be. Jin likes Jimin as much as
everyone else in the company does. It would be unfair to tell Jin and risk that he’s going to have a
negative opinion on Jimin. Besides, Taehyung’s not going to be here for much longer anyway. If
Jin was on his side, it would be the wrong one.

Maybe they’ll bring Jimin into the band as well once Taehyung is gone. He’d fit right in with them.
He’s a great singer, a skilled dancer, and the other members all like him. Taehyung would actually
like that. Jimin deserves the chance to debut, and he would look good in Bangtan Sonyeondan. It
would make leaving the band easier, knowing that someone he adores fills his spot.

Jin sighs upon realizing that Taehyung won’t answer him, but he’s thankfully not asking further questions. He sits with the younger teen in silence for another few minutes, keeping up the comforting touch.

“We’re going to play Monopoly in a bit. If you feel up for it you can join us, but if not I’d appreciate it if you could at least come out for dinner later.”

Taehyung hums under his breath, but he makes no promises. Jin pats what he assumes is Taehyung’s head beneath the blanket affectionately, before climbing down the ladder again and quietly leaving the room.

Time passes but Taehyung’s not aware of it. He’s thinking of everything and nothing at once. Wishes that Mr. Kim would die from a heart attack. Wishes that Mr. Kim had never heard him sing. Sometime later, Yoongi comes into the room to get Taehyung for dinner, but Taehyung closes his eyes and mimics sleep, effectively avoiding having to face the others once more. Eventually, Taehyung genuinely drifts off.

He gets roused from sleep violently when he feels the bed dip beneath him and a body next to his. His heart beats rapidly fast as he tries to scramble up. The room is dark and he looks around confused, completely disoriented.

“I’m sorry, hyung.”

Jungkook.

“I didn’t mean to wake you.”

Taehyung lets out a shaky breath and lies back down again. He swallows harshly but allows Jungkook to settle down next to him.

“It’s okay,” Taehyung whispers. He’s not sure if they are the only ones in the room or if the others are here as well. If Donghyuk is here as well. The thought of sleeping in the room with someone unfamiliar unsettles Taehyung.


“It’s nothing you need to worry about, Jungkook. Just go to sleep.”

Jungkook makes a noncommittal sound and leaves it at that, falling asleep only seconds later. Taehyung can tell by his breathing pattern becoming deeper and regular.

Minutes later he’s startled again when another voice starts talking.

“He was really sad about the fact that you didn’t join us for any games.”

“What the heck, hyung,” Taehyung murmurs, cursing Yoongi under his breath.

“Scaredy cat,” Yoongi teases.

Taehyung hadn’t noticed before, but Yoongi has been sitting on his mattress and tapping away on his phone all along. Now that he’s paying attention to it, he can hear quiet voices drifting into the room from outside. It seems as if the three of them are the only ones present in the room.

Turning his head from where he’s lying on his mattress, Taehyung stares down at Yoongi.
“Are you here to guilt-trip me?” the younger teen asks.

Yoongi grins up at him. “Maybe.”

But then the grin drops and he becomes more serious. “You’re starting to avoid us again, aren’t you? It’s obvious, but why? Is it because of Jimin? Or is Donghyuk making you uncomfortable? He doesn’t know anything, I promise.”

As if you don’t know why I feel this way, Taehyung thinks bitterly to himself. After all, it was Yoongi who had the conversation with Namjoon in the kitchen only days ago, the one that made Taehyung’s world crash down. But if Yoongi can play dumb, then so can Taehyung.

“You know I have a hard time with strangers,” he says, and it’s the truth. He already knows that he’s not going to feel comfortable sharing the room with someone unfamiliar. He doesn’t know if he can trust Donghyuk yet. It’s going to take him days to get used to the presence of someone new, and maybe then they’ll kick him out. An effort made for something absolutely pointless.

“Then it would have been really practical if you had joined us for games and dinner earlier,” Yoongi grits out sarcastically.

Taehyung would like to ignore him. Just turn around and pretend that he’s fallen asleep again. Of course Yoongi wouldn’t buy that, and he probably wouldn’t let him get off the hook that easy anyway. On the other hand, Taehyung has Jungkook sleeping soundly next to him, so maybe Yoongi wouldn’t bother him this time. But it would be rude to do that, so Taehyung sighs, resigned to appealing to Yoongi’s heart to leave him alone instead of just ignoring him.

“Please hyung,” he murmurs, “I’ve already had a hard enough time with Jimin today. I’d rather not clash heads with you as well tonight.”

“Did you really have a fight?” Yoongi inquires, interest piqued.

“I really don’t want to think about it anymore, hyung.”

Yoongi finally seems to understand that Taehyung means it, and the room falls quiet again. The boys trickle in one after another, until six out of seven mattresses are occupied. If it wasn’t for Jungkook sleeping next to Taehyung, then all seven mattresses in the room would have been used. It’s odd to hear more people shuffle around in their sleep than usual. Jin stays with them from time to time but Taehyung is still more aware of his presence than of Namjoon’s soft snoring.

And then there’s Donghyuk.

Taehyung can pick his breathing out easier than all the other sounds in the room because it’s so foreign to him. It stands out like a beacon. Sometimes he’ll drift back to sleep, but as soon as he gains consciousness again it’s the first thing he’s aware of. Needless to say, it’s a bad night’s sleep that he’s getting, and Jungkook deciding to throw a leg over his own legs in his sleep definitely doesn’t add positively to the uncomfortable experience.

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Donghyuk records for ‘No More Dream’. He spends longer in the studio now then all of them, but when he’s done and his voice is added to the original track, Bang PD and the producers still frown at the result.

Taehyung wishes that the company boss would just say what’s wrong. That Taehyung’s the weak link that must be eliminated. But he doesn’t say a word, just shakes his head and informs them that
something still sounds off and leaves them on their own again, disappointed.

There’s not much time for disappointment to settle though. Donghyuk has to catch up with the rest, which means that when he’s not in the studio for recording he’s trying to learn the choreography. If there’s someone that looks even less happy about the idol aspects of becoming an idol than Min Yoongi, it’s Shin Donghyuk. He’s always frowning as Hoseok patiently teaches him the steps. Taehyung overhears him talking to Namjoon one day, asking what the point of all this is. Saying that he doesn’t quite understand why Namjoon quit his rap team to become a part of this. It’s a weird thing to say for someone who is now also set to debut in a K-pop band as an idol. It’s something that an idol in training shouldn’t say.

Days trickle by slowly. Taehyung is barely aware of their passing. He just goes through the motions. Get up early. Go to the studio. Practice this and practice that. Study Japanese. Sometimes he’ll help Jungkook with his homework. There’s no more talk about potentially sending him back to school these days. Sometimes he’ll think that this is it, this is the moment he’s informed that he’ll have to leave the band when Namjoon calls him over. Only when Jungkook asks him one morning if he’ll join him and Jin for baking a cake for Jimin’s birthday with the little means they have does he realize that it’s already the middle of October.

“No thanks, I think I’ll pass,” Taehyung says and Jungkook looks dejected, but he accepts it and scurries back to the kitchen where Taehyung can hear Jin clattering with pans and whatnot.

He hasn’t talked to Jimin since the fight. They avoid each other at the company now, but maybe it’s for the better. Some of his members have tried to pry and find out what’s going on, but Taehyung keeps quiet and apparently so does Jimin. Taehyung’s just glad that the other boys don’t just pick sides in their fight.

It’s already fairly late, and except for Hoseok and Taehyung the dorm is empty. He’s texted Jungkook earlier, worried of the youngest member’s whereabouts this late at night. Apparently he’s still with Jimin to celebrate his birthday. Taehyung’s already in his pyjamas. He’s brushed his teeth and washed his face and basically he’s ready to go to sleep after the current episode of the show he’s watching with Hoseok is finished, when his phone rings. Taehyung frowns as he looks at the display.

“Who is it?” Hoseok asks. He’s already on the brink of falling asleep himself and looks displeased at having been startled awake by the ringtone.

“It’s Namjoon.”

The answer seems to to wake Hoseok out of his half-slumber as well. “Namjoon? Why would he call you so late?”

Taehyung’s heart starts to beat a bit faster, because he doesn’t know. He has no clue why Namjoon would need to call him except for that there’s bad news. He slides the green button across the screen to accept the call.

“Hello?”

“Taehyung?” Namjoon sounds frantic and Taehyung swallows harshly, willing his fast-beating heart to calm down again. “I’m sorry I’m calling so late, but can you please come to the company? PD-nim’s office? It’s urgent.”

Hoseok looks alarmed by the one-sided conversation he’s hearing. They look at each other wide-eyed. At this point Taehyung has given up on willing his heart to slow down.

“This isn’t a conversation we should be having on the phone. Just please, come as fast as you can.”

Taehyung never thought that one day he’d be waving down a taxi in Seoul in his pyjamas and order it to drive to a music company’s headquarter, yet here he is. Hoseok offered to come with him, but Taehyung refused. He can’t deal with someone else right now. He needs to clear his head, and he’s incredibly thankful when the taxi driver keeps silent. He’s most likely judging Taehyung’s appearance – a coat hastily thrown over his pyjamas, his hair a mess – but he doesn’t seem all that bothered by the distressed teenager riding in the back.

Taehyung leans his head against the window. The glass feels cold against his skin, and from the corner of his eyes he watches the buildings rush by. Traffic isn’t that bad, thankfully. He’d go insane right now if he’d be stuck somewhere.

Oddly enough, Taehyung feels calmer now on his way to the company building than he’s felt when receiving Namjoon’s call. Maybe it’s the fresh air that cleared his head while he was hunting down a taxi, or maybe it’s because whatever happens can’t be that bad anymore in contrast to everything else that happened in Taehyung’s life. His past? A painful mess that he doesn’t want to think about. His present? Hanging by a thread that he knows will be cut soon enough. His future?

Future. Throughout all of Taehyung’s life, his future had been something that he hadn’t dared to dream about at the hands of his violent father. He’d just been glad to make it through each and every single day somewhat intact. Of course his grandma had encouraged him to think of his life as something bigger. She had told him that he could be anything he wanted to be for the first time at the age of eight, as Taehyung was sitting at her kitchen table with a black eye and nibbling on a cookie.

“Anything I want?” he had asked back then and taken another bite while contemplating this new revelation. “Then I want to be a pilot, so I can fly away from all my problems like the birds do.”

His grandmother had smiled at him, but it didn’t reach her eyes. Instead they were lined with creases of worry. With his grandmother’s death, Taehyung’s courage to dream of a better future for himself had also died. Maybe that had been the real reason he had packed his measly belongings, taken Soonshim, and come to Seoul – because he knew that back home there was no future for him left. Only pain and memories that left a bitter taste in his mouth.

BigHit was the first time after coming to Seoul that Taehyung dared to dream again, although reluctantly. Because it had always been too perfect. Too fairy tail-like. He thinks that he always knew that it would end before it could really begin.

The sidewalks are mostly empty, and the city is only lit up by streetlights and billboards. There’s something calming about the way it’s swallowed up by darkness. When most windows are black it’s almost as if the city is on pause the way its inhabitants are, except for the lost souls and the wandering souls that search for something more under the moonlight, something that the sunlight hides. An invisible answer that gets swallowed up by the bustling crowd in glaring daylight. The ones who occupy the city at night, Taehyung thinks, are all a little bit damaged. He knows what he’s talking about. He’s one of them after all, a nightwalker disguised as a being living under the sun. Soon, he’ll return to the realm of moonlight again. A damaged resident of night-time Seoul. There’s no escaping into the bright light for people like him.
When the taxi arrives, Taehyung pays with bills that Hoseok gave to him while telling him that a car is the fastest way to the company. The middle of October is not mercilessly cold in Seoul, but Taehyung still shudders from the few steps he has to take between the car and the company. At least his heartbeat is steady again.

The hallways are empty and barely lit, sometimes only illuminated by the eerie green glow of the emergency exit sign. Taehyung makes his way through them quickly, his footsteps the only other sound he’s aware of echoing through the corridor besides his breathing.

Light floods into the hallway from the gap between the floor and the door to Bang Si-hyuk’s office. Taehyung knocks before opening it. He’s blinded by the brightness of the room when he enters, and has to briefly squeeze his eyes shut.

Three things immediately draw Taehyung’s attention to them once his eyes have adjusted to the light. There’s Namjoon and Bang PD, as expected. But then there’s also Yoongi, chewing his bottom lip nervously, and Taehyung is immediately reminded of the conversation the two teens shared in the kitchen not too long ago.

Namjoon wouldn’t frantically call him to the company in the middle of the night just to kick him out of the band though. That’d be ridiculous. Or at least that’s what Taehyung hopes.

The fourth thing that catches Taehyung’s attention is a bouquet of flowers in a crystal vase on the desk. It’s big and it’s beautiful. Taehyung doesn’t know much about flowers, but he recognizes the white chrysanthemum among red roses and greenery immediately, the last connotation with them being the painful memory of his grandmother being laid to rest.

“Taehyung,” Bang PD says, and finally draws the teenager’s attention away from the flowers. There are sombre looks on the faces of all three people present. “We need to talk to you. Please have a seat.”

Chapter End Notes

(At this point it's not a Brighter Days chapter unless it has Jungkook cuddling into Taehyung...)
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

This chapter and I had a fight, and I'm still not entirely sure who won. Anyways, thank you so so much for the comments you guys. I loved reading your speculations on what's about to happen next! Some of your guesses were pretty damn good. ;) And sorry for the cliffhanger, but not really. My usual beta has gone MIA, so until I'll sort that out the next few chapters will probably be unbeta'd. This one was beta'd by my lovely friend. Hope you enjoy. :) x

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Namjoon is pacing next to the desk and it’s irritating. It doesn’t help that Yoongi, who’s on the chair next to Taehyung’s, relentlessly taps his left foot against the floor, creating a mismatched rhythm along with Namjoon’s footsteps. Bang PD leans back in his office chair across from them and sighs.

“I don’t know how to say this,” he groans, and that’s an odd thing to hear. Bang PD is a man of confidence, but with his mouth drawn into a straight line and the way he’s slumping in his chair he simply looks defeated. Ten years older than his age. Instead of elaborating, he slides a few papers over to Taehyung.

One envelope, white and small and already opened, is lying on top of a few articles cut out of newspapers.

“Read this,” Bang PD says, and then he rests his elbows on the surface of the desk and rubs his face with a heavy sigh.

It’s hard to pinpoint how Taehyung is feeling at his moment. Nervous? Definitely. He’s confused, and the white chrysanthemums unsettle him, their smell assaulting him with unpleasant memories. Others may find them beautiful, but to Taehyung they are ugly as they force him to remember his grandmother’s funeral. Maybe he’s just imagining it, but he swears he can pick up their penetrating smell. Unlike the sweet smell of the red roses in the bouquet, the chrysanthemums possess an earthy odour that tickles Taehyung’s nose in the most unpleasant way.

He reaches for the unsealed envelope first. His name is written on it.

“It came with the flowers,” Yoongi offers. The statement doesn’t answer any of Taehyung’s questions, so he wonders why Yoongi felt the need to let him know.

Taehyung looks at his hyung and hums in acknowledgement. He’s never seen Yoongi this fidgety before and it’s odd. Alarming. The older teen is always calm and collected; to see him out of his depth and uncertain causes Taehyung to feel even more unsure about the current situation.

There’s a piece of manila paper inside the envelope and Taehyung carefully pulls it out. Oddly enough, Taehyung’s first thought is that the paper looks expensive. A few words in black ink are centred. They look as if they have been written with a typewriter.

Taehyung looks at the words with a slack expression, brows drawing together as he tries to make
“I don’t understand…” Taehyung trails off. Namjoon’s pacing has finally stopped, but he’s still annoyingly aware of Yoongi’s foot tapping on the floor. None of the people present offer him an explanation, but Namjoon tells him to look at the newspapers.

There are two things that Taehyung is certain of. Number one: the flowers and the letter are from Mr. Kim. K. A. are his initials. Sometimes, when they had an appointment, Taehyung would find red roses in the hotel room that Mr. Kim had always declared to be a gift for him. Taehyung never actually took the roses with him, but he did feel smug back then when Mr. Kim had told him that roses are the only thing on this planet that could come even close to his beauty. He’d been so proud of having a customer wrapped around his little finger like this, so confident. Who could have known that it would backfire like this?

Number two: Someone has died. The white chrysanthemums were not just a coincidence but a deliberate decision. But that leaves another question open: Who has died? Why does Taehyung receive flowers and condolences from Mr. Kim? It doesn’t make any sense.

Taehyung sets the envelope and the manila paper aside and reaches for the few pages of articles. They’ve all been torn out from different newspapers, and one article on each one is circled in red. Taehyung quickly scans the headlines. There’s talk about a car accident, and an investigation that declares drunk driving as the cause of the accident rather than a planned suicide.

“I still don’t understand it.” Taehyung says, too impatient to read through every article. He’s tired, just wants answers. He’s not here to play a guessing game.

Yoongi turns away as Taehyung looks at him, obviously trying to avoid his inquisitive stare. Namjoon finally settles down in the other chair next to Taehyung, but he only shakes his head when Taehyung looks at him.

That leaves Bang PD.

“Taehyung,” the company boss sighs, and glares at both Namjoon and Yoongi, obviously displeased that he is the one who will have to say whatever it is that needs to be said. “I’m so sorry to tell you this, but your father… he died in a car accident in April.”

Taehyung freezes, eyes back on the articles still in his hand. His mouth shapes into an ‘o’ as he hears the news. Yoongi inhales sharply next to him before resting a hand on his shoulder.

“We’re so sorry for your loss,” he says and squeezes Taehyung’s shoulder softly.

Taehyung’s at a loss on how to react. An absolute loss. There are so many thoughts in his head, but he can’t seem to sort them out. This is… he doesn’t know. He’s never experienced a feeling like this before. It’s rushing through his entire body and taking over every cell of him and it feels so good, but it also feels wrong. He feels guilty for feeling this way.

“Are you sure?” He has to ask. What if this isn’t true? What if it’s a bad joke? He can’t… no, he won’t allow himself to feel whatever this weird sensation is if it’s not real.

“We’re certain. We’ve double and triple-checked. We didn’t want to tell you until we were one-hundred percent sure. I’m really sorry,” Bang PD says. “It seems like Kim hired a private detective to dig into your past. That’s how he found out. We wouldn’t have known if he hadn’t sent the
There’s so much regret in Bang PD’s voice, as if he’s never felt sorrier for Taehyung than he already did. He’s obviously surprised when Taehyung starts laughing. To be quite fair, Taehyung’s also surprised when the giddiness he’s felt at the news finally takes over him.

“I don’t think he’s quite understood what we’re saying,” Yoongi says as all three people present watch him double over and clutch his stomach because he’s laughing so hard. There are tears forming in his eyes, but they aren’t sad ones. They are tears of joy. Taehyung knows he’s in the wrong. He shouldn’t laugh about the death of someone, but the man who called himself his father doesn’t deserve anything else. The years of abuse he had put Taehyung through are still visible on Taehyung’s body in the form of scars. When he first fled to Seoul, he’d been haunted by nightmares of his father finding him again. Sometimes he still has them. But now? Now he can’t come for Taehyung anymore.

Relief. That’s what he’s feeling.

“I understand what you’re saying perfectly,” Taehyung says once he’s calmed down, and he looks Yoongi straight in the eyes, “but I refuse to mourn over that bastard.”

There’s a stunned silence, and Yoongi’s eyes widen at Taehyung’s harsh words. Taehyung wonders if that’s what Yoongi looked like when Namjoon first told him about his profession. The rapper’s eyes immediately dart to Namjoon’s as Bang PD clears his throat.

“Taehyung, that’s not how you should talk about your dead father,” he scolds, although reluctantly.

“I was my dear dead father’s punching bag for most of my life; he can rot in hell for all I care.”

Again there’s silence, and a look of hurt flashes across Bang PD’s face before he puts on a mask of calmness again and nods. “I see.”

Taehyung thinks that he may really see. It’s obvious that the cogs in his head are turning fast and that he’s finally putting the puzzle that is Taehyung’s journey to Seoul together.

“You knew!” All heads suddenly turn to Yoongi as he points at Namjoon accusingly. “You knew that his father was abusive, didn’t you? That’s why you were so calm when you found out. You said yourself that you’re not that worried about Taehyung’s reaction. You knew this entire time!”

“You knew?” Taehyung asks, and suddenly he’s horrified, because how could Namjoon possibly know? He’s told no one. Well, no one except for… “Jimin told you.”

Namjoon’s a terrible liar, which is why Taehyung immediately knows that he’s right. The leader is avoiding meeting the eyes of anyone else in the room and Taehyung can’t help but feel betrayed. He had confided in Jimin. He had trusted his friend to keep it a secret, and he had… done what? Gone to Namjoon and blurted it out immediately? Or had he told Namjoon once his unexplainable resentment and jealousy towards Taehyung had began? He had thought of Jimin as a good person, but that belief is close to shattering.

“He didn’t tell me on purpose,” Namjoon tries to explain. “He made a comment – when you and Hoseok were still fighting – about how I should go easy on you or something because you had a hard past. And I asked if you also told him, and he was surprised I knew. We thought we were both talking about the same thing, but before I could make sure, he already let slip that your dad was a horrible person. He really didn’t mean it, Taehyung.”

“You never told me,” Taehyung accuses. Thinking back, he realizes that Namjoon must have
heard from Jimin shortly after Taehyung told him. He and Hoseok almost made up immediately after the night he confided in his friend. Namjoon has known for months.

“Because you didn’t want us to know. You already had no choice about letting us in on you being a prostitute. I wanted you to at least have control over who knows about your family.”

Taehyung lets out a deep breath and sags into the chair. This is all too much to take in. His father is dead. There’s no family of his left anymore. Although technically his family died with his grandma. Who knows, maybe his mother is still alive somewhere on this planet, but she’s no more family to Taehyung than his father was. Although he’s not completely right. Soonshim’s still with him. He’s not entirely alone yet.

“So you ran away from home because of your abusive father?” Yoongi poses the question carefully. He sounds sad, as if the thought pains him. It’s weird to hear it spoken out loud, and it’s even weirder how unhappy Yoongi sounds.

“When my grandma died, I had no reason to stay with him any longer. I still stuck around for a bit, but then he wanted to give Soonshim away and I couldn’t handle the thought of that. So I packed my few belongings, grabbed Soonshim and came to Seoul.”

“Soonshim?” Bang PD inquires.

“The dog he visited with Jin,” Namjoon answers for him, and Bang PD nods as if remembering now. Of course they’ve told him about this as well. Taehyung’s every step since he joined the company is monitored and reported to both Namjoon and Bang PD. By tomorrow morning both Seokjin and Hoseok will without a doubt also know about everything that transpires in this office tonight.

“You guys should go home and get some sleep. All three of you look exhausted. But Taehyung, we’ll need to talk soon in terms of what’s going to happen next now that we know that your father passed away. Was he your only legal guardian?”

Taehyung nods apprehensively. He knows what this is leading up to. Bang PD will tell him that it’s the end. Taehyung just wishes that he would do it right away, so he doesn’t have to suffer any longer. That’s not entirely true. He also wishes that he’ll never know, because really he never wants to give all of this up.

Namjoon gets up and leaves the room, claiming that he’s going to fetch Jungkook, who should still be somewhere around the building together with Jimin. Right, it’s still Jimin’s birthday. Taehyung could go and wish him all the best. Or he could go there and ask what the hell he was thinking telling Namjoon. But Namjoon did say that it was an accident, so Taehyung is torn on whether he should believe him or not.

“You’re really okay?” Yoongi asks. He looks doubtful. Maybe he can’t relate, but the news of his father’s passing doesn’t shock Taehyung all that much. It must have been a drunk driving accident, as far as he had read from the newspapers, and he was the only victim. It’s kind of ironic that the thing that gave him the most confidence and turned him into a monster was also what eventually put him to an early grave.

“I’m fine.” Taehyung assures him. It’s not a lie. His father’s death interests him as much as any stranger’s. “The thing I’m more concerned about is that Mr. Kim hired a private detective. Like, what’s even the point of that? What does he know?”

“That’s something we’re trying to figure out,” Bang PD says with a solemn look on his face. “He’s
obviously trying to play a game.”

“He always got off on having power,” Taehyung throws in, and Yoongi and Bang PD look equally disgusted at that statement. Taehyung couldn’t be bothered less. He just shrugs and murmurs under his breath that he’s just stating facts.

They can hear Jungkook’s and Namjoon’s voices down the hallway and Yoongi and Taehyung get up from their seats.

“Get some sleep, and tomorrow afternoon you should come to my office so we can talk. And Taehyung,” Bang PD looks at him intently, “I’m sorry — not exactly for your loss, but for what’s been done to you. And what’s still happening to you; we’ll do our best to help.”

Taehyung bows with gratitude when Namjoon and Jungkook arrive at the door frame. Jungkook’s eyes dart first to Taehyung, before continuing to Yoongi, Bang PD, and lastly the big bouquet on the desk.

“Did something happen?” he asks, but Taehyung shakes his head and ruffles the younger teen’s hair.

“We were just here to talk about some possible changes for ‘No More Dream’.”

Yoongi looks at Taehyung as if saying “Really, you couldn’t think of a better lie?” and Jungkook also raises an eyebrow, as if waiting for Taehyung to come up with a better excuse. He breaks eye contact though when he starts to yawn, and Namjoon ushers them all to the van, because it’s late and they should get as much sleep as possible.

In the van, Jungkook settles down next to Taehyung and rests his head on the older teen’s shoulder.

“Did really nothing happen?” Jungkook asks quietly. Yoongi has his headphones on and Namjoon is sitting next to the driver, so neither of the other two can hear them.

“Of course everything’s fine. Why are you so worried?”

Jungkook keeps silent for a bit and Taehyung thinks that he’s not going to get an answer anymore, that the younger might have fallen asleep already.

“The flowers on Bang PD’s desk were chrysanthemums, right? Aren’t they usually displayed at funerals?”

It honestly surprises Taehyung that Jungkook has made the connection between the flowers and their meaning so quickly, especially because he only had a few seconds to look at them.

“It was probably just a thoughtless gift.”

Jungkook hums and leaves it at that, mind apparently put at ease by Taehyung’s answer.

It’s then that Taehyung catches Yoongi’s eyes, and he immediately knows that the rapper has been listening in on their conversation, the headphones only a disguise. Yoongi doesn’t even pretend to not have listened in. He purses his lips and Taehyung grimaces. What else was he supposed to tell Jungkook? He doesn’t like lying to his friend, but it’s not like he can tell the truth either. Jungkook would only feel bad if he learned about Taehyung’s loss, and Taehyung really doesn’t want to explain why exactly he’s not mourning. Does he feel bad about keeping stuff from Jungkook? Of course he does. He adores Jungkook. The younger one always tries to comfort him. He’s wriggled his way into Taehyung’s heart almost deeper than anyone else. He’s the one Taehyung feels most
comfortable with. Sharing a bed with anyone else? Taehyung can’t imagine that. Just the thought of having Namjoon cuddle up to him actually freaks him out, not because he doesn’t trust Namjoon at this point but because it would be odd. Really odd.

So it’s not fair to keep Jungkook in the dark, but it’s really just for the better. The youngest member already has so much pressure on him, and Taehyung doesn’t want to add to that. What Jungkook should be worried about now is school and training, and even those are more worries than a boy his age should shoulder. There’s no reason to make him worry about even more than that.

They stumble into the dorm, dragging a drowsy Jungkook along with them. Hoseok and Donghyuk are sprawled out on the couch, and the moment Hoseok lays his eyes on them it’s so obvious that he’s itching to know what’s going on. With Donghyuk present, however, he’s keeping quiet.

“Let’s get ready for bed,” Taehyung murmurs to Jungkook and they make their way to the bathroom. Before they leave the living room, Taehyung notices Yoongi settling down next to Donghyuk and Namjoon trailing off to the kitchen to get a drink. Hoseok is looking between Namjoon and Taehyung anxiously, and when Taehyung meets Namjoon’s eyes he nods briefly. Namjoon seems to understand, so he gives Hoseok a subtle sign to follow him to the kitchen. Hoseok immediately jumps from the couch and trails behind Namjoon.

Jungkook looks between his members inquisitively, as if realising that something’s going on that he doesn’t know about, but doesn’t lose another word about what just transpired and follows Taehyung quietly to the bathroom.

They brush their teeth next to each other in silence, their shoulders touching in the confined space. Jungkook yawns and some toothpaste spills over his lips and runs down his chin before dripping into the sink. He doesn’t bother to wipe it away before continuing to brush. Taehyung doesn’t know why, but something about the white foam drying on Jungkook’s chin bothers him. He shifts from one foot to the other as he tries to look away, but his eyes always dart back to the younger’s face. It’s odd. He’d even call the feeling unsettling.

When Taehyung applies lotion to his face and Jungkook is still busy washing his face, Taehyung strikes up a conversation again. The silence in the room makes him nervous.

“You never lost a word about Jimin’s party.”

Jungkook looks up at Taehyung through the mirror, droplets of water running down his face and wet hair sticking to his forehead.

“I didn’t know if I should tell you about it.” Taehyung’s taken aback by Jungkook’s honesty. The black-haired teen is seldom straightforward with his hyungs. “Since you and Jimin had a fight I thought you might not want to know about it.”

“Jungkook,” Taehyung says, washing the remains of lotion off his hands and drying them on a washed-out white towel. “Just because Jimin and I aren’t on the best of terms that doesn’t mean that you have to be careful about what you’re saying around me. You can still be friends with him and tell me about the things you guys did. It doesn’t bother me.”

Jungkook’s face lights up at that with a smile, and Taehyung wonders if maybe his fight with Jimin bothered Jungkook more than he let on. If that’s the case, he’s really sorry about it. He never wanted to make Jungkook feel like he had to choose between them or be cautious around him.

“We went bowling with a few of his friends. I almost won, hyung, but since it was Jimin’s birthday I decided to let him win and messed up on purpose.” Jungkook grimaces. “I’m pretty sure he
noticed though. We went back to the company to have some of the cake that was left over, but the others didn’t join anymore so it was just the two of us. We just goofed around then. It was really funny.”

Taehyung smiles and ruffles Jungkook’s hair. He’s glad that Jungkook had a fun day; he deserves to unwind every once in awhile. Still Taehyung can’t help but feel a pang of envy, because he wishes that he could have as much fun with Jungkook as well. Lately Taehyung’s only been tense. He can’t allow himself to let loose anymore. He should, though. He’s going to get kicked out soon anyway — might as well make some final good memories with Jungkook.

“I’m glad you had a good day,” Taehyung tells him and he means it. “How about we go out for breakfast tomorrow morning? I’ve been craving pancakes lately.”

“But hyung,” Jungkook whines and pulls a face, “we’re supposed to be on a diet.”

“That didn’t stop you from eating cake,” Taehyung teases him and pinches Jungkook’s stomach. It’s not like there’s a lot to pinch in the first place. Really, that diet they’re put on is fucking ridiculous. Jungkook shrieks and shies away with a laugh and agrees happily.

It’s another night in which Taehyung barely sleeps, and Donghyuk isn’t even the cause of it anymore. There are so many thoughts running through Taehyung’s mind that he just can’t bring himself to close his eyes. The death of his father. He’s free. Finally, really free, at least from one monster hiding in his closet. At last, all the scars on his skin tell a story from the past. He doesn’t have to be scared of his father finding him anymore. No more nights of cowering in the corner of his room as he waits for footsteps to approach and hands to bruise.

Then there’s the question of why Mr. Kim gathered knowledge about Taehyung’s past? Why a private detective? It doesn’t make any sense. He already has enough material to blackmail Taehyung. Does he try to get more? If yes, what’s the point of that? Taehyung can’t wrap his head around it.

And finally, his conversation with Bang PD tomorrow. Taehyung knows that it’s going to be the end for him. What else is there to talk about still? Bang PD will tell him to leave now. And Taehyung’s not even mad. Bang PD does what’s best for the group. Taehyung wants what’s best for the group too. Still, he’s scared. For now, he vows to himself to put on a brave face when the news is broken to him. No crying. Not in front of the boss, nor in front of the boys when he has to say his goodbyes. They’ve seen him crying enough to last a lifetime, he at least wants them to remember him smiling when they see him for the last time, no matter how fake it is.

Needless to say, Taehyung feels like death warmed up in a microwave when he gets ready for breakfast with Jungkook the next morning. He scraps together the last money he has left of the month after paying for Soonshim because of course he’s going to pay, and puts on a cap to hide his bed hair. At least Jungkook seems to have had a full night’s sleep. He’s energetic and rushing around to get ready as fast as possible.

“Excited for your date?” Hoseok laughs from where he’s sitting at the couch and watching the younger rush back to the bedroom from the hallway because apparently he’s forgotten his phone. Jungkook blushes heavily, which only elicits more teasing from Hoseok.

“Leave him be,” Namjoon finally laughs after Jungkook explains with red cheeks that he’s finally ready, and yes he’s got all his things after running back three times.

Jungkook eats waffles. Taehyung opts for a blueberry muffin. Firstly, it’s much cheaper than the warm dishes on the menu and Taehyung really doesn’t have a lot of money left. Secondly, his
stomach is upset from nerves. Even if he had the money to order pancakes – and he’d really love to eat pancakes now – he wouldn’t be able to stomach them. Besides, he’s happy with his muffin as long as Jungkook is happy with his waffles, and that the younger teen definitely is. He shovels them in in record time, and when he has some whipped cream stuck to the corner of his mouth once he’s finished, instead of wiping it away with a napkin his tongue darts out to clean it off. When he’s not busy eating, he tells Taehyung about all kinds of things. He doesn’t even seem to notice that he’s dominating the conversation, but Taehyung is content to just sit back and listen and watch Jungkook’s eyes sparkle in excitement as he shares what he’s passionate about. He cherishes the moment. In the back of his mind, Taehyung knows that a few hours from now this happiness he’s feeling will be over, so for now he tries to hold on to this feeling for as long as he can.

Chapter End Notes

Come talk to me on tumblr at theshyauthor for quality entertainment. (I'm kidding. I'm a lousy entertainer. But I'd love to hear from you anyway!)
Taehyung finds sanctuary in the small studio that Namjoon and Yoongi spend most of their time in. It’s messy. It’s always messy. He had to take some of the clothes piled up on the black couch and dump them on the floor to make room for himself. He’s sitting on his crossed legs and biting his nails. It’s a habit that he stopped a long time ago, but right now he’s so lost in thoughts that it’s an automatic action.

Namjoon must be searching for him. It’s going to be a matter of time before he’ll check this room. Taehyung hopes that it takes forever. There’s too much going on in his head right now for him to want to face any of the members.

The meeting with Bang PD has been…

He sincerely doesn’t know what to think of it. He’s trying to wrap his head around what had been said, but it just doesn’t register with him. Namjoon had been with him at the meeting, and he must have noticed Taehyung’s shock. He asked multiple times if everything was alright. Apparently Taehyung had gone pale, and even Bang PD had inquired if he’s not feeling well.

He didn’t get kicked out of the band. Not a single sentence was lost about him having to leave. There were no words that could have held any hidden meaning about a possible departure for Taehyung. He’d been sure – so so so sure – that Bang PD would kick him out, that he’s not entirely certain how to process the news that he’s definitely not out.

The door to the studio opens.

“There you are!” Namjoon exclaims with a sigh. Taehyung was right. He must have been searching for him. “Why do you look so worried?”

Taehyung shifts on the couch and draws his knees up to his chest. It’s shabby and uncomfortable, and no matter how he tries to arrange himself, it doesn’t get any comfier. Namjoon comes over and throws the rest of all the shit piled up on the couch on the floor to make room for himself.

“What’s wrong, Tae?”

So much is wrong. He’s still in the band. That’s wrong. That’s so wrong. Bang PD must have made a mistake. Maybe he was drunk. Maybe he wasn’t in his right mind. Taehyung hugs his knees and rests his forehead on them. He lets out a sigh. Namjoon ruffles his hair. It’s something that they always do with Jungkook, but no one really does with Taehyung except for special occasions. It should feel annoying, but it’s actually quite a comforting touch. Reassuring. Caring.
“Why am I still in the band?”

His voice is quiet, merely a whisper. Namjoon doesn’t understand, so he asks for Taehyung to repeat himself. Taehyung doesn’t want to say it again. Those words aren’t even meant for Namjoon to be heard. He doesn’t want for their leader to have to listen to his pity party. Yet Taehyung wants answers. He just doesn’t understand any of this. He’s so much trouble to all of them. Why don’t they just get rid of him already? Why do they let him hold them back again and again? His heart is racing in his chest as he repeats what he just said.

Namjoon almost growls when he understands, and Taehyung recoils. It’s a natural reaction still. He just doesn’t like it when people are angry at him. When Namjoon quickly apologizes after seeing his response, the tension seeps out of Taehyung’s body again.

“Why would you not still be in the band?” Namjoon asks. He sounds genuinely curious. Taehyung’s not sure if he’s just playing dumb or actually serious.

“I’m nothing but trouble. I know that everyone thinks the same. It’s not just Mr. Kim but my entire past. People will recognize me. Former clients will see me on TV and know who I am. Who I was. What I was. We’re never going to be safe, even if the issue with Mr. Kim resolves itself somehow. And Bang PD’s plan for me to file for emancipation… that will take forever. We can’t debut before I can legally sign a contract, or else the company will get in serious trouble. It’s all a mess. It would be so much easier if I just left.”

“But if you’d leave, we’d lose an incredible singer. We’d also lose a friend. Right now we don’t know what Mr. Kim’s goal is, but we’ll find a way to get rid of him. And of course there’s always the risk of someone coming out to the public about you, but do you seriously think anyone will believe them? Unless they all have blackmail material – and I doubt, or at least I pray they don’t – their words are worth nothing. And who’d want to admit that they’ve had sex with an underage prostitute in the first place? And sure, it won’t be easy to get you emancipated, but it’s the only chance we have unless your mother turns up.”

Taehyung grimaces. That was another one of Bang PD’s suggestions, one that had made him blanch. The only person alive he wants to see even less than Mr. Kim is his mother. She’s the root of all of Taehyung’s problems. The day she left was the day Taehyung’s life fell into shambles. Taehyung doesn’t want to see her, but even if he did meet her again he doubts she would be of any help to him. She’s never in his life helped him in any way, so why would she possibly start doing it now?

“You know what I really don’t get?” Taehyung asks. He looks up at Namjoon, who worries his bottom lip with his teeth. If he’s going to keep this up, his lip might actually split again. Taehyung hadn’t really understood why his lips are sometimes bloody before Jin had pointed out to him that it’s because of Namjoon’s bad habit when he’s got a lot on his plate. “I don’t get why Bang PD is so keen on keeping me. There are other singers out there that are way more talented than I am. So why does he bother with me?”

When Namjoon suddenly looks away, Taehyung immediately knows that he’s on to something. Namjoon avoiding eye contact is a clear sign that he has something to hide.

“There’s a reason, isn’t there?” Taehyung perks up, and for the first time since he walked out of Bang PD’s office his thoughts stop circulating around why’s and what if’s. His interest is piqued. If he could just know the reason, then maybe it would put him more at ease. Make him feel more secure. He wouldn’t have to wonder every day why they are still bothering with him.
“I’m not supposed to tell you.” Namjoon lets himself fall back into the couch and winces. They all constantly forget that it’s way harder than a couch should be. So uncomfortable. It makes no difference really if you sit on the floor or on the couch, both are equally inconvenient for comfort.

“You also shouldn’t have told Yoongi that I was a prostitute. Jimin shouldn’t have told you about my dad. Clearly people at this company aren’t all that skilled at keeping things for themselves.”

Namjoon looks conscience-stricken, and Taehyung knows that he’s going to talk. Maybe he is guilt-tripping Namjoon into telling him the answer, but who cares? It’s not like he’s lying.

“It’s actually an open secret in the company, so it’s not like you wouldn’t have found out anyway I guess. I can’t guarantee that this is really the true reason, but I suspect it is why Bang PD goes to all this trouble for you. His younger sister ran away when she was sixteen. They didn’t have a good relationship from what I’ve heard. She was found dead four years later, and as far as I know drugs were involved. Some people also say that the mafia had something to do with it, but you know how stuff gets blown out of proportion sometimes. I think that he still feels guilty for not having been there for her.”

Immediately, Taehyung remembers the woman – no, the girl – he’s been sharing his street corner with from time to time. Her jitters from withdrawal, the tattoo that had peeked out. He wonders if she’s still alive. If maybe she’s shared the same fate as Bang PD’s sister.

“So he’s doing this because of guilt?”

“I assume that he feels responsible because of that. You’re also a young runaway. Maybe he’s trying to make right with you what he couldn’t with his sister.”

“I don’t know how to feel about that,” Taehyung murmurs. He’s probably – most likely – misunderstanding this, but it sounds like Taehyung is a charity case now. He’s only around because Bang PD feels bad about what happened in the past.

“Don’t even think about taking this the wrong way,” Namjoon says. “You’re here because you’re an incredible singer, and not because someone pities you.”

Taehyung nods. What else can he do?

“Hyung, can you maybe leave me alone for a little while? There’s a lot I’d like to think about.”

“Of course,” Namjoon says. He squeezes Taehyung’s shoulder and leaves the studio quietly, leaving Taehyung behind on the shabby couch with too many thoughts in his head that he doesn’t know how to even begin to get a grip off.

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Later that day, Taehyung slinks down the BigHit hallways. He’s not entirely sure what to do with himself. Hoseok’s practicing choreography with Yoongi and Donghyuk. They’ve invited him to join, but he doesn’t think that he can muster up the concentration to, and besides he’s already quite good at the choreography for ‘No More Dream’. He asks them why Namjoon and Jin are missing from practice, since they definitely need it the most.

“I think they said they’re going back to the dorm for something,” Hoseok says with a shrug, before counting the others in to go through the choreography for the chorus one more time.

Jungkook’s at school and Taehyung is bored. Some of the staff and other trainees passing by greet him, others send him confused look. He must look like a tired mess right now, and his stomach’s
grumbling. All he’s had today is the muffin he ate for breakfast when he was out with Jungkook. Maybe he should go to the dorm and make something to eat. There’s nothing scheduled for today Namjoon had told him, and he doesn’t know what else he could do at the company building.

He’s trudging around a corner with his eyes glued to the floor when he almost bumps into someone.

Taehyung looks up in surprise, and the words of apology get stuck in his throat. Jimin is standing in front of him, sweaty and thinner than he remembers, and looking probably even more tired than Taehyung does. Jimin also looks at him with surprise. He’s the first one to talk.

“I’m sorry.”

Taehyung shakes his head. “No, I’m sorry.”

They stare at each other in silence for a few seconds. It’s awkward, so incredibly awkward. Then Jimin smiles. Maybe calling it a smile is exaggerated, but the left corner of his mouth is slightly twitching upwards as if a puppeteer was pulling on the strings of a marionette. It’s supposed to be a smile though, and Taehyung can’t help but feebly smile back. And then the moment passes and they sidestep each other and move along, neither of them looking back.

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When Taehyung returns back to the dorm, it’s quiet. That’s weird. The small living room is empty, but Jin’s shoes are on top of the mountain of shoes they have piled up at the entrance, so he and Namjoon still must be around. He makes his way to the kitchen, his stomach now almost aching in pain. It’s what he gets for only eating little this morning and barely any dinner last night.

He’s still somewhat in a daze from the meeting with Bang PD earlier, and that mixed with tiredness and carelessness makes him knock over a glass. It falls to the floor, but it doesn’t break. Taehyung curses nonetheless as he stoops down to pick it up.

He hears a door open and Jin hesitantly call out, “Hello?”

Taehyung moves to the doorway of the kitchen to see Jin standing at the entrance to the bedroom. His hair is a bit tousled and Taehyung frowns. “Is Namjoon hyung with you?” Jin nods hesitantly. “What were you guys doing in the bedroom?”

Taehyung’s busy inspecting the glass he’s still holding for any cracks, so he doesn’t notice the blush creeping up on Jin’s face.

“Namjoon lost his phone,” Jin says after a moment of silence. “We’ve looked through the entire flat already, the bedroom’s the last we need to check.”

“Have you looked in the crack between the mattress and the bedframe? He lost it there before. Do you need help searching?”

“We haven’t but we will, and no thanks.”

Jin closes the door again and Taehyung shrugs to himself. If anything, he’s glad he doesn’t have to help them search. Food has priority right now. As he returns into the kitchen, Taehyung’s eyes immediately fall on the green fruit bowl, more specifically on the phone with the cracked screen that is obviously Namjoon’s tugged in there between bananas and apples. Taehyung rolls his eyes, but he doesn’t call out to the two searching in the bedroom. His hyungs will find it eventually.
So I don't know when I'll update next, but it might take a bit longer. I'm actually having trouble with my right eye right now, as in I can't read anything anymore with it which puts a lot of strain on my left eye. Very convenient if your entire life revolves around reading and writing. I'm hoping to get a doctor's appointment soon, but until then I'll try not to strain my eyes too much. Maybe I can write the next chapter without looking at the screen, but that's going to be hell to edit. I'll try to figure something out. I'm going to post updates if I know more on this mess on my tumblr @theshyauthor. But I promise the next chapter will be worth the wait. :D
Thank you for the comments you guys. I’m glad you all seemed to enjoy the last chapter and especially the end of it. :)  

Sorry it took a while to update, but things with my eye escalated quickly and I spent a lot of time at the hospital this month and had surgery for a biopsy. Long story short they don’t know what’s wrong yet. It might be something really mundane, but to the doctors it looks like it could also be cancer. Results are still pending for another week or two. The only reason I’m telling you this is because I want you guys to know why I might not update as frequently now, please don’t comment about how sorry you are. I’ve heard enough of that from everyone in real life already and while I appreciate it, it’s also exhausting. If you want to talk about it, come to my tumblr. Just know that updates might be slower because I’m trying to come to terms with the possibility of cancer and barely have a clear head for writing fics these days.  

On a more positive note, BTS are coming to Europe in October and I’m hyped and ready to fight for tickets. :)  

Hope you enjoy. :) x  

“Hyuuuung,” Jungkook whines. He’s leaning over his history book and looking anything but happy. “How am I ever supposed to remember all these dates? What’s even the point of that? There’s no point.”  

Taehyung pokes his arm and tells him to stop complaining, before dedicating himself to his Japanese vocabulary once more.  

“But I don’t want to study. The weather’s so nice. I want to go out. It might be the last warm and sunny day of the year. Don’t you want to walk under trees whose leaves have changed colour as well?”  

“No,” Taehyung deadpans and Jungkook whines again, head hitting the textbook hard as he just collapses into himself in exasperation.  

“Jin hyung told you to study for tomorrow’s test, so you will study for tomorrow’s test. That’s what you get for keeping upcoming exams a secret from him and not studying for them at all.”  

Jungkook looks ready to argue once more, but after a pointed look from Taehyung he closes his mouth, sits up straight again and looks at the book with something that’s supposedly concentration. His tongue is sticking out at one corner of his mouth and his head is cocked to the side. Two minutes later, he closes the book in frustration and Taehyung rolls his eyes at the younger teen’s antics.  

“Tell you what,” he says. “Remember the dates, and I’ll take a walk with you right after. And to make it even more tempting, I’ll even top it by getting us a dog to walk.”
“Where would you even get a dog from, hyung?”

Taehyung winks at him and grins as Jungkook’s cheeks turn slightly red. It’s so easy to make him flustered. “I know exactly where.”

Jungkook perks up at that. “You promise?”

“I do. But the deal only stands when Jin verifies that you’ve studied diligently.”

Taehyung’s more than surprised to see that his offer has worked. Jungkook immediately opens up his textbook again and browses for the page he’s last been on.

While the younger one finally studies, Taehyung’s thoughts drift off from his Japanese vocabulary to the world outside as he stares through the window. Jungkook’s right. It’s a warm and sunny day in Seoul. It’s the end of October, so there probably won’t be many of them left this year. They should take the opportunity if it presents itself to them, but Jungkook’s academic success comes first. After all he’ll be graduating middle school soon.

“Shouldn’t you be studying too, hyung?” Jungkook asks after a while, and Taehyung jumps slightly, his thoughts having drifted far away from the room they are stuck in.

“Shouldn’t you be looking at your book?” Taehyung remarks as he looks back at the younger teen, and catches him blush and avert his eyes to the textbook quickly again.

Taehyung grabs his phone and leaves the room quietly as to not disturb Jungkook’s concentration – who’s he kidding, there’s no way Jungkook is actually concentrated – and makes a phone call to a number he rarely called.

“Eomma,” Taehyung greets the caretaker of his dog as the old woman finally picks up. “I know that this is rude of me to ask, but could you do me a favour?”

“You’ll take a walk with Jungkook and your dog?” Jin asks with raised eyebrows. “And you’re telling me that before you leave, Jungkook will actually have studied for his exam?”

The disbelief is blatant on his face, and Namjoon who sits next to him chuckles on the quiet.

“You never told me that you can do magic, Tae,” the leader says and Taehyung almost glares at him. It’s not magic. It’s just persuasive measures to get the boy to study, a tactic that Jin obviously lacked so far looking at Jungkook’s grades.

“So you’re okay with us taking a walk with Soonshim?” Taehyung clarifies.

“As long as you keep Jungkook away from the part of town you brought me too and he really has studied, I don’t see why I shouldn’t be okay with it.”

Taehyung nods enthusiastically. Eomma promised to bring Soonshim to a park near their company building for extra money, and she’ll pick Soonshim up three hours later again. Taehyung will get the dog while Jungkook gets quizzed by Jin and it will all work out fine. He’s not really sure why, but he’s really excited. A walk in the park is going to be fun. He’s looking forward to seeing Jungkook play with his dog. He’s been quite serious quite often lately, and Taehyung misses his quiet laugh. Besides, Jungkook’s also hanging out with Jimin more often than not these days, so he gets to see him even less.

He doesn’t know what he should think about that. The two of them are constantly meeting up
when they both have time. Yoongi had remarked once how they always have their heads together and mumble like teenage girls. They’ve been close before, but Taehyung has the odd feeling that there’s something more now between them, but he can’t really pinpoint what it is. They act as if they’re keeping secrets judging by the looks they exchange. Or maybe Taehyung’s just imagining thing.

And huh, that’s odd. It almost feels like he’s a little bit jealous. That’s stupid though, right? Why would he be jealous of Jimin? Besides, it’s not like he’s the one in a group with Jungkook and, therefore, the one who gets to spend more time with him. Admittedly it’s a childish thought, but it still makes Taehyung feel better.

So yes, he’s excited about the walk today. In fact, he’s so excited that he quietly hums to himself while walking down the corridors, and minutes seem to pass by unbearably slowly now. He hopes that Jungkook will be done studying soon.

When Jungkook goes to Jin to get quizzed, Taehyung goes out to grab Soonshim from Eomma. He playfully threatens Jungkook to get all the answers right, or else he’ll give the dog back again, and Jungkook pouts, his eyes wide, as if that empty threat is the worst thing he could possibly imagine happening.

“It’s good to see you,” Eomma greets him, but Taehyung barely hears her. He’s too preoccupied with going down on his knees and saying hi to Soonshim, who’s excitedly wagging his tail and let’s out soft barks of joy upon seeing his owner again.

“Thank you for bringing him,” Taehyung eventually says after straightening up again and bows slightly.

“You know I’ll do anything for money,” Eomma answers. She’s always been blunt like that, constantly reminding Taehyung that whatever she does she does for cash, but Taehyung knows that deep down she’s at least a little bit fond of him the way he is fond of her. Instead of saying that, however, he hands over some money and takes Soonshim’s leash in exchange, confirming with her once more that he’ll bring Soonshim back in three hours at the same spot, before making his way back to the BigHit building and waiting in front of it.

Jungkook almost skips out of the building and when he sees Taehyung, he walks over and excitedly tells him that he only got one question wrong. As soon as he spots Soonshim though, sitting next to Taehyung’s legs and wagging his tail contently, he shrieks and changes his slower pace to a run, skidding to a halt right in front of them.

“Oh my god,” Jungkook gushes as he drops down on his knees in front of the fluffy white dog – Soonshim seems to have the power of bringing people to their knees with his cuteness – and offers the palm of his hand for the dog to sniff at before petting him. “Where did you find such a cutie?”

Taehyung thinks that he’s never heard Jungkook talk in such a high voice before, nevertheless shrieking. It’s cute. Maybe even almost as cute as Soonshim.

“This is Soonshim. He belongs to a friend,” Taehyung introduces, and by the time he’s finished his sentence, Soonshim is already lying on the floor, belly up, and enjoying belly rubs by Jungkook. It’s a comfort that Taehyung doesn’t feel a zing of jealousy at that sight.

Jungkook smiles so brightly that his cheeks must hurt and it’s such a good sight. There’s almost always a shadow of stress on his features these days, and to see all of that fall off makes Taehyung happy.
“And we can really go for a walk with him?” Jungkook asks, and now that Taehyung is looking
down at him, it’s one of the rare moments he sees him for the young boy he still is. It’s hard to
forget that when he hears Jungkook sing or sees him dancing, always giving one-hundred percent,
always being good at everything.

“We’ve got him for three hours.”

“Can I take the leash, hyung?”

Taehyung hands the red leash over ceremoniously after Jungkook has gotten up and dusted off his
knees. Soonshim looks disappointed that his belly rubs have already ended.

They walk to the nearby park in a comfortable silence while Soonshim trots next to Jungkook.
Taehyung watches the younger teen and notices how his eyes never really leave the dog, except for
when he looks up to cross the street.

It really is a beautiful autumn day to take a walk. The rays of sun are still warm enough to only
need to wear a light jacket, and the leaves that are falling from the trees have a similarity to cherry
blossoms. They might not be as pretty as the blossoms, but Taehyung almost prefers coloured
leaves to pink petals.

At the park the first thing Jungkook does is look for a suitable branch to throw for Soonshim. He
lets the dog off the leash after seeking approval from Taehyung and starts to play with him in the
grass while Taehyung sits down on a close bench and observes them.

It’s good to see Jungkook play around like that. He’s rolling around on the ground with Soonshim
and playfully barking back at the dog when it barks up at him to throw the branch with a wildly
wagging tail. His clothes are going to get stained and Jin will so not be happy about that when he
sees that, but Taehyung doesn’t have the heart to tell Jungkook to take things a bit slower and
Jungkook obviously doesn’t seem to care.

Taehyung smiles to himself. He’s glad he offered Jungkook the incentive. Seeing Jungkook so
happy and carefree – even if it’s just for a short amount of time – warms Taehyung’s heart. The
younger teen is so cute the way he laughs and his nose scrunches u-

Hold on.

No.

Not cute. Jungkook’s not cute. Okay, objectively speaking he is cute, but that’s not the kind of cute
that Taehyung just thought about when watching Jungkook’s nose scrunch up and eyes crinkling as
he laughed at Soonshim’s antics. Not the innocent kind of cute, and Taehyung’s stomach plummets
at that realisation. Surely he’s just confused. He’s messing things up. He can’t possibly find Jeon
Jungkook *cute* cute. He can’t. Not possible. There’s so many things wrong with that. Jungkook’s
only fifteen years old. He’s still a boy. He’s not cute. Taehyung’s never thought that way about
anyone, and he’s surely not going to start now – especially not a fifteen-year-old boy. That’s just
creepy and wrong. It’s simply that he has a soft spot for Jungkook and for Soonshim and seeing the
two of them together confused him for a second.

But he doesn’t think that Jeon Jungkook is cute.

No.

“Why’re you sitting at the bench over there and not playing with us?” Jungkook pouts, effectively
ripping Taehyung out of his downward-spiralling thoughts.
Not cute. Taehyung shakes his head and gets up to join the other teen and the dog, and he makes a point to bury those stupid thoughts in the depths of his mind. If Jungkook notices that Taehyung doesn’t really look at him for the rest of the time they play with Soonshim, he doesn’t mention it.

“How was your park date?” Yoongi asks later when they return to the dorm with an amused smile on his lips.

Jungkook immediately goes off about how adorable Soonshim is, and how nice the weather was, and when Namjoon asks if he still knows all of what he studied before going out, Jungkook looks sheepish and promises to look over his textbook once again before going to sleep tonight.

“It wasn’t a date,” Taehyung grumbles after Jungkook has bounded off to the bathroom, and both Yoongi and Namjoon look up at him in surprise.

“Why are you so sour?” Yoongi asks. “I was just kidding, calm down.”

Taehyung shrugs his shoulders as he scoffs. “I’d just prefer if you maybe could stop making those kind of jokes. Please. All of you guys. It makes me uncomfortable.”

He notices the confused looks that Yoongi and Namjoon exchange, but they readily agree to his request, slight traces of guilt etched onto their features when Taehyung plays the uncomfortable card. They must think that it’s related to his past. He can’t let them know that it’s related to the boy they can hear singing loudly in the bathroom as he turns on the shower.

“What’s wit him?” he hears Namjoon ask quietly when he steps out of the living room.

What’s with them?, Taehyung asks himself. Those remarks aren’t funny. They’re just plain stupid. It’s not like he makes these kind of jokes whenever he sees any of the other guys doing stuff together. Surely Namjoon wouldn’t appreciate it if he asked him about his and Jin’s date whenever they go to that coffee shop they both like without any of the other guys. It’s ridiculous. Why the fuck would he and Jungkook ever go out on a date?

Chapter End Notes

Edit: I got the call half an hour after posting this. It's cancer. Sorry if I don't post for a while.
Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

There's so much to say and I don't know where to begin and where to end. First of, as always, thank you so much for your lovely comments. I'm glad you enjoyed the less angsty chapter, be prepared for the peace not to last. We're finally starting to get into the main action 75,000 words in. Secondly, thank you so much for your kind words and well-wishes. I'll be sent to Germany at the end of the month and will stay there for almost three weeks for treatment. Incidentally, I will be in a hospital in Berlin when the BTS concert tickets for Berlin drop. There's a lot on my mind, but the author's notes aren't the best place to ramble on, so without further ado, I hope you enjoy this next chapter. x

EDIT: I knew I forgot something exciting! There's now over 1000 (!!!) subscribers, which is - pardon my language - absolutely fucking incredible. Also a bit intimidating, because that's a lot of people. Shoutout to all of you, I can barely talk to a class of 25 people on a good day, but it's incredible to think my story reaches so many of you. I hope it continues not to disappoint!

Taehyung’s body aches. All seven boys are lying on the ground, panting and sore. Sweat is covering Taehyung’s skin and soaking his clothes.

“That was really good.”

The praise of their dance teacher makes some of the boys cheer – only softly though, because they’re so out of breath – and others just groan.

Hoseok’s the first to get up again, because he’s a dancer and has a better stamina than the rest of them. It’s probably partly due to their diet that they’re that out of breath. It would be a lie to say that they aren’t a bit malnourished right now. Anyway, Hoseok’s the first to get up, but even then he has to bend over and rest his hands on his knees, too tired to stand up straight.

“Is it debut stage worthy?” Hoseok asks what the others think but don’t dare to voice.

All eyes shift to the dance teacher, who looks contemplative. Taehyung’s stomach drops, because really they’ve done everything they could. They’ve exhausted themselves down to the bones. If they’re not debut stage-worthy yet, then they’ll never be.

The contemplative look gets replaced with a smile, and Taehyung lets out a breath he didn’t realize he’d been holding when the teacher assures them that it was debut stage-worthy.

“But don’t think that you can slack off now,” he tells them half-jokingly, half-threateningly, before sending them on a break for fifteen minutes.

Taehyung stays on the floor as the other members scramble up. He’s staring up at the ceiling, and his heart is beating fast from overexertion. His arms are sprawled out because the floor is cooling his overheated skin.
He can hear Donghyuk complain to Yoongi that this is more dancing than he had signed up for; a claim that he reminds everyone of whenever he can. Donghyuk seems to hate dancing even more than Namjoon does, and that is quite impressive. He’s waiting to hear Yoongi’s response when he jumps slightly as a weight settles down on his left arm.

“Didn’t want to scare you,” Jungkook whispers, his head resting near Taehyung’s shoulder. Taehyung wants to shake him off, to tell him to fuck off because they’re both sweaty and it’s quite gross for their sweaty skins to stick together, but he keeps quiet when he sees Jungkook close his eyes and sigh contently.

“Are you tired?” Taehyung inquires. It’s almost Midnight and it’s been a long day. He lifts his other arm off the floor and goes to brush some hair out of Jungkook’s face, but stops himself the last second.

No.

He’s not going to do that. So he rests his arm on his stomach and diverts his eyes back to the ceiling.

“Mhm,” Jungkook hums, and Taehyung suspects that Jungkook might actually fall asleep on his arm any second.

Things between them have been strained lately. Or maybe they haven’t, but Taehyung makes them that way. He’s not doing it on purpose. He doesn’t want to push Jungkook away, but ever since they went out with Soonshim…

Taehyung can’t seem to shake the thought that Jungkook’s cute. He looks at him giggle and scrunch up his nose and his heart flutters, and when he sees the younger teen exhausted he wants to wrap him up in a blanket and take care of him until he feels well-rested again. He’s had these thoughts before, but somewhat they are different now and that freaks him out.

What the fuck is wrong with him? He can’t like a boy two years younger than him. It’s wrong for so many different reasons. Jungkook’s still more child than anything else. It’s so not okay for Taehyung to consider him anything more than a friend. He can’t – he’s not a predator. He’s not like those disgusting men that picked him up from street corners. He doesn’t like them young. What is he saying? He doesn’t like boys at all. The thought of becoming intimate with Jungkook– Taehyung’s breath stutters. It’s such a wrong thought and his stomach flips in disgust, but then it also flutters and his heart skips in his chest and no no no no

“Tae?”

Taehyung gasps as a hand settles on his shoulder and he tries to recoils from the touch in surprise, but the dead weight of Jungkook’s head on his arm bolts him to the spot.

“Hey, it’s okay. You’re okay.” It’s Jin, crouching next to him and looking concerned. He softly squeezes Taehyung’s shoulder.

“You looked like you completely zoomed out. Is everything alright?”

Taehyung swallows. His throat feels dry. When he looks over at Jungkook, he sees the younger teen’s eyes are closed. Asleep. He hasn’t noticed anything.

“I’m okay,” Taehyung echoes Jin’s words from earlier. His voice betrays him as it breaks, but Jin doesn’t mention it.
“Since we’ve done well they decided to let us leave early. Jungkook has school tomorrow, so we should get him to bed soon,” Jin says.

He lets go of Taehyung’s shoulder and instead does what Taehyung had longed to do just minutes ago, to brush Jungkook’s hair out of his face.

“Jungkook-ah,” Jin murmurs as he caresses Jungkook’s cheek. “It’s time to wake up. We’re going home.”

Jungkook doesn’t seem bothered by the touching at all. If this was Taehyung sleeping, he’d be wide awake by now. The other members know that it only takes one slight poke to make him wake up. Jungkook’s the complete opposite. He just smacks his lips and scoots closer to Taehyung.

Before any of them know what actually happens, Taehyung pulls out his arm and Jungkook’s head falls to the floor, causing the younger teen to startle and wince.

“Taehyung!” Jin’s voice rises and Taehyung sits up, stares at him wide-eyed. “What the fuck was that for?”

“I- I-”

Taehyung looks at Jungkook, who looks up at them in confusion, and then he looks at Jin who looks disappointed.

“I’m sorry,” Taehyung murmurs. He’s tense all over. He’s feeling sick to the stomach. And he has absolutely no answer to Jin’s question.

Jin just shakes his head and helps up Jungkook, who’s looking at them all bleary-eyed, obviously not sure what’s going on.

Taehyung’s not sure what’s going on either, but he’s sure that whatever this weird feeling is that he gets whenever he looks at Jungkook has to be extinguished before it can get any worse.

It might sound stupid, but with everything going on – all the debut preparations, the dance practices, the lessons on how to be an idol, his weird fucking feelings about Jungkook – Taehyung almost forgets about Mr. Kim.

Almost.

Until a photo-shoot is around the corner, and the stylists are buzzing around the boys for fitting clothes, and an employee comes by and hands a package over to Taehyung. He’s not the only one receiving a package, as he can see how all the other members get one as well.

“What’s that for?” Namjoon asks. The packages are small, their stage names neatly written on them with a black felt pen.

“A sponsor’s gift for the photo-shoot. I’ve been told you can keep it afterwards,” the employee says before taking his leave.

One of the stylist noonas frowns, because whatever’s in there has not been sanctioned and might mess up the entire outfit.

“The package is so small, I doubt it will make a difference,” Jin tries to soothe her ruffled feathers.
Taehyung shakes the packages. It’s light and whatever’s in there doesn’t make much noise.

Jungkook is the first one to actually open his, basically tearing it apart in excitement. They know that sponsors have already invested their money into them, but so far they haven’t personally profited from it at all, so he’s absolutely thrilled to discover what’s in there. They all are.

It’s a wristband, tidily resting in a sleek-looking black box. Jungkook raises it for everyone to see, a golden band that looks like a chain.

Taehyung can hear one of the stylist noonas sigh in relief, because this is an accessory that definitely matches their style instead of fucking it up.

Donghyuk is the next one to open his package to find an identical wristband in an identical box.

“There’s no note,” Hoseok observes after opening his. He looks mesmerized.

Taehyung is still surrounded by two of the stylists, adjusting his clothes and styling his hair, so he can’t open his yet, but he watches as all his other band members put on their wristbands.

There is a note in Namjoon’s package that looks like it’s been written on a typewriter.

“Please wear them well for me,” Namjoon reads it aloud. “There’s no signature. That’s weird.”

“We certainly will, no matter who sent it,” Hoseok cheers and they start laughing, excitement thrumming in their veins because if a sponsor is willing to buy them jewellery for a photo-shoot – expensive looking jewellery at that –, they know they’re on the right path.

As soon as the stylist is done with Taehyung, he too starts ripping open his package, although he already knows its content. His eyebrows draw together in confusion, however, when he doesn’t find a black box in it. Instead, the golden wristband is nestled on black cloth. That’s certainly odd. What’s even odder is that there’s a small tag attached to one of the chain links. Taehyung glances over at the wristband that Hoseok is wearing, and it’s plain.

With a frown, he reaches inside and picks the wristband up to take a closer look at the small golden tag. There’s a ‘V’ carved into it. The way it’s written reminds him of calligraphy, elegant, yet simple. He puts it on, still unsure about the reason his wristband looks different to the others, but at this point he’s still unsuspecting.

In hindsight it’s fucking stupid that he didn’t realize what’s going on right from the beginning.

He’s about to discard the package when he spots it, the white envelope pressed against one of the sides and that’s when he has the first inkling of understanding that something’s wrong.

Taehyung takes it out and opens it. He takes a quick look around to make sure no one’s watching. Maybe he should alert Namjoon right away, because obviously something’s fishy, but he keeps quiet instead and opens it after making sure that all the others don’t have their attention on him. He finds a letter inside.

Dear V-ssi,

I hope this letter and my presents reach you well. Please wear them for the photo-shoot. It would fill me with pleasure to know you have them on you, even though they might not be visible. Always mine.

K. A.
Taehyung’s emotions hit him all at once. Panic, because the wristband on his arm is from Mr. Kim. Disgust, because he doesn’t want to have any of the man’s possessions. Confusion, because Mr. Kim was talking about multiple presents when there’s only the wristband in the parcel. A shudder of fear runs through Taehyung as he reads over the words once more.

*It would fill me with pleasure. Always mine.*

He wants to rip the wristband off, and tell the others to do the same. But then he glances over at Yoongi and Hoseok admiring them, and simply can’t bring himself to do it. But just the thought that any of them – especially Jungkook, if he’s honest with himself – wearing jewellery bought by that pervert makes his skin crawl. Heck, the wristband feels as if it’s searing burn marks into his flesh. Branded by Mr. Kim once again.

*My presents reach you well.*

Taehyung ponders the words and takes one more glance at the parcel, when it finally hits him. All other bracelets have arrived in black boxes, but his came on top of black cloth. So does that mean-

He takes out the black cloth and spreads it apart. It takes a second or two too long for him to figure out what it is. By the time he does, he feels physically sick, let’s go off the fabric as if it had burned him.

“Is that underwear?” Donghyuk’s words reach his ears, but Taehyung doesn’t reply. He clenches his fists to hide his trembling fingers.

*It would fill me with pleasure.*

Taehyung bursts out of the room and makes it to the toilet only just in time, emptying the little lunch he had into the toilet bowl.

—

“It’s like a dog tag.”

“I will have a word with him. This certainly crossed a line.”

“Do you think it’s a good idea to confront him? He still has the blackmail material.”

“But you can’t let this go either.”

Taehyung hears Namjoon, Yoongi and Bang PD-nim talk, but he doesn’t pay much attention to what they are saying. The offending objects are laid out on PD-nim’s desk for all of them to see. Taehyung avoids looking at them, but something always draws his eyes back again.

He’s still shaking, hasn’t stopped since Jin found him bent over the toilet; Jin who’s currently rubbing his arms and his shoulder and telling him that everything’s okay.

*It would fill me with pleasure.*

Taehyung cringes again just at the thought of those words. Of course it would fill Mr. Kim with pleasure to think of Taehyung wearing such a skimpy thing. They are black boxer briefs. A lace pouch barely just covers the crotch, while the rest is made up of a black criss-cross weave. The lace trim looks beautiful and expensive; Taehyung can’t deny that. Yet it repulses him to have received such a gift, especially with those implications behind it.

Why is he so affected by this? He doesn’t know. It’s not like Mr. Kim is here. He’s not threatening
to touch him. He’s merely implying that he’ll get off to Taehyung’s pictures from the photo-shoot with the thought of him wearing such underwear in mind. But still, it disturbs Taehyung more than he’d like to admit. It shakes him up in ways that he hasn’t felt in a while.

The worst of all is that Donghyuk and Jungkook now know that something’s going on. They’ve both seen the underwear. They’ve both seen Taehyung drop it and flee out of the room. He doesn’t know how he can get himself out of this one. It seems impossible. Namjoon told him to not worry about it, that the rest of them will take care of it, but Taehyung doesn’t think this can be taken care of in any way that does not reveal the truth.

“So what are we going to do?” Yoongi asks the question on everyone’s mind, and all eyes, except for Taehyung’s, go to Bang PD. Taehyung’s are still stuck on the underwear openly displayed on the desk.

“Do you think you can do the photo-shoot, Taehyung?” Bang PD addresses Taehyung. “Because if you’re not up for it, we’ll send you home.”

Taehyung frowns. Send him home but have the other members do the shoot?

“No,” Taehyung croaks out. “I don’t want to go home. I want to be part of the shoot.”

Jin sighs softly next to him, the palm of his hand resting on Taehyung’s knee by now. The younger teen wants to slap it away, but he holds still.

“It wouldn’t be good for Tae to be intimidated by him,” Namjoon takes his side. “What that psycho obviously wants is to have a hold on Taehyung. His letter sounds possessive. He thinks he owns Taehyung. If he finds out that he’s gotten under Taehyung’s skin enough to not have him participate in a shoot, he’ll be even more satisfied with himself.”

“So we wear the wristbands,” Taehyung says.

He’s met with a chorus of questions all at once as he reaches out for his wristband – dog tag as Namjoon has so fittingly called it earlier – and slips it on his wrist.

“You said yourself to not be intimidated,” he directs at Namjoon. “Because that’s what the motherfucker wants. I’m sure as fuck not going to wear the underwear—”

“And none of us would want you to,” Jin chimes in.

“-but I want him to see the wristbands. Let him think whatever twisted fantasy he wants to think. If he thinks I play by his rules, then he’ll have his guard down…” he trails off, because what then? What can Taehyung do when the moment comes? Grab the copies of the files and delete them? It’s not going to be as easy as that. That’s just his wishful thinking.

“Are you sure?” PD-nim asks.

Taehyung looks at the four people present, all sporting equally unsure looks on their faces.

“I’m sure.”

After the photo-shoot, he corners Namjoon to enquire what they’ve told Donghyuk and Jungkook.

“We told them that it must have been a mix up and that we’ve contacted the sponsor who profusely apologized for the mistake, as the underwear was meant for her husband.”
“And they bought that?” Taehyung asks incredulously.

“Donghyuk looked sceptical, but Jungkook believed it without a second’s hesitation.”

Taehyung glances over to where Jungkook is resting against Hoseok’s shoulder, eyes heavy with sleep, but smiling nonetheless at the dancer’s antics.

“Of course he would believe that,” Taehyung murmurs and shakes his head, envious of Jungkook’s innocence. He wishes that he could still have some of that.

Chapter End Notes

In case you're craving something less angsty, I've published a Jimin x Hoseok one-shot that, believe it or not, is actually fun and light-hearted: waves will break (but we won't).

Also some of you have asked if there's a way to stay up to date with what's going to happen next with my cancer. Well, let me redirect you to my tumblr, where I'm ranting about my daily problems and will have fascinating live-updates about the joy of radiation treatment in Berlin. I'm also doing fic commissions there right now to help afford the trip to Berlin, more info on that can be found here.

Take care, I'm hoping to be back with another update before Berlin. x
Sometimes Taehyung has nightmares. Occasionally they are bad enough that one of the other members has to wake him up. The bad dreams have gotten better over time, but every now and again he’ll still toss and turn in his bed and wake up drenched in sweat, shirt sticking to his skin, one of the members looking at him in concern. Those nights, he has to bite his tongue to not scream and wake up the others. It’s rare, but when it happens it’s bad. He’ll be so tired and irritated the next day. Everything makes him jumpy. Touches set him on edge. And the dreams always vary. Sometimes it’s his dad, fist raised and ready to strike. Sometimes it’s the countless men he’s been with in order to survive, their faces grinning down at him as he’s pinned to the mattress. Sometimes it’s the faceless man in the alley, the one he never wants to remember. It’s always different, but it’s still also the same, always pain one way or another.

It’s been Mr. Kim before. Of course he’s had dreams about him. Dreams? Nightmares. Even though his memories of Mr. Kim are fonder than most other clients – and isn’t that a fucked up thought? – they are still nightmares. It’s another one of Mr. Kim tonight, but even though Taehyung’s not aware of the fact that he’s dreaming, he’s very well aware of the fact that something’s off. It’s too intimate, the feeling between them. Mr. Kim between his legs. Both of them naked. Something’s off about him but Taehyung can’t put his finger on what it is, and for some reason what happens arouses him. He’s turned on. He’s turned on and Mr. Kim is on top of him, and he’s grinning down but he looks different, and there’s something about his face that has changed, and Taehyung squints up because he needs to figure out what is-

He freezes when he spots it. That’s not Mr. Kim’s smile. Mr. Kim’s lips have never looked like this before. Different on the face of the man, they still look familiar to Taehyung. His brain rattles as he tries to find a memory he can associate with those lips, another face maybe. It doesn’t click, but that smile captivates him. He can’t look away. He wants to rise on his elbows to be able to taste those lips on his. He startles at his own thought. Willingly kiss Mr. Kim? He never kissed a client before, not if they didn’t force it on Taehyung. So why would he-

And in the middle of his thoughts, he looks up once more and wants to scream, because Mr. Kim’s face seems to melt. The clear definitions all become blurry until there’s nothing to recognize anymore safe for those lips that still smile down at him so lovingly. Taehyung rubs his eyes with his fingers clenched to fists, because surely this can’t be real. He rubs his eyes so hard that he can see stars burst behind his closed eyelids, and the next time he opens them the scream he was tempted to make earlier gets stuck in his throat once again because-

Jungkook. It’s not Mr. Kim on top of him. It’s Jungkook. But the smile is still the same, because it was Jungkook’s all along, and this is so wrong but Taehyung is so aroused and no no no no no nonononononoNONONONO
“Taehyung, for fucks sake!”

Taehyung darts up. He’s panting. His shirt sticks to his skin with sweat. All the signs of a nightmare, but this wasn’t— Or was it? No! It was so much worse than a nightmare.

“Are you okay?” Taehyung jumps and looks at Yoongi, who’s climbed up the ladder to his mattress. He looks grumpy, probably because he hates being woken up, but Taehyung can also detect worry in his voice. “You’ve been muttering ‘no’ over and over again.”

Yoongi’s hand comes up to his shoulder and he only hesitates for a moment before resting it there and squeezing gently. Taehyung only recoils slightly from the touch.

“You’re drenched. Maybe you should get changed into another shirt. Let me bring you a fresh one and some water.”

Before Taehyung can protest, Yoongi has climbed down the ladder again and Taehyung gets a second to breathe and gather his thoughts. What the fuck just happened? His eyes search for the mattress that Jungkook occupies. He can barely make out his figure in the dark of the room. How can he be so disgusting to dream about sex with Jungkook? If any of his hyungs found out, they would call him a freak.

He swallows harshly. He’s been trying to keep his impure thoughts at bay. He’s trying to act towards Jungkook as if nothing is wrong, but his subconscious must have had something else in mind.

Disgusting. God, he’s so so disgusting for having such thoughts, especially about Jungkook. He’s in the middle of beating himself up for even having such a dream when he notices it, the strain in his boxer shorts.

“Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck,” Taehyung mutters to himself, panic crawling up his throat and clawing at his chest once more. He tumbles down the ladder as quick as he can and rushes into the bathroom. Yoongi calls after him from the kitchen, but Taehyung doesn’t pay him any attention. He throws the door shut and locks it with trembling hands.

Yoongi bangs against the locked door and Taehyung finds it hard to breathe. Time passes and he can hear more voices outside now as his thoughts race too fast for him to actually catch up, the others apparently having woken up when hearing the commotion.

He feels cornered. There’s no way out, no way to avoid the others, to avoid Jungkook, but he can’t stay in here, the room too small, the walls closing in on him, and he still can’t breathe properly, starts feeling dizzy.

“For fucks sake, open up the door,” he hears Yoongi curse, the frantic knocking picking up again. The noise increases the anxiety bubbling up in his chest, spreads through his entire body, reminds him of old times he’s been locked away, the banging on the door a threatening promise of violence to come. It’s too much. Everything’s too much. He wants it to stop. The loud noises from outside, the horrible images of Jungkook in his mind.

“Hyung?” And now he’s starting to hear Jungkook’s voice in his head, muffled but still there. He’s losing it. He’s going insane. “Please open the door. We can hear you gasp for air. Namjoon hyung is seconds away from calling an ambulance.”

Door? Namjoon? Gasping for air? Taehyung’s scattered thoughts come to a screeching stop as he stumbles over those questions.
Ambulance? Ambulance!

Taehyung’s becoming aware of a burning feeling in his chest, a pain that feels too real to be the fabrication of his panicked imagination, and that’s when the fog in his mind starts to lift.

He’s in the dark. There’s no light safe for the small slip coming through the crack under the door. The tiles under his feet are cold. He can hear voices outside, his friends, and he realizes that Jungkook’s voice was not just in his head. He can also hear a choking sound that at first he can’t recognize, but then he makes the connection between the burning in his lungs and the noise and realizes that he really can’t breathe.

A new form of panic grips him unrelated to the one he’s felt before. He’s had panic attacks in the past that had made it hard to breathe, but it’s never been that bad. Never been so painful in his lungs. Never so dizzying. He has to get out.

His fingers clumsily search for the lock on the door in the dark and when he finds it he hesitates, unsure whether he willingly wants to hand himself over to the scary pounding noises from outside. But the fear of choking overwhelms the fear of painful memories clouding his mind, and he unlocks the door, and pushes against it with all his might, not aware at all that the resistance against opening the door at first is due to the bodies of his friends crowding it.

He hears someone curse in pain from getting hit by the door – it might have been Hoseok, but really Taehyung can’t concentrate on anything at all so he can’t be too sure about that – and almost crashes to the floor as he tumbles out. His hands are wrapped around his throat unconsciously as he’s just trying to get some air, any air, anything, to help him breathe more freely again.

There are voices. Many voices. Also hands. On his shoulders. On his back. On his arms. He doesn’t want them. Needs to brush them off. Needs to breathe.

He’s not sure what happens, but the pressure from the hands on his shoulders increases and his knees buckle under his weight, bringing him down to the floor. The impact hurts, but he barely notices it.

“Taehyung? You can breathe. Can you hear me? It’s okay. You just need to take a deep breath in, and then let it out again. It’s alright. You can breathe just fine. Trust me. Try it with me. In… and out again… in… and out.”

His hands are pried from where they clutch at his throat and pressed against a chest. He coughs and it hurts, but there’s a steady rise and fall beneath the palms of his hands now and he can feel a rumble in said chest whenever the voice speaks. If he could only understand the words. If only he could look around him, the tunnel vision gone, the edges of his vision not black anymore so he can figure out what’s happening.

“In, and hold your breath for a bit. And then slowly out again.”

There are cold fingers holding his clammy hands against the unclad chest. The voice talking to him sounds familiar. A shudder runs down his spine and his breath hitches, but he doesn’t feel like there’s something constricting wrapped around his throat anymore. The steady rise and fall beneath his hands captures all his attention, and subconsciously he tries matching his own breath to it.

“That’s it. There you go. You’re doing great.”

Yoongi. That’s Yoongi’s voice. That’s his hyung’s hand pressing Taehyung’s fingers against Yoongi’s chest, and with the realization that he’s with Yoongi – that he’s safe – whatever invisible
force has been pressing against his chest, had its claws wrapped around his throat, disappears. Taehyung gasps for air and he can finally feel it flow into his lungs again, easing the burning sensation.

Maybe it had been a sob that had been lodged in his throat all along that made it hard to breathe, because as soon as air comes to him naturally again, Taehyung starts crying. He doesn’t know why. It just happens. He doesn’t even know why he’s crying. Maybe out of fear? The aftermath of the shocking sensation of not getting any breath? He doesn’t know. All he knows is that Yoongi shushes him and pulls him into a hug, and that there are other voices quietly talking in the background but no more hands touching him.

“You’re alright, Tae, you’re okay,” Yoongi tells him over and over again, and when Taehyung can’t cry anymore – when there are no tears left – he slumps against the older teen in exhaustion, his forehead resting on Yoongi’s shoulder.

“Should we get him to bed?” Hoseok asks.

“Maybe the couch would be better,” Namjoon argues.

Taehyung’s eyes are closed, but he can focus on their voices now, recognizes them, recognizes what they say. His heart is still beating too fast in his chest and his body still trembling, but that’s only the aftermath of the shock.

“Does this happen often?” That’s Donghyuk, sounding genuinely concerned.

“Sometimes he has nightmares and panic attacks, but it’s never been that bad,” Jungkook answers, and Taehyung remembers all of a sudden how this all started. His dream about Jungkook…

No. He can’t think about this again, because just the fleeting thought of it makes his lungs feel as if they’re tightening again.

“Tae, are you okay to move to the couch?” Yoongi asks him, cards his fingers through Taehyung’s hair. It’s a comforting gesture and Taehyung hums. He’s tired, but he knows that he won’t be able to fall back asleep again, even if it’s the middle of the night. There’s too much adrenaline still in his body.

They jostle him to the couch and make sure that he feels comfortable and safe. Jungkook finally brings him the water that Yoongi wanted to get before this entire ordeal started, and he brings it in the mug with all the smileys he had drawn on for Taehyung months ago. Namjoon tells everyone to try and go back to sleep.

Jungkook complains that he refuses to let Taehyung alone, and even Donghyuk looks disbelieving at the idea of going back to sleep after what just happened. It’s weird. To Taehyung he’s nothing but a stranger he now has to work with, but he has the feeling that Donghyuk sees him in a different light now. He wonders how long he can keep his secret from him. Wonders how Donghyuk will react.

Hoseok doesn’t look too happy about Namjoon’s order either, but he still shoos the two younger members back to the bedroom.

“You know I’m not leaving,” Yoongi says.

“Of course you’re not,” Namjoon sighs.

Taehyung watches all of what’s happening around him quietly, curled up under a blanket. His head
hurts now, something that always happens once a lot of tension has first drained his body and then
drained out of his body.

Yoongi is sitting by his feet, one hand beneath the blanket and massaging his ankles. It’s a pleasant
touch. Namjoon sits down next to Yoongi, and he grimaces as he can hear the others argue from
the bedroom.

“I’m sorry for causing trouble,” Taehyung whispers. It’s the first time he’s spoken, and his voice is
hoarse and shaky. “I didn’t mean to.”

He can feel Yoongi’s hand stop for a second before picking up the relaxing movements again.

“Don’t you ever apologize for something like that again,” he tells Taehyung, and Namjoon is
quick to agree. “Panic attacks are something natural and not your fault.”

“I’m just wondering…” Namjoon trails off and looks at Yoongi questioningly, who shrugs his
shoulders. Namjoon sighs and continues. “You’ve had them before. Mostly around the time you
first joined. But they’ve almost never been this bad. Can you tell me… was it just a nightmare? Or
is there something else that could have triggered it? Was it the package from the other day?”

Taehyung presses his lips together and shakes his head. This is… he can’t tell Namjoon about this.
He can’t tell anyone about this. They’d hate him if they knew. They’d hate him so much if they
knew that for some fucked up reason he’s attracted to Jungkook. He knows that they’d kick him
out of the band in an instant. Without hesitation.

“Just a bad nightmare,” he says, and then closes his eyes. Feigns exhaustion. Neither Namjoon nor
Yoongi ask any further questions. He doesn’t know if they believe him or not, but if they don’t
they are nice enough to not mention it for the moment. Good. Taehyung’s tired, and he’d really
rather not think about it any further. Just as he predicted, he doesn’t get much sleep for the
remaining night, but Yoongi stays with him and falls asleep with his hand still on Taehyung’s
ankle, and it provides a little comfort.

“I’ve heard you had a rough night,” Jin says the next day as they grab lunch together.

“Of course you did,” Taehyung mutters sarcastically. He’s sure that more people know than he’d
like to, because usually he doesn’t get sent for lunch by staff while the rest of the members are told
to keep their strict diet. Obviously they are trying to feed him in order for him to gain energy again
after last night’s episode. So he and Jin grab food in the cafeteria and get one of the tables a little
bit further away from the rest of the employees, where the trainees usually flock together.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Jin offers after having opened a water bottle and taking a sip.

“Not particularly, no.”

Jin doesn’t look pleased with Taehyung’s answer, but he drops the topic nonetheless and instead
talks about how his dog barfed all over the kitchen at his parent’s home yesterday.

“Charming,” Taehyung says. In the back of his mind he considers visiting Soonshim. But
Soonshim played so well with Jungkook, and Taehyung fears that if he looks at his dog he’ll just
be reminded of the younger band member again. He really has to put an end to this. He was barely
able to look at Jungkook all morning, and whenever the younger teen talked to him he tried to find
excuses to get away, the dream last night still etched into his mind in detail.
One of the other trainees approaches their table and comfortably rests his palms on the table top. Taehyung barely knows him, but Jin greets him by name and with a smile.

“Have you guys heard yet? The watchdogs are doing surprise phone checks. Rumour has it someone was caught having a risqué conversation by text, so if there’s anything you don’t want them to find you better delete quickly.”

“We haven’t heard yet, no. Thanks for the warning,” Jin answers politely. Taehyung wants to snort, because he just knows that none of his members would be caught dead with a message like that on their phone. They either don’t do it at all because they know that it gets them into deep shit, or they just delete them right after receiving. He’s not too sure about that, but he’s one hundred percent certain that if someone was to check any of his member’s phones right now, they’d be clean.

“Honestly I can’t believe that Jimin of all people would be so stupid to be caught.”

Jin’s eyebrows shoot up and Taehyung perks up at that as well, lunch in front of him now completely forgotten.

“Park Jimin?” Taehyung asks, just to make sure.

“The one and only,” the trainee says. “I just wanted to give you guys a little warning.”

“We appreciate it,” Jin answers, his shocked expression now replaced by a smile that looks a bit strained to Taehyung’s trained eyes.

The trainee nods and walks away again. They sit in quiet until they’re sure that he’s far enough away to not hear them anymore.

“What the fuck,” Taehyung hisses at the same time that Jin shakes his head in disbelief. “Jimin? A risqué text? He trains so hard. He never thinks he’s good enough. He’d never risk doing something stupid like that.”

“Honestly I think this is really just a rumour more than anything. Like you said, Jimin works hard. He wouldn’t throw that all away for a fling with someone.”

Taehyung pokes away at his lunch, all interest he previously had in it now completely forgotten. If he could, he’d love to go to Jimin right now and ask what’s going on. If he’s okay. The rumours must have gotten to him by now, word spreads fast in a small company like that. More than anything he’d like to ask if it’s true. And if yes, why?

“Don’t look so concerned, Tae. You know how rumours are. I’m sure it’s fine and not as big of a deal as we’re making it out to be right now,” Jin tries to calm him and digs back into his salad. Taehyung goes back to eating as well, but his appetite is gone now, his thoughts merely circling around what he’s just heard.

When they arrive back to practice, Jungkook’s missing.

“He went to Jimin,” Namjoon says, seemingly unbothered by the fact as he’s wiping sweat away with a towel. Quite obviously the rumour about Jimin hasn’t reached the rest of BTS yet, and Taehyung glances over at Jin and wonders if the oldest member is about to disclose what they’ve just heard.

Jin, however, stays quiet and so does Taehyung. He doesn’t like to admit it, but he’s glad that Jungkook’s gone. He’s tired and on edge around the younger and it finally gives him a break. He
can’t for the love of him get rid of the images inside his head, that weird and terrible dream he had last night. It still haunts him, comes back to the front of his inner eye whenever he lowers his guard for just a second. It’s exhausting.

“Yoongi was called over by one of the producers and Jungkook’s gone anyway, so we’re going to take a bit of a break right now,” Namjoon tells them.

“I might go take a nap in the studio. I’m tired,” Taehyung sighs.

“Of course,” Namjoon agrees with him, before turning to Jin. “What about you?”

Taehyung doesn’t hear Jin’s answer. He gives them a lazy wave and turns away, trotting to the studio. The uncomfortable black couch in there seems as soft as a cloud to him right now as he plops down on it with a sigh. It’s heaven. His eyes feel heavy and he’s sure that he can fall asleep in seconds. Taehyung closes his eyes and sees the dream repeat all over again in front of his inner eyes.

No. This can’t be.

And still he feels something about the dream, some sick and twisted desire.

But it can’t be.

Taehyung can’t like boys. More specifically, he can’t like Jungkook. He can’t like a boy two years younger than him, and so innocent. He can’t. He’s not gay. He’s not. He can look at his other members and not feel a thing. Honestly he can also look at girls and not feel a thing. He’s not gay. He’s not anything. He’s not interested.

Maybe it’s because he hasn’t jerked off in a while. He still only does it rarely, when it all becomes too much. When it’s been too long. A quick act in the shower, only the amount of touch necessary to make him come. Maybe that’s what he needs right now.

He opens the fly of his trousers and wraps his hand around his cock. It only takes seconds for him to get hard, so he starts to move his hand immediately, hopes that once he’s finished, this nightmare he’s currently living in will be over.

And then Jungkook’s face flashes in front of his closed eyes again, sweaty and face scrunched up in pleasure and lips looking so very kissable, a look that Taehyung’s never seen on him before. Never wants to see on him ever.

This doesn’t work. Fuck, it really doesn’t work. He quickly lets go of his cock and pants heavily. Calm down. He needs to calm down. This can’t develop into another panic attack again.

But what can he do?

His eyes fall on the computer in the room. The one that his hyungs produce their songs on. The one that, as rumour has it, sometimes has viruses because his hyungs keep downloading porn.

Maybe that…

No.

But then again…

Taehyung gets up from the black couch and turns on the computer. He’s never been a fan of porn,
never really watched it. Well, he did watch it when he first got into prostitution, to educate himself, but that was all the interest he ever had in it. But if it helps him get his mind off Jungkook, he’s willing to watch it again.

It’s too easy to find the file on the desktop that obviously holds what he’s looking for. ‘Other stuff’ is quite obviously the place you’d hide your pornos in. He wonders who of his members came up with that name. And there they are, just as Taehyung had predicted. The videos he’s been looking for. There’s sixty-three of them in the file, and Taehyung’s almost surprised by the amount of them. Also a little repulsed. He really doesn’t want to know who of his friends downloaded that many. Who watches them.

Taehyung clicks on the first one. The video player opens and he remembers to turn off the volume. He doesn’t want to risk anyone from outside being able to hear any of this. There’s a man lying on a bed in the video, and Taehyung skips forward because he’s impatient. He needs to get this done and over with as soon as he can.

To his surprise, the scene he skips to does not feature a woman with the man as he expected. Instead there’s a second man whose lips are wrapped around the other’s cock, and Taehyung’s stomach drops, and his cock twitches, and he quickly closes the window because what the fuck, confused about what he’s just seen. Maybe this was an accident. Maybe the woman was only going to join them later.

He clicks on another video, and this time he gets what he wants. Two people of the opposite gender in a bathroom, making out straight away. Good. This is good. This is exactly what he wants. But as he watches it, he doesn’t really find anything interesting in what he’s seeing. They suck off each other’s faces and Taehyung doesn’t find it the least arousing, and it doesn’t get better once his pants are on the floor and her legs wrapped around his hips, doesn’t get better as he holds her up and pounds into her. Taehyung watches, but his penis is flaccid.

This… this is doing absolutely nothing for him.

“You know,” Yoongi’s voice startles him, “if you want to watch porn in here at least lock the damn door.”
Hey guys, thanks for all the love in the comments! Surgery is done and radiation starts next week. They're 98% sure the cancer has spread to the liver, but we'll know 100% in a week or two. But even then the doctor said there are good treatments available for me since I'm young, so I'm not too worried about that.

I think that there are approximately 10 chapters left to this story, and they'll be longer from now on. Also I've got a ticket for BTS in Berlin, so after a long time luck was on my side again. :) Hope you enjoy this next chapter! :) x

“Hyung,” Taehyung squeaks and closes the window with the offending video. “I didn’t- I wasn’t-”

“There’s no use in denying it, I’ve been watching for a minute or two,” Yoongi grins, and he looks all too delighted. “To be honest you were the last person I expected to find watching porn in here, and I’ve walked in on most of the others at least once already.”

He’s teasing and Taehyung knows it. He can’t help the blush though. Fuck, he’s so embarrassed about being caught. What if Yoongi tells the others? Hoseok will never let him live this down.

“But then again you weren’t really watching porn for the usual reasons, were you?”

Taehyung sits up ramrod straight when he hears that and watches warily as Yoongi comes in and closes the door behind him. He takes a seat on the uncomfortable black couch, leans forward and rests his elbows on his knees, fingers clutched together. The teasing expression is gone from his face, instead replaced by something that Taehyung can’t quite put his fingers on. Worry? Confusion?

“What do you mean?” Taehyung blurts out. He just hopes for the ground to open up beneath his feet and swallow him whole. This entire situation can’t get any more embarrassing or uncomfortable than it already is.

“I mean that you just stared at the video completely motionlessly and weren’t affected at all.” Yoongi’s eyes dart down to Taehyung’s crotch briefly to show what he means by those words before he makes eye contact again. Taehyung shifts and rests his hands on his crotch, although Yoongi’s right. There’s nothing there to hide. “And we both know that just watching isn’t really how porn works. Which makes me wonder what you were actually doing with that video.”

Taehyung has no excuse. He wants to say something, parts his lips already to respond, but there’s nothing coming out. There’s no good argument he can retort with that Yoongi would actually believe.

“So do you want to tell hyung what’s going on? The panic attack last night? The porn? The fact that you’re again trying to push us out? Especially Jungkook. He looks like a kicked puppy whenever you turn away from him.” Yoongi frowns. “Don’t look so surprised, you’re not as subtle as you think.”
Dumbstruck. Taehyung is absolutely dumbstruck. He didn’t think that anyone had noticed. But here’s Yoongi proving him wrong. And if he can believe Yoongi’s words – and really, Yoongi has never given him a reason not to believe him – Jungkook has noticed too. Jungkook’s hurting because of him. The last thing Taehyung wants is to cause Jungkook pain.

The fly of his pants is still open and Taehyung fiddles with it to close it with shaky fingers. Yoongi is silently sitting and waiting for an answer. His eyes are so intense that Taehyung fears Yoongi can see right through him. He knows that trying to convince Yoongi that he’s fine would be pointless. Yoongi is smarter than that. As much as it scares him, he knows that Yoongi knows him better than that.

“I promise that it’s nothing you have to worry about, hyung,” Taehyung settles on saying.

“But I want to worry about you, Taehyung. Let others help you for once. You might not believe it, but it helps a lot in taking the weight off of your shoulders. And even if you say that it’s nothing I have to worry about, I will worry about it nonetheless.”

Taehyung lowers his head. He can’t look at Yoongi anymore. His words are too honest. If Yoongi knew, he wouldn’t talk so kindly to him. There’s no way he would. But he’s suffering, and he’s tired and scared, and the thought of sharing what’s bothering him with someone else sounds nice. Nevertheless, he fears Yoongi would react negatively.

Would he tell the others? Of course. He would let Namjoon know, and as soon as Namjoon knows, Taehyung will be out of the band. Which is why he can’t tell.

Can’t tell what exactly? It’s almost like he’s admitting his crush on Jungkook. The terribly forbidden feelings he has developed for his dongsaeng. It’s so wrong. Why Jungkook of all people?

Taehyung licks his dry lips. What if he tells half the truth? What if he tells Yoongi that he might like boys? Would that be okay? Would Yoongi look differently at him for that? He knows that Taehyung slept with men before and yet he still talks to him. Treats him nicely. Maybe it wouldn’t be that bad.

“I can see the wheels in your head turning, Tae. Whatever it is, you can tell me. Trust me.”

Can he trust Yoongi with this? He always carries his own weight on his shoulders, so what if he just allows himself to give a bit of his burden to someone else? The idea does sound nice.

“I think I like boys, hyung.” He says it quietly, maybe in hopes of Yoongi not actually hearing. His heartbeat starts to pick up speed as the words escape his lips. It beats so violently in his chest that he fears it might break his ribs.

There’s silence. Yoongi doesn’t answer and Taehyung’s too scared to look up and meet his eyes. No answer is never good. Or did Yoongi really not understand him? No, if that was the case he would have asked Taehyung to repeat his words. He must have heard it. It’s all over now. Taehyung can only imagine the shadow cast on Yoongi’s face, the dislike etched into his features.

“And?” Yoongi is saying it as if he’s waiting for more. Taehyung draws his eyebrows together in confusion. And what? That’s it. That’s all there is. Why does Yoongi make it sound like there’s more to come? Like this isn’t bad enough? When Taehyung says no more, Yoongi clicks his tongue. “Are you telling me that’s all that’s been bothering you?”

“I’m saying that I might be gay,” Taehyung says quietly.

“And I’m saying that that is nothing you should get so worked up about, Tae,” Yoongi answers.
and gets up from the couch. He walks over to Taehyung and crouches down in front of him, tries to meet the younger teen’s eyes that are still glued to the floor. “Hey, Taehyung. I’m serious. If that is what has you so worked up lately, I promise that you have nothing to worry about.”

“How do you know that?” Taehyung asks, voice trembling. “I’m not supposed to like boys. That’s not normal. I’ve had sex with so many men and now I still want them? That’s fucked up. There’s got to be something wrong with me.”

Yoongi cups Taehyung’s cheeks with his hands and raises his face to force Taehyung to look at him.

“Taehyung, there’s a difference between prostituting yourself in order to make money to survive and your own desires. One doesn’t have to influence the other. There’s nothing wrong with liking boys, at least in my opinion.”

“How do you know that?” Taehyung whispers. He can barely believe what he’s hearing. He feels so relieved. If Yoongi doesn’t hate him for being attracted to the same gender, then maybe the others won’t either. They wouldn’t have to know about Jungkook. No one can ever know about Jungkook.

“I promise.”

“Can you maybe not tell the others?”

Yoongi grimaces. “I won’t tell the others if you don’t want them to know, but you should at least tell Namjoon. I know he’s not going to think any different of you either.”

Taehyung takes a deep breath and nods. Namjoon. He can tell Namjoon. If Yoongi still likes him, and reacted like this, and says that Namjoon will be the same, then he can tell one more person.

“I will. But not now, please. I just- can I have some more time for myself?”

“Of course,” Yoongi agrees. He gets up from his crouching position and pats Taehyung’s head lightly. “I’ll leave you to it. And next time you watch porn, remember to lock the damn door.”

Taehyung buries his face in his hands in embarrassment and murmurs a disgruntled agreement.

“Hey, Tae?” Yoongi asks at the door as Taehyung has already turned back to the computer, ready to shut it off. “Where’s that sudden realization coming from anyway? Is there someone you like?”

Yoongi wriggles his eyebrows comically and laughs as Taehyung looks at him with a startled expression, like a deer caught in the headlights. He already knows that Yoongi won’t let him live this down, but Taehyung’s glad that he told him nonetheless. He really feels lighter now. Better. Now if he can get rid of that annoying crush he has on Jungkook, everything’s going to be alright.

As he watches the computer turn off, he briefly remembers the video of the two men on the bed, but there’s too much going through his head at once to keep a hold of that thought for longer than a second.

—

Taehyung returns to the dorm late that night. Once he dared to leave the studio again over an hour later, when his heartbeat had settled down somewhat, he decided to return to the dance studio only to find Hoseok and Donghyuk there practicing and decided to join them. On the way home, the three of them had decided to stop for some food. Taehyung doesn’t entirely know how it happened, but today has definitely turned into a good day. Hoseok’s arm is wrapped around his shoulders and
he even exchanges some jokes with Donghyuk. At one point Hoseok pinches his cheek and notes that Taehyung seems in a better mood than the past few days.

It’s true. It’s definitely true. Taehyung feels elated. He doesn’t know why, but Yoongi’s words encouraged him. For days he had thought of himself as absolutely disgusting. To some extend he still does, because why is he attracted to Jungkook? Jungkook’s young and pure and Taehyung is too dirty and comes with too much baggage for someone as sweet as the younger teen. But Yoongi had said that it’s okay for him to like boys. It doesn’t make him sick, even though he’s slept with so many of them before, more or less consensually but never really willingly. Yoongi told him it’s okay. If Yoongi still accepts him, and says Namjoon will accept him as well, then maybe it’s really not that bad. Maybe it’s okay for him to like boys. He still doesn’t want to accept that it’s the truth, but with Yoongi’s promise the knowledge doesn’t weigh down his stomach as much as it did before.

So Taehyung, Hoseok and Donghyuk return to the dorm around midnight. All three of them are tired, eyes heavy from diligent practice and delicious food that their managers definitely can’t know about. They expect to return to a quiet dorm, because things usually tend to settle down around ten. Their expectations aren’t met. Before Taehyung has even managed to kick off both his shoes, he flinches in surprise at the sound of voices screaming, followed by a door slamming.

“Jeon Jungkook!” That’s Namjoon’s voice booming through the dorm, louder than Taehyung has ever heard it and also very angry sounding.

“What the fuck?” Donghyuk asks, and he and Hoseok look just as confused as Taehyung feels.

“Who do you think you are slamming doors in my face? Show some fucking respect!”

Taehyung can’t see what’s going on from his position at the entrance, but his heartbeat spikes with anxiety at the loud screams. He doesn’t like them. That’s actually quite the understatement. He hates them. He stumbles further into the hallway, but only behind Hoseok and Donghyuk so his view is still a bit obscured. Hoseok must notice, because he glances back at Taehyung and smiles at him, before shuffling around to place himself closer in front of Taehyung. Acting as a shield, Taehyung realizes. The younger boy’s heart fills with warmth as he notices the subtle move, but he quickly forgets about it as he tries to figure out what’s going on.

Namjoon, completely red in the face, is storming from the living room to the bedroom and rips the door open.

“Leave me alone!” he can hear Jungkook scream as soon as Namjoon enters the bedroom, voice loud and hoarse. “Don’t tell me what to do!”

Taehyung swallows. He feels uncomfortable. He doesn’t know what to do. He’s irrationally scared for Jungkook. He knows that Namjoon would never…

But he looks so angry. And he’s screaming. Taehyung doesn’t think he’s ever heard Namjoon scream before. What if he hurts Jungkook?

“Welcome to the party,” Yoongi says sarcastically as he also joins them in the hallway, and to Taehyung’s surprise even Jin is here.

“What’s going on?” Hoseok asks.

“Namjoon told Jungkook to keep some distance to Jimin,” Yoongi explains. “You know, with those recent rumours and everything.”
“Needless to say, Jungkook’s not taking it all that well,” Jin adds with a conflicted look on his face. There’s more screaming coming from the bedroom and Taehyung flinches unintentionally. He knows that both Jin and Yoongi notice, their eyes focused intently on him.

“Why don’t we go into the living room and let the two of them scream it out?” Jin then suggests.

“But Jungkook…” Taehyung trails off meekly and gnaws on his lower lip. He tries not to listen to the raised voices, but he can’t tune them out. There are goose bumps on his skin and he wishes the screaming would stop.

“Jungkook will be fine,” Hoseok tells him. “It’s not the first time the both of them fight. There was a time when Jungkook picked fights with most of us. It hasn’t happened in a while, but it definitely happened before.”

Yoongi snorts and mutters something about a banana that Taehyung doesn’t quite catch, but according to the embarrassed smile on Hoseok’s face he guesses that the dancer was also part of that fight.

They file into the living room where the screams are just as loud, but wedged between Hoseok and Jin Taehyung tries to drown them out. Hoseok said that Jungkook will be fine.

Namjoon wouldn’t hurt any of them.

Taehyung’s still worried.

It’s only a few more minutes before Namjoon emerges from the bedroom. His has been the only voice they’ve heard for the past minute, and after he closes the door behind him and joins them in the living room he looks absolutely exhausted.

“That brat stopped responding,” he grits out.

“Don’t call Jungkook a brat,” Jin chastises him. Taehyung’s glad that Jin speaks out loud what Taehyung thinks but doesn’t dare say. He’s younger. It’s not his place to butt into a fight that doesn’t have anything to do with him. “Maybe I should go talk to him.”

“Leave him be. I doubt he’ll want to talk to anyone else tonight,” Yoongi sighs.

Jin looks displeased, but he relents and adds that he just doesn’t want Jungkook to think that no one is on his side.

“You’re not on his side either,” Namjoon reminds Jin. He sits down next to the oldest member and rests his head on Jin’s shoulder.

“You know what I mean,” Jin grumbles.

“What’s even going on?” Hoseok asks. “You said something about a rumour and Jimin?”

“You haven’t heard yet?” Donghyuk looks at him in surprise.

“Jimin may or may not be involved in a dating scandal,” the leader explains. “No one knows exactly what the truth is, but apparently there have been some interesting texts found on his mobile phone. And I thought it may be for the best to tell Jungkook to stay away from Jimin for a while. He didn’t really appreciate my opinion on the situation though.”

Yoongi snorts and calls that an understatement under his breath.
“I still can’t believe that Jimin would be so dumb as to meet with someone. He knows the rules. He wants to debut so badly, why would he risk it?” Jin asks. No one answers.

The rest of the night the mood in the dorm is subdued. Taehyung’s elated feeling has disappeared. He feels anxious again, skittish. He doesn’t do it on purpose, but he tries to avoid Namjoon, intimidated by knowing just how threatening Namjoon can sound when he screams.

“You okay?” Yoongi asks him when he finds Taehyung brush his teeth in the bathroom. Taehyung nods, a bit of foam running down his chin.

“Don’t worry too much about what happened today, okay? Namjoon and Jungkook will be fine again in a day or two. Namjoon doesn’t hold grudges for being disrespected. He knows what it’s like. He’s been Jungkook’s age before. And you should definitely go and talk to him soon, okay? And maybe stop pushing Jungkook away. I think he’d appreciate if there was someone on his side, even if it’s just silent support. And I know that you still care about Jimin enough to not want him to be on his own through this as well. You don’t think it’s a good idea to tell Jungkook not to see him as often, right?”

Taehyung spits out the toothpaste and rinses his mouth. After he’s dried off his face with a towel that has one too many loose threads by now, he looks at Yoongi through the mirror.

“Am I really that much of an open book?” he asks worriedly.

Yoongi cracks a smile.

“Don’t worry, you’re not. I’m just good at riddles.”

Namjoon decides to sleep on the couch, and Jin offers to join him, although there’s a perfectly good mattress for him in the bedroom. Taehyung wishes them a good night before quietly sneaking into said room. Hoseok is sprawled out on his bed and already deep asleep, and Jungkook curled up on his mattress on the floor, entirely hidden from Taehyung’s view underneath his blanket.

Taehyung’s already up two steps on his ladder before he changes his mind. He climbs back down and tiptoes over to Jungkook’s mattress. He’s not entirely sure if Jungkook’s awake or asleep, but judging from his breathing he thinks that the younger boy isn’t sleeping yet.

The older teen crouches down and nudges at the form under the blanket.

“Scoot over,” he whispers quietly, and when Jungkook’s head pops out from under the blanket with wide eyes and tear tracks still visible on his face, Taehyung sends him a smile although his heart breaks.

Jungkook shuffles over like Taehyung ordered him to, and Taehyung slips under the warm blanket with him. He doesn’t say a word, but he opens his arms in a silent invitation. Jungkook doesn’t hesitate for a second. He quickly scoots closer and presses his face into Taehyung’s shirt-clad chest. Taehyung can feel fresh tears soak the fabric. He wishes that he had the right words to say to Jungkook to ease the pain, but he’s lost for words. Instead he cards his fingers through the younger teen’s soft hair, a motion he knows helps calm Jungkook.

They fall asleep with tangled limbs, and Taehyung hopes that Jungkook can find at least a small amount of comfort in his presence.

The next day, Jungkook refuses to talk to Namjoon and he barely exchanges words with any of the other members. However, he decides to stick to Taehyung like a chewing gum to the sole of a shoe. Namjoon looks tired and disgruntled, but the glances he steals in Jungkook’s direction let
Taehyung knows that he just wishes to talk this out. The air between the seven of them is loaded with tension, everyone on edge.

Taehyung’s in the kitchen, stuffing clothes into the washing machine. Jungkook’s sulking at the kitchen table. The thing about the washing machine at their dorm is that Taehyung can never get the right amount of detergent down. It’s always either too little leaving his clothes stiff, or too much leaving his clothes with an overwhelming smell of flowers. It’s a weird thing to worry about considering that Taehyung never even thought about using detergent before he moved in, but Jin makes sure that there’s always enough stocked up in their dorm and all the boys use it because Jin asks them to. It’s ridiculous, considering that Jin doesn’t even live with them yet.

“You should talk to Namjoon hyung,” Taehyung eventually dares to suggest quietly, but all Jungkook does in reply is look daggers at him. “You know that he only wants what’s best for you.”

“And what about what’s best for Jimin?” Jungkook asks. He’s tapping his nails on the surface of the table, a familiar rhythm that Taehyung can’t quite put a name on. “Everyone’s gossiping about him and keeping their distance. He’s suffering. He knows that he did wrong, and right now he has to fear being kicked out of the company. I don’t want him to have to go through this on his own.”

Taehyung sighs. What about what’s best for Jimin? That’s a good question. Taehyung doesn’t want Jimin to suffer, but at the same time he wants Jungkook to be as little involved in this situation as possible. He perks up when he realises that Jungkook just confirmed the rumour, probably unintentionally. Jimin knows that what he did was wrong. Forbidden. And yet he still did it. It makes no sense. Not knowing how to answer the youngest member, Taehyung tries to steer the conversation in a different direction.

“You know the company rules, Jungkook. Dating’s forbidden. What Jimin did was wrong, and he’ll have to deal with the consequences. But you’re our member, and we don’t want you to get involved in this as well.”

Jungkook huffs. He pushes back the chair he’s sitting on, the chair legs screeching on the linoleum floor. Taehyung knows that whatever he’s said must have been incredibly wrong by the sudden fury he can see in Jungkook’s eyes. Well, his attempt at defusing the fight took a horribly wrong turn somewhere along the way.

“You know what, hyung? You all think you’ve got this figured out. Jimin’s the bad guy and that’s it. It’s all black and white, isn’t it? I know that people only see what they want to see, but I really thought that you’re not that judgemental. Jimin’s behaviour might have been unfair and he did wrong when he picked a fight with you, but right now you’re not better than he was.”

Taehyung watches in stunned silence as Jungkook leaves the kitchen, shouldering past Donghyuk who just entered and looks after him in confusion.

“What’s gotten into him?” Donghyuk asks and rubs his shoulder.

Taehyung shakes his head in disbelief and jumps slightly when he hears another door in the flat slam shut.

“I honestly have no idea.”

Donghyuk leaves the kitchen after getting something to drink, leaves Taehyung behind to wonder about Jungkook and about whether or not he has picked the right amount of detergent this time around. Probably not.
Jungkook continues to be standoffish for the next few days, and it goes so far that even the staff tells him to drop the act and start behave himself again. This results in Jungkook sulking even more, and whenever he’s not required to be with the group he slinks away. They all know that he’s fleeing to Jimin, but no one mentions it. Jin tries to make peace with Jungkook again by cooking his favourite dish for dinner, but even then Jungkook only grabs a plate, mutters a silent thank you and disappears into the bedroom. Namjoon looks ready to chase after him for a new round of screaming and even Jin looks as if he’s run out of patience, something Taehyung’s never gotten to witness before.

If there’s one positive thing that’s come out of this situation, it’s that Taehyung has laid his worries about his pathetic crush on Jungkook to rest in order to worry about the youngest member. He can’t forget the words Jungkook had charged him with. Judgemental. Is he judgemental? Taehyung’s not sure. Above everything, he’s really fucking confused about Jimin’s behaviour. Jimin had started a fight with him because he was jealous about not being as close to debut as Taehyung, which is why it makes no sense whatsoever that he would throw it all away so easily by dating someone. Jimin sticks to the rules. Practices diligently. Wants nothing more than to debut. Then why would he be so stupid to risk it all? They may not have talked for months now, but if there’s one thing that Taehyung knows it’s that all Jimin really wants is to become an idol and Taehyung’s one hundred percent sure that Jimin’s biggest wish hasn’t changed.

None of this makes any sense, and that thought repeats in Taehyung’s mind over and over again. So when Yoongi casually remarks that Taehyung still hasn’t talked to Namjoon, Taehyung simply shrugs him off by saying that they’ve got bigger problems right now.

“You being gay isn’t a problem,” Yoongi remarks and Taehyung cringes at how openly Yoongi uses that word.

“Can you not put it that bluntly?” he pleads.

His older friend raises an eyebrow in question and states that being gay is exactly what Taehyung told him he is though.

“I said that I think so,” Taehyung stresses, “I never said I am.”

Yoongi shrugs.

“The sooner you’re comfortable with who you are, the better.”

Taehyung presses his lips together and doesn’t reply, and Yoongi must sense that he’s hit a sore spot. He throws up his hands in surrender and walks away, but not before telling Taehyung one more time that he should talk to Namjoon soon.

Taehyung scoffs once he’s alone again. The sooner he’s comfortable with who he is, the better? Yoongi makes it sound so easy, but that’s easier said than done. Taehyung doesn’t want to like men. All they’ve ever done is fuck up his life.

Jin bumps into him a few minutes later in the hallway, as Taehyung still frets over Yoongi’s words.

“You look troubled,” Jin says. Taehyung doesn’t mean to, but he just glares at the oldest member as he passes by.

“Geez,” he hears Jin mutter to himself and he’s quite sure that he wasn’t meant to hear it, “what’s going on with all of you lately?”

A lot, Taehyung thinks to himself bitterly. There’s so much more going on than you can imagine.
Chapter End Notes

Come talk to me on tumblr. :)
Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

Thank you guys for all the love you've shown the last chapter! I'm sorry it's been a while. After I returned from Berlin I tried to pick up my social life again (or life in general really), and university deadlines approached and I was waiting for the results on whether or not I need chemo. There were some complications and I'm still waiting for the results, but I signed the contract to take part in a chemo study yesterday nonetheless, with the condition that for the week of the BTS concert in Berlin I will not have to come to the hospital. Priorities, after all I just signed a form that basically has me give up an entire year of my life. Anyway, after I signed that form I decided it's time to return to the old life and wrote a chapter in a night. Hope you enjoy. :) x

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The last place Taehyung expects to bump into Jimin after first hearing the rumour is at the supermarket near the company building, but that's exactly where it happens. He turns the corner, arms full of protein bars and Gatorade, when he spots both Jimin and Jungkook in front of the refrigerator that holds sandwiches. Neither of them has spotted him yet, so Taehyung scrambles back and carefully looks around the corner.

He can’t hear what they are talking about, but they stand close together and Jimin’s arm is casually thrown across Jungkook’s shoulder. Jimin wears a bright red beanie, black baggy pullover and grey jogging pants, but as far as Taehyung can tell he has gained a bit of weight again, his cheeks fuller than the last time he saw him. Both of them are laughing about something and Taehyung tries to figure out what to do. Should he act like he hasn’t seen them and head straight to the cashier, hoping that they won’t spot him on the way? Or should he go up and say hi?

Jungkook slowly started acting normal around them again, but only after a scolding from Bang PD and Namjoon ordering the entire group to sit down together to talk things out. Taehyung hadn’t had particularly much to add to the conversation, but it was interesting to observe how the problem was eventually solved. Namjoon had asked Jungkook for more respect and to not completely disregard his orders, because he only wants what’s best for the youngest. Jungkook had apologized as well, and Namjoon had officially allowed him to hang out with Jimin again – which he had done the entire time anyway – after the scandal had been debunked as a rumour by the company.

A rumour. Taehyung knows that’s not what it was. Jungkook had slipped up without noticing when he had told Taehyung that Jimin knew he had done something wrong. The company must have known as well if the decision on whether or not he was allowed to remain as a trainee had been pending by the time Jungkook had accused Taehyung of being judgemental. There was something they were trying to cover up, and Taehyung had no idea who he could turn to in order to talk about this.

“Hyung?”

Taehyung startles out of his thoughts and drops one of the protein bars he’s been trying to balance. Jungkook jogs over to him to pick it up and help take some of the others Taehyung’s still struggling with, while Jimin trails after him with an apprehensive look on his face and a pack of
sandwiches in each hand.

“What are you doing here?” Jungkook asks once he’s made sure that none of the products Taehyung still holds on to threaten to fall.

“Hoseok needed someone for a supply run before dance practice this afternoon, and since our maknae was missing I was the lucky chosen one,” Taehyung teases. Jungkook smiles sheepishly at that and apologizes half-heartedly, and by that time Jimin has reached them and comes to a halt next to Jungkook, looking awkward and entirely out of place.

“I can help you carry everything back. Hyung and I were just done here anyway,” Jungkook exclaims, and before either Taehyung or Jimin have the chance to protest, the youngest makes his way to the cashier with half of Taehyung’s groceries in his arms and without looking back.

Taehyung looks at Jimin, and Jimin looks at Taehyung, and it’s really really really awkward.

“I was trying to hide from you guys,” Taehyung blurts out before he can actually think about what he’s saying, and Jimin looks up perplexed.

“What?”

“I mean… that might have come across as a bit weird? This is-” Taehyung gestures between the two of them with the one hand he can finally move after Jungkook has relieved him from some of the items he had been trying to juggle, “awkward. And I saw you guys, and I didn’t want to make it awkward for any of us. So I tried to hide.”

It sounds ridiculous when he says it out loud, and why the heck had he wanted to share that piece of information with Jimin in the first place? Such a dumb idea.

Jimin’s lips are shaped to an o and he seems speechless, but then he snorts. Their eyes meet, if only for a brief second, and both of them start laughing. Jimin doubles over, hands still clutching onto the two packs of sandwiches he’s been holding the entire time. Taehyung almost bows forward as well because his stomach is straining from laughing so hard, but then some more items he’s holding on to would definitely topple to the floor, so he keeps a straight posture and tries to blink back the tears that accompany his fit of laughter.

Something falls back into place at that moment, as they laugh in the aisle of a supermarket, ignorant of the confused looks that strangers shoot them. Equally ignorant of Jungkook glancing around the corner with a beaming smile on his face. Something falls back into place that’s been missing for so long. It doesn’t fit entirely, but it’s back and it’s trying to fit and it’s a start, and that’s all that matters.

“I never apologized to you,” Jimin says when they have calmed down, and the positive energy in the air turns sombre all of a sudden. Jimin’s voice is a whisper now, a stark contrast to the booming squeaky laugh that just echoed around the aisle. “I’m sorry. I really am.”

Taehyung wants to say that it’s okay. It’s not entirely okay, and they haven’t talked in months, but Jimin sounds earnest and he looks guilty, and Taehyung shakes his head.

“To be honest, I don’t even know anymore what we were fighting about,” Taehyung says, and he basks in the warmth he feels when Jimin’s smile slips back on his lips at those words.

“Why do you take so long?” Jungkook complains and destroys the moment. It’s so obvious that he’s seen their exchange in the way that he doesn’t acknowledge it at all. Or at least that’s what Jungkook seems to believe. Taehyung notices the flushed cheeks and the grin on his lips that’s
incredibly big.

They pay for their groceries and head back to the building that houses their small company. The conversation on their way there is a bit stilted. Jungkook carries most of it on his own, so really it’s more of a monologue than a conversation in the first place. Sometimes Taehyung and Jimin exchange glances and a few words and it’s still awkward, but it’s good the way it is.

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November is chilly with harsh winds and the first snow. Although the weather changes and the final leaves have been blown off their branches, Taehyung’s routine stays pretty much the same. Dance practice. Recording. Vocal lessons. Language lessons. Behavioural lessons. Photo-shoots. Meetings. It all becomes pretty repetitive once you get used to it.

Yoongi is another one of these repetitions, always stalking over to him when no one is looking and asking if he’s talked to Namjoon yet. If it wasn’t so impolite, Taehyung would have just pushed him away by now. However, he doesn’t have a death wish and he’s aware of a bad shoulder injury that Yoongi mentioned in the past which could not have happened long before Taehyung joined the band; he doesn’t want to accidentally add more damage to Yoongi’s shoulder by pushing him over.

“Will you ever stop nagging me about this?” Taehyung asks with an exaggerated sigh. He’s still out of breath and oh so sweaty as they’re taking a break from dance practice. He can’t believe that Yoongi of all people still has the stamina to walk over to him and ask Taehyung whether or not he has told Namjoon.

“No. It’s important that you talk about this and Namjoon needs to know,” Yoongi insists.

Taehyung groans, but is startled out of it when he hears a voice right behind them.

“What do I need to know?”

Yoongi must not have noticed Namjoon approaching them either. He looks equally caught, and Taehyung can feel the blood drain out of his face.

“Nothing, hyung,” he says hurriedly. Namjoon gives him a look that quite obviously tells him to stop talking bullshit.

“Yoongi?”

Yoongi bites his bottom lip, a guilt-stricken look on his face. This is obviously not something he had thought would happen. Taehyung stares at him intently, willing him to not say another word.

Namjoon looks displeased when Yoongi doesn’t answer and fixes Taehyung with another look that makes him freeze in place, no idea how to get out of this situation unscathed and with his dirty little secret still in tact.

“Taehyung, don’t even think about hiding things from me. That’s nothing you should even consider doing in your situation. I can only help you as long as you’re completely honest with me. No holding anything back.”

“But it’s got nothing to do with any of the complicated stuff,” Taehyung mutters, consciously avoiding the word blackmail or mentioning Mr. Kim. The others are still around, too close, quite possibly listening in.

“No secrets, Tae. If it’s your secret, it’s automatically Bangtan’s now. That goes for all the
members.”

There’s suddenly a weird tension in the air, as Yoongi scoffs and narrows his eyes at Namjoon. The leader, in return, raises an eyebrow and looks at Yoongi challengingly, as if to say ‘you wouldn’t dare’. Taehyung watches them both and swallows harshly.

“We’re going to talk after dance practice,” Namjoon decides as they hear their teacher clap his hands and call them back to practice. Taehyung already knows he’ll mess it all up now, mind too preoccupied to try and figure out a way to distract Namjoon.

For a second he even considers ratting out Jungkook. He knows that there’s more to the Jimin rumours than everyone suspects. He could tell Namjoon, and then Namjoon would turn to Jungkook instead of him and scold the youngest. Jungkook would surely act up again, and Namjoon’s mind would be too preoccupied to even think of him. But Taehyung can’t backstab Jungkook like that, and he only just started talking to Jimin again. Besides, he would not only be a terrible friend, but also a terrible person in general for doing something shitty like that.

Namjoon leaves them to go back to the rest of the group already assembling themselves in front of the mirror. Taehyung curses under his breath. Yoongi must have heard, as he squeezes Taehyung’s shoulder encouragingly. The younger teen has to hold himself back from actually glaring at the rapper.

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Taehyung thinks he’s sly when he sneaks out of the dance studio past Donghyuk and Hoseok right after practice is finished; the former complaining to Hoseok about why they are torturing themselves like this willingly. He tells the others that he needs to use the bathroom, and as soon as he’s out in the hallway he starts walking as fast as he can without looking suspicious, in case anyone spots him.

“The toilet’s the other way, Tae.”

The voice behind him makes Taehyung freeze for the second time today and turn back around again. Taehyung thought he was sly, but he forgot that Namjoon’s a genius. Of course the leader would see through him and know he’ll try to escape. Namjoon’s still standing in the doorway to the dance studio, arms crossed and eyebrow raised challengingly. Taehyung heaves a sigh and his shoulders drop in surrender.

“Now do you actually need to go to the loo or can we move to our studio straight away?”

“The studio is fine,” Taehyung mutters incoherently, but Namjoon must have picked it up anyway. Slowly Taehyung starts to loathe the studio. There are barely any good memories connected to it. And it always smells rank. He’s still not sure what’s up with the gay porn on the computer either.

“So,” Namjoon says once they both have settled down, Namjoon in the office chair that’s falling apart, and Taehyung on the uncomfortable black couch that’s falling apart even more.

If Namjoon thinks that Taehyung’s just going to spill his secret, he’s damn wrong. Taehyung doesn’t want to tell. The members had promised him that they’ll always make him feel comfortable and Taehyung doesn’t feel comfortable sharing that piece of information. Therefore, Namjoon should actually back off or he’ll break his former promise. Taehyung thinks that if he was to tell Namjoon that, the rapper would be less than happy with him.

“So,” Taehyung eventually echoes the utterance.
“You really don’t want to talk about it, huh?”

Namjoon’s sometimes pretty stupid considering the fact that he’s supposed to be the smartest out of the entire bunch.

“Not particularly, no.”

“Taehyung,” Namjoon says, and his voice sounds strained. Definitely not happy. “We’re a unit. There can’t be any secrets between us. And if Yoongi says that I need to know, then I need to know. I’m surprised he didn’t come to me about this in the first place.”

“I just think it’s unfair,” Taehyung retaliates, grasping at straws now to make Namjoon stop. He doesn’t want Namjoon to know. Even though Yoongi says that Namjoon would accept him, Taehyung doesn’t want him to know. One person in on the secret is more than enough.

“Unfair?” Namjoon asks. He’s visibly thrown off by that claim, and Taehyung is quickly latching on to the confusion. He didn’t survive months on the street for nothing; he knows how to manipulate people. He may not have done it in a long time, and he absolutely hates doing it, but if it throws Namjoon off track he’s more than willing to use distracting techniques. Changing topics, it is then. Make Taehyung out to be the victim in all of this.

“You say we should have no secrets from each other, yet you’re keeping them from me as well!”

Namjoon chokes on his own spit and coughs, a look of alarm on his face. However, Taehyung’s too much into his performance to pay attention to Namjoon’s flushed face and panicked look.

“How can you expect me to share everything of myself, when you hide so much from me? No one tells me anything about how we’re advancing against Mr. Kim. I’m completely left in the dark. I’m like a doll discarded in the corner and only being taken out when it’s time to play.”

Okay, maybe he’s getting a bit too much into this, but desperate times call for desperate measures.

“I want to be equally involved in this. I want to know what’s going on. What you communicate about. I don’t want to be the last to know. That’s not fair.”

Taehyung shuts up and finally looks at Namjoon, who stares back stunned. To be quite honest, Taehyung’s also surprised by himself when he’s done. Just to really drive the point home, he clears his throat one more time to deliver the final punch.

“My secret is nothing that concerns the safety of Bangtan. It’s personal. And unless I’m in the know about everything regarding Mr. Kim, I refuse to reveal it.”

Namjoon keeps quiet for some time. He’s obviously thinking about what Taehyung just said, and Taehyung nervously fidgets with his fingers. He shouldn’t have talked like this to Namjoon. He knows it might have consequences. He’s nervous and sweating and really, nothing good ever happens in this damn studio.

“As your leader I’m incredibly pissed that you defy my orders and talk to me that way,” Namjoon eventually starts to say. “But as your friend I understand your position and I think it’s probably only fair to accept that deal.”

A look of uncertainty crosses Namjoon’s features. He tries to shake it off quickly, but Taehyung has caught on to it. Namjoon’s a terrible liar. If there’s something bothering him, it always shows on his face immediately. It’s a trait he should definitely get rid of before they debut.
“But?” Taehyung digs deeper. At this point he’s not sure what he would prefer: have Namjoon tell him everything and bare his secret in exchange, or be kept in the dark and further keep it to himself.

“But for the past weeks I’ve had the feeling that the company started holding information about Mr. Kim back from me as well.”

Taehyung leans closer with every word Namjoon says, and at the end he almost falls off the couch in shock.

“What?”

Chapter End Notes

Come talk to me on tumblr. :)
Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

It's been a month. I do apologize for that, but writing was out of the question as I've been waiting for results on my liver for so long and was eaten up by really bad anxiety. The bad news is that my liver is fucked and chemotherapy starts in September, but the good news is that now that I know, I'm no longer anxious and can finally pick my life back up again where it left off. And that means my head is also finally clear enough to write again. And oh dear, have I missed writing this story. I wrote this chapter in about two hours, and I'm itching to start working on the next one right away because so much stuff is going to happen! Hope you enjoy. :) x

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Something is up, and Taehyung can’t concentrate for days after Namjoon’s confession. He’s confused. He thinks that Namjoon is confused as well, because when he sat Taehyung down and admitted that the company stopped involving him in Taehyung’s case, he looked genuinely worried. It’s possible that Namjoon might just be a good actor, but Taehyung’s known the rapper for almost a year now, and so far Namjoon has been terrible at acting. That means it’s very likely that Namjoon is speaking the truth, and if that’s the case then Taehyung is thoroughly confused.

What is he supposed to do now? Confront the boss or other people handling his case? Taehyung scoffs at that thought. As if they’d tell him anything. He’s been playing this game for months now, just run along and let the grown-ups handle it. But the grown-ups have handled everything quite terribly so far, so maybe Taehyung should confront them for once.

Practice continues. November days move on, trickling one into another like the raindrops that fall from grey clouds often these days, creating a puddle of unremarkable time past. It gets dark early and Taehyung invests some of his pocket money in a big warm coat, the kind of coat he wished for so many times during his days on the streets. It’s not exactly an expensive coat, and it’s also not the warmest, but whenever Taehyung slips it on he feels content and gets reminded of just how much his life has changed in a matter of months. Hoseok tells him that he looks good in that coat and Taehyung just brushes it off with a quick thank you. When Jungkook tells him that he looks good in it, Taehyung blushes for two minutes straight, hoping that the younger boy chalks his rosy cheeks up to the cold air.

Sometimes Taehyung meets Jimin in the corridors, and it’s still awkward. But they smile at each other now, say hi, ask about each others days, and then they move on. It’s not the friendship that Taehyung first found in Jimin and his crinkling eyes and his encouraging smiles, but it’s definitely a step into the right direction.

Yoongi and Namjoon, however, are still nagging him and that’s not a step in the right direction. Taehyung refuses to tell Namjoon the secret the leader tries so desperately to find out. Sometimes he suspects that Yoongi will tell on him, but it seems as if the oldest rapper has his lips sealed shut. He still urges Taehyung to talk about it, but he keeps his promise of keeping quiet. It’s a relieve honestly, because if Yoongi would tell anyone else, Taehyung’s trust in him would be irreparably broken. It’s all as chaotic and confusing and scary as it’s always been, but actually Taehyung wouldn’t want to have it any other way. How boring would his life be if none of his problems kept
him on his toes? What would he do with all the spare hours he wouldn’t spend on worrying about all of this? However, he’d still really love to know about what’s going on with Mr. Kim and Namjoon’s sudden exclusion from the planning and plotting. Something about it just seems so very wrong.

It’s a Tuesday night and Taehyung can’t sleep. He’s been tossing and turning for over an hour now, eyes squeezed shut and muscles exhausted, but he stays awake regardless. Namjoon’s snoring doesn’t help with the situation either. When the clock above Jungkook’s mattress signals 1 a.m., Taehyung gives up and climbs down the ladder of his bunk bed to sneak out. He puts on his shoes and shrugs on his warm jacket and is about to leave the flat when a voice behind him makes him jump.

“Where are you planning to go so late at night?”

It’s Jin, hair tousled and tired-looking, yet still beautiful with his sleepy look and wrinkled clothes. Taehyung envies him. He wishes that he could look as good rolling straight out of bed. It’s a new occurrence that Jin stays over more often than not, cooking for the band and driving Jungkook to school at morning. Taehyung thinks that maybe Jin’s prolonged stays are a sign that their debut nears, but that’s impossible. He knows their debut won’t happen as long as his situation isn’t sorted out, but it’s still nice to have Jin around. He brings a different dynamic to their dorm, and for once the kitchen looks cleaner and doesn’t smell of burnt food quite as much as it used to.

“Couldn’t sleep. I just wanted to go for a walk,” Taehyung says, heart still beating a bit too fast from the surprise.

“Mind if I join you?”

Taehyung shrugs his shoulders and Jin grabs his coat as well.

They must look weird, walking through the streets of Seoul in the middle of the night with their pajamas and coats on top. It’s mostly silent between them, Jin occasionally humming a slow tune under his breath. The November wind is harsh and cuts Taehyung’s cheeks. He should have taken a mask with him, but it’s too late to turn back now.

“Namjoon’s been talking to me,” Jin eventually says when they stop at the edge of a park to rest on a bench. No one else is there, because most people are sane and don’t leave their warm flats in the middle of the night in this cold temperature. Taehyung obviously doesn’t belong to those smart ones, that and sometimes the night just calls for him. If he wasn’t a part of Big Hit, he would still stand on a street corner in this weather every night, wearing revealing clothes instead of a warm coat. That is, if he would have survived on his own up until now. Sometimes when everything around Taehyung is confusing, the streets at night are what’s familiar and calming and offers the most comfort. It’s an odd habit that he’s ought to shake off.

“What has he been talking about?” Taehyung asks. He can imagine where this conversation is going, and he wishes now that he had told Jin in the beginning to not come along for the walk.

“That there’s something you’re not telling him.”

“I’m not going to tell you either,” Taehyung sighs. He can’t read Jin’s face all that well in the darkness, but he thinks that his features slightly drop in disappointment.

“Yoongi knows, doesn’t he?”

“Yoongi found out by accident.” Taehyung’s annoyed by now. He understands the whole team
mentality, really, but why does he have to share everything with everyone? Why is he not allowed to have his own secrets? It’s not like they’ll hurt anyone.

Jin must sense Taehyung’s unwillingness to further talk about this topic, whether it be in the cold tone of Taehyung’s voice or his body language, hands crossed in front of his chest and face turned away from the older teen.

“You might not like it, but I’m really glad that at least he knows, accident or not. I’ve told you this before, but it’s time for you to stop carrying the weight of the world on your shoulders.”

“Hyung, is this really the time to get all poetic on me?” Taehyung groans. “I get it; I’m supposed to share everything with you guys. But I haven’t had anyone to share anything with for the longest time, it’s not that easy for me. Why can’t you guys understand that? I know by now that keeping Mr. Kim and the blackmailing from you was a bad idea because it affects all of us-”

“Kookie and Donghyuk still don’t know,” Jin interjects with a pointed look.

“-and they won’t find out if it’s not necessary. You promised me that. But what I’m trying to say is that this secret isn’t something that could jeopardize Bangtan. It’s something that I want to deal with myself, and I’m just not comfortable sharing it. That’s not because I don’t trust you, but because I’m not used to sharing. And I need some secrets for my own. I’d feel more comfortable not having them out in the open.”

So maybe this is half a lie. His secret could very well jeopardize the band and it’s also something that he definitely doesn’t trust the members with, scared of the backlash that could happen once they find out. For fuck’s sake, Taehyung’s mad at himself for liking boys, how can he expect the others to be fine with it?

Jin is quiet for a while. He looks at Taehyung in a way he’s never looked at him before. Surprised? Inquisitive? With respect? Taehyung can’t pinpoint it, but the way Jin’s lips are pressed shut and his eyebrows drawn together, he looks at Taehyung with fascination as if he’s never seen him before, or at least never in the light he sees him now. It’s a kind of look that Taehyung’s never really received before, and something about it makes him feel warm inside.

“You’re right,” Jin eventually says and lifts his gaze from Taehyung’s face up to the sky. The moon is hidden behind clouds. “And it’s not like none of us have secrets. I do. So does Namjoon. He shouldn’t ask you to tell him, not as long as what you say is true and it’s harmless. In case you’re hiding another secret past, however, that could again threaten our debut…” Jin trails off, but it’s obviously a joke. The heavy air between the two of them has lifted and Taehyung bites back a smile.

“Namjoon has secrets? Our Namjoon, who constantly tells me to share mine because we need to know everything about each other in order to rely on each other, hides something from me? Do tell me more.”

Jin chuckles and shakes his head. “Sorry, but if I tell you it’s not a secret anymore.”

Taehyung pouts, but it’s not like he actually expected Jin to answer.

“I’m glad we’ve had this talk, but can we go back to the dorm now? It’s freezing,” Jin complains then, and Taehyung agrees. It’s cold and it’s windy and Taehyung can’t feel his ears anymore at this point.

When they’re back at the dorm, tiredness finally catches up with Taehyung and he yawns. They
shed their coats and relish in the warmth of the apartment, stumbling back to the bedroom where cozy blankets wait for them. Before they enter, Jin stops Taehyung by placing a hand on his shoulder and looks at him earnestly.

“Don’t worry too much about Namjoon, okay? I’ll talk to him, tell him to get off your back until you’re willing to talk.”

Taehyung smiles. It’s tired and it’s more a twitch of his lips than anything else, because sleep is taking dominance of him more quickly than he’d like to admit. “Thank you, hyung.”

“A Christmas song?” Yoongi asks with clenched teeth, looking less than impressed.

“That sounds super fun,” Jungkook exclaims with sparkling eyes.

Even though Yoongi seems less than thrilled judging by his words, Taehyung knows that he’s excited. He can see it in the way Yoongi’s leg bounces up and down at a rapid speed, and the hopeful sparkle in his eyes that matches Jungkook’s. He knows what that means. They all know what that means. A Christmas song means initiating their YouTube account. Getting themselves out there for the first time. And it’s a cover of ‘Last Christmas’ of all things, the greatest Christmas song in existence. It’s a step towards that debut they’ve been working towards for so long already. Of course that doesn’t mean that anything is set in stone, but it’s a start.

“We get to write the lyrics ourselves,” Namjoon says, and then scratches his neck while looking sheepish. “I kind of already finished most of them, but of course we can scrap mine as well if anyone has better ideas.”

The mood between the members that day is tense like never before, but in a positive way. Jungkook keeps jumping up and down in excitement. Yoongi disappears into the dingy studio straight away, muttering about writing lyrics. Donghyuk hums the melody of the song under his breath wherever he goes, and later that night Hoseok belts the lyrics out under the shower for everyone to hear. Jungkook sings along with him from the living room, both of them trying to harmonize but clearly failing through frail walls.

“Don’t make me lose my hearing,” Yoongi scoffs, but try as he might to not look excited, Taehyung knows that there’s a notebook with possible rap lyrics for the song scribbled on blank pages lying hidden under his pillow.

Recording of the song won’t start until the middle of December, but the news itself helps the boys close November on a good note. It’s one step closer to the debut that’s so far out on the horizon that it’s not even visible yet, and it gives Taehyung a sense of security. Knowing that he’ll be able to participate in it means knowing that his spot in the group for now is meant to be permanent. It makes him sleep easier at night and a little less doubtful about Namjoon also being denied information about the Mr. Kim situation. If Taehyung’s allowed to participate in a pre-debut song, that must mean that things are being taken care of properly behind the scenes and moving in the right direction. At least that’s what Taehyung hopes it means.

Chapter End Notes

Come talk to me on [tumblr](https://tumblr.com). :)}
Taehyung doesn’t particularly like or dislike the Christmas lights adorning the streets of Seoul at this time of the year. They’re pretty, that much he can admit, but he’d never go out of his way to visit places in the city just so he can see them sparkle in artificial light. Jin, on the other hand, loves Christmas lights and that’s how Taehyung and the rest of the members find themselves on a tour through what are apparently Seoul’s most beautifully decorated spots for the oldest member’s birthday on December 4th, all of them with varying degrees of interest.

Donghyuk and Hoseok are always at the back of their little group, talking with each other and not paying particular attention to the lights. Yoongi seems mildly fascinated, and Namjoon, Jin and Jungkook drag them from place to place with exclamations of joy and fascination. Taehyung would roll his eyes at their antics, if it wasn’t for the way Jungkook’s eyes sparkle beneath the lights with wonder. His slightly blemished skin and dark hair are drenched in all kinds of different colours as he stares at different light installations, wide-eyed and his mouth gaping. He looks soft, unbothered, like he’s not just been scolded in the studio only hours before because his voice sounded too unstable; something that made him self-conscious, hiding away from the other members for half an hour in a bathroom, before emerging again with red and puffy eyes and a runny nose and insisting that he’s fine.

This Christmas song they are recording is a blessing and a curse. It’s a blessing, because they’re all so excited about putting something out there for the first time. This is how the world will get to know them, finally. They get to record a song that is meant to be released soon, unlike ‘No More Dream’ which they’ve been sitting on for months now. There’s a deadline for the release even, and with every day that it comes closer they get more excited. And it’s a curse as well, because up until now they’ve only led the harsh life of a trainee. Hours upon hours of training, more training, and even more training with no real guarantee that they’ll ever make it beyond the practice room. With this song, however, they will make it beyond and they’ll have to portray themselves from their best side. The employees at the recording studio make damn sure to let the boys know that whatever they are showcasing is definitely not their best, and they’re very vocal about it. The rappers have it easier, but especially Jungkook and Jin have been on the receiving end of harsh words more than once in the past couple of days. Taehyung has heard his fair share of insults too, but unlike the others he’s not too bothered by it. Taehyung is used to degrading words that are meant to put him down. He’ll hear and acknowledge them, but he’s good at not letting them get to his head. His father called him a piece of shit before Taehyung really knew what that meant, he’s been a pro at dodging painful words for many years now.

There are bags under Jin’s eyes that haven’t been there previously, which is why the members have decided to indulge him on his birthday and go see all the Christmas lights, something that Jin
apparently loves doing. They’re all kind of broke – except for Jin – and a cake is the only thing they could really afford safe for some small keepsakes they bought such as a tacky keychain, which they know Jin will appreciate but never find any real use for.

So yes, Christmas lights. They’re pretty, but they don’t make Taehyung feel anything in particular when he looks up at them. There are no fond childhood memories buried in the depths of his brain that resurface, not with the type of family he grew up in. Of course his grandma tried to make winter for him as enjoyable as any other season of the year – going sledding, baking cookies, gushing over his ugly snowman and lending Taehyung a pot to put on his head as a hat – but to Taehyung, Christmas is just as meaningless as any other holiday. Jungkook though loves Christmas, and looking at Jungkook look up at the sparkling lights makes Taehyung feel all kinds of weird. He scoffs and ducks his head, knows that he’s blushing when his eyes meet Yoongi’s after having stared at Jungkook for a tad bit too long and seeing his hyung questioningly raise his eyebrows. Taehyung knows it’s a joke on Yoongi’s part, but he doesn’t dare look back at Jungkook after that.

Jin treats them to dinner, because he’s nice like that and he pays with his parents’ credit card. It’s a good evening that ends in a perfect night, the seven of them talking and laughing together and one after the other falling asleep in the too small living room, Jin’s head on Namjoon’s shoulder, Yoongi sprawled out on the floor with Donghyuk right next to him, and somehow Taehyung ends up huddled together with Hoseok and Jungkook under one blanket. He’s the last one who’s still awake and he listens to their familiar breathing patterns – which sounds really odd, but to him it just makes sense to be accustomed to them by now – and Namjoon’s occasional snores. For the first time Taehyung thinks that the unfamiliar feeling bubbling in his chest, slightly uncomfortable because quite honestly it’s overwhelming, must be bliss.

Bliss. The Cambridge Dictionary defines it as a noun to mean perfect or complete happiness. Taehyung never thought that something like complete happiness could exist, but slowly he thinks he’s starting to understand what it could possibly mean. These six people around him have become more than colleagues and friends. Slowly they’ve started morphing into something that feels like home. When Taehyung arrives at the dorm and kicks off his shoes in exchange for slippers and can hear them tinkering around in the various rooms, when he collapses along with them on the floor of the dance studio in exhaustion after a tough dance practice, when they joke around and he laughs so hard that he has tears in his eyes and his belly hurts – these aren’t just friends anymore, but in a way they’ve started to become his home. His comfort. His safe space. He wonders if this is what a family is supposed to feel like, and he wonders if one day just maybe he will be able to call these people around him that have slowly wormed their ways into his guarded heart his family.

Jungkook coughs in his sleep, and Taehyung looks over at him. The younger teen’s lips are slightly parted and his hair is a mess. His eyelids flutter and there’s a beautiful prominent mole right under his bottom lip that Taehyung really wants to kiss. His heart picks up speed at that thought, and he quickly closes his eyes and wills the traitorous organ to calm down again, eventually drifting off to sleep.

Taehyung learns that bliss is an unreachable concept on a cloudy Sunday afternoon in the middle of December. It’s no extraordinary Sunday really, there’s nothing special about it at all. It snowed in the morning and stopped around noon, the white blanket covering Seoul turning into a disgusting gray slush within hours. All the members are at the company building, because honestly where else would they be on a Sunday? Taehyung’s not completely sure, but he thinks that Namjoon and Yoongi are tinkering around with the now hopefully finally fully recorded Christmas song. He’s not really sure what the other’s are doing, but Taehyung’s tucked into a corner of the dance studio
and watching Hoseok dance, mesmerized by his movements. Watching Hoseok dance is as fascinating, if not even more fascinating than watching Namjoon bend over a notebook and passionately scribble down lyrics. Hoseok doesn’t even dance to the music, it’s more like the music is flowing through his body and taking control of him. Taehyung’s been watching him for an hour now, but he’s still not bored. Maybe he should force himself to do something productive instead, but he’s so comfortable in his corner that he doesn’t even consider moving.

There’s a commotion on the corridor outside the dance studio that makes Hoseok stop mid-dance to listen, and Taehyung involuntarily freeze when he identifies three to four voices screaming on top of each other.

“What the fuck is going on?” Hoseok asks, wiping sweat from his forehead and slightly out of breath.

Taehyung shrugs his shoulders and hopes that whatever is going on outside quiets down soon. After all these months he still can’t help it that loud noises and screaming set him on edge. It’s just his luck that he’s sharing a dorm with Kim Namjoon then, the king of constantly knocking things over or dropping them. The other day he dropped a pot in the kitchen and Taehyung almost fell off the couch in the living room, it startled him so bad.

He doesn’t know what’s going on, but he can immediately tell that something is seriously wrong when the door to the dance studio gets ripped open and Donghyuk tumbles in, face coloured red from what Taehyung thinks might be anger.

Namjoon and Jin stumble in after him, both of them trying to grab him by his clothes and pull him back as he approaches Taehyung with fast steps, finger pointed at him accusingly.

“You!” he screams and Taehyung huddles into his corner, confused and overwhelmed and feeling threatened all at once.

“Donghyuk!” Hoseok shouts, but he’s apparently just as frozen in place as Taehyung is, watching the drama unfold from the very spot he stood at when the three other members first barged in.

Taehyung doesn’t know what’s going on, but he involuntarily starts to tremble. Whatever is happening is definitely not good, and Donghyuk’s rage is directed at him and really that can only mean one thing. Or two. Actually three, because Taehyung has a lot of bad secrets that can set people on edge if they find out, and Donghyuk isn’t supposed to know any of them. Oh no. No no no god no.

“Did you know that he lets himself get fucked by old men?” Donghyuk bellows and Taehyung squeaks, eyes pressed close and ducking his head, shielding it with his arms. It’s getting hard to breathe and he hears more shouting. Although the voices are familiar, he can’t make out the words that are being said anymore, his brain foggy and his vision blurry and this entire drama unfolding in front of him feels like being smacked in the face, a harsh reminder to stop daydreaming about something as foolish as bliss.

There’s the sound of people brawling, clothes being ruffled and more voices screaming on top of each other, before the sound of something crashing and breaking echoes through the room, causing Taehyung to flinch.

The next thing Taehyung knows is that someone is trying to pull his hands away from his ears that he covered in complete panic to drown out more of the noises. He pries his wrists away from intruding fingers, and then it’s Jin’s voice that finally reaches him.
“It’s okay, Tae. Donghyuk’s gone. You need to calm down. Breathe.”

And breathing sounds like a good idea, because Taehyung feels dizzy and his throat feels scratchy and everything feels surreal and how could it all have come crashing down in the span of minutes? Donghyuk wasn’t supposed to find out. How did he find out? Oh god, what if Jungkook found out too?

“Is he okay?” he hears Namjoon ask from somewhere.

“Of course he’s not okay, you dimwit,” Jin bites back and Taehyung can’t help but to recoil once again when he hears the annoyance in Jin’s voice.

When the smoke in Taehyung’s mind finally clears after the violent explosion, it’s time to count the wounded. A small table with two mugs on top was knocked over. Namjoon’s shirt was ripped in the scuffle. Bangtan just lost its newest edition, because as Jin recounts what exactly happened to Taehyung upon inquiry, he states that Donghyuk left the practice room while loudly declaring that he’s out.

Taehyung feels sick, bile rising in his throat. Donghyuk left. It’s his fault. Donghyuk discovered what’s going on and he left, and he could possibly tell anyone, he could tell-

“Jungkook?” Taehyung asks, dread settling heavy in his chest.

“He’s with Jimin. I don’t think he knows.”

But Donghyuk just left, and Jungkook will demand an explanation. Deserves an explanation. And Donghyuk knows, and he can tell anyone.

How did he find out?

Taehyung chokes on thin air as the thoughts start spiralling in his head.

“Don’t worry about it too much, okay? I will talk to PD-nim. It’s going to be okay,” Namjoon tries to soothe. But nothing is okay, and Hoseok, Jin and Taehyung all know that. Namjoon probably knows it as well, and that knowledge makes tears well up in Taehyung’s eyes, forces him to double over and pathetically sob into Jin’s chest.

Hoseok watches all of it quietly, still frozen in the same spot he stood at when the drama started to unfold.

When Jungkook hears about Donghyuk’s departure, he’s beyond confused. He asks too many questions, but no one gives him clear answers.

“We’re going to have a talk with PD-nim tomorrow, the entire group. We’ll know more then,” Namjoon tries to placate him, but the youngest member doesn’t accept that answer so easily. If he wasn’t the youngest, Taehyung knows that Jungkook would give them a harder time about this. Being the maknae in a culture heavily influenced by age, however, makes him stop questioning the others, instead deciding to sulk in his bed and not talk to them anymore for the rest of the night.

When Yoongi hears what happened, he gets angry. It’s the quiet kind of angry, where the muscles in his jaw start twitching and his hands are clenched to fists. He gets the full story in the dingy studio room, where Taehyung hides away from the world on the uncomfortable sofa and Namjoon quietly works on songs to offer him company.
“How could he find out?” Yoongi asks. Namjoon avoids both Yoongi’s questioning and Taehyung’s tired eyes.

“He found the USB with the videos,” the leader mumbles. Taehyung hears this for the first time, but he’s too tired to care. It doesn’t matter how Donghyuk found out. He found out, and he knows, and he can share that knowledge with anyone and everyone. And he left the group. It’s all Taehyung’s fault once again.

“The USB you were meant to keep locked away in the bottom drawer?”

“I might have accidently given him the key when I forgot that it was in there.”

Yoongi looks beyond pissed at this point. “How could you?”

“Hyung,” Taehyung says meekly. He doesn’t want Namjoon to take the blame. That’s not fair.

Yoongi presses his lips together tightly and pats Taehyung’s ankle absentmindedly from where Taehyung’s feet are resting on his lap.

“Maybe it’s for the better. Donghyuk hated this whole idol thing,” Yoongi says.

“You hate it too, hyung,” Namjoon reminds him half-heartedly. “We both do.”

“We’re doing it for reasons though. We want people to hear our music. Donghyuk just joined because he was asked to, not because he had a goal.”

Taehyung sighs.

“I’m sorry,” he whispers into the contemplative quietness that has settled in the room.

“You shouldn’t apologize for anything. PD-nim is talking to Donghyuk right now. We’re going to figure something out.”

Once again, Taehyung doesn’t have the heart to disagree with Namjoon although he knows that there’s nothing to figure out. He’s just so tired, and the tendrils of sleep are tugging at his body and coaxing him to a different world full of dreams. Taehyung doesn’t have the heart to fight them. Any world is better than the real one right now.

As Namjoon promised, by next morning the group is called into one of the meeting rooms – there aren’t enough chairs for all of them, dance instructors and managers and so many other people somehow involved with BTS included, and with the two extra chairs they have to drag in, the room is too crowded for Taehyung’s comfort – and Taehyung is nervous. Donghyuk never returned to their dorm last night. Taehyung guesses that means he’s gone for good, but it doesn’t lessen his anxiety not knowing where Donghyuk is or what he is doing right now; who he’s possibly telling about Taehyung right now.

Taehyung isn’t the only one who’s anxious apparently. Hoseok’s been bouncing around full of nervous energy all morning, and when Jungkook tried to talk to him, he just snapped back at the youngest to go play somewhere else. The others must have noticed his weird behaviour as well, because Namjoon asks if he’s okay and Yoongi punches his shoulder when Hoseok glares at him.

So now they’re all squished into an undoubtedly too small room full of nervous energy and Bang Si-hyuk tells everyone to be silent for the meeting to start. Taehyung shudders involuntarily from
nerves and Yoongi, who’s sitting next to him, rests his hand on Taehyung’s thigh in a gesture of comfort.

“As you all know by now, Shin Donghyuk made the decision to leave project Bangtan Sonyeondan yesterday. Although he will no longer be a trainee, he will not leave the company but instead return to his previous position of training to become a producer. He decided to leave due to a reason that I believe has been kept hidden secret for too long and should openly be discussed.”

Taehyung startles. His mouth is dry all of a sudden. This can’t happen. No. No way. Namjoon would have told him. But Namjoon said himself that he started being excluded from behind the scenes, so what if the leader didn’t know either? No. PD-nim can’t just share what’s happening like that with everyone. Jungkook is here. Jungkook can’t know. Jungkook would hate him. Taehyung wants to interrupt, to say something just to make the CEO stop. He knows that he can’t do that though. It’s not his place to interrupt the CEO of his company.

“Bangtan Sonyeondan is being blackmailed.”

There it is, out in the open. He can hear some people around him react in surprise, but he doesn’t look up. His eyes are glued to his thighs, where Yoongi’s hand still lies to lend support. He doesn’t want to listen anymore. This is bad, so so so bad.

“I will not go into details as I don’t have the consent of the person involved to do so. Furthermore, I don’t believe that more details about the case should be shared. But I believe that it’s best to let everyone know the situation we find ourselves in. We’re working to resolve this situation, but as long as it is ongoing the debut of Bangtan is most likely not going to happen. It is the kind of blackmailing that made public, would destroy the band without a doubt.”

Taehyung can breathe a little easier now, although he’s still on edge. PD-nim’s words seem reasonable. Jungkook won’t find out what’s wrong. If Donghyuk still works for Big Hit, then PD-nim must have him under his control. He won’t go blurring out Taehyung’s secret, that would jeopardise his position. That would be stupid. Taehyung’s thoughts are so dominant that he barely listens to the CEO, until somewhere in the back of his mind alarm bells ring at what he subconsciously picks up nonetheless. “There is one more piece of news I have to share. Donghyuk isn’t the only member that has decided to leave the group after careful consideration over the past few weeks.”

The room explodes with commotion, people talking but no one really listens to the other. Taehyung’s mouth goes back to being as dry as the dessert. He must have understood the words wrong. There’s no way, absolutely no way, that someone else would leave. That can’t happen. It’s not true. Taehyung knows the other five members. None of them would be capable of leaving behind what they’ve worked for so hard up until now. All the pain. The humiliation when things went wrong. The hours of training. The tears. The smiles. There’s no way.

Bang PD is quiet as everyone panics and shouts out in surprise and looks around in disbelief, everyone but Hoseok. Hoseok sits in his seat quietly, eyes on his lap, fingers locked and shaking and Taehyung knows in a heartbeat that it’s true.

“Hoseok will leave the team and the company as of today.”

The rest is a blur to Taehyung. Jungkook cries. Namjoon cries. Jin cries. Yoongi stares at Hoseok, but he doesn’t say a word. None of them saw this coming. With Donghyuk they could understand. Donghyuk never liked the idea of becoming an idol. He hated dancing more than anyone else, hated the make-up and the clothes and the idea of becoming a girl’s dream. But Hoseok-
Hoseok loves to dance. He doesn’t just dance to music, he feels it. And there’s something about him, a kind of presence and grace that demands you pay attention to him. Hoseok is royalty on stage. When he was a back-up dancer, he still owned that stage as if he was the main event. He’s not the kind of person dreaming about an idol life either, but he doesn’t hate the idea of it. He wants to succeed in becoming an idol just to say that he can do it. And Hoseok would be such a good idol. The type of idol that’s not even your favourite member, but when on stage with the rest of the group you’ll still look at him instead of your favourite because of the way he moves, hypnotizing and oozing of charisma with every step he takes and move he makes. He belongs on a stage. He’s made to entertain.

Hoseok starts to cry as well. Says over and over again that he’s sorry. It must be hard to look at Namjoon, see the blatant look of betrayal and hurt on his face and know that you’re the cause of it. It must be hard to know that you’re the reason your friends are crying.

Taehyung doesn’t feel like crying. He’s just numb at this point, and when Hoseok sobs out that he doesn’t think Bangtan Sonyeondan has a future, coming from a tiny company and already with a blackmailing scandal on its doorstep before debuting, Taehyung wants to rip out his traitorous heart and throw it on the floor and step all over it to never have to feel such guilt and pain again.

When Hoseok leaves, he leaves a hole behind. In their dorm. In their band. In their hearts.

Namjoon tells them all to get their shit together, but Namjoon cries in the shower at night and thinks that none of them can hear him when the walls are paper-thin. Namjoon tells Jin one day that without Hoseok they are screwed, but Taehyung’s not supposed to hear it. In front of everyone else, Namjoon portrays the strong leader who still has everyone’s back and believes that Bangtan can achieve great things. They all know it’s a lie. Hoseok’s departure has made them realize that. Taehyung wonders just how long Hoseok has considered leaving. Bang PD said that it’s been weeks, but Hoseok refused to tell them. He blocked all their numbers too, and the day he left the dorm two days after the announcement was the last time any of them heard from him.

Taehyung knows he’s the reason for Hoseok’s departure, just like he’s the reason for Donghyuk’s departure. He wonders if Hoseok would return if he just left, if both of them would return. He considers talking to Namjoon about it, or Bang PD maybe, but something stops him every time. He’s scared to leave. He doesn’t have a place to go. If he gives up now, he’ll be back on the streets. That was the contract he had with Bang PD all these months ago, join BTS or leave. He can’t do what Donghyuk did and still stay at Big Hit. He can’t return back to his family home like Hoseok presumably did, a city in which the dancer had already made quite a name for himself. Taehyung can only go back to the streets, back to his corner, and hope that his old regulars still want to pick him up for a quick fuck.

Hoseok’s departure has one positive thing. Jungkook’s too preoccupied mourning his hyung’s leaving to ask questions about the blackmail case. If Hoseok had stayed, Jungkook most likely would have pried. But now he’s just quiet, subdued, spending his days in the dorm or at the company building without really doing anything. Jin still drives him to school most mornings, insists on it since Jungkook will graduate from middle school soon.

Christmas comes, but it’s not something that Bangtan Sonyeondan really celebrates. They don’t have the money for gifts, and the small plastic Christmas tree in their already too small dorm doesn’t lift the mood either. Bang PD treats them to dinner. It’s a futile attempt of lifting their moods, as the cover of ‘Last Christmas’ they are about to upload in an hour or two has Yoongi rapping in the first verse about never getting to have dinner outings with the company.

The Christmas song. It’s a catastrophe. Taehyung hasn’t heard it yet, but it had to be rearranged
after Hoseok’s and Donghyuk’s departure and he heard Namjoon and Yoongi curse about it a lot. The lyrics are daring, Jungkook once told him giddily. Taehyung didn’t quite understand what’s daring about it, but then again Taehyung feels like he still doesn’t understand trainee and idol culture after becoming a trainee almost a year ago.

“Trainees don’t just roast their companies and call them out on no dating policies and stuff,” Yoongi had tried to explain it to him when Taehyung had let it slip that he never understood Jungkook’s excitement about the lyrics.

The song held so much excitement for them all, but now the thought of it leaves a bitter taste in Taehyung’s mouth. When it drops on Soundcloud, none of the boys are interested in turning it on, until Namjoon sighs and searches for it.

“We should be celebrating right now,” he says as they all linger around the living room.

“There’s nothing to celebrate,” Yoongi counters.

Namjoon doesn’t talk back, and that scares Taehyung. Through all the months, Namjoon has been the one to pull them along, but now it seems like he’s given up. If Namjoon has given up, Taehyung has a hard time imagining that anything will ever get them back out of this slump. Anything like a miracle. Anything like the return of Hoseok.

It’s quiet as the song starts playing, and Taehyung’s heart aches again. He looks from member to member, the misery visible on all their faces. Jungkook has lost some weight in the past few days, but he’s already on the edge of being too thin for Taehyung’s liking. Taehyung wants to tell him that it’s okay, that everything will work out fine, but he’s not going to lie. That’s a promise that he can’t keep.

Taehyung’s eyebrows draw together in confusion when he finally starts paying attention to the song after Yoongi’s and Namjoon’s part in the beginning are over. He cringes at his own voice, but then he frowns as there’s another one singing that’s neither Jin nor Jungkook.

The others must have caught on to it as well.

“Isn’t that Jimin hyung singing?” Jungkook asks. All eyes are on Namjoon and Yoongi, who’ve both been working on this song non-stop the past two days to finish it in time to post it on Christmas Eve.

“That’s definitely not the version we handed in when we were done editing.” Namjoon answers. “Jimin once helped us out with the demo, but we never used his voice for the real thing.”

“Then what’s he doing on our track?” Jin voices what all of them think, exchanging questioning looks with each other. “Namjoon, you’re the leader. Shouldn’t you know what’s going on?”

Namjoon huffs in frustration. “As if the company tells me anything.”

“But they can’t just…” Taehyung trails off, regroups his thoughts. “Can they add Jimin without telling us anything in advance?”

“You were certainly a surprise, and although we’ve heard rumours of Donghyuk joining, Namjoon was the only one they actually told before making it official,” Yoongi says, shrugging his shoulders. “To be honest I wouldn’t be surprised if they decided to throw someone else in. We’ve just lost two members, and PD-nim made it very clear back when Donghyuk hadn’t joined yet that something was definitely lacking. There’s no BTS debut with just the five of us.”
“You think Jimin hyung will be a part of Bangtan?” Jungkook asks, and for the first time in days he sounds happier. More hopeful. But then Taehyung watches the excitement in Jungkook’s eyes fade out again after they flicker to meet Taehyung’s, and that reaction confuses him. Taehyung and Jimin made up. They’re tentative friends again, so why would Jungkook’s joy of Jimin joining be dampened by looking at Taehyung?

“Don’t get carried away,” Namjoon says with a sigh. “I’ll go to the company first thing tomorrow morning to find out more.” He rubs his temples as if he’s having a headache, and honestly Taehyung wouldn’t be surprised if that’s actually the case. They all become quiet again and listen to the ending of the song, before silence engulfs the room again.

It’s an unspoken agreement that even if a new member was going to join, the loss of Hoseok could never be repaired. Jimin is a dancer, but he’s trained in modern dance and isn’t a street dancer like Hoseok was. He’s a singer with a voice he can’t quite control yet, not versed in rap and to a certain extent also singing like Hoseok was. Adding a new member to the group, no matter how talented Jimin might be, would never be able to fix Hoseok’s absence.

There’s no point in thinking about if’s anyway. Jimin’s voice on the track might have been a mistake. The entire track was a mistake in Taehyung’s opinion. It lacks something, and that something is so obviously Hoseok’s familiar voice. But that doesn’t matter anyway. As Hoseok has pointed out so nicely, they’re from a small company. It’s not like anyone would even care listening to a bunch of boys dising their company in a bad ‘Last Christmas’ cover. Besides the five of them and maybe the other four members’ friends and family, no one will ever listen to the song anyway.

Taehyung had never celebrated Christmas, but when he slips under his blanket at the end of Christmas Eve, confused and sad, he thinks that he’s never really missed out on anything anyway.

It’s kind of funny how fitting Hoseok’s stage name was. With J-Hope gone, there’s little to no hope for Bangtan SonyeonDan left.

Chapter End Notes

I suggest you watch this ‘A Typical Trainee’s Christmas’ line distribution video before screaming at me, because you could have seen this coming. ;)

Come talk to me on tumblr for mourning the loss of Jungkook’s glorious red hair. (And Jin’s blond one while we’re at it.)

Since university is starting soon, I’ll finally go back to a somewhat scheduled life, meaning updates will happen faster again from now on. :)
Chapter 33

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for the comments you guys! You all know how much I appreciate them, right? I keep telling you that, but I really mean it. I just love reading your theories and observations. :) Your local ao3 author is officially getting published soon. :o It's only a short story in an online journal, but let me tell you that I'm thrilled. So between that, starting to plan my wedding and doing well with chemo, life is pretty exciting. Hopefully it treats you good as well on these beautiful autumn days and I hope you enjoy this new chapter. :) x

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“We were right,” Namjoon announces on December 25th, as the rest of Bangtan Sonyeondan is squished on the couch in their dorm. “They are in the talks of adding Jimin to the group. They’re not sure yet if he would fit our image though.”

“What image?” Yoongi snorts. “Hip Hop Idol group? You and I don’t fit the idol part, the other five don’t fit the Hip Hop part. Jimin would fit right in.”

Namjoon looks unimpressed at Yoongi’s snarky remark.

“We’d have another great dancer,” Jin offers. “Although I’m not sure if Jimin’s contemporary dance education can be of any help to us.”

“At this point we have to take what we can get,” Namjoon concludes the impromptu group meeting.

Shortly after, the leader and Yoongi leave for the studio, while Jin scurries into the kitchen and busies himself there. The day Hoseok moved out, Jin unofficially moved in, although no one really acknowledges it.

“If they really consider to add Jimin to the group, why do you think he kept it a secret from me, hyung?” Jungkook asks Taehyung, who’s the only one left with him on the couch now. His eyebrows are drawn together and he looks genuinely confused. “He could have at least texted me about it.”

Taehyung’s surprised by just how intently Jungkook is observing him when he waits for an answer, as if the fate of the world depends on his words.

“With everything going on right now, maybe he didn’t want to impose? It’s been a rough few days for us. He might think it’s better to let us come to terms with everything before being added. Or maybe he’s scared of being seen as Hoseok’s replacement, and thinks that we’ll react negatively to the news.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Jungkook says and pouts. “Hyung is talented. He would be an addition, not a replacement. I still don’t understand why he would keep it secret from me. He should know me enough to know that I’d be more than happy to have him with us.”
“That’s because you’re a good kid, but not everyone’s that accepting,” Taehyung says and ruffles Jungkook’s hair.

“I’m not a kid,” Jungkook huffs, and Taehyung suppresses a grin.

“Whatever you say, kid.”

Jungkook sighs, but scoots closer to Taehyung on the couch to rest his head on the older teen’s shoulder. “I’m scared for Bangtan, now that Hobi-hyung is gone. I’ve never seen Namjoon-hyung so devastated. And that blackmailing incident that PD-nim talked about; do you know what it is about?”

Taehyung freezes, but he tries to cover it up by starting to card his fingers through Jungkook’s hair.

“I’m sure that hyung will recover and find his spirit again to continue. Apparently Hoseok never told him about his thoughts of leaving either, so it’s only normal that he’s reeling to come to terms with what happened. And as for the blackmailing thing, I’m sure that it’s nothing that you need to be concerned about. PD-nim said that he’s in the process of handling it, so we have to believe him.”

Jungkook hums, and Taehyung lets out an imaginary sigh of relief when he doesn’t talk more about that topic. It’s not a lie, really. Taehyung never flat out denied that he doesn’t know what the blackmailing incident is about. He only said that it’s nothing Jungkook should be worried about, and that’s actually the truth.

“I still don’t know why Jimin would want to keep it a secret from me though,” Jungkook murmurs.

“I’m sure he’s just doing it because he thinks that it’s the best for you,” Taehyung tries to pacify him.

Jungkook doesn’t reply anymore. Instead he reaches for the TV remote and turns on the TV. He hops through various channels, but when he doesn’t find anything exciting he settles for some documentary about animals. He cuddles up to Taehyung once more, and Taehyung tries to ignore how his heart skips a beat in excitement.

It only takes Jungkook ten minutes to fall asleep.

“Do you guys- oh!” Jin comes into the living room, and immediately lowers his voice when he finds the maknae sleeping. “He looks comfy.”

“My shoulder starts feeling numb,” Taehyung complains, but moving is out of the question. Jungkook gets too little sleep as it is, Taehyung’s surely not going to disturb him when he naps, even if it’s only eleven o’clock in the morning and his arm is falling asleep.

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Days trickle by as they always did. Practice. More practice. Studying. Even more practice. It’s hard at first, when there’s only five of them left. It feels odd, the dorm too quiet. Eventually though the boys pick themselves off the ground and the fire inside them rekindles.

“It’s not over yet,” Namjoon says, chin sticking out, after a particularly gruelling dance practice. Hoseok’s absence is glaring in their choreography. They look like toddlers bumbling around without a clue of what they’re doing. Not even Jungkook, who’s really good at dancing, can fill the hole that Hoseok left. “Let’s do it one more time. We’ll get it right eventually.”

They welcome January in their dorm. It’s a small party, and Yoongi isn’t even awake anymore.
when the clock strikes 12 o’clock. Namjoon holds a small speech about how this will be the year that Bangtan Sonyeondan will finally debut. Jin tells Taehyung later that Namjoon has held the exact same speech two years in a row already, and Taehyung admires his dedication. How can someone work so hard, take all those hits, and still come out hopeful on top?

January 1st finds Yoongi and Namjoon in a meeting with PD-nim. Jungkook, Jin and Taehyung wait for them on the dingy black couch in their studio, full of curiosity. All they’ve been told is that it has something to do with Jimin, but other than that they’re left in the dark. When Namjoon and Yoongi return to them with the dancer in tow, Namjoon’s arm slung over his shoulders and a blush on Jimin’s face, no words are needed to let the three remaining boys on the couch know what it means.

“Welcome Bangtan’s newest vocal member,” Namjoon announces.

Jungkook is off the couch first, almost trips over his own limbs as he crashes into Jimin for a hug. The older teen stumbles backwards from the force of Jungkook’s body and laughs heartily. Somehow, it turns into an awkward group hug that even Yoongi reluctantly joins once Jin tells him to, and Jimin has tears of joy glistening in his eyes.

Taehyung knows what this means to him. Jimin is a perfectionist. Jimin never thinks that he’s good enough. To be added to the line-up of a group that is set to debut someday eventually is a big deal for him. Taehyung is unspeakably happy for his friend.

“Now we only need Hobi back, and we’ll be an unstoppable force,” Namjoon says once the group hug is dissolved and all that’s left is Jungkook clinging to Jimin’s side, the older teen’s arm looped around his shoulder and holding him just as tight. Jungkook beams up at Jimin, and Taehyung’s heart lurches because he can’t remember the last time Jungkook looked at him this way.

This is stupid. He’s often felt a bit jealous of Jimin and how close the two of them are, especially when he and Jimin had not been talking to each other. He shouldn’t be jealous of Jimin though. The two of them are just friends. And besides, Taehyung and Jungkook too are just friends. Taehyung has no right to be jealous. It’s fucking ridiculous. Why can’t he just turn his feelings off? Especially in moments like this.

Jin announces that they should go for celebratory ice cream. It’s a stupid idea considering all of them are on a diet, but the only one who actually voices that concern, albeit very timidly, is Jimin.

“You’re thin enough as it is, one scoop won’t kill you. Hyung will pay, it’s a special day after all.”

Only when they tumble out of their company building, wrapped in scarfs and zipped up in jackets, do they realize that ice cream at the beginning of January is a stupid idea, and instead they visit a cozy coffee shop and Jin treats them to hot chocolate, except for Yoongi who opts for coffee instead.

Sometimes when Jungkook sips his hot chocolate, a few drops cling to his top lip and it takes him a few seconds to realize before his tongue sweeps out and licks the residue away. Maybe Taehyung has seen too many dramas recently, but every time that happens his heart skips a beat at the unwelcome thought of leaning over and kissing it away. It doesn’t help the situation that Jungkook almost always catches his eyes right afterwards and smiles his way. Jungkook is going to be the death of him eventually, and when he realizes that Yoongi observes him watch Jungkook, he wishes the floor would open up and swallow him whole.

They drag Jimin to their dorm that evening, even if all his stuff is still at his old place. Taehyung remembers that run-down building all too well. The heart-felt conversation they had in the hallway
on the upper floor, when Hoseok smashed the glass in the kitchen and Taehyung had to flee. He’d opened up to Jimin that night as much as he had allowed himself to open up to anyone at that time, had told him about his abusive father. To this day, Jimin is still the only one that really knows about him. Of course Taehyung’s aware that the other members who know about his past have an inkling as to what was happening in his life to push Taehyung to leave his family home, but he’s never explicitly told them. Jimin’s old dorm is also the place their ridiculous fight started all those months ago, and now Jimin is set to move in with them within the next few days. It’s crazy how life can change. Taehyung knows about that all too well by now.

“What are you thinking about?” Yoongi asks as he settles down next to him. “You keep zoning out of the conversation.”

“Nothing in particular,” Taehyung answers, and forces himself to not space out anymore, but now that there’s this thought at the front of his mind, he can’t not think about it. It’s January. It’s been exactly one year since all of this started. It was on a cold January night in 2012 that Mr. Kim beckoned Taehyung into his car and drove him to a hotel with a nice view. He remembers the chocolate-covered strawberries and the feeling of relief when the warm water hit his skin after sex. He doesn’t remember which fateful song he sang under the shower that day anymore, but he remembers that back then, although he loathed all his clients, Mr. Kim was his favourite because he always treated him well. Oh, how things have changed.

Twelve months. Such a long time, such a short time. All Taehyung used to have was himself, his mouldy room and a ton of trust issues. The latter still remains to a certain degree (and who can blame him for that really?), but there’s so much he has gained. He has friends now that he can rely on. A job. A possible future that he didn’t dare dream about in the past. He’s never had dreams of a future before when he was younger, not when he had thought that he would never make it out of his father’s house alive. Not when he had sold his body on the street just to make it through another week and rack up enough money to buy enough food for Soonshim. Prostitutes don’t get to think about a future, all they get to think about is how to survive the night. He has a life now, a real life worth living. A reason to get up in the morning. Even though his body often hurts when rolling out of bed, it’s for a different reason now. It’s the hours of practice he has invested in to improve, and not the bruises that other men have left behind, be it his father or his clients. It’s a good kind of pain that he welcomes and relishes in and that reminds him that there are hopefully good things ahead.

Taehyung flinches when something touches his cheek, and when his eyes focus he notices Yoongi wiping away a tear he didn’t realize he shed.

“Are you okay? You can tell hyung if anything is wrong,” Yoongi says full of concern. His voice is lowered so the others don’t notice what’s going on. Taehyung manages a wobbly smile.

“I’m okay, hyung, I promise. It’s just that I’m really happy right now.”

Yoongi looks perplexed for a second, hand still on Taehyung’s cheek, but then he smiles as well, one of his rare gummy smiles that suits him so well. “I’m glad to hear that.”

Above everything else, the most important thing Taehyung has gained is a family.

Chapter End Notes

I’ve never officially separated this fic into parts, but unofficially this chapter is the end
of part 2, which means that the final arc of this story is about to begin. And I'm so excited to write it, because there's so much about to happen, you guys have no idea. I'll have the next chapter up before the BTS concert in Berlin (which is in 13 days, I'm dying omg like I'm a calm person but I'm definitely NOT calm about this). Until then I'd love to hear your thoughts and if you want to have a chat, come talk to me on tumblr. :)
Chapter 34

Chapter Notes

I’ll never make promises about when I’ll next update again. I’m sorry it took longer than I said, the last chemo hit harder than expected and I had another surprise stay at the hospital. The good news is that I did get to see BTS live in Berlin afterwards, and I’m really drawing strength from that. And now that I got out of the hospital from my third chemo surgery today and am feeling suspiciously well, here's finally the next chapter. Thanks so much for all the love on the last one, and I hope you enjoy this one as well. :) x

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Taehyung is sleepy. Somewhere in the BigHit building, Jimin is currently stuck in a recording studio to record for “No More Dream”. Namjoon is filming a log. That’s his new thing now. He’s talking to a camera, complaining about being hungry and how he should write his raps. Taehyung sits on the dingy black couch in the back – out of sight, because technically he’s still not a confirmed member and that kind of stings – and watches him. He keeps spacing out as he watches the leader ramble about hardships and more practice, and the only thing he can really think about is that Namjoon’s hair looks like a mess these days. They also have a twitter account now, have started using it around the time Hoseok and Donghyuk left actually, but only Namjoon and Jin use it so far. Taehyung has seen Yoongi draft a tweet every now and again, but then the rapper decides to delete it again and instead goes back to writing lyrics. Taehyung wonders what makes him stop from sending that first tweet. Maybe it’s the fear that by officially introducing himself as part of Bangtan Sonyeondan Yoongi confirms his idol status, but Taehyung can only guess. If he was allowed to tweet out that he’s a part of the band, he would have done so long ago.

All in all, things move forward somewhat smoothly. Jimin picked up the improvised and Hoseok-less choreography for “No More Dream” fairly quickly. He’s not as good as Hoseok, that much is obvious. Hoseok’s dancing had an edge to it, whereas Jimin’s movements are smooth and elegant, no matter how hard he tries. It’s not perfect, but it’s okay. They can make it work with this, even if now and again Namjoon still insists that somehow there has to be away to get Jung Hoseok back.

Every time Taehyung hears those words, he feels guilty. After all, he’s the very reason that Hoseok left in the first place. The dancer would have stayed if it wasn’t for the drama surrounding the blackmail situation. He never would have doubted BTS if it wasn’t for the uncertainty that Taehyung’s situation brought to the equation. And Namjoon’s not the only one suffering from Hoseok’s loss. Jungkook mentions him ever so often, asks them if he has replied to any of their messages, wonders out loud what Hobi-hyung might be doing now. Whenever he hears Hoseok’s name now, it makes Taehyung want to disappear. Either that, or search the entirety of South Korea for one Jung Hoseok, so he can present him to Jungkook and make the youngest member stop worrying so much.

Taehyung slinks back to the dorm after Namjoon finished recording his log. He’s tired and his body is aching. It feels as if he’s coming down with a cold, which is totally not what he needs right now. BigHit still has them on this stupid diet, and Taehyung wonders why they fattened him up in the first place after picking him up from the streets, when now he’s back to eating too little food to sustain the normal healthy body weight of a still growing teen.
Returning to the dorm with no expectations, Taehyung is taken aback when he finds Jungkook on the couch with puffy red eyes and a swollen face. He’s wrapped in a blanket and Jin sits next to him, rubbing his shoulder while they are both absorbed in some anime.

“Is everything okay?” Taehyung asks carefully as he enters the room. Jungkook looks terrible. Taehyung has seen him cry before, but he’s never looked this tired and resigned when he did. He’s like a picture of misery and all kinds of worst-case scenarios start running through Taehyung’s mind. Did someone get hurt? Die? And then there’s the irrational voice that screams at him that Jungkook cried because he found out. That he’s so disgusted with Taehyung that it brought him to tears.

Jungkook refuses to make eye-contact and for a second Taehyung really suspects the worst, but when he notices the tips of Jungkook’s ears colour red, he realizes that Jungkook’s stubbornness to ignore him stems from embarrassment.

“Everything’s okay. It just wasn’t a good day,” Jin says with a soft smile. He looks tired as well, but Taehyung can’t find any actual worry in his eyes, so he believes his hyung. It happens. They all have days like that, where they’re close to their breaking point and struggling. And sometimes it’s just easier to let go and let it all out. Taehyung suspects it must have been a day like that for Jungkook.

“You know what makes a bad day better? Tea. I’ll make us some tea,” Taehyung decides, and makes his way to the kitchen. It’s definitely time to do the dishes again, because their cupboards are as good as empty and the dirty dishes are piled up on the counter and floor. Disgusting, but there’s only so much to expect from six busy teenage boys living together.

There’s only one mug left in the cupboard, and it’s exactly the cup Taehyung was looking for. It’s always neatly kept at the back of the cupboard, and all the other guys know to keep their fingers off it, even if it’s the last one clean. They share everything in this flat, but Taehyung feels overly protective of this very mug, the one that Jungkook drew on for him so many months ago, and it’s respected by everyone. No one else ever touches it, but for tonight Taehyung can make an exception. He brews tea and fills two glasses and the mug to the brim. It’s a miracle really that he doesn’t drop any of them on his way to the living room, because the surface is hot to the touch. It’s just as much a miracle that he doesn’t spill over and scald his fingers, and even if he had the pain would have been worth it for the small smile that spreads over Jungkook’s face when Taehyung hands him the special mug. It might be a weak smile that doesn’t quite reach his eyes, but it looks tons better than the pulled down corners of Jungkook’s lips that accompanied his tear-streaked cheeks just a minute ago.

Taehyung settles down on the other side of Jungkook that’s not occupied by Jin, and the three of them sip their tea in quiet and watch whatever anime is playing on the screen. Taehyung’s never seen it before, and he’s not really getting invested into the storyline either. He’s still not bored though, just wallowing in the comfort of Jungkook next to him, occasionally letting out an irritated huff of breath or the smallest hint of a chuckle.

Jin falls asleep right after finishing his tea. He’s not a snorer, but when he breathes in he makes a small whistling noise due to his blocked nose. He was the first of them to develop signs of having caught the flu, and they’re all waiting with bated breaths and hoping that it doesn’t spread, although Taehyung really thinks he’s lost that battle already. Practice is gruelling enough with a body that’s not completely exhausted, but practice when sick is just torture.

“You know, if you want to talk about anything that got you down with me, you can always do that,” Taehyung eventually offers as the credits of the third episode they’ve watched now roll
across the screen. “I know you’ve talked to Jin already, but if you still feel like getting anything off your chest…” he trails off, hoping that Jungkook gets the point.

“Thank you, hyung. But I think it’s okay now. I just needed to vent, but I’m all better now.”

“Are you sure?”

Jungkook hums, but he bites his lower lip as he does so and his eyes find the mug he still has clutched between his fingers although it’s long empty. He’s not entirely truthful, then. Taehyung doesn’t want to poke any further though. If Jungkook’s not comfortable talking about it, then who’s Taehyung to pry? He’s curious, that much he must admit, but it’s Jungkook’s right to keep a secret. It’s not like Taehyung doesn’t have a few of them on his own. What he can do though, is help Jungkook distress.

“What do you say about taking Soonshim out for a walk again sometime soon? We haven’t seen him in a while.”

Jungkook’s eyes light up like Christmas lights, and Taehyung’s heart flutters in relief.

“Can we do that? Really?”

“Of course. Honestly just say the word whenever you’re in the mood and I’ll try to arrange it. We’ll talk to Namjoon and ask when we have off in the future, and then you can spend an entire day with him.”

“We can go to the park with him and play for hours. Do you think he has the endurance for that? I certainly do.”

Taehyung laughs and ruffles Jungkook’s hair, the excitement he’s showing also elating his own mood. “I’m sure he’ll have enough endurance to tire you out, and if you’re both good, I’ll even treat him to some dog treats and you to candyfloss.”

Jungkook is ecstatic at the mention of candyfloss. It’s incredibly endearing, but then again everything Jungkook does is endearing to Taehyung. And a day in the park with Jungkook and Soonshim… it does sound like a date. It’s not, obviously. It could never be, for so many reasons. But Taehyung still looks forward to it, because a boy at least can dream.

They fall asleep somewhere between episodes, and only when Namjoon returns does he wake the three of them up and guide them to the bedroom, “because you’ll really fuck up your backs sleeping on the couch.”

Taehyung’s not sure anymore because the memory is blurry, but he thinks that Jin curses at Namjoon. He also doesn’t know how it happens, but he never makes it to his own mattress either, crashing on Jungkook’s instead and drifting back to sleep with the younger teen, all tangled limbs and deep breaths.

When he wakes up, it’s not by sunlight blinding him or the ruckus of five other boys sharing the dorm with him. The mattress next to him is empty and already cold, indicating that Jungkook must have gotten up some time ago already. He’s most likely at school, his middle school graduation coming up soon after all. Although Jungkook complains a lot, Jin is adamant on him actually attending on his final days.

Taehyung’s eyes drift shut again, exhaustion of weeks of training and a poor diet pulling on his body. He’s tired most days, more tired than what is probably considered normal. Even during his night shifts on the street exhaustion never attacked him so vigorously as it does now. He’s almost
back to sleep again, but then the same thing that woke him up in the first place rips him from the claws of blissful sleep once more; someone’s damn phone keeps vibrating and Taehyung’s ready to throw it out of the window.

Someone’s damn phone turns out to be Jimin’s phone, which is a fairly odd sight to see abandoned on his mattress, because the phone is usually glued to the newest member’s hands for taking grainy pictures and texting other trainees and his school friends, because Jimin is some kind of wizardry social butterfly. Taehyung huffs and gets up from the mattress after entangling his feet from the blanket. It still keeps vibrating with new text messages and as Taehyung can’t fall back to sleep anymore, he might as well do Jimin a favour and bring him his phone.

He’s not nosy, he’s really not. He also doesn’t mean to look, but when he picks up the phone his eyes catch a new message flashing across the screen, or more specifically the red heart emojis on said screen. Taehyung freezes. He looks at the bedroom door; it’s still closed, no one can see what he’s doing; and then waits with bated breath and Jimin’s phone clutched in his hand for the next message to pop up.

*I found a ramyeon place I think you would love.*

More red heart-shaped emojis follow. *Kim Eun-Ji* is the name of the sender, and next to the name there’s another heart emoji. Taehyung remembers in an instant the rumours that surfaced months ago of Jimin dating. He’d been shunned by so many. Taehyung also vividly remembers the conversation he had with Jungkook, how the youngest member had called him judgemental and said that Jimin had learned from his mistakes. The messages on his phone right now don’t support that thesis though.

Taehyung gulps. He lays the phone back down where he found it and stares at it blankly. What is he supposed to do now? Ask Jimin about this? Ask Jungkook if he knows? Talk to Namjoon? He doesn’t want to be a snitch. It wouldn’t be fair to tell on Jimin, not with the amount of skeletons that Taehyung has hidden in his own closet.

But still.

Dating? They have a strict policy against this. BigHit was aware of Jimin texting a girl. Surely they would keep a closer look on him now than ever, as he’s set to debut with their newest boygroup eventually. And surely Jimin would not be so stupid as to throw this all away by risking it for a girl. And yet Taehyung has seen the texts, and there’s no mistaking what they’re about. So what does this say about Jimin? Taehyung’s really not sure anymore whether he thinks he knows who Jimin as a person is. Maybe it was the months of silence between them in which Jimin changed so much? Maybe he had always been this way and Taehyung had just not realized it? Whatever the answer to that question is, Taehyung absolutely can’t believe that Jimin would be so brazen to openly text a girl (with a heart emoji next to her name of all things) and be so stupid to just leave his phone lying around when he’s now officially part of a team set to debut. It just doesn’t add up with the hardworking and desperate to debut Park Jimin he met almost a year ago.

Taehyung leaves the phone where he found it. He walks out of the bedroom and is greeted by Yoongi alone in the living room, teasing Taehyung about wondering if he had turned into Sleeping Beauty because he was sleeping so long.

“If Jungkook hadn’t been at school, I would have asked him to play the prince and kiss you awake an hour ago already. We’ve got to leave for a test photo shoot in half an hour, so hurry up.”

Taehyung sputters and quickly shuffles into the bathroom, ignoring Yoongi’s amused cackle. There’s already too much going on in his mind at the moment, he really doesn’t have the patience
to add a teasing Yoongi to the list of things he has to deal with right now.

Chapter End Notes

Come talk to me on tumblr. ;}


Taehyung wakes up in a cold sweat. His heart is beating obnoxiously fast and a shudder wrecks his body. It takes him a few seconds to recognize where he is, but when he does the tension leaves his shoulders. His throat feels dry and he clenches his hands to fists to stop the slight trembling in them. His shirt sticks to clammy skin and it’s disgusting.

After several deep breaths to help calm his racing heart, Taehyung climbs down the ladder as quietly as possible. He doesn’t know how late it is, but he can hear Namjoon snore slightly. When he’s down from the bed, he realizes that the mattress that Jimin occupies below his own is empty. Looking around, Taehyung takes note of the fact that all the other members are present.

He tiptoes to the door and opens it as quietly as possible, yet it still creaks. It’s an issue that Yoongi has been meaning to fix for days now, but he hasn’t gotten around to it yet.

There’s movement and the rustling of blankets, and then Jin’s quiet voice that’s hoarse from sleep.

“Taehyung? What are you doing?”

“I’m just getting some water, hyung. Go back to sleep.”

Jin mumbles some unintelligible words and Taehyung suspects that he won’t even remember having woken up in the morning.

Taehyung never gets the glass of water. Instead he figures out what time it is (1:30 and a miracle that most of the members except for one are already asleep) and sits down on the couch, wraps himself in a blanket and tries to forget. He doesn’t get nightmares all that often these days, but when they come they shake him up like a snow globe and the snow takes long to settle.

They don’t leave him particularly scared these days, because Taehyung can differentiate the present from the past. He knows that what happened can’t harm him anymore, but still the memories make him act irritated and twitchy. The only things that make him flinch these days are abrupt physical contact that can be misinterpreted as violence in the heat of the moment and loud noises, but after nightmares he can’t really stand any physical contact for hours, if not days. The time after a nightmare is never fun, when he feels hands on his skin like dirty stains that he’ll never be able to wash away.

Most of the time he doesn’t even remember the nightmares, but the way his skin tingles and the phantom pains are answer enough. He might not have to prostitute himself for survival anymore, but the memories will always remain, and while he can deal with them rationally while awake, in his dreams he’ll always remember the true horrors of his past.

The jingling of keys startles Taehyung out of the spiralling whirlpool that are his thoughts. It’s Jimin who stumbles into the dorm wrapped in a coat and scarf, yet still shivering because January
nights in Seoul are unforgivingly cold. Taehyung knows that all too well.

“I’m back,” Jimin says as he first struggles out of his shoes and then out of his winter clothes.

“Everyone else is already asleep,” Taehyung answers and pulls the blanket tighter around his body. “Where’ve you been?”

The dancer comes over to the couch and plops down next to Taehyung. Too close for Taehyung’s comfort when the invisible hands still tug and pull, and he tries to inconspicuously put some more distance between the two of them.

“I’ve been bowling with some friends.”

The answer comes quick as a shot. Taehyung probably wouldn’t have questioned it in his tired state, but now that Jimin sits so close to him a whiff of something catches his attention. It’s a sweet and floral smell, and it’s the odour of a woman’s perfume if ever Taehyung smelled one.

“Was it fun?” Taehyung asks nonchalantly.

Jimin shifts next to him and ends up closer again.

“Very,” he says, before swiftly asking: “Why are you still up when everyone else is already sleeping?”

Taehyung knows what Jimin’s doing. He’s not stupid. It’s so obvious that he’s trying to change the topic. When Jimin goes out with friends and you ask him about it afterwards, he’ll recount all the details and funny incidents. A one-word report on a bowling trip with friends is not Park Jimin style.

Yet Taehyung won’t call him out. He’d like to ask Jimin what’s really going on, but he’s tired and the nightmare has left him too impatient for a conversation like this. So he just gnaws on his bottom lip and contemplates about whether or not he should be the one that’s honest with Jimin.

He settles for yes. If he’s honest, maybe Jimin will understand that Taehyung really needs some space right now and stops shuffling closer again whenever Taehyung tries to broaden the gap between them.

“Had a nightmare.”

“Oh,” Jimin says. He’s quiet for a few seconds, before asking, “about your dad?”

Right. Jimin knows about his dad. Taehyung almost forgot about that. Now that he thinks about it, it’s a good thing that Jimin knows about that. Otherwise he might have asked what the nightmare was about, and then Taehyung would have been fucked. Obviously thinking isn’t his forte when he’s tired and unsettled.

“Yeah.”

It’s weird. They only ever had one brief conversation about Taehyung’s dad, in the hallway on the upper floor of Jimin’s building after the incident with Hoseok and the broken glass. Taehyung remembers how Jimin had accidently let Namjoon in on the secret, and that reminds him-

“He’s dead now. Died a while ago already, actually.” But we didn’t talk when I found out, so I never told you, Taehyung leaves unsaid.
“I know. Namjoon told me. I guess he wanted me to know that he can’t hurt you anymore.”

Namjoon. Huh. Jimin’s usual source of information was always Jungkook after the fight, but they never told him about Taehyung’s dad. Taehyung would have never expected that Namjoon thought about informing Jimin about the change of circumstances.

“We never really talked about it since I became a shitty asshole pretty soon after you told me, so I get if you don’t want to talk to me about it now either. But if you need someone to listen, I’ll gladly lend an ear. And I promise that this time around I won’t get into a petty fight with you afterwards. Are you okay?”

Taehyung snorts lightly at the last comment, before turning serious again.

“I’m okay. Mostly. Most of the time. Nightmares just… It takes some time to bounce back from them. It’s like the memory is right there, all fresh and painful. But he can’t hurt me anymore. I’m fine.”

Jimin goes to rest his hand on Taehyung’s knee, but Taehyung pulls away just in time.

“Don’t. Please. I know you mean to comfort me, but space is the best comfort to give me now.”

“Oh,” Jimin breaths and pulls his hand back, settling it on his own thigh instead. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” Taehyung answers. “How could you know?”

“So do you want to talk about it?”

“Not really, no,” Taehyung says with a sigh. He knows that this particular nightmare wasn’t filled with violent punches and loud screams from his father, but with rough hands and inappropriate touches in seedy places that he never wants to think about ever again. Talking about his father now would open up an entirely different can of worms that Taehyung really doesn’t want to think about.

“There’s this new webtoon I’ve been meaning to tell you about,” Jimin starts, and Taehyung is beyond thankful that his friend seems to immediately understand what Taehyung really needs right now. He closes his eyes and starts listening to Jimin’s excited narration of the plot, immensely grateful when he realizes that Jimin has scooted a bit further away now as well. Maybe someday soon they’ll really be able to become as close as before the fight again.

—

“Do you know where Namjoon hyung is?” Taehyung asks, gnawing on the back of his pencil. He’s in their small studio together with Yoongi, occupying the uncomfortable couch. An array of papers are strewn out before him as he’s trying to study some English. He’s stuck at one exercise and Namjoon is good at English, so maybe he could get some help from him.

“He’s somewhere with Jin, probably back at the dorm,” Yoongi answers absentmindedly, typing away on the computer keyboard. He’s working on something, a melody or a beat or a rap or whatever. Taehyung never really asked, he just quietly snuck in and sat down in the back to start studying because he was bored. Jimin would surely tease him for it. Studying when he’s not even attending school is ridiculous, as Jimin has proclaimed. But Jimin doesn’t understand what it’s like to not have an education although you want one, and Bang PD never followed up on the tentative promise of trying to get him into high school so far, so this is the best that Taehyung can do. Self study. And it’s not like he’s trying to learn math or anything. Languages might actually be useful in his life one day.

Taehyung huffs in frustration. If Namjoon’s at the dorm, he’s not going to be of any help to him.
What’s their leader doing there anyway? He’s been running around the company building all day already and had complained about how much more he’ll have to do in the afternoon. So where did he find the time to return back? Taehyung’s just going to skip the English exercise he doesn’t understand for now and start on the next one.

He’s deep in thought when an impatient knock sounds on the studio door, before it gets ripped open and one of their staff members pokes their head in.

“Have you seen Namjoon? It’s urgent, Bang PD is searching for him.”

Yoongi turns around on his swivel chair, seemingly irritated at having been interrupted by his work.

“Sorry, haven’t seen him,” he says lazily, before turning his back on the staff again and continuing whatever he’s been doing.

“Do you know where he is?” the guy asks Taehyung, but Taehyung just shrugs his shoulders in reply.

A few seconds after the door closes again, Taehyung clears his throat loudly.

“You told me that Namjoon is at the dorm with Jin,” he states. “So why did you tell him something different?”

“Because Joon has a lot on his plate and he deserves an hour of two of quiet and not everyone knowing his location.”

It’s definitely not the first time that Yoongi has lied to one of the staff members. He constantly does it about small things, such as not having eaten lunch yet or definitely having practiced choreography instead of being locked up in the studio and writing. Yoongi has never lied about another member’s whereabouts though. Taehyung finds that beyond odd.

“But you’ve heard it yourself, PD-nim is searching for him. It’s urgent.”

“He can wait for an hour or two. Joon’s mental health is more important to me. Besides, I promised him and Jin not to rat them out to anyone.”

Taehyung’s eyebrows draw together as he frowns at that choice of words. “Why rat them out? What are they doing, hyung?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” Yoongi teases, and it really irritates Taehyung. Yes, he’d very much like to know. What a fucking stupid question.

The English exercises in front of Taehyung are long forgotten as he leans forward eagerly, looking at his hyung with wide eyes and Yoongi laughs at his enthusiasm.

“Can you keep a secret?”

Taehyung perks up and nods keenly. “Of course, hyung.”

“Well, so can I. And you of all people should be happy about that. By the way, I still think that you should really talk to Namjoon about being gay.”

Taehyung sputters.

“‘m not-”
“Save it,” Yoongi laughs and turns back to the computer while Taehyung’s face turns the lovely shade of a ripe tomato. “And by the way, I think I spotted some new gay porn in the porn file last week in case you’re curious.”

Taehyung wants the couch to swallow him up as he groans in embarrassment.

“Hyung,” he asks though, somewhat reluctantly, “why is there gay porn on our work computer anyway?”

Yoongi snorts, and that’s all the answer Taehyung gets from him. He drops the topic, too mortified to dig deeper into his conversation and returns to his English exercises. Or at least he pretends to return to them, but in his head the cogs keep turning trying to figure out why Yoongi would lie to a staff member when the matter was urgent. It makes Taehyung think that whatever Namjoon and Jin are up to should not be known by anyone else.

Taehyung sits still for about five more minutes, before his curiosity gets the better of him and he goes to seek out Jungkook. Maybe he’ll know what’s going on and be less secretive about it than Yoongi.

He finds their maknae in the practice room, sitting on the floor and doodling into the margins of a notebook. Taehyung’s pretty sure that instead of doodling, he should be studying for his final exams. Jungkook is set to graduate middle school at the beginning of February before taking a gap year to focus on training instead of heading straight to high school. He and Jimin are currently working on releasing a music video to celebrate his graduation. Taehyung can’t deny that he’s jealous about not being allowed to join them. This hidden member game is seriously starting to get annoying, as even Yoongi had finally written his first tweet two days ago. It was hilarious to watch how nervous he was about it for some reason, full of excitement and adrenaline. Taehyung wants to experience that feeling as well. He wants to go out there and say that he’s a proud part of Bangtan Sonyeondan.

“How hard I see,” Taehyung teases.

Jungkook looks up and grimaces. “I’m trying.”

“I won’t disturb you for long, but I just wanted ask if you know what Namjoon and Jin are up to right now?”

“Why should I know that?” the youngest asks.

Taehyung recounts the story of Yoongi lying to the staff, his words getting faster the further into it he gets, giddy with the allure to find out something he’s apparently not supposed to know. He’s not really sure why, but the idea of catching Namjoon and Jin doing something forbidden makes him excited, especially because Namjoon always preaches for them to follow the rules.

Jungkook hums when Taehyung is done with his story, but he never stops doodling in the margins of the notebook. The topic clearly doesn’t interest him at all, which in turn piques Taehyung’s curiosity.

“Wait, why do you not care about this?” Taehyung asks with a pout.

“Why should I care?” Jungkook asks in return. He starts drawing small circles now, and Taehyung is low-key impressed by just how circular they look. “It wouldn’t surprise me to find out that the hyungs have secrets they don’t want to share with us. Besides, I’m the youngest. If there’s a secret, I’m bound to be the last to find out by default I suppose. Like that blackmailing thing PD-nim
talked about? I got the feeling that our hyungs were all aware of it already but I wasn’t. You know why that is? Because no one comes to the maknae for advice after all.”

“Huh,” Taehyung answers foolishly. Jungkook has a point there, but Taehyung’s surprised about how _aware_ the youngest is of his role. There’s also a hint of bitterness in Jungkook’s voice that catches Taehyung off guard, as if Jungkook talks from past experiences. “But that’s because people don’t want to burden you, you know?”

Jungkook finally looks up from his doodles and stares at Taehyung somewhat disbelievingly. His fringe is almost too long now, so that Taehyung isn’t even sure if Jungkook sees him or just glares at his own hair.

“Of course, hyung,” he sighs after a few seconds of silence, but he doesn’t sound convincing at all. “The same goes for you as well though. If there’s a secret hyungs are hiding from you, then I’m sure it’s only to protect their dongsaeng.”

Taehyung chooses to ignore how snappish Jungkook sounds. Maybe he’s just having a bad day.

“Is there anything else you need?”

Taehyung shakes his head, and with another sigh Jungkook returns to doodling in the margins, obviously finished with this conversation. Taehyung frowns, but he leaves Jungkook to it. It’s really high time he takes the youngest member for that relaxing walk with Soonshim to help him relax and maybe drop that attitude.

With nothing to do, Taehyung slinks around the BigHit building for hours. He talks to some staff, talks to some other trainees, reads some webtoons on his phone. He’s bored beyond belief, and the entire day just feels off. Little does he know that it’s only getting worse from here on out.

Jin finds him in the early hours of the evening, face pale and voice frantic as he asks Taehyung to come with him. Upon Taehyung’s request on what’s wrong, he simply shakes his head.

Taehyung knows it can’t be good when Jin leads him to one of the smaller conference rooms, Namjoon, Yoongi and Bang PD already present there with equally displeased expressions on their faces that perfectly match Jin’s.

Immediately Taehyung realizes what this must be about.

“What did he do?” Taehyung asks.

“Take a seat, Taehyung-ah,” Namjoon says and pats the stool next to him. Taehyung doesn’t want to take a seat. He wants to know what’s going on _now_, but Namjoon looks up at him expectantly and PD-nim also gestures for him to sit down. It makes Taehyung nervous that Jin, instead of also sitting down, stands behind him with a hand resting on his shoulder.

“We got a request earlier today from Mr. Kim,” Bang PD starts. He looks worn out. They all do. “A request and a new video.”

Taehyung blanches. Jin squeezes his shoulder.

“He demands you introduce yourself on social media as an official member of the group, or he’ll release it. It’s different than the ones he sent before. Your face isn’t entirely visible, but it’s still enough to recognize you. His face is visible too, but it’s blurred out.”

“We haven’t heard from him in a while. Why now? Why would he want that?”
“We’ve only started introducing members officially recently,” Namjoon says. “We think that his plan is to have you as a confirmed member to have more power over you. Over us. As long as you’re hidden, he can’t really do much with the videos. But once you’re confirmed, he’s got us in the palm of his hands.”

Taehyung swallows. He wonders if Namjoon has seen the new video. If Yoongi or Jin have seen it too. He knows that there’s a USB stick locked away in the studio with at least one of the videos on it. After all, Donghyuk found it by accident. The idea that any of them have seen what he’s done makes his skin crawl.

“What are you going to do?” Taehyung asks. “You can’t make him release it.”

His voice is trembling with desperation. He can’t have a clip of himself getting fucked be out there on the internet. When that happens, it’s over for him. Bye bye Bangtan Sonyeondan.

“We’ll try to negotiate. Ask if there’s something else we can give him instead. I need you to be prepared for the possibility that he’ll ask for something else, maybe specifically of you.”

Taehyung’s heart drops, but he nods regardless. That’s okay. It’s not ideal, but it’s okay. He’ll do anything if it means staying a part of Bangtan.

“I have one more question though. You said in December that you’re working on solving the problem. Do you even have any plan at all?”

“Taehyung,” Namjoon hisses at the obvious lack of respect in Taehyung’s words.

The younger just shrugs. It’s a valid question and if someone deserves answers, it’s him.

“We do have a plan. As a matter of fact, we’re currently in the progress of getting things sorted out. It might take a while to execute though. Taehyung, you have to understand that debuting Bangtan is important to us. To me. And you’re a part of Bangtan. As long as this situation isn’t solved, there won’t be a debut so trust me when I say that it’s in my best interest to resolve this issue and I’m giving everything I have to do so.”

“And what exactly is that plan?” Taehyung grits out. It pisses him off to think that things are happening that he has no idea about, even if this entire situation concerns him. It hits him that this must be how Jungkook must be feeling, reminded of their earlier conversation.

“I know I ask a lot of you, but you just need to trust me on this. The less people know about it, the better. But we will sort this out.”

It’s not like Taehyung has a choice, and after Bang PD leaves the four of them, he turns to Namjoon.

“You promise that you don’t know the plan either?”

“I promise by my position as leader of this band,” Namjoon answers. “I’m sorry this is happening again. But we’ll find a solution. And as soon as I know what they’re doing, I will tell you.”

Taehyung’s too tired to argue that right now it seems they are further away from a solution than they’ve ever been, so he just closes his eyes and sinks further into his seat. He’s exhausted and his head hurts, and Jin’s touch on his shoulder is less of a comfort and more of a burden so he shrugs it off.

He can hear the other three talking above his head, but he doesn’t pay any attention to them.
anymore. This is messed up. On the one hand, all he wants is to be able to introduce himself to the world as a member of Bangtan Sonyeondan. On the other hand, doing so means he’s even more vulnerable and oppressed than already. There is no right solution here, it’s all just a big mess.

Jin and Namjoon eventually leave, probably realizing that Taehyung has disengaged from the conversation and needs his space, leaving him behind with Yoongi only.

“You okay?” Yoongi’s voice is deep and gravely and full of concern.

That’s a stupid question if Taehyung ever heard one. He’s just learned of more blackmail material against him being in the possession of the company, just learned that at least Bang PD has seen a new video of him getting fucked by a former client, so of course he’s not fucking okay.

“I just don’t understand why he can’t leave me alone. Isn’t it bad enough that I had to have sex with him in the past? That obsession of his is sickening. I always suspected that he had a crush on me back when he still fucked me, but I never thought it could turn out like this.”

“Why did you think that?” Yoongi asks. He sounds nonchalant. Too nonchalant. It’s so obvious that he’s hyperalert considering where this conversation is going.

“Because he went from quick fucks in the back of his car in some dark alley to fancy hotel rooms, champagne and chocolate-covered strawberries,” Taehyung spits out bitterly. He’s never going to be able to eat those again in his life and not associate them with that disgusting asshole. Another thing that son of a bitch ruined for him.

Yoongi hums. This is new territory for the both of them, dangerous territory. Taehyung’s never talked in this much detail about his past before. The others know the basics, but that’s about it. They aren’t supposed to know more than that. The more details they get, the more real it becomes and the more disgusted they can be when they figure out just what kind of things Taehyung has done in the past to survive.

“He must have really liked you then.”

“He always booked a hotel room with a gorgeous view because he knew I liked them.”

“And you never thought that going with him after his crush developed could have been dangerous?”

Taehyung grimaces. He’s not really sure if he wants to talk about this. Actually scratch that, he doesn’t want to talk about this, but he can’t help the words bubbling out of him.

“I did when he started wanting to make out and didn’t take no for an answer at first, because I didn’t do kissing. But you’ve got to understand one thing, hyung. I didn’t start out getting fucked in expensive hotels. I started out being fucked against my will in a dark alley one night, and when that piece of shit was finished he just tossed me some bills and left with a laugh. After I had gotten my shit together, I realized that this could be a more effective way to make money than begging and pickpocketing. There are no other jobs for kids on the streets. It was always alleys, cars and seedy motel rooms at best. When you’re in a situation like that, you’re not going to say no to the one guy that treats you with at least a grain of decency.”

Yoongi inhales sharply.

“Shit, Taehyung-ah.”

“Save it, hyung. It's okay. It’s over. But I hope you understand now why I couldn’t exactly say no
to him. It’s not like I could have known that accepting his twisted kindness was going to come back to bite me in the ass.”

Yoongi looks stricken. For a second, Taehyung thinks that his hyung is going to reach out and hug him. That would have been beyond odd, because Yoongi is not a person that appreciates or initiates skinship. He looks as if he’s not sure what to do with himself now, or what the right words to say are. Maybe Taehyung shouldn’t have told him, but somehow it’s also nice to get it off his chest. Yoongi already knows more about him than Taehyung feels comfortable with anyway.

“Kim Taehyung,” Yoongi eventually says, and there’s a weird proud flicker in his eyes that Taehyung’s never seen before and finds hard to identify, “you’re by far the strongest person I’ve ever met.”

Chapter End Notes

Come talk to me on tumblr. :}
Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

I wanted to make fried potatoes today and set off both fire alarms in my flat, and I think that sums up my life at this moment very nicely. True story, but in all honesty I stay in the hospital one week each month, and have a harder time adapting back to real life each time I come back out. This is kind of an excuse, but also a fact. Today was the first day I finally felt like writing again, and then this chapter happened. I'll try to update more frequently again, but I can't make any promises as I'm going to be back in the hospital again one week from now.

Thank you for the love you gave the last chapter, and thanks for sticking around although it sometimes takes some time to update. I definitely won't let you wait for another month though, promise. Hope you enjoy this chapter, which I've been very much looking forward to writing for a very long time! :) x

Taehyung’s hands are trembling. He blames it on the merciless cold that has Seoul tightly in its grip in what is barely the second half of January, but he knows it’s just an excuse. He is trembling from the cold as well, that much is true. His shoulders shiver and his knees jitter and those are indicators that he’s freezing, but Taehyung doesn’t really take notice of that. His fingers have never really trembled from the cold before; it’s the anxiety that causes their shaking, and no matter how many times Taehyung tries to blow hot breath into his cupped palms, the trembling won’t stop anytime soon. His body is a traitor for exhibiting signs of anxiety while his mind is surprisingly calm. Maybe the few gulps soju he nicked from Yoongi’s hidden stash did help after all. He hates alcohol for turning his father into a monster, for its smell clinging to so many of his former clients, but tonight it grants him some relief which he is entirely grateful for.

He watches the traffic light change colour many times while waiting at the crossroad. Only a few minutes are left to midnight, and the streets aren’t crowded anymore. Occasionally someone passes Taehyung by, an employee who comes home late for work or college students on their way to have some fun. None of them pay him any attention, and none of the cars slow down either.

Taehyung’s shoes are drenched in the remains of mushy snow that’s been walked all over and has lost all of its white innocence, only a gray heap of wet dirt now. He kicks some of it and stuffs his hands into the pockets of his coats, wishing that he had taken some hot packs with him. It’s not like they’d stop the trembling of his hands, but maybe the warmth could help lessen the rest of his body’s shaking that is definitely the by-product of clothes too thin for this time of the year. Taehyung curses himself for not having taken up Namjoon’s offer to join him for some clothes shopping, instead opting to save the money.

When a car pulls up next to Taehyung, his heartbeat starts to pick up. Traitorous heart, giving in to anxiety just like that. The windows are tinted, but the one on the passenger side slides down. Taehyung swallows when spotting the familiar figure behind the steering wheel.

“Can you imagine how surprised I was to get a phone call from you?”

A cold shudder runs down Taehyung’s back when hearing the voice, but this time it’s not from the
“You’ve got a new car,” Taehyung says. He tries to sound nonchalant, hoping that the slight tremble in his voice goes undetected.

“The seats are leather. They’re quite comfortable. Fancy trying them out?”

Taehyung can hear the tell-tale sign of the car doors being unlocked. He swallows as he grips the handle and yanks the door open with more force than is necessary. A surge of warm air welcomes him as he slides in and instantly sinks into the leather passenger seat, heart now beating so violently he fears it might get stuck in his throat. A hand lands on his knee and he wants to pull away from the unwelcome touch, but Taehyung forces himself to stay still.

“So tell me, V-ssi, what exactly it is I can do for you?”

And that’s the moment Taehyung knows just how much he actually fucked up, but it’s too late now. He’s in a car with Mr. Kim, and it’s too late to go back now. It was his own idea. It’s his own fault. He was dumb enough to search for Mr. Kim’s phone number the day after his ultimatum, and call him for a meeting. He also didn’t expect said meeting to happen the same night. If he had more time, he might have changed his mind, or come up with a plan. But now he’s just sitting in Mr. Kim’s car with no one knowing where he is and not knowing what to do. He had acted irrationally, and he’s royally screwed. He’ll be damned if he’ll let this man see his insecurity though.

“Twitter. You want me to be introduced as an official member, but that’s not possible. I’m still not an official member yet.”

Taehyung knows how dumb he sounds, but at least his voice is stable.

Mr. Kim snorts.

“Don’t be ridiculous. Of course you’re an official member. They’ve introduced you as such to us sponsors. Do you really think I’d believe such a dumb excuse? Oh,” Mr. Kim looks at Taehyung with a mixture of surprise and amusement, “did you think you still weren’t an official member? Darling, if they didn’t believe in your success they would have kicked you out a long time ago with all the baggage you’re dragging along.”

Taehyung cringes. He knows that he’s more trouble than good for the company, but hearing it like that is a painful reminder.

“I want to stay a hidden member for now,” he says and forces himself to have eye contact. “If BigHit wanted to introduce me to the public, they would have done so already. But they didn’t, which means they want to keep me hidden for a reason. A surprise member.”

“Your excuses get more desperate each time, try again. We both know why they want you hidden, and we both know why I want the world to see you. Such beauty shouldn’t be hidden from anyone. Your pretty face should be admired by many people.”

A finger drags along Taehyung’s lips and he flinches back.

“Don’t touch me,” he seethes. “You want me to be officially announced so you have more power over your little puppet with those damn videos.”

Mr. Kim laughs, but it’s not the kind of laugh that stems from joy. It’s dangerous and makes Taehyung’s blood freeze in his veins.
“Videos? What videos? For all I know you could be recording me right now. I’m not stupid. But now that I see you again up close after such a long time, I realize how much I missed you. How about we go somewhere more private to catch up with each other, just like old times? I’m in need of some fun, and if I’m happy I might be inclined to give you until March to become an official member. I’m okay with the world not seeing your pretty face for longer if I get it all for myself for a while.”

Taehyung’s skin tingles in disgust and the hairs on his arms stand on end. His hands start to tremble again, or maybe they’ve never stopped in the first place. The car is still parked at the side of the road and snow has started falling down.

“Take your time to decide, I’m in no rush,” Mr. Kim says, and he turns on the radio. A fast-paced song from the 80’s comes on that he hums along to while pulling out his mobile phone and seemingly answering some messages.

Taehyung’s mind is in over-drive. He doesn’t know what to do. His instincts tell him to rip open the door and make a beeline for the dorm, for safety. He has a choice now, unlike a year ago when choosing to say yes or no was never an option. But this is an important opportunity. He’s said it before and he means it, he’d do anything for Bangtan Sonyeondan. He knows how big of a danger it is to already have him revealed as a member. Bang PD is still working on his plan to help get Taehyung out of this mess, and he said himself that the band can’t debut before all of this is sorted out. Wouldn’t it be easier to have Taehyung hidden for longer? And what if he gets revealed and another client recognizes him? He doubts that his former clients pay particular interest in rookie idol groups, but the chance exists. If someone else recognizes him before debut, Taehyung knows that he’ll be kicked out of the group in seconds.

What’s so bad about one night with Mr. Kim if it guarantees him one and a half more months with his members? Maybe until then their plan is finished and they’ll have figured it all out. He hasn’t had sex in a year, and he knows that it will hurt like fuck, but he’d do anything to stay with his friends.

“I pick the room. No recordings. No marks. No kissing. No reveal of me as a member until March. You tell the company you’ve changed your mind, and when they ask why you give a good excuse.”

Taehyung knows he’s not in the position to make commands here, but he needs to look strong. His stomach is rolling with nausea and he regrets having had dinner, scared that he might throw it all up soon. He can’t let Mr. Kim know how terrified he is, how disgusted with himself to allow this to happen. After one year he’s exactly back where he started, offering sex to old men for a better life. Everything has changed, and yet it’s still the same.

The smile on Mr. Kim’s face reminds Taehyung of a shark ready to attack.

“I always knew that you’re a reasonable one, V-ssi.”

Taehyung returns to the dorm around five o’clock in the morning. If it was summer, he’d be witness to dawn on his way home, but winter escorts him home in complete darkness. He doesn’t feel the cold anymore this time around, and his hands don’t tremble either. There’s nothing but emptiness inside him and the smell of expensive cologne and smoke clinging to his clothes and skin. His clothes. He threw them on the second they were finished, and while he jerkily pulled his pullover over his head, Mr. Kim pushed a wad of money into the back pocket of his jeans. Taehyung got the money out again, ripped it into shreds in front of Mr. Kim’s eyes, grabbed his coat and fled the motel room.
The dorm is quiet when Taehyung enters, and his breath hitches as he kicks off his shoes. His skin is on fire. He needs a shower, needs needs needs to scrub off the touch and the smell and his skin. He sheds his coat, doesn’t look at it twice when it falls to the floor. Stumbles over a pair of shoes, doesn’t know who they belong to, doesn’t care. Stumbles further down the hallway, almost past the kitchen door. Almost. Freezes when he realizes he’s not as alone as he thought he was, spotting movement in the kitchen, notices the light in the kitchen had been on all along. It illuminates him standing in the doorway of the dark hallway, blinds him. Notices two figures embracing each other, notices one of them noticing him.

“Taehyung?”

His breath hitches again. No one was supposed to see him. Not before his shower. Not before he’s washed off the stench and the sweat and the burning patches of skin that had been touched.

“Oh god, Taehyung, what happened?”

Hands reaching out for him, touching him, wiping at his wet cheeks. He recognizes Namjoon and Jin, but his mind isn’t quite on par with his body and so he stumbles back from those hands, whines, only now realizes that he’s crying.

“I’m sorry,” he chokes out, over and over again, because he’s so so sorry. He never wanted this. Never wanted to disappoint his hyungs. Never wanted to sell his body for anything in return ever again.

Jin hugs him close. Takes a deep breath in through the nose.

“Why do you smell like expensive cologne?” he asks, panic evident in his voice.

“I’m sorry,” Taehyung whines again, buries his head in Jin’s neck, seeking comfort although every fibre of his body screams, not wanting to be touched. But Jin is safety and is good and Jin won’t hurt him.

“What are you sorry for?” Namjoon tries now, but Taehyung just shakes his head, rubs snot and tears into Jin’s t-shirt.

“That’s okay, you don’t have to talk now if you don’t want to,” Jin assures him. “Do you maybe want to sit down?”

“Shower,” Taehyung presses out, bottom lip trembling and more sobs threatening to force their way over his lips. “Really want a shower.”

He doesn’t see the worried look that Namjoon and Jin exchange, lets himself be led to the bathroom like a pliant doll.

“Do you need any help?” Jin asks while Namjoon fetches him a change of clothes.

Taehyung shakes his head, closes the toilet lid and sinks down on it in exhaustion. Namjoon brings the new clothes without a word, before leaving again.

“Oh okay. I’ll leave you alone then. Just- please don’t lock the door. Can you do that for me? I promise no one will come in.”

Taehyung nods and closes his eyes. He has a headache now, and his brain is muddled. He craves loneliness, and feels as if a new wave of tears is ready to crash down on him in full force any second now.
“Okay,” Jin repeats himself, “take all the hot water you want and call if you need anything.”

The bathroom door closes, and Taehyung is finally alone. He climbs into the shower, and starts soaping his skin right away, the too hot water and scrubbing turning it red. But it doesn't help. No matter how much he scrubs, he can’t get rid of the all too familiar feeling of hands all over him. Taehyung bites his lips until he tastes blood and his hands start to tremble again, those traitorous things.

—

“Hyung is acting strange today,” Jungkook murmurs to Jimin when no one else listens.

“I noticed. He seems tired,” Jimin answers, dabbing sweat off his skin with a towel during break time. “He’s moving as if he’s in pain, too.”

“I think I heard him crying in the hallway last night. Don’t know though. I woke up to some noises. His, Namjoon’s and Jin’s mattress were empty, and I could hear their voices. It sounded like crying at least, but I was tired. Fell asleep right afterwards again.”

Jungkook drinks some water, almost gulps down half the bottle at once.

“Do you think he’s okay? Should we talk to him?” Jimin asks. The phone in his pocket chimes, announcing a new message.

“You know hyung, he barely shares what’s bothering him.”

“I know,” Jimin sighs. “I’m just worried.”

Jungkook hums, playing with the bottle. Jimin’s phone chimes two more times.

“You should text Eun-Ji back. She’s getting impatient,” Jungkook teases.

Jimin slides out his phone while rolling his eyes. “She’s been talking about taking me to this restaurant lately. I told her that I’m on a diet, but she doesn’t care. Won’t take no for an answer. Spoiled princess.”

“Don’t piss her off,” Jungkook sighs. “No matter how annoying she is; you’d regret letting her go.”

Jimin’s face softens at the younger teen’s words. “Yeah,” he says, before clearing his throat. “I know. I won’t.”

—

Taehyung seeks shelter on the uncomfortable black couch in their small studio. He’s curled up on it and has some music playing in the background so the silence doesn’t swallow him whole. His body aches from last night, but he tried to push through it for dance practice. He knows that he wasn’t on top of his game tonight, saw it in the displeased look on the dance teacher’s face and the worried glances Namjoon and Jin threw in his direction whenever they thought he wasn’t looking.

He’s so tired, barely slept two hours before coming to the office building. And yet he still can’t fall asleep now, hidden away from everyone. The solitude doesn’t last long, however, when the door opens and Namjoon walks in.

“I knew I’d find you here,” he says, and the grave look on his face makes alarm bells ring in Taehyung’s brain.

Namjoon sits down on the computer chair, rests his elbows on his knees and his chin on the palm
of his hands.

“Do you want to tell me what happened last night?” Namjoon asks, and Taehyung straightens up on the couch, all tiredness forgotten. “Or do you want me to make a guess after just having learned that Mr. Kim so graciously retracted his demand?”

Taehyung swallows harshly. He can’t look at Namjoon as shame colours his cheeks a bright red.

“She tells me this isn’t true,” Namjoon sighs. He rubs his face, massages his temple as if he was the one with a headache. “Tell me you didn’t meet Mr. Kim last night.”

The music plays on in the background, the only thing keeping the room from being drowned in silence. Taehyung doesn’t want to lie. He doesn’t want to admit to the truth either. Namjoon looks ready to have a nervous breakdown.

“Why?” he asks, absolutely exasperated. “Why would you do something like that? We promised to protect you, so why are you going out of your way to endanger your own safety?”

“I’m sorry,” Taehyung murmurs.

Namjoon shakes his head and gets up from the chair.

“You know I didn’t want to believe it at first, but your condition yesterday and today’s phone call— I still didn’t want to believe it. Actually, I still can’t believe it. I need some time to think about this.”

There’s a stone lodged in Taehyung’s throat, keeping him from being able to talk. To explain. He did it for the band. Really. If Namjoon could just see that. But Taehyung’s vocal cords have stopped working and all he can do is watch Namjoon cross the small room and open the door to the studio.

“Please don’t tell hyungs,” Taehyung choke out, eyes wide and breath quick.

Namjoon looks at him tiredly. “I’m sorry, Taehyung, but I can’t promise you right now that I won’t.”

The door falls closed quietly, but to Taehyung the noise is as loud as an explosion. He sits on the couch, and there’s a mixture of numbness and pain swirling in his chest. Anxiety too. His hands have started shaking again.

He’s disappointed Namjoon. All he wanted to do was help the band, but now he’s let them down.

Taehyung clenches his fingers to fists. He wants to run after Namjoon, wants to say sorry a hundred more times. Wants to beg him on his bruised knees to not tell anyone else. He can’t disappoint anyone else. They’ll hate him for what he did. He hates himself for what he did.

Instead he stays frozen on the couch and wishes for the ground to swallow him whole.

He knows that Jin knows when the eldest member finds him in the studio sometime later, pity in his eyes. Taehyung still hasn’t moved from his spot after Namjoon has left, still too numb and confused and frankly terrified. He wasn’t sure whether he should expect Yoongi or Jin to check up on him. He always believed that Yoongi was the one Namjoon could rely on the most, but then he remembers the embrace he had walked in on last night, how comfortable and close Namjoon and Jin had looked with each other before their peaceful moment was ruined by him. He wonders if Yoongi feels jealous of what seems like Jin taking up his spot in Namjoon’s life as closest friend,
much like Taehyung felt jealous when Jungkook and Jimin became close.

“Taehyung,” Jin says, and that one word carries all the pain that Taehyung wishes he didn’t have to hear.

“He told you,” Taehyung mutters accusingly.

“Because he’s not sure how to deal with this situation,” Jin defends Namjoon. “You know Namjoon, he’s impulsive. He sent me because he fears that he doesn’t have the right words to say, that his anger right now only makes things worse. But he’s worried about you, and he just doesn’t understand why you would choose to do something like this when the company said they’ll take care of it.”

Taehyung’s bottom lip wobbles.

“I just wanted to help,” he answers meekly. “I didn’t want to- I just wanted to help too.”

Jin settles down next to him and cards his fingers through Taehyung’s hair, the younger one hanging his head in shame and tiredness and defeat.

“I know that. Namjoon knows that too. It’s just hard for us to see you put yourself on the line. We can’t protect you if you’re alone with that asshole and we’re worried. And Taehyung – the last thing we would ever want you to do is offer your body in exchange for Bangtan’s safety. It’s harmful for you and it hurts us as well.”

Sometimes Taehyung thinks that he has no tears left to cry, and then he finds out that it’s not true after all. He can’t keep them at bay at Jin’s genuine words, and they silently run down his cheeks.

“I’m sorry,” Taehyung apologizes, again and again and again, but it never fixes anything.

“You have nothing to be sorry for. You were scared and you wanted to help, I understand that. Just please don’t do anything like that anymore. And talk to us. You know that we’ll always be there for you.”

Taehyung nods miserably, and when Jin pulls him into a hug, some of the tension drains from his shoulders. At least Jin is not mad at him. Jin understands. That’s all Taehyung can hope for for now.

___

Days trickle by slowly. The physical pain leaves, but the haunting memories remain. Taehyung wakes up in cold sweat every night, and eventually starts sleeping on the couch. When Jungkook asks him about it, Taehyung blames it on the cough he’s developed over the past few days, says he doesn’t want to give it to the rest of the boys and that as soon as he lies down, he starts coughing and doesn’t want to risk waking them up. Jungkook doesn’t look convinced, but he lets the issue rest.

Namjoon talks to him a day after having found out, sits him down and tells him that what Taehyung did was very very wrong, as if he didn’t already know that. Taehyung cries again, but Namjoon assures him that he’s not mad at Taehyung either, and that does calm the younger’s nerves. Namjoon also makes a promise to not tell Yoongi, but he urges Taehyung to do so himself.

“The two of you seem to get along well. Yoongi doesn’t tell me specifics, but he says that sometimes you guys have good conversations. He already knows that something is up as Mr. Kim’s demand was retracted, so he’s suspicious. He’ll understand too. Of course he’ll be mad that you put yourself at risk, but I think he’s someone you can really rely on. Yoongi’s never had the
easiest time growing up either, so he understands how to help others through a rough time as well.”

Taehyung says he’ll think about it, but he knows that if it’s not by accident, he’ll never bring this up to Yoongi, just how he never brings up to Namjoon that he might possibly like boys, like Yoongi told him he should do.

Things start to fall back into place and Taehyung returns to the daily grind. More vocal lessons. More dance practice. More bruises and short nights and wondering if this flower that is Bangtan Sonyeondan will ever get to bloom. No, not even blooming. The band flourishing is something that Taehyung doesn’t even dare dream about, no matter how much he wishes it for his hyungs. He’d already be happy if the seed that is Bangtan Sonyeondan turns into a flower bud and makes it through the dirt, gets to see the sunlight just once.

On January 24, Jimin tweets for the first time as an official member, and after he hits send, he cries for ten minutes, always tears up throughout the day. He’s only been a member for less than a month, and yet his place in this band is already a given. There’s something to his voice that compliments Jungkook’s so well, and there’s something in the way he moves his body that captivates everyone. He’s still no replacement for J-Hope, can never fill the hole left behind by the dancer, but he’s secured his own unique spot in the band over the shortest amount of time that makes it absolutely unthinkable of letting him go now.

The same evening, Taehyung is in the dance studio on his own. He’s trying to improve on his dancing too, wants to become good at it. He’ll never be as good as Jimin or J-Hope or even Jungkook, but he wants to be good enough to also draw peoples’ eyes on him when moving to the music. He’s completely in his element, so when the door to the dance studio gets ripped open and Jungkook bursts in breathlessly, he flinches in surprise and almost topples over. Before he can ask what’s wrong, expecting the worst – always expecting the worst – Jungkook is already screaming at him.

“Hyung, I just spotted Hoseok hyung in the building!”

Taehyung is trying to tell Jungkook to calm down because there’s no way that Hoseok is in the building. None of them have heard from Hoseok since he left the band, so it’s impossible for him to just turn up out of nowhere and walk the hallways of Big Hit Entertainment as if he never left. Taehyung gets taught that he’s not always right in life when a staff member comes minutes later – amid an argument between the two of them about whether or not Hoseok is really in the building – and tells them to go to one of the conference room.

“I tell you it’s because hyung is here,” Jungkook whispers excitedly as they walk down the hallway fast, just slow enough to not actually run yet.

“And I tell you that there’s no way that he’ll return back out of the blue,” Taehyung whispers back.

He’s wrong, because as soon as they enter the conference room, Jungkook squeals and throws himself into Hoseok’s arms, almost causing both of them to fall over.

Taehyung can’t quite believe his eyes. It’s almost as if Christmas has come very late. He notices that all the other members are already there, but all of them seem a bit subdued. That’s not the reaction Taehyung expected from them upon the return of Hoseok.

When Jungkook finally lets Hoseok go, Taehyung also goes in for a quick hug. He’s reminded yet again that he’s the very reason Hoseok left in the first place, and he too starts feeling sombre, his mood matching the other members’ facial expressions.
He kind of gets why Jimin doesn’t seem to thrilled. He’s been Hoseok’s not-replacement replacement. He has only officially introduced himself as a member of BTS earlier today, and now the very man he originally filled in for comes back. Taehyung can imagine that Jimin might feel threatened.

Namjoon and Jin he really can’t read, but upon closer inspection he thinks that Yoongi looks slightly amused. Curious too, as if waiting for something specific to happen.

Bang PD is in the room too, and he tells Jungkook and Taehyung to settle down in empty chairs.

“Boys,” he says, one hand on Hoseok’s shoulder. “Some of you already know, and others can already imagine why I’ve gathered you here.”

Jungkook looks ready to explode with happy emotions, and slightly bounces up and down in his chair. It’s annoying, but Taehyung also finds it really endearing.

“Hoseok-ssi has contacted the company recently and stated that if we would still take him back, he would love to return to the band. We all know what a great asset he is to the group, so of course we have approved his return. However, there is one condition he has before re-joining. I think it’s best if I let him speak himself.”

Hoseok nods at Bang PD, and thanks him. He then turns to the boys, and a look of uncertainty crosses his face before he composes himself again.

“I know that Bangtan is the best thing that could have ever happened to me. I respect and love this team, which is why if you want to take me back, I would be ready to give my life for this band. But I believe that the only way we can really achieve something together is by being open and honest. I will return back under one condition, and I thank PD-nim for graciously accepting my request: If we continue as a unit, no more secrets from here on forward. None. We’ll get together, and everyone speaks the truth and nothing but the truth. I don’t want to be part of a team that doesn’t trust one another. And I know that this might be harder for some of you than for others,” Hoseok’s eyes lock with Taehyung and the younger teen’s breath hitches, “but that’s what I want. It’s a difficult decision to make and I understand that, so I’m asking of you to have an answer by tomorrow night. I will also accept if you tell me to fuck off. I left the team once, so if you can’t trust me again I take full responsibility for that and will leave for good.”

Hoseok nods at the end of his little speech, seemingly satisfied with what he had said. There’s complete silence in the room, before Bang PD awkwardly clears his throat. “I think it’s a good idea to let you guys discuss this by yourself.”

He leads Hoseok out with a hand on the dancer’s shoulder, but the former member turns back to the boys once more. “It’s really nice to have seen you all again. I missed you.”

When Hoseok is gone and the door closed behind him, there’s silence for a second, before Jungkook speaks up.

“I mean, it’s out of the question to turn him away, right? We’ll accept his offer, right? Namjoon hyung, you said yourself that we need Hoseok hyung! Why are you all so quiet?”

“Jungkook-ah, it’s not always that easy to lay all your secrets bare,” Yoongi says. His eyes travel from Taehyung to Namjoon and Jin. “There are reasons people have secrets.”

Taehyung watches quietly. His mind is racing, but at the same time he’s trying to keep up with the conversation. He knows that he’s the one keeping all the secrets. This conversation is about him.
But Hoseok’s demand… his eyes flit over to Jungkook and Jimin. Hoseok’s request means that they would find out, and when they find out then there’s a chance that Jimin or Jungkook will leave the band. Taehyung’s heart seizes in terror at the thought. He can’t lose Jungkook, and he’s only just started being friends with Jimin again.

“Are you fucking serious?” Jungkook asks. He looks absolutely furious.

“Jungkook,” Namjoon hisses. “Mind your manners. I understand that you’re angry and you’re right in that I think we need Hoseok for this team, but this is a big decision. Some of us carry very important secrets. It’s not your decision to make whether they share them with others or not.”

Jungkook jumps from his chair and it falls over as he does so, hitting the ground with a noise that makes Taehyung flinch. He starts feeling uncomfortable due to the raised voices and aggravation that is palpable in the room. Knows that this conversation is all because of him and feels shame creep up. Jimin next to him looks almost as uncomfortable, and Taehyung briefly wonders if that’s the case because he’s scared to tell anyone about his girlfriend.

“What very important secrets?” Jungkook laughs bitterly. “Do you mean you and Jin secretly dating, or the fact that Taehyung used to be a prostitute and is now being blackmailed?”

There’s stunned silence in the room as all eyes are on Jungkook in disbelief.

“There, I said it. I know. I knew all along. Not just the quiet maknae, huh? Any other secrets we should know about, or can we finally accept Hoseok back on the team and start being fucking honest with each other?”


“Jungkook!” Namjoon bellows, but to no avail. The youngest member runs out of the conference room and slams the glass door so hard that for a moment Taehyung fears it might break.

Jungkook knows Jungkook knows Jungkook knows Jungkook knows Jungkook knows Jungkook knows Jungkook knows

“Well,” Yoongi says as everyone sits quietly in their chair, trying to wrap their minds around what just happened. “I don’t think any of us saw that one coming.”

Chapter End Notes

Foreshadowing is my favourite thing, and a long long time ago I wrote a really short scene that made some of you suspect that Jungkook had found out. Surprise, you were right all along. ;) (Ten points to your Hogwarts house if you can tell me which scene I’m talking about!)

Come talk to me on tumblr. x
Hey guys. I'm kind of blown away by the response the last chapter got. I mean, I was expecting some kind of response because obviously it was a big chapter, but never this amount of feedback. Seriously, thanks so much for leaving comments, and theorizing, and everything. I had such a blast reading your responses! You made my December with that. Also, I saw that some people have figured out when exactly Jungkookie found out what's going on, I'm so happy you caught that. :D So yes, thank you thank you thank you thank you. And without further ado, here's the next chapter! Hope you enjoy. :) x

Jungkook knows Jungkook knows Jungkook knows Jungkook knows Jungkook knows

“Taehyung-ah? Can you hear me?”

“I told Hoseok that this is a stupid idea, but he insisted.”

“He couldn’t have known that this would happen.”

“I don’t think any of us could have known. Did you know that Jungkook…?”

“No. I never suspected it once.”

“Tae, it’s really time to stop freaking out now, as hard as that might seem.”

Someone shakes his shoulder, and suddenly Taehyung feels as if he breaks through the surface of water after being under for too long. He gasps for air and when he meets Yoongi’s eyes, reality slowly starts to fall back into place around him.

“Jungkook knows,” is all he says, all he thinks, all he feels.

“We’re aware of that,” Yoongi replies in a dry voice. “And I’m sure that you won’t like to hear this, but Jimin knows too.”

Taehyung gapes at Yoongi for a few seconds before that information makes it through his muddled thoughts of Jungkook knows Jungkook knows Jungkook knows Jungkook knows-

All eyes in the room shift to Jimin, who looks uncomfortable under the stares. He rubs the back of his head and scoots lower on the chair, as if trying to slip under the table.

“Actually,” Jimin says meekly, avoiding to look at anyone, eyes focused on the table top, “I’ve known for a while, Jungkook told me.”

“Oh god,” Taehyung groans and buries his face in his hands. He feels as if the room is spinning around him, too much overwhelming information to take in in too little time.

“I can’t believe he’d go around and share Taehyung’s secrets like that,” Namjoon says and in his desperate state, Taehyung just barely registers how angry he sounds. He’s never heard Namjoon
this furious before.

“To be fair, he said that he didn’t know who else to turn to. Said that he needed to talk about it, but couldn’t go to any of you because you deliberately left him out. He’s young, how do you think he’s supposed to deal with knowledge like that? That other thing though… Uh… I didn’t know about that. He never told me.”

“This is not what we’re talking about right now,” Namjoon says icily.

“But we might as well since it’s also in the open now,” Yoongi interjects, and Taehyung’s not looking, still too busy hiding his face in his hands because oh god Jungkook knows Jungkook knows Jungkook knows, but he knows that Yoongi must receive a deadly glare from Namjoon right now.

A soft knock on the door forces Taehyung to look up with dread in his stomach. It’s Hoseok, poking his head in and looking confused.

“Is everything okay in here? I just saw Jungkook run past and crying almost hysterically. I wanted to go after him, but then I thought maybe it’s better to ask what’s going on first.”

Hoseok’s eyes trail over the five people present, one looking more devastated than the other, and the corners of his mouth drop into a frown. “What happened?”

Namjoon throws his hands in the air, and his voice booms through the room, oozing with sarcasm, as he says: “Congrats! You might have single-handedly destroyed Bangtan Sonyeondan right now.”

Before anyone can say anything else, Namjoon gets up and hurries out of the room, unceremoniously pushing Hoseok aside, who’s still standing in the entryway and obviously not able to follow what just happened.

Jin sighs.

“I’ll go after him. Don’t take his words to heart, Hobi. You know how his emotions can get the best of him rather quickly. He’ll just need to cool down before he can think rationally again.”

Jimin is the next to leave, after awkwardly declaring that someone should go look after Jungkook to make sure that he’s fine.

That leaves Hoseok still in the doorway, and Yoongi and Taehyung in their seats, Yoongi’s hand still on Taehyung’s shoulder, grounding him at least a little.

“What happened?” Hoseok asks once again, a scared waver in his voice.

“I’m sorry, but can you leave us alone for a bit? I’ll clue you in later, but Tae needs me. Don’t worry about what Namjoon said though. I’m sure that what just happened was much needed. It just didn’t pan out the way I expected it to.”

Hoseok looks conflicted, but eventually does as Yoongi asks him to and leaves.

“Taehyung, are you with me?”

“Yeah,” Taehyung croaks out. “Kind of.”

“How are you feeling? You’re taking this remarkably well!”
Yoongi hums. He tightens his grip on Taehyung’s shoulder, but not in an uncomfortable way.

“That’s understandable. Do you want to talk about what just happened?”

Taehyung shakes his head. He can feel a headache coming on, and his whole body is wracked by a brief shiver that finally subsides after making his chest vibrate. He’s shocked and confused and there’s too much going on that he can’t wrap his mind around, and if he was to talk about it now he thinks that all he would be capable of saying is that Jungkook knows. So instead he simply leans forward and rests his forehead against Yoongi’s shoulder.

Within seconds, everything he thought he knew has changed, and he’s not quite sure yet how to face the debris left behind by this ginormous storm.

There’s a knock on the door, but Taehyung doesn’t look up from where he rests his face against Yoongi’s shoulder. He doesn’t want to have to deal with anyone else anymore.

“I thought you were going after Namjoon, hyung?”

So it’s Jin.

“He locked himself away and I think he’s freaking out. You know how he gets when that happens, and then it’s best to leave him alone to have the opportunity to mull over everything that happened. And since I can’t help him and don’t know where Jungkook is – or if I even want to see him right now – I though I’d stop by to see if everything is okay in here.”

“Okay isn’t quite the word I’d use to describe the situation, but we’re managing. Taehyung is taking it a lot better than expected.”

“I’m glad.”

Yoongi clears his throat, before tentatively asking: “Are you okay though, hyung?”

And oh. Oh. Suddenly Taehyung remembers that it wasn’t just him getting exposed (Although he wasn’t really exposed now, was he? Because apparently everyone was in the know already, whether Taehyung had wanted that or not being out of the question.) but Namjoon and Jin as well. They were both outed, and the meaning of that takes a second for Taehyung to understand because oh.

All this time, Yoongi had told Taehyung to tell Namjoon about his preference for boys, had promised him that Namjoon would understand. Now it makes sense why Yoongi was so convinced. Namjoon and Jin? Together? That means that not only Namjoon, but also Jin must like boys. Does that mean that both of them would understand him?

“I’m not really sure how I’m feeling right now to be honest. I’m mad at Jungkook, but on the other hand I can understand his frustration. That still doesn’t justify what he just did though.”

“Hyung?” Taehyung croaks out and finally sits up again, detaches himself from Yoongi’s t-shirt and leaves some wet spots in his wake. “Do you like boys?”

Jin is startled for a moment. He blushes and looks down on the floor, as if ashamed. “I do.”

Taehyung swallows. Yoongi’s hand has left his shoulder by now, but now it settles down on his knee and squeezes there reassuringly. Taehyung licks his lips. Takes a deep breath in, and another
“Me too, hyung. I also like boys.”

His voice wavers, but he looks at Yoongi, who gives him an encouraging smile, and knows that he’s made the right decision.

“Oh,” Jin says. He blinks rapidly, and Taehyung can see how he’s trying to make sense of that piece of information before it finally seems to register, and his face lights up with an amount of joy that Taehyung never imagined to receive when sharing that secret. “Really? That’s great news.”

Taehyung nods shyly, heart in his throat from the nerves that came with sharing such a burden, confused about Jin’s enthusiasm. And for a second he almost forgets that Jungkook knows.

Almost.

Because Jungkook knows Jungkook knows Jungkook knows Jungkook knows, and he must have known for quite some time already. There are a hundred thoughts on his mind about Jin and Namjoon, but a thousand more about Jungkook.

“How long do you think he knew?” Taehyung asks quietly.

“According to Jimin it must have been quite some time already.”

Taehyung groans and buries his head in his hands again.

“The most important question we have to ask ourselves though is how we continue from here on out. What do we do?” Jin asks.

Yoongi makes that hissing noise he tends to make whenever he’s thinking thoroughly about something. They’ve dubbed it his noodle sound, because it makes him sound like he’s slurping down the most delicious cup of ramen.

“I’m not going back to the dorm,” Taehyung says.

“Taehyung-ah,” Jin starts, but Taehyung doesn’t want to hear any of it.

“No. Do you really think I want to see Jungkook now?”

He clenches his hands to fists, nails digging into the skin of his palm. Now that the shock slowly starts to fade away, Taehyung starts to feel the pain.

Betrayal.

Taehyung feels betrayed. How dare Jungkook just blurt out his secret like that? How dare he act all innocent for months, and then drop a bomb like that? How dare he-

His heart aches the more he thinks about it. He likes Jungkook. He likes him, and Jungkook just went and stabbed a fucking knife into his back like it was nothing. And for what? For Hoseok. He’s so desperate to have Hoseok back that he doesn’t even care about other’s feelings.

“You of all people should understand how I feel right now,” Taehyung adds, and Jin’s shoulders sag.

“You’re right. I’m pissed as hell at him and he shouldn’t have done what he’s done, but somehow I still understand him.”
“No,” Taehyung says once more. “I’m not going back to the dorm tonight.”

“I’ll stay with you. We’ll sleep in the studio. You can take the couch, I’ve slept on that ratty chair many times already so I don’t mind,” Yoongi adds.

“Hyung, I’m not taking the c-“

“You take the couch. You’ll need a good night’s rest. Jin-hyung, can you grab us some things from the dorm?”

Jin frowns at them.

“I really think that avoiding isn’t the right thing to do. We need to sort this out.”

“We’ll sort this out,” Yoongi agrees with him, “but for now let everyone calm down and come to terms with their feelings.”

“Okay. Tell me what you need and I’ll bring it.”

Yoongi nods gratefully, and Taehyung slowly starts unclenching his fists, leaving red crescent-shaped marks behind.

When Jin is gone, Taehyung slumps against Yoongi’s shoulders once more in exhaust, and the older teen brings his hand up to rub his back in comfort.

“Thank you, hyung,” Taehyung murmurs tiredly.

“You’ve got nothing to thank me for,” Yoongi answers, sounding just as tired.

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Jungkook can barely hear the footsteps pass on the hallway over the thumping sound of his heart in his ears. He knows that Jimin rushed by earlier, calling out his name, undoubtedly searching for him.

He can’t face anyone now. That’s the reason he’s hidden away in the janitor’s closet. The smell of chemicals is still strong enough to be recognizable through his stuffy nose. He’s never looked for a light switch in this room, but darkness is his friend right now anyway. He’s got a headache from crying too much, and he hates himself for it because he doesn’t have the right to cry.

He fucked up. He fucking up he fucking up he fucking up.

They’ll kick him out of the band. Namjoon will never talk to him again. Jin will never talk to him again. Fuck. Taehyung will probably never want to see him again, and Jungkook can’t even blame him.

He never wanted to blurt all of those secrets out like that. He wasn’t even sure if he ever wanted to approach anyone about them even, let the story play out naturally and see what happens.

But now…

He was so excited about the prospect of having Hoseok back. They’d finally be complete. They’d be perfect. As soon as Taehyung’s problem would be out of the way, they’d be ready to debut. They’d make such a good team.

But now there’s never going to be a team.
He knows there’s a reason why Namjoon and Jin kept their relationship hidden. The leader of a nugu group and the visual being a couple? A gay couple in an idol group? If anyone knew, they’d be done for immediately. And now he’s told everyone, and Jin and Namjoon are going to hate him. They’ll kick him out. He’s made them lose trust in him, and all because he’s just too stupid to keep his big mouth shut.

And Taehyung.

Jungkook knows that one of them will have to leave. Taehyung won’t agree to be in a group with him anymore, and the thought hurts Jungkook’s stomach and his chest. And he knows that if one of them will have to leave, the company will not accept Jungkook’s departure. They’ll want Taehyung to go, but Taehyung has nowhere to go. Taehyung will be back on the street, no job, no home, no money. Jungkook at least has a home and a family to go back to, has a few more company’s contact cards somewhere at the back of his closet that said they’d be willing to take him whenever he decides to leave BigHit behind.

He can’t do this to Taehyung, can’t force him to go. It’s the least he can do, turn his back on the company, on his band, his members, his friends, so Taehyung will never have to return to the streets.

A fresh wave of sobs wracks through him at the thought of having fucked up so bad. Of being on the edge of losing it all. He’s so stupid, so fucking stupid, and he bites his knuckles to make sure that his sobs can’t be heard in the hallway.

There’s no way he’ll ever be able to face any of his members again. He’ll stay inside this closet forever. Maybe, if he wishes for it hard enough, he’ll just disappear into thin air.

His wish doesn’t come true as a ray of light blinds him right in the face as the door gets pushed open and hits against his knees in the tiny space. Apparently he’s even too stupid to lock a fucking door.

“Oh good, I thought you had run off to do some more stupid shit. I’ve been searching every corner of this building already,” a voice drawls and Jungkook dissolves into even more sobs.

“Hey hey hey, I was just kidding,” Jimin hurries to say, and before Jungkook knows what happens, Jimin has squeezed into the room with him, turned on the lights, shut the door, and drops to his knees, quick to gather Jungkook in his arms.

“Don’t cry, Jungkookie. Please don’t cry. It’s okay. It’s all going to be okay, you’ll see,” he’s quick to comfort the younger teen, and cards his fingers through Jungkook’s hair soothingly.

“They hate me,” Jungkook chokes out, all snot and tears and fingers desperately holding onto Jimin’s pullover.

“No one hates you. They’re shocked and angry, yes, but they’ll get over it eventually. I can’t promise that they won’t be mad at you for a while, but it’s going to be fine.”

Jungkook doesn’t say a thing after that, just continuous crying until there are no tears left, and silently appreciating the one friend he’s hopefully not lost.

“We should go back to the dorm,” Jimin carefully suggests after a while, and Jungkook’s entire body tenses.

“No!”
“Taehyung and Yoongi won’t be there. They’ll stay here tonight.”

“Namjoon and Jin-hyung,” Jungkook whines.

“I don’t know where they’ll be, but you can’t hide from them forever anyway. You have to talk to them.”

“Not tonight,” Jungkook whispers. His voice is hoarse by now from all the crying. “I’ll stay in here tonight. No one will find me.”

Jimin sighs.

“I’ll ask Eun-Ji to provide us with a hotel room, okay? She offers all the time to buy me stuff since she has the money and knows that I don’t. She won’t mind, especially if I tell her it’s for a friend in need.”

Jungkook nods shyly and pushes Jimin a bit away from him, before wiping his nose on his black shirt’s sleeve.

“Please.”

Jimin nods. “Of course.”

“Hyung? Are you going to tell them about her?”

Jimin looks conflicted. He bites his lips as he pulls out his phone, ready to text the number that’s on top of his ‘last called’ list most of the time.

“I’ve talked to PD-nim about it before Hobi’s announcement.”

“You knew he was going to come back?” Jungkook asked, and couldn’t help sounding just a little bit irritated. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I literally got told minutes before the meeting. And it’s not like you told me about Namjoon and Jin either,” Jimin fires back, arching an eyebrow. “PD-nim said to tell them about her.”

“Everything?” Jungkook asks, not masking his surprise.

“No, not all of it. Just tell them that we’re a couple. Let them know she exists. They don’t have to know everything, that’s what PD-nim said. And honestly I agree.”

Jimin looks tired under the artificial lights as he starts typing the message.

“It’s hard for you too, hyung, isn’t it?” Jungkook asks quietly. “This entire situation.”

Jimin looks up with a smile that doesn’t meet his eyes. “Of course, Jungkookie. You of all people should know best just how hard it is to keep secrets, right?”

Chapter End Notes

So here it goes. Hope you all will have a happy New Year! :) One of my New Year's resolutions is to finish this fic in 2019, fingers crossed that will actually happen! ;)
Come talk to me on tumblr. :)
Chapter 38

Chapter Notes

It's been 84 years. Thank you so much for all the love on the last chapter. As always I really enjoyed reading your opinions on it! I wanted to finish this chapter before chemo at the end of January but couldn't because writing it was like running against a wall repeatedly, and then after chemo I just felt like dying for two weeks. Worth it though, I'm officially in partial remission! Always fun times going through chemo pain, but I've finally managed to finish the chapter between and it's even a longer one. Hope you enjoy. :) x

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Taehyung’s curled up on the couch, knees drawn to his chest. He watches Namjoon pace around the small living room while arguing on the phone.

“I don’t care, Jimin. It’s been two days! The company is ready to burn me at the stake. Do you even think about what your actions are doing to others?”

He’s quiet for a few seconds, and Taehyung can vaguely hear Jimin’s voice coming from the phone, quiet and distorted.

“I don’t care that Jungkook doesn’t want to come back yet. Jungkook doesn’t even have a right to hide. Bring him back. I’ve been sacrificing myself up until now, but if he doesn’t get his ass here soon, I’m going to make sure that he’s the one to experience all the consequences. Then he can get a scolding and be screamed at. Let Jungkook receive the threats of being disbanded if we don’t sort our shit out, after all he’s the reason for them.”

Namjoon’s voice got progressively louder, before he simply hung up, not giving Jimin a chance to reply.

“Joon-ah,” Jin says and comes up behind him. He rests a hand on Namjoon’s shoulder. “You need to calm down.”

Taehyung watches them quietly. He wonders if Jin has always looked so fondly at Namjoon and if he simply hadn’t noticed up until now. It’s weird to watch the two of them together now that he knows the truth, because suddenly Taehyung has become hyperaware of every interaction between them.

“It just pisses me off that I’m the one who has to pay for Jungkook’s cowardice. You know how they’ve been tearing me apart since the fight. I’m the leader, I’m supposed to lead. They’re questioning my skills, if I have no power over half of my members.”

“I know that, but screaming at others won’t solve the problem either,” Jin soothes him, his hand slipping from Namjoon’s shoulder to his lower back to rub it comfortably.

The leader huffs in frustration. “I need to go back to the company. If I never return again, they’ve either killed me for failing my job or I’ve run away, because I can’t deal with this anymore.”
“You’ll be fine,” Jin reassures once again, and watches Namjoon leave.

“He’s really stressed,” Taehyung says after they can hear the front door slamming shut.

“Namjoon’s always stressed,” Jin muses. “I guess that comes with his position.”

Namjoon and Jin. Honestly, Taehyung’s too scared to ask many questions. That and he doesn’t want to pry into their relationship. It’s not his right. But from what he’s heard, they started dating sometimes during the earlier days of summer. Secretly, of course. Only that it wasn’t all that secretly when Yoongi accidently walked in on them, and they’ve guarded their relationship as if it was the holy grail ever since. Neither of them was able to figure out how Jungkook could have known, but that seemed to be a universal in this team, because Taehyung simply doesn’t know how Jungkook could have figured out his secret either.

“You once almost caught us, though,” Jin had laughed and pointed at Taehyung. “And Namjoon almost died from a heart attack once he realized that we weren’t alone at the dorm anymore.”

Taehyung refrained from asking further questions. He didn’t want to know. Truth be told, he doesn’t want to know anything about Jin’s and Namjoon’s relationship. It’s not like he’s against them dating, but it’s just…

Dating involves physical contact and sex, and his hyungs having sex isn’t something that he ever wants to think about. It’s not just because they’re his hyungs, but it’s the entire idea of sex. He knows that they’re both consenting to this, that if they have sex it’s because both of them want to, and yet…

He just really doesn’t want to think about it. At all. In no way whatsoever.

Taehyung also doesn’t really want to think about seeing Jungkook again. It’s been two days since the youngest member has gone into hiding with help from Jimin, and more than enough time for Taehyung to mull over how he would react when seeing Jungkook again. Quite frankly, he hasn’t come to a conclusion. Whenever he thinks about it, it just hurts too much to remember how easily Jungkook had sold out his secret for someone else. And then there’s the fact that Jungkook had kept his knowledge hidden for so long. How many times did Taehyung tell him a white lie when Jungkook already knew the truth? So yes, on a list of things that Taehyung wants to avoid at all costs, confronting Jungkook is right on top. It’s inevitable though and he knows that. Taehyung just doesn’t know if he’s ready for the confrontation when the time comes.

Taehyung is startled out of his thoughts when Hoseok slinks out of the bedroom to the kitchen.

“I’m leaving for dance practice in half an hour,” he murmurs as he passes both Taehyung and Jin without making eye contact. Namjoon still blames him for this mess, and apparently Hoseok has taken it to heart, although Jin and Yoongi repeatedly try to convince him that it’s not the case. He’s moved in with them once more, but Taehyung never really sees him because he’s either hiding in the bedroom or somewhere practicing dancing. It’s his coping mechanism, drowning himself in dance until his body is too exhausted to continue, so he can collapse in bed and fall asleep within seconds, no chance to ponder his roll in creating this mess they are stuck in.

“I’ll join you,” Jin says, although his words don’t really seem to register with Hoseok. Taehyung knows exactly what the oldest member is doing, keeping an eye on Hoseok because he’s worried.

It’s kind of funny how fucked up this entire situation is.

So after half an hour, Taehyung finds himself alone in the dorm. He wonders if he should go to the
company as well. Maybe practice? That’s all they ever do, practice. So he should most definitely practice, but he can’t find the energy to get up and get ready. He’s been the opposite of Yoongi for the last two days, hiding away from the BigHit building after having spent the night there. Yoongi, on the other hand, hasn’t left their company building since that night. He eats there, he sleeps there, he brushes his teeth there. And when he’s done with the little self-care he invests time in, he hauls himself to the studio and doesn’t come out for hours on end.

Namjoon always used to preach about teamwork, but right now Taehyung has the lingering suspicion that Bangtan Sonyeondan is anything but a team. They’re supposed to pull on one side of the rope together, but instead they’re scattered all over the place, without anyone knowing which side of the rope to pull. Heck, right now none of them even sees the metaphorical rope they’re supposed to pull at, if he’s entirely honest.

Taehyung has nothing to do, so that’s exactly what he does: nothing. He turns on the TV, remote thankfully within reach as he’s still curled up on the couch, and watches whatever drama or variety show comes on. He doesn’t know what time it is, but suspects that afternoon has turned to evening when he hears the front door being unlocked. What he doesn’t expect is suddenly coming face to face with Jimin, who looks equally as startled to see that he’s not the only one at the dorm.

“I can’t believe you actually have the guts to show up here when Namjoon is ready to kill you,” Taehyung says. “He’s not here, stop looking so worried.”

The tension leaves Jimin’s body at those words. “We need fresh clothes.”

Taehyung hums. He feels on edge with Jimin in the room, knowing that Jimin knows too. That Jimin knows because Jungkook told him. The thought leaves a bitter taste in his mouth.

“How long do you want to hide Jungkook for, anyway? You realize that with every hour this band is falling apart more and more, right?”

“Until it’s safe for him to come out again,” Jimin says and Taehyung laughs mockingly at his answer.

“Until it’s safe? Are you fucking serious? What danger is he in right now? Namjoon’s wrath? It’s not like anyone will hurt him for what he’s done.”

Jimin winces as Taehyung’s voice gets louder with each word. “He’s ashamed.”

“Oh, is he now? And how does he think Jin and Namjoon feel, being outing like that to everyone? How does he think I feel after he just blurted out my secret as if it’s nothing? We feel ashamed, but Jungkook has no right to.”

“Taehyung-ah-” Jimin tries, but Taehyung doesn’t want to hear it. He’s not surprised that Jimin doesn’t understand. He wouldn’t have expected Jimin to be on his side anyway.

“Shut up, I don’t want to hear it. Just grab your stuff and then fuck off.”

Taehyung uncurls from the couch, his knees hurting in protest from being in the same position for too long, and walks to the bathroom, slamming the door shut behind him. For a few seconds he hears nothing, and then Jimin is shuffling around, presumably getting clothes like he said he would.

Taehyung breathes heavily. He walks over to the sink and looks into the dirty mirror that has stains of toothpaste all over it. There are bags under his eyes, and his hair is an unwashed and unkempt mess. He’s lost a bit of weight again from all the worrying, his features having become sharper.
When he locks eyes with himself in the mirror, all he sees there is despair.

Turning on the cold water, he washes his face to clear his thoughts and calm his anger. It helps just a little, but when Taehyung looks back up in the mirror, the same exhausted-looking two eyes stare back at him mockingly, taunting him for wishing that his worries could disappear as easily down the sink as the water does. The more he thinks about it, the more Taehyung realizes that there really seems to be no happy end to this story.

Jimin gets introduced as the fourth official BTS member on Twitter when everything still lays in shambles. Namjoon is outraged, because he didn’t know anything about this. Namjoon’s also outraged because Jimin is still hiding himself and Jungkook from the others, but apparently Bang Shihyuk thinks it’s a wonderful idea to introduce one of the new members right when the entire group is threatening to fall apart.

“I’m going to kill him,” Namjoon seethes. He’s pacing along the line of mirrors in their dance studio, every member safe for Jimin and Jungkook also present. He’s pacing a lot these days, Taehyung has observed. They just got the tweet notification five minutes ago and it’s honestly a surprise that Namjoon hasn’t smashed any of the mirrors upon receiving it, but maybe that’s why he’s pacing, to contain himself from doing anything more stupid.

“You mean Jimin? Or PD-nim? I don’t think killing either of them would be a good idea,” Yoongi drawls, sprawled out on the floor.

“We really need to get this shit settled,” Hoseok murmurs, and Taehyung can only agree. Hoseok has just returned, but judging by the way the corners of his lips are constantly angled downwards, he very much regrets that decision. Who can blame him though? He thinks he’s returning to a fully functioning group, and instead gets thrown on top of a huge pile of trash.

“I think that’s what PD-nim is trying to tell us as well by officially announcing Jimin. Remember what you said, hyung, when Mr. Kim made his ultimatum?” Taehyung interjects, “If I was to be made official, he’d have me in the palm of his hand. And by introducing Jimin officially…”

Taehyung trails off, because they all catch his point anyway. By officially introducing Jimin to the line-up, he’s telling them to get their shit together as a group. A unit.

“Shouldn’t he have introduced Jungkook then?” Hoseok asks.

Namjoon grits his teeth and Taehyung knows all too well why Jimin was picked over Jungkook. If Jungkook was introduced to the group as an official member without consulting Namjoon, the leader of said group, in the middle of this fight, there’d be a whole new battle in this war.

“Jungkook will be introduced soon anyway. He’s been working on that graduation song with Jimin and some producers, I guess they’ll release that around the time of his actual graduation,” Jin muses, “which is in a couple of days. Which is why, Namjoon, it’s time to finally stop being pissed and mediate. You’re the leader, for god’s sake. You’re supposed to hold us all together, but right now you’re not really doing that job well.”

Yoongi whistles at those words as Namjoon blanches. Taehyung doesn’t think he’s ever seen him this shade of pale before, genuine pain on his features. He’d never admit it out loud, but Taehyung agrees with Jin. Namjoon has always talked about working with each other instead of against one another, but out of all of them he seems the least willing to reconcile with Jungkook, Taehyung himself excluded. But Namjoon is the leader, and a group is only so strong as the one at the very front. It’s very out of character for him to be this affected and upset. Although Taehyung can
understand his hurt – Jungkook exposing him and BigHit reprimanding him for not having everything under control are surely huge burdens to carry – it’s quite a surprise for him that Namjoon is so adamant on being mad. As far as Taehyung knows, Namjoon hasn’t reached out to Jimin in peace once.

“Fuck you,” Namjoon says once he has regained his composure, loud and well articulated, and shoulders past Jin out of the room, leaving the boys behind in stunned silence.

“Hyung,” Taehyung starts, but Jin simply shakes his head and smiles to the best of his ability. It comes not even close to reaching his eyes.

“It’s okay. He needed to hear this, and he didn’t mean what he said. I meant what I said though, and I know that he knows that too. I’ve basically just said all his insecurities right to his face, can’t blame him for cursing at me. But now that they’re out there, he has to deal with them, and I hope that once he’s done doing that, he comes back as the leader of Bangtan that we need. Should we get back to practice now?”

No one dares to question the oldest, so they all just scramble up from the floor and agree to returning back to dance practice. Namjoon doesn’t return.

Later that day, some producers corner Hoseok and tell him that after some consideration, it had been decided that he should join Jungkook’s graduation song as well. They whisk him away before anyone has a chance to protest, and leave Taehyung behind with acid bubbling in his stomach.

Jin, Yoongi, Namjoon and Jimin are already revealed as official members on twitter. In a matter of days, Jungkook’s song will be released, naming him as the fifth official member of the band. If Hoseok is to join the song and video, that means that he as well will be introduced officially, as the sixth member.

One, two, three, four, five, six… but there won’t be a seventh. If Bang Shihyuk’s plan is to reunite the boys again by involving them in each other’s project and announcing all of them officially – so no one can even come up with the crazy idea of backing out once more – then it’s failing miserably, because above anything else, Taehyung feels left behind once again.

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“I saw Jungkook, and honestly he doesn’t look good,” Hoseok says when he returns to their dorm that night, and everyone is listening keenly, except for Namjoon who still hasn’t returned. “He lost some weight, and he kept clenching his hands to fists when he couldn’t stop shaking. Got scolded a lot, because he often missed the timing or stuff. When he saw me, he almost started crying.”

Taehyung’s heart drops when he hears that. He’s hurt, but somehow that still doesn’t mean that he wants Jungkook to hurt.

“Jimin seems fine, but then again why shouldn’t he be? Overprotective, glared at me when they first dragged me into the recording studio, but once he realized that I’m not on anyone’s side in this mess, he acted like he always does. Very concentrated and self-critical.”

After Hoseok has left for the bathroom and Jin for the kitchen, only Taehyung and Yoongi remain on the couch in quiet.

“Hyung,” Taehyung starts and clears his throat as his voice breaks on the last syllable. “Be honest with me, do you think we can actually fix this?”

Yoongi sighs. He runs his hand through his short hair to get it out of his eyes.
“Right now I can’t see how we’re supposed to become a well-functioning group again, but obviously PD-nim believes in us and the power of the seven of us being together. I think we should trust his instincts. What about you, though? Do you think you’re ready to forgive Jungkook?”

Taehyung shrugs. He knows that the answer is no, but he doesn’t want to admit to it. He wishes the answer was yes, but that would be a lie. Much like Namjoon, he’s still too hung up on what happened. He has so many questions, wonders how many times he had lied to Jungkook only to have Jungkook lying right back at him. He did it to protect Jungkook from the truth, but he simply can’t wrap his mind around why Jungkook would have done it. His heart still feels as if it threatens to shatter whenever Taehyung thinks about it.

“I can tolerate him,” Taehyung settles on saying, and judging by the way that Yoongi looks at him, Taehyung knows that Yoongi understands exactly what he means.

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Namjoon returns to their dorm sometimes the next morning.

“You look like soju,” Yoongi laughs, toothbrush in his mouth and words coming out slurred.

“He also smells like soju,” Jin deadpans, and Taehyung wrinkles his nose in distaste because he really doesn’t want to know.

“PD-nim took me in for the night and we had a talk,” Namjoon says, and Taehyung tries to gauge if he’s still drunk or just going through a hangover. The thought of someone drunk still makes him uncomfortable, and he stays as far away from Namjoon as the room allows, because just the smell triggers unpleasant memories of his father.

“You were right all along, hyung,” Namjoon says and looks at Jin with stars in his eyes. He definitely still feels the alcohol a bit, Taehyung decides and takes another indiscreet step towards the next available door providing an emergency exit. He’s not quite as discreet as he thought though, as Yoongi’s eyes catch his movement and the older teen shifts in Taehyung’s direction.

“It took you PD-nim and soju to realize that?” Jin asks incredulously.

“And beer,” Namjoon adds sheepishly.

“Yes, I can smell that one on you too,” Jin says and crinkles his nose in disgust.

“It helped me relax and stop overthinking everything. I finally saw things from Jungkook’s perspective too. I don’t know if I’m willing to forgive him yet, but I’m ready to give him a second chance. Everyone makes mistakes. And I’m still disappointed in Jimin for hiding him and causing trouble for me that way, but I also understand him. We’re going to have a meeting later today. All of us. And we’re going to talk about this openly and like adults. We may not be grown-ups yet, but that doesn’t give us a reason to act like children. We’ll talk, we’ll listen, and then we’ll somehow fix this mess, albeit it might take time for all wounds to heal.”

Yoongi claps lazily as Namjoon comes to the end of his speech, and Hoseok joins him, looking impressed.

“That’s the leader I’ve been looking for,” Jin says, as cold sweat breaks out on Taehyung’s skin at the thought of seeing Jungkook again so soon.

“If you excuse me now,” Namjoon says, the upright posture he’s had just seconds ago transforming into a slouch and all the bravado leaving his voice, “I’m going to bed now. I’m not feeling all that well.”
“I’ll get a bucket,” Hoseok offers amidst boisterous laughter from Yoongi and Jin, and even Taehyung cracks a smile. “Better to be safe than sorry.”

Namjoon looks a little bit paler than usual that evening when the five of them enter the meeting room, but if he doesn’t feel well he doesn’t lose a word about it. He stands tall and his chin is slightly jutting out, and that’s how Taehyung knows that he means serious business.

None of them know if Jungkook and Jimin will actually show up. Namjoon has reached out to the older of the two via text message and received a simple “ok” in response, but that doesn’t guarantee anything.

Taehyung’s nervous. He’s bouncing his foot up and down as he reclines in the seat he has taken. He can’t help it, but after everything that’s happened he can’t be calm about this. It almost feels like a repeat of the previous scene will happen with all seven of them in a meeting room, and that has Taehyung’s frazzled nerves even more on edge.

“They’re going to show up,” Hoseok says full of confidence, and Taehyung has no clue where he got that from. After all it was Hoseok who saw Jungkook last and said that he doesn’t look good at all. If this situation tears at Jungkook’s nerves as much as it does on Taehyung’s, then Taehyung doesn’t think he’ll show. If he was in Jungkook’s position, he wouldn’t come either. He’d choose to hide instead, because hiding seems like less of a hassle when the people you’re closest to resent you. That thought sends a jolt through Taehyung’s body and suddenly he sits upright in his chair.

“You okay?” Yoongi asks, before going back to his phone after Taehyung answers affirmatively.

He’s never seen it this way. Right now, the people that Jungkook looks up to, calls his family, sometimes even shares his insecurities with that he likes to kept hidden from the world, resent him for something that he said while charged with emotions. It’s no wonder that Jungkook has gone into hiding.

In the end, Hoseok was right. Jimin and Jungkook show up, ten minutes after Namjoon’s proposed time.

Jungkook looks haggard, drowning in his slightly oversized black shirt and with prominent bags under his eyes, almost as dark as the fabric he’s wearing. Hoseok wasn’t kidding when he said that the youngest isn’t looking all that well. Even though half his body is still hidden behind Jimin, Taehyung can tell that he lost weight. His shirt slips slightly and the collar reveals a collarbone peeking out a bit too much to look entirely healthy, and Taehyung can’t help but worry that Jungkook hasn’t eaten enough due to stress.

It was easy to be angry at the younger teen when he was out of sight, because then all Taehyung had to do was focus on his negative emotions. It’s different now that Jungkook stands in front of him though, because no matter how hurt he is he can’t deny the feelings he harbours for the youngest member and those don’t just evaporate amidst the hate. He still cares for Jungkook, of course he does, and seeing him so fragile tugs at Taehyung’s heartstrings.

The room is dead quiet except for Hoseok, who releases a tense sigh that cuts through the air like a knife and makes Taehyung’s muscles tense even more.

All eyes are on Jungkook except for Jimin’s, who’s busy glaring at them. Jungkook looks at the floor and his bottom lip wobbles dangerously. Jin elbows Namjoon lightly, signalling him to say something. Before their leader has the chance to, Jungkook drops to his knees and Taehyung winces, because that quick impact with the hard floor must have really hurt. Jungkook falls
forward, forehead resting on his hands and shoulders shaking as he holds the position of a big bow.

“Jungkook,” Jimin says quietly and crouches down next to him, placing a comforting hand on his back. The rest of them just watch on in silence as he breaks down in tears, none of them having expected this reaction and all of them being clueless about how to handle it.

“I’m so so sorry,” Jungkook stammers out, barely audible between sobs and Taehyung’s heart breaks all over again.

“Get off the floor,” Namjoon says quietly. “Don’t be ridiculous, you don’t have to bow to us.”

Taehyung watches with bated breath as Jimin grabs Jungkook by the elbow and slowly guides him back up. His eyes are rimmed red and his face is puffy and blotchy and he looks like a mess when he sits down in the empty chair at the head of the table, hiccupping every now and again. When their eyes meet for the first time, Jungkook looks ready to burst into tears again.

“Well,” Namjoon says after clearing his throat and Taehyung wonders how many times the leader has gone over the words he’s about to say in his head already, “We know why we’re here. No more running, no more hiding. No more secrets either, because Hoseok did have a point: keeping secrets makes us weak. We’re going to talk tonight. Everyone is going to talk tonight. Secrets, thoughts, grudges you’re holding against anyone over anything, it better be resolved by the end of the night, no matter how long this conversation takes. We’ve received a once in a lifetime opportunity to debut, we’ve worked hard for this and I’m not letting this go to waste because of us simply being to immature to talk to each other. And because I know that I’m asking a lot of you, I will be the one to start.”

Namjoon swallows as he scans the room, looking slightly uncomfortable.

“I’m bisexual. Jin and I are dating. I realize what this means for the group. I’ve tortured myself over my feelings for many nights before I accepted them. I realize that if Jin and I broke up it might become awkward, but we’ve talked about this in depth before finally committing to each other. If we were to break up, we would go back to friends and bandmates. Jin will get no preferential treatment from me when it comes to band issues, I’ll always remain neutral. If any of you have a problem with your leader dating a member from the band, tell me now.”

“Or forever hold your peace,” Yoongi mutters quietly. Namjoon glares, Hoseok snorts, and the tension in the room finally begins to drain. Taehyung’s in awe. Namjoon just openly admitted to liking boys and no one objected to it.

“All I’m asking of you is to please keep our relationship your secret. We don’t want it to be known in the company, because you know that the leader and the visual of the group being in a relationship would be the death of the band. The less people know, the better. And tell Jin and I if we ever make you uncomfortable acting too much like a couple.”

Namjoon’s eyes find Taehyung’s over the table as he says that and Taehyung has the feeling that maybe the words are directed at him entirely.

“Jungkook, it hurt me when you exposed us like that. I wish you would have come to us to talk about it when you found out. Being outed when you’re not ready to share something with someone else is not a nice experience. But I forgive you. And Jimin, I’m sorry I screamed at you over the phone. The pressure from the company just got too much.”

Namjoon looks around the room for a second and presses his lips together, his dimple appearing.
“I’m sure there’s more I want to say but I can’t think of it now. But we’re going to be here for a while anyway, so I’ll get it off my chest eventually. I’ve talked too much, I think it’s time to let someone else talk now.”

Taehyung feels as if back at school, avoiding a teacher’s searching gaze for the next victim to call out to solve a math problem he has no idea about. He avoids Namjoon’s gaze and skids down a bit further in his seat to appear smaller.

“I don’t mind talking next,” Yoongi says, arms crossed and looking calm and collected, “but since we’re going to be here for a while, can we get coffee first?”

“And maybe order pizza or something,” Jin chimes in. “Comfort food never hurt no one and I think our managers will forgive us if we indulge for one day, especially when we’re finally putting the broken pieces of us back together.”

A few minutes later, steam is rising from the mugs on the table and the pizza is on its way. The mood is less tense now, although Jungkook still looks worried and Taehyung can’t seem to relax either. They all settle back down in their respective seats and Yoongi sighs appreciatively after his first taste of coffee.

“I don’t have much to say,” he eventually starts. “I knew about Taehyung, I knew about Namjoon and Jin hyung. I don’t have any big secrets. I don’t even have small secrets to share really. I’m not holding a grudge against anyone. Do I think what Jungkook did was wrong? Yes. Do I understand him? Partially. That’s all I have to say really.”

Taehyung hides his pout behind his mug, feeling kind of betrayed by Yoongi. Of course he’d volunteer if it was so easy for him to share everything he had to say. His mood doesn’t improve when Hoseok chimes in to add that he’s of the same opinion as Yoongi and also has nothing to share.

“Also I’d like to apologize for causing this entire mess. That really wasn’t my intention.”

Taehyung huffs in irritation and crosses his arms in front of his chest.

“This isn’t fair. You can’t expect me to bare all my secrets and then say that you have nothing to share with the group.”

“Well, what do you want me to do? Make up some sob story?” Hoseok fires back, looking unamused.

“Guys,” Namjoon interrupts them. “We’re not here for more fighting.”

“If this is the way it is, then I demand to choose what I can share with you and what not. I was abused by my drunk dad. I ran away, had to whore myself out to survive, and now get blackmailed by a former client. He has videos of me performing sexual acts, okay? And he’s willing to share them if I or BigHit don’t do what he wants. That’s why I’m a hidden member, but why the fuck do I have to tell you that? It’s not like you all don’t know already, whether I wanted you to or not. I think I might like boys, but maybe that’s just my brain being fucked up from too many male clients. These are all my secrets, everything you need to know. I won’t answer further questions on any of the topics.”

Taehyung’s heart races in his chest. He’s sweating from nervousness. It’s not like all of them know already, at least the most important part. He doubts they’ll pay much attention to his confession about his father, but he’s scared about how they might react to his admission of possibly liking
boys. Then again no one seemed to have a problem with Namjoon and Seokjin, so wouldn’t they be as accepting of him as well? After all the bullshit they’ve already supported him through, this seems to be the smallest issue at the moment.

Everyone in the room looks uncomfortable. Yoongi has a pained expression on his face, which Taehyung finds odd because it’s not like he’s hearing all of this for the first time. Why are they all acting so odd about it? They wanted all the secrets, and now they have them. Taehyung wants to scream at them to get their shit together and stop looking so affected by what they just heard, but he bites his tongue.

“Taehyung,” Jin starts gently, but Taehyung cuts him off.

“No. If I’m comfortable sharing anything else, I will do so. But that’s my decision. You can’t make me spill everything in this absolutely touching heart to heart, just like you can’t expect me to forgive Jungkook immediately.” He glances over at the youngest member, who shifts in his chair as if trying to make himself smaller. “I’ll give you a second chance, but I don’t forgive you. Eventually I want to have a talk with you, just the two of us, because I have questions, but for now that’s all I have to say.”

He leans back in his chair and signals that his turn is over. There’s a knock on the door and it opens to one of the staff members.

“Pizza is here, guys.”

The staff member stops with the square boxes in his hand and looks around the room reluctantly, obviously realizing that he stepped into a bad moment at the sour and pained looks on their faces.

“Perfect, I’m starving,” Jin says to try and lift the mood, and Jimin jumps up from his chair to get the boxes from the staff member with a quiet thank you.

Taehyung doesn’t dig in like the rest of the members, and he notices that Jungkook plays with his slice of pizza more than actually eating it. No one says anything and the awkwardness of the moment lies heavy on everyone’s shoulders.

“I’m gay,” Jin blurts out, and Jimin almost chokes on his piece of pizza, coughing loudly as Jungkook pats his back in support. “It’s not like that’s a surprise now, but just so you know. I’ve actually never really admitted it to anyone before. Feels kind of weird.”

“Can I ask you something?” Hoseok asks, and gestures between Jin and Namjoon. “How did this happen? How could I have actually missed this going on between you?”

Namjoon blushes and ducks his head while Jin smiles so brightly his cheeks must hurt. He seems genuinely happy.

“You know how Joonie always goes to Yoongi to seek advice? He always comes to me to seek comfort, and honestly I don’t even know. It was a slow development, wasn’t it? I don’t think I realized for the longest time how much I actually like him, but somehow me comforting him over time turned more and more into us lying together and enjoying each other’s presence – cuddling, I guess you can call it – and then one day I noticed that my heart races at the thought of Joon and I being together in a way it’s never really done before.”

“This is so fucking sweet,” Yoongi says, “I need to go to the dentist to check for caries.”

“Shut up, hyung,” Namjoon whines and hides his face behind his hands, obviously embarrassed. Taehyung’s not sure if he’s referring to Jin to stop him from explaining, or to Yoongi’s sarcastic
“I have a girlfriend.”

All heads whip around to look at Jimin in shock.

“If we’re sharing secrets, I guess you should know,” the teen says, face bright red. “Her name’s Eun-Ji. PD-nim knows. He’s not happy about it, but he didn’t tell me to break up with her either. That’s my secret.”

Taehyung’s hyungs look absolutely stunned, none of them having expected a confession like that.

“So the rumours a few months ago?” Namjoon asks.

“Weren’t rumours at all. I really was caught texting her and got in big trouble,” Jimin answers sheepishly.

“Seriously, why we’re at it, are there any other things we should know? Jungkook, do you have anything to share?”

Jungkook shakes his head quietly.

“I’m really sorry,” he mutters, and that’s all there is to say.

Taehyung wonders if this is the end of their heart to heart. If now that everything is revealed, they’ll really manage to get back to the way they were before. If it’s really that easy, when he can still feel the uncomfortable awkwardness buzz around the air. He doubts it. He feels awkward and out of place, and the conversations happening from here on out don’t interest him anymore. No one calls anyone out, like Namjoon suggested they do. No grudges are brought up to bury for good. Instead, everyone treads around each other as if they were an elephant in a porcelain store.

Taehyung leaves the pizza untouched, instead only sips his coffee and listens to the conversations half-heartedly.

Jungkook and Jimin return to the dorm that night, and the awkward atmosphere follows along with them.

“You don’t think that tonight was a success, do you?” Yoongi eventually asks, cornering him in the kitchen. “It’s so easy to tell that you’re uncomfortable as fuck.”

Taehyung slumps against the counter. He’s already changed into his pyjamas and there’s a sheet mask on his face. He’s waiting for his tea water to boil, so he can make himself a mug – not Jungkook’s smiley mug, that one is catching dust in the darkest corner of the shelf since the day Jungkook betrayed him – and settle down for the night. Every bone and muscle in his body hurts although he hasn’t had dance practice in the last few days. He doubts he’ll have a good night’s sleep now that Jungkook and Jimin have returned, but a boy can dream.

“What do you expect, hyung? That I’m happy about how today went? I honestly think it’s unfair that all of you expected me to share stuff I don’t want to share. And I know that Namjoon is unhappy with how basic I kept it. What does he want me to say though? I’m not going to share my sob story to have the group bond again.”

“No one’s expecting that from you,” Yoongi says, but Taehyung knows that it’s a lie. If Namjoon had gotten his will, Taehyung would have spilled everything tonight. But there are things that happened that Taehyung has tugged away in corners of his heart he never wants to revisit again. He might not forget about them, but that doesn’t mean that he’s willing to share them with others.
either.

“I’m also not forgiving Jungkook just for the peace of the band.”

“No one’s expecting that from you either, Taehyung.” Yoongi lowers his voice and leans closer. “I know that you really like Jungkook. It must have hurt like hell for him to treat your issues like they were nothing, for him to have lied to you and be ready to expose your secrets to someone else, for someone else. But Jungkook really likes you a lot too and it’s obvious that he’s terribly sorry, so I hope you mean it when you say that you’re willing to give him a second chance. This band is doomed already anyway, so the least we can do is be there for each other.”

Yoongi leaves the kitchen and the water starts to boil, but Taehyung doesn’t react to it. Instead he stays slumped against the counter, thinking about Yoongi’s words.

*This band is doomed already anyway, so why are all of them forcing themselves through the countless struggles when there’s already a bitter end in sight?*

Taehyung can hear Jin laugh from the small living room, loud and boisterous, and Namjoon cackle as well. He hasn’t heard that sound in a while.

*Hope,* Taehyung thinks to himself as he starts moving and pouring the water into the cup, watching the colours swirl out of the teabag and paint it green. *It’s because for different reasons all of us are still stupid enough to have hope that somehow this will all work out.*

Chapter End Notes

I'm curious to hear your thoughts on what happened!

Come talk to me on tumblr. :)

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Chapter 39

Chapter Notes

You know that your comments mean the world to me, so thank you once again for leaving them on the last chapter!
My life might be in shambles, but at least I updated within a month! You shouldn't get used to it though, I was rushing to finish this (so the proofreading might be a bit eh...sorry) before being admitted back to the hospital tomorrow for two weeks for a new therapy. My cancer might be shrinking, but my therapies keep multiplying. Since this is a new one I don't know how long afterwards I'll be a completely useless sack of potatoes, so please don't expect the next update all too soon unless I'm experiencing some magical recovery. Hope you enjoy! :) x

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Taehyung thought that he had known awkwardness before, but the first dance practice after their reunification teaches him wrong. Never in his life had he felt so uncomfortable before. Their dance teacher keeps scolding them; even Hoseok, who never really makes a mistake during dance lessons, screws up and gets to feel the wrath of the mortified instructor.

“This is a disaster!” the man says, hands thrown in the air as if he was praying for their skills to magically improve. Taehyung knows that won’t happen, they’re all too awkward around each other to actually get shit done right. Constantly bumping, apologizing, tripping into each other, apologizing, elbowing each other’s ribs, apologizing. They’re a puzzle made out of unfitting pieces, and if the atmosphere remains the way it is right now, they will never become a whole.

“We’re taking a half an hour break, and you better not make any mistakes after that. I promise I’ll keep you here until this is perfect, even if it takes until two in the morning.”

Taehyung watches the dance instructor leave the room with quick-paced steps, slamming the door shut behind him and causing Taehyung to flinch. He’s going to report their tardiness to PD-nim, Taehyung’s sure of that and by the worried look that Namjoon has on his face, their leader knows that as well.

The boys fan out over the small studio, either to get some water, a nice corner to catch their breaths for themselves or, in Jimin’s case, making a beeline to his bag to pull out his phone that had kept vibrating constantly throughout practice. It’s honestly a surprise that the disruptive noise hadn’t ticked off the dance instructor, because it surely irritated Taehyung.

“Can you put your phone on silent or tell your sweetheart not to contact you this much when you practice? I get that relationships are important and if you’re all in love you want to spend every second together, but you’ve got to set priorities, and your priorities should lie with the band,” Namjoon says with a frown.

“Sorry,” Jimin mutters, face turning bright red. It doesn’t help that Hoseok starts crooning “Jimin’s sweetheart” in the background before laughing and Yoongi suddenly perks up with an apparently newfound interest in Jimin’s love life.

“You’ve never told us anything about her. What’s her name? What’s she like? When did you start
dating? Do you have pictures of her?”

Jimin puts his phone on silent and lets it fall back into his bag like a hot potato.

“Why the sudden interest in her, hyung?” he asks.

“You can’t expect me to not be curious when my dongsaeng is dating,” Yoongi says, and by now everyone else except for Jungkook looks at Jimin in expectation.

Jimin sighs and runs his hands over his face. He suddenly sounds absolutely exhausted when speaking.

“Her name’s Eun-Ji. We’ve been dating… I don’t know, since a couple of months ago. I don’t really keep track. She’s nice, but you shouldn’t waste too many thoughts on her, hyung. I don’t plan to still be with her when we debut.”

Everyone except for Jungkook, who’s quietly humming to himself now as he goes through some of the dance moves in front of the mirror by himself, looks at Jimin in stunned silence, having noticed just how snappish Jimin sounds.

“Why does it sound like she’s more of a toy to you then anything else?” Jin asks with a frown.

Jimin turns his face slightly away from the older members and rotes his eyes, but Taehyung catches the motion anyway. He’s just as surprised as the rest of them about how Jimin speaks of his girlfriend. Judging from the text messages that he had read, Jimin seemed to like her just as much as she apparently liked him.

“She’s not a toy, hyung. When the time for us to debut comes, I just want to give it my everything, no distractions.”

“Then why are you still with her now? Don’t you think that the longer you drag this out, the more it hurts the both of you?”

Jimin looks back at Jin, obviously fed up with the topic now. “No offense, hyung, but I don’t advise you on your relationship either, so I’d like for you to also give me my privacy.”

While Jin snaps back at Jimin to not speak to him with such disrespect, Taehyung hears Hoseok whisper to Yoongi that maybe this Eun-Ji should get Jimin laid, to help him relax. He immediately blocks out the rest of that conversation as well, and instead starts swirling what’s left of the water inside his bottle around, watching it slosh inside the plastic container.

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They film the video for the graduation song on February 2nd, and since three of the members are occupied, the other four get a day off. It’s cold outside but the sun is shining, so Jin and Taehyung decide to take a walk along Han river while Namjoon and Yoongi have decided to once again return to the studio.

“Workaholics,” Jin murmurs under his breath as both of them deny their request to join them for a day outside.

Taehyung really enjoys spending time with Jin. Since Hoseok had first announced his departure right before Christmas, he had barely spent any time outside of practice or their dorm with any of his hyungs, and conversations had usually revolved around the problem they had been facing. To just walk along the Han river, enjoy the view, the fresh air, and mostly the fact that for once
everything seems to go somewhat well, is quite pleasant. They talk about everything and nothing, and Jin proudly shows off a picture of his dog Jjangu that his mother had sent him the previous day, reminding Taehyung that it’s definitely time to finally visit Soonshim again.

It’s obvious that, at first, Jin avoids heavier topics on purpose, and Taehyung is thankful for that. The weather is unusually nice for early February, and the nice conversation and the feeling of the sun shining on his face for the first time in weeks elevate his mood. He hasn’t felt this content in a while, and the day becomes perfect when they decide to get tteokbokki for lunch and eat it on a bench by the river.

When they have eaten so much that they don’t think they can’t move anymore and sleepiness sets in, Jin’s phone beeps, announcing a new message that turns out to be a picture Jungkook has sent to him, showing him together with Jimin and Hoseok at the video shoot. All three of them are grinning in the camera so brightly that it’s almost blinding.

“Looks like they’re having fun,” Taehyung says after eyeing the picture from the side.

“It does,” Jin agrees with a small smile on his face. “Finally a day on which all of us have fun.”

Taehyung snorts because he knows that Jin is partly mocking Namjoon and Yoongi for being so engrossed in working on music, but he feels the mood between them shift and realizes that now will be the time that Jin starts talking about the topics Taehyung would love to avoid.

“You still don’t talk much with Jungkook, do you?”

“Hyung, don’t pose it like a question. You know I don’t.”

“It hurts him,” Jin says, and he sounds genuinely worried. “It’s so obvious that you mostly ignoring him doesn’t do him any good. He relies on you a lot, you know? I know that out of all the members, he feels closest to you.”

Taehyung scoffs and points out that he was hurt as well. He also adds that there’s Jimin, and that Jungkook depends equally as much on Jin.

Jin ignores the first remark for now as he tries to explain himself.

“But in the end it was always you he sought out for comfort when he felt bad. Namjoon told me that it was always you he ended up in bed with at night when feeling low. Although he’s so young he’s a fighter, trying to get through any problems he has by himself. But when he showed weakness, it was mostly around you. In a way it seems that you’re to him what Yoongi is to you.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Taehyung laughs, surprised by the remark.

Jin shrugs his shoulders.

“Some people are more compatible with each other and easier to talk to. For some reason, you have an easier time finding solace in Yoongi than with the rest of us. And Jungkook has an easier time to be more vulnerable in your presence. Remember when we first got introduced to the sponsors?”

Of course Taehyung remembers, especially what happened after the official presentation as he got cornered by Mr. Kim.

“Jungkook stuck to your side all the time, because that’s where he felt most comfortable.”

Taehyung also remembers how Jungkook joined him in his bunk bed that morning before the
meeting with their sponsors and admitted his insecurities. It was one of the rare moments that Taehyung saw him as the actual boy he still is, just as scared as the rest of them although he refuses to show his weakness. Taehyung wonders if Jungkook had already known when he had cuddled against Taehyung’s chest, or if he had only found out later.

“I can’t believe you and Namjoon have forgiven him so quickly,” Taehyung eventually answers, trying to stray away from the topic. He’s not ready to discuss his current dislike of Jungkook with anyone really.

“It’s not like he really harmed us or our relationship,” Jin shrugs, “which reminds me of something else...”

Jin trails off and Taehyung knows exactly what’s going to come next. He’s been expecting for someone to try and have that conversation with him for a while now. Just like Jimin’s girlfriend, Taehyung’s confessions of both having an abusive father and potentially being gay have been hushed up.

“You mentioned that you like boys?”

Taehyung can feel his face heating up at the question. He shouldn’t be nervous talking about this, because he’s talking to Jin who’s gay himself. Yet he can’t help but feel his heart speed up in distress.

“I don’t know,” he admits quietly, but that’s a lie. He knows that he likes boys. His heart wouldn’t do that annoying thing where it feels like it’s doing a somersault every time he spots Jungkook otherwise, even now that he’s mad at him. “And I don’t know how much of it is me actually liking them and me being...”

“...traumatized?” Jin finishes the sentence for him and Taehyung nods, shoulders dropping and lips pulling into a frown. It’s not a nice word, but that’s essentially what it is, right?

“You’re obviously not comfortable talking about this yet, but once you are I think you should maybe consider going to a therapist. It’s nothing shameful, don’t look at me like that. Yoongi is seeing one like once a month, did he never tell you? It’s just something to think about, okay? But honestly I don’t believe that the reason you like boys is because of your past. You can’t choose who you have feelings for. If anything, I would have expected you’d be repulsed by the idea of ever being with another man again.”

“It’s not like men were my only clients,” Taehyung points out, getting more uncomfortable about this topic by the second.

Jin’s eyes widen when he hears that as if he’s never considered it before, but he quickly masks his surprise. “Isn’t that an even bigger indicator that you like boys for being boys?”

Taehyung shrugs. That’s a good point, because the idea of sexual intimacy with a woman disgusts him just as much as a man. He doesn’t voice that thought out loud though. Jin doesn’t need to know everything.

Sensing Taehyung’s discomfort, Jin changes the topic to something trivial, some new computer game that will come out soon that he really wants to buy but really shouldn’t, because it’s not like he’ll have time to play it with all the time they have scheduled for recording, practicing, photo shoots, behavioural lessons and whatever other duties. Taehyung is grateful for the change in topic and his muscles slowly unlock from the tension that has gathered there as he smiles along as Jin tells him all about that video game and the attention of detail paid to the design of its world and
Overall, it’s a really good day.

Jungkook is revealed on Twitter as official member the day before his graduation to hype up the release of his, Jimin’s and Hoseok’s graduation song on social media. Taehyung doesn’t know how many followers they have because he doesn’t like to look at the account, but he’s heard that it’s quite an okay number for a rookie group from an unknown company.

Only Hoseok is left to be revealed now. He’ll make his debut with the release of the music video, but his reveal date is set for a few days later, to keep the hype going and have people guess about the third person in the video for a while.

When that happens, it’s truly only going to be Taehyung who’s left to be revealed, and they all know that it won’t happen until Mr. Kim has been dealt with, but at this point Taehyung isn’t sure anymore if Mr. Kim will ever be dealt with. Then again Taehyung’s deal with Mr. Kim is only upright until March, so time is ticking. He wonders what BigHit will do once Mr. Kim doesn’t back down from demanding Taehyung to be revealed. He’s promised Namjoon that he’d never go near Mr. Kim ever again, but if there’s no other option…

Taehyung shudders at the thought. He can’t go through that again. Sometimes he still thinks he can feel Mr. Kim’s hands on him and turns the shower water hot enough to scald his skin, leaving whoever has the misfortune to shower after him to complain that he’s used up all the warm water again.

Taehyung’s stomach feel all funny for various reasons. Jimin slides down the wall next to Taehyung. They haven’t really talked much since Jungkook’s outburst, not after Jimin obviously took Jungkook’s side in the fight. Taehyung’s honestly surprised that Jimin sought him out, because even after the reconciliation they’ve barely talked with each other. It’s sometimes easy to forget that Jimin also knows about Taehyung’s past when Taehyung is so busy falling apart with the knowledge that Jungkook knows, but every now and again he’s reminded of it and it just makes him want to disappear into thin air even more.

Taehyung thinks as he doesn’t pay Jimin much attention.

“Are you okay?”

Taehyung jumps at the unexpected voice and looks up from where he’s curled against the wall at the practice room. It’s technically lunch break, but all the members are again put on a diet that is simply ridiculous, because it’s not like any of them are not thin. That is why only the dance instructor is actually gone. Jungkook is crowded by Jin and Hoseok, who are congratulating him on his first tweet and patting his back and acting all affectionate towards him. Watching them interact with the youngest member makes Taehyung’s stomach feel all funny for various reasons.

He wonders when Jimin found out. Where they still friends? Did Jungkook tell Jimin while they had been hostile with each other? That would have seemed like even more of a dick move, Taehyung thinks as he doesn’t pay Jimin much attention.

“You seem spaced out,” Jimin says, as if to justify why he came over to ask Taehyung if he’s okay. What a fucking stupid question that is. Obviously Taehyung’s not okay, hasn’t been in weeks now. Everyone can see that by the paleness of his skin and the circles under his eyes that indicate many sleepless nights.
“Why’d you care?” Taehyung asks lazily and takes glee in the way Jimin slightly flinches at his harsh tone.

“Why do you think I don’t?” Jimin asks back, and he’s talking in a whiny voice that grates on Taehyung’s nerves.

Taehyung looks over to him, contemplating asking if Jimin’s actually serious for a moment. He’s saved from this conversation that he very much doesn’t want to have – like most other conversations these days – by the dance instructor returning from lunch break, calling them to action by clapping loudly. Taehyung shoots up faster than he thought was actually possible in his state of exhaustion, and stumbles to the middle of the room, away from Jimin.

If Jimin really cared, he would have tried to talk out things with Taehyung already. If Jimin really really cared, Taehyung thinks bitterly, he should have let Taehyung know that he’s aware of his situation a long time ago. Not that it would have made any of it any better, but at least Taehyung wouldn’t have felt like he’d been lied to by him all along.

That night, Taehyung wakes up with a start, gasp on his lips and heartbeat rapidly fast. He’s sweating all over, the t-shirt he’s wearing uncomfortably sticking to his chest. He can’t remember the dream, which is the case more often than not these days, but judging from the strong tremors in his hands it wasn’t a pretty one.

Taehyung climbs down the ladder as quietly as he can. He thinks he succeeds in sneaking out amidst six sleeping teenagers, but he’s wrong.

“Hyung?” Taehyung cringes at the voice, and then Jungkook is tossing and turning on his mattress, before sitting up, hair ruffled and sticking in all directions. “Did you have a nightmare?”

“Go back to sleep,” Taehyung hisses, cursing the fact that he’d woken up the person he wanted to least notify about his distress.

Jungkook does not go back to sleep. Instead he kicks off the blanket and gets up shakily, reminding Taehyung of a baby giraffe that just learned how to walk.

“I’m serious Jungkook, go back to sleep,” Taehyung hisses once more, not daring to raise his voice in fear of disturbing anyone else.

It’s fruitless. He exits the room, not looking behind him, but he hears the tell-tale sign of bare feet following behind him.

“Hyung, let me help,” Jungkook whispers as he follows Taehyung out of the bedroom, closing the door behind them as quietly as possible. Taehyung’s footsteps speed up to escape from Jungkook into the kitchen. He knows it’s ridiculous, Jungkook will be right by his side seconds later, but he tries nonetheless. The floor feels icy cold against his bare feet and he shivers, not sure if from the cold or the memory of the nightmare. He wishes he had a hoodie to hide in and provide him with warmth and a feeling of security.

Taehyung opens one of the cupboards and reaches for the tea box, a dented old tin box that he struggles to open on the best of days. Naturally, his shaking fingers fight against the lid of the box without success. He hurts his nail, and then the box slips from his clammy fingers and falls to the floor with a loud bang that makes Taehyung flinch.

Before he has the chance to pick it back up, Jungkook has already gotten a hold of it.

“Let me, hyung,” he says, and when he opens the tin box so effortlessly, Taehyung’s protest dies
down. He leans against the refrigerator and hides his hands behind his back, willing them to stop shaking.

“You’re graduating tomorrow, you should go back to bed and rest.”

Jungkook rolls his eyes. “Hyung, no one will care whether or not I have bags under my eyes tomorrow. Besides, it’s not like I ever have a healthy sleeping schedule.”

Taehyung can’t argue with that. Often they only get four to five hours of sleep. He watches quietly as Jungkook brings water to a boiling point and starts rummaging in the cupboards. When he pulls out the smiley mug that had been hidden at the very back, Taehyung bites his lower lip so hard that he almost draws blood.

Jungkook pretends as if this isn’t an odd situation, withdraws a second mug and fills both of them with hot water.

“Are you going to attend my graduation tomorrow, hyung?”

He asks it nonchalantly while putting in the teabags, but Taehyung can see how his shoulders have suddenly tensed and his voice slightly hitched.

Is he going to be at Jungkook’s graduation? In all honesty he hadn’t thought about it yet. Taehyung accepts the smiley mug that Jungkook hands him and holds on to it firmly as to not drop it.

“I don’t know,” he answers honestly and watches Jungkook’s shoulders drop in disappointment, although his face is a carefully constructed mask that doesn’t show that this answer affects him.

“Why are you suddenly doing this? Why are you taking care of me?”

It’s a question that has been running through Taehyung’s head since Jungkook got out of bed and followed him.

“You had a nightmare, you shouldn’t have to deal with it alone.”

“I’ve dealt with them just fine on my own until now,” Taehyung snaps, and immediately feels guilty as Jungkook takes a step back, takes a deep breath.

“You wouldn’t have had to if you had told me what’s going on,” Jungkook shoots back, and Taehyung looks at him, stunned. Jungkook is staring straight at him with a rebellious twinkle in his eyes. “If you had let me, I always would have helped you.”

“But you knew anyway. So what made you hold back?”

Jungkook’s jaw ticks and Taehyung knows that he’s pushed him just a tad bit too far.

“I heard you tell the others to not tell me, and now you’re blaming me for not saying anything? Are you serious?” The younger teen turns around, dumps the contents of his mug into the sink before carelessly dropping the ceramic in it as well. “Make up your mind, hyung, because blaming me for both things is not fair.”

Taehyung watches quietly as Jungkook leaves for the bedroom. He’s sure that if it wasn’t the middle of the night, he would have slammed the door shut, but Jungkook is a considerate dongsaeng. He wouldn’t want to wake the others up.

Taehyung’s heart slams against his ribcage and he also drains his tea down the sink before carefully putting down the smiley mug next to Jungkook’s. He’s anxious, needs to remind himself
to take deep breaths or else he fears he’ll hyperventilate. It’s all too much: the dream, Jungkook being mad at him. He just wanted a calming cup of tea, how could it have escalated like this?

He slinks to the small living room and curls up on the couch, wrapping a blanket around his body for comfort. When the bathroom door opens he startles so bad that he yelps.

Jimin walks out looking uncomfortable, and Taehyung knows that he’s heard everything, must have been in there by the time he and Jungkook had left the bedroom. Taehyung had never thought to check if all members had been in their beds. Tears well up in his eyes and he tries to blink them back, but to no avail. They roll down his cheeks and he sniffs, wondering just how pitiful he must look right now.

To his relieve, Jimin doesn’t say a thing. He just looks at Taehyung for a second, probably gauging his mood and wondering if he will lash out at Jimin again, before coming over and wrapping him into a hug. Taehyung rests his head against Jimin’s shoulder and lets his tears get soaked up in the fabric of Jimin’s shirt. Neither of them says anything, and Taehyung is thankful for that. He just quietly seeks comfort within Jimin’s hug and tries to starve down the panic attack bubbling up in his chest.

Jimin falls asleep in this uncomfortable position, but Taehyung doesn’t. Before the first rays of the sun light up Seoul, his phone vibrates with a message from PD-nim, telling him to stop by the office today as early as he can.

Untangling himself from Jimin without waking the other member up, Taehyung tiptoes around the dorm to get ready and leaves when the morning sky is painted in oranges, pinks and purples. The other members will probably wake up soon as well. Taehyung doesn’t know the exact time, but he knows that Jungkook’s graduation is before noon. For a second he wonders if he should attend, and then he wonders if Jungkook would even want him to attend. He breathes in the cold air and it feels exhilarating, as if cleansing both his body and soul, and opts to walk to the BigHit building this morning instead of taking the bus, his cheeks, nose and ears tinged red from the cold once he arrives.

“Bang PD-nim is already waiting for you in his office,” the receptionist greets Taehyung with a small smile, and he wonders just how important this meeting is when he’s ordered to the office. His two most memorable times there were his first day at the company, when he was accusing PD-nim of just wanting a good fuck, and when he got the news of his father’s death. Most confusingly of all, Namjoon isn’t with him today.

“Taehyung-ah,” PD-nim greets him behind his desk. “Please take a seat.”

Taehyung looks at the older man warily, trying to get a read on his mood. To his surprise, the CEO seems content. There’s a small but inviting smile on his face and no worry-lines that he tends to get around Taehyung. No bad news then, Taehyung supposes. No new message from Mr. Kim? Because that was definitely one thing Taehyung had feared, a new ultimatum. He doesn’t want to face Mr. Kim, not again, not so soon. But what then? It can’t possibly be good news, can it? If it was, he’d think that Namjoon would be here with him already. Information just for him? But what could that possibly be? His thoughts are racing as he sits down on the other side of the big wooden desk.

“How are you doing?” PD-nim asks as he leans back in his black leather chair.

“Eh- good, sir?” Chit-chat was the last thing that Taehyung had expected to encounter when stepping into the office. PD-nim has never been one to beat around the bush regarding any topic before.
“I’m glad to hear that. Are you getting along okay again with the other boys after the little dispute you had?”

Little dispute. Taehyung wants to laugh at that, but he bites his tongue and simply nods. It’s never a good idea to be snarky towards your company’s CEO, and Taehyung has been harsh towards him more times than he can remember. It’s a miracle he’s still allowed to sit here. Other less patient CEO’s would have already kicked him out again before he would even have had a chance to show his skills. Now that debut is hopefully coming closer and half the band is already officially introduced on twitter, he really shouldn’t be brave enough to challenge PD-nim anymore.

“We’re getting there,” Taehyung answers. It’s an honest of an answer as he can give, although Taehyung has to admit that he’s not trying particularly hard to reconcile with Jungkook.

“Good, good. I’m sure you can imagine why I called you here today?”

“I assume that it’s about Mr. Kim?” He’s more nervous now than before, and it doesn’t help that he’s still a bit on edge after the nightmare he’s had. The seconds that pass by until PD-nim answers feel like hours, and he almost doesn’t hear the man speak over the sound of his heart beating in his ears so loudly.

“That’s right. I thought it would be best to inform you that we’re progressing nicely in our pursuit to take him down.”

“Take him down?” Taehyung repeats the words in surprise. It almost sounds like a war declaration, not only like them trying to get him off Taehyung’s back but-

“He repeatedly paid for sex with a minor, Taehyung-ah. We don’t just want him to leave you alone. We’re planning to bring him behind jail.”

Taehyung’s mouth falls open and he’s unable to articulate the many thoughts running through his head at once. They want to lock him away. He’d never be able to even come close to Taehyung again.

“How?”

“I don’t want to give too many details away. The more people know, the more likely he’s going to hear about it and then we’re done for. But the plan is in motion. I can’t give you a timeframe either, it might be weeks or months still until we’ve got him locked down. But I want you to know that there is progress and to not lose hope.”

“Thank you,” Taehyung says, still shocked. He has no idea how PD-nim will pull this off, doesn’t know how it could be possible to get this man behind bars without revealing Taehyung’s identity either, but he has to trust him. That’s the only thing he can do now really.

“Once we’re far enough into the plan and have gathered all the puzzle pieces, I promise that I will tell you everything. I have a meeting in ten minutes, so I need to leave. Can you stop by the recording studio while you’re here? Kang-nim said he needs you to record some more lines.”

Some more lines turn into one and a half hours in the studio, and by the time Taehyung leaves and takes the first look on his phone screen, he’s bombarded with many missed calls and text messages that make his heart drop in his stomach, especially Jin’s frantic one asking where he is and saying that Jungkook has been crying for half an hour.

Jungkook’s graduation.
Taehyung completely forgot about Jungkook’s graduation, and he’s running down the corridors as soon as he remembers, his shoes squeaking on the linoleum floor.

Guilt suddenly grips his throat and makes it hard to breathe as he waves down the first free taxi, something he technically can’t really afford even with the allowance BigHit gives him. That doesn’t matter now though, because Taehyung forgot Jungkook’s graduation and Jungkook is crying because of him for god’s sake.

He meant it when he had said that he wasn’t sure if he would attend or not, but now – while the actual event is taking place – he thinks of himself as stupid for ever not wanting to be a part of it. Of course he’s going to attend Jungkook’s graduation. He’s only graduating from middle school once, how bad of a hyung would Taehyung be to not attend?

The worst, it seems like, because they get stuck in traffic and Taehyung already knows that he’s not going to be there in time, and none of the others are picking up their phones or replying to his messages and Taehyung is stressed.

He throws the money at the driver once they have arrived, not even waiting for his change, and stumbles out of the car, running towards the gates of the school as his heart drops. Students and their parents are already mingling in the front court and Taehyung’s too late, has missed it, didn’t even mean to and still managed to hurt Jungkook like that.

Taehyung pushes through the crowd, frantically looking around. Some curse at him, but he doesn’t have the time to turn back around and apologize. He needs to find Jungkook.

He spots his band members under a stark oak tree, together with Jungkook’s parents. Jungkook is holding his certificate and a bouquet of flowers, and Taehyung can see the red of the younger teen’s eyes from where he’s standing in the distance, a tell-tale sign of past tears.

Before he can think about it, he sprints over, calling out Jungkook’s name loud enough that half the court becomes quiet to spare him disapproving looks.

Jungkook’s eyes widen as he turns to the familiar sound of his name being called, and as soon as he spots Taehyung he drops the items gathered in his hands and stumbles away from the group, almost tripping over a tree root. Namjoon barely catches him on his elbow to keep him from falling, but Jungkook rips himself free and topples forward, right into Taehyung’s arms.

“Hyung,” he whines as he hides his face in Taehyung’s neck, voice muffled from the scarf. “You came.”

He’s slightly shaking and Taehyung knows that he must have started crying again. He feels horrible, even though Jungkook fucked up too not long ago, even though he’s not entirely forgiven yet. Because this is a day in Jungkook’s life that he will only experience once, that he’ll never get to repeat for a second time, and Taehyung’s the reason why it might leave a bitter taste in his mouth to recall the memories of today.

“All is so sorry,” Taehyung says and tightens his arms around the younger teen. “I didn’t mean to miss your graduation. I was called to the company and forgot the time in the recording studio.”

Jungkook sniffs and pulls away a bit to look up at Taehyung. His brown eyes are glistening and his nose is bright red. Taehyung’s heart skips a beat for an entirely different reason now, and he knows that he’s blushing with the way Jungkook looks at him. He just hopes that his face is still red enough from running that no one will notice.
“Does that mean that you’ll come to eat lunch with us?” Jungkook asks hesitantly, eyes all wide and innocent, and if Taehyung looks into them for long enough he’s sure to find some guilt still hidden away in there as well.

Without thinking about it, Taehyung ruffles Jungkook’s hair and smiles as the younger teen ducks away, out of his grasp, and complains.

“Of course I’m coming with you. Have you ever seen me deny a meal that’s paid for by someone else?”

Chapter End Notes

Come talk to me on tumblr, where you can also find a recent post linking to my instagram. :)

In other news, I’m ready to fight you all (once again from my hospital bed) for BTS tickets in London! ;)

Chapter 40

Chapter Notes

Guess who's back, probably earlier than you thought. They couldn't go through with the big chemo surgery, so instead I'm starting Immunotherapy soon. Fun times ahead, at least I'm done with surgeries now. Also your girl got tickets for BTS in London both days, praying side effects won't be bad so I'll get to enjoy the concerts.

As always, thanks so much for your lovely comments. Right now it seems you guys are pretty divided on the Vminkook issue, half of you glad they made up and the other half saying that they haven't done enough for Tae's forgiveness yet. It was super interesting to read your different opinions on the issue!

Hope you enjoy this new chapter. :) x

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Graduation song gets released right after Jungkook’s graduation, and it’s met with little reaction from the general public, which was to be expected. BigHit is a small company after all, and there are not really many people anxiously awaiting Bangtan Sonyeondan’s debut, especially not without an official debut date. However, the band has gained a small traction of followers on Twitter, which is exciting.

After Jungkook’s graduation things slowly start to settle down for good. Taehyung still wouldn’t call either Jimin or Jungkook a good friend again, or even a friend for that if he’s entirely honest, but it’s the tentative beginning of rebuilding something that had looked inevitably lost a few weeks ago.

Life continuous on as it did before. It’s practice, recording, lessons, practice, more recording, more lessons. Jimin still goes to school in the midst of all of that, and Taehyung thinks that it’s pretty impressive that he manages to pull it off, because out of all of them Jimin practices the hardest. He’s constantly seeking a vocal coach, asks the dance teacher how he can improve on a move that he already copies perfectly, and he’s pushing himself to the limit so much and sleeps so little that Taehyung fears he might actually collapse soon if he doesn’t slow down. And on top of that, he still tries to make time for his mysterious girlfriend.

“You could break up with her,” Hoseok suggests one night, when Jimin tries to sneak out of the dorm but gets caught anyway, looking absolutely exhausted but insisting that he has to go visit her. “You said you’d do it anyway, why not now? It would take one thing off your plate.”

Jimin grimaces and his eyes flit over to Jungkook, the two of them sharing a look that doesn’t go unnoticed by Taehyung. “I can’t do that, hyung. I’d feel terrible breaking up with her out of the blue. I’m trying to work it out slowly, let her down gently.”

“Such a gentleman,” Hoseok teases. “Do you at least finally have a picture of her? I’m curious to see your type.”

Namjoon, who had been lying on the couch unresponsive and reading a book, perks up as well. “I’d like to see her too.”
Jimin blushes and fiddles with his flip phone. “The quality’s really bad,” he murmurs, which isn’t a surprise because the quality of flip phone cameras is naturally bad.

“I don’t care about that,” Hoseok exclaims and gets off the couch, making grabby hands at Jimin’s phone. “Show me!”

Jimin pulls his phone out of reach, but relents with a sigh and flips open the phone, pulling up a picture he deems good enough.

With his curiosity now aroused, Taehyung also gets up from the couch and glances over Jimin’s shoulder to take a look, Namjoon crowding them from the other side.

The quality of the picture is really bad, it’s a bit blurry and was obviously taken at night time, the two faces on it illuminated by a streetlamp that causes the entire picture to be grainy.

“That’s truly a terrible picture,” Hoseok complains. “I can barely recognize you on it.”

It’s true, Jimin is barely recognizable with his facemask tucked under his chin and eyes hidden under the shadow of a cap. There’s a smile on his face, but it looks off. Taehyung doesn’t have much experience with relationships – none at all, to be entirely honest – but he thinks that if he was to take a picture with someone he cares about, he’d definitely look happier in the photograph. For fucks sake, Jimin looks more cheerful in every selca he’s taken with the members, his eyes formed into crescents from smiling so big and cheeks round like a chipmunk’s.

Half of the face of the girl next to him is obscured by a mask as well. Her skin is pale, and Taehyung thinks that her eyes are very expressive. They remind him of a cat, sharp and observing.

Taehyung squints at the picture, but jumps back in surprise when Jimin quickly flips the phone shut.

“Enough ogling my girlfriend,” he says jokingly, but the tone is forced. Again, his eyes flit nervously to Jungkook, who watches all of them silently. Hoseok and Namjoon whine, asking for a better picture, but Jimin shakes them off.

Taehyung returns to the couch. He sinks into the cushions next to Jungkook, who has gone back to reading his comic book, while Namjoon and Hoseok trail after Jimin into the hallway to harass him some more.

“What’s the name of Jimin’s girlfriend again?” Taehyung asks as Jungkook flips the page.

“Her name’s Eun-Ji,” Jungkook says, sounding bored.

Taehyung’s eyebrows draw together as he tries to match that name to the face and wonders why he thinks that this wasn’t the first time he has seen her.

“She seems oddly familiar,” he murmurs to himself, surprised that Jungkook listened to him while reading.

“Hyung said that she’s a model. I think she’s done some popular ramyeon commercial fairly recently,” Jungkook answers and looks up at Taehyung sharply. “Maybe that’s why.”

“ Might be,” Taehyung agrees and that’s the end of that conversation. He’d love to ask why Jimin is so secretive about his girlfriend, but he doubts that Jungkook would openly discuss Jimin’s relationship with him so he leaves the youngest member be and goes to wash up. Still, Eun-Ji’s eyes don’t leave his mind and he wonders if it’s really only because his subconscious is playing
tricks on him after having seen them in a ramyeon commercial.

Hoseok gets introduced on twitter a few days after the Graduation Song is put on Youtube, and as far as the public is concerned, all members of Bangtan Sonyeondan are now officially introduced to the world. The band goes out for a small midnight snack after dance practice is over at the end of the day in order to celebrate. Taehyung opts out of eating, his stomach feeling too queasy. Jimin also refuses food, intent to stick to the diet they should all be following. The choreography for ‘No More Dream’ is in it’s final stages of development now that they’re a fixed group for good, and one of the new moves includes all of them lifting up their shirts, which is ridiculous. Taehyung doesn’t have a six-pack and he’s not really comfortable with the idea of lifting his shirt up on camera, but their choreographer was relentless when the boys asked to take that part out of the choreography. All of them are required to work on their six-packs now. It’s dumb because they’re all too skinny anyway, and literally no one will take them serious if they flaunt their not-particularly spectacular stomachs. Jimin is the only one with a somewhat defined stomach from years of dancing. He’s the one who could most likely get away with indulging in food, and yet he just sits with the rest of the boys and refuses to even taste anything. Taehyung admires that determination.

That night he can’t fall asleep, no matter how hard he tries. At 5 a.m., after tossing and turning on his mattress to no avail, he eventually leaves the bedroom and sends a text message to Eomma, asking her if he can pick up Soonshim for a walk. She replies within minutes that he can drop by whenever he is free, and Taehyung is grateful for the distraction. He leaves a note on his whereabouts on the kitchen counter for whoever finds it first and quickly shrugs on his jacket. As he’s about to put on his shoes, he can hear the door to the bedroom open and freezes. So much for his plan to sneak out. Surely whoever it is will tell him to stop being stupid and catch up on some more hours of sleep before another dreadful day of rehearsals starts.

“Hyung,” Jungkook asks, sleep evident in the scratchiness of his voice, “where are you going?”

Taehyung’s shoulders sag, because he knows that he won’t be able to actually go out now. Jungkook has turned into a tick, always latching on to him wherever he’s going, as if he’s afraid that Taehyung will disappear into thin air. If Taehyung leaves the dorm now, it surely won’t be without Jungkook.

“I’m going for a walk,” Taehyung answers nonchalantly, and just as he predicted, Jungkook is eager to join him. Taehyung grimaces. He doesn’t want to turn Jungkook away, because the youngest member seems to have developed some serious issues after their fight. Taehyung wonders if he’s trying to prove that he can be a good friend, that it’s the guilt nagging at him that makes him so annoyingly clingy.

“Ehm…” he scratches the back of his neck and tries to find the right words. “I’m actually going for a walk with Soonshim.”

Jungkook’s entire face lights up and Taehyung knows that it was the wrong thing to say. He wonders if Jungkook even knows that Soonshim is Taehyung’s dog, or if he really bought into the lie of it being a friend’s dog.

“That’s even better! We had planned that for a while anyway!”

“Ah, yes…” Taehyung trails off and curses himself. They had indeed planned this back in January, before everything went to hell. Taehyung remembers, but he hadn’t thought that Jungkook would remember as well.
“Let me get changed really quick, I promise it will only be a minute!”

“Jungkook—” Taehyung tries to call after him quietly to not wake up the rest of the members, but Jungkook is already hurrying down the narrow hallway to get ready, and Taehyung knows that if he says no now, he’ll break Jungkook’s heart.

Well, he had meant to have a talk with Jungkook about everything anyway, might as well throw him into the deep end of the pool.

With a sigh, Taehyung finishes putting on his shoes and leans against the wall to wait, wondering just how he can possibly introduce Jungkook to his old life.

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Getting to the part of the city Taehyung used to live in takes a while. The busses aren’t crowded yet as rush hour hasn’t started, but workers are already occupying some of the seats, watching the world outside the window drift by with tired eyes.

“I’ve never been to this part of Seoul before,” Jungkook frowns when they make it to a less popular area, and Taehyung thinks to himself that it would have been best if it had stayed this way.

“Listen, Jungkook. When we go and grab Soonshim, I need you to stay with me, okay? Close to me. Don’t talk to anyone. If anyone talks to you, ignore them. If anyone talks to me, ignore them as well. This is important, okay? For both of our safety.”

Jungkook looks at Taehyung with wide eyes.

“Hyung—”

“Save the questions for later, okay? We’ll grab Soonshim, and then we’ll go to a nicer part of the city. Understood?”

The younger teen nods quietly, before averting his eyes to the outside world. His leg is bouncing up and down in a quick rhythm that makes Taehyung nervous, so he places his palm on Jungkook’s knee. Jungkook jolts in surprise, but stops immediately.

“You don’t need to be nervous. Just careful.”

Walking from the bus stop to Eomma’s flat is thankfully going smoother than Taehyung had imagined. He knows the streets like the back of his hands, so he knows which alleys to pass by quicker and streets to steer clear of. As the city is waking up, most of the human rats have already returned to the sewer, so there’s not all that much hassle to avoid. They pass by two prostitutes, but Taehyung simply glares at them as they glare back, and Jungkook stays next to him, facing the ground and his grip on Taehyung’s elbow almost painful.

“You can relax now,” Taehyung says after they have entered the dingy apartment building Eomma lives in. Taehyung takes two stairs at the time and Jungkook follows swiftly, and when they stand in front of Eomma’s door, both boys are out of breath.

Taehyung knocks, and before he can hear Eomma, he already hears the barking of dogs. As always, the second the door opens, a white ball of fur rushes towards Taehyung, tail swishing in excitement.

Once Soonshim has calmed down under Taehyung’s affectionate touch, the trainee greets the old lady with a hug, almost tripping over the dog as it tries to get between them.
“Eomma,” Taehyung says, “it’s so good to see you.”

He squeezes her and feels her bony hands on his shoulders. “Why are you so thin? Are you not eating enough?”

“Don’t worry about me, Eomma,” Taehyung soothes her, “I’m taking care of myself just fine.”

Taehyung turns around as the woman cocks her head and looks at Jungkook, a disapproving frown on her face.

“Aigoo, Taehyungie, you should know better than to bring innocent pretty boys to this part of the city.”

“It’s just to pick up Soonshim,” Taehyung promises. “Eomma, this is Jeon Jungkook. He’s also a trainee.”

The old lady eyes up Jungkook quietly from head to toe, while Soonshim barks at Taehyung’s feet and Jungkook shifts awkwardly, before seemingly remembering himself and bowing deeply, quietly saying that he’s pleased to meet her.

“Not as handsome as the other one, but definitely a beauty in the making!” Eomma says with a grin.

Taehyung whines.

“The other one?” Jungkook asks confusedly.

“Ah, what was his name? Jae?”

“I’ve brought Jin with me once,” Taehyung explains, before turning his attention back to Soonshim. “Hey, big boy, did you miss me? Did you miss me? I missed you too, so much.”

They bring Soonshim to a park in a better part of Seoul, and Eomma offers to pick him up when they are finished, because “It’s really not safe for a boy like Jungkook in a place like this.”

For a while, they walk through the park quietly, following wherever Soonshim leads by pulling the leash. Taehyung knows that Jungkook is dying to ask questions though, like a cooking pot ready to spill over.

“Go ahead, ask your question,” Taehyung sighs, and braces for impact.

“Eomma?” is the first word out of Jungkook’s mouth. He sounds absolutely disbelieving.

“She’s not my mother. It’s just what the kids on the street call her. She looks after Soonshim for me, has done so since back when I lived on the street.”

“You lived on the street?” Jungkook asks in disbelief, before shaking his head, as if trying to bring order to his questions. “What about the friend that Soonshim belongs to?”

“I’m that friend. I brought him with me from Daegu.”

“Why did you come from Daegu with a dog and end up homeless? At what- how old were you?”

“My dad,” Taehyung answers, and he figures that’s enough of an answer. He’s told them that his father was abusive in the past, and he’s sure that Jungkook is smart enough to count one plus one
together. “You seem awfully surprised for someone who already knows some of this stuff.”

“Hyung,” Jungkook says, and pointlessly gesticulates with his hands, trying to find the right words to express his thoughts. “It’s one thing to hear about stuff. It’s another thing entirely to- to see that kind of neighbourhood. You lived there, didn’t you?”

“Yes. But now that we’re talking, I want to know things as well. When did you find out? How?”

“I overheard you talking to the others when you all thought I was asleep. I think you told Hobi-hyung that night. I didn’t mean to listen, I swear. You told them not to tell me, and you sounded so serious. So I made sure you didn’t know that I knew.”

Taehyung sighs. It’s a drawn-out sigh full of frustration and tiredness. He remembers the night he told Hoseok in the living room. He shouldn’t be surprised that Jungkook was able to listen, they weren’t exactly quiet and the walls in their flat are barely existent.

“How did you find out about Namjoon and Jin-hyung then?” Taehyung asks, because he’s curious now.

Jungkook makes a disgusted face, and that’s all Taehyung needs to know.

“The walls in our dorm-”

“-are not very soundproof,” Taehyung ends the sentence and thanks the heavens that it wasn’t him who witnessed that spectacle. He’s still trying to come to terms with the fact that Namjoon must have been the one to download gay porn on their work computer, and that’s as far as he’ll allow himself to think of this issue. Never any further.

“I won’t ask anymore questions,” Jungkook eventually says after quietly observing Soonshim for a minute, taking Taehyung by surprise. “If you’ll tell me, I’ll gladly listen to your troubles, but I don’t think I deserve to quench my curiosity right now. I’ve really fucked up when I said what I said. I want to treat the issue with the respect it deserves. I don’t think that I’ve fully understood the extent of the situation yet, but seeing where you come from has made me realize some things. I’ve said it before, but I’m truly sorry, hyung. Instead of me asking questions and you being uncomfortable, why don’t we play with Soonshim? I think all three of us would feel more joy that way.”

Taehyung is taken aback by the sincerity of those words that are essentially said by a child. He knows that Jungkook is mature for his age, but he rarely articulates himself so well or expresses his thoughts so clearly.

“I said you could ask questions, but I’d honestly like that more. I told you that you’re forgiven, but I hope you understand that the trust I used to have in you isn’t as easily repairable.”

The younger teen nods seriously.

“I promise I’ll make it up to you,” Jungkook says and holds out his pinkie. Taehyung frowns as he links his pinkie with Jungkook’s, the determination in the other member’s eyes visible. Taehyung doesn’t voice it out loud, but he doesn’t think that it’s really possible to actually make up for that kind of betrayal.

Chapter End Notes
Come talk to me on tumblr or follow my Instagram. :)

Up until here you'll notice that BTS real life Twitter activities from December to Hoseok's reveal in February match up with this fic. From now on though I'm taking more liberty because nothing all that exciting happened on Twitter for a while. Muahahaha, the freedom!
Chapter 41

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for your continuing support on this fic. By now, your comments have turned into discussions as well on the characters and their actions, and it's really interesting to read. I enjoy it a lot, because I've never written the kind of fics before that trigger that kind of discussion and it's nice to get an insight into what other people think about it, especially your opinions are very diverse!

I hope you get to enjoy some warm spring days, and that you enjoy the new chapter as well! :) x

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Taehyung’s feet hurt, and his shoulders hurt, and his arms hurt, and really everything hurts. It doesn’t help that his skin is disgustingly slick with sweat, and his clothes are sticking to him like a diving suit. It’s still cold outside in Seoul at the end of February, but the practice room feels like a sauna, unbearably hot.

He’s not really doing it on purpose – really, he isn’t – but Taehyung can’t bring himself to look away when Jungkook peels his shirt off to change into a new one. He’s skinny, his ribcage being visible, but that’s really not what Taehyung thinks about when he stares at Jungkook. Quite frankly, he’s not thinking about anything really, not even realizing that he’s been ogling the youngest member until Yoongi comes over and pats him on the back.

“Are we going to talk about you pining over Jungkook or should we just pretend that it’s not obvious?”

Taehyung shakes off Yoongi’s hand and turns away, trying to hide the blush. “I’m not.”

“Sure,” Yoongi says, dragging out the word mockingly. “So we’re pretending then.”

“Hyung,” Taehyung frowns. “Seriously, let it be.”

There must be something in Taehyung’s voice that makes Yoongi back down, but he still looks at Taehyung with an arched eyebrow as if to say “Just because you ignore it doesn’t mean it isn’t there” before shifting the conversation to something else.

Taehyung listens half-heartedly, eyes darting back to Jungkook now, who’s fully dressed again, hair sticking out in all directions and laughing at something that Jin had said.

With every passing day that Jungkook and Taehyung spend together carefully trying to fix what was broken, Taehyung has to try and fend off the feelings he had developed for Jungkook more and more.

Although “feelings” is a big word. Crush, then. His crush on Jungkook develops splendidly, and it’s a problem, because it slowly starts to affect the way he acts around Jungkook, or how he interacts with him.

It doesn’t help that apparently all of his hyungs have picked up on it. They don’t tease him as
much, because they know that the entire situation makes him feel uncomfortable, but every now and then one of them will remark something that leaves Taehyung sputtering, face turning bright red in embarrassment. Oddly enough, none of them try to discourage his festering emotions. Taehyung doesn’t know why his hyungs aren’t just telling him to come to his senses, but he thinks that maybe it’s because they’re trying to be considerate of his feelings. They must know that a crush is a novelty for Taehyung, because there’s no such thing as time for childish feelings when protecting oneself from an abusive father or fending for oneself on the streets of Seoul, managing to survive only by selling sex.

So they indulge him on his dumb schoolboy crush, and Taehyung really doesn’t know if he’s grateful for that or not.

Namjoon catches him off guard one time, openly offering to talk about his sexuality with him, and Taehyung sprints in the other direction with a feeble excuse, not ready to have that open talk with anyone anytime soon.

“Now I can’t tell if you’re staring at him again or just spaced out,” Yoongi muses, and Taehyung shakes his head to get rid of the memory.

“Just spaced out,” he clarifies, and hopes that Yoongi finds someone else to annoy.

The door to their practice room opens and one of the managers pops his head in.

“Jimin?” he calls out, and the dancer jogs over. Taehyung can’t hear what they’re talking about as they have a hushed conversation, but next thing he knows Jimin is packing his things and excusing himself from practice.

“Did something happen?” Namjoon asks in concern, but Jimin just shakes his head and promises to tell them later, before scurrying off after the manager.

“That was…weird,” Hoseok observes, and all of them agree. It’s never a good sign when someone gets summoned by a manager, especially not at this time of night. “Did his evaluation not go well?”

“He’s still having a bit of trouble with getting the modern dance style out of his Hip Hop dancing, but other than that he did well,” Namjoon says. “So it shouldn’t concern his performance. And if it concerned the band, I’d be with him right now. Let’s hope it’s nothing too serious.”

As one of them is missing and it’s already past 9 p.m., the dance instructor has mercy on them and sends them home. The decision is met with cheers, and everyone is quick to pack up.

Jungkook keeps playing with the strap of his bag nervously throughout the entire drive home and Taehyung watches him intently. He glances around the van quickly to make sure that no one else is paying attention to them, before leaning into Jungkook and whispering in his ear: “You know where Jimin went, right?”

It’s been obvious to him from the start, how everyone was confused about Jimin being retrieved by the manager but Jungkook didn’t utter a word, disregarding the announcement.

“And you know how Hoseok-hyung said no more secrets, remember?”

Taehyung feels Jungkook shudder and leans back again to look at the younger teen. Jungkook’s eyes are wide and guilt-stricken, and yet again Taehyung feels betrayed as he realizes that he’s been right in his assumption all along: Jungkook and Jimin are still hiding something from the others, and that... that hurts.
“You were quick enough to throw Namjoon, Jin and me under the bus, but you think that your own secrets should stay hidden?” Taehyung laughs bitterly. “Don’t worry, I won’t say anything to the others. But I’m honestly disappointed in you.”

“Hyung,” Jungkook starts, but Taehyung cuts him off.

“Save it.” He turns around, nudges Jin in the shoulder to get his attention and gestures to one of his ears, asking to share his earphones. Jin is quick to give him what he’s asked for, and Taehyung settles against him and rests his head on Jin’s shoulder, trying to shut his mind off and enjoy the music. He can’t shake off being hyperaware of Jungkook next to him, as the younger teen has gone back to frantically fidgeting with the strap of his bag. Taehyung closes his eyes, and his chest hurts.

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Taehyung doesn’t mean to overhear the conversation that night between Jungkook and Jimin when Jimin finally comes home sometimes after two in the morning. He’s lying on his mattress and he had been asleep already, but he’d woken up when Jimin had shut the entrance door more loudly than necessary at this ungodly hour of the night. He doesn’t think that any of the other boys have woken up, because they’re all deep sleepers. It’s just him who’s waking up from every tiny noise because that’s what he had to do for years to ensure his safety. Even back when he had still been living with his father, Taehyung had always woken up from the smallest sounds to gauge whether or not his father was on his way to his room, drunk and aggressive. More often than not that gave him enough time to hide in places his father couldn’t find him at in his inebriated state and saved him from violence.

Now it’s just a nuisance, because sharing a flat with six other young men is bound to not be quiet, and nights that Taehyung gets to sleep through entirely are really rare, because someone is always too loud and the walls are thinner than paper.

This must be how Jungkook had listened to Taehyung tell Hoseok what was going on all these months ago. Taehyung’s heart skips a beat as he listens to the two of them talk. Jungkook must have come to the hallway to see Jimin, because Taehyung can hear almost every word they’re saying by the entrance door.

“Did you get it?”

There’s no greeting whatsoever, Jungkook comes straight to the point.

“Jungkook,” Jimin starts, but Jungkook is quick to interrupt him. “Did you get it, hyung?”

Taehyung can hear Jimin sigh, but then there’s silence.

“Fuck,” Jungkook hisses, so Taehyung assumes that Jimin must have shaken his head. He wonders if the two of them know that it’s this easy to listen to them. He wonders if anyone else is awake and listening. Certainly not Namjoon, because Taehyung can hear him snore loudly.

“It’s not that easy. I tried, but I didn’t have the chance to. It’s pretty much impossible on my own.”

“I’ll come with you next time then.”

“Kookie, we’ve talked about this. I really don’t want you to be that involved in it, it’s too dangerous.”

“Tough luck,” Jungkook says and sounds like a defiant toddler. “You said yourself it’s almost impossible on your own.”
Jimin sighs again, and Taehyung is absolutely lost. Did Jimin get what? What’s he involved in? One of the managers picked him up, so obviously management must be involved in some way. For fucks sake, why does it sound like they had sent Jimin on a drug run?

“I think we should tell the others,” Jungkook says after some shuffling around, and Taehyung can hear footsteps. He closes his eyes and pretends to be asleep just in case.

“You know we’re not allowed to,” Jimin says gently.

“Taehyung already knows that something is going on. And you know what Hoseok said about no more secrets. Hyung, what if Hobi hyung leaves again because of us?” Jungkook sounds genuinely distressed, and then another door – presumably the one to their living room which they almost never close – falls shut loud enough to make Taehyung jump, and all that left to hear are muffled voices and fragments of sentences, too distorted to make much sense.

Taehyung’s mind is racing as he tries to figure out what the fuck is going on. He’s considering getting out of bed and making his way to the living room to make them explain, but that would cause more commotion than he’s comfortable facing right now. Taehyung wonders if whatever this is involves Jimin’s girlfriend that he’s acting so mysterious about. What dangerous situation is he in that he doesn’t want to involve Jungkook in it even more than he already is?

“What the fuck,” Taehyung hears quietly and startles so bad that he hits his head on the wall behind him.

“Sorry Tae,” Namjoon whispers, and Taehyung stares down at him incredulously.

“I thought you were asleep?” Taehyung asks in confusion, and he can hear Jin snort.

“Oh please, couldn’t you tell just how fake that snoring was?”

“Can you guys shut up? Some of us are actually trying to sleep,” Yoongi grumbles, and Taehyung is astonished to find out that even Hoseok’s awake, telling Yoongi to take this fucking serious.

“Why are you all awake?” Taehyung asks.

“Oh please, as if you didn’t stay awake because you were curious either,” Yoongi grumbles, obviously tired and grumpy.

“What? No! I woke up because Jimin slammed the entrance door shut…”

“Oh…” Yoongi says, and then it’s quiet for a few seconds. “So what are we going to do about this? Corner them and force out their secret? Pretend we don’t know?”

“Whatever it is, it involves the company,” Namjoon murmurs. He sounds defeated, and Taehyung feels bad for him. Namjoon is the leader of this group, and yet no one seems to actually involve him in anything. That’s certainly not how it should be, and he vows in that moment to be more open with Namjoon, if only to make it easier for him.

“Are you going to leave the company again, Hobi-hyung?” Taehyung asks quietly.

“I think I’m already in too deep,” Hoseok sighs. “Wouldn’t it have been too nice if we only had a blackmailing issue?”

They can hear the door to the living room open and footsteps approach the bedroom. Everyone quietens immediately and there’s some shuffling around. Taehyung closes his eyes as the door gets
opened and Jimin and Jungkook sneak in.

“Good night, hyung. Sleep well,” Jungkook says as he crawls under his blanket on the mattress on the floor, and the bunk bed groans under Jimin’s weight as he climbs up.

“Night, Kookie,” Jimin answers, “and don’t worry too much, okay? We’ll manage, and then we’ll tell them. I’m sure they’ll understand when they hear the entire story.”

Taehyung doesn’t fall back asleep immediately, too occupied with trying to figure out what the fuck is going on. He’s sure that neither of the other members falls asleep either.

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Hoseok gently shakes him awake the next morning.

“We have to get to practice soon, Tae.” His eyes are red and his hair is a mess and Taehyung assumes that he doesn’t look any better.

“Five more minutes,” he murmurs and buries his face back into the pillow, but Hoseok shows no mercy.

“I’m sorry, but I really waited until the last possible moment to wake you up. Come on, up you get. We’ll try to have a meeting today, the five of us, to talk about how we’ll proceed.”

Taehyung doesn’t need to be told who the five of them are or what procedure Hoseok is talking about. He already knows. He sits up with a groan, blanket pooling around his lower half, and rubs his eyes.

“Okay, okay, I’ll be up in a second.”

“Don’t make me come back up your bunk again,” Hoseok says teasingly and gently pokes Taehyung’s stomach as a playful threat. Taehyung squirms away with a whine, and Hoseok thankfully climbs down the ladder to give him peace.

Taehyung scratches his head and forces his eyes to stay open. He’s tired, so damn tired, and wishes that he could just hide under the blanket for another round of sleep. He blames Jimin for that tiredness, but on the other hand he’s glad that he had woken up from the slamming door. The secrets in Bangtan Sonyeondan continue to be ever-present.

After climbing down the ladder, Taehyung shuffles into the bathroom, only to find the shower running. He closes the door again quickly and walks into the kitchen instead. When Jin moved in, it had been decided that seven boys and one bathroom weren’t working all that well.

“No locking the door anymore,” Namjoon had said, “we can’t afford to wait for everyone getting done separately in the morning.”

Taehyung doesn’t adhere to that rule and everyone knows that, but no one has dared to say anything about it. He’s just not comfortable with the idea of sharing a bathroom with someone else when he’s under the shower, too many men having sneak ed their way under the warm water cascading down his body and meant to wash him clean, only to make him feel dirty again. The idea of standing under the shower naked and vulnerable with someone else in the room makes his mouth feel dry, even though he knows that the other members wouldn’t hurt him. So he locks the door and whenever someone else is in the shower, waits it out outside.

“Want some tea?” Namjoon asks, and when Taehyung answers with a hoarse “yes”, voice still
scratchy from disuse, Namjoon hands him a mug with hot water, the freshly placed teabag painting it green. Neither mentions that it’s Taehyung’s special mug from Jungkook, but Taehyung thinks that they’re both very aware of that fact.

Taehyung seems to be the only one still in pyjamas and more asleep than awake, because everyone is bustling around the small dorm already.

“Hyung, have you seen my headphones?” Jimin calls through the small flat, and both Namjoon and Jin holler back “Bedroom floor” at the same time from different corners. Namjoon blushes and hides half his face behind the mug he’s holding, and Taehyung grins at him.

“You guys are kind of cute together,” he says. Namjoon looks at him in awe as if hearing these words from Taehyung are the most unexpected thing that could have ever happened, face blushing even redder, and murmurs an awkward “thank you”.

They sit in the kitchen in silence as Taehyung waits for the sound of the shower to stop so he can go brush his teeth. The tea is still hot, but he still takes a small sip that scalds his tongue. It helps against the disgusting cold that settles deep in his bones on a chilly morning like this one and makes him miss his blanket a little less by warming him up.

Yoongi comes into the kitchen, training clothes on already. He’s holding his phone and his notebook in one hand, and with his free one he pulls out a cup from the shelf and fills it with black coffee, not bothering with milk. Taehyung grimaces at the sight, not understanding how anyone could stand the taste.

“I can’t believe it’s already the last day of February. Where has the time gone?” Yoongi says. Namjoon hums affirmatively. Taehyung freezes.

The last day of February. It’s the final day of February. Tomorrow is going to be March. He’d been so occupied with everything that had happened, all the drama going on, that he had forgotten about the ultimatum given to him. Just like that it had been wiped from his brain when really he should have searched for a solution all along.

How about we go somewhere more private to catch up with each other, just like old times? I’m in need of some fun, and if I’m happy I might be inclined to give you until March to become an official member. I’m okay with the world not seeing your pretty face for longer if I get it all to myself for a while, a familiar voice echoes through his mind, and Taehyung can’t suppress the shiver running through his body, this time definitely not from the only mediocre warm air in their apartment.

“Tae, you okay there?” Namjoon asks in concern, resting a hand on his shoulder that Taehyung tries to shrug off as inconspicuously as possible. “You zoned out there for a bit.”

“Yeah,” Taehyung says, voice again scratchy, but this time from nerves and not from sleep. “I’m fine.”

Namjoon looks at him sceptically, but lets it go. Taehyung gulps down the hot tea when he realizes that the noise of the shower has stopped, and flees into the bathroom. The mirror is fogged up and the humidity doesn’t help his panicked short breaths.

Taehyung’s time is over. Mr. Kim will be back any day, with more threats and more demands; either Taehyung’s reveal, or Taehyung’s body.

It’s the last day of February, and Taehyung is fucked.
“Hyung, are you okay? You seem on edge,” Jungkook asks as they’ve crammed into the van, on their way to the Big Hit building. Taehyung curses Jungkook’s perceptiveness, because suddenly all eyes are on him with curiosity, and Namjoon’s at this time pretty much permanent frown deepens, certainly not having forgotten Taehyung suddenly freezing up in the kitchen yet.

“I’m fine,” Taehyung forces out and decidedly ignores all questioning glances by looking out of the window. His mind is racing, because it’s the end of February and this is as long as Mr. Kim promised him not to make demands, but February is over tomorrow and Taehyung isn’t a step closer to finding the solution to his problems. He knows now that PD-nim is working on something, but he doesn’t know what it is or how long it will take, and he also knows that once again he’s facing the problem of threatening to be revealed as an official member.

If he’s confirmed, Mr. Kim will have even more power over him and the entire band and basically the entirety of Big Hit, because really there’s no other bands to manage here, and they’ll be majorly fucked.

But Taehyung doesn’t know how to solve the problem. He can’t offer himself to Mr. Kim, not again. One time was one too many, and he remembers the looks of pain and sadness etched on Jin’s and Namjoon’s faces when they had found out the truth. He promised them to never put himself on the line like this again, and he doesn’t think he’ll have the mental strength to pull through it one more time either. He doesn’t want any more hands on him touching him inappropriately, but what else can he offer other than sexual pleasure to buy them more time? He genuinely doesn’t know.

Fucked. Fucked. Fucked. He’s truly fucked.

Taehyung doesn’t have any more time to ponder the problem as they are ushered out of the van, already ten minutes late to their dance practice thanks to being stuck in traffic. Some of the members stretch their tired muscles after getting out of the car or fall into quiet conversation as they make their way to the dance studio, but Taehyung stays behind all of them, not engaging and with his head down.

“We’ll send Jimin and Jungkook on a grocery run around lunch time and then we’ll meet in the studio,” Yoongi lets him know quietly before dance practice starts.

Taehyung keeps making mistakes. He neither has the focus for dance practice, nor sorting out the Jungkook and Jimin situation, but he knows that he can’t let any of the others know. Lunch break can’t come fast enough, and at the same time Taehyung wishes it would never come.

Jungkook and Jimin let themselves be bullied into leaving to grab lunch easily. Namjoon deliberately sends them to a restaurant that’s a bit further away from the studio, claiming that he’s been craving their food lately and Hoseok loudly chimes in that that’s a great idea.

The second Jungkook and Jimin have turned around the corner down the hallway, they all rush to the small studio. By now the dingy black couch feels so familiar to Taehyung that he doesn’t even mind the spring pressing into his back anymore. Namjoon snags the chair at the desk, so the other three squeeze on the small couch as well, making it too crowded. Taehyung doesn’t particularly care though that Jin is basically pressed against his side, his mind still far off in the distance, grappling with the Mr. Kim situation at hand.

“Here’s what we know,” Namjoon says, grabbing the attention of the others. He’s leaning forward, elbows resting on his knees and hands clasped together. “Jimin is hiding something. Jungkook knows about it.”
“Hypocrite,” Yoongi says, and Taehyung wants to agree. All their secrets were so readily exposed by him, and yet he keeps quiet about Jimin.

“Hyung, that’s an issue for a later discussion. For now, we need to figure out what to do. Jimin is involved with something, and obviously it involves management as well, because they were the ones to fetch him.”

There’s quiet among the five of them as four are thinking, while Taehyung’s mind drifts off to Mr. Kim once again.

“You don’t think he’s getting blackmailed as well?” Hoseok asks timidly.

“PD-nim doesn’t bother to include me in my own blackmailing case, so I doubt that if Jimin was blackmailed, he’d be this involved in it,” Taehyung points out. “They’re not even telling me their plans, for fucks sake.”


“Honestly it’s pointless to play a guessing game on what he’s doing. The important question is, how are we going to react? Honestly, I say corner the two of them and demand answers. If they don’t spill, Hoseok can always pretend to leave Bangtan again. That’ll make Jungkook talk,” Yoongi says dryly.

“I agree that we need to talk to them, but cornering and threatening aren’t the way to go,” Namjoon says, forehead wrinkled.

“What if one of us approaches and says they’ve overheard them talking last night? Pretend that no one else knows? They might open up easier that way,” Jin suggests.

“You’re the one studying acting, you do it,” Yoongi huffs, obviously displeased that his idea was discarded.

“Taehyung-ah, what would you do?” Namjoon asks, and Taehyung tunes back into the conversation again, only having listened half-heartedly.

“You want to know what I think?” Taehyung asks in astonishment. He’s the youngest of the five, and although he’s already noticed that age hierarchy is not as highly regarded among the members as some other people, he didn’t think he’d have much to offer to the conversation, with the older ones surely knowing how to handle it.

“You’re the one who had to hide the biggest secret. If it was you in that situation, how would you want to be approached?”

“Definitely don’t corner them and blurt everything out,” Taehyung says and glances to Yoongi, who lowers his head a bit. The singer is sure that all of them are reminded of the moment Jungkook decided to spill everything, and the terrible aftermath that followed. “That will only provoke them. Talk with them about it level-headedly. You’re the leader, I think that you should sit down with them – or maybe only Jimin, as Jungkook seems to be a witness only – and openly talk about it. Jimin can’t deny that something is going on, we’ve all heard him admitting to it. And he looks up to you, hyung. I think if you’d sit down with him and lay your cards on the table, he’ll be willing to share his as well. And don’t be harsh on him. You know that he’s quick to think of himself as a failure.”

Namjoon nods along as Taehyung explains his point of view.
“That sounds the most reasonable,” he agrees, and in the next moment Jin is messing up Taehyung’s hair, jokingly gushing over how smart he is. It’s a move they usually pull with Jungkook, and Taehyung now understands the younger teen’s dislike of the teasing. He growls and ducks away from the touch, trying to comb his hair back in place with his fingers.

“Are we all in agreement on that plan?”

“Only if Jimin shares his secret with everyone,” Hoseok speaks up, and the others murmur in agreement.

When their plan is finally finished, Namjoon set to talk to Jimin after dance practice in the evening, the leader leans back in his chair, shoulders dropping. He looks tired – they all do, Taehyung belatedly notices – and Taehyung remembers that they all got even less sleep than he had done that night, actually waiting for Jimin to return.

The tense situation in the room loosens up, and the members start to talk among each other. Taehyung doesn’t really partake in this conversation either, because once again his mind reels back to Mr. Kim and what he should do. For a moment, he considers bringing up the topic, but he quickly throws that idea away. Openly discussing Mr. Kim with his members? Never. He thinks that both Jin and Namjoon might actually suffer a stroke if Taehyung tells them the time of the agreement has run out, and Yoongi and Hoseok don’t even know about it in the first place. It’s better to keep quiet, as it has always been better to keep quiet.

Unsurprisingly, the conversation shifts to Jimin’s girlfriend and how weird he is about her.

“How does he refuse to show us proper pictures of her?” Hoseok whines with a pout. “It’s not like we’re going to steal her from him.”

“Jungkook mentioned to me that she’s a model for ramyeon,” Taehyung mentions offhandedly, and immediately all eyes are on him. “What, did you not catch that conversation?”

“Let’s search her online,” Hoseok suggests with excitement, and Namjoon immediately spins around in his chair and pulls up to the desk, turning on the computer.

Boys will be boys, Taehyung thinks in amusement as the other members get up from the couch and crowd around the computer with new-found energy, obscuring his view of the desktop entirely.

“What ramyeon brand is she modelling for?” Yoongi asks.

Taehyung shrugs. They didn’t get into much detail. “One that must be highly visible, because she seemed familiar to me.”

“Search for her name and ramyeon,” Jin says, boxing Namjoon’s shoulder gently to make him hurry up.

“What was her name again?” Namjoon asks, pulling up Naver.

“Kim Eun-Ji, I think,” Yoongi says.

Taehyung lays down on the couch, tuning out the chattering. He’s feeling tired, eyelids drooping, and maybe he can catch a few more minutes of sleep before Jimin and Jungkook return with lunch.

The boys holler all of a sudden, and Taehyung grins to himself. They must have found her then. He catches some phrases about looking at pictures and looking at her credentials of what is apparently a small acting career. It’s a nice background noise that lulls him to sleep.
The sudden silence that fills the room gives him chills, and Taehyung looks up from where he’s laying.

“What the fuck?” Yoongi says quietly. No one replies. “What the actual fuck?”

“What’s going on?” Taehyung asks, and all eyes dart to him, varying looks of confusion written all over their faces.

“I think you need to see this,” Namjoon says, and even his voice wavers.

There’s something wrong, that’s easy to tell, but it’s so unnerving because Taehyung doesn’t know what is wrong. His heart immediately starts hammering in his chest as he gets up from the couch, observing his hyungs and their expressions of utter shock. His mouth is dry and he’s sweating, and he doesn’t even know why. Anxiety thrums through his veins as he has no idea what he’s about to see. The worst case scenario flits through his mind: Taehyung’s video has made it online.

But that’s impossible, because then Mr. Kim would have no more leverage over Bangtan Sonyeondan, and why the fuck would his video even show up while his hyungs are searching for Kim Eun-Ji? Taehyung quickly discards that thought, but the anxiety remains.

Hoseok makes room for him to get closer to the computer. Taehyung’s not wearing his glasses or contacts, so the picture opened up on the desktop is blurry, but he can make out the shape of two humans on it. He squints as he comes closer, and he finally can see it clearly.

On the left side of the picture, Kim Eun-Ji stands in a stunning red evening gown, long dark hair falling over her shoulders, those familiar eyes lined with fine laugh lines as she beams at the camera. On the right side stands a man in a suit and tie, arm wrapped around the teenage girl’s shoulder.

Taehyung’s brain takes a moment to make the connection, what he’s seeing on the screen too puzzling to immediately wrap his head around.

Only when his brain catches up with what he’s seeing, he realizes that the kind eyes of the girl are not familiar because he’s seen her in a ramyeon commercial before, but because they’ve stared at her in the form of a picture in a wallet time and time again.

Taehyung inhales sharply as realization hits.

Next to Kim Eun-Ji, in her beautiful red evening gown and sporting a smile so bright it’s blinding, stands Mr. Kim. His smile looks like a copy paste of the teenage girl’s, and his cold dark eyes pierce Taehyung through the computer screen.

Chapter End Notes

Come talk to me on tumblr or follow my Instagram. :)


Chapter Notes

You can tell that I'm supposed to do something else (write a master thesis *cough*) by the fact that I'm updating quicker, because I'm procrastinating on doing said thing by writing this fic. Thank you so much for the comments on the last chapter. I'm glad to see that some of you were caught by surprise, but I'm equally as pleased to know that some of you had already figured out what's happening before that. :D Sending this chapter to you from the hospital bed as I'm hooked on IV's for my first Immunotherapy, surrounded by the constant angry beeping of the blood pressure monitor. Hope you enjoy it. :) x

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Someone correct me if I’m wrong, but this looks like Jimin is dating Mr. Kim’s daughter, in which case: what the fuck,” Yoongi says. And he’s right. It does look like Jimin is dating Mr. Kim’s daughter, because the man on that picture is most definitely Mr. Kim, and it’s hard to deny that the teenage girl next to him is his daughter. They have the exact same smile and even share the shape of the eyes. And even if the likeness of the two wasn’t enough of a hint, Taehyung remembers her face from one of the two pictures inside Mr. Kim’s wallet that he had proudly shown to him, because to Mr. Kim his two daughters are his biggest pride.

Eun-Ji, the older one, and Choon-Hee, who only turned ten years old last year if Taehyung remembers correctly. Mr. Kim liked bragging about them, about how good they were in school, how clever they were at learning a foreign language, how skilled they were at playing instruments. And Jimin was dating one of them.

“Let’s not jump to rushed conclusions,” Namjoon sighs, “she might not be-“

“She’s his daughter. I know she is. He showed me her picture before,” Taehyung interrupts him.

“Well fuck.”

Taehyung’s head is spinning. He needs to sit down. Stumbles back to the couch and holds on to it for dear life. Jimin is dating Mr. Kim’s daughter. Since when? How? Why?

“Does Jimin even know who Mr. Kim is?” Jin. Always the voice of reason.

Does Jimin know who Mr. Kim is? That’s a valid question. Taehyung doesn’t know. He doesn’t know if Jungkook knows that either. Jungkook knows that he’s being blackmailed, but they’ve never talked about the specifics of it, simply because Taehyung refused to. He should have asked, should have inquired just how much Jungkook really knows. He knows that Jungkook listened in when Taehyung had told Hoseok everything, but at that time Hoseok had already known that something was wrong with Mr. Kim, and Taehyung can’t remember just how much they discussed the man in question that night. Quite honestly, he doesn’t remember much at all from the time he was coming clean to Hoseok, so he’s not entirely sure what it means when Jungkook says that he knows. Because there’s knowing and then there’s knowing, and Taehyung doesn’t know into which of those two categories Jungkook falls.
“I don’t know if he knows,” Taehyung says quietly. He doesn’t think that the other members have even heard him at first, all still too transfixed by the picture.

The thought of Jimin interacting with Mr. Kim spikes anxiety in Taehyung’s heart, because Mr. Kim is a man that should be kept far away from pretty boys. Taehyung knows that best.

“He must know,” Yoongi answers. “There’s no way in hell he can’t know.”

“Then why the hell is he dating his daughter?” Hoseok hisses.

“How the fuck am I supposed to know?” Yoongi shoots back.

“Guys,” Jin hushes them, “this is not the time to argue. Joon-ah, I think you should talk with Jimin now. We’re not going to have a productive practice if this isn’t sorted out.”

Namjoon hums in agreement, before spinning around on the chair to look at Taehyung. “You’re coming with me, okay? You don’t need to do any talking if you don’t want to, but I need you there.”

Taehyung nods hesitantly. This is a conversation he doesn’t want to have, and he doesn’t even want to be a part of it if he only has to sit silently at the back. Is he curious about what the fuck is going on? Of course he is. But he doesn’t like confrontation and he doesn’t want to be a part of this, doesn’t want to think or hear any more from Mr. Kim. Fuck.

“Should we return to the dance studio to wait for them?” Jin suggests.

“Yes. Don’t tell Jungkook what exactly is going on, okay? He’s not a part of this. Just say for now that there’s been an issue in Jimin’s family or something, nothing to alarm him.”

“But he knows,” Hoseok interferes.

Namjoon silences him by raising a hand: “We know that he knows something, but we don’t know what he knows. Jimin dating Mr. Kim’s daughter is most likely not related to Jimin’s weird secret that Jungkook is in on. There’s no way.”

“This is so fucked up,” Yoongi says once again as Namjoon minimizes the browser window. “You okay, Taehyung-ah?”

Taehyung shrugs his shoulders from where he’s sitting on the couch. None of this makes any sense to him, so he doesn’t really know how he’s feeling, except for confused and anxious. He’s very disoriented, and everything around him that’s happening feels kind of fuzzy, and really he’d just like to lay down and take a nap and forget about it all.

They go back to the dance studio, and then they wait. Everyone is obviously occupied with their own thoughts. Hoseok starts to practice dance moves in front of the mirror, obviously trying to take his mind off things. Yoongi is pacing. Namjoon and Jin sit next to each other, but they don’t exchange any words either.

“We’re back!” Jimin announces eventually, after long minutes of tense silence. He holds two paper bags up in the air triumphantly and Jungkook shuffles into the room behind him holding on to two more. Immediately sensing the tension, Jimin lowers the bags and scans the room in confusion. “What’s wrong? What happened?”

“Jimin, do you have a few minutes? We need to talk.” Namjoon gets up from where he’s seated, takes the bags from Jimin and hands them over to Hoseok.
“Now? We just brought food.”

“It’s urgent,” Namjoon answers and already grabs Jimin by the shoulder to turn him around and guide him out of the room.

“What’s going on?” Jungkook asks, his young features drenched in concern. “Hyung?”

“Don’t worry about it, Kookie,” Hoseok quickly jumps in and makes sure to link arms with the younger so he can’t follow after them. “Let’s get out the food, yeah? They’ll be back in a minute.”

Taehyung watches quietly, before meeting Yoongi’s eyes. His hyung nods into the direction of Namjoon and Jimin as they’re leaving, Jimin asking a thousand questions and is slightly pushing against Namjoon, demanding to know the problem. When Jungkook is distracted by both Hoseok and Jin, Taehyung slips out of the room to follow them.

“Tae?” Jimin asks quietly as he notices that Taehyung trails after them, quiet like a shadow.

“Just come with us,” Namjoon sighs as he drags the dancer down the hallway and back to the small studio, where he unceremoniously pushes Jimin onto the couch and reclaims the chair, turning back to the computer. Taehyung remembers that Namjoon never closed the browser window of that picture, and he realizes where this is going. Deciding to keep standing by the door as his nerves have already triggered some kind of fight or flight instinct that loudly screams at him to choose flight, Taehyung watches as Namjoon pulls up the picture once again, before spinning around in his chair.

“Do you want to explain this to me?”

Jimin, too, has bad eyesight, and he has to get up from the couch and come closer to see the picture. Once he recognizes what’s going on, the confusion slips from his face and is immediately replaced by a mask of stoic indifference as he sits back down on the couch.

*What if Mr. Kim has already gotten to him?* Taehyung’s anxious mind screams at him as he monitors Jimin’s every reaction closely.

“Why are you showing me a picture of my girlfriend?” he asks calmly, but Jimin’s never been a good actor. Unlike Taehyung, who has practiced to hide his feelings behind a mask within a heartbeat to protect them, Jimin never had the necessity to learn this skill. His lip quivers slightly, and his eyebrows twitch, and his nostrils flair as he tries to take deep calming breaths. Jimin might act unbothered on the outside, but it’s so easy for Taehyung to see that on the inside he’s not calm at all.

*Because Mr. Kim already got to him,* his mind helpfully fills in the blank, and Taehyung feels bile rise at the back of his throat.

“This is a picture of your girlfriend together with one of our sponsors,” Namjoon points out, “who looks to be her father if I’m not mistaken.”

Jimin still looks unfazed, but he’s starting to chew on his bottom lip, a tell-tale sign that he’s not able to keep up that mask for much longer.

“Is that forbidden?”

“It’s not forbidden I suppose, but care to tell me how exactly you came to date our sponsor’s daughter? Where did you meet?”
“Why do you care?” Jimin asks sullenly.

“Jimin,” Namjoon barks all of a sudden, and both Jimin and Taehyung flinch in surprise. “Stop playing fucking games. Why the fuck are you dating the daughter of the man who’s blackmailing Taehyung?”

Namjoon’s red in the face, his chin jutting forward as he stares down the dancer while waiting for a reply. Jimin looks back at him wide-eyed, obviously not having anticipated Namjoon’s outburst. Taehyung hadn’t anticipated it either, pressing himself against the door with his hand on the handle, just in case things are going south. He can’t help it that he’s trembling slightly as his nerves are on edge. The leader must notice Taehyung’s discomfort, because he takes a deep breath and forces himself to smile at Taehyung.

“It’s okay, Tae. I’m sorry, I didn’t want to scream like that. You can leave if you want to, but I’d appreciate if you could come back so we can have this conversation that’s been long overdue.”

Taehyung nods hesitantly, before slipping out of the room as quietly as he can. It’s a relief to get outside, and for the first time he feels like he can properly breathe again.

“You okay?”

Taehyung yelps and jumps so hard that he bumps his elbow into the wall, wincing at the painful impact.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you,” Jin smiles apologetically, holding out a chilled water bottle to the younger teen, which he accepts gratefully. The cold water soothes his frazzled nerves and parched throat.

“Did you hear him scream?” Taehyung asks quietly when he’s done drinking, screwing the bottle closed again.

Jin nods. “It was hard to miss.”

“What are you even doing here, hyung? Shouldn’t you be with Jungkook?”

“The others have him occupied. I thought it wouldn’t be a bad idea to stick around in case the talk doesn’t turn out well.”

That’s nice of Jin, Taehyung supposes. Namjoon might be the leader, but he doesn’t have a reign over his emotions at times, so to have the oldest hyung as a buffer should Namjoon get carried away is a calming thought. They really complement each other nicely, Namjoon the emotional and Jin the rational one.

“I should go back in again,” Taehyung rasps.

“Do you want to?” Jin inquires.

Taehyung wants to say no. Of course he doesn’t want to go back in there. The tension is high, and Taehyung is scared of how this conversation could turn out. He still has no idea why Jimin would be dating Mr. Kim’s daughter, but the more he thinks about it the more he is convinced that it can’t be by coincidence. There’s no way, and he’ll never learn the truth unless he goes back in there.

He has to know if Jimin’s become a victim of Mr. Kim as well, just like him. If he’s being blackmailed with something as well. If Mr. Kim holds some strange power over him that forces Jimin to date his daughter. Taehyung simply can’t imagine that Jimin would be with her out of his
own free will.

“I have to,” he says, and Jin nods understandingly.

Taehyung hands the bottle back to him and takes another deep breath.

“I’ll keep waiting here,” Jin says reassuringly, and that knowledge helps Taehyung find the courage to open the door and go back inside the room.

He hasn’t been missing for long, but a lot must have happened in the time between his exit and his entrance, because Namjoon is no longer on the chair in front of the desk. Instead, he’s kneeling before Jimin, who’s crying into his hands, thin shoulders shaking. Taehyung slowly comes closer.

“I didn’t expect you to come back so soon,” Namjoon says.

Taehyung just shrugs and sits down on the couch right next to Jimin.

“Did you know?” he asks, not sure where the sudden courage to talk stems from, “that you were dating the daughter of the man who blackmailed me with sextapes?”

Taehyung has to know.

Jimin doesn’t reply verbally. He’s still too busy wiping away tears and snot, and as soon as he tries to open his mouth he closes it again, because all that would come out is a pathetic sob. So he just nods.

Taehyung swallows nervously. “Did Big Hit tell you to date her?”

A shake of the head.

“Did Mr. Kim tell you to date her?”

Namjoon looks up at him abruptly in confusion, eyebrows drawn together as he tries to figure out what Taehyung could possibly imply.

Jimin shakes his head once again. Taehyung lets loose a sigh of relief he wasn’t aware he’d been holding back, but that anxiety nagging at the back of his mind still hasn’t been wiped out completely.

“So it was your decision to date her?”

Another nod.

“Why?”

There is so much exasperation in that one word, that for a moment Jimin stills, the fact that he’s crying forgotten for a short amount of time. He looks over to Taehyung, eyes red and wet, his entire face blotchy, lips chapped. Jimin looks like a mess.

“I did it for you.”

Taehyung tries to understand, he really does. Maybe he’s just too stupid, or maybe it’s just too much going on at the moment to wrap his head around that information.

“What do you mean?” Namjoon coaxes the dancer on as it becomes apparent that neither of the two of them is going to say anything else.
Jimin takes a deep breath, and for now the tears seem to have stopped for good, except for one or two strays that must have been left over. He’s looking between Namjoon, still kneeling on the floor in front of him, and Taehyung, and takes a deep shuddering breath:

“Jungkook just started crying one day. I asked what was wrong, and he told me that he had overheard something he wasn’t meant to hear, and that he didn’t know what to do. We were still fighting at the time, or more like I was still acting like a fucking asshole and being pissed at you for always thinking they’d kick you out of the band. I talked Jungkook into telling me what he had heard that bothered him so much, and he must have been so stressed about the situation that he just told me everything. And I felt guilty, because suddenly I understood your fear.”

He stops talking, and when he’s met with two confused faces, he continues dejectedly: “I just realized that the reason you thought they’d kick you out was because of the videos Kookie had told me about. He had said that apparently you’re visible but the face of the guy was blurred out. And I was thinking that if it’s blurred out, there must be the possibility of a version around where he’s visible. I could make it up to you that way, get the tapes, have something against the guy, hand them to you and make up for my mistakes. You wouldn’t have to fear being kicked out again, and we could go back to being friends. Jungkook made me promise not to tell you that I know though.”

Jimin smiles bitterly: “It was a fool-proof plan. I thought it would be so easy.”

“That was your plan? You came up with that yourself?” Namjoon asks to clarify. He sounds just as stunned as Taehyung feels.

“I was acting like a dick towards Taehyung over nothing back then. I wasn’t sure if he’d forgive me, so I thought that this way I’d get his forgiveness for sure.”

“You were my first friend, I would have forgiven you with a simple sorry,” Taehyung says quietly, and Jimin’s tears seem to well up once again. “Does Jungkook know that she’s Mr. Kim’s daughter?”

“He didn’t know anything about my plan at first, but I eventually told him because he was always so distraught that he couldn’t help in any way. I wanted to reassure him. He was constantly worried that they would kick you out of the band if this issue wasn’t sorted soon.”

Taehyung feels guilt in his stomach as heavy as stones. He’s never wanted to worry anyone, yet that’s all he ever does. And then that voice is screaming at him once again, because if Jimin is dating Mr. Kim’s girlfriend, that means that there’s a connection between Jungkook and Mr. Kim.

What if Mr. Kim figures out what is going on? What if he hurts one of them? What if it’s already too late… what if he’s already made advances on pursuing Jungkook? Taehyung gasps at that quietly, but neither Namjoon nor Jimin seem to notice.

“And management?” Namjoon presses forward.

Jimin smiles once more, but again it looks fake, doesn’t reach his eyes. “Why do you think they never kicked me out after finding my text messages with Eun-Ji back in November? Ever since they know, they’ve basically turned me into a spy for them. Call retrieving the tapes from Kim’s house plan B.”

“Plan B? What’s plan A then?”

Jimin shrugs. “I don’t know. Big Hit doesn’t know that Jungkook’s involved in all of this either, and I’d like to keep it that way; keep him away from Mr. Kim.”
He turns around to look at Taehyung once again, looks absolutely exhausted.

“I’m really sorry for the way I treated you all these months ago, but you know that already. To be honest, I wasn’t sure how to act around you, knowing your secret and all, which is why I didn’t approach you that openly anymore. And I hope you understand why I kept this a secret from you as well. I doubt you would have welcomed the idea of me dating the daughter of the man blackmailing you. You’ve kept everyone distant from your past, so I didn’t think you’d accept my help either.”

Taehyung nods. He’s honestly speechless at the moment, no clue what to say. If someone had told him one hour earlier that this was what Jimin had been hiding from all of them, he would have called them a liar, because in no way could Jimin possibly date someone in order to-

He feels dizzy just thinking about it.

“So maybe we should talk to Jungkook,” Namjoon sighs. “Actually scratch that, we should have openly talked with Jungkook a long time ago.”

“More talks,” Taehyung choke out and shakes his head. He can’t possibly do that right now. He needs time to gather his thoughts and breathe. What if Jungkook-

“I’ll talk to him alone,” Namjoon soothes him, “no more talks for you today. Thanks for sticking around for this one.”

Taehyung nods jerkily, and takes this as his invitation to leave the room. Jin is still where he was when Taehyung entered the room, waiting with bated breath and nervously twisting the water bottle between his hands.

“Everything okay?” Jin asks. Taehyung passes him without a word.

He makes his way to the practice room with hurried steps. It shouldn’t be a surprise to find the remaining members in there, all caught in various states of having dinner. Jungkook’s cheeks are puffed out as he’s eating and his eyes go wide in alarm when he sees a distressed Taehyung stumble into the room. Yoongi quickly puts down his chopsticks and gets up.

“What happened?”

Taehyung ignores them and makes a beeline for his bag and jacket. He needs to get out, needs fresh air to process everything he’s heard. He’s trying to shoulder past Yoongi, but Taehyung’s a scrawny teenager and Yoongi, although far from bulky, at least has some muscular strength, effectively holding Taehyung in place and preventing his great escape.

Hoseok reacts just as quickly, taking both bag and jacket from Taehyung as the singer tries to struggle against Yoongi to no avail.

“Taehyung, get your shit together,” Yoongi snaps, and suddenly Taehyung goes still in his arms, his eyes meeting Jungkook’s. The youngest member is gaping at him, food long forgotten, obviously unsure about what to do. He’s frozen in place as he watches his hyungs wrestle, and suddenly Taehyung remembers the conversation between Jimin and Jungkook, Jungkook’s offering to accompany Jimin to wherever he had been going to provide help, and it all makes sense.

“You damn idiot,” Taehyung screams, and now Yoongi and Hoseok aren’t busy anymore with trying to stop him from running away, but from hurtling himself at Jungkook with tears stinging in his eyes. The look of confusion on Jungkook’s face morphs into one of fear of the unknown as he watches the scene unfold in front of him. “How could you put yourself into danger like that?”
Taehyung’s voice cracks, and somehow Yoongi manages to wrestle his arms behind his back, linking their arms to keep Taehyung in place.

“You need to calm down,” Yoongi barks from behind him, but all Taehyung can hear is red hot rage rushing through his ears, blocking out all other sounds.

“How could you be so dumb and throw yourself in harm’s way? How could you not have told one of us about Jimin fucking losing his mind and sacrificing himself?” His voice booms through the empty practice room.

“Taehyung-ah,” Hoseok tries to calm him, but it’s pointless. There’s so much pent up frustration in him, and Jimin has given him the outlet on a silver platter.

“You have no idea what you were up against! What if he had found out? What if he started targeting Jimin or you? For fucks sake, he could have hurt you!”

Taehyung sacks to the floor, going weak in the knees and Yoongi follows down after him with a pained sound.

“He could have hurt you,” Taehyung repeats it again, quiet this time, looking up at Jungkook from where he’s kneeling, and his face twists into a grimace at the thought of that. “Please tell me he didn't hurt you.”

“Hyung,” Jungkook answers, not louder than a whisper. He’s stumbling over to Taehyung and kneeling down in front of him, his warm hands cupping Taehyung’s cheeks gingerly as he makes steady eye-contact. “He didn’t hurt us.”

Taehyung falls forward, his forehead resting against Jungkook’s shoulders as he loses the fight against the tears that had been welling up.

“Oh thank god,” Taehyung sobs in relief.

Chapter End Notes

Come talk to me on tumblr (or scream at me about the comeback trailer and concept photos, honestly either thing is fine because same, I'm also screaming).

(Btw, if this Taekook is so slow-burn that you feel like you need something more to fulfill your needs, let me rec you this angsty and smuty and absolutely perfect Taekook fic: walls gold-plated (but the room feels like you))
Chapter Notes

Thank you all for the love and support on the last chapter. I've said it before, but I honestly mean it that nothing gives me more joy than reading your responses! I see that some of y'all forgave Jimin and JK now. ;)

I wanted this chapter to be longer, which is why I had it sitting in my drafts like this for a few days, but honestly I think the ending of this is good as it is, and adding anything else would have destroyed that. I guess that from here on out, there's going to be a maximum of 6 more chapters which will all be longer.

Hope you enjoy! :) x

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Practice is out of the question after Taehyung’s outburst. He’s still kneeling on the floor, all his anger and fear dissolving into tears that get soaked up in the fabric of Jungkook’s t-shirt, when Namjoon, Jin and Jimin return to the dance studio. It’s chaos when they arrive, Yoongi and Hoseok bombarding them with questions as Taehyung still clings to Jungkook for dear life, while the youngest member repeatedly promises him that he’s fine, Jimin’s fine, nothing happened to any of them.

“It’s all a bit more complex than we expected,” Namjoon says as he tries to calm down Hoseok and Yoongi and explain the situation. Jimin stands behind him, looking drained, and leans against Jin’s shoulder in exhaustion, the oldest member wrapping an arm around him to provide support, both physically and mentally.

“So you’re essentially a spy?” Yoongi asks when Namjoon has given them a quick run-down of what’s going on.

“A ninja,” Hoseok chimes in, and Yoongi elbows him in the ribs while fixing him with a glare that is meant to tell him to stay serious.

“I guess,” Jimin answers timidly. “I didn’t mean to hide it. I just- PD-nim didn’t allow me to tell anyone.”

“You told Jungkook though,” Yoongi points out, and now Hoseok gently nudges him, a silent reminder to focus on the bigger picture and not get hung up on details.

“The important thing is,” Namjoon raises his voice to steer this conversation away from turning into a discussion of who told whom what, “that all of us are really on the same page now.”

Everyone agrees quietly. Taehyung can feel Jungkook relax against him, and he wonders just how difficult it was for Jungkook to be caught in the middle of all of this, harbouring so many secrets that he had to hide from everyone. But now all the secrets are out, or at least that’s what Taehyung hopes, and they can finally move forward as a unit.

Their dance teacher chooses this moment to enter the room again, and freezes as he takes them all
in. Jimin’s eyes are puffy from crying, and Taehyung is still on the floor and his face pressed against Jungkook’s shoulder, body trembling from the leftovers of adrenaline.

“Come back tomorrow,” he tells them with a sigh as Namjoon tries to explain what happened without actually giving away what happened and flounders.

It’s only the early afternoon, and half their lunch is still originally sealed in its plastic boxes, and because the sun is shining outside they decide that the best thing to do now is pack everything up and drive to the Han river. Because it’s so early in the year, the sun isn’t strong enough yet to lounge around in a t-shirt, but with a jacket and a beanie Taehyung feels comfortably warm as he lies on the grass. The birds are chirping on the branches of the trees, and he occasionally picks up pieces of the conversations that the other members are having.

Maybe he should engage in these conversations as well, but he’s too tired to care. He knows they’re talking in more detail about Jimin and Eun-Ji. They’re telling Jungkook that instead of keeping things to himself, it’s better to share them with the people concerned immediately to clear up possible confusions. They talk in hushed and serious voices, but over time the knot of tension seems to unravel and Taehyung can hear them giggle, Jin’s laugh being the easiest of them all to identify.

Taehyung takes a deep breath. His jeans are damp because the earth beneath him is still moist from past gloomy days, and he’s very aware of the rise and fall of his chest. He has his arms above his head, fingers linked to rest the back of his head on them, and a blade of grass tickles the skin on the side of his left hand.

So much has happened in the span of just twenty-four hours and there’s so much new information to process that Taehyung feels a headache coming on from just thinking about it. And then he remembers that it’s March, and that his deal with Mr. Kim has come to an end, and it feels like there’s a stone lodged in his throat all of a sudden, making it hard to breathe.

“Hyung,” Taehyung wheezes, because that imaginary stone makes it just as hard to speak as it does to breathe, and he scrambles up from his lying position, trying to take in deep breaths of air and just calm the fuck down.

Immediately the others are crowding around him in worry. Taehyung chokes on his spit as he’s trying to talk, and starts coughing instead. Someone is patting his back for support.

“What’s wrong?” Namjoon asks, and his eyes scan their surroundings as if there was immediate danger.

Taehyung shakes his head, tears stinging his eyes from the coughing fit and he quickly blinks them away. Just this morning he had planned to not tell any of them about how the deal with Mr. Kim has ended, but now that the tables have turned, that Jimin is involved in some kind of sneaky ninja plan to save Taehyung’s honour and this band’s debut, maybe it’s a good time for Taehyung to stop holding back important information from them as well.

“I just remembered,” Taehyung presses out the words, clears his throat because his voice comes out scratchy, “that Mr. Kim’s deal comes to an end in March. He’s going to want me announced as official member soon, probably.”

“What deal?” Hoseok asks, as Yoongi’s eyes flash with suspicion. Taehyung knows that he suspects what must have happened in order for Mr. Kim to pull back his original demand, and Taehyung turns his head away from his hyung in shame.
“Mr. Kim demanded that Taehyung be officially announced as a member in January,” Namjoon explains slowly. “If he’s officially announced, Mr. Kim will have more power over us than now. After all, we could just kick Tae out and he’d have nothing on us.”

Taehyung winces and Namjoon smiles apologetically. “You know we wouldn’t do that. You’re as much a part of this band as anyone else. Anyway, an arrangement was made that had Mr. Kim agree to delay his demand until March. Now he’s most likely going to be back with a new video of Taehyung that he can dangle over our heads to get what he wants.”

It’s a relief that Namjoon leaves out the details of said arrangement.

“Why do we have to hide hyung?” Jungkook asks. “We’re already working on collecting evidence against Mr. Kim to help Taehyung be free. What if we just announce Taehyung?”

“Kook-ah,” Jin says and shakes his head. “Once Taehyung is officially introduced as a part of the band, Mr. Kim will have power over all of us and not only Taehyung anymore. He can demand anything of us. If those videos come out, it’s not only going to be the end of Taehyung’s career, but of ours as well as we’re associated with him.”

“I don’t want him to have power over any of you,” Taehyung murmurs and starts picking at the blades of grass, ripping out one after another as his thoughts drift between Mr. Kim and his members and a possible solution to their problem.

“What if,” Hoseok starts, before stopping and chewing on his bottom lip, looking at Taehyung guiltily. “It’s only a suggestion, and it’s not actually going to happen, but what if we pretend that Taehyung has left the group?”

Taehyung inhales sharply.

“He wouldn’t believe that Taehyung left the biggest chance of his life behind on his own terms,” Namjoon says.

“So he got kicked out?” Jimin suggests, and Taehyung’s hand clenches into a fist around the blade of grass he’s currently holding.

Namjoon ponders it. Taehyung has trouble breathing. Yoongi must notice the conflict raging within him at that suggestion, as he scoots over and places his hand over Taehyung’s fist reassuringly.

“You know we would never actually kick you out,” he says and ducks his head a bit to make sure that he catches Taehyung’s eyes, who’s head is lowered in self-doubt. “But that way we wouldn’t have to worry about that asshole blackmailing us. If we make him believe that you’re not a part of Bangtan anymore, he’ll have nothing to hold against us.”

“We’d be free,” Namjoon says. Yoongi glares at him, and the leader quickly backtrack. “I mean free to find a way to destroy Mr. Kim without him constantly lurking somewhere waiting to attack.”

Taehyung doesn’t say anything. He just sniffs, that familiar burning sensation at the back of his throat that’s a tell-tale sign of tears threatening to well up in his eyes having returned once again.

“How do you want to pull that off though?” Jin asks sceptically. “Mr. Kim isn’t stupid. We can’t just say that Taehyung left and continue like before. He lives and trains with us. We’d also have to tell all the other sponsors, or else it wouldn’t be believable.”
“Do you have a better idea right now?” Namjoon asks, slightly irritated. “This is first and foremost about Taehyung’s safety, and if pretending that he’s not a part of the band anymore is what it takes to get Mr. Kim off our backs, it’s worth the hassle. We will have to include management in this though. This isn’t something we can pull off on our own.”

They’re all quiet, trying to wrap their minds around that new plan they’ve just formed.

“I don’t like it,” Jungkook says meekly.

“It’s not about what we like, it’s about what we need to do,” Namjoon replies.

“This will be a ton of work. We have to rearrange the songs we’ve recorded to only be sung by the six of us. Adjust the choreography too, or there’ll be an obvious hole,” Yoongi sighs.

Taehyung can’t help it when the tears start rolling down his cheeks. He’s not really crying, not ugly sobbing and gasping for breath. His insides feel as if they’ve been tossed by a hurricane, all knotted up and painful, but on the outside it’s only silent tears that give away the agony he feels over their decision.

“Hey,” Yoongi says as he notices the tears and squeezes the fist he’s still holding on to. “This isn’t us kicking you out. Instead, it’s us making sure that one day; hopefully sooner than later; you’ll be able to debut with us without the fear of someone revealing your biggest secret to the world.”

Taehyung nods. He understands that. He understands that they’re not actually kicking him out, but it feels as if and he can’t help that it makes him emotional. He doesn’t look at the others, instead glaring at his knees while trying to will the tears away, so he doesn’t notice Jungkook crawling over until the youngest member has his arms wrapped around Taehyung’s chest to pull him in for a hug.

“Not letting you leave,” Jungkook murmurs quietly enough to have no one but Taehyung hear his words, “just making sure that you’re protected.”

For a moment, Taehyung is taken aback by Jungkook’s forwardness and the sudden offer of comfort that the younger teen so readily provides Taehyung with. Jungkook is shy, and he’s never the first to offer skinship for comfort like Jin does, or subtle touches to help Taehyung ground himself the way Yoongi provides them. To have Jungkook hug him twice within only a few hours feels odd, but it makes Taehyung’s heart flutter. The more he thinks about it though, the more Taehyung realizes that maybe this sudden willingness to lend support so openly stems from the fact that up until now, Jungkook didn’t have the chance to be there for him.

Taehyung nods and pulls away a bit, wiping away the remaining wetness from his cheeks as he tries to compose himself and blushes as he realizes that all six members are staring at him.

“What are you okay with that plan, Taehyung? If you say no, we won’t go with it. It’s your decision,” Namjoon offers, and Taehyung sniffs once more and swallows harshly.

“They’re not kicking you out, he reminds himself. They’re your friends and all they want is to help you.

Taehyung’s never really had friends when he was younger. Maybe in kindergarten, when life wasn’t all too cruel to him yet, there were some children his age that he hung out with, and sometimes at school he’d talk to others, but first and foremost Taehyung was always too occupied with keeping himself safe to actually take the time and make friends. His closest friend had been his grandma, but after her death it’s only been him and Soonshim against his world. Now that he
looks at the six boys in front of him who so obviously care about him – who go to great lengths to protect him when they could just take the easy way out and discard him to find success in the music industry – his heart fills with warms.

“Yes,” Taehyung says, voice still a bit wobbly. “Let’s trick this motherfucker and stab him in the back.”

There’s a beat of silence and then everyone starts cheering, and before Taehyung can realize it they tackle him to the ground, piling on top of him one after the other in excitement. Taehyung is taken aback for a second in surprise, but then he starts laughing and wheezes that he can’t breathe anymore, which only prompts Hoseok – the last one to join the pile – to jump on Jin with more force than would have been necessary, prompting collective groans from all others beneath him. It’s the first time that the weight of bodies on top of Taehyung doesn’t feel threatening or repulse him, but makes him feel protected and safe instead.

Chapter End Notes

Come talk to me on tumblr. :) 

If you're in a good mood and feel like reading a happy fic, let me point you to my JiHope one-shot waves will break (but we won't), which celebrates it’s one-year anniversary on the 1st of May.
I start every chapter note with 'thank you so much for your comments', but like?? Thank you so much for all the love and support you continue to show this fic!! I mean I write this fic because I want to write it, but if you're a fic writer you'll probably relate with me when I say that comments just fuel that want even more and are the motivation to continue when I'm stuck. I don't know what I'll do without your lovely messages once this fic is over. And I really appreciate your kind words about my health situation as well, so thanks! Also I saw a weird influx of subscribers/bookmarks since the last chapter. Hi, nice to have you all on board. Sorry you had to catch up on over 100k words. Hope you enjoy this next chapter. x

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Taehyung’s leg bounces nervously and he can’t bring it to stop. He’s tried, but as soon as he forces himself to sit still, this urge to move takes over his entire mind and body. So he clutches his fingers to not start fidgeting with them, but as soon as he’s occupied thinking about his fingers, his leg starts to bounce again on its own accord. He’s given up taming it now, accepts that it shakes non-stop and that his calf feels on the verge of cramping already.

At least he’s not compulsively rotating from left to right on his conference chair, forcing the furniture to squeak in agony each time, the way that Jimin does. Jimin, who’s face is pale and who’s hands are clenched to fists, doesn’t look as if he’s mentally present. His eyes are vacantly fixated on a spot, and even though his body moves with the chair, his head stays still.

Jimin.

After everyone had gone to sleep last night – surprisingly early for a bunch of boys in their teens, but all their energy had been drained by their heightened emotions of that day – Taehyung had stayed on the couch in the living room, wrapped up in a blanket because although the day had been filled with sunshine, night time still brought a wintery chill.

When Taehyung had thought that everyone had long drifted off to sleep and succumbed to his own thoughts; they really want to go through with this insane idea, really want to pretend that he’s no longer a member, really plan on confronting PD-nim the next morning, all seven of them as a unit because for the first time something akin to actual unity blooms between them; a quiet voice had jerked him out of his thoughts.

“Can’t sleep?”

Jimin stood leaning against the doorway in an oversized white shirt and boxershorts, hair sticking in all directions suggesting that he had been restlessly tossing on his mattress before getting up again.

Taehyung hummed, and when Jimin shuffled closer he noticed the dancer shivering slightly in the cold of the apartment and offered a spot under his blanket quietly by lifting up one of the edges. Jimin accepted the invitation and quickly slipped under the blanket, sighing contently when he had adjusted it enough to be fully wrapped up in it as well. They were squished right next to each other.
on a couch that would have comfortably allowed both of them to fully stretch out without having to touch, but Taehyung didn’t mind the contact. If he’d had a nightmare, he’d probably not be as willing to let Jimin cosy up to him, but there were no negative thoughts of a distant past lingering in his mind so it was okay; only the worry that he’s even unofficially no longer going to be a member of Bangtan Sonyeondan starting from tomorrow gnawed at his thoughts.

“You’re not mad at me, are you?” Jimin whispered. There was no reason for him to speak so quietly, but Taehyung got it. The dorm was mostly dark safe for the light in the hallway illuminating the room and drawing shadows on the walls. Any loud noises would only disturb the comfort of the night.

Taehyung shook his head.

“I’m only scared this might end badly, for either you or me.” His voice was as quiet as Jimin’s.

“I wanted to tell you for a long time,” Jimin confessed. “But I was scared that if Big Hit found out I told you, or wouldn’t need me anymore after getting my hands on the videos, they’d kick me out.”

Taehyung knew what that fear felt like, had lived through it a thousand times the previous year, and would live through it a thousand more times this year when their new plan would start unfolding.

“They’re not going to kick you out now. You’re a part of Bangtan,” Taehyung promised quietly.

“And so are you,” Jimin answered, a look gleaming in his eyes and an urgency to his voice that had Taehyung swallow.

“Hyungs?”

Both of them flinched at the sudden voice, neither of them having been aware of the bedroom door opening and footsteps padding down the hallway.

Jungkook’s eyes were swollen from sleep as he squinted at both of them. Taehyung noticed how his shoulders sagged in relief upon spotting the two of them.

“Kookie, what are you doing up?” Jimin asked and the amount of affection that laced his voice sent a pang of jealousy through Taehyung’s heart, which he immediately felt guilty for. Jimin held love for others in his heart that he could easily express. It wasn’t his fault that Taehyung was so bad in doing the same thing, not being able to show as much affection.

“Your beds were empty,” Jungkook said as if that was a valid explanation for him to stumble around the dorm in the middle of the night when he had already been asleep for at least three hours, and suddenly Taehyung realized that he did not only share a similar fear with Jimin, but with Jungkook as well.

Jungkook had been scared that one of you was gone, his brain supplied helpfully, and a feeling of warmth spread through Taehyung’s chest at that.

Jimin shuffled around, and much like Taehyung a few minutes earlier, lifted the blanket in a silent invitation for Jungkook to take the spot between them. The youngest member didn’t hesitate to join them, and while it was suddenly cramped under the blanket and both Jimin and Taehyung had to hold on to the edges to not accidentally be stripped of it, Jungkook’s warmth had added another layer of comfort that Taehyung basked in.

Jungkook’s head rested against Taehyung’s shoulder and he had fallen back asleep almost within
seconds of getting comfortable between them. The moment that Jimin and Taehyung had been sharing was over, and the spell of the night broken. There was no easy way to return back to the conversation they’ve had before, and with Jungkook between them Taehyung didn’t feel comfortable picking it back up either.

So he just settled for a “thank you” that came from the bottom of his heart, and was rewarded with one of Jimin’s soft smiles that made his eyes shape into crescents. With Jungkook pressed against him and the shared warmth of their bodies under the blanket, Taehyung too fell asleep within minutes.

Namjoon is tapping the pen he’s holding against the surface of the table without any rhythm. He was the one to find the three of them curled up on the couch the next morning, decided to take a quick picture of them to capture the moment before waking them up and sympathetically patted their backs when all three of them complained about cramped necks. He had pretended that he’s not nervous about their meeting with PD-nim, but now that they’re all scattered around the conference room and waiting for the CEO to arrive, it’s obvious that he too is absolutely stressed out.

“You all need to calm down,” Yoongi grumbles. “It’s not like he can say no to our demands if the entire group asks for them.”

“Would you like to talk to him, hyung?” Namjoon asks slightly irritated, the pen in his hand freezing for just a second. Jin is quick to calm him with a hand on his shoulder.

“Don’t let your nerves get the best of you,” the oldest member says warningly, and the way his eyes trail around the room can only mean that he’s not just addressing Namjoon. He seems the calmest out of all of them, Taehyung thinks, but he’s sure that’s just Jin acting. After all, he’s not a drama student for no reason.

When Bang Si-hyuk walks into the room, there’s an immediate reaction to his arrival. The fidgeting stops, but muscles are coiled tighter and no one dares to look the CEO of Big Hit into the eyes.

“I’ve heard you’ve wanted to talk to me,” Bang says as he takes the empty seat at the head of the table. “What can I do for you?”

“PD-nim,” Namjoon says, and Taehyung is impressed by the fact that Namjoon’s voice doesn’t shake. There’s a reason he was chosen as a leader, and Taehyung supposes that this is it. Even in nerve-wrecking situations, Namjoon knows how to keep his calm, as long as he’s not confronted with a problem from left-field that makes him lose his temper. “There’s something we need to talk to you about.”

Bang Si-hyuk gestures for Namjoon to continue.

“We know about Jimin’s girlfriend. We know…” he trails off, obviously searching for the right words to say.

“Who she is,” Jimin says quietly. He lifts his hands in surrender when the CEO looks at him with raised eyebrows. “I promise I didn’t tell. Taehyung, he…” Just like Namjoon, he’s trailing off too.

“I recognized her from a picture,” Taehyung jumps in quietly. “And we found a picture of her with Mr. Kim. When we confronted Jimin, he told us the truth. No more secrets.”

It’s quiet for a few seconds, before Namjoon takes the wheel again: “We want to know everything
that’s going on behind the scenes to bring down Mr. Kim. Jimin mentioned that what he’s doing is referenced as plan B. We want to know what plan A is, and we want to be involved in it. We promised each other no more secrets, and we expect this promise to extend to the company.”

He’s staring down Bang PD, his voice leaving no room for argumentation.

“Furthermore, we know that it will only be a matter of time until Mr. Kim will come back to demand Taehyung be made an official member publicly. We’ve come up with a solution for that as well, but it’s a plan that will be a lot of work. We believe that it will be successful though, so I want to ask you to listen to us with an open mind.”

The CEO raises his hand and Namjoon immediately shuts his mouth.

“I knew you were eventually going to ask to be more involved,” he sighs, his voice somewhere between strained and amused. “I’m just surprised it took you all this long.”

“We’re finally a team now,” Yoongi says as he crosses his arms and leans back in his chair. “For the first time, there’s seven of us pulling the rope in the same direction. Before that it was a tug of war against each other.”

Bang PD looks impressed with Yoongi’s words and nods. “So you want to know the full plan to bring Mr. Kim down?”

Everyone answers eagerly with a yes.

The CEO’s eyes linger on Taehyung as he starts to speak: “Technically it’s not a plan A and plan B that are in the works. Instead, it’s one big plan that relies on individual steps. Jimin’s duty, as I suppose you all know by now, is to infiltrate the fucker’s home. We’re hoping that Jimin can still find the tapes in which his face isn’t blurred out to use to our advantage. However, the tapes are just a safety measure for us to use as blackmail against him like he did with us.”

“What?” Hoseok asks before he can stop himself. “You’re not going to use them against him?”

“We might have the tapes that reveal his face,” Bang PD says, and Taehyung knows where this is going, and before he can stop himself he finishes the CEO’s sentence: “But he still might have the videos with my face uncensored as well.”

“Exactly,” Bang PD agrees. “You know that laws surrounding sex with minors in this country are complicated. We’ve had lawyers looking into it, trust me. Taehyung might be young, but he was old enough to not be considered a minor. If we wanted to get him for sexual harassment or abuse of a young person, Taehyung would have to testify against him.”

“What about prostitution?” Namjoon asks.

“Taehyung would only harm himself if he admitted to that. Not only could he be prosecuted, but it would also defy the point of trying to not have anyone find out about it. If we want Taehyung’s past to stay hidden, we can’t publicly use these videos against him.”

“So what are we using them for?” Jin enquires. That’s a good question, Taehyung thinks. Jimin dating Eun-Ji seems absolutely pointless, if the videos obtained from it aren’t of any use to them.

“As I’ve already said, it’s blackmail material. Our safety insurance so to say. When we bring him down, it might happen that he decides to say fuck it and release the video with Taehyung clearly visible but his own face pixelated. However, I doubt that when he’s on his way to prison and already has bad press, he’ll enjoy another scandal of him being caught with a young male prostitute
when the completely uncensored video comes to the surface.”

Taehyung flinches, and for the first time since this meeting started, Jungkook raises his voice in alarm: “You can’t do that! That would ruin all of our hard work!”

“Relax, Jungkook,” the CEO says, seemingly more endeared than annoyed by Jungkook’s sudden outburst, while the maknae’s cheeks turn red from embarrassment. He turns back to Taehyung as he continues to speak: “I know this sucks. There’s always a possibility that he’s going to post the video, even if he knows that by doing so we will post the full version. However, he’s always been very meticulous about his public image. When we’re done digging up all the dirt on him, he’ll be going to jail for fraud and tax evasions. It’s going to be a business-related downfall, and I doubt that he’ll want to risk it and be exposed as an even more horrible person publicly. He’s always been big on maintaining a squeaky clean family image, so we doubt that he’ll expose you.”

“You’re going to bring him to jail for business-related things? Does this mean that what he did to Taehyung will go completely unpunished?” Yoongi asks incredulously.

For the first time, Bang PD looks uncomfortable. “I’m sorry to say that right now, this is our best shot to bring him down. We’re almost done gathering enough evidence to press charges against his business; which will be pressed anonymously by a third party, no one will know that we’re behind this. That fucker always confided in me about business that he should have kept to himself. I don’t think he ever considered that telling me about the corruption going on behind his official company image could bite him in the ass some day. The only thing that we’re really waiting for now is for Jimin to manage to get a hold of the videos.”

All eyes flit to Jimin, who sinks down deeper into the seat as if to disappear from their stares.

“It’s not so easy,” he says defensively. “He doesn’t know about Eun-Ji and me, so I can only go to his house when he’s gone. And once I’m there, I actually have to make it into his office I suppose, start his computer, find out his password and find all the files – that is, if he even stores them on his computer.”

Taehyung’s stomach sinks at those words. They might have a plan, but it doesn’t sound feasible at all. How in the world is Jimin supposed to find out the password?

“I told you, hyung, take me with you next time. Eun-Ji likes me. You can distract her while I look for-”

“Absolutely not!” Jin snaps, while Yoongi’s loud “no” also echoes through the room before Taehyung even has a chance to interject. “You’re not going there!”

“I have to agree with them,” Bang PD says. “It’s nothing against you, Jungkook, but you’re too young to be involved in this.”

“If Taehyung hyung was able to survive in the streets of Seoul at that age, why am I not old enough to sneak around to help him?”

“Jungkook!” Namjoon sounds scandalized.

“You’re forgetting the price I paid for survival,” Taehyung says dryly. “Jungkook, this man pays to have sex with underage males. He knows who you are. If he caught you snooping, I don’t even want to imagine what he’d do to you.”

Hoseok, who sits right next to Taehyung, actually shudders at his words.
“That goes for all of you guys. I don’t want any of you involved in this further than necessary. I will be the one to break into his office.”

“But what if he catches and hurts you?” Namjoon interjects.

“He can’t do anything to me that he hasn’t done before,” Taehyung replies matter-of-factly, and the room is suddenly drenched in heavy silence as no one knows how to reply to that. Taehyung is shocked to see that Jin’s eyes have gotten misty and the pained look that crosses Yoongi’s face, as well as the stunned expression on Jimin’s.

“Okay,” Bang PD says and clears his throat, clearly just as much at a loss for what to say as the rest of his band members. “We can discuss the fine print in more detail at a later time. There are more urgent matters on our hands. You said you have come up with an idea to keep Mr. Kim off our backs about announcing Taehyung as a member?”

“Yes,” Namjoon says, taking control of the situation again although he’s clearly uncomfortable. “We decided that it would be best to officially kick Taehyung out of the group.”

The CEO’s eyes grow twice as big, and Namjoon is quick to clarify: “It’s only pretend. He can’t blackmail us if Taehyung’s not in the group anymore. Of course he’ll stay with us, but we’ll have to officially announce his leaving to the sponsors; all sponsors. We’ll adapt the choreography back to six people again, we’ll produce the song in two versions – one with Taehyung and one without him – and when we finally managed to bring Mr. Kim down, we can debut immediately after. Unless you think we’re still not ready for debut yet.” He adds the last sentence almost as an afterthought, tentatively looking at Bang PD to gauge his reaction.

Taehyung is surprised to find that their boss looks impressed, and he thinks he shares that surprise with the other six members. None of them had actually thought that their silly idea would be accepted, but as the man nods to himself while thinking about it, Taehyung knows that he’s already made up his mind.

“And you would be okay with that, Taehyung?” Bang PD asks him.

Taehyung squares his shoulders, making sure to look confident as he answers: “I want them to be able to debut as soon as possible. As of now I’m only holding them back, and if that’s what it takes I’m willing to do it.”

Hoseok elbows him slightly. “You mean you want us to succeed, Taehyung, not ‘them’.”

Taehyung’s heart soars at those words, and he nods, not faking his confidence this time: “I want us to finally debut.”

“You know what’s funny?” Bang PD says as he makes eye-contact with each one of them individually, “You guys have been mocking the name Bangtan Sonyeondan and what it’s supposed to stand for so many times.”

Taehyung sees some of the members duck their head with a sheepish grin. He knows how especially the three rappers in the beginning had detested the name and concept of the band, but he hadn’t been a trainee at that time. When he had joined, the jokes about the band name had evened out already, although every now and then one of the older members had made a snide remark about it.

“You’ve come to me whining about and asking to change it for weeks because you found the motto behind it so cringey, and yet here you sit and make plans to protect a teenager from suppression
and attack like bullets.”

Taehyung’s departure has to look real, all the boys agreed on that, but none of them had anticipated just how much work that would require. Ignoring the fact that they will have to adapt the choreography to six people once again and the song has to be remixed completely from the start, it also means that Taehyung has to move out again. Big Hit, however, is not the type of company that is swimming in money and can afford to rent their trainee an extra apartment. They contemplated putting him in one of the dorms that hold their other trainees, but the risk of Mr. Kim catching wind of that would have been too big. That’s how Taehyung ends up moving into the tiny dingy studio with the uncomfortable black couch. It’s a room with no windows that can be locked from the inside and is only intended to be used by the members of the band. It’s a perfect hideout.

All his clothes and possessions fit into two big cardboard boxes. It’s still sad that his life doesn’t amass more than that, but it’s a long way from where he started already when he first moved into the dorm. Taehyung remembers waiting for Jin to pick him up in front of his lousy old building, with only a bag to his name that held freshly bought clothes from the store, because the few other he had owned were neither appropriate for dance practice nor any other normal activity really. He wanted to bolt out of that dorm so many times the first night he stayed, slept on the couch because he didn’t trust these boys nearly enough to share a room with. How much things can change within the span of a year, he thinks to himself, as he sits down on the uncomfortable black couch. Now this dorm is home, and all he wants to do is curl up on his mattress in the shared bedroom and fall asleep to the comforting sounds of his members around him.

“Are you sure that you’re okay with this?” Namjoon asks, looking between the cardboard boxes and Taehyung. “I’m sure we can come up with another idea.”

“I’m fine,” Taehyung replies. He pulls up his feet and hugs his knees close to his chest. Truth be told, he has absolutely no idea how he’s supposed to pull this disappearing trick off. Most staff will be informed about his departure, safe for the people that Taehyung absolutely needs to be in contact with, such as the dancing instructor, a select few producers, his vocal coach and the managers. If possible, he’s not supposed to be seen by anyone else in the company until he officially returns to the band shortly before debut. His members will bring him food and sneak him around the building to dance practice or the recording studio, making sure that the hallways are empty. That means he’ll also need someone to look out for him for such simple things as going to the toilet.

An event has been announced five days from now to declare Taehyung’s official departure to the sponsors, in which the remaining six band members will perform No More Dream and We Are Bulletproof Pt. 2. This means that when Mr. Kim is in the Big Hit building, Taehyung will be driven back to the dorm by one of their managers for safety reasons, before returning back to the small studio after the event is over.

Mr. Kim. Taehyung shudders. He’s received a text message from him, had totally forgotten that the man possessed his number before he remembered that he had been the one reaching out to Mr. Kim back in January. It was a short text message, only three words, that Taehyung had immediately deleted after receiving it, but not before showing it to Namjoon, who had frowned at it.

_Time is up._

Taehyung wishes he knew how to block a number, or had the money to change to a new contract for a new one, but neither is the case. So instead he flinches whenever his phone vibrates, and his heart will refuse to calm down for almost a minute each time he receives a text message or a phone
“I’ll have to meet up with PD-nim now to go over some more details for the sponsor event,” Namjoon says, sceptically looking around the room once again. “Yoongi-hyung will come to keep you company in a short while. You still remember the knocking signal?”

Taehyung nods. He’s supposed to keep the door locked at all times when he’s on his own, and only when he hears a certain pattern of knocks is he allowed to open the door.

When Namjoon leaves, Taehyung uncurls from his position on the couch to slump down on the uncomfortable piece of furniture. He’s looking up at the ceiling for a few seconds, before he remembers that he has to lock the door and quickly gets up to do so.

The room is already small, and the two cardboard boxes don’t help either. Taehyung has to step around them carefully. He’s sure that he’s going to bang against one of them sooner or later. He could unpack them, but there’s no actual space to put his clothes. The few shelves that are in the room are already stacked full of old music equipment and unnecessary knick-knack.

As promised by Namjoon, Yoongi shows up after a few minutes and quietly takes his place on the couch after Taehyung has let him in. Taehyung sinks down next to him, when he suddenly notices a penetrative smell come from his hyung that makes the fine hairs on his arms stand up.

“Hyung,” Taehyung says incredulously, “did you smoke?”

Yoongi grimaces. “Can you smell it? I had a chewing gum earlier.”

“You actually smoke?”

“I know, I know, it’s not good for my health. I used to occasionally back in Daegu even though I couldn’t afford it, and after my shoulder injury, when I had to give up basketball, it increased by a lot. I stopped though, because Jungkook wouldn’t stop bothering me about it. But sometimes, when I’m stressed...” Yoongi trails off and shifts around, slipping a box of cigarettes out of his back pocket. He opens it, half of the cigarettes already gone, and takes out the lighter that he hid in there before carelessly throwing the pack on the table. He flicks the lighter on repeatedly and watches the lazy flame dance. “I’m not a smoker anymore though.”

The smell makes Taehyung uneasy, and the flickering flame doesn’t help to ease those nerves. He shifts slightly away from Yoongi, who notices and stops playing around with the lighter.

“You don’t like fire?” he asks, sounding nonchalant. He looks curious though, and Taehyung can see the cogs turning in Yoongi’s head to try and figure out where his discomfort comes from.

Taehyung presses his lips into a thin line. He could answer the question with a simple yes or no and be done with it, but he really doesn’t like the idea of Yoongi smoking. There was a time when Yoongi’s demeanour had reminded him of his father, before he had allowed himself to lower his walls and discover that despite being guarded himself, Yoongi is one of the most caring people he has ever met. He knows now that Yoongi has nothing in common with the man who put Taehyung into this world, but he can’t help but associated cigarettes with that asshole and he doesn’t want to have that connection between Yoongi and that man, even if he’s dead.

“More like I don’t like cigarettes,” Taehyung admits as he pulls up his shirt slightly to reveal his hip, where he knows his skin bears scars in the shape of circles. There are five of them, at this point faded enough to not be noticed if no one is looking for them. To Taehyung though, they still stick out as much as they did the day he received them, angry red burnt flesh as punishment for
something so trivial that he can’t even remember it anymore.

“Shit,” Yoongi curse under his breath and lets the lighter fall on the table as if he had been the one getting burned. Taehyung smiles grimly.

“Jungkookie isn’t the only one who would appreciate it if you didn’t smoke anymore, hyung,” he says. He knows that it’s unfair of him to demand something like that of Yoongi, and he’s surprised at how quick the rapper is to promise him that he’ll never touch another cigarette again.

“Does the smell bother you? Do you want me to leave?”

Taehyung shakes his head. “It’s okay. I know it’s... you wouldn’t... just don’t play with the lighter like that, please.”

Yoongi doesn’t ask anymore questions, but he also doesn’t touch either the lighter or the cigarettes until he leaves and takes them with him.

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Jungkook is in charge of bringing him dinner that evening, and he brings his school backpack with him. He must have showered before coming to Taehyung, because his hair is still wet, which Taehyung frets over because it’s March and it’s still cold outside and that’s the best way for Jungkook to catch a cold; ergo the entire band is going to be wiped out by a flu soon if that happens.

“Why are you caring your backpack around when you’re on a break from school?” Taehyung asks in amusement as he watches Jungkook put down the bags full of food on the coffee table. The entire room is immediately filled by the smell of it, and without the option to air it out, Taehyung knows that it’s going to smell bad in the studio soon enough. He really wishes there was a window in here.

“I’m staying the night,” Jungkook explains cheerfully. “Dance practice starts tomorrow at 8. If I sleep here, I won’t have to get up until like ten minutes earlier.”

He’s beaming, teeth on full display and nose scrunched up, and who is Taehyung to deny him the joy of sleeping in? He just doesn’t really know how the two of them are going to fit in here comfortably over night, but he’ll figure something out. The couch definitely isn’t big enough for the two of them, but if Jungkook can sleep well on it, Taehyung doesn’t mind taking the floor.

“I brought some games too, hyung! Practice without you today was really boring. It’s insane how obvious it was to all of us that a piece was missing when doing the choreography with six members only. I hope it doesn’t take too long until we can officially have you back. I already miss you, and it’s only been a day.”

Jungkook is rambling and pouting, obviously still energized from dance practice and not sure where to put all of that energy. Taehyung knows from experience that once he’s got some food inside his stomach and has settled down for a few minutes, Jungkook’s eyes will start to droop, exhausted from practice. Taehyung doubts they’re going to play a lot of games tonight.

He’s right in his assumption when Jungkook slumps against him after dinner is finished, eyelids heavy like lead.

“Gaming night, huh?” Taehyung asks teasingly as he lets the younger teen nestle into his side. Jungkook whines, but he’s also grinning sheepishly.

“Today was exhausting,” Jungkook says as Taehyung starts to play with a strand of his hair.
“I can believe that. Thank you for putting so much effort into trying to save my ass.”

“Of course,” Jungkook bristles, “besides it’s not a lot of effort if you’re doing it for someone you like, and we all like you, hyung.”

Taehyung’s heart flutters with warmth at Jungkook’s heartfelt words.

“Can I ask you something?” Jungkook says, and he suddenly sounds serious, making Taehyung dread what’s to come next.

“You can ask, but I can’t promise that I’ll answer.”

“In the meeting with PD-nim, you said that if Mr. Kim caught you, there’s nothing he could do to you he hasn’t already done before.” Jungkook falls silent after that, and Taehyung nudges him gently, partly to urge him to continue and partly to check if the youngest member hasn’t fallen asleep on him yet.

“That’s not a question,” Taehyung tries to lift the mood, but he can imagine where Jungkook is going with this and he understands if he’s lost for words. “Are you asking about what he’s done to me?”

“I can imagine what he’s done to you,” Jungkook spits the words out like they taste bitter on his tongue. “I just… I mean… was it always that bad? Or were there good days too?”

Taehyung wants to snort. Was it always that bad? What kind of question was that? Of course it was always that bad, and his first reaction is to give a snide remark. Then he remembers that Jungkook doesn’t have a clue of the extend of pain he’s been going through his whole life, and suddenly the maknae’s question doesn’t sound as ridiculous anymore. Jungkook doesn’t know what it’s like to sell your body to survive, to be forced to do so because your own family is a threat to your life, so how can Taehyung blame him for such an innocent question?

“Prostituting myself was always bad. You eventually get more or less numb to the pain, but it stemmed from a bad first experience, so no matter what followed it was always going to be hard for me I suppose.”

Jungkook swallows harshly, but he stays silent as Taehyung continues to play with his hair.

“There were good days. Sometimes I didn’t have to work the night, or other times I had enough money for three full meals a day. Even a smile from a stranger on the street was enough to lift my mood on some days. The smallest things started to have a huge impact on me. But overall, it was one long string of bad months or years, or one bad life really.”

He’s surprised to look over at Jungkook and see tears gleaming in his eyes. Taehyung laughs uncomfortably. “Hey now, there’s no reason to cry over something that’s already in the past. I’m here and I’m good, that’s all that matters.”

Jungkook uses the sleeve of his sweater to wipe his nose. He looks miserable.

“When I first found out about what had happened to you, your behaviour started to make so much more sense. The nightmares. The distance you kept to us initially. I just wanted to tell you that you could trust us, but you sounded so desperate when you asked the others not to tell me what was going on that I just couldn’t admit to knowing it.”

Taehyung rests his cheek on Jungkook’s slightly damp hair and closes his eyes. He doesn’t know how to respond to that. He still hates the thought of Jungkook knowing how weak he is, how his
past haunts him even now that he’s in safety.

“Can I ask you something else?”

Taehyung hums. He’s feeling vulnerable, but he’s also feeling comfortable enough to share with Jungkook to a certain extent. It’s the fullness of his stomach that makes him drowsy, the familiarity of the studio that acts like a safe bubble, protecting him from the outside world. Or maybe it’s just Jungkook, the scent of his body wash and shampoo, the warmth of his body pressed against Taehyung’s, his big inquisitive eyes and his soft voice that lull Taehyung into a sense of security. He just hopes that Jungkook doesn’t feel his erratic heartbeat.

“It’s about Jin-hyung and Namjoon-hyung. Do they bother you?”

He hates to do it, but Taehyung pulls away from Jungkook so he can look at the younger, confused by the question.

“Bother me? Why should they bother me?”

Jungkook also sits up straight and Taehyung mourns the loss of his warmth pressed against him. He’s nervously playing with his fingers now, avoiding eye-contact.

“Not them. You know… I mean… them being a couple.”

“Why should that bother me? I’m not a homophobe, Jungkook.”

Jungkook quickly shakes his head. “That’s not what I meant, hyung. It’s just… are you okay with the idea of two men being together after… getting paid for that by men?”

He’s stumbling over his words and mumbling so badly that Taehyung can barely understand what he says. When it registers with him what Jungkook meant, he starts to chuckle.

“It’s not just men who rent a prostitute, Kook-ah.”

“Oh,” Jungkook says, blushing furiously. “Okay.”

“But I understand your reasoning. I was surprised at first, but I have nothing against their relationship. If they’re happy, I’m happy. I’m just not comfortable with the idea of them having sex. That’s not because they’re both male though. It’s the idea of sex that repulses me, and if either of them was with a woman I’d feel the exact same thing.”

Taehyung takes a look at Jungkook and bursts out laughing. He’s never seen the maknae look so uncomfortable before, avoiding his eyes at all costs while fidgeting with the hem of his sweater.

“For someone who lives together with six guys, you’re surprisingly pure for your age,” Taehyung wheezes as Jungkook ducks his head and murmurs to “Shut up, hyung”.

Whatever spell of the moment was between them for Taehyung to share his thoughts so comfortably is broken now, and he doesn’t really want to talk about this topic anymore. There’s so much more to the idea of being with another man for Taehyung. He’s not lying when he says that he’s not bothered by Namjoon and Jin being a couple, but that doesn’t mean that he’s not grappling with the idea of being attracted to the teen in front of him. He doesn’t know why he likes Jungkook, whether it’s because he was the first male in a long time Taehyung’s not felt threatened by immediately when meeting the band, or maybe it’s that he’s fucked up by all the things that had been done to him by others that make him feel attracted to someone two years younger than himself. Or maybe, a small voice in the back of his head dares to say that Taehyung tries to shut
down pretty quickly, it’s because Jungkook is pretty and kind and funny and…

No. He’s not going to allow his mind to wander now. All he knows is that while he’s happy for Jin and Namjoon, admitting to his own crush still feels absolutely forbidden.

Jungkook also looks desperately ready to leave that conversation behind, so Taehyung offers him a lifeline to save him from his embarrassed misery: “How about we play one of the games you brought, now that you’re no longer falling half-asleep on my shoulder?”

Chapter End Notes

Come talk to me on tumblr so we can scream together about the flipping bouncy castles for the Speak Yourself tour, because I'm still not over them.

Also if you're a non-native English writer, let me tell you about Tint Journal, an online journal that is focused on highlighting work from non-native English writers. They are currently having a call for submissions (open until June 14) to submit your original short fiction, flash fiction or poetry to get published in the second online issue. So if you want to get your work out there to a (small but hopefully growing) audience, you might want to consider this. :)

I can't make any promises, but I'll try to update one more time before the London concerts. Hope you're all happy and living your best life in the meantime. x
Chapter 45

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for the comments and ongoing support! x

I really wasn’t sure if I’d be able to post this before London, but I’m so glad I managed to finish it. Honestly wouldn’t have happened if I wasn’t put back in the hospital for side-effects, so shoutout to Immunotherapy for making my body weak and this chapter possible. I hope you enjoy! :) x

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jungkook sometimes drools in his sleep. It’s not the first time that Taehyung notices dried drool in the corner of Jungkook’s mouth and on his chin, but he’s never seen it from up close before. Jungkook’s lips are slightly parted, front teeth peeking out. His hair needs a trim as it’s now long enough to fall into his eyes unless he constantly flicks it to the side. He sometimes scrunches his nose like a bunny, and Taehyung gets the urge to boop it because it’s so adorable, but he’s scared that he would wake Jungkook up by doing so.

They both fell asleep on the floor last night after talking, laughing and gossiping amidst trying to destroy each other in different card games. Jungkook, who is scarily good at anything he does, won so many times that Taehyung started pouting non-stop, causing Jungkook to burst into fits of uncontrollable giggles. Taehyung doesn’t even remember when exactly he fell asleep, but the artificial lights violently blaring down at them suggest that both he and Jungkook must have fallen asleep by accident if none of them had managed to turn off the light switch.

Waking up in a room without windows feels disconcerting. He doesn’t know what time of the day it is until he manages to reach for his phone without making too much ruckus to wake up the younger teen. Once he realizes that he still has another half an hour before he should wake Jungkook up, he settles back down on the floor, rests his head on his arm and allows himself to continue looking at Jungkook.

Maybe it’s a bit creepy that he’s just lying here and studying the youngest member’s features. He feels as if he’s doing something forbidden, but he so rarely has a chance to just be with Jungkook and look at him that he can’t resist now. Those rounded cheeks, the nose that is a bit too big for his young features, his doe-eyes that are currently hidden and framed by beautiful lashes; all of these things make Taehyung’s breath stutter, and he’s scared that if he breaths too loudly, Jungkook’s eyelids will flutter open and the spell that Taehyung is currently under will be broken.

His arm starts tingling after a few more minutes, the tell-tale sign that it’s falling asleep under the weight of his head. Taehyung’s body also hurts from lying on the floor all night, hipbone digging into the flooring uncomfortably which he knows will most likely leave a sore spot behind for the next few days to come. And even if he could ignore all these things like he wants to just to gain a few more minutes of peacefully looking at Jungkook, there’s one thing that he definitely can’t ignore: he needs to take a piss, and he needs to take a piss soon or else he fears his bladder might burst.

“Jungkook,” Taehyung says quietly and reaches up to gently shake Jungkook’s shoulder. He’s sorry for having to wake Jungkook before the alarm goes off, but he really needs a toilet. As he has
almost expected, the youngest member doesn’t respond. He’s watched Jin wrestling Jungkook out of bed often enough at this point to know that it’s not that easy to wake the maknae from his slumber.

“Jungkook,” Taehyung tries again, shaking his shoulder with more force and raising his voice, “wake up!”

Jungkook murmurs something incomprehensible, his arm coming up to push Taehyung’s hand away and he starts to turn.

Taehyung sighs in exasperation and starts to poke Jungkook’s stomach, making the other squirm and frown. It’s adorable, Taehyung can admit that much, but he’s also starting to get annoyed.

“Kookie,” Taehyung tries again, and finally Jungkook opens his eyes and blinks at him, before quickly forcing them shut again as he too is blinded by the lights, much like Taehyung was when first waking up.

“What?” Jungkook grumbles, and Taehyung is quick to grab his arm to prevent him from rolling to the other side, not only to keep him from turning away but also because he’s sure that Jungkook would bump into the coffee table, the narrow studio floor definitely not being big enough to roll around on.

“I need to pee,” Taehyung hisses.

Jungkook lifts his head to look at Taehyung once more, lips formed to a pout as he apparently tries to figure out where he is and why Taehyung would wake him up because of that.

“And I’m not supposed to walk down the hallways before someone checks if they’re empty,” Taehyung continues, observing in amusement as the cogs in Jungkook’s brain start to work as he starts to piece things together.

“Oh,” Jungkook says and lowers his head back to the floor, apparently not having realized yet that there’s no pillow bellow. His head hits the flooring hard enough for Taehyung to wince and Jungkook to whine, the pout on his lips intensifying. It’s really really fucking cute.

It takes two more minutes for Jungkook to finally find the strength to get up and play Taehyung’s bodyguard, making sure that the hallway is empty as they turn the corner and that there’s no one in the male restrooms. It’s a relief that BigHit is a small company, because less employees mean less possibilities to bump into someone. Taehyung is sure that they wouldn’t be able to pull off something like this in a big company. He’s also sure though that in a big company he either would have never had the chance to debut, or enough hush money would be available to just silence the blackmailer.

Taehyung goes straight for one of the empty stalls as he always does. He can hear Jungkook using the urinal and whistling to himself. Taehyung thinks he recognizes the melody to No More Dream.

“Hyung, can I ask you something?” Jungkook asks after having washed his hands. Taehyung had thought that last night’s hour of over-sharing is already over, but apparently not to Jungkook. “Why do you always use toilet stalls and never urinals?”

“It’s too early for stupid questions, Jungkook,” Taehyung answers.

“Does it make you feel vulnerable?”

Taehyung flushes, gets his clothes in order and shoots Jungkook a glare when he leaves the stall to
wash his own hands.

“I said it’s too early for stupid questions.”

“You also said last night that I could ask anything, but it wouldn’t guarantee me an answer.”

“Then was then and now is now,” Taehyung shoots back. “No stupid questions this early in the morning.”

Jungkook deflates, and they make their way back to Taehyung’s tiny makeshift room, before Jungkook offers to grab them breakfast from the bakery across the street. Once he’s gone, Taehyung starts to clean up the takeout boxes from the previous night, pondering where Jungkook’s sudden interest in all of his past and habits is coming from. It’s also kind of terrifying how Jungkook correctly guessed why Taehyung always uses the stalls. Urinals are a normal thing, but there’s something about the close proximity of other men with their dicks out that makes Taehyung feel uneasy about them. He never thought that Jungkook would actually notice that though, let alone come up with a theory that is right. He’s a lot more perceptive than Taehyung sometimes gives him credit for, and that thought worries Taehyung. He knows that most of his members have picked up on his less than subtle crush on the youngest already. What if Jungkook notices too?

What if he’s disgusted by Taehyung once he finds out? What if he never wants to talk to him again?

His mind starts spiralling down a dangerous abyss, until a knock on the door pulls it back out again as Jungkook has returned with breakfast, all big smile and sparkling eyes that cause Taehyung’s heart to skip a beat.

“Are you going to join us for dance practice today, hyung?” Jungkook asks mid-bite, mouth full and speech muffled.

“I’d love to, but I’ve got some things to do today,” Taehyung declines.

Jungkook’s face falls at that. “What could you possibly have to do in here?”

It’s true, safe for the computer this room doesn’t offer anything for Taehyung to do really, but for today the computer is all he needs. He just hopes that being stuck in here for a longer amount of time won’t make him go insane. Then again, he’s lived through worse. A small room for a certain period of time is nothing that should unsettle him.

After Jungkook is headed out to practice and the door is locked behind him, Taehyung turns on the computer and waits for it to start at its terribly slow pace. He thinks of the USB stick in the lowest drawer under the desk, and he thinks of the porn videos hidden in one of the folders on the desktop, and then he shakes his head and pulls up Naver, typing in Mr. Kim’s and Eun-Ji’s name and bookmarking every website he can find.

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Taehyung is lying on the floor of the practice room, eyes closed. He can hear the music coming from the speakers, a pair of sneakers squeaking as feet drag over the vinyl floor, and Jimin quietly counting through the steps as he goes over the choreography over and over again.

When the music stops, Taehyung whines. “Haven’t you practiced enough for today, Jiminie?”

“This one move,” Jimin answers, and Taehyung can hear him start counting and the sound of his shoes dragging over vinyl once again. He sighs. He doesn’t know what time it is as the clock on
the wall had run out of batteries days ago and no one bothered to fix it, but the other members had left for the dorm at least two hours ago. It must be late already, close to midnight if not already past that. Jimin had volunteered to stay longer with Taehyung, and Taehyung had looked forward to spending some time with him. If he had known that all Jimin would do is dance, he might as well have had Yoongi as his companion, who either keeps falling asleep on him all the time or works on music in the tiny studio.

The showcase is in three days, and everyone seems to be on edge for obvious reasons. There’s practice and more practice to make the performance as a sextet impeccable.

“There’s no one move you’re doing wrong, Jimin. It looks fine. Rest a bit.”

“You might not see it, but it’s so obviously wrong,” Jimin mutters under his breath. Taehyung rolls his eyes. There’s no winning an argument against Jimin when it comes to practice. Jimin wants to be flawless, and the sad thing is that in Jimin’s own eyes, he will never be. He’s so different to Jungkook, Taehyung thinks. The youngest member knows that he’s talented, picks up anything in a short amount of time and executes it perfectly, and although he puts his all into practice, Taehyung has never seen him stay behind to practice some more after his hyungs have already left.

Jimin, on the other hand… could really need a break.

Suddenly reminded by Jin’s gift to him yesterday, Taehyung thinks he’s found a solution to help Jimin rest.

“Jin-hyung gave me tickets for an IU concert the day after the showcase. Said his father gave them to him, but he’s not particularly interested in going. Do you want to join me?”

Jimin stops for a moment, and looks at him oddly, before shaking his head. “IU? You should ask Kookie, he idolises her.”

Taehyung frowns. “Jin-hyung said the same thing. I don’t understand why he didn’t give the tickets to Jungkookie in the first place.”

Jimin tilts his head as he looks at Taehyung for a little longer, before starting up practicing again.

“Is that a no? Did you just reject me?” Taehyung asks while pouting.

“As I said,” Jimin answers, “ask Jungkook. He loves IU.”

Jimin’s phone vibrates seconds later, indicating a new text message.

“It’s your girlfriend,” Taehyung pipes up after a quick look on the display.

“Don’t call her my girlfriend,” Jimin grumbles, but he finally comes over to Taehyung and grabs the phone.

“I’ve done research on her and Mr. Kim over the past few days. Basically soaked up everything about them I could find.”

“Why would you do that?” Jimin asks in confusion, eyebrows drawn together.

“So that when I meet her, I know exactly what she likes and dislikes and can get her to like me.”

“You could have just asked me.”

“But you’re not exactly keen on talking about her, are you?” Taehyung asks sarcastically and Jimin
avoids his questioning gaze. Instead, he reads the message and quickly texts back. Sometimes Taehyung wonders if Jimin actually likes Eun-Ji. If maybe, after playing pretend, he has developed feelings for her. Or maybe he’s just feeling bad for using her and that’s why he doesn’t like to share much about her with the others. It’s hard to read his emotions.

Jimin starts practicing again and Taehyung watches him quietly. It’s not going to be long now until they officially announce his departure from the company, not long until Mr. Kim hopefully believes that he no longer holds any leverage over Bangtan Sonyeondan, not long until Jimin can introduce Taehyung to Eun-Ji, and Taehyung can play up his charming side to get her to like him, so he can join Jimin when the dancer visits Eun-Ji’s home. So he can hopefully retrieve the original files from her father’s office, and can hopefully soon debut with Bangtan Sonyeondan.

Jungkook says yes when Taehyung asks if he wants to join him for the IU concert, and subsequently throws his arms around Taehyung’s chest and hugs him so hard that Taehyung has to gasp for him to let go so he can breathe again. The unadulterated expression of joy on Jungkook’s face makes Taehyung wonder why Jin decided that he should be the one to receive the two tickets, and not Jungkook in the first place. He’s not complaining though, as this gives him the opportunity to spend an evening with Jungkook, just Jungkook, outside the company.

The more time he spends scooped up in his tiny prison, the slower time seems to trickle by. Sometimes they allow him to go outside, but fears of Mr. Kim having hired a private detective to keep tabs on him limit that freedom immensely. As the showcase is their top priority now, the other members practice for it non-stop, which means that Taehyung’s presence isn’t needed. He reads books, studies Japanese, watches anime streams on the computer in shitty quality, but nothing seems to help make time pass by more quickly.

And then, out of nowhere, the day of the showcase arrives, and everyone’s nerves are on edge. Taehyung says good luck to his members, wishes them well. They’re all nervous, both about pulling off this stunt, but also about showing off their skills to the investors, proving to them that they are worth the money. Coming from a small company with little support, they know that every person willing to invest money in them is incredibly important. Everything has to be perfect.

They have a final group huddle before Taehyung’s members leave, in full stage outfits, hair and make-up. The jewellery they are wearing looks tacky, but they carry it with a pride. Taehyung would give everything to be able to follow them right now, to carry those heavy fake gold chains around his neck and show off the skills he honed over the past year, but today that’s not the part he’s playing. Their dance instructor comes knocking at the studio door shortly after the members left and leads him to his car with fast steps to drive him to the dorm while Mr. Kim is in the building.

Entering the dorm feels special, even though he had been gone for only about a week. The giant mountain of shoes by the entrance, the clothes strewn all over the place, dishes stacked up in the sink and the unmistakable smell of a bunch of teenagers living together all welcome him. It’s the first time Taehyung ever has the feeling that he returns to a home.

Taehyung is nervously pacing around, because what if it goes wrong? What if Mr. Kim doesn’t believe them? What if he sees through their plan all along? What if he decides to post the video because he’s pissed? What are they going to do then?

He stops in his steps when his eyes fall on the tiny coffee table in the living room, that he only now notices is suspiciously empty off stuff, save for a familiar white mug with black sharpie smileys drawn on it set in the middle and a selection of teabags laid out around it in a circle. Taehyung’s not
sure why, but suddenly the tension in his shoulders starts to drain and he can’t help but smile. He picks up the mug, and notices that on the opposite side of the familiar writing, a new word has appeared: “.”

Relax.

Below that, a tiny heart had been drawn.

Taehyung almost drops the mug in surprise once he realizes that as butterflies erupt in his chest.

Relax. Jungkook wants him to relax. Taehyung’s not entirely sure what the youngest member wants to tell him with that heart though. If the voice of hope that he’s locked away in his mind for so long is quietly whispering that maybe, just maybe, Jungkook likes him too, Taehyung will never admit to having heard it.

He puts the mug back down, his hands sweaty from excitement that he blames on nerves but knows all too well was really triggered by the heart, and he nods to himself.

Relax. Jungkook wants him to relax. He can’t help his band members at the moment, but he’s also no help for them if he just paces the dorm for the next few hours. So he’s going to make himself some tea, and he’s going to be helpful in any way that he can right now, even if it’s just by washing the dishes.

Time goes by, and Taehyung cleans the dorm while he drinks mug after mug of tea, a warm feeling appearing in his stomach each time he looks at the cup that he’s going to blame on the tea but knows is actually caused by the tiny heart in black marker.

When the door finally opens and all the members file into the dorm, Taehyung holds his breath. He meets them in the hallway that is most definitely too small to hold seven people. They’ve changed back into their normal outfits, but their hair is still styled and their faces are full of make-up. They all look absolutely exhausted.

“How’d it go?” Taehyung asks, unable to sound unbothered.

“The investors liked our performance. Some of them want to invest even more. They love it. Think we’ll be really successful with this concept.” Namjoon sounds proud, almost as if he’s in disbelief about what he’s telling Taehyung. But that’s not what Taehyung wants to know, and Namjoon knows that.

The other members shuffle around behind him, all avoiding eye-contact with Taehyung, and his stomach drops at the thought that if they look this subdued, all their effort had been for nothing. Mr. Kim must have noticed. Must know what they are planning to do. Didn’t believe them. Maybe by now has already put the video online. It’s over. This really is the end of Taehyung’s career in Bangtan Sonyeondan, not just an elaborate plan to safe his ass.

“And,” Namjoon says, and suddenly his face splits into a giant grin that sends Taehyung’s thoughts scrambling in confusion from the unexpectedness when he was so sure that they had failed. “Mr. Kim has demanded to no longer be an investor for this band. Officially resigned. He took the bait, was absolutely fuming.”

He looks incredibly giddy, and the five others in the back start to match his expression as Taehyung stares at them in disbelief as he tries to process the news.

Resigned. Mr. Kim has resigned, because he believes that Taehyung is no longer in the group. He took the bait. He took it. And now he no longer has a hold over the group, and they can finally
strike.

“Oh my god,” Taehyung whispers, eyes wide. “Oh my god.”

Before he knows it, he’s tackles by the others as cheers erupt and laughter fills his ears, and he jumps with them in the narrow space of the hallway and laughs with them, a feeling of elation taking control over his body that he’s rarely experienced before, causing his entire form to tremble from adrenaline. He knows that in a matter of minutes someone from BigHit will pick him up and drive him back to his small room, hidden away from the rest of the world, to make sure that Mr. Kim, who undoubtedly will start looking for him now, can’t find him. But that’s okay. Taehyung can survive a hundred more days in that confined space if that’s what it takes to bring Mr. Kim to his knees, as long as he has his band members by his side.

And his mug to drink out of. In a moment when no one is paying attention, he hides it under his jacket before leaving the dorm. When he lies on the uncomfortable couch in the studio that night, he keeps staring at it, his thumb tracing the outline of the heart.

Chapter End Notes

Come talk to me on tumblr, or if you want to you can check out my instagram, where I'll most likely be storying my London concerts experience!
Chapter 46

Chapter Notes

You know what's insane? This fic is celebrating it's two-year-anniversary soon. Oh shit.

Everyone, thank you so much for the comments! I'm back again with the next chapter. This one was supposed to happen quicker, but I literally got back from London and yeeted right to the hospital for a week straight because of side-effects, whoops. I'm honestly the luckiest person to have made it to London. But I'm okay and my most recent scans show further positive results, so all is good. I hope you're all doing okay. Expect updates to come a bit quicker now, I'm on a roll. Let's just say London and BTS inspired me to become more productive all of a sudden. I'll link to an insta post about it at the end of the comment in case you want to experience the moment at Wembley Stadium with me. In case this chapter feels a bit different, that's because I'm trying to push a bit out of my comfort zone and tackle real life interactions more heads-on, as I'm usually a sucker for avoiding conversations in stories. Do let me know what you think about it please! Hope you enjoy. :) x

Taehyung knows IU’s music. Almost everyone in South Korea knows her music. She has good songs, but Taehyung would never consider himself a fan of hers, which doesn’t explain why he’s so nervous to attend tonight’s concert. He’s been restlessly pacing around the small room all morning already, until Namjoon picked him up to bring him to dance practice. Now that the showcase is over, there’s no more need for just the six of them to practice, which means that Taehyung is a permanent fixture in the constellation of the band again.

It’s a relief. As dumb as it sounds, at the back of his mind there had been a constant nagging voice that had taunted him about Bang PD realizing that a six-member group would be much more efficient. So when Namjoon knocked on the door with a bright smile, the stress and bags under his eyes he had been carrying around with him over the past few days finally gone, and announced that he’s Taehyung’s escort to dance practice today, Taehyung had been so happy that he went in for a hug. Namjoon had been surprised as he’s not one of the more physically affectionate members and neither is Taehyung, but was quick to hug him back and squeeze tightly.

“That’s in a good mood today,” the leader casually mentions as they walk down the hallway after Namjoon made sure that it’s empty.

“I’m just really happy to be able to regularly practice with you guys again!”

“And about going to the concert, I assume?”

Taehyung blushes and shrugs.

“Is everything organized? You and Kook-ah are meeting at the venue, right?”

“Yeah, we’ll arrive and leave separately.”
Namjoon nods. “Good. I’m sure you’ll have lots of fun together!”

They arrive at the practice room before Taehyung can answer and the topic gets dropped as the rest of the members greet Taehyung enthusiastically. The tension that had been lingering in the air around them is dissolved, at least for now. Everyone is in high spirits, and everyone is willing to practice hard, as they’re learning the choreography for what will be their concept trailer. And it’s intense. At one point Taehyung even does a backwards roll over Jimin’s back, and each time Taehyung’s heart does a spin as well with nerves in fear of that move going wrong and one of them getting hurt. It never does, but Taehyung’s back already hurts after half an hour of practicing only doing that particular move over and over again. Jimin’s back can’t feel much better.

BTS has never been a group of slackers, Taehyung had been made aware of that from the very moment he joined them. He’s never met a group of people as hardworking as these six other individuals, never met people so willing to improve themselves and their skills. It’s inspiring to be a part of a group like that. They’ve always been hard workers, but now that the pressure is temporarily gone, they go even harder.

And Jungkook is glowing today. He’s giving two-hundred percent, his tongue sticking out in concentration as he’s going through the moves, and his nose scrunching up as he displays his widest smile when their choreographer compliments him on his outstanding performance.

There’s teasing and bickering when someone takes a wrong step, but it’s more light-hearted than it had been in the past. Yoongi declares Namjoon and Jin to be the worst dance couple of the group when the dance teacher steps out of the room.

“They are the only couple of the group,” Hoseok helpfully points out as Namjoon hides his face in his hands and Jin’s ears turn bright red.

“I’m aware, but what I’m saying is that even if there was another couple to form within this band, it could never be worse at dancing than the combined power of the two of them.”

Jimin doubles over laughing as Jin rants about Yoongi not respecting his elder, and Namjoon tells all of them to shut the fuck up. Taehyung quietly watches and hides a grin behind the towel he uses to dab the sweat off his face.

They practice into the hours of the early evening, before it’s time for Jungkook to go back to the dorm to get ready for the concert. Yoongi plays Taehyung’s chaperon back to his room, and then to the public bathroom that rarely anyone at BigHit frequents. Once again, it’s the perk of a small company that not too many people linger in the washing facility, and once Taehyung has slipped into one of the shower cubicles and closed the door behind himself, there’s no immediate risk of being found out anymore.

He’s not a particularly big fan of the shower, but at least BigHit does provide cubicles, and not those open shower rooms that are nothing more than a bunch of shower heads on the walls providing no personal space whatsoever. Yoongi turns around when Taehyung undresses and waits outside the room with the cubicle, whistling a melody that Taehyung isn’t familiar with over and over again and tweaking it.

When Taehyung is done, towel-dried and wet hair sticking into all directions, Yoongi turns around and whistles approvingly as he sees Taehyung’s outfit.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen you in a shirt before in your spare time,” he grins and Taehyung avoids eye-contact, trying to supress the blush he knows will colour his cheeks red. He’s usually a t-shirt person, that much is true. The only time he really wears button-down shirts is when they go
for fittings or photo shoots, but even then the Hip Hop concept doesn’t allow too much wriggle-room for fancy clothing like that.

Not that his shirt is particularly fancy. He bought it at a second-hand shop three or four months into being a trainee at BigHit. He’s very frugal when it comes to the little money he earns, preferring to store it away for possible bad days to come instead of spending it on something as unnecessary as fashion, but he saw the shirt in the shop window and couldn’t bring himself to leave it behind.

It’s nothing special really, dark blue and a bit ill-fitting on his skinny body. The sleeves are rolled up to his elbows, the double-sided fabric a lighter blue that adds a bit of a contrast to the rest of the shirt. He’s wearing his usual black jeans and scruffy black sneakers with it, so it’s not like he’s put a lot of effort into his outfit, but he’s bought that shirt and then never worn it, not sure what kind of place would fit the occasion of him wearing something more sophisticated than a simple t-shirt.

He’s finally found that occasion.

Taehyung’s never been to a concert before, so he’s not entirely sure what people are supposed to wear to one, but Yoongi looks him up and down approvingly, so he thinks he’s made the right choice.

“You should get that mop of hair under control though, or you’ll look like there’s a bird nesting on your head,” his hyung says nonchalantly after having appraised Taehyung’s outfit for longer than Taehyung thinks was necessary.

Once Taehyung’s hair is in place, they make their way back to his room with about ten more minutes to spare before one of the managers is going to pick him up.

“Are you excited?” Yoongi asks.

“Why does everyone ask me that today? I have no clue what to expect.”

Yoongi’s answer is nothing more than a humming sound that grates on Taehyung’s nerves as he gets more antsy with every passing minute. He’s excited, yes, but he’s also on edge. He expects there to be many people at the concert, which he isn’t all that thrilled about, and for some reason the idea of being alone with Jungkook outside their usual setting also frazzles his already frayed nerves.

He doesn’t know why he’s so jittery though. It’s not like he’s never been out with Jungkook before, but this time around it feels different. He remembers how thrilled Jungkook had been when Taehyung had asked him to join, and the heart on the mug that he’s hidden away in his bag so the other members won’t see it (although he’s sure that they know about it anyway).

But the heart doesn’t mean anything.

Taehyung had to repeat that over and over in his mind throughout the day, whenever his gaze caught on to Jungkook. It was nothing more than a kind gesture to help him relax, and he shouldn’t read anything into it at all.

He just wonders why his hyungs didn’t stop Jungkook from drawing it, knowing full well that Taehyung is harbouring a crush for the younger that surely won’t disperse if Jungkook does cute things like that.

When Taehyung and Yoongi return to his room, he notices his phone blinking on the table, indicating a new text message. Yoongi flops down on the couch, complaining about his aching shoulder, as Jungkook grabs for the phone, expecting the message to come from Jungkook to tell
him he has finished getting ready.

What he finds instead makes his blood run cold.

*Where are you, you little worm? You can’t hide from me. You need me. Don’t play coy now. I know you need my money.*

“Is everything okay?” Yoongi asks, and Taehyung realizes that he’s clutching his phone so hard that he fears it might break in his grip. He quickly flips it closed and puts it in his jeans pocket, clearing his throat and praying that his voice doesn’t tremble.

“Everything’s fine.”

There’s no reason to freak out. Taehyung had expected something like this to happen, for Mr. Kim to try and contact him. He knows that there’s no way that he’ll actually find him, Bang PD-nim having promised him that any and all actions will be taken to keep Taehyung safe. The text message still causes an unsettling feeling to fill up his stomach, squashing the nervous butterflies that had previously housed there in anticipation of the concert and quality-time spent with Jungkook.

It’s okay. He’s not going to let Mr. Kim ruin tonight.

His phone vibrates again in his jeans pocket, but Taehyung ignores it. Yoongi squints at him, but doesn’t say anything else after Taehyung’s assurance that everything is fine.

Mr. Kim is looking for him. Mr. Kim knows that if he’s on his own now, Taehyung is left with nothing again. The street corner he used to frequent comes to his mind, and he wonders if Mr. Kim already passed by it last night after the showcase, on the lookout for Taehyung. Why is this terrible man so terribly obsessed with him?

Taehyung swallows as Yoongi continues to look at him in suspicion. Today is supposed to be a good day. He’s going to spend the evening with Jungkook. He’s going to his first ever concert. Mr. Kim won’t ruin this for him, Taehyung refuses to allow him that. So he’ll suck it up and ignore the message, and tomorrow he’ll show it to the members. That’s it. That’s going to be what he will do. If anyone will try to ruin this evening for him, he’s going to hunt them down and kick their ass into the next dimension. Figuratively, of course, because Taehyung can’t deal with violence.

When the manager comes to pick Taehyung up a few minutes later, his heartbeat accelerates. Yoongi tells him to have fun once more and pats his back affectionately, before calling Taehyung back once again because he forgot the concert tickets on the table. When his hyung hands them over, there’s amusement glinting in his eyes.

“Don’t lose your nerves now,” Yoongi teases, and then Taehyung leaves for real, the tickets clutched between his fingers like a lifeline.

“We’ll meet Jungkook at the underground parking lot of AX-Korea, and that’s where we will be picking up the two of you right after the concert has ended,” the manager explains to him as he navigates them through the evening traffic of the streets of Seoul. “You will have direct access to the venue from the underground parking lot. For your own safety, make sure to not leave the venue.”

Taehyung nods along. He’s heard this talk before. He’s been given it by his hyungs and PD-nim already. He’s going to play by the rules, because being discovered by Mr. Kim isn’t in his best interest anyway.
His phone vibrates in his jeans pocket once again and he takes it out with a trembling hand. With a sigh of relief, he opens the text message from Jungkook that lets him know that the other has just arrived at the venue and where in the garage to find them.

“I hope you two have fun today,” the manager says as they too make their way down the underground parking lot a few minutes later, “with everything else going on, you really deserve it.”

There’s an unspoken rule between the few BigHit employees in on Taehyung’s secret to not talk about his situation. Taehyung is taken aback by the sincerity of the manager’s words, and he bows his head slightly as he thanks him. His manager glances over at him and smiles, before focusing back on driving.

When they pull up next to the car that Jungkook had been brought with, the younger teen is leaning against the black surface with his arms crossed, talking to their dance teacher, who had been in charge of chaperoning Jungkook to the venue. As soon as Jungkook spots them, he straightens up and starts to smile so brightly it lights up his entire face and makes his nose scrunch up. Taehyung inhales sharply before he realizes that he’s not by himself and quickly bites his bottom lip, waving outside as he waits for the manager to park.

Jungkook looks good. He’s wearing a white shirt and a light-blue denim jacket on top, paired with his favourite black pair of jeans. His short hair – he had gotten a haircut before the showcase and complained that it’s too short, but it fits him so well – is styled upwards and his forehead is showing. With how he looks right now, Taehyung doesn’t think he’ll be able to concentrate on anything or anyone but Jungkook for the entire evening.

“Hyung,” Jungkook cheers as Taehyung gets out of the car. He’s bouncing on the balls of his feet and waves at the manager behind the wheel, who calls out once again for Taehyung to come to this very spot immediately after the concert is over before leaving. Their dance teacher bows to them, which Jungkook and Taehyung both reciprocate, wishes them a fun evening at the concert as well, tells them to take notes on the performance, and also leaves right after.

“I’m so nervous to see IU,” Jungkook gushes when they’re alone in the parking lot, bringing his hands together to clap in excitement. “She’s perfect, you know? Her voice, her stage presence – and she’s so pretty too, hyung.”

An unreasonable pang of jealousy jolts Taehyung out of just fondly listening to Jungkook’s raving. He shakes it off quickly though, because it’s stupid. There’s absolutely no reason to be envious of a famous and well-established singer that Jungkook seems to have a tiny crush on.

“You’re going to absolutely love her too, hyung,” Jungkook continues to swoon.

“Whatsoever you say, Kook-ah,” Taehyung humours him. “Should we go in? The concert starts in one and a half hours.”

The noise of excitement that Jungkook makes at that suggestion doesn’t sound human at all, and Taehyung chuckles.

“Cute.”

Jungkook stills, blushes, and then smiles sheepishly. “I’m sorry, hyung. I’ll try to tone it down a bit.”

“Nah, you’re good,” Taehyung reassures him. “I’m glad you’re so stoked.”

Without really thinking about it, he grabs Jungkook’s hand – smaller but warm against his own
palm – and pulls him along towards the staircase that leads to the entrance. Jungkook follows along with a giggle and tells Taehyung to slow down. They run up the stairs instead of waiting for the elevator, their fingers still intertwined and neither of them showing the intention of letting go any time soon.

Once through ticket check and a small security pat-down that Taehyung knows was meant to be non-invasive, yet still made his skin crawl, they’re finally inside the event arena.

There are people everywhere, queuing up for all kinds of things. The smell of popcorn wafts through the air and Taehyung watches as Jungkook scents the air, hand coming up to cover his stomach.

“I’ve been so nervous that I barely ate anything today,” the younger admits, and yes, Taehyung had noticed that during lunch time. While the others had heartily dug into their takeout boxes, Jungkook had played around with his chopsticks more than eating anything.

“So we’re getting popcorn now,” Taehyung declares, and again he grabs for Jungkook’s hand and pulls him along, singling out the queue that sells snacks and drinks. “And coke while we’re at it. Let hyung treat you, I can’t have you faint from lack of energy as soon as you see IU on stage. That’d be just sad.”

“I wouldn’t faint,” Jungkook sputters, but once again he allows Taehyung to pull him along without any resistance.

It’s easy, being with Jungkook these days. In a way, it’s easier now to be with him than when Taehyung had still kept his past a secret. They joke without Taehyung constantly having to put in the effort to not make a wrong remark that could give him away. They laugh, make fun of their hyungs, complain about their choreographer’s strictness – surrounded by the positive energy of so many other people, in a place like this that Taehyung has never been to before, he feels both foreign and yet at ease. Like somehow he belongs. Like somehow, just this once, he leads a life that’s ordinary by the books.

It’s nice.

They share the popcorn and coke after having found their seats, and while Jungkook is busy licking salt from his fingers, Taehyung takes in the size of the concert hall in astonishment.

“This is insane,” he says as he watches the seats slowly fill up with more and more people.

“One day,” Jungkook says and wipes his fingers on his jeans, “we’re going to have a concert in here as well.”

“At AX-Korea?” Taehyung snorts. “Don’t be ridiculous! How many people fit in here?”

“I think it’s about five-thousand,” Jungkook says and starts drumming his fingers against his thighs nervously. Taehyung can feel the shift of the energy from the crowd as well that seems to make him more nervous, can feel how the excitement starts to rise.

Taehyung barks out a laugh. “And you think we would be able to attract that many people?”

Jungkook looks over at him and his eyes soften as he gives a bright smile. “Once we debut, that will be my new dream. Something I can work towards, a goal to keep in mind. Namjoon-hyung said that anything is possible, so this can’t be out of our realm. Don’t you have a dream, hyung?”

“To be honest I haven’t had all that much time to look for one yet. Been kind of preoccupied with
other stuff,” Taehyung jests, but he knows the joke falls flat when Jungkook’s expression falls.

The younger teen cocks his head. “Then it’s about time we find you one.”

“Let’s start on that quest after I have a giant target off my back,” Taehyung says gently. “Come on, we’re supposed to enjoy tonight. No talk about stuff that could bring the mood down. There’s still enough time to ponder all these things tomorrow. Let’s just have fun right now, yeah?”

Jungkook looks ready to argue, but then he just nods with a resigned look. “Okay. That means we’re going to shift to serious topics now: how many IU songs do you know?”

“Like four, maybe?” Taehyung answers after thinking about it for a few seconds, “I think.”

The look of absolute and sheer terror on Jungkook’s face is enough for Taehyung to quickly forget their recent topic, and just be endeared by how Jungkook tries to give him a crash course on IU approximately ten minutes before her concert starts.

Seeing a concert live for the first time is an unbelievable experience to Taehyung. He’s seen people busk on the street before, especially in Hongdae, and had always enjoyed the atmosphere that came with it, but it’s nothing in comparison to a professional singer with a professional stage. He can’t help but to flinch when the screams start at first as the lights go out and the opening VCR starts playing, but then Jungkook’s hand lands on his shoulder and the younger teen gives him a bright smile, before starting to cheer along with the crowd as well and that is all it takes for Taehyung to get lost in the moment.

He loves it. He loves it so fucking much, that line between artist and audience that is visibly there and yet still crossed. He sways to the music even if he doesn’t know the songs. He screams so much that his throat feels hoarse halfway through already. Most of the time, he doesn’t even take notice of Jungkook because he is just so focused on all the new experiences that are taking possession over him like waves that dominate the shore. Occasionally though he’s able to pull away from that daze, to look over at Jungkook, and in those moments it seems like time stops completely. Jungkook’s eyes are always trained on the stage, wide-eyed as if he can’t believe that he really sees IU in the flesh, his face illuminated by the colourful stage lights. He’s laughing when she says something funny, nose crinkling up, and once Taehyung even spots a tear at the corner of his eye during a ballad. He’d like to tease Jungkook for that, but he bites his tongue. It’s obviously an important moment for the younger, and who is Taehyung to ruin his joy by making fun of him for being emotional?

When the show ends and the lights come back on, Taehyung feels as if in trance, like the last two hours of his life had been a dream. Even seconds later, looking back on it he’s not entirely sure if what he witnessed has actually happened.

Jungkook is beaming. He’s clutching his hands to his heart, eyes also still focused on the stage as if he can’t believe this moment had happened either, probably for entirely different reasons than Taehyung. Seeing your unattainable crush live for the first time must be quite the experience. The people next to them in the row that want to get out are starting to get antsy, but Taehyung doesn’t care for them because fuck. He needs another minute.

“You enjoyed it, hyung, didn’t you?” Jungkook asks teasingly, and all Taehyung can do is nod. At this point the people next to them are just pressing by, but Taehyung doesn’t pay them any attention.

“That was…,” Taehyung starts, swallows, tries to find the right words but he doesn’t know how to explain it. He feels dumb, trying to explain the relationship between the artist and the audience, but
it was so beautiful that it’s all that he can think about. Clear boundaries and mutual respect for each other. For someone like him, a job like that seems unbelievable. “You really think that one day we could be the ones standing on that stage?”

Jungkook nods enthusiastically, obviously intrigued by where Taehyung’s thoughts are going.

Taehyung clears his throat and looks at the stage once again. Jungkook believes in this. Jungkook believes in them enough to think that one day, they too can have this mutual respect with their audience, can have enough fans to scream their name and sing along to their songs and-

Fuck, Taehyung has to stop thinking now or he’s actually going to tear up. This is beautiful. He never thought it could feel like this. He’s never thought about wanting to do a concert, because for him joining BigHit had always been about something different. Of course the idea of being an idol had been alluring, but the idea of stability and safety and money even more so. He’s always been impressed by how the others are living and breathing music every second of the day, dying to put themselves out there into such a vulnerable position. Have concerts. Gain fans. Touch them with their songs. Taehyung understands it now.

“A concert,” Taehyung says. Jungkook cocks his head and waits for Taehyung to elaborate, having patiently waited for Taehyung to obviously gather his thoughts. “I want to have a concert. That’s my new dream.”

“Well, then you should already pick out the one to follow after that,” Jungkook says with confidence, “because that one isn’t all too far away.”

The fall comes right after the high when Taehyung looks at his phone to text their manager that they’re on their way to the parking lot after queuing for the toilet, and finds at least twenty text messages from Mr. Kim, becoming increasingly more vulgar, angry and incomprehensible.

Jungkook notices. Of course Jungkook notices the second the smile slips off Taehyung’s lips and the blood drains from his face, and he grabs for Taehyung’s phone before he has time to protest.

They don’t drive Taehyung back to the BigHit building, but instead take him back to the dorm. He can’t breathe. He’s shaking and he can’t breathe, and the final message keeps ringing in his head over and over again.

I will find you, you ungrateful bitch. And then you’re going to pay.

Jungkook holds his hand the entire way back, and oh god, Jungkook has read the messages as well. He’s telling Taehyung that it’s going to be okay, that there’s no need to worry, but the more he talks the more Taehyung panics because this was supposed to be a nice night for the both of them, and now it’s fucking ruined, and Taehyung is reminded once again of how fucking disgusting and ruined he is – how happiness isn’t a thing that exists in his world, and how he should stay away from Jungkook to not suck that piece of innocence out of the younger teen as well.

“This is fucking unacceptable,” Yoongi scoffs after having read the messages, and for a second Taehyung thinks he might throw the phone against the wall. Maybe that would be a good idea, so he couldn’t read the offensive words anymore.

“We’re going to get you a new number first thing tomorrow morning,” Jin says, “so he can’t contact you anymore. Honestly we should have done that all along.”
Taehyung is slumped over on the couch, wrapped up in a blanket and listening, but not really listening either. He’s tired. He’s been so happy and now he’s so sad, and all he can think about is how he ruined Jungkook’s night. So much for having a fucking dream.

And he knows what his members are worried about. The text messages sound aggressive. Possessive. Mr. Kim is mad at him for disappearing, for investing money into this band only for Taehyung to drop out again. They’re scared that now that he’s angered, he’ll release the video anyway, just so he can get his way. Taehyung wouldn’t be surprised if it’s already out there, for the world to see.

He tucks the blankets tighter around his body as Hoseok lets his fingers run through his hair comfortably.

“IT’s going to be okay, you’ll see,” he tries to reassure him, but words are nothing than empty promises to Taehyung right now. There’s no guarantee he can keep them.

“A new number,” Namjoon agrees with Jin, “and Jimin, you’re going to set up a meeting with Tae and Eun-Ji soon. We’ve wasted enough time; we finally need to act.”

Jimin nods grimly, already on his phone.

Taehyung can’t stand listening to them talking anymore. He knows that they only mean well, but he needs quiet. He’s going to stay with them at the dorm tonight, but secretly he wished it wasn’t like that. He’d love nothing more than to curl up on the black couch and cry himself to sleep, too overwhelmed by all the emotions he’s feeling. Instead he’ll have to hold it all in.

“If you excuse me,” he murmurs and gets up. “I’ll go to sleep.”

“Do you want-” Jimin offers, but Taehyung just shakes his head. He knows that none of them are going to go to bed anytime soon. There’s too much to process. He appreciates any amount of quiet he can receive right now.

The mattress feels familiar, yet so strange. It’s softer than the couch, but Taehyung can’t value it right now. He bites back a sigh when only after a few minutes the bedroom door opens and closes again.

“Hyung?” Not having expected Jungkook to follow him of all people, he shuffles around in surprise to look down at the black-haired teen staring up at him in his bunk bed. “Can I join you?”

There are bags under Jungkook’s eyes and he’s changed into sweatpants and an oversized pyjama shirt, his earlier carefully styled hair a tousled mess on his head now.

Without a word, Taehyung raises the blanket in silent invitation and Jungkook quickly climbs up the ladder, as if he’s scared that if he waits for just a second too long, Taehyung will change his mind.

“I’m sorry,” Taehyung says after Jungkook has gotten as comfortable as can possibly be on the narrow space up high, both of them facing each other.

Jungkook furrows his eyebrows. “What are you sorry for?”

“Ruining your night,” Taehyung elaborates, and saying it out loud makes him choke up.

Jungkook’s frown only deepens. “You didn’t ruin my night, hyung. I had fun today. It didn’t exactly end like I hoped it would, but I still enjoyed it. And it’s not really your fault that it ended
“How would you have liked for it to end?” Taehyung asks quietly, and stupidly enough his heart skips a beat as Jungkook’s eyes just for a moment linger on his lips.

“Happier. You were glowing after the concert ended. I wish you could have held on to that feeling for longer than just a few minutes.”

“Jeon Jungkook, are you pitying me?” Taehyung asks with a teasing lilt to his voice, ruffling Jungkook’s hair, the younger teen swatting his hand away playfully. He’s trying to hold it together for Jungkook, he really is. He doesn’t want Jungkook to see him be even weaker than he already is.

“I’m not. I just enjoyed tonight. I wanted you to know that. Thank you for taking me.”

“You should thank Jin-hyung for the tickets, not me.”

“I already did that,” Jungkook says, “but still. I really had a good time tonight. Please don’t feel more upset because of me.”

“Why- wait, how do you even realize that that’s bugging me? When did you get so perceptive?” Taehyung asks with a groan.

Jungkook rolls his eyes. “Well, the fact that you’re apologizing to me for something absolutely ridiculous that’s completely out of your control is a dead giveaway. Also I’ve always been paying attention. It’s just that none of you guys ever noticed.”

Taehyung can’t argue with that.

“Is it okay if I sleep with you tonight, hyung?” Jungkook asks as he stifles a yawn.

“As if you’d ever leave,” Taehyung snorts, and Jungkook takes that invitation to shuffle closer, resting his face so close to Taehyung’s t-shirt-clad chest that he can feel his warm breath against his skin through the fabric.

“I’d leave if you’d tell me to,” Jungkook says.

Taehyung doesn’t respond. Instead he carefully wraps his arm around Jungkook’s shoulder, pulling him just the tiniest bit closer. It’s odd how earlier he had wished to be left alone, but now finds comfort in Jungkook’s presence. He doesn’t want to think about the fact that if it was any of his other friends on the mattress with him, he probably wouldn’t feel this way. He won’t allow his mind to wander there.

“Good night, Kook-ah,” Taehyung murmurs. He doubts that he will fall asleep anytime soon, as there are still too many thoughts racing in his mind, but he closes his eyes nonetheless.

“Night, hyung,” Jungkook answers, and he already sounds more asleep than fully conscious. “I hope you have a good dream.”

Chapter End Notes

Here’s the instagram post from London. There's also a full story on my profile with everything I got up to. I know, I know, for once in my life I was one lucky person to
get this experience! (Spoilers: my seat for day two was... pretty incredible).

As tumblr's dying down lately, I'm trying to be more active on twitter, so if you want to talk over there, I'm around!

And as always, you can come talk to me on tumblr. I'd love to hear from you guys! :)
“Act natural,” Jimin says. He’s tapping his foot up and down, eyes nervously scanning the crowd for a familiar face in the coffee shop.

“Jimin,” Taehyung counters and nudges his knee under the table with his own, “stop fidgeting. And if anything, you should be the one concerned with acting natural. Are you this antsy with her when Jungkook is around as well?”

The corners of Jimin’s mouth drop. “No…”

Two days have passed since the concert, filled with uncertainty and anxiety, but now it’s finally happening: they’re moving along with their plan for good, ready to go from the defensive into the offensive to retrieve those tapes, before finally calling the police on the bastard to lock him up.

Step one is for Taehyung to meet Eun-Ji.

He’s not nervous, but he can’t deny that it’s odd to know that he’s about to meet face to face with the daughter of the man who had fucked him countless times. Taehyung doesn’t know what to expect from meeting her. Jungkook had told him that she is a genuinely sweet person. When he had asked Jimin about it, the dancer had shut him down. As much as he doesn’t want to believe it, Taehyung fears that just maybe, over the time they have spent with each other, Jimin has started to care about her.

And that would genuinely suck, because quite frankly Jimin is the downfall of her father, and if he has started to develop feelings for her, this must hurt Jimin as well. Add another point to the list of Taehyung’s ever-growing guilty conscience.

“I’m just scared she’ll notice…” Jimin worries as he takes a sip of his drink.

“That she’ll notice what? That she’s talking to the boy who got fucked by her father? I don’t think you’ll have to be concerned about that thought crossing her mind.”

Jimin winces at Taehyung’s explicit use of words and Taehyung quickly backs down. “I’m sorry.
That was too harsh.”

“No, you’re right. She doesn’t know who you are. And besides, you’re the best actor I know. If anyone can pull off acting as if nothing’s going on, it’s you.”

“I’m flattered that you acknowledge my skills like that,” Taehyung jokes and rests a flat palm against his heart, prompting Jimin to stick out his tongue.

“I think I’m just struggling with the conscience of knowing that I’m going to hurt her,” Jimin admits quietly and starts to play with the straw in his glass, twirling around the ice cubes. “She doesn’t deserve that.”

“If I ask you something, will you answer me seriously?”

Jimin shrugs.

“Do you like her? I mean, actually like her?”

Jimin doesn’t have to answer for Taehyung to know that he’s hit the spot. He’s not looking up from his glass as he’s chewing on his bottom lip. He looks like a kid that got caught with his hand in the forbidden candy jar, and Taehyung’s heart breaks at the thought that it’s going to be his fault that his friend’s heart is soon going to bleed as well.

“I never meant to,” Jimin stutters over his words, “and at first I was good at pretending. But then I took her out on dates, you know? I really wanted to make it up to you, so I went all out to sneak my way into her life. I didn’t mean for us to get intimate, but somehow it happened. And now I’m stuck between a rock and a hard place, because in order to help someone I genuinely like, I’m forced to destroy the life of someone else I also genuinely like. I know that developing feelings for her was wrong, but I couldn’t help it. By the time I was ready to admit to myself that I might actually like her, it was already too late.”

“I don’t blame you,” Taehyung says, “you can’t control who you catch feelings for.”

Jimin snorts. “If you of all people would blame me for that, I’d actually kick your ass.”

Taehyung blinks at him owlishly. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Oh please,” Jimin scoffs, “everyone knows-”

He stops mid-sentence as his eyes dart to the entrance door, and Taehyung follows his gaze, immediately recognizing the teenage girl that enters from the countless hours he had spent online, stalking her on social media and finding any and all articles on her on the internet.

She’s pretty, that much Taehyung had already admitted to himself when he looked her up online, but the aura she carries around her makes her stand out among the crowd. Her eyes roam the tables and when she finally spots Jimin, a smile takes over her face that rounds her cheeks and crinkles her eyes: genuine happiness.

She waves as she makes her way over, navigating through the maze of tables in a flowery blouse and blue skinny jeans, and Taehyung feels as if all of a sudden he’s stuck in a Korean drama. He only notices belatedly that Jimin has gotten up from his seat and spares Taehyung one sheepish glance, entire face bright red, before he leans in to greet her with a small peck on the lips.

Oh. Taehyung hadn’t expected that. Somewhere in the back of his mind he had registered that Jimin had admitted to having been intimate with Eun-Ji – something that he honestly has a hard
time wrapping his mind around because that’s not how he wants to think of Jimin or any of his friends at all –, but hearing about it and seeing it are two entirely different things, especially if he wasn’t prepared for it at all. In hindsight that was stupid of him though. Jimin and Eun-Ji are a couple as far as the public is concerned, no matter to what degree the relationship is real, so how else are they supposed to greet?

“You must be Taehyung,” Eun-Ji says as she turns to him and bows. She has a silvery voice that fits her friendly complexion. Taehyung nods his head politely as he watches Jimin pull out a chair for her.

“I’ll get you something to drink. Iced Coffee?”

“Please,” Eun-Ji answers, and Jimin squeezes her shoulder as he passes by to get to the counter. They both watch him leave for a second, before the girl turns to him with a genuinely open smile.

“I’ve heard so much about you already. It’s so nice to finally meet you in person. Jimin never really introduces me to his friends with his job and all and I get that, but I still love to know the kind of people he hangs out with in his free time.”

She sounds truthful, and just for a second Taehyung falters before he composes himself. Jungkook had said that Eun-Ji is a nice person, but Taehyung had not anticipated for her to be so charming. On the pictures online, there had always been a resemblance between her and her father, especially around the eyes, but in real life Taehyung can’t see any of it. If he looks into them, all he sees is kindness.

“I’ve heard a lot about you as well!” Taehyung answers and he know that he’s said the right thing when she amps up that smile even more.

“Really? I know that he’s very secretive about me with the company and all. It’s nice to hear that this isn’t the case with friends outside.”

She looks back over to where Jimin is waiting for her drink, and Taehyung realizes that all three of them are screwed. He hadn’t been sure what to expect from meeting this girl, but sincere emotions towards Jimin hadn’t been it. Up until this point, Eun-Ji had been fake, the second villain in the play. Taehyung had liked to imagine her as daddy’s spoiled girl. He wishes he had been right.

“I guess it can’t be helped if he wants to become an idol.”

Eun-Ji nods, and after a few more seconds of looking at Jimin with a longing that makes Taehyung’s stomach twist in discomfort, she turns back to him and tugs a strand of black hair behind her ears.

“Jimin told me that you guys met in Busan when you were children. It’s amazing that you kept in touch all these years and got to reunite in Seoul. So tell me, Taehyung, what was he like as a child. Any embarrassing stories to share?”

Taehyung settles back in his chair comfortably and grins. This he can do. It’s the easy part of the plan. Fabricating stories is what he’s done all his life, and it comes natural to him: making up stories about nasty bruises to nosy teachers, convincing shop owners that he’s off age to buy his father’s alcohol.

“You wouldn’t believe it with how graceful he dances, but Jimin was the clumsiest child I’ve ever met.”

When Jimin comes back with Eun-Ji’s drink, Taehyung cranes his neck to look up at him with the
most innocent smile he can muster.

“You’ve returned at the right moment. I was just going to tell Eun-Ji about that time we were at the beach when the seagull attacked you. Remember, that time you dropped your ice cream? You were so scared that you started to cry.”

Eun-Ji laughs wholeheartedly, and Jimin flicks Taehyung’s forehead as he settles down at the table, clearly embarrassed about such a story that’s not even true being shared with a girl he likes.

“I didn’t introduce you to my girlfriend so you could make a fool out of me in front of her,” he complains with a pout.

“But Jimin,” Taehyung gasps dramatically and wriggles his eyebrows at her. “That’s what best friends are for.”

“I cooked you dinner. You can’t live on takeout only,” Jin says as he shoves a box into Taehyung’s hand that still feels warm to the touch. “The others enjoyed it, so I hope you do too.”

“Thanks, hyung.” Taehyung answers as he holds the box carefully and brings it closer to his face to inhale. “It smells delicious.”

“Damn well it does, and it tastes delicious as well,” Jin agrees. “I heard that the meeting with Eun-Ji today went good.”

Jin is making himself at home on the couch next to Taehyung as the younger teen unwraps the chopsticks and opens the lid of the box. His mouth waters just at the sight of the food and his stomach, with the perfect timing of a comedian, starts to rumble.

“Actually eat first, and tell me all about it later. Cold food is a tragedy. I can wait.”

Taehyung doesn’t need to be told twice, immediately digging in. The food is incredible and he hums appreciatively as he slurps in some noodles. It’s not as hot as he’d like it to be, but it’s a home-cooked meal with love from his hyung which makes it a hundred times better automatically.

“Meeting Eun-Ji was interesting,” Taehyung says with a full mouth once the initial vigour has died down and his stomach filled up. “She’s a very nice person, and I think she likes me.”

“Jimin mentioned that she already invited you over to join their next movie night.”

Taehyung nods and wipes away a bit of sauce that has escaped down his chin.

“Yes. It was a lot easier than I had thought. We’re planning to meet up next week. But to be entirely honest with you” Taehyung lowers the chopsticks, “I have no idea where to go from here. I mean I know the plan. Infiltrate the house. Find wherever he hopefully stores the original videos. There are so many if’s in that equation though. We don’t know if he has the original with his face on it as well still. We don’t know where it could be hidden. We don’t know any of his passwords or pins or whatever.”

“We have time,” Jin reassures him. “You don’t have to go in immediately, guns blazing. Just look around for now. That’s all we can do.”

“And besides,” Taehyung laments, “Eun-Ji is really kind. I feel bad for doing this to her. I felt bad just lying to her all afternoon. And Jimin really likes her too.”
“I know.”

“You know?” Taehyung asks in surprise. “That Jimin likes her?”

“He might think he’s hiding from us that he likes her, but Jimin’s obvious.” Jin shakes his head. “I feel like that’s a Bangtan problem.”

“What do you mean?” Taehyung asks, but Jin just waves his question aside.

“Jimin might like Eun-Ji, but you have to remember that his priority is debuting. He’s always wanted to be an idol. He’s incredibly hard-working. Taehyung, even if whatever is between them had nothing to do with Mr. Kim, they wouldn’t work out. Do you really think that he would be able to date a girl as a freshly debuted idol? Even if our agency doesn’t have an official dating ban, his career would be over before it had already started if fans found out. That’s way too dangerous, and he knows that. Jimin would have to break up with her either way, so you shouldn’t be too worried about the both of them. You’ve got enough on your plate already.”

“But you and Namjoon…”

The tips of Jin’s ears turn red as Taehyung points it out.

“Namjoon and I... I’d like to say it’s different, but that would make me sound like a hypocrite. Let’s just say I think it might be easier to keep a relationship within the band than outside. And now drop that topic and finish dinner.”

Taehyung obeys to the order, but the food doesn’t taste nearly as good as it used to. Jin has a point when it comes to Jimin and Eun-Ji: it would never work out anyway, regardless of the situation. Jimin is a performer. He wants to be on stage, wants to have that idol life, and he knows that it entails difficulties in dating. If it wasn’t for Taehyung, he thinks that Jimin wouldn’t ever have thought about romantically being with another person while being a trainee, but like he had said, emotions happen. They can’t be controlled, and Taehyung knows that better than anyone else. It still doesn’t squash the guilt he’s feeling for the heartbreak that he’s eventually going to put both Jimin and Eun-Ji through. The last bites of food taste nothing but bland as he swallows them, no matter how much care his hyung had put into making it.

Life continues. Practice continues. Jimin, Eun-Ji and Taehyung arrange a movie evening for the following week, which means that for now the only thing to do is to wait. As promised, Taehyung receives a new phone number from the company, discarding the old pre-paid SIM card at the bottom of his duffle bag.

More photoshoot practices with the tight-lipped team. More dance practice. They are sometimes whisked to the recording studio as well for some more ad-lips, but the songs per se that will go on their first mini album are done.

The first time that the boys get to listen to the mostly finished product, they are huddled together after practice, sweat making their hair and clothes stick to their skin all grossly. When they listen to what is going to be the final product, there are tears everywhere. Namjoon, of all people, their leader who never tries to show weakness, breaks into tears approximately fifteen seconds into “No More Dream”. It doesn’t take long for the rest of them to follow, although not all of them are quite as emotional as Namjoon.

“Three years,” Namjoon croaks out after the last chord, looking at his trembling fingers. “After three years it’s finally going to happen.”
No one has the heart to point out that technically they’re still not there yet. There’s no debut date, and there won’t be as long as Taehyung’s issues aren’t sorted. He thinks though that once this all is over, their debut will happen fast. After all, they have prepared for this so hard already. They are perfect, every note and every step immaculate, ingrained into their mind, soul and body. As soon as Mr. Kim is out of the way, Bangtan Sonyeondan is ready to present themselves to the world. It makes Taehyung itch to get it all over with even faster, and he grinds his teeth in the knowledge that waiting is all he can do.

Taehyung’s losing his mind. Not only due to the waiting game, but also because he’s permanently locked into BigHit now. No one wants to risk anything, which means that he’s under constant surveillance to make sure that he won’t be seen. At first it was doable, but as the days tick by and March starts to come to an end, it becomes unbearable. The white and empty hallways, the public bathroom, and that fucking studio without a fucking window: every time he has to enter it again, he wants to smash something.

His members are trying to make it as tolerable for him as they can, but it’s to no avail. Taehyung is getting so restless these days, locked away like a caged tiger, that he can barely fall asleep anymore even after hours of physical exertion.

Finally being able to go out to Eun-Ji’s house for the movie night feels like such a relief.

“And there’s absolutely no chance that he will be there?” Namjoon asks for what must be the hundredth time. He seems more anxious than Taehyung, absolutely unwilling to let him go.

“Relax, hyung. He doesn’t know we’re dating and she wants to keep it that way. We’ll be fine,” Jimin pacifies him. “We’ll be safe.”

Namjoon grimaces, and Jin elbows him in the arm.

“Leave them be. They know what they’re doing.”

Taehyung shoots his oldest hyung a grateful look. Jin is right. They know what they’re doing. They have a plan, and it’s nice to know that his hyungs are willing to trust him with it.

“I know, I know. I’m just worried.”

“We all are, but it’s the risk we have to take,” Hoseok also butts in. “And I’m sure that out of all of us, Taehyung knows best how to take care of himself.”

Taehyung’s chest swells with pride at Hoseok’s supportive words. Lately there seems to have been a change of mind going on in his hyungs when it comes to the issue at hand. They had always tried to protect him, to not have him involved in any way, but they seem to now have realized that this is the only way to go, and desperate to finally debut, they’re willing to gamble.

Because nothing is going to happen to Taehyung. He’s going to be totally fine. Besides, it’s not like anything important will go down today. They’re just going to watch movies, and Taehyung will stake out the house. It’s absolutely improbable that Taehyung will strike gold and find what he’s been searching for at first try. To be entirely truthful, Taehyung doesn’t even know what he’s looking for. Video files on a computer? A USB stick? It’s daunting to think about looking for something, exactly knowing what you’re looking for, but having absolutely no clue as to where to look.

“If something happens to you guys, I’ll personally kill you,” are Namjoon’s final words as he sends them on their way, and Yoongi cuffs him in the ear.
“Hyung?” Jungkook says when they’re about to step out of the room, and his hand shoots out to grab Taehyung’s wrist, eye imploring as he speaks: “You’ll promise you’ll be careful, right?”

Jimin comes up beside Taehyung and throws his arm around his shoulder confidently. “Don’t worry, Kook-ah. I’ll take good care of your precious hyung.”

“I’m careful,” Taehyung promises him too, and Jungkook lets go with a resigned look as Jimin and Taehyung make their way to the car.

Mr. Kim lives in a posh neighbourhood of Seoul. Taehyung isn’t particularly surprised about that. In fact he had expected it, since he’s the CEO of a successful company and had always enjoyed spending money on Taehyung. Expensive champagne, excellent room service, a hotel room with a view over the city because he knew how Taehyung had loved to look out the window for hours after they were finished and marvel over the beauty of the view – Mr. Kim had never not bragged about the life he could offer Taehyung, when Taehyung had brushed off his obsession as some trivial bedevilment about something he could never have, knowing full well that his family, reputation and entire life were at stake.

Seeing the modern mansion with his own two eyes, however, and making the connection that this is exactly where Mr. Kim’s picture-perfect life takes place feels surreal. Eun-Ji lets them in with a welcoming smile after they walked over from two streets away after being dropped off by their manager, and Taehyung is creeped out by the fact that as Jimin enters, he doesn’t even look around because he’s so attuned to his surroundings already. For Taehyung, this entire place feels like a movie set.

“Make yourself at home,” Eun-Ji tells him, as Taehyung trails behind her and Jimin down a hallway and curiously peeks into different rooms. The place is huge, and surprisingly empty, at least the parts of it that he can see. It’s almost like a museum, no dust on the shelves that display what must be expensive exhibits. “The maid has already left, mum and dad are both on business trips and my little sister is staying with a friend. So if you need something from the kitchen or anything, just take it.”

“Thank you,” Taehyung says, and he’s touched by her kind-heartedness. “You have a sister?”

“Yes. She’s two years younger than me. Actually I think she’s Jungkook’s age then, right Jimin? Maybe we should introduce the two to each other – I think they would get along quite well. Have you met Jungkook, Taehyung?”

“Jimin’s friend Jungkook? Yeah, we met once.” Jimin coughs and Eun-Ji pats his back gently, while Taehyung stares daggers at him from behind at his obvious attempt to choke down a laugh. “Do you get along well with her?”

Eun-Ji shrugs, and she passes by a part of the hallway that displays at least thirty pictures in both multi-coloured and monochrome frames, a complete thorn in the eye to the otherwise carefully curated hallway. Taehyung’s blood runs cold even just meeting the eyes of Mr. Kim through a photograph.

“I guess. We bicker all the time, but what can you expect from your siblings? My mum always denies it, but we know that she’s her darling sunshine. That’s okay though, because we both know that dad would always take my side over hers.”

She grins as she offhandedly mentions it and opens the door next to all the picture frames, not noticing how her words make Taehyung swallow harshly. He likes Eun-Ji, he really does, but that knowledge makes him apprehend her. The way she says it she obviously cares for her dad, and that
makes her a danger.

“Oh,” Taehyung answers and Jimin shoots him a careful smile as if to ask if he’s okay. Taehyung nods confidently and follows them into the room that turns out to be a mini-movie theatre. Taehyung stops stunned at the door frame.

“I know, this place is sick, right?” Jimin grins.

“Are you close to your family, Taehyung?” Eun-Ji asks as she busies herself setting things up. “Jimin, can you pick out a movie for us to watch? You know what both Taehyung and I like, I’m sure you’ll find something good.”

“I don’t really have a family anymore,” Taehyung says awkwardly but truthfully.

Eun-Ji freezes. “Oh… I’m sorry.”

Taehyung shrugs it off. “That’s okay. It’s for the best like that. Besides, I found a new one that takes better care of me than my old one ever did.”

He feels Jimin looking over at him, but pointedly ignores him.

Eun-Ji nods to herself. “I’m glad to hear that then. Make yourself comfortable, okay? I’ll go get us snacks.”

When she’s gone and Taehyung has plopped down in one of the cushioned seats in the middle of the room, Jimin trudges over to him with a DVD case in his hand.

“You okay?” he asks.

“Yeah, sure,” Taehyung tries to brush him off, but Jimin is oblivious to it.

“You know, if Jin-hyung had just heard what you said, I think he might have started crying.”

Taehyung groans and hides his face behind his hands. “Jimin, please shut up.”

Jimin chooses a comedy, and then a second one which is exactly when Taehyung starts his quest. He complains that his stomach feels a bit uncomfortable while Eun-Ji changes the DVD, and ten minutes into the movie he claims that he needs the bathroom.

“Do you want us to pause?” Eun-Ji asks, and Jimin – who has his arm comfortably draped around her shoulder – pretends to be concerned as well. “You already said when we came here that you weren’t feeling so well, should we leave?”

Taehyung shakes his head vehemently. “No, no. I’m fine. I’ll just go to the bathroom. Continue the movie, I think I’ve seen it already anyway. Just-” he stops, clutches his stomach and pulls his face into a painful yet abashed grimace. “I’m sorry. This is so embarrassing.”

“Don’t worry about it!” Eun-Ji assures him, “it happens. Bathroom is the third door to the left in the hallway.”

Taehyung leaves quickly, trying to convey urgency with his movements, but after he closes the door to the hallway behind him he drops all acting and takes a deep breath. Okay, this is it. He needs to focus now. Jimin is in there to distract Eun-Ji as long as he can, and should she decide to go look for Taehyung he’ll shoot him a text. Taehyung can do this. He doesn’t know how much time he has, but he has time and he’s going to use it wisely.
He swallows harshly. He hadn’t been nervous before, but now the adrenaline rushes through his veins and his senses are heightened. It has turned dark outside since they have arrived, so he turns on the lights in the hallway first and pointedly ignores the overwhelming amount of family portraits on the wall, a feeling of unease overcoming him at the thought of Mr. Kim’s inquisitive eyes.

Logically thinking, what should he do first? Taehyung supposes that maybe getting a blueprint of the house seems like the best idea to start at. Jimin had filled him in on as much information as he could, but it’s entirely different to hear about a place and to actually see it. So Taehyung tracks back to the main entrance, and makes sure to look into every room along the way: a kitchen and a pantry, a giant living room, a dining room, the bathroom that Eun-Ji told him about, a washing kitchen – how could only four people live in such an enormous house? What did they do with all that space? There are two more rooms on the ground floor next to the mini-theatre. Taehyung doesn’t think that what he’s searching for can be found anywhere in here.

Upstairs it is then. He walks back down the hallway again, tiptoes past the door to the movie theatre where he can hear the movie play quietly, and sneaks upstairs on the extravagant open staircase made out of white stone with a black iron railing. The entire worth of just those stairs must be more money than Bangtan’s entire dorm, and when he finds himself on the railing he throws his head back in frustration, realizing that there are seven more doors leading to rooms.

Taehyung makes his way through them one after the other. There’s another bathroom, a closet, three bedrooms – two of which he assumes belong to Eun-Ji and her sister and the third one being the master bedroom – and two offices, one neatly organized with a vase full of flowers on the desk and the other one absolutely cluttered, looking as if it might belong to a hopelessly overwhelmed old university professor. Taehyung issues an educated guess that the unorganized office is Mr. Kim’s. It would fit his type.

Approximately five minutes have passed since Taehyung left Eun-Ji and Jimin. He thinks that he has a bit more time, maybe ten more minutes, before his absence will start to get suspicious. Now that he knows the layout of the house, he should figure out what to do next. If he was to hide something that no one is meant to ever discover, where would he do so? His first thought is immediately his private bedroom, but Mr. Kim shares a bed with his wife and Taehyung doubts that’s where he would hide pornographic content of himself with a minor.

His office then? It seems like the most reasonable answer. Taehyung takes a deep breath and readies himself to enter the personal space. The shelves are cluttered with books and papers, and a giant dark maple wood desk stands close to a window. Artworks decorate the walls, and Taehyung wonders how anyone can get anything done in a mess like this? He knows that their small studio isn’t the cleanest space either, but at least you can see the surface of the desk. In here, every inch is covered by paper. How can such a successful man be so unorganized, especially with the rest of the house looking as pristine as it does?

Taehyung walks over to the desk with caution, his eyes darting into every corner of the room in apprehension. He doesn’t think that there will be any, but he’s scared of hidden cameras. If Mr. Kim is paranoid enough to have them installed in his office, Taehyung is thoroughly fucked. He knows that there’s CCTV at the entrance of their mansion, but Jimin had said that Eun-Ji swore that no one ever looks at it – just a security blanket for rich people, to scare off potential burglars. At first glance he can’t find any cameras, so he gathers courage and draws even closer to the desk. There’s a flat-screen desktop on it that has gathered some dust, and a computer keyboard hidden under papers. Taehyung presses one key cautiously, cold sweat breaking out on his skin, but the monitor stays black.
Rounding the desk, he notices the four drawers below it and tugs at one experimentally. It’s locked. Taehyung can’t be sure, but he thinks that if he had something to hide, this is most likely where he’d do it. He chews on his bottom lip as he looks at the drawer, then at the computer, and then around the entire room once again, crushed down by the thought that whatever he’s looking for could be hidden anywhere in here.

He knows it’s fruitless, but he turns on the computer and twitches when it starts to whirr and beep. The screen shows the start screen, and as Taehyung had expected it’s password protected. With a frustrated huff he turns it off again, aware of the fact that he’s using up too much time.

Taehyung leaves the office behind for now and carefully treads into the master bedroom, the floors carpeted in an ugly green beige colour. Based on assumption, he picks Mr. Kim’s bed to be the one to the left side, with nothing but an alarm clock and a box of tissues on the bedside table, while the other one is stacked with books and what looks to be moisturizing creams. Taehyung kneels down in front of the nightstand and pulls on the drawer, heart skipping a beat when it opens easily. As quietly as he can, he combs through everything he can find inside, which is nothing but useless knick-knacks as he realizes with a heavy heart – useless knick-knacks, condoms and lube that make the skin on Taehyung’s fingers tingle uncomfortably as he brushes them on accident.

Tentatively closing the drawer again to make sure that he doesn’t change the chaos inside with a too harsh gesture, Taehyung kneels in front of the nightstand motionlessly, a feeling of dread overcoming him. It’s no use. He’s tried, but he sees now how absolutely unfeasible his challenge is. Taehyung doesn’t even know what he’s searching for – a video file, a USB stick, a CD, something entirely else maybe? – and tears of frustration sting his eyes when he realizes that there is no potential for him to ever find it. His knees dig into the plush carpet next to the bed that Mr. Kim blissfully sleeps in at night, and he has to swallow harshly to compose himself and not entirely lose his mind.

Taehyung allows himself another minute to stay still and silently wallow in the misery that has overcome him, before he gets up from the floor and texts the manager waiting for him at a nearby coffee shop. He makes his way back downstairs and forces himself to smile as he opens the door to the small movie theatre.

Eun-Ji stops the movie and turns back to him in concern, asking if he’s okay. Taehyung knows that Jimin is staring at him, scrutinizing him for hints as to whether he was successful or not, whether he found out something valuable. Taehyung doesn’t look at him. He can’t, because he knows that Jimin would immediately be able to spot the desperation in his eyes.

“I’m really sorry, but I’m not feeling well at all. I think I’m going to go home, if that’s okay with you.”

“Of course,” Eun-Ji assures him, and offers to call him a taxi that Taehyung brushes off.

“No, you stay behind. I want you guys to have a nice night.”

Jimin’s eyebrows shoot up, because the original plan had been for them to leave together, but he doesn’t argue with Taehyung. Taehyung wants him to have some time with Eun-Ji. They genuinely like each other so it’s the best he can offer, even if he knows that Jimin catches on to something being wrong as they deviate from the original plan to leave together.

“I’ll bring you to the door then,” Eun-Ji says before Taehyung can argue. He follows her outside, well aware of Jimin’s eyes drilling holes into the back of his head.
“Thank you for inviting me! I’m really sorry I have to leave like this,” Taehyung apologizes sheepishly as he puts on his shoes, but Eun-Ji just shrugs him off.

“Don’t worry about it. We can repeat it another time, yes? Just make sure that you’ll get well soon!” To Taehyung’s surprise, she pulls him in for a hug goodbye and yet again it hurts him to think what a genuinely nice person she seems to be. He wonders how she would act towards him if she knew that he was in the process of possibly destroying her entire family. Wonders how she would react if she knew all the things her dad had done to him.

Taehyung walks down the street the direction he came from, the manager already waiting in the car for him.

“Where’s Jimin?”

“Staying with Eun-Ji,” Taehyung answers.

He slips into the backseat of the car instead of the passenger seat and rests his head against the cold window after buckling in.

“Did it everything go okay?”

“As expected.” Taehyung condenses and closes his eyes. He doesn’t want to talk about it right now, and the manager seems to catch on to that, turning up the volume of the radio instead of trying to make conversation.

Taehyung watches the dark neighbourhood rush by quickly as he nervously fiddles with the phone in his hands, his mind screaming at him over and over again that this won’t work. There’s no way. They have way too little intel to pull this off. But he has another plan. In all honesty, he’s had this plan at the back of his mind for a long time already, but he had been too scared to voice it, knowing that just by suggesting it he would bring the wrath of his band members upon him. They would never support him, would never understand, but Taehyung knows that this is the only option they have. He’s going to tell them about it. They’re going to hate it, but they can’t stop him no matter what. It’s not just about being able to debut at this point, but it’s also for Taehyung to break out of his chains, finally leave his cage. They might not understand, but Taehyung’s not only doing this for them as a team anymore, but most importantly for himself.

When he arrives back at his small room, tired from emotions he wishes he knew how to ignore, he goes to his duffle bag and searches for the small SIM card he had carelessly thrown into it just days ago. There’s not a lot of money on the prepaid card, but Taehyung doesn’t need much. He knows that one text message will be enough.

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Taehyung wrings his hands together with nerves. He knows that the other members are observing him like an insect under a microscope, waiting for an account of what had happened the previous night. They want to know how he assesses the situation, without a doubt having already heard from Jimin that he acted strange when he left as soon as possible. They’re gathered around the practice room just after noon, ready to start practice after the quick briefing that Taehyung is supposed to give, the information he is to share about how their plan is proceeding. Whether he found anything helpful.

Truth be told, he barely slept all night. In the beginning, because he couldn’t believe either what he had just done, asking himself if he had lost all brain cells that were still working somewhat productively. But the more he had thought about it, had thought about the actions he was about to
take, the more he had realized that it was the only thing he could really do. Then he had barely slept from nerves because he knew that first thing the next morning, he would have to go and talk to Bang PD-nim, to get his blessing on the plan. And then Taehyung hadn’t been able to fall asleep because he knew that if PD-nim would allow him to proceed – and really he couldn’t backpedal now, not when Taehyung had already set the new plan in motion and tipped over the first domino piece – he’d have to face and confess to his friends.

And that is the scariest thought of all. Not the idea of what is about to come, of what he is willing to put himself through in order to finally gain freedom. No, the scariest part of them all is to admit to his friends that once again, he’s willing to whore himself out again, this time for something far more important than money.

Freedom.

Taehyung knows that once he tells his bandmates, all hell will break loose. They are protective of him and he realizes the danger that he is willing to put himself in for the greater cause, so it’s only natural for their reaction to be harsh. Taehyung still flinches though when Yoongi starts to scream at him if he has lost his fucking mind, but then he braces his shoulders and raises his chin, staring Yoongi square in the eyes.

“As a matter of fact, hyung, I did not.”

“It sure doesn’t sound that way,” Yoongi barks, and for the first time in a long time Taehyung genuinely thinks that the rapper could harm him. Something on his face must give him away, because Hoseok steps in and grabs Yoongi’s elbow, holding him in place.

“Taehyung,” Jin says next. His face has gone ashen, “no.”

“Yes, Taehyung answers, and with every passing second he gets more defensive about his decision.

“No,” Namjoon echoes Jin’s words, “this isn’t going to happen. What do you think, that PD-nim would approve of something as stupid as this?”

Taehyung crosses his arms in front of his chest. He knows that he looks like nothing more than a sulking teenager, but the knowledge that he already won over Namjoon’s argument makes him not care. “As a matter of fact, he already did.”

There’s silence, and then there’s a thudding sound, and Jungkook’s phone is lying on the floor as the youngest member holds on to nothing but thin air, eyes wide in disbelief and mouth parted, and then all hell really breaks loose. Everyone is screaming over each other, Yoongi yanks himself free of Hoseok’s grip and topples forward to grab Taehyung by his shoulders and shake him with a bruising hold that makes Taehyung’s skin hurt.

In a blind moment of sudden panic, Taehyung pushes him away with all his strength, and as Yoongi stumbles backwards he trips and crashes to the floor.

Everyone freezes. Taehyung’s fingers tremble, so he balls his hands to fists to hide the weakness he’s displaying. Yoongi hurt him. Yoongi physically hurt him, and although he knows that it was a spur of the moment thing, that he didn’t mean any harm, there’s an angry fire blazing in his chest he can’t contain anymore.

“This is not about you!” He’s screaming the words loud enough for them to boom across the entire room, and Jimin visibly recoils in surprise. “This isn’t about any of you, but me! It’s pointless, okay? It’s fucking pointless to look for those files when we don’t know where they are, and this is
the only fucking way. Don’t you get that?”

His throat hurts and he stoically blinks away the tears that spring to his eyes.

“I’ve been fucking trapped in this nightmare for a year now. I want it to end! And if fucking him for that to happen is what it takes, then I’m taking that risk. I’m not some weak pliant doll he can move around as he wants to. I’m human. I want to make my own decisions. I want to make my own choices, and I’ve chosen!”

“Taehyung,” Namjoon snaps, but Taehyung cuts him off.

“Fuck off, all of you! You don’t understand. You have no clue what it’s like to live like that.”

He needs to get out. The walls are closing in. Six pairs of eyes are staring at him in disbelief. The silence crushes him. He needs air. He can’t breathe. Yoongi is still on the floor, staring up at him in absolute bewilderment. Everything is blurry, his sight clouded by tears and his chest heaving as he tries to catch his breath. He needs–

Taehyung dashes out of the room, all caution thrown to the wind. So what if someone spots him now? What does it matter? He pushed Yoongi. He might have actually hurt Yoongi, even if it was a panic-fuelled act of self-defense in the moment. He screamed at Namjoon. He cussed at all of them.

Their faces pop up in his mind again as his brain helpfully revisits the moment he told them that he’s going to return to Mr. Kim, fuck Mr. Kim, get all information out of him. Disgust. Shock. Rage. Hoseok had looked as if he was going to throw up. Not one of them had seemed supportive of the idea, but they don’t understand. There is no other way, he has no other choice.

And he’s so sick of hiding away from the real world, from the real life monster that hides under his bed and waits for him every night. Ignoring it won’t make it go away, hasn’t done so for months, so what other option does he have than to feed it and domesticate it, make it his friend and beat it with its own weapon?

Taehyung flees to the studio, because there’s nowhere else he can go. It’s his only sanctuary, the only place at the moment he belongs. He locks the door behind himself and falls to the couch, curls up and presses his hands against his face, tries to breathe breathe breathe. He waits for the knock on the door, for someone to have come running after him, either to scream at him or calm him down – but there’s no one, and Taehyung is alone with his thoughts and feelings that shake him up like a small boat on a stormy ocean.

Someone had always come running after him. The knowledge that this isn’t the case now feels like another punch to the gut. It shows Taehyung just how lowly they think of his idea, how much they detest it. Detest him for it.

The mug with the heart stands on the small shelf, fully visible from every angle of the room, and it mocks him with its presence. Relax. Please always be happy. As if. Happiness doesn’t exist in Taehyung’s life, not the way it does for other people. It stops by to give him a taste of it every once in a while – in the form of his loving grandmother that had taken such good care of him when life at home had been nothing but a nightmare, or in the insane idea of escaping all his past troubles by becoming an idol – but in the end it had never stuck with Taehyung for long. Happiness moves on, and Taehyung is left behind in his gray world full of troubles and pain, yet again a chess piece in someone else’s game.

But he’s tired of playing games. Of course he’s scared too, but Mr. Kim is the only thing that binds
him to a past life full of pain. He’s the last denominator that connects Taehyung today to the guarded and tired of life teenager he used to be a year ago, and he needs to be eliminated for good. Even if he hurts Taehyung now, the pain will be worth it in the end. When he is erased, Taehyung will be left with a new start, a blank slate.

Taehyung wishes that his friends could understand.

The knock on his door comes eventually, but at least an hour must have passed. Taehyung’s heartbeat spikes for a second, before he goes to open the door, not surprised to find Namjoon standing behind it. His jaw is clenched and his eyebrows are furrowed. Maybe he should have kept the door closed.

“Can I come in?”

Taehyung steps back and allows him to enter. He waits for Namjoon to pick his seat – he goes for the desk chair – and waits by the door.

“If you’re here to scream at or lecture me, you can leave again,” Taehyung says defensively. Namjoon stares at him quietly, sighs and then shakes his head.

“I’m not. I want to, but that’s not why I’m here.” Dropping his guard and his shoulders, Taehyung leans against the armrest of the black couch. He doesn’t want to sit down entirely. He’s not in the mood for what he supposes is a serious talk to come. “And I want to make something else clear. I’m not here as your friend right now, but as the team leader. As your friend, I would lecture you. But I had a talk with PD-nim, and he told me that this is a matter of the mind and not the heart – whatever that’s supposed to mean – so go ahead. I’ll listen.”

He gestures for Taehyung to say something, but Taehyung is so caught of guard that he’s not sure how to reply. “You’ll… listen?”

“You’re smart. And responsible. You usually don’t act impulsively. Explain to me your decision, and I will think about it rationally and don’t judge – as a leader, but not as a friend.”

This is more than Taehyung could have hoped for. He knows that PD-nim had assured him his support if Taehyung thought this is what he needed to do, although begrudgingly. If he can convince Namjoon from a leader’s perspective that this is the right thing to do, then maybe Namjoon can mediate between him and the other members. Maybe they won’t look at him with disgust but with understanding, and give him what he needs the most – support.

“I have been thinking about this long before I first stepped foot into Mr. Kim’s house, but we don’t know where or how he keeps the files, let alone how many copies he has. We have received what, like four different videos?”

“Four or five, always on USB or CD.”

Taehyung nods and licks his lips, mouth dry. “Yes. We don’t know how many more there are. It’s like finding a needle in a stack of hay the size of Burj Khalifa; impossible. And when I went to his house, that knowledge was just reinforced.”

Namjoon keeps quiet as he listens, the grave expression on his face not leaving once. But he actually listens, and that’s all Taehyung can ask for at the moment really. He starts off by rambling, fast-paced and tripping over every other syllable like a clumsy child, but when he realizes that Namjoon grants him the time to explain without interrupting, he starts to slow down and choose his words more meaningfully until he has shared everything that’s on his mind. When
he’s done, he feels like a balloon that had been released of air – deflated, empty and grossly wobbly.

“I realize that it’s dangerous, but I’m willing to take the risk. I don’t want to have him touch me, but I’m strong enough to handle it. I’ve been before. But what I really need, hyung, is you guys for support. That’s what makes me strong. I don’t think I can do this on my own.”

“As your friend, I don’t support this idea at all,” Namjoon says once Taehyung gestures that he’s done, “because I’m worried about you.”

Taehyung collapses into himself, shoulders drawn forward and head hanging low. It’s what he expected. He’s still grateful that Namjoon gave him the time to listen though.

“But as a person – and this isn’t even about the leader role anymore – I think I get it. I think that I would do the same.”

The younger teen perks up at that, glances at Namjoon from under his mop of hair carefully and worries his bottom lip with his teeth, waiting for Namjoon to continue.

“As a leader, I’m telling you that if this is what you think is best for the group, go for it. If it’s best for you, go for it. But you’re going to see a therapist, and that sooner than later. And you’re going to be open with that therapist – and with me, about everything that happens. Any pain, every interaction. You tell me exactly what went down, so I can be there to support you, okay? Keep shit to yourself, and I’ll personally make sure to lock you into this room and never let you leave again.”

Namjoon looks as if he can’t believe either what he just said, matching Taehyung’s stunned expression.

“You don’t- you won’t hate me for doing it?”

“No one would hate you for that, Tae. It just hurts us to see you put in harm’s way.”

There’s so much relief washing over Taehyung at those words, at the knowledge that at least one person – although begrudgingly – takes his side, that he’s overwhelmed with emotions out of the blue, surprised to find tears dampen his cheeks that he hastily wipes away, sniffing through a suddenly blocked nose.

“Thank you, hyung. That… your support means everything.”

Before he knows it, Namjoon has stumbled over to him and wraps him in a hug, a move the leader usually wouldn’t be so forward with as he’s more comfortable using words than gestures for comfort, and Taehyung clinches to his shirt with all the strength he can conjure up with his trembling hands, hiding his face in the crook of his hyung’s neck as he loses all control over his emotions. Namjoon says nothing. He just pats his back and runs his fingers through Taehyung’s hair, and squeezes just a little tighter as Taehyung shudders, until he’s somewhat calm again.

“Are you feeling better now?” Taehyung nods weakly as Namjoon scoots back a bit to give him space. “I’ll talk to the others for you, okay? I’ll explain. I doubt they’re going to accept it, but they’ll come around. Also expect Yoongi-hyung to show up sometime soon, he’s beating himself up for what happened at the studio.”

“I hurt him,” Taehyung murmurs, voice pathetically weak.

“You reacted in self-defense. He should have known better than to grab you like that.”
Namjoon is reluctant to leave Taehyung by himself, but there’s so much to think about, a lot to discuss with PD-nim, and the other members are still waiting as well.

“I can send in one of the others to look after you?”

Taehyung shakes his head and shuffles down on the couch as Namjoon gets up, rolling himself into a ball.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea right now. You said yourself you came as a leader, but they wouldn’t. I don’t think I have the emotional strength right now to deal with a friend. Besides, I’d like to be alone for a bit anyway. I barely slept last night, and I’m tired.”

“Okay,” Namjoon says, but he still stalls leaving, “if you need anything, text me. And lock the door when I’m out.”

Taehyung hums in acknowledgement, but he doesn’t move a muscle after Namjoon leaves the studio to get up and lock up. Instead he curls in on himself tighter and closes his eyes as tiredness pulls him in, both physically and emotionally.

When Taehyung wakes up again, two doe eyes stare back at him. Yelping in surprise, he pulls back a bit.

“Wow, you’re finally awake. Hyung, you should really lock the door when you’re by yourself, especially if you want to sleep.”

“Jungkook, what are you doing here?” Taehyung croaks. His throat feels as dry as sandpaper.

“Waiting for you to wake up.”

Taehyung blinks at him owlishly. “Because…”

“Because we need to have a talk. I’m also hiding from the vocal coach though. As if I’d have the time to worry about improving my singing now.” He scoffs and shakes his head in disbelief. “Anyway, hyung, we need to have a talk.”

It’s unfair of Jungkook to ambush him like that, when Taehyung is still groggy from sleep.

“I’m not going to talk to any of you until Namjoon-hyung did.”

“He already did,” Jungkook butts in. “You slept forever.”

“I told him I don’t want to see any of you for a while. If you’re here to lecture me, you might as well leave again. I won’t change my mind.”

Jungkook looks exasperated. He’s kneeling in front of the couch, but now he scrambles up and pulls Taehyung into a sitting position, making the older teen frown up at him with displeasure, before plopping down to his knees in front of Taehyung again. “You’re a real joy to be around when just having woken up, hyung.”

“What do you want?” Taehyung whines and hides his face behind his hands. He’s tired. He’s confused. He doesn’t want to have to deal with any of this now. Can’t he just be left in peace for a little while?

“Namjoon-hyung talked to all of us, and I’m not going to lie, none of us want you to do it.”

Taehyung opens his mouth to defend himself, but Jungkook shakes his head.
“Can you just shut up and listen for once, please? I talked to him afterwards, when Yoongi was busy trying to come to terms with it – Yoongi punched a wall, hyung, he’s actually at the hospital with Hoseok now, can you believe it? – and he told me that it seemed most important for you that we support you, even if we don’t understand or want it. And I’ve come to the realization that I need to tell you something really important.”

As drowsiness starts to lift, Taehyung lowers his hands to stare at Jungkook with curiosity.

“What?” That word is full with trepidation, not knowing where this is going as Jungkook’s talk sounds ominous to him.

“Hyung, I love you.”

“I love you too, Kookie, but what is it?”

Jungkook barks out a short laugh and throws his head back. He groans as he stares at the ceiling for a few seconds, before looking forward again and catching Taehyung’s eyes.

“No, hyung. I love you.”

“Yeah, but…” Taehyung trails off as he looks at Jungkook, really looks at him and the words get caught in his throat. His jaw is clenched and there’s a fire burning in his eyes that catches Taehyung off guard. He can’t recall the last time he’s seen him like that, or if he’s ever seen him look so determined before at all. When he finally wraps his head around Jungkook’s words, when they start to make sense, he violently shakes his head. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that I love you, hyung. I like you a lot in a non-platonic way, and I have forever, and literally everyone but you knows. And I know that you like me too that way, I’m not dumb. And this is fucking terrifying, but Namjoon said what you need is support, but I don’t support the idea of you going and doing that, but I support you because I love you and none of the things you choose to do will make me change that, even if the pain is going to kill me.”

“Jungkookie…” Taehyung says with a shaky voice as Jungkook talks himself into a sweat, eyes wide and tongue tripping over syllables as he tries to rush it all out.

“And I’m not saying that because I want our relationship to change, although I wouldn’t mind if it did, but because I want you to know that I’m here for you. And that whatever you do won’t change a thing. I’ll stick by your side. I love you, okay? I really love you.”

He lowers his head, his forehead resting against Taehyung’s left knee, and inhales deeply.

The words have hit him the second time Jungkook had said them, but they’re only slowly starting to sink in now, with Jungkook stock-still against him. Quiet. Perhaps waiting? But Taehyung’s not sure what he’s waiting for, and Taehyung has no idea how to respond, because this is absurd. Impossible. This is – it’s Jungkook on his knees, confessing his love to him, and how is that something that could be real? He must still be asleep, even though this heavy feeling in his stomach and the elevated heart rate in his chest feel way too real. That’s the only explanation to make sense: it’s a dream. It’s his mind that needs comfort, and it conjures it up with the ridiculousness that is a love confession from none other than Jeon Jungkook, setting Taehyung up for yet another heartbreak when he’s really awake.

“Hyung, I know this is a bit much all at once, but can you please say something?”

If this is a dream, then why does Jungkook feel so real pressed against his knee? Out of nowhere, Taehyung remembers a technique Yoongi once taught him to help him through his panic attacks
when they used to be absolutely severe that helped him come to realize where he was and what was reality: grounding his five senses. How did it work again? Taehyung’s mind is all jumbled, but he believes it might start with noticing five things he can see.

His eyes dart around the room, and he catches sight of the computer first: that very computer he knows has all kinds of porn stored away by Namjoon, has played the file of his video before as Namjoon showed it to him when the blackmailing first arose, was the cause to find out that Jimin threw himself into a dangerous situation by dating Mr. Kim’s daughter.

Second, he can see a toy figurine of an anime on one of the cluttered shelves. He doesn’t know the character, but he thinks it belongs to either Yoongi, Jin or Namjoon. It’s always been standing there since the day he first stepped into this studio over a year ago, but he’s not entirely sure if it has ever received a dusting off in all that time.

Third, he spots his mug one shelf below, placed in a way that he can see the smileys and read “Please always be happy”, the black marker slowly having started to fade from the white background and scratched up a bit.

Fourth, he sees the cheap piano keyboard pushed against the wall, the one that Namjoon and Yoongi are constantly working on. He’s tried to start playing it to kill time since he moved into the studio, but no great melodies come to his mind and he doesn’t even know how to read sheet music to begin with, so he’s not made much progress on that front ever since he moved into this room.

Fifth, he sees Jungkook kneeling before him, his hands folded in his lap, and feels his forehead press against his knee still, looking very much alive and real with his shorter haircut and oversized white t-shirt and gray sweatpants, patiently waiting.

He knows that there are more steps to this exercise, remembers something about touching and feeling, so he reaches out and lets his fingers run through the familiar texture of Jungkook’s hair and – oh, he can feel that.

“This is real,” Taehyung says lowly, and Jungkook finally raises his head as Taehyung’s fingers still run through his hair, and nods. “You like me.”

Jungkook nods once more.


“I like you too,” he admits quietly, nervously, and Jungkook smiles up at him so infectious that Taehyung can’t help to respond with one as well.

“I know, hyung.”

In all his wildest dreams, Taehyung had never allowed himself to think of a situation like this.

“But where do we- I mean, what now? Why did you- I…” Taehyung huffs out an exaggerated sigh. “I’m sorry. This is… a lot.”

“Listen, hyung, we have all the time in the world to figure this out. With everything else going on, I don’t want to rush anything. I told you because I want you to know that I’m here for you. I support you. Nothing has to change between us, but I hope that when you put yourself through what’s about to come – and I know it’s not going to be easy for you, or me, or any of us really –” Jungkook reaches for Taehyung’s hand that’s still in his hair and links their fingers together, squeezing tightly, “that you’ll find solace in the knowledge that I like you just as much as you like me. That’s
“Yeah,” Taehyung says thickly, and he clears his throat and blinks away a fresh batch of traitorous tears that threaten to spill over uninvited. His heart is soaring with joy as he squeezes Jungkook’s fingers right back, and he can feel his cheeks sting from the smile he can’t contain. “Thank you, Jungkookie. That is more than enough.”

Chapter End Notes

I’d love to hear your thoughts and opinions on this chapter, so thank you if you're leaving a comment!

Or you can also come scream at me on Twitter or Tumblr! :) x
Chapter 48

Chapter Notes

Thank you all so much for all the love you gave the last chapter! The end is near, and at the rate this is going I think that we're going to be done with this fic before September, which is great timing as I'm going to study abroad in Venice finally (one year after I was originally supposed to go) and I'm sure that I'll be getting inspired for new stories there left, right and center - not that I'm already planning like three fics, shhh. This is another long one, and I hope you enjoy it! :) x

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Taehyung leans against the rough wall, squishing his almost empty backpack up against it, and waits, one foot propped up and arms crossed in front of his chest. He’s chewing on a gum that lost all taste within thirty seconds and watches the cars drive by, waiting for one of them to slow down. It’s not warm enough yet at the end of March for Taehyung to not be freezing with the rips in his jeans and only a fake leather jacket over his white shirt, but he knows that a thicker jacket isn’t an option because it doesn’t make him look as good. There’s eyeliner smudged around his eyes. He blows a bubble and pops it nonchalantly as he glares at two women pass him by on the empty sidewalk, their steps speeding up the closer they draw to him.

Time ticks by slowly, and his annoyance builds up with every extra second he wastes at this fucking street corner when there are a hundred more productive things he could be doing at the moment. He knows that his manager, parked in the vehicle across the street, could be doing a hundred better things with his time as well, and yet he’s stuck like a babysitter, waiting for Taehyung to be picked up – one safety measure implemented by the company, to not lose Taehyung’s location at all times. Taehyung also knows that both Namjoon and Jin are sitting in the backseat and waiting, refusing to leave him alone in this. He feels both comforted and disturbed by that thought at the same time, grateful that his hyungs care about him enough but agitated that he knows they’ll be so close when he lets himself get fucked by an old man.

It hasn’t been easy to make all the members understand the necessity of the situation over the past two days. Yoongi is wearing a splint for his right broken ring finger, a gift he received as he punched the wall in anger that will stay with him for a few weeks. He’s apologized to Taehyung since for his aggressive behaviour towards him and the idiocy of punching an inanimate object over it, but he couldn’t make any promises to punch other things in the future over the idea of Taehyung getting hurt.

“But you will never have to fear hyung,” he had said. “I promise I’ll never touch you like that again. I’m sincerely sorry for that.”

Jimin has had a hard time making as much as eye contact ever since. He’s disappointed that after everything he went through to help Taehyung out, his friend still has to put himself through the wringer. Hoseok is much the same, having a hard time looking Taehyung in the eyes without feeling guilt, knowing that out of all the members, he’s also least close to Taehyung still and, therefore, the least stable pillar of support.

Namjoon and Jin are trying to go for support and normalcy, but even interacting with them feels
different these days. They, too, put blame on themselves that it has come this far, but at least they try to pretend that everything is fine. But nothing is, and Taehyung’s stomach churns as he thinks that their eyes are most likely on him as if they’re birds of prey, nerves frayed, right this very moment.

Surprisingly, the only one who Taehyung feels hasn’t changed in the slightest towards him is Jungkook. He’s still just Jungkook, wide-eyed and excited, bouncy with energy and affectionate with Taehyung the way he used to be. There hasn’t been a change in their relationship at all since his confession. They haven’t really talked about it either, and Taehyung’s still not sure that he has his mind wrapped around the idea entirely already, not sure if he can believe Jungkook’s words to be true.

He had asked Jin about it in a quiet moment, because Jungkook had decided not to make a secret out of having confessed to Taehyung to the others, which had been accepted by the members with a chorus of “finally”’s and congratulatory pats on the back. No one really had a clear enough mind to think about what this could actually mean for the future though, too preoccupied with the problem of the present.

“Of course we all knew,” Jin had said while scratching the back of his neck, “or do you really think we would have encouraged your crush on him otherwise? He didn’t really hide it from us, but he asked us to not tell you once he really accepted it.”

“Oh please, he was so obviously into you the moment you got introduced to us,” had been Yoongi’s response. “When he first joined the company, he actually had a crush on Namjoon, but he thought that he was slick hiding it. He really wasn’t back then, and not with you either. You were just too busy to notice that he looked at you with hearts in his eyes at all times, but we were teasing him non-stop. We noticed a change and thought his crush was fading after a while, but now I think that was when he found out about your past and decided to take a step back, realizing that you have other things to worry about.”

So they didn’t talk about it and continued like they used to, and sometimes Taehyung still pinches himself to make sure that he’s really awake and not still asleep on the couch in the studio, and that Jungkook’s confession had really happened. Two days passed, and Jungkook still hasn’t taken it back, and still smiles at him with adoration when saying goodbye for the night, even in the knowledge that the next time he sees Taehyung, he will have met with Mr. Kim. All the other members had just shuffled awkwardly around him and wished him good luck, and Hoseok had looked ready to throw up.

An unfamiliar black Mercedes Benz rolls up at the curb next to Taehyung. At first he doesn’t move, but when the passenger window rolls down and he spots an all too familiar face behind the wheel, he pushes himself off the wall and clenches his jaw as he walks closer.

It’s showtime.

“Didn’t recognize your fancy new car,” Taehyung drawls. He leans forward to look inside, before making eye contact with Mr. Kim. “Long time no see.”

“Do you like it?” the man asks as he lets his fingers run along the steering wheel. “The interior is entirely custom-made.”

Taehyung shrugs. “I couldn’t care less to be honest.”

Something akin to a challenge sparkles in Mr. Kim’s eyes. “I’m sure I can make you appreciate the rear bench very much.”
“What, no fancy hotel room for me this time around?” Taehyung asks mockingly and clicks his tongue. “How disappointing.”

He can tell that he’s riling up Mr. Kim with every word he says. The CEO squints at him, obviously taken aback.

“The last time I met you, you weren’t so confident. Where’s all that bravery coming from all of a sudden?”

“The last time you saw me, I thought I had made it out of this life. And then I lost everything again, because of you. I’m not in the mood to play games. Do you want to fuck or not? You were the one to text me desperately not too long ago. My rate has gone up a bit though, just so you know.”

He’s chewing his gum provocatively as he waits for Mr. Kim to assess him, and then he sees him reach for the button to unlock the doors.

“Attaboy,” Taehyung grins as he opens the door and slides into the comfortable leather seat after spitting his gum on the pavement.

“Frankly I’m surprised you did contact me. For a while I thought you were trying to avoid me.”

“In a world like this, you can’t avoid money.”

It gets quiet in the car as Mr. Kim drives off, only the low hum of the motor and the radio providing background noises. Taehyung turns his head to look out of the window at the buildings flying by. He’s got this. He’s calm and composed, and so far he knows that he’s doing a fantastic job. Doesn’t even flinch when Mr. Kim’s hand lands on his knee and starts to squeeze there.

“I missed you,” the old man breathes and Taehyung shudders inwardly. He bites his lip and doesn’t reply. The CEO’s voice softens as he continues to talk: “Are you mad at me?”

“We’re here to fuck, not to talk about my feelings,” Taehyung scoffs.

“You are mad at me,” Mr. Kim laughs, and he takes his hand off Taehyung’s thigh again, allowing him to breathe a bit easier. “You’ve always been an easy one to read, V, wearing your emotions all over your face.”

“You offered me a better future and then ripped it away from me again. You know that the company kicked me out because of our stupid little private films, right? Because Bangtan Sonyeondan is ready to debut, but they couldn’t yet because of me – because of your dumb videos. Of course I’m fucking mad.”

“Don’t be like that. I just realized that I wasn’t willing to share you with the world. I can be quite possessive about the things I love, but I’ve told you before and I’ll tell you again, if you allow me to I’ll provide you with the greatest life you can imagine – you’re still the most beautiful person to walk this earth and I want you to be mine.”

Taehyung jeers. “I’m not your toy.”

“You’re cranky.”

Taehyung doesn’t reply. From the corner of his eyes he notices how Mr. Kim’s fists are clenched around the steering wheel, short-trimmed nails digging into the surface hard. Good. He’s got complete control over this situation. That’s a relief. He’s still got Mr. Kim wrapped around his finger – that’s a relief as well. If it had turned out that after all these months, he wasn’t interested in
Taehyung anymore for more than a quick fuck, this entire plan would have gone down the drain. But Mr. Kim still seems infuriated with him, still wants to please Taehyung after everything that had happened. Taehyung knows he’s made the right decision, putting himself on the line like this. This is how he’ll win their game of cat and mouse.

Truth be told, as collected as he is right now, he’s fucking terrified of what he knows is about to come. This he can still handle, teasing Mr. Kim, stringing him along. But the physical part that’s about to come is the reason he could barely stomach anything all day, Jimin pressing a nutrient shake into his fingers with a concerned frown once he had caught up to it after dinner.

He had prepped himself after a shower, the humiliation of having to ask Namjoon to go buy him lube and condoms having been absolutely mortifying, and receiving what he had asked for even worse. It had been months since the last time someone – Taehyung himself included – had touched him there, January to be exact when Taehyung had sought out Mr. Kim to convince him for the first time not to announce Taehyung as an official member on social media. It had been terrible. He had hated every second of it, but he knew that for his own comfort later on it would be beneficial. The bottle of lube and a few condoms are waiting in the backpack that rests at the bottom of his feet now. He knows that it’s not going to happen, but Taehyung can’t help but hope that maybe he won’t need them, or at least not the lube. If he could get away with a blowjob tonight, or maybe a teasing handjob–

No. He knows that’s not what he’s here for. He knows the look in Mr. Kim’s eyes, the raging lust burning within them to touch Taehyung, take Taehyung apart, use him–

Deep and even breaths. Don’t show any weakness. Taehyung is fierce. He’s lost everything that mattered to him, he has to tell himself that over and over again, and he has nothing else to lose. That’s the narrative he’s going for, the person he has to portray. He can’t show hesitation or weakness, because the Taehyung that Mr. Kim knows now doesn’t have a weakness anymore, has nothing to his name.

Mr. Kim steers the car into the garage of a swanky hotel.

“I thought I was going to get to know your fancy back seats,” Taehyung says.

“And I said I’d only provide the best for you,” Mr. Kim counters and Taehyung inwardly cringes at the haughtiness in his voice.

In the elevator, the CEO goes to slide the card through the card reader and press one of the upper floor buttons. Taehyung reaches for his wrist quick like lightning before he can actually push it.

“You already have a room?” he asks, and Mr. Kim looks at him mildly surprised.

“Yes, I’ve checked in beforehand for our convenience.”

“Book a different room,” Taehyung demands.

Mr. Kim’s eyes bug out at him in surprise “What?”

“I said book a different room. Who knows where you hid the camera – get us a new room, or I’ll be leaving. I told you I play by different rules now.”

Mr. Kim hesitates, and for a moment Taehyung panics that maybe he’s pushed his luck a bit too far. He holds his breath in anticipation as he waits, but breathes out in relief when the wrist clutched in his grip moves and he presses the first floor without another word.
Taehyung listens like a hawk as Mr. Kim checks them into a new room, but his eyes continuously roam the hotel lobby until he spots their manager walk through the glass door. Good. They managed to keep up with Mr. Kim, they know where he is. Despite everything, that knowledge does help calm Taehyung down. He waits for the manager to spot him and scratches the left side of his neck with his right hand – a sign they had agreed on signaling that everything is okay should they manage to come into contact with each other. The manager looks away, but Taehyung picks up on the brief nod he gives before turning back to Mr. Kim and putting his full attention on him.

He knows that the most important part of the night is finished for him. He’s played the standoffish whore holding a grudge but desperate for money. The only thing left for him to do now is spread his legs and pray it’s over soon, so he can return back to BigHit and wash off the physical grime he knows won’t emotionally go down the drain.

Taehyung has to stop himself from flinching when the door to their hotel room falls closed behind them, and he suppresses a shudder as an arm sneaks around his waist, Mr. Kim spinning him around to face him while pulling him in a little closer.

“Where do you want me?” Taehyung asks, and he relishes in the fact that Mr. Kim looks displeased at his frostiness.

“V, don’t treat an old man so cold-heartedly,” he says and leans in, but Taehyung turns his head and swallows as a pair of lips sloppily lands on his cheek, moist breath ghosting over his skin.

“Some rules might have changed, but this one still stands. I don’t kiss on the job. Now where do you want me? I don’t have all night.”

Mr. Kim steps back with a frown. “I think the bed will do for today.”

Walking over after kicking off his shoes by the door, Taehyung shrugs off his backpack by the bed and starts to discard his clothes, first his jacket and then his shirt. He can feel Mr. Kim’s eyes burning into his naked back, and as his fingers come down to undo the button of his ripped jeans, he turns back to meet the lust-filled gaze of the CEO.

Taehyung hesitates, but it’s all an act. In reality, he’s had this moment playing out in his head from the very start, knowing that after pretending to be all tough, showing vulnerability will make Mr. Kim lose his fucking mind.

“It’s been a while,” he whispers into the room and bites his bottom lip, a look of hesitancy on his face, “can you please be gentle with me tonight?”

“Where can I drop you off?” Mr. Kim is opening the passenger door of his black Mercedes Benz for Taehyung, but he shakes his head.

“Nowhere. This is part of my increased service fee – when we’re done, you leave, and I take care of my own transport back home.”

“You changed,” Mr. Kim. accuses Taehyung once again, but he doesn’t seem quite as irritated now as he did about it before they fucked. Instead it sounds more regretful.

“You put a camera in the room and filmed us fucking only to use it as blackmail material later on. The more I think about it, there’s also that private investigator who found out about my father’s death. Maybe try to make up for that, and we can talk about me changing back into a more amicable service provider.”
Mr. Kim closes the passenger door then.

“Fair enough, I suppose I don’t deserve your trust.”

“You might have higher chances to increase it with a good tip,” Taehyung japes as he watches Mr. Kim get out his wallet, and counts the won bills with satisfaction before stuffing them in the back of his jeans pocket.

“When will I be seeing you again?” Mr. Kim asks.

“You have my number. Text me, but know that you’re not the only customer on my list so I might not always be free.”

Taehyung watches as Mr. Kim grinds his jaw at that statement, jealousy glinting in his eyes. He steps closer to the man and leans forward, so his mouth is right next to the CEO’s ear. “It was a pleasure to be doing business with you. Get home safely.” He allows his lips to linger there for a moment longer, before stepping back out of reach as Mr. Kim’s face reddens.

“You’ll hear from me” Mr. Kim says, and a minute later he watches him pull out of the parking lot, leaving Taehyung by himself in the well-lit garage of one of Seoul’s most pricey hotels.

Taehyung feels… he doesn’t know what he feels. Empty. He thought that the second he’d be by himself and would no longer have his guard up, he’d be overwhelmed by emotions, but standing between all these expensive cars by himself, there’s absolutely nothing, except for a dull physical ache that he doesn’t want to think about. He had thought that once this is over, he’d need a few minutes to compose himself before texting the manager, but that doesn’t seem necessary. He types out a quick message that he’s waiting in the garage, and then he waits in silence for the car to come.

He slips into the passenger seat, having spotted Namjoon and Jin at the back, and is welcomed back with soft “hello”s. The tension in the car is thick, and he knows that all three people present are dying to know how it went. He can see the manager bite the inside of his cheeks, eyes fixated on the front and not looking over at him. He can feel two sets of eyes from the back studying his profile and gauging hs reaction. Taehyung closes his eyes and lets his head thump back against the headrest.

“How was it?” Jin sounds careful as he finally finds the courage to ask, voice soft.

And oh. Oh. Now those feelings hit him all at once, slap him in the face and pull him apart limb by limb, overwhelm him like a tremendous wave. That is unexpected.

Taehyung clears his throat. “I’m okay. Just… give me a minute, yeah?” He knows his voice trembles and that must make it look like he has gone through hell just now, only heightening the concern of his hyungs. To be fair, it’s not inaccurate that he has just been put through a certain form of torture, but it wasn’t all that bad. Really. He’s just oddly overwhelmed all of a sudden when seconds ago he wasn’t.

“Do you want to return to the dorm or BigHit?” their manager asks.

“BigHit please,” Taehyung decides. They had discussed the option of bringing Taehyung back to the dorm after visiting Mr. Kim, for his own comfort and the comfort of the members. At the moment, however, Taehyung doesn’t think that he wants to see any more of them, not if just one gently spoken sentence by one already throws him down the depths of emotional despair. The ride back to the BigHit building is quiet. Taehyung keeps his eyes closed through all of it, and
he tries to keep his mind blank as well, but occasional flashes of hungry eyes and unwelcome
touches overpower him at times. It’s okay. He’s got this. It was just sex. It wasn’t even painful sex.
Mr. Kim had been careful, just like Taehyung had asked him too. Somehow Taehyung doesn’t
know if that helped or worsened the situation.

“Tae, we’ve arrived,” Namjoon says and a hand softly shakes his shoulder. Taehyung knows that.
He’s felt the car slow down and pull over and the engine turning off, but maybe the others think
that he has fallen asleep. He opens his eyes and looks outside at the edifice that houses BigHit. “Do
you want me and Jin-hyung to go in with you? Or just one of us?”

Alone. Taehyung wants to be left alone, but he knows that’s out of the question right now.
Namjoon has refused to allow him to be by himself after visiting Mr. Kim, “because you deserve
someone to care for you, yeah? At least for now. Please grant me that peace of mind to know that
one of us will be there to look out for you.”

“Jin-hyung, please,” Taehyung says. He’s known that if he’d get to choose, Jin would be his first
answer. He might not always seem like it, but Jin can read people’s emotions like words in a book
at times and attune to them perfectly. Maybe it’s because he studies acting that he has acquired that
skill, something that Namjoon is most definitely still lacking at times.

Namjoon looks disenthralled to not be the one chosen, but he doesn’t argue. “Okay. I’ll see you
tomorrow then. Have a good night.”

As Taehyung slips out of the car, he hears Namjoon say to Jin to text him if anything happens. If
there’s one thing he is glad about at the moment, it’s that he’s clearly given space by the two of
them although they must be dying to know what went on. He appreciates that. It makes him feel
better to allow them to be such a big part in this, to allow them so close to him at a time when he’d
like to recoil into the darkest, smallest and most unaccessible space he can find, like the octopus
he had watched in a documentary together with Hoseok months ago, when he was still living at the
dorm.

He opts for a shower first, asking Jin to please stay out of the communal bathroom and wait for
him in the hallway. It’s night time so there is close to no threat for anyone to bump into Taehyung,
and he’d feel more comfortable being naked in the bathroom by himself. Jin agrees, of course he
does, and in the shower Taehyung allows himself to let go just a little, lets a few tears mingle with
water and wash down the drain. But the weird surge of emotions that had pulled him under in the
car has ebbed away again, so he’s left with the frustrating feeling of wanting to cry for some relief
but not really being able to, feeling dissatisfied after leaving the shower, body clean but his skin
still feeling dirty dirty dirty.

Jin doesn’t push him to talk after they go back to the studio. He settles on the computer chair and
plays on his phone while Taehyung curls up under his blanket on the couch, cheek squished into
the pillow that needs to be laundered soon.

“Thank you, hyung,” Taehyung says eventually after a few minutes have passed. “For not pushing.
That helps a lot.”

Jin puts his phone down. “There’s no need to thank me.”

“I’m okay. Really, even if I might not have looked like it in the car. I’m not hurt. There’s just a lot
going on in my head right now and I’m trying to figure it out.”

Jin hums, but he doesn’t ask for details. “Did it all go as planned?”
Taehyung nods, cheek rubbing against the fabric of the pillow. “Yes. He’s still as obsessed with me as he used to be. I’m sure he’ll call again soon. He knows that I hold a grudge against him. I managed to slip in a mention of the video once or twice, but he didn’t look suspicious about it.”

“That’s good,” Jin concurs.

“Hyung,” Taehyung whispers. “When all of this is over, do you think I will be functioning enough to have a normal relationship? Something like you and Namjoon-hyung?”

“I wouldn’t call Namjoon and my relationship normal by any means, but I don’t see why you shouldn’t,” Jin answers. Taehyung can hear the surprise in his words. not having seen that change of topic coming. He doesn’t offer an explanation though. Jin shouldn’t have to worry about another aspect of Taehyung’s life, especially not as private as this one, but here’s the thing. Taehyung’s notion of sex is entirely screwed up. He knows that. His notion of intimacy probably too, and he’s scared shitless that once this all is over – once he finally has the time to process that Jungkook likes him the same way he does – he’ll fuck whatever tentative chance of a relationship he could possibly have with the younger up. He hates that this thought pops into his head right after visiting Mr. Kim. He doesn’t want to think of Jungkook and that man in the same context. He needs to shut his brain up.

“Hyung,” Taehyung says again, “can you tell me a story? Anything really. Maybe about your family?”

Jin shifts in the chair, and Taehyung watches him quickly type something on his phone, most-likely confirming with the others that Taehyung is okay and not to worry, before he discards it on the table and dedicates his full attention to Taehyung. “Have I ever told you about the time SM tried to scout me and I literally ran away from them?”

Taehyung listens with only one ear. He’s genuinely interested in the story, and it’s doing exactly what he hoped it would do – take his mind of things. He thinks that Jin knows exactly why he asked him, exaggerating and making big hand gestures and telling the story as if he had an entire audience full of people and not just one friend in front of him, because he also knows that it helps to distract Taehyung. But he’s starting to get tired, and his brain still tries to process all the events of the day, and spins around Jungkook and his relationship and the question of if there is a possible future for it, and his eyelids start feeling heavy and flutter shut. He’s too exhausted to open them again as Jin tells him about how when he first joined BigHit and BTS, Namjoon and he would constantly clash with each other, and falls into a blissfully dreamless sleep.

The next morning, Taehyung fears the awkwardness that’s to come, but the others are trying for normalcy. They ask if he’s okay, and he notices that especially Hoseok, Jimin and Yoongi seem to have a difficult time to pretend that nothing has changed, that he’s not been fucked by an old man the night before for information and money, but they’re trying their hardest to act normal. Taehyung is grateful for that. But he’s most grateful for Jungkook, who stands to his word and doesn’t act any different around him than before. He still looks him in the eyes with no hesitancy as if he’s the same Taehyung he was yesterday, before he got in Mr. Kim’s car. It’s an immense relief.

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March turns into April and nothing much changes in life if Taehyung ignores the three more calls he receives from Mr. Kim. The other members tactfully avoid looking at his bruises, or the limp, or the raspy voice. It’s always Jin or Namjoon who comes to pick him up after one of the meetings with Mr. Kim, because that’s how Taehyung wants it. Yoongi still frowns most of the time as soon as Taehyung broaches the topic of Mr. Kim. He knows that Hoseok is relieved about not having to
be the one to be there, and Jimin secretly too although he sometimes offers. Jungkook fights him with tooth and nail on it to be the one to pick him up just once, but Taehyung flat out refuses.

They’ve had this conversation a couple of times by now, Jungkook testing the waters over and over again, and this time it’s before dance practice – honestly this is all they do these days, dance dance dance even if almost every step already fits perfectly. Taehyung has dreams about dancing at this point, and when he wakes up it’s like he got no sleep at all.

“I don’t want you to see me like that afterwards. My emotions are all over the place.”

“But I want to be there for you, hyung.” Jungkook whines, and it’s one of the few times that Taehyung is reminded that he’s really just a teenager, which is often easily forgotten considering how mature he acts for his age.

“Believe it or not, Kook-ah, but the way you’re here for me right now is the best. You have no idea how much comfort I find in you just acting normal. I fear I might lose that feeling if I let you come too close to me in that moment. Does that make sense?”

Jungkook becomes quiet and thinks that over. He cracks his neck, causing Taehyung to wince at that disgusting noise, and then nods to himself. “Yeah, I guess.” He takes Taehyung’s hand and squeezes. “If this is what you prefer, I can deal with it.”

Jimin comes walking over to them and plops down unceremoniously on the hard floor.

“I need help,” he announces and glances at the two teenagers’ linked hands, “so stop flirting and give me your full attention.”

“We weren’t-” Taehyung sputters, but Jimin just shushes him.

“I want to take Eun-Ji on a date. Something special. But I don’t know where to go or what to do with her. Honestly the fact that she’s from a rich family and I can’t provide anything great for her bugs me so much.”

Jungkook pats Jimin’s back in sympathy. The topic of Eun-Ji still dangles over their heads like a damocles sword, but no one seems to want to acknowledge it. Taehyung remembers Jin saying that he shouldn’t be too concerned about it. Even if Eun-Ji wasn’t who she was, Jimin and her would never end up continuing to date when Bangtan Sonyeondan debuts. The fact that Jimin still invests into the relationship, however, is worrisome. He claims that he does it to keep up the act, but Taehyung knows that’s a lie. He does it equally as much because he wants to spend time with her. Taehyung wants to tell him that stringing her along is heartless, but he knows that it comes from within a good place of Jimin’s heart. Maybe he hopes that this way, by treating her perfectly while they’re still together, he can soften the blow of tearing her entire family apart. That’s a dumb thought, but Taehyung doesn’t say it out loud.

“You could take her to an amusement park. Lotte World sounds like a great place for a date,” Jungkook suggests.

“She doesn’t like fast rides though, and neither do I really. Do you think she’d still enjoy that?”

“I mean there’s still a lot of other stuff to do besides roller coasters at an amusement park.”

*If you take her to an amusement park and break her heart afterwards, she might never be able to enjoy one again,* Taehyung wants to throw in, but he bites the inside of his cheek to keep still. When Jungkook looks at him as if waiting for an answer, he blinks confused. “What?”
“I said what do you think? It’s still a great trip for a date, even without the roller coasters, right?”

Taehyung shrugs. “I wouldn’t know. I’ve never been to an amusement park before.” He can feel the awkward shift in the air when both Jimin and Jungkook gape at him, but try to pull themselves together quickly again. “But I suppose it’s nice? Better than the movies, since you can talk with each other and she has a movie theatre in her house anyway. Or maybe take her for a picnic at Han river? It’s cherry blossom season now anyway, and that’s probably cheaper than an amusement park I presume. You could make your own sandwiches, be all cheesy and stuff.”

“That’s… actually a really good idea,” Jimin says, and Taehyung takes mild offense at how astonished he sounds. “I didn’t know you were such a romantic.”

Taehyung snorts, because he’s anything but romantic, but before he can respond, their choreographer comes into the room, claps his hands and tells them to stop lazing around and start warming up.

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“The videos you took of us – did you delete them?”

A hand comes up to caress Taehyung’s cheek and he wishes he could sink his teeth into the fingers, bite them off and spit them out to not feel that disgusting touch anymore.

“Oh darling, I could never delete art.”

Taehyung’s stomach drops. “You still own them.”

“They often bring me pleasure. Don’t look so worried. I promise I’m keeping them safe. You know that I don’t like sharing your beauty with the world.”

“I’m just worried that if I ever get out of this business, you’ll pull out the videos again and block my future once more. That’s a valid fear.”

Mr. Kim laughs as if the thought of Taehyung ever not being a prostitute is genuinely funny.

“Also what if your wife finds them? Or your daughters?”

The CEO’s face turns to stone and the hand on Taehyung’s cheek wanders lower down his neck, thick fingers wrapping around it threateningly, and Taehyung knows it will leave bruises in the morning. “Leave my family out of this, V. They won’t find them. No one will. I’m not a fucking amateur. And now shut up and do your job properly.”

When Taehyung tells Namjoon after slipping into the car that the video is safe, that no one else owns it, Namjoon looks ready to start crying. Taehyung can honestly relate to that, because he too feels so relieved about that knowledge that he wants to cry. If Mr. Kim hasn’t spread it anywhere else, refuses to share it with anyone else because of his possessiveness over Taehyung, that truly means that when Taehyung finds the video, he’ll be free. For good.

All he needs to do is find out where those damn files are now.

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“Hoseok-hyung,” Taehyung chirps as he bounces over to the dancer while everyone is packing up their things at the end of another evening of practice. They had a photoshoot earlier in the day that had heightened their spirits, even if they looked more like clowns in their outfits than an upcoming Hip-Hop idol group. “It’s been a really long day and I’m sorry to bother you, but could you do me a favour?”
“What’s up?” Hoseok asks and looks up at Taehyung from where he’s crouching on the floor, ready to throw his bottle and towel into his duffel bag.

“You know how the dance teacher scolded me because my moves seem very choppy at points? And that I should work on controlling my flow better, make my moves look more boneless?”

Hoseok nods and Taehyung grimaces. “I have no idea what that means. I was wondering if maybe you could help me with that? I imagine since you can move like you don’t have a single bone in your body, you would know better what he’s getting at.”

“I can try,” Hoseok laughs at the chagrin in Taehyung’s voice. “Are you up for some more practice now, or would you prefer another time?”

Another time sounds like the more pleasant option to Taehyung, but he’s already sweaty anyway and he wants to hear the dance teacher say that he’s improved soon, so he declares that now is as good a time as any.

“Joon-ah,” Hoseok calls over to the leader as they’re all finishing up to leave for the evening. “I’ll stay with Tae to help practice.”

Namjoon nods in acknowledgement and the others shuffle out after saying their goodbyes, eager to get home and get some rest.

“Okay,” Hoseok says and claps his hands together as he gets up from the floor. Taehyung is stunned at how energized he still is, how after all these countless hours they’ve spent dancing – and its repercussion such as swollen legs and sore muscles and all the other aches that are ingrained into their body right now as a daily routine – he still seems genuinely excited to do more of it. Hoseok dancing is truly like a fish in water, exactly where he is supposed to be. “Where do you think you have the most troubles? With No More Dream? I Like It? We Are Bulletproof Pt. 2? Or is it the choreography for the concept trailer? Although that one does have a more choppy feel to it, so you should be okay.”

Taehyung looks at him sheepishly. “Hyung, I don’t think the issue is with one of the choreographies. It’s more that I don’t know how to use all of this properly.” He holds up his arm to align his shoulder with his elbow, rest of the arm dangling down, and slaps it with the other hand, pretending to spin it as if this part of his body was detached from the rest like a robot. It looks pathetic.

“I can see the problem,” Hoseok teases, and Taehyung drops the arm. “But I think that’s something you can definitely learn with practice if you put effort into it. How about we start small, yeah? Let’s learn the arm wave, from the tips of your fingers on your left hand to the tips of your fingers on your right.” Hoseok demonstrates, and then gestures for Taehyung to do the same. When Taehyung does, Hoseok heaves a sigh. “Okay, yeah. I think we’re going to be here for a while.”

“Rude,” Taehyung complains, but he’s eager to learn. “Everyone says you’re a good teacher, so I expect to be a pro at this by the end of the night.”

Hoseok laughs loudly. “Dream big, I guess. So what we’re going to do first I think is to get you familiar with all the joints in your body you’ll need for this.”

It’s all going well until it isn’t, until Hoseok hits Taehyung’s shoulder jokingly because while he has control over how he moves his arms, the motions in his shoulder are absolutely not under his control. Hoseok slaps it gently and under any other circumstances it wouldn’t even hurt, but Hoseok doesn’t know that there’s a nasty bruise hidden at that spot below the fabric of Taehyung’s
shirt from the corner of a table that pressed into his skin when he was with Mr. Kim two nights ago, and before Taehyung can stop himself he yelps and flinches at the unexpected surge of pain.

Hoseok freezes, and then he takes a step back with wide eyes, both hands in front of him as if he wants to show Taehyung that he means no harm, as if Taehyung was a feral animal in need of soothing.

“I’m sorry,” Hoseok gasps.

“Hyung,” Taehyung presses out through gritted teeth as he tries to reach back and cover the painful mark with the palm of his hand as if that would ease the pain. “Calm down, you just hit a bruise is all.”

“Oh,” Hoseok says and drops his hands. He shifts on his feet, but doesn’t move any closer and the entire situation is getting more and more awkward by the second. “I’m sorry. I thought… I don’t know what I thought actually.”

“I didn’t flinch from you.”

“Good.” They get back to practicing after that, but the atmosphere is strained. It’s obvious that Hoseok’s holding back now, that he thinks twice about it before touching Taehyung.

Shortly after midnight they call it a day, and while Hoseok packs his things, Taehyung checks his phone. He’s not surprised to find a message from Mr. Kim on it, but he sighs in annoyance nonetheless.

“Everything okay?” Hoseok asks.

“Mr. Kim texted. I told him I’m not open for booty calls the same night, but he keeps doing it.” He texts back quickly, before flipping the phone closed again and slipping it into the pocket of his sweatpants.

Hoseok looks uncomfortable. He’s standing now, bag strap on his shoulder, and it’s clear that there’s something he wants to say but doesn’t know how to approach the subject. Taehyung waits patiently for him to figure it out.

“I usually avoid the topic,” the dancer says when he seems to have finally found his words. “And I’m definitely not your closest hyung in this group. If anything, I think the both of us have had the most struggles in the past. But I just want you to know that just because I’m not sure how to deal with this situation as well as the others – and we both know I don’t, I quit the group because of it once and I still feel terrible for that – you can always come to me if you need anything.”

He rocks back and forth on his feet and avoids eye contact, and Taehyung’s chest fills with warmth at the sincere words. It’s true, he and Hoseok have always had the biggest struggles. and Taehyung would consider him to be the member of the band he’s the least close to, but he hadn’t assumed that Hoseok had given thought to that as well. Or that he had been worried that Taehyung might think he couldn’t turn to him because of that if he needed help.

“I know that, hyung,” Taehyung assures him.

“Sometimes I think that I’m just not doing enough to help you, you know? Like I should be there for you in another way.”

“But you’re here for me in your way. You teach me dance. You don’t bring up the topic of Mr. Kim constantly. That’s a breath of fresh air. You’re helping more than enough.”
A look of relief washes over Hoseok’s face, and then he smiles tentatively. Taehyung wonders for just how much time he’s been worrying about this.

“You know, you’ve really come a long way Taehyung-ah. Watching you grow over the last months has been truly inspiring.”

Taehyung frowns. “How so?”

“When you first joined, you were this stoic kid that let no one close to him to protect yourself. But when you realized that you wouldn’t have to go back on the streets, you turned into this terrified kid that still didn’t allow anyone close to him because you were scared of being hurt. And look at you today – you wear your heart on your sleeve, you stand up for your wants and needs, and despite everything you’ve gone through in the past, you’re still such a kind-hearted person. It’s inspiring. It makes me want to be a better person too. You’re the bravest person I know.”

Taehyung blushes and tells Hoseok to be quiet, and Hoseok laughs and wraps an arm around his shoulder to guide him out of the practice room, claiming that he’s done with his heart-to-heart now anyway. There’s no hesitation in his movements now when he tugs Taehyung along down the corridor to show him off to his room and maybe, Taehyung thinks, Hoseok had needed this. That a knot had unravelled now that had made him hesitant, that saying out loud how Taehyung isn’t who he was months ago makes it easier for him to come to terms with it as well. And maybe it eased some of the guilt he must be feeling for not supporting Taehyung like the others do, and if cringing through compliments like that is what it takes for Hoseok to achieve that, then Taehyung can suffer through the embarrassment.

Brave.

Hoseok thinks he’s brave. Yoongi had used that word before as well to describe him. It’s odd, because Taehyung doesn’t feel brave. He has his fears, many of them. It’s just that over time they have changed. He’s still scared of Mr. Kim, just in different ways than before – he’s not scared of the man anymore, but of how easily he can destroy him. But as far as Taehyung is concerned now, Mr. Kim is nothing but an ant that deserves to be squashed by all means. He’s not so scared when Mr. Kim touches him, because sex now is a means to an end. There’s no pleasure in it, even if Mr. Kim coerces him into finishing. He still remembers when he first moved into the dorm and heard one of the boys masturbate, how he had laid awake all night fearing that maybe – he doesn’t even know anymore what he was thinking back then because it’s so absurd, but he remembers being terrified and finding it hard to breathe. And he still hates it, hates the idea of sexual intimacy because his body has never truly been his, and he feels dirty after returning from Mr. Kim and he feels his handprints on his skin during the day, thinks that others can see them as well and recognize how disgusting he is – but the physical act of going through it doesn’t bring him fear anymore, because he knows it’s what’s necessary to find his freedom.

No, Taehyung has new fears now, and at the top of his list is Jungkook. Jungkook, who also has a crush on him, who holds his hand and smiles at him and tells him that he’s special. Jungkook, who he wants to cuddle up to at night and bury his nose in his hair and smell his shampoo, and press kisses to his forehead and his nose and-

Taehyung doesn’t fear sex as a means to an end now even if it makes his skin crawl, but he fears that if he and Jungkook pursue a relationship, it will come along with physical intimacy. Sexual intimacy. And that is one of Taehyung’s biggest fears, because he doesn’t think he could provide that. But Jungkook is a healthy teen with hormones, and that is what he wants and needs and deserves, and what if Taehyung can’t? It’s not just that the idea of being sexually intimate with someone scares him, but the fact that before Jungkook there were so many others. What if he’s
with Jungkook, and suddenly remembers someone else? Taehyung doesn’t think he can, he just-

He tries to shake off that thought. No. It’s not important now. He and Jungkook aren’t a couple. They’re still friends. Friends that are crushing on each other, but still friends. This isn’t his problem right now, he shouldn’t even be thinking about it when there’s still something so much bigger looming over his head. There’s no point thinking about it until Bangtan Sonyeondan’s debut is guaranteed. Still, the thoughts keep coming back throughout the most random times of the day, and it drives him insane.

So no, Taehyung isn’t brave. It’s just that his fears and worries have changed.

The fall comes after the seventh time Taehyung meets up with Mr. Kim, in the middle of April. Taehyung should have seen it coming, he supposes, but he had gotten too confident in thinking that he can handle this. He’s wrong. He can’t, and Namjoon is the one to pick up the bloody pieces when Taehyung stumbles into the car, and cuts his fingers on the jagged shards of Taehyung’s broken mind.

Taehyung slips into the backseat of the car as Namjoon already waits for him.

“Everything okay?” he asks, because he has figured out that that’s Taehyung’s favourite question to answer, as it’s not too specific. A simple yes or no is enough, easy to give, but tonight even that seems too much. Taehyung sits slumped in his seat and stares at the headrest in front of him. And then he breaks down and bursts into tears, gasping for breaths while a cold fist is clutching at his heart and crushing crushing crushing, pressing down on his lungs and pushing pushing pushing out all the air, wrapping around his throat and squeezing squeezing squeezing.

Namjoon is talking, but none of the words register with Taehyung, and there are hands flitting over his body – real ones, not the demon hands his mind conjures up that hurt his chest and his neck and his every fibre of his body and rob him of precious air – that he doesn’t take notice of either.

Everything is a blur. He thinks that the car is moving, but he can’t be sure, and there are frantic voices, but he can’t be sure of those either, and then there are more hands, he’s sure of those, and they drag him along as he stumbles, trips over his own feet because his knees are so weak, but there’s never the pain of falling on concrete and he still can’t breathe.

“Is he hurt?”

“I think physically he’s fine.”

“Get the fuck out, everyone. Stop crowding him.”

“Hyung!”

“No, I said out!”

There’s more commotion that Taehyung doesn’t pay attention to because he’s still crying, still sobbing, still gasping for air, his body not his own anymore and his brain nothing more than a replay of the last few hours of his life, stabbing at his chest like a sharp knife.

All of a sudden his neck feels ice cold, the hair there standing on end and he physically recoils from the damp sensation with a gasp.

“Taehyung, can you hear me?”
The uncomfortable feeling doesn’t leave. On the contrary, it seems to press harder against his skin, and for the first time the haze in his mind lifts and he blinks, and he realizes that there is air being drawn into his lungs and pushed out again with every labored breath he takes. Through the tears in his eyes he frowns at a blurry but familiar looking linoleum floor that his knees press into and his palms rest against. Taehyung reaches up one of the hands, from the floor that looks like the pattern of their dorm kitchen, and reaches for his neck. He frowns as he draws his fingers away and realizes that the tips are wet.

“Tae.”

Slowly the world around him starts to tilt back to normal again although not much makes sense yet, but Taehyung recognizes that voice, and when he looks up there’s Yoongi crouched next to him, smiling gently but eyes clouded with worry.

“Hey, are you back with me now?”

Taehyung lets the words settle and runs his tongue over cracked lips. Nothing really makes sense to him, but he recognizes now that the uncomfortable cold sensation against his neck must be a wet cloth that Yoongi is pressing against his skin.

“Yeah.” His voice sounds brittle, as if he’s ready to burst into tears again any second, and that’s a valid concern.

“You gave us quite the scare there,” Yoongi says gently, and he finally takes off the washcloth and offers Taehyung a glass of water instead with his left hand, as he still needs the splint for the right one. Taehyung settles back down on his knees and sits upright, grabs the offered glass with trembling fingers and takes a few tentative sips.

“How- how did I get here?”

He was correct in identifying the linoleum floor of their dorm kitchen even in his messed up state, and he looks around in confusion at the familiar room. Can hear the others through the closed door to the living room, talking in hushed voices. Has no idea how he got here.

“What’s the last thing you remember?”

Taehyung frowns as he thinks about it, and takes another sip. “The car. Getting into the car. After that…” He shakes his head. Nothing, but that choking grip around his neck and that blinding pain in his chest.

“Yeah, you got into the car and Namjoon said that you were completely out of it. Wouldn’t react to anything, just kept crying. He didn’t know what to do, so he and our manager decided to get you to the dorm instead, and then we helped you up.”

There’s silence as Taehyung tries to remember any of it. He remembers tugging. Remembers stumbling. So that must have been the members helping him up. He shakes his head, but the fog from the way from the hotel to the dorm kitchen doesn’t lift. It’s scary.

“I don’t want to push you, but I need to know – are you hurt? Physically?” Yoongi sounds cautious as he asks.

Taehyung ponders the question. He’s sore, and there are certainly new bruises, but that’s nothing new with Mr. Kim, No. He shakes his head. He’s not hurt, at least not physically. But then he remembers why it hurts so bad in his chest and his throat starts to obturate again, and new tears sting in his eyes and no no no-
“It’s okay. You’re okay.”

The wet cloth is back on his neck, not as cold as before but still an unpleasant experience, and Taehyung closes his eyes, forces himself to take deep breaths like Yoongi tells him to. He puts down the glass and balls his hands to fists, digs his short nails into his palms to remind himself to not slip into that terrifying void again.

“Can I take a shower?” Taehyung asks when he thinks that he has himself under control again.

“Of course,” Yoongi agrees. “Do you need help getting up?”

Taehyung manages on his own, but he has to grab for the counter because his knees are still shaking like the legs of a fawn that’s trying to take its first steps. Yoongi goes into the living room first, and Taehyung can tell how the entire room hushes where there had been hurried voices before.

“He’s fine. He’s going to take a shower,” he can hear Yoongi tell them, and then he walks out of the kitchen, head lowered in shame. The other members are all piled up on the couch and watching him with concerned eyes, but Taehyung doesn’t spare them a glance. He scurries past quickly, wants to get out of their sight as fast as possible. Yoongi follows, brings him a new towel and some track pants and an oversized shirt that Taehyung thinks might belong to Namjoon. “Please leave the door unlocked. And shout if you need anything.”

As he washes and scrubs his skin, he tries not to think about it. Tries not to think about what had set him off like this, but he knows that once he’s done in the shower, he’ll have to face it anyway. Namjoon has been adamant in persisting that Taehyung shares things with him that hurt him, and he knows that after his breakdown there is no way that Namjoon will let him off the hook easily. He shampoos his hair and tries not to think about it, lathers his body with soap for the third time and tries not to think about it, turns off the now cold water and tries not to think about it, towels his skin dry so firmly that it turns red and tries not to think about it.

When he comes into the living room, he finds an eerie pretense of normalcy. He can hear Jin puttering around in the kitchen and curse under his breath, while Yoongi and Namjoon are lounging on the couch. The rest of the members he can’t hear or see at the moment, but he suspects that they’re loitering close by – maybe in the kitchen with Jin, but from where he’s standing he can’t peak in – and listening.

Namjoon pats the spot next to him on the couch. It’s a demand and not an invitation, Taehyung knows that, so he follows the quiet instruction.

“Taehyung-ah,” Namjoon says when Taehyung has settled down, tucked himself into a ball of protection, wrapping his arms around his knees to try and keep himself from falling apart again when forced to remember, “what happened tonight?”

Taehyung swallows harshly. He doesn’t want to think about it. He doesn’t want to think about it, about the words whispered into his ear so sickly sweet while hands held him down roughly. How they had completely destroyed him from the inside out, ripped him to shreds and carved him out, left his chest feel hollow as Taehyung was crushed into the mattress with a sweaty body on top.

“He said he loves me.”

A beat of silence.

“That no one else would ever love me like he does.”
And that burning feeling returns, the ghost hands scratching at his chest and digging for his heart and pressing on his lungs, because those were only the words Mr. Kim had started with, had dug even deeper, had laid out all of Taehyung’s insecurities in the open and spit on them, and before Taehyung knows it he’s crying again disgusting disgusting disgusting no one else would ever love him because how could they after everything he is and does and the voice of Mr. Kim rings in his head over and over.

“Oh Tae,” Namjoon breathes out, and Taehyung shakes his head as tears and snot once again sully his freshly washed face, and he tries to wipe them away with the back of his hand but they keep coming coming coming.

Taehyung didn’t think that if he would break, it would be like this. Over something as simple as words. But they hurt more than he could have ever imagined, more than any harsh snap of the hips or bruising fingerprints.

“You know that that’s not true,” Namjoon tries to assure him.

“I don’t think he’s in the right state of mind to realize that right now,” Yoongi says quietly. And he’s right. Taehyung’s not in any state of mind right now to realize anything besides the pain, but at least this time he’s not choking, and he cries and cries on the sofa as Namjoon and Yoongi patiently wait, offer comforting words and careful touches that don’t help much to ease the pain but let him know that at least he’s not alone in this.

When Taehyung has stopped crying, he goes straight to bed. He’s tired, emotionally and physically drained. He finds the bedroom occupied by Hoseok reading, who smiles at him tentatively but doesn’t say a word. So the others must have been in the kitchen, must have all listened in. Taehyung’s too tired to care. He lies down on his mattress and closes his eyes, and hears Hoseok shuffle out of the room right afterwards, undoubtedly catching up with the others about just what had happened. Another tear slips out of the corner of his eyes. I love you. No one will ever love you like I do. You’re a lucky whore to have me in your life. Who else would ever care for you? Taehyung prays that sleep pulls him under quickly, to escape the wicked voice in his head.

Something is off the next morning. When Taehyung wakes up, the bedroom is empty. He can hear the others puttering around in the rest of the flat. Sunlight is streaming in through the windows brightly. Taehyung frowns. They were supposed to have dance practice by eight in the morning, but from the way the sun is standing in the sky, it must be past that time already.

Taehyung doesn’t feel well-rested by any means. As soon as his sluggish brain catches up with his body, he remembers the events of the previous night. It still stings, but the pain isn’t as sharp anymore, more of a dull throbbing. He sits up, scratches an itchy spot on his back and then rubs the palms of his hands over his swollen face. Why had no one woken him up?

“Good morning, sleepy head!” Jin chirps, the first one Taehyung bumps into when leaving the bedroom. “Breakfast is in the kitchen, go and eat.”

“Hyung,” Taehyung says. Oh. His voice is a mess, croaky from sleep and rough from crying. “Dance practice. Why did no one wake me?”

“Change of plans,” the oldest says and pats his back when walking by. Taehyung looks after him for a few seconds, before making his way to the kitchen. All the members are around in various states of dressing, some in pyjamas and some ready for the day. Taehyung frowns. Tries to remember if there was a change of schedule that he hadn’t paid attention to, but he can’t remember.
“How are you feeling today?” Jimin asks in the kitchen and hands Taehyung a bowl. “Jin-hyung went all out for breakfast today.”

“Confused,” Taehyung answers. “What are we doing today?”

Jimin smiles brightly, and Taehyung realizes that it’s not him who has forgotten some kind of schedule, but his members in on a secret that no one cares to share with him. “Something fun. Now that you’re finally up, eat quickly and get ready so we can finally leave.”

A look at the clock in the kitchen reveals that it’s just past ten, and Taehyung can’t remember the last time he slept this long when the company expects them to be ready between seven and eight the latest. He scoops rice in the bowl Jimin gave him and tries to listen in on the others chattering in the living room to find out what is going on, but to no avail. The rice isn’t answering his countless questions either, no matter how much he stares it down.

They tell him to dress casually and all crowd into a van. Taehyung can feel the excitement in the air, and it only furthers his confusion. Jungkook is bouncing in the seat next to him. Taehyung wonders if he knows what happened last night. He supposes they all do. Is surprised but grateful that none of them bring it up. Wonders what they think about it. Remembers that Namjoon had said it’s not true, that what Mr. Kim feels for Taehyung is not love, that he shouldn’t let the words get into his head no matter how hard it is. But Taehyung can’t help but wonder.

Jungkook said he loves him. Or has a crush. Or likes. Or whatever. Does Jungkook know? That no one will ever love him like Mr. Kim does? No. No no no. He knows that’s not true. Mr. Kim does not love him. He’s mentally sick, and love for him is a dangerous obsession. If Jungkook loves him, he loves him differently. More so than Mr. Kim, because he would never intentionally hurt him, Taehyung thinks. The real question is – would Taehyung ever be able to love him back like that? Be able to trust Jungkook enough to believe that what Jungkook feels for him is love? He rests his head against the window and watches the world pass by, and wonders what love even means. Wonders why the words last night have such an effect on him if he knows and understands that they’re wrong, that whatever the fuck Mr. Kim feels for him is nothing akin to love.

What Taehyung had assumed when the boys had told him that there’s a change in plans was that there was a change of schedule and that – instead of being locked away in the practice room for hours upon hours – they’d be doing something more fun instead like a photoshoot. Oh, how wrong he was.

“Lotte World?” he asks incredulously, as their manager brings the car to a stop near the entrance and tells them that he’ll pick them up right here at closing hour. “We’re going… to an amusement park instead of practicing?”

“You said you’ve never been,” Jimin answers as the boys start to file out of the car. “We didn’t mean to take you so soon…”

“But you deserve a fucking break,” Yoongi chimes in from the seat in the back. “So now you’re getting it, at least for a day. Also give me your phone.”

“What?”

“Your phone.” He holds out his hand expectantly and wriggles his fingers impatiently. “Now. No calls from any creeps for you today.” There’s no leeway to argue. Taehyung takes out his phone and hands it over begrudgingly. Yoongi unceremoniously lets it drop in the car door compartment. “Try not to get lost or you’re fucked.”
Taehyung realizes why exactly he’s fucked the moment he steps foot into the amusement park, after cringing about the ridiculous price Namjoon had to shell out for the tickets, wondering how they could possibly afford that. The place is huge according to the map, and although Jin mentions in delight that there’s not all that much going on considering it’s a weekday noon, it’s still crowded in his opinion. When all six members turn to him to ask what he wants to do first, he just stares back at them wide-eyed, having no idea what to answer. Namjoon suggests they just walk around for now, and if they see an attraction they like, they’ll get on it. Taehyung agrees with that easily, glad he’s not forced to make a choice.

Walking through an amusement park feels like walking through a movie. Everything feels fake yet real and Taehyung can’t whip his head around fast enough to catch all the impressions attacking him from left and right, and quite frankly he’s absolutely overwhelmed. There’s happy music everywhere, too friendly employees, all the colours are soothing and yet engaging and sometimes he can hear people scream from roller coasters they pass by – they look absolutely terrifying but somehow Taehyung is intrigued by them – and it’s really a lot. The perk of it though, which Taehyung won’t come to realize until they’re back in the van hours later, absolutely exhausted but blissfully happy from a fun day outside the grueling trainee life, is that he’s so busy taking everything in that Mr. Kim and his words have been locked into a corner of his mind he’s forgotten how to access for a while.

The first ride they take him on is titled The Adventures of Sindbad. Taehyung vaguely knows of Sindbad, thinks that his grandmother might have told him stories about the character in the past. The boys snicker about the choice of ride and Jungkook complains that it’s a children’s ride, while Jimin and Hoseok look relieved, having claimed that they don’t particularly enjoy wilder rides. It’s a boat ride – five rows that hold four seats each, Taehyung sits first row squeezed between Jungkook and Jimin, next to whom is Hoseok, with Namjoon, Jin and Yoongi one row behind them – and although Hoseok assures him that it’s tame, he’s still ridiculously nervous as their boat starts to drift further away from the entrance point.

The moment everything around them becomes dark and the ride really starts, Taehyung thinks that he must have entered a whole new world through a magical portal, because all that surrounds him feels surreal and yet so real. The rocking of the boat, the effects of the lights, the sets they slowly pass, moving and incredibly detailed and absolutely mind-blowing. He’s never experienced something like this before, takes it all in with his mouth wide open, screams just slightly along with Jimin and Hoseok when they speed up or drop, laughs as Jungkook gets a bit splashed by water. He watches everything open-mouthed, wants to point out details to the others but he fears that if he does that he’ll miss something else. He hears their banter but he doesn’t listen, too occupied with trying to soak it all up like a sponge because he’s never seen something as fascinating before. And then he feels a hand grab for his, looks down and sees that it’s Jungkook’s, and he links their fingers together and shoots him a beaming smile before concentrating back on the ride and gasping as they pass under three giant moving heads of dragons.

When it’s over, Taehyung almost wants to beg the others to go once again, but then he remembers how huge the park is, and wonders what other absolutely fascinating rides it holds, and he can’t have the others walk fast enough to experience more. They do bumper cars, pick roller coasters considered more harmless for Taehyung to try out – he absolutely loves them, but he can’t help feeling dizzy and a bit sick – and buy unhealthy food and tacky hats for all of them that are again completely overpriced and make Taehyung question who’s actually paying for today.

Eventually, the group splits apart unplanned. They lose Namjoon and Jin first, and then they all joke that that wasn’t an accident at all. Then there’s a divide in where people want to go, because while Jungkook is dying for a faster roller coaster, Yoongi, Jimin and Hoseok want to go to a theatre show that the youngest has zero interest in. Taehyung really doesn’t care about where he
ends up as long as he gets to see more, so they decide to split up as well – him and Jungkook going to the roller coaster, the other three going to the theatre – and meet in front of the castle later.

What Taehyung doesn’t yet realizes the moment that decision is made, but soon after, is that being alone with Jungkook in an amusement park feels eerily like a date, and that’s a problem. Jungkook takes his hand and pulls him along to the roller coaster he wants to go on – and Taehyung’s heart skips a nervous beat when he realizes that said roller coaster has a looping, now that’s terrifying – and when they line up, hands no longer intertwined but Jungkook still standing close to him, all excited nervous energy and a giant grin and asking Taehyung what his favourite thing about the amusement park was so far, that’s when the realization that this might as well be a date hits, and throws Taehyung back into the canyon of doubt. He suddenly feels awkward, and then he feels bad about it. This isn’t a date. It’s just him and Jungkook hanging out, the way they did at the IU concert. And while technically everything changed, nothing changed at all, because they’re still Jungkook and Taehyung, just friends, and he should stop having stupid thoughts about possible relationships and enjoy the moment. This is his day. He’s supposed to have fun, and not worry. So he tries to shake the thoughts off and argues why *The Adventures of Sindbad* was his favourite, while Jungkook is appalled about Taehyung having picked the most boring ride of them all.

It works for the most part. Taehyung enjoys himself, and he enjoys his time with Jungkook, but then the younger teen will do something incredibly endearing, or reach for his hand, or smile that smile that scrunches up his nose so cutely, and Taehyung’s heart will flutter and he knows that he’s completely and utterly fucked, that while his head screams friends friends friends, his heart screams more more more, and there’s absolutely nothing he can do about that.

They have a bit over half an hour left before they’re supposed to meet up with the others again and decide that instead of queuing up for something else and possibly being late, they’re going to treat themselves to cotton candy – half the staff concerned with their debut would probably have a heart attack finding out about them eating such unhealthy food – and claim a park bench under a tree near the entrance of the castle, that Jungkook makes a dash for as soon as they realize that another family is also trying to reach it, and giggle to each other at the dismayed frowns on the parents’ faces once they’ve changed course after Jungkook reached the bench first.

Taehyung has had cotton candy before in his life a couple of times, but never often enough to not be surprised by the sweet taste, or the texture of nothingness, or the annoying stickiness of it on his fingertips that he uses to tear it apart. It’s so good that once he’s finished and only has the wooden stick left to twirl between his fingers, he wishes he could go and buy more. But money is an issue and their bodies need to be in presentable conditions, so he restrains himself and watches quietly as Jungkook finishes his cotton candy, eyes following the people surrounding them observingly as if watching a movie, and he smiles at a little girl adorably that twirls by in a sparkly dress with fairy wings on her back. There’s some cotton candy stuck at the corner of Jungkook’s mouth once he’s finished.

“You… uh… got some cotton candy there,” Taehyung says and taps his finger against his own mouth to show Jungkook exactly where it is. Jungkook’s tongue darts out, leaves his lips glistening with spit, but he misses the tiny piece of pink candy.

“Is it gone?”

“No, it’s right-” Before Taehyung knows what he’s doing, he reaches out and uses his thumb to brush it away, gets it stuck on his thumb, and wonders if he should just suck it off. But Jungkook looks at him, lips slightly parted, eyes wide, and that’s too intimate no no no that’s not what friends do, lick candy from their fingers that’s been stuck to their friend’s skin, and Taehyung awkwardly brushes his thumb against his jeans as his heart thumps in his chest and he can feel the blood rush
“Uh,” Jungkook says, and Taehyung awkwardly mutters sorry as he goes back to twirling the wooden stick between his fingers, refusing to move his eyes away from it. His face must be as red as a stoplight now, and as the sun is starting to set and the chilly dusk sets in, he feels the heat even more prominently staining his cheeks.

Jungkook clears his throat. “There’s nothing to be sorry for.” It’s a relief that he sounds just as dumbfounded as Taehyung feels.

“That’s not really what friends do.”

“I think we’re past the point of just friends,” Jungkook laughs awkwardly, and Taehyung knows it’s supposed to be a joke, but his stomach drops.

“Jungkook,” Taehyung murmurs, and without meaning to he accidentally breaks the stick in two pieces, frowns down at them in dismay. There’s suddenly a heavy silence between them as neither of them moves, both of them waiting if the other is going to cave and say something first. But Jungkook keeps quiet, and Taehyung knows that now is as good a time as any other to cut into a heavy topic like that, even if it threatens to ruin the day. Who knows when else he’ll have a chance like this, just him and Jungkook and no one to interrupt? And he has to settle this once and for all, thinks that he’ll lose his mind if he doesn’t talk about it with Jungkook soon because that cold feeling of dread feels all too familiar in his stomach now whenever he’s around the younger and his heart flutters in his chest, doesn’t want it to be associated with Jungkook in any way. “I don’t know if a relationship between us would be a good idea, even if we are attracted to each other.”

“Hyung, I was just joking. I told you, I-”

“No, Kook-ah. I know that was a joke right now, but I’m talking in general.” He breathes out a heavy sigh as he can feel Jungkook tense next to him. “I just… I don’t know if I’m relationship material, you know? I’m damaged in every way, and you’re in your best years. And to be completely honest, I’m fucking terrified.” Taehyung laughs bitterly.

“Of me?” Jungkook asks, voice so strained Taehyung barely hears it.

“No, not of you. But of the idea of physical intimacy. Sexual intimacy. Emotional intimacy even. What if I can’t give you that? A normal relationship.”

There’s more quiet. For the first time, Taehyung dares to look up and he wishes he didn’t when he sees the crestfallen look on Jungkook’s face.

“Kook-ah…”

“But how do we know that I’m relationship material?”

“What?” Taehyung asks, stunned.

“Well, it’s not like I’ve been in a real relationship before. What if I suck at it? What if I become a super clingy boyfriend you’re absolutely annoyed by?”

“I-”
“We won’t find out if we don’t try, right? Obviously not right now, but in our own time? And I’m sure that sex is great and all but I’m also sure that I can live without it if it makes you uncomfortable.” Taehyung looks around them panicky for a second, making sure that no one’s close enough to listen, because a public space with lots of children might not be the best place to have this conversation after all if that’s the direction they’re taking. It looks like they’re in the clear though. “I don’t want to force you into anything, hyung, but please give us at least a chance. Give yourself a chance. And if it doesn’t work out, we can always go back to being friends. Trying doesn’t mean that anything’s set in stone.”

He’s staring at Taehyung with both hopeful and fearful eyes, worries his bottom lip with his teeth, his foot is bouncing up and down nervously and Taehyung is so fucking weak for this kid he can’t even believe it. Absolutely whipped. Wants to pull him into a hug and never let him go, wants to hold his hand at all times, wants to buy him fucking chocolate on Valentine’s Day. Wants to give this a chance so bad even though he knows how fucked up it is, how fucking scared he feels that he could possibly mess up Jungkook, one of the six best things that has ever happened in his life.

“In our own time?” he asks, and he can’t believe that this is the turn this conversation has taken.

“Whenever you’re ready, when all of the heavy stuff is over,” Jungkook agrees, and Taehyung catches the movement of his arm out of the corner of his eyes, sees how Jungkook wants to grab for his hand but stops himself in time.

“Okay,” Taehyung agrees, and the knot in his stomach is still there, but it feels a little less tight. “In our own time.”

___

It’s 3 a.m. as Taehyung sneaks out of the hotel room, room card and phone clutched in one hand and with the other he’s closing the door behind him so so so quietly that absolutely no noise can be heard. That’s easier said than done with the way his fingers are trembling, and his vision is kind of blurry, and his knees are shaky, and he’s fucking tired and exhausted and his body bruised and his ass hurts, and the adrenaline rushes through his veins.

He flips open his phone and shakily goes for the first member’s number he sees, knows he’ll wake them all up collectively if they’re already asleep no matter whom he calls. Doesn’t even check which of them he actually dialed, but then there’s Yoongi’s panicked and croaky and absolutely tired voice on the other end of the line.

“Taehyung? What’s wrong? Did something happen?”

There’s no member waiting for him in a car one block away tonight. He’s in this on his own, after Mr. Kim had requested him for an entire night. Taehyung had agreed, against the protests of his members and Bang PD and the manager’s and his own rationality, as an idea had taken hold in his head at the possibility of spending more time with Mr. Kim, and then he had asked his manager to buy him two bottles of wine on the way to the meeting point – he’d received a look of disapproval, but the bottles as well – because it was almost the end of April and they were nowhere near closer to figuring out where Mr. Kim hid those damn files.

So Taehyung, who hates alcohol and its effect on people with every fibre of his body and every scar marring his skin, had gotten Mr. Kim drunk. And it was so fucking easy, and Mr. Kim was so willing, but the more he drank the rougher he got, and Taehyung didn’t anticipate that. Nevertheless, he continued pouring more wine in Mr. Kim’s glass, pretending to sip his own as
well, started opening the beer and soju from the mini bar eventually, and hoped that he wouldn’t shoot past the point of inebriation that made Mr. Kim talk openly, but be already far enough gone to not pay any mind to the direction Taehyung was leading the conversation to. What he didn’t expect was for Mr. Kim to also become an easily aroused drunk, and a slightly aggressive one at that, handling Taehyung with less than carefulness after a jibe about his wife accidentally finding the tape.

“Hyung,” Taehyung rasps. His throat fucking hurts as well. He knows that there’s got to be some skin broken somewhere, but if it had bled it must have stopped by now, because Taehyung had waited for Mr. Kim to pass out on the bed before sneaking out of the room. Tears sting his eyes and he holds his breath as he hears a noise down the corridor.

“Fuck, Taehyung. What’s wrong?” Yoongi sounds absolutely frantic now and Taehyung can hear the others in the back, talking over each other and sounding equally as worried. He presses his hand against his mouth to suppress a sob, and looks down the hallway to make sure that there’s no one else. He’s only wearing his underwear and a shirt, slides down the wall as his knees buckle and he can’t hold himself up any longer.

He tries to take a breath to calm himself, but it only ends up in another sob and Yoongi is telling him that they’re on their way, that they’ll get him right now, that everything’s okay.

“Hyung,” Taehyung wheezes, coughs, and can’t help but cry into his knees, pathetically curled up on the dirty carpet of an expensive hotel hallway as relief floods his body, and happiness fills him to the brim so much that he feels he’ll explode out of his skin. “I got it,” he presses out between sobs, and suddenly there’s silence, and he knows that on the other end of the line six people are holding their breaths, trying to make out his babbling, trying to make sense out of it.

“The tapes,” he forces himself to say as clearly as he can and a shiver of joy wracks his entire body. “I know. A USB stick. I know now. I know where it is.”

Chapter End Notes

Your comments and thoughts are as always much appreciated! <3

Come talk to me on twitter @itstheshyauthor or tumblr @theshyauthor. :) x
Chapter 49

Chapter Notes

This is it, my friends, the penultimate chapter! Gotta be honest with you, when I sat down and began writing the final one, I suddenly got really sad realizing that this will be the last time I'll be spending time with these characters like that. After two years, you do get strangely attached to them...
Thank you so much for all the love you have shown the last chapter, I'm so glad you enjoyed it! I hope that you like this one as well! :) x

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A USB stick in a safe, hidden behind a painting in Mr. Kim’s office. That’s where he said the only copy he owns of the video files lies in his drunken stupor as Taehyung had goaded him to reveal it. In the morning he remembers nothing, throws up right after waking up and apologizes to Taehyung for the bruises while pressing kisses to his neck, and Taehyung prays to all the gods he’s never believed in that he doesn’t want to go for another round, because it hurts. For once his lucky streak continues, because Mr. Kim needs to be at an important meeting at 8, and he leaves Taehyung behind in the hotel room because check-out isn’t until 11, and Taehyung orders room service and takes a prolonged shower, genuinely enjoys the hot water and the water pressure and the scent of the shampoo in the tiny bottle that he decides he’ll throw into his backpack and take home, because it’s the smell of freedom.

Taehyung had been so close to it already that one time in Mr. Kim’s office, and he hadn’t even known. Obviously it might also be a lie, maybe there’s no safe behind any painting at all, but Taehyung thinks that Mr. Kim had been too drunk to not tell the truth at that point, so unless proven wrong he’ll hold on to hope, and he’ll believe that’s the place he needs to seek out to finally end all of this. Of course there’s the next problem that they’re facing now, that Taehyung doesn’t know the code and none of the members come with a handy skill of breaking into safes, but that’s a hurdle they can overcome as well. As Taehyung presses into a bruise absentmindedly while watching water drops roll down his forearm, he can’t help but smile to himself. Now that he knows what and where he’s searching for, the numbers of times he’ll have to meet with Mr. Kim are finite. He knows that he can’t sever all ties with Mr. Kim immediately – that’d be too suspicious, especially if his memory does come back and he figures out that Taehyung knows where the tapes are and puts one and one together. Not that Taehyung thinks he would, because to him Taehyung is still no longer a member of BTS, but he’s not a stupid person by any means, wouldn’t be the rich CEO of a company if he was, and Taehyung can’t fuck this up.

The breakfast he ordered tastes like heaven, the best food that Taehyung has ever had, and maybe that’s subjective because he connects it with all these feelings of happiness. He eats slowly, chews thoughtfully as he channel-surfs sprawled out on the big bed, balcony door open to air out the smell of stale alcohol and sex and allow in fresh air, dressed in a fluffy bathrobe. Taehyung wonders if this is what being a successful idol would be like as well, lounging around in a fancy hotel room with delicious food, enjoying a calm morning as he waits for his schedule to start. Then he snorts, because BigHit can’t even afford to take them out for a company dinner, and settles on a cartoon, before texting his manager at 10 that he’s ready to be picked up.

“You gave me the shock of a lifetime last night. I aged about ten years. My hair has turned gray.
Never do that again,” Yoongi laments the second he spots Taehyung, but pulls him into a hug immediately. Taehyung winces, because he’s bruised and sore, but he hugs right back.

“He’s been going on like this the entire time while getting ready at the dorm.” Hoseok rolls his eyes. “But you really almost gave all of us a heart attack last night.” And then before Taehyung knows what’s going on, he finds himself in the middle of an uncoordinated group huddle, and he’s barely slept last night, only arrived back from the hotel ten minutes ago, but he feels so uncontrollably happy that he ignores someone’s’ elbow digging into his shoulder blade and someone else stepping on his toes.

When the boys finally let him free, he tells them about everything he has found out.

“We don’t know if it’s true yet,” Namjoon says when Taehyung is done, and he looks thoughtful. “So I think our next step should be to find out if there really is a safe behind a painting in his office. If yes, I guess it’s safe to say that we’ve struck gold – no pun intended.”

“I remember there being artworks in his office, so I’m not sure why he would lie about that in his drunken state,” Taehyung adds.

“Good. Jimin, can you set up another movie night with Tae and Eun-Ji?”

The dancer nods. “We’re supposed to meet up tomorrow anyway, I’ll suggest it then. But I’ve got to warn you… she’s seemed a bit distant with me lately.”

All heads turn to him in surprise as the dancer nervously fiddles with his fingers, shoulders hunched and a frown on his face.


Jimin shrugs. “It’s hard to explain. She doesn’t text back as much. Seems discouraged. Maybe it’s because she knows our debut is drawing near – and that we don’t really stand a chance. Maybe she’s starting to realize that our relationship is hopeless.”

Hoseok scoots over on the floor and rests an arm around Jimin’s shoulder, and asks if he’s okay. Jimin nods. “It’s not like we ever stood a real chance anyway. But what I’m saying is that we need to start acting quick. If she decides to break up with me first, we’ll no longer have access to Mr. Kim’s house. Tomorrow I’ll arrange something.”

“Jimin-ah,” Jin proposes as they start to disperse, today’s schedule not having dance practice until the afternoon and every member being assigned other activities in the morning – Taehyung’s being to catch up on some sleep, he lucked out – “join hyung for a PC bang after practice tonight?”

Jimin nods, but the dejected look on his face doesn’t give way.

“Hyung,” Taehyung ponders, “do you think that Jungkook is acting suspicious?”

He’s lying on his black couch and throwing and catching a tennis ball repeatedly, trying to pass time and boredom. Yoongi is sitting at the computer and working on music. Taehyung had asked him to explain what he’s doing at first, but Yoongi had been talking in terms that he didn’t understand, so he had given up relatively quickly. He wishes he could be at the PC bang with Jin and Jimin instead. Once his lockdown is over, he’s going to spend an entire day or more there. He has a list of things in his head now that he plans to do when he finally doesn’t have to hide any longer, the most mundane ones like roaming around a shopping mall or go with one of the members for streetfood – something he’d never spend much time thinking about if he wasn’t so
restricted, but now that he is that’s all that’s on his mind.

Or go for a walk with Soonshim – he really misses Soonshim, wishes that he could bury his face in the dog’s white fur, cuddle and play in the park with him. He hopes Soonshim is well. He sends extra money to Eomma these days, as he gets to keep what Mr. Kim gave him. He hopes she buys Soonshim good treats with it. The rest he saves up, and he’s been contemplating what to do with it. Namjoon had suggested to buy himself something that makes him happy, because after everything he’s been through he deserves that. But Taehyung doesn’t think that he wants to buy something from that money for himself, because it’s attached to bad memories and how can that bring him joy? And besides he’s frugal; doesn’t believe that buying something expensive is worth it because who knows when he could need that money for important stuff? Instead, he wonders if he should buy something for his members. A present to say thank you for sticking with him through the worst, but what could he possibly buy them?

“Suspicious?” Yoongi questions, not taking his eyes off the computer, “what do you mean?”

“When I snuck up on him today while he was texting someone, he panicked and almost threw his phone across the room.”

“Maybe you just startled him.”

“He stammered when I teasingly asked who he was texting – and then he said Eun-Ji.”

That catches Yoongi’s attention, and he spins around on the chair to look at Taehyung. “Why would Jungkook text her?”

“I don’t know. Afterwards, he guarded his phone like he was a dragon protecting his treasure.” Yoongi frowns. “What? Why do you look like that?”

“Namjoon told me the other day that Jungkook asked him if maybe we should consider asking Eun-Ji for help. To find the USB stick.”

Taehyung is so surprised that he misses catching the ball and it hits him on the chin. He winces. “He wants to do what now?”

“Namjoon told him not to be naive.”

“Surely he wouldn’t…” Taehyung starts, but then trails off. Jungkook knows best what it’s like to be the only one not involved in a secret, but he wouldn’t jeopardize their progress like that. That’d be dumb. Absolutely stupid, and Jungkook is a smart kid. He wouldn’t have come this far already if he didn’t have enough brain cells to realize that that’s the world’s dumbest idea. “No way. He knows that Eun-Ji and Mr. Kim have a close relationship. Telling her could destroy everything. He wouldn’t throw me under the bus like that.”

Yoongi hums in agreement. “You’re right. Still I’m going to talk to Namjoon about this. We’ll keep a closer look on him.”

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As promised to Namjoon to be allowed to get close to Mr. Kim, Taehyung sees a psychologist now. She’s a lady in her forties, and she comes to BigHit once a week to meet him in one of the conference rooms. At first, Taehyung had been surprised. He had thought that he’d be getting Namjoon’s therapist as well, but within the first meeting with her he had realized that Bang PD must have thought that a mere therapist is not enough to fix all of Taehyung’s issues – she’s specialized in cases of abuse, emotional, physical and sexual. And she’s a nice enough lady, very
friendly and looks easy to talk to, but Taehyung just can’t open up to her. Whenever he talks to her, his tongue feels heavy as if weighed down with lead, and after every appointment she leaves with almost just as little information about Taehyung as she arrived with. She’s patient, but Taehyung thinks that on the inside she must be frustrated with him.

Yoongi tells him that it’s okay, that he doesn’t have to be ashamed to talk to her. It’s her job and she’s confidential, and nothing he says will be shared by her, but Taehyung doesn’t think that Yoongi understands. He’s barely able to open up to his friends about his past, so how can he possibly confide in a stranger? But he knows that Yoongi does understand, because Yoongi too saw a psychologist in the past, sometimes still does, and he wishes that Yoongi could teach him the magic trick of loosening up his tongue and just talking when he sits in front of that woman. But there are walls around his heart still and it’s taken months to let the other boys in, so how does anyone expect him to open up to a woman he’s seen three times before about his deepest darkest secrets?

“Have you had a good week, Taehyung-ssi?” she questions with that empathetic voice of hers.

Taehyung shrugs, then affirms her question. He sits in his chair and tells himself to talk to her. Open up. She can help. So many thoughts in his head that he can’t sort, but she’s someone who could actually support him with that if he’d just talk talk talk. “I went to an amusement park for the first time.”

“Oh, that sounds nice. Which one did you go to?”

“Lotte World.”

She nods. “I have been there before. Did you enjoy it?”

Taehyung thinks back to that place, to The Adventures of Sindbad, the fake streets that felt so real, the music and the smells and Jungkook and cotton candy.

Jungkook.

“It was good.”

“Who did you go with?”

“My friends. Members. The people I will debut with. They surprised me with it.”

Jungkook on the bench, with a bit of cotton candy stuck to the corner of his mouth, Taehyung brushing it away, Jungkook’s soft skin under his touch. Taehyung squirms in his seat.

“That’s very nice of them. You have a close relationship with them, don’t you?”

“I have a question,” Taehyung blurs out, completely ignoring her words. He blushes and mutters an apology under his breath, but she just makes a welcoming hand gesture and tells him to go ahead. “It doesn’t have to be just me asking you things all the time. If I can help with something, ask ahead. That’s what I’m here for.”

“Hypothetically speaking,” Taehyung says, and he cringes at himself because it’s so obvious that he’s not hypothetically speaking and it’s so obvious that both of them know, but she lets his dignity live by playing along with his game of hypothesis. “If someone… has had a really fucked up childhood. And has a really fucked up relationship with... intimacy. Sexual.” He stutters over his words, feels his face turn hot from embarrassment and wishes he’d never started to speak, but now it’s too late anyway so he might as well continue this tragedy. “Is it possible… for them to still
have a normal relationship?”

She’s quiet for a few seconds as she seems to gather her words. “Hypothetically speaking,” she offers Taehyung a gentle smile, “yes. I believe that anyone, no matter how bad the past has been, has a chance to still live a normal life and experience normal relationships. But it takes effort, and work from both partners. Relationships are always a give and take. In this case, it would require more of that from both and the willingness to be honest with each other and work on issues. Would it be easy? Definitely not. But I think it’s possible. But I’d need more information on this hypothetical case to offer my opinion on what can be done for it to work.”

Taehyung swallows as his throat feels tight. He glances down at the table surface hard as he lets the words sink in. This is a professional. Someone who works with people like him all the time, and she still thinks that it’s possible. That Jungkook and him could have a chance. That Taehyung wouldn’t fuck up Jungkook in the process. His head is spinning at that thought.

“I…” he trails off and frowns, “I don’t even know where to start.”

“Whatever you’re most comfortable sharing with me for now, Taehyung-ssi. This isn’t our only meeting, and we have time.”

He takes a deep breath and tries to ignore the tremors in his hands as his heart feels as if it’s beating so hard that it’s going to jump in his throat and get stuck there. Thinks about all the fucked up things in his life, all the bad stuff, and what of these he’s most comfortable sharing with. Maybe it’s best to start from the beginning and slowly work his way up.

“My father… was an alcoholic. And my mother ran away. I don’t remember her anymore. But she left me with him and my grandmother. He… used to hit me.”

“We’re having a movie night with Eun-Ji on the 27th,” Jimin announces as soon as he spots Taehyung. “That’s the next time all her family is gone and she’s home alone.”

“So next week?” Taehyung clarifies. “Good. That’s fairly soon.” He thinks about it and wonders if he’ll have to see Mr. Kim once more before that, or if he can manage to shut him down for an entire week. It’s risky, but maybe he can indulge in a break and only come back to him after knowing for sure that the safe is where it’s supposed to be. If not, Mr. Kim has undoubtedly lied to him anyway, so what would be the point of going to see him again?

Taehyung takes in the way Jimin scratches the back of his neck as he avoids his eyes, looking as if there’s more to the story that he’s unwilling to tell, and his expression is tight with strain.

“What?” Taehyung asks and squints at Jimin, immediately suspicious of what the other is obviously still keeping from him.

“Jungkook is going to come with us as well.”

Taehyung sputters. “Absolutely not!”

“I don’t know why, but she insisted on it.”

“Tell her he has no time.”

“She invited him herself via text message and he already agreed.”

Taehyung thinks back to the conversation he had with Yoongi the other day, about how Jungkook
had acted suspicious on his phone and then admitted to texting Eun-Ji. “That brat,” he hisses as he realizes what Jungkook must have been doing. He’s always bugged Taehyung to be allowed to help him, but Taehyung had never given him permission to, so he must have taken matters into his own hands and gotten closer to Eun-Ji to make her invite him as well. “We have to talk him out of this.”

Jimin raises an eyebrow, looking at him unimpressed. “You know Jungkook. You know how stubborn he is. Never in a million years will he not come with us.”

“But he can’t,” Taehyung stresses. He doesn’t want Jungkook anywhere near Mr. Kim or his house or his family, even if technically he’s been close to them many times already.

“It’s just a movie night,” Jimin reiterates, “we’re only going to see if the safe is where Mr. Kim said it is, right? What’s the harm in taking Kook-ah along? If anything, maybe he’ll feel like he’s finally done something for you and backs off.”

“You’re right,” Taehyung mutters, but he’s not happy about this. “I’m going to have a talk with him either way. He can’t just go and make his own plans now. That’s too dangerous. And he of all people should know that keeping secrets from the group isn’t okay.”

Jimin snorts at that, and Taehyung lightly punches him in the arm while he tells him to shut up, before they fall into mindless banter, and Taehyung proudly demonstrates the arm wave that he has finally somewhat perfected after days of practicing with Hoseok. It’s still not as smooth as he wishes it could be, but he’s making progress, and that’s what’s most important. Next up they’re going to practice body rolls, Hoseok had promised him, but Taehyung’s not too sure if he can actually categorize it as a promise or a threat.

When he finds Jungkook and casually leans next to him, arms crossed and face a blank canvas and says the words “So, Eun-Ji, huh?” Jungkook’s entire face pales. It’s almost hilarious, but Taehyung hasn’t expected that reaction at all, so when Jungkook starts stuttering about how he’s sorry and how he just wanted to help and to please not be mad, Taehyung stops him by putting a hand on his shoulder and telling him that it’s okay.

“Did you think I wouldn’t have found out that you’ve been getting closer to her so you can join us? I’m not happy at all that you did that and that you agreed to her invitation, but I think I get it. You think you can be of more help if you’re involved, but honestly you’re more helpful to me if I know that you’re safe somewhere else.”

Jungkook shuts down like a computer and blinks up at him owlishly, before his system seems to boot again. “The movie night? You get it? Yes. I… I’m sorry, hyung. I really just wanted to help.”

“One time, okay? You’re allowed to go with Jimin and me this one time, and after that you do not get involved in this any more than you already are. Do you understand me? Don’t do any bullshit behind any of our backs.”

“No hyung, it won’t happen again. I promise.”

Taehyung lets go of Jungkook’s shoulder and offers him his pinky instead. Jungkook looks at it in confusion briefly, before understanding what Taehyung asks of him and linking their pinkies together. “No more interfering from here on out. You pinky promised now, you can never go back on it.”

The removal of Yoongi’s splint is celebrated Bangtan style, with more dance practice.
“Next time you want to punch a wall, hyung, please actually think before doing so,” Namjoon pants, because now that Yoongi can give one-hundred percent again, their choreographer is having no mercy on them. Well, it’s not like he’s ever had any before, but it’s even worse now. With their debut presumably approaching, he notices how all the staff is getting harder on them than before, constantly criticizing and sometimes downright insulting them. Yoongi had told Taehyung to let it go when Taehyung had gone on an angry rant about it, because if he’s already taking it to heart now, he’s going to have a terrible time once they have debuted. “We’re essentially what pays their bills, and we’re entering a cut-throat business. They’re not doing it to be mean, but to prepare us.”

“Next time I’m punching you instead of the wall,” Yoongi grumbles to Namjoon. Taehyung notices how he holds the formerly broken finger clutched in his other hand. He hopes that Yoongi is careful with it and doesn’t overdo anything, so he won’t end up back in the hospital when he’s just gotten out of it.

“Should someone upload something on Twitter?” Hoseok asks, “to let our followers know we’re practising hard?”

“Not me,” Jungkook rasps. He’s caught a sudden cold two days ago and his throat hurts, looks a bit like death warmed up in a microwave but still cute in Taehyung’s opinion, and everyone’s keeping their distance from him as much as possible, because history has taught them that if one member gets sick, the others are often quick to follow like dominoes. Namjoon’s worried because they’re supposed to go back to recording something in a few days, so he’s making him drink tea with lots of ginger and makes sure that he’s not going too hard during dance practise. Taehyung hopes, as mean as it sounds, that the cold sticks around for a few more days – just long enough for him to have to cancel on the movie night. Jungkook, to their collective surprise, is listening to Namjoon and swallows whatever healthy stuff Jin prepares for him without complaint, takes it easier at dance practise even if their teacher isn’t too happy with that, having only just gotten back all seven members fully. Normally, the way they know their stubborn maknae, he would just push through the cold and still give everything until he’d be in such bad shape that Jin would impose bedrest on him. It had happened once before already since Taehyung joined the team, and before that as well from what Jin had told him back then with a concerned frown. Taehyung suspects that this time around he’s not taking care of himself because he wants to avoid a situation like that once again, but because he knows if it gets worse and any of his hyungs exercise their authority, he would not be able to join Jimin and Taehyung on the weekend.

“My skin looks like trash,” Jimin is the next to deny posting a picture, and that’s not a lie. His complexion is blemished lately, maybe from stress or nerves, and he hasn’t posted a picture on Twitter for a while. “I’m planning to film a log soon though, most-likely before the movie night.”

“You’re all terrible at social media,” Yoongi groans. “I’ll post something later.”

Taehyung wishes he could post something as well, or film logs like the others and share them. He’s filmed some before, just for himself, to practice. Whenever one of the others film their logs in the studio, he always has to push all of his stuff into a corner so it doesn’t show up on camera, getting rid of his existence. But he wants to interact with the fans as well so bad, wants them to know that he exists. It’s frustrating. The others always tell him to be patient, that he won’t have to wait much longer to meet the fans, but since no one knows when all of this is really going to be over, Taehyung doesn’t find much comfort in those words. And then there’s the next thing he has to worry about: what if the fans don’t want him? They expect a six-person group, have become familiar with the members over the internet, and suddenly there’s another one showing up completely out of the blue without any warning. What if they don’t like him? These are some of the other prominent worries in Taehyung’s life at the moment, when he can’t fall asleep and isn’t busy fretting over Mr. Kim or Jungkook.
“Get your lazy asses back up, your break is over,” their choreographer calls as he claps his hands together to catch their attention. He’s met with a chorus of pained groans at the knowledge that they’re probably stuck here for another few hours at least.

Jimin films his log on the 26th, approximately twenty-four hours before Mission Safe, as Jungkook – who to Taehyung’s chagrin quickly recovered from his cold – has dubbed it is about to start. Taehyung watches him film it from the corner of the studio, all his stuff scattered around his feet to make sure that none of it can be seen. It’s a short log, only three minutes in length – Taehyung has noticed that they like to keep it short that way – and Jimin doesn’t say much momentous in it. He complains about the condition of his skin, which is one of his favourite topics at the moment to go on about, and shares with whoever is going to watch this that occasionally he gets really nervous about debuting. Taehyung unintentionally hunches in on himself as Jimin says that, the old familiar feeling of guilt settling down in his stomach again as that topic is being brought up. Soon, he tells himself. It’s not going to be much longer until they’re ready to debut. All they need are those tapes, and they almost have them. It doesn’t ease the feeling of guilt possessing his mind and body though, not as long as he doesn’t actually hold the USB stick in his hand and knows that it’s over. Various worst-case scenarios about it not actually existing, or not actually being where it supposedly is hidden away, have been running through Taehyung’s head non-stop for the past few days. He wonders how he would react if he found the safe to be empty, if he didn’t get a hold of that USB. It would have all been for nothing. How would BTS progress? It would be the end for him.

Taehyung snaps back to the present when Jimin whirls around on the office chair to tell him that he’s done, and dumps the bed linen he’s been holding close to his chest unceremoniously back on the black couch.

“Are you nervous about tomorrow?” Jimin asks.

Taehyung shrugs. He’s not particularly nervous and he tells Jimin as much, because it’s not like they’re doing something dangerous or risky. It’s just another movie night like the first one. Taehyung knows where the office is by now, so he’ll be quick and doesn’t need to buy much time with dumb excuses while Jimin and Jungkook will be busy keeping Eun-Ji entertained. He’s just going to rush upstairs, go inside, check behind the artworks, and as soon as he finds the safe his job is finished. Once its existence is confirmed, the real challenge will begin – finding a way to open it.

“We’ll just blow up his house,” Yoongi’s deadpan answer had been when they had discussed what to do about that, “and if Mr. Kim is home at the moment then that’s all the better.” Taehyung isn’t entirely sure how much of that was meant as a joke and how much was actually serious, but the unbothered expression on Yoongi’s face suggested that he had no qualms with that plan. Instead of blowing up houses, Namjoon had suggested that maybe Taehyung should familiarize himself with different types of safe locks, so when he stands in front of it he can identify what they will actually be searching for next, and Taehyung had done just that at night when he couldn’t fall asleep, spending hours in front of the glowing computer screen researching safe locks. He thinks he’s prepared for pretty much anything he encounters now, and hopes that it’s not a lock that opens with fingerprints, because how could he possibly pull opening that off?

“You’re right, technically there’s really nothing to worry about,” Jimin sighs as he shuts off the computer.

“How are things with Eun-Ji going, by the way?” Taehyung questions offhandedly, and by the grimace on Jimin’s face he knows it’s not good. This might become a serious problem. Eun-Ji and Jimin need to work out long enough for Taehyung to have access to Mr. Kim’s house. Maybe
Jungkook’s plan to befriend her separately from Jimin wasn’t such a bad idea after all, just in case their relationship breaks off before Taehyung’s breakthrough. He feels bad about thinking of Jimin and Eun-Ji as a commodity though.

“I think she’s very aware of the fact now that when I debut, this won’t work out anymore,” Jimin explains. “She hinted at it a couple of times now, but I don’t think she actually wants to end it? It’s good though that she’s thinking about it… I think it might make it easier for her when shit goes down to not have thought that we’ll have a serious future.” The dancer looks pained as he talks about it, and presses his lips into a thin line afterwards, examining his fingernails in thought.

“I’m sorry,” Taehyung offers, but he knows it doesn’t help with anything. It’s just meaningless words that can’t improve the situation he has pushed them all into.

“You have nothing to be sorry for,” Jimin tells him. “Everything between Eun-Ji and I happened because I chose for it to happen. Even if she wasn’t the daughter of Mr. Kim, we wouldn’t end up together – you know I’d choose Bangtan over her any day. Maybe we’re just not meant to be in this world…” He trails off and sighs.

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Eun-Ji greets Taehyung with a hug at the entrance door. He’s not surprised about it this time the way he’s been the first time she pulled him in, when saying goodbye after the first movie night. Instead he hugs her back and asks how she’s doing, mindful of the bag of snacks he’s holding because he doesn’t want to keep showing up as a guest at her place with empty hands.

“You really didn’t have to bring anything!” Eun-Ji chides him when he hands the snacks over. “But thank you. Jimin and Jungkook are already here, I think they’re currently fighting over which movie to watch. Jungkook is dead set on Iron Man.”

Taehyung has to bite the inside of his cheek to not reply with something offhand like “Of course he is,” because as far as Eun-Ji is concerned, he and Jungkook are mere acquaintances. They had decided that he and Jimin should arrive together, seeing as they are from the same company, and Taehyung was to show up about half an hour later. They’ve been going over the details of their relationship over and over again back at the company as to not mess up.

“This is perfect media training,” their staff had told them, and praised Taehyung for how naturally he had acted when telling the story of how he had first met Jungkook that never actually happened. “You’re really good at this. Maybe you could consider going into acting.”

They’ve had media training for month now, and Taehyung had always been the one most complimented by the staff, to his chagrin. After all, his skills at lying without batting an eyelash didn’t develop from nothing.

“Am I very late? I’m sorry I made you guys wait,” Taehyung inquires as he follows Eun-Ji to the little home movie theatre, this time not paying attention to his surroundings at all. “Are your parents on a business trip again?”

“You’re not late at all! Besides, you brought snacks – which, as far as I am concerned, means that all is forgiven.” She shoots him a blinding smile, and yet again Taehyung is endeared by this girl and her kindness, and feels terrible for the things he’s planning to put her family through in the future. “Mum’s abroad again, and dad’s at some boring charity gala that usually lasts until the early morning hours, which means he’s staying at his company afterwards to get a few hours of sleep in.”

Taehyung falters in his steps for a moment, but quickly regains himself. Mr. Kim is still in Seoul?
Taehyung had thought that he wouldn’t be in the city at all. If that’s the case, they can’t risk to stay for longer than one movie, two tops. He wonders if it’s true that he’s staying at the company after these events, or if that’s just his catch phrase that translates to fucking Taehyung. He hasn’t received a message from Mr. Kim about requesting him for tonight though, so maybe he really tends to stay at his office after social gatherings. It does sound plausible, but Taehyung’s confidence in tonight’s plan has started to falter. He’ll have to talk to Jungkook and Jimin about this as quickly as possible, to warn them.

They step into the movie theatre and Taehyung greets Jimin with a hug, while he waves at Jungkook from a distance. The youngest is sprawled out on one of the beanbags in the room as the menu for the Iron Man movie is projected on the screen against the wall.

“Iron Man? I see Jungkook won the battle,” Eun-Ji smirks. She and Jimin take one of the loveseats, while Taehyung claims the other one for himself. There’s a variety of snacks and drinks, and after they chatter briefly Eun-Ji presses play. Taehyung wishes she would have had to leave the room once more to grab something, but she must have prepared everything before his arrival already so he doesn’t get the chance to talk to either Jimin or Jungkook by themselves.

He’s seen the movie before – Jungkook made all the members watch it in the past already – so he doesn’t pay all too much attention to it. Instead he glances between Jimin and Jungkook, who both seem for the most part relaxed. Jungkook, although he must know the movie by heart by now, hangs on to every word said on screen, and Jimin has his arm resting around Eun-Ji and alternates between also watching the movie and quietly talking to her. If Taehyung didn’t know better, he’d really believe that this was just a normal evening with friends. But Taehyung knows better, and he keeps contemplating when the best time to sneak out is. He doesn’t want to leave too early into the movie, but the irrational fear of Mr. Kim returning home – which he’s sure won’t happen, Eun-Ji would never invite Jimin over if she wasn’t entirely certain that her parents won’t be home – makes him antsy and he keeps fidgeting. Jimin must have picked up on it by now, because he looks over and their eyes meet, and he arches an eyebrow in question. Taehyung tries to look nonchalant, because he doesn’t want to alert Jimin about the fact that one part of the equation – the most dangerous at that – has gone rogue, and sends him a subtle thumbs up instead.

Thirty minutes into the movie, Taehyung decides that it is finally time to act on his plan. He’s thought about this carefully, and decided that he couldn’t bring the bathroom excuse a second time without Eun-Ji probably getting suspicious. So instead he pulls out his phone and frowns at it in false pretense.

“I’m sorry,” he says as he hauls himself up from the loveseat he’s been lying on, “but I got a call and a few messages from a co-worker who literally never contacts me. I’ll call him back real quick.”

“She should we pause the movie?” Eun-Ji asks, just like she did the last time they were here, but Taehyung brushes the offer off.

“No, I already know it. Besides, this will only take a few minutes I think. I’ll be right back.” He walks out of the theatre room in no hurry, but as soon as the door closes behind him he makes a turn to the left and rushes up the by now familiar open white stone staircase.

The door to Mr. Kim’s office is closed today, unlike last time when it was left slightly ajar. Taehyung doesn’t particularly like that, would prefer if he could just gently nudge it and have it swing open by itself. Instead he has to push down the door handle and hope that it doesn’t make any sound – it’s not like anyone could hear him, but there’s some unexplainable paranoia bubbling up in him and grating at his nerves – and that feels a lot more like trespassing than an already open
Taehyung carefully walks in and leaves the door open. He’s greeted by the same mess as last time, papers and books scattered around every surface and seemingly no order to them at all. The dark maple wood desk still looks as imposing as it did the first time, but unlike last time it isn’t Taehyung’s main focus. Instead he immediately turns to the walls and counts three paintings, all in different shapes and sizes and looking like they belong into a museum more than a private home with their lavish golden frames.

There’s no time to pay attention to what’s actually on the artworks, because all that really matters is what’s hidden behind. A safe behind a painting, Mr. Kim had slurred back then. With quick strides Taehyung makes his way over to the first one, and his heart thumps loudly in his chest. He’s unconsciously holding his breath as his fingers touch the frame – it’s as heavy as it looks and Taehyung just hopes he doesn’t break it, is kind of scared that it crumbles to dust under his touch and gives his presence away to its owner – and slightly pulls it back from the wall to peer behind the gap. He’s met with a solid white wall. Blowing out a breath after carefully having brought the painting back into position, Taehyung closes his eyes and forces himself to take a few seconds to calm down. It’s okay. It’s all good. There are still two more paintings in this room. He’s got this. One of them will hide the safe Mr. Kim had talked about – it has to.

He’s met with an equally as solid white wall behind the second painting as well, and with every passing second he becomes more and more aware of his strong heartbeat, of how it feels as if it threatens to break his ribs and jump right out of his chest, or jumps so high it will get stuck in his throat and choke him to death with nerves. His hands tremble now, and his confidence slowly starts to dwindle because what are the odds? He feels as if he’s playing reverse Russian Roulette at this point, the gun raised against his temple as he reaches for the final picture frame, hoping that when he pulls the trigger he’ll be lucky to catch a bullet. His mouth is dry and he’s too scared to actually look at first, closes his eyes as he gently lifts it to create a small gap between the canvas and the wall, and then he opens them and blinks, eyes adjusting to the light.

And there is nothing.

More sturdy white wall glares right back at him, and Taehyung lets go of the final frame as if it has burned his fingers, not caring about possibly damaging anything anymore. There’s no safe behind an artwork in Mr. Kim’s office, just walls, walls and more walls that laugh in Taehyung’s face as he drops to his knees when the room starts spinning. It’s over. It was all for nothing. Mr. Kim had lied to him, and Taehyung doesn’t even know if unintentionally or not, and it was all for absolutely nothing, all the pain and humiliation he had put himself through over the past couple of weeks. They’re back to zero. Back to scratch. They’ve got absolutely nothing.

He lowers his head to the ground, presses his forehead against the floor and tries to take deep breaths because this feels suspiciously like the beginning of a panic attack, something that he doesn’t particularly have the time for right now. He tries to blink back the tears that sting his eyes, tries to stay calm calm calm although his intestines feel like they’re forming into knots and his lungs feel like they’re being filled with icy water and he really needs to stay calm right now, can’t afford to freak out until he’s back in the safety of either the dorm or his small room. He’s still on the enemy’s turf, he needs to get out of there before he can allow himself that weakness.

A couple more deep breaths, and then he raises his head and tells himself that it’s okay, that this doesn’t have to mean the end – only that they’re not as far ahead in the plan as they had hoped they would be. But it’s not over yet. Maybe Mr. Kim wasn’t talking about his office at home, but the one at his company. Taehyung can’t fathom how someone could be so stupid to hide such incriminating evidence against themselves there, had always assumed that Mr. Kim must be talking
about his home office, but the more he thinks about it, the more he is convinced that this must be it. He needs to get into Mr. Kim’s work office. He’s been searching in the wrong place all along.

Taehyung still feels dizzy, and also sick to his stomach from the disappointment, but he finds enough strength to get up from the floor. This isn’t the end, he tells himself over and over again. It’s not time to give up yet. He hasn’t come this far in life by throwing the towel too quickly, and he sure isn’t going to start with it now. They just need a new plan.

Before he exits the office, he takes one more final look around – and that’s when it catches his eyes. A painting, an artwork that he hadn’t noticed before, because it’s not exactly what Taehyung would think of when someone tells him about art – a big canvas on the wall, without a frame, and obviously painted by children. Taehyung supposes that it must have been done by Eun-Ji and her younger sister many years ago, depicting a family of four in the style of stickman figures, a smiling green sun in the upper left corner, a house in the back, and lots of colourful small handprints around the edges. It looks messy and kind of ugly if Taehyung is honest, but he supposes that it has sentimental value – Taehyung’s grandmother liked to keep the pictures he drew for her in kindergarten, no matter how terrible they looked. His father never liked them all that much, and Taehyung remembers that once in his drunken stupor, he ripped them off his grandmother’s fridge and tore them to pieces upon realizing that there was no more alcohol in her house. Taehyung had only drawn one last picture after that to give to his grandmother in secrecy, and she hadn’t hung it up like she used to, making the young boy believe that she hadn’t kept it and that it really had no value like his father had said, and never drew another one again. Only after her death, when Taehyung looked through the few belongings his grandmother possessed, he found the drawing carefully tucked away behind official documents.

An artwork. Could it possibly be… no, it can’t! But then there’s stupid hope bubbling up in Taehyung’s chest once again, his heart fighting against his head, screaming that maybe yes yes yes this is an artwork as well, while his head screams no no no you’re only going to get disappointed again. He has to look nonetheless, see if maybe he is right. If maybe Mr. Kim hadn’t lied to him after all, and considers this ugly drawing his children must have made for him an artwork just as much as the three expensive-looking framed pieces that must all cost a small fortune each.

Taehyung quickly makes his way over. He’s already wasted too much time, needs to hurry up so Eun-Ji won’t get suspicious, and if this is another blank he wants to get it over with as fast as possible, like ripping off a band-aid. He holds his breath unconsciously as he touches the canvas and lifts it up, and then almost lets go of it in surprise when he comes face to face with a small black walled-in safe with a digital safe lock.

And then he almost cries again for the second time in the span of a few minutes because he’s so relieved, because luck finally seems to be on his side in life.

“Get your shit together”, he mutters to himself. Now is not the time to freak out. But his heart is beating fast again like it did before, this time for entirely different reasons, and Taehyung can’t help but reach out and touch the cold surface of the safe just to make sure that it’s real, that it’s really there right before his eyes. It doesn’t disappear when he makes contact with it, and he finally blows out the breath he’s been holding all this time. Only one unknown code separates him from the files now, a few numbers he’ll have to figure out – or learn how else to crack a safe, whatever he deems to be easier – and then it’s finally over. He can almost taste the freedom now.

Remembering that he doesn’t have much time to spare, Taehyung begrudgingly lets go of the painting and exits the office, quietly coming down the big staircase again. He tries to put his emotions on the backburner so that Eun-Ji won’t notice anything strange, and then re-enters the small home theatre.
“Sorry guys, that took longer than expected,” he apologizes as he steps into the room. He must have been gone for ten minutes he supposes, and both Jimin and Jungkook look at him with nervous eyes as he enters. He nods, and can see both of them physically falling into themselves as tension leaves their bodies. Taehyung takes his previous spot on the loveseat, lies down on it and thinks that he suddenly feels really tired, that if he closed his eyes right now he’d probably fall asleep from the exhaustion that comes after all the excitement his body has been through within the last ten minutes. He knows that Jungkook and Jimin are dying to know more, can feel their nervous energy buzzing in the room, but as long as Eun-Ji is present they’ll just have to wait.

Their suffering ends fairly quickly, as Jimin’s girlfriend says that she needs to use the bathroom, and they pause the film. As soon as the door falls closed behind her, Jimin and Jungkook are immediately rushing out of their seats and over to him, both talking on top of each other.

“You took forever,” Jungkook complains, “we were super worried.”

“So you found it? The safe? It’s where he said it is?” Jimin asks with wide eyes, and Taehyung – knowing that they only have a very limited amount of time before Eun-Ji will return – briefly tells them the watered-down version of what happened, starting with the fact that the safe is hidden behind a doodle from the daughters, before explaining that he didn’t find it at first because he was so focused on the actual paintings in the room, because he knows that he looks like a mess after being put through all these emotions in such a short period of time and he knows that his two friends can tell.

“Also we can’t stay here for long. I don’t think it’s a smart idea to even stay for a second movie,” Taehyung adds as an afterthought, “because Mr. Kim isn’t out of the country. He’s at some charity dinner or something in Seoul. Eun-Ji said that he never returns home after these overnight, but it’s still risky.”

Jimin pales at that piece of information and Jungkook looks concerned as well, but they’ve already spent too much time talking, so they make their way back to their respective seats and Jungkook grabs a half empty bowl of popcorn on his way to the bean bag. He starts to throw hand after hand of the snack into his mouth and chews on them vigorously as Jimin shoots him a weird look and off-handedly mentions that they’re not supposed to eat too many snacks for their diet.

“I was nervous all day long about whether that safe is there or not,” Jungkook defends himself, “so I could barely eat anything because my stomach felt so heavy. But now that we know, I’m getting hungry.” His words are accentuated by another handful of popcorn being shoved into his mouth right after.

Before Jimin can reply, Eun-Ji returns and they continue the movie – only for Jungkook to interrupt not more than ten minutes later to ask for more popcorn.

“Of course we have more!” Eun-Ji chirps and gets off the loveseat, pausing the film once again. “You don’t mind if I take a few more minutes to make some for Jungkook? Sorry for interrupting again.”

Jimin and Taehyung both assure her that it’s fine, and as she’s about to take the bowl from Jungkook’s hands, the younger insists that he’ll go and help her as she has to do the work per his request. They close the door as they leave, and Taehyung, who’s tired from all the emotional turmoil, sinks further down the lovechair and completely sprawls out on it, a position that threatens to put him to sleep any second, but he’s honestly too tired to sit up at this point.

“When did Jungkook become so rude to finish all the snacks and even ask for more?” Jimin ponders in confusion, “He’s usually more reserved than that.”
“It’s Jungkook. He always does things that will surprise you.”

Jimin agrees with a laugh. “I guess that’s true. So all that’s left now is to find out the code for the safe, right? And then it’s over.”

“Yeah,” Taehyung breathes out, “and then it’s over. And we can finally debut.”

They fall quiet, both getting lost in their own thoughts until they hear hurried footsteps down the hallway. Taehyung doesn’t pay them any attention as he wonders whether he should just doze off for the rest of the movie, until the door to the room crashes open and makes them both jump.

“Imagine how surprised I am to leave a charity gala early to spend time with my precious daughter, just to find that she’s not by herself like she said she would be. What the fuck are you doing in my house?”

The air gets knocked out of Taehyung’s lungs as he hears the all too familiar voice, and dread settles in his bones as he stares at Jimin, who has scrambled off the couch. Taehyung can’t see the door from where he’s lying on the loveseat, hidden behind the back rest, but he doesn’t need to see the person to know that it’s Mr. Kim standing in the doorway, and he sounds livid.

“Who are you? Why are you here? Answer my questions!” Mr. Kim barks at Jimin, and Taehyung realizes in that moment that just as he can’t see Mr. Kim from his position, he’s also hidden from the CEO’s view. Jimin’s eyes dart over to him briefly, but Taehyung shakes his head quickly and puts his finger against his lips, hoping that Jimin catches his drift and pretends he’s not here.

“I… I’m sorry, sir, I’m a friend of Eun-Ji’s. We were having a movie night.” Jimin stumbles over his words and swallows harshly, and Taehyung sends a prayer to whatever god is willing to listen to get them out of this situation in one piece. There are a million thoughts running through his mind although only seconds pass by, like how it’s odd that Mr. Kim apparently doesn’t recognize Jimin as a Big Hit trainee – maybe he was always too obsessed with Taehyung to care about the others? – or how it’s just as odd that he must have passed the kitchen on his way to the movie room but not have spotted Eun-Ji and Jungkook there making popcorn. That’s a relief at least. And then Taehyung wonders how Mr. Kim could have even known that they’re here, and his mind supplies that it must have been their shoes in the entrance hall that gave them away.

“Eun-Ji doesn’t have male friends,” Mr. Kim retorts and his voice grows louder with every word, “and even if she did, she knows that she’s not allowed to bring them home when she’s alone.”

Jimin whimpers as he takes a step back. “I’m so sorry, sir. I didn’t know, really. We just-”

“Out!” Mr. Kim screams and both Jimin and Taehyung flinch at the booming sound, “before I change my mind and beat your ass out of South Korea.”

Jimin freezes, and his eyes flit over to Taehyung once more. He doesn’t know what to do, and Taehyung doesn’t know what he wants him to do either. Jimin should leave while he can, get out of here and maybe get help, but on the other hand Taehyung wants to throw up at the thought of being left alone in the room and then discovered by Mr. Kim. He doesn’t think there’s ever been a moment in his life in which he’s been so terrified.

“He said get the fuck out!” Mr. Kim bellows once more, and Jimin finally starts to move towards the door, towards Mr. Kim, with hesitant steps. Taehyung shifts as quietly as possible to peek past the armrest, making sure to stay low so that Mr. Kim hopefully won’t spot him. He watches as Jimin is about to make his way past Mr. Kim. He has almost made it out of the room, when suddenly the CEO grabs him by the wrist and pulls him back again, squinting at him, and Jimin shrinks back
from his inquisitive stare.

“You look really familiar,” Mr Kim begins, “have I seen you somewhere before?”

“You’re hurting me,” Jimin yelps, and Taehyung can’t continue to stay hidden and just watch. He needs to do something, needs to make sure that Mr. Kim lets go of Jimin – and, god forbid, doesn’t find Jungkook – and without thinking, he gets up off the couch and, with the element of surprise, runs towards Mr. Kim and Jimin and pushes at the CEO with all his might, making him stumble out of the door into the hallway in shock. He lets go of Jimin, which is exactly what Taehyung had hoped for, and his face when he realizes just who pushed him goes through so many emotions in such a short amount of time that if he was an actor, his performance would be Oscar-worthy: recognition, surprise, confusion, realization and last but not least pure anger.

“You!” Mr. Kim screams, and by now the only thing that Taehyung can think of is shit shit shit shit shit shit because they are well and truly fucked. Then Mr. Kim looks to Jimin and it finally seems to click just why the dancer looks familiar, and Taehyung doesn’t think he’s ever seen someone’s face turn such an intense shade of red. “You’re one of the Big Hit rats!”

Jimin, rubbing the wrist that had been previously in Mr. Kim’s strong hold, takes a cautionary step back without daring to take his eyes off the man. He’s already furious, and he doesn’t even know yet why they are in his house. But understanding slowly seems to settle as he looks between them and tries to put the puzzle pieces together, and then it must click, because the CEO looks between them absolutely bewildered and Taehyung – even though he knows that fuck fuck fuck fuck everything is going wrong and this is the end, isn’t it? – can’t help but draw back his shoulders and raise his chin and look him square in the eyes with a fire of defiance blazing in his chest.

He doesn’t see the backhanded slap to his cheek coming before he feels it because it happens so quickly, knuckles and wedding ring bruising his skin and cutting it open, taking him so much by surprise that he trips over his own feet and crashes to the floor, not able to catch his own fall in time and thudding against the hardwood with full force. He winces as his head hits the ground and all he can see is a white flash. Taehyung thinks that he can hear Jimin call out his name, but there’s a loud ringing in his ears so he can’t be entirely sure. It takes a few seconds for him to recover from the fall and he groans in pain.

“So what’s all of this really about?” Mr. Kim taunts, and nudges Taehyung’s head with his foot so that he’s forced to look up at him, but his vision is blurry and all he sees is a towering male over him, and for a few seconds he’s twelve again and at the mercy of his father’s wrath, before his sight clears and he recognizes just who is above him. “You thought a worthless whore like you could trick me? You’re after those damn videos, aren’t you? Been mentioning them over and over again, I should have known all along. So what, you’re still in the band then? They still want a whore like you with them?” Taehyung cringes as Mr. Kim spits on him with a look of disgust.

And then the voice of Eun-Ji carries down the hallway although she’s out of sight, and suddenly Mr. Kim freezes and the expression of mockery on his face changes again to rage.

“You’ve involved my daughter in this,” he growls, only now seemingly realizing what it means that both Taehyung and Jimin are in his home with his daughter all by herself. “You fucking assholes have dared to involve my daughter somehow.”

Taehyung can only watch helplessly as Mr. Kim reaches for one of the many picture frames on the wall depicting the happy family and hurls it at Jimin, who can only duck down in the last second before the glass of the frame shatters on the wall behind him. Eun-Ji’s voice comes closer in panic now, followed by Jungkook’s, as Mr. Kim continues to grab and throw frames at Jimin, often missing narrowly but also hitting him once or twice, and when Jimin darts back into the movie
theatre room and hides behind the door, Taehyung is still lying in front of Mr. Kim helplessly and he’s the next victim of his violent attack. He’s not sure if they are hits or kicks that are raining down on him, but everything hurts and he tries to curl up, and the taste of blood mixed with battery acid fills his mouth.

“Oh my god, dad stop! You’re killing him!” he hears Eun-Ji scream, and he thinks that he hears Jungkook as well saying that he’s calling the police, and he closes his eyes and hopes that this pain ends soon.

The blows stop coming and Taehyung can hear struggling, and then someone’s stepping on him and he winces and there’s a crash, and he howls as an enormous weight comes down on his left leg. When he opens his eyes to try and see what causes the pain and how to get away, his mind all hazy and not really sure what’s going on anymore, he finds four other bodys on the floor all struggling with each other. The movement causes him to feel dizzy and he rests his head on the floor again and closes his eyes, and thinks that fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck it’s over and it has all been for nothing, all their efforts thrown out of the window within the span of a few minutes, and he’s tired.

“There’s so much blood,” he hears Jungkook’s panicked voice and that makes him panic as well because is Jungkook hurt? Jungkook can’t be hurt. But he’s too tired to open his eyes once again to check, and he’s too drowsy to ask if Jungkook’s okay, and he feels himself slipping in and out of consciousness, and although he’s trying to make an effort to stay in the present, the comforting pull of darkness eventually wins over, making the pain subside at last.

Taehyung gains consciousness for a few minutes. He’s in an unfamiliar room. There’s a woman next to him, and a tube stuck in his arm, and his tongue feels too heavy to properly articulate words and his brain too fuzzy to actually realize what’s going on.

“You’re at the hospital, honey.” He blinks at her owlishly as she gently pats his forearm. “If you feel tired, don’t fight it. That’s just the pain medication. Just sleep some more, and you’ll see that you’ll feel way better the next time you wake up.”

He’s not sure if it’s a dream or not as he feels as if wrapped up in cotton, but Taehyung thinks he remembers a few instances of being awake before falling asleep again, each episode just a few minutes longer than the last one and equally confusing.

The first time he awakes fully conscious, actually feels somewhat well-rested, not as confused and doesn’t drift back off to sleep within a relatively short period of time, the early rays of sunlight announcing a new day stream in through the window. Taehyung’s mouth and throat feel dry and he coughs, an action he regrets seconds later as pain blooms in his chest.

There’s a rustling coming from the corner and Taehyung quickly looks over to find Namjoon sprawled out in a plastic chair, seemingly also waking up. He blinks a couple of times sluggishly, but as soon as he realizes that Taehyung is awake, he scrambles out of the chair and over to the bed that Taehyung lies in.

“You’re awake,” he says kind of pointlessly, sounds incredibly relieved, “how are you feeling? Oh wait, I need to call the nurse.”

Taehyung watches him press the call button and tries to remember what happened, but it’s all a bit of a blur and the few memories he can recall make no sense to him. He knows he’s at the hospital. He remembers a nurse telling him that when he thought he might be dreaming. And he knows that the reason he’s in the hospital is Mr. Kim, remembers pain that he can’t feel anymore due to the painkillers that make his brain all woozy, he assumes. And then he jolts, because he remembers
that it wasn’t just him with Mr. Kim, but also Jungkook and Jimin and oh god if he’s in the hospital then-

“Hey, you’re okay,” Namjoon assured him, and Taehyung realizes that he had started to whine without noticing. “Everything’s fine now.”

“J…” He can’t even speak out their names because his mouth feels so dry and his brain so mushy, but Namjoon must have guessed the cause of his distress from just that consonant.

“Jungkook and Jimin are both okay. I’ve sent Jimin home to rest, and Jungkook is currently at the cafeteria.” Namjoon smiles at him reassuringly. “I’m sure he’s going to kick himself for having been gone when you woke up. They’re both a little banged up, but it’s nothing a few days of rest won’t heal.”

A nurse arrives at that moment, and when she sees that Taehyung is awake, she ushers Namjoon out of the room and calls for a doctor, before finally handing him something to drink. Taehyung has to answer all sorts of questions – his name, his age, his hometown, what day it is – and then he has to wriggle all his limbs – legs, arms, fingers, toes – before the doctor seems satisfied that everything is okay with him and finally wants to know if he remembers what happened.

“It’s coming back slowly,” Taehyung says, because the longer he’s awake the more the drowsiness lifts, and he slowly starts to recount the events of last night.

“The police will be with you in a bit for an interview,” are the doctor’s parting words, and then he’s alone in his room and left confused about that statement.

When the door opens again, he expects Namjoon to come in, but instead Jungkook enters the room, and he rushes over to Taehyung’s bed with quick steps and carefully reaches for his hand, holding it as light as a feather.

“Hyung,” he sniffs and his eyes shine with tears, “you’re finally awake. I was so worried about you. When you were lying on the floor – there was so much blood.” He pales at the memory and Taehyung squeezes his hand lightly. There’s a dressing wrapped around his head tightly, because apparently during his fall he not only got a small concussion, but also ripped open skin and bled all over Mr. Kim’s hardwood floor. He can’t recall that though, only remembers the taste of blood in his mouth and the backhand slap that tore into his cheek.

Jungkook must have come out of the situation mostly unharmed from what Taehyung can tell. He can spot a few bruises, but no broken skin. The trauma isn’t in his body, but mostly in his eyes as he looks down at Taehyung and undoubtedly remembers what he looked like beaten up on the floor.

“I’m okay,” Taehyung promises him, and it’s not a lie. The injuries he’s received – mostly bruises next to that small concussion and one slightly cracked rib – are nothing he hasn’t experienced before, and to no extent the worst of what he’s been through in life. He knows they’ll heal within a couple of weeks. “The nurse said the police is going to come. Why?”

“Did Namjoon-hyung not tell you? Mr. Kim was arrested last night. We called the police on him. And PD-nim was so angry when he heard about what happened, that he decided to go forward with the charges against his company right away.”

Taehyung’s eyes go wide, and suddenly the painkillers he’s hooked to on an IV don’t help keep him calm at all anymore. They can’t charge him now. That means the police will search his place. His house will be a crime scene. No. No no no no no. They don’t have the files yet. They’re still in
the safe and if the police finds a safe hidden behind a painting, they’re sure to open it and to look at the USB stick and see the video of Taehyung and then they’ll know; they’ll know and Taehyung has failed, has failed and there’s nothing else he can do now it’s over it’s over it’s over-

He’s heaving, trying to draw in air but he really can’t, and shaking his head violently and it hurts and his chest hurts both from the injuries and from the pain of yet again the realization that the last few weeks have been all for nothing, this time for real. That Taehyung won’t be able to debut in Bangtan Sonyeondan after all the shit he’s gone through, because the police will now find the files and surely they’ll want to question him and maybe put him in jail because prostitution is illegal and other people will get to see the tapes, will get to see how Mr. Kim defiled him and they’ll ask questions and he won’t be able to stay with BTS, he won’t be able to debut with his members, he won’t be able to stay with his friends, with Jin who always took his mind off things and with Yoongi who took such good care of him, with Namjoon who could offer the best advice and with Hoseok who tries in his own ways to be a good friend, and with Jimin who risked everything just to help him and with Jungkook whom he loves so much just like his other five brothers, and a little bit more in a special way.

“Hyung! Hyung, you need to calm down!”

Taehyung starts to cry before he knows it, and he blubbers out that it’s over again and again, and it’s all been for nothing and what is he supposed to do with his life now? Where should he go now? He has nothing and no one except for these six boys, but without the files in their possession he can’t stay with them and he’s really done for now.

“It’s not over,” Jungkook tries to assure him, but those are just empty words trying to calm him down, Taehyung knows that. He shakes his head and Jungkook lets go of his hand. Taehyung wants to hide, tries to hide his face behind his palms to give him at least some dignity in front of the youngest when he’s breaking down, but then Jungkook is grabbing his hand once again and pulling it towards him, and he’s pressing something into his palm and tells him to stop crying, to pay attention, but how can Taehyung stop crying when everything he’s ever wanted has been ripped away from him?

“Hyung,” Jungkook bellows, voice raised, and that gets Taehyung’s attention. Jungkook rarely raises his voice, let alone towards his hyungs, and it startles Taehyung enough to stop crying for a second.

“Look,” Jungkook says, and nods towards Taehyung’s hand, and Taehyung notices that there’s still something pressed against his palm that he can’t see now because he’s clutching it like a lifeline. Taehyung’s heart starts to hammer in his chest as he opens the fist he’s been making, and words get stuck in his throat as he sees a black USB stick nestled into the palm of his sweaty hand.

He wants to ask questions. How? Why? Is that what he thinks it is? And if yes, how is that possible? He’s forgotten all about the hysterical crying he did just seconds ago, as his mind has come to a screeching halt as it tries to process what’s happening. He stares at the USB for long seconds, and then he stares up at Jungkook in disbelief, who smiles down at him with pride.

“I told you, hyung, it’s not over.”

Chapter End Notes

As always, your thoughts and comments are much appreciated!
I wrote a Taegi one-shot last week, so if you want to read that you can click here.

You can come talk to me on twitter @itstheshyauthor or tumblr @theshyauthor if you want to, and follow my impending breakdown over finishing the final chapter! And I'll read you soon one last time for the final update! :) x
Chapter 50

Chapter Notes

For one last time, I hope you’ll enjoy. :) x

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Taehyung,” Jin yelps, “put that down again!”

Taehyung groans, but he knows that as soon as Jin has spotted him with the box in his hands – and it’s not even a heavy box, but he knows that Jin won’t allow him any room for arguments either way – it’s game over. He puts it down again in the back of the van as Jin stares him down with a scowl. “If you’re trying to be productive, carry up the blankets and pillows; one at a time.”

“That’s not fair. I want to be helpful as well,” Taehyung pouts, but Jin levels him with a disapproving glare that allows no more disputing and makes Taehyung begrudgingly sift through all the stuff to find their bedding.

“Yeah, shouldn’t have gotten a cracked rib then,” Jin deadpans, before grabbing the very same box Taehyung had been forced to drop just seconds ago.

It’s moving day, and everyone’s in high spirits. It’s a warm afternoon at the beginning of May, the Seoul air humid and fine dust levels at an average, and Bangtan Sonyeondan is busy lugging around boxes and furniture as they have packed up their lives in the old dorm to move to a new one. It’s only slightly bigger than their last one but considerably closer to the Big Hit building. It’s still six bunk beds and a mattress on the floor that make up a bedroom, but Taehyung doesn’t mind that. He likes when he wakes up in the middle of the night and can hear the other members around him – it gives him comfort.

Technically, the seventh mattress on the floor is unnecessary anyway, because more times than not Jungkook ends up in Taehyung’s bed to cuddle at night, or sometimes in Jimin’s or Hoseok’s, or sometimes Taehyung falls asleep on Yoongi’s mattress as he watches his hyung scribble lyrics on paper and Yoongi doesn’t have the heart to wake him up and send him to his own bed when he has already fallen asleep. Very rarely, Jin and Namjoon will share a mattress as well, one of them sneaking under the blanket of the other when the rest of them are asleep, but they get caught anyway when one of the other members wakes up before them. So really, the mattress on the floor is unnecessary because most of the time someone’s sharing anyway, but it’s there nonetheless and has started to turn into Jungkook’s closet over time, the youngest throwing all his clothes on it mindlessly.

“I’m tired,” Jimin whines once they are all done unloading the cars and sprawled out in their new living room, surrounded by unpacked boxes, and Hoseok agrees with a groan. Some furniture still needs to be assembled as well, but none of them can find the motivation to do that at the moment.

“I’m not,” Taehyung teases, and ducks as a pillow comes flying towards him from Namjoon’s direction. It’s late afternoon, and the company has allowed them the rest of the day off after moving. Jungkook has already dozed off and the others look close to doing the same, but Taehyung can’t blame them. It’s been an insanely busy few days since his release from the hospital, and from here on out after today – their last free day for who knows how long – it will only get busier with
their debut only thirty-three days away. But who’s counting anyway? Certainly not Taehyung.

He leaves their new dorm in the early hours of the evening with a fixed itinerary in mind. His first stop leads him to a store that he’s passed a couple of times already, and with each time what had first been just a dumb idea had formed into something more solid, and now Taehyung is ready to make the purchase. He’s researched online, knows that he has made enough money during his meetings with Mr. Kim to afford it effortlessly and still have a few savings, and he also knows that his members will greatly appreciate the gift. The shop assistant looks a bit perplexed at the teen walking in and purchasing the same product seven times, but she quickly recovers and smiles amicably and promises that the delivery to their new dorm will take place tomorrow afternoon.

After he’s finished at his first stop, Taehyung takes the public transport back to the familiar bad quarters he called his home for so long to pick up Soonshim. He walks down the sidewalk briskly, hands in his jeans pockets and head lowered, but his shoulders aren’t hunched and he doesn’t feel as uncertain walking down these streets as he used to. He knows now that he won’t have to return here again, that the life and the Taehyung that had stood at the corner of the sidewalk and lured in cars with paying customers are dead now, and that all that’s left of them are his memories. Of course he knows that he can’t be certain that life won’t slap him in the face and throw him down another deep well one day that he’ll have to climb out off again, but for now he’s in the open, has escaped, and he’s willing to let that old Taehyung go – at least to some extent, because he knows that the old Taehyung will always be a part of him, that his scars run deep and will never fully fade, but that’s okay. That’s life, and at the moment life is good, and that’s not something that Taehyung had really experienced before, so he wants to focus on the positive and enjoy the moment, and hopes that the Taehyung from the past will forgive him for trying to let go and not be bitter about it all too much.

Soonshim greets him with the usual enthusiasm, all barks and whines and licking his face, and Taehyung feeds him one of the expensive treats he has bought for him from the money he received from Mr. Kim.

“I won’t bring him back too late,” Taehyung promises Eomma. She squeezes his hand between her bony fingers and tells him to spend all the time he wants with his dog. Her eyes linger on the fading bruises on his face and the split lip, but she doesn’t comment. In this part of Seoul, you keep your hardships to yourself, and you don’t go nosing around in other people’s business unless you’re looking for trouble. Taehyung regards her with a worried look as well, because age has gotten to her, her gray hair thinner and her skin weathered, and he makes a mental note to bring back food for her when he returns Soonshim, because she’s gotten skinnier as well.

Taehyung takes Soonshim to Han river, and he finds them a small patch of sand by the water near Mapo bridge, providing a view of the suicide bridge and Seoul’s ever changing skyline. He knows all about that bridge – everyone in Seoul does. As he settles down on the ground and starts scratching Soonshim, who has laid down and decided to rest his head on Taehyung’s legs, behind the ears, he wonders why exactly so many people pick Mapo bridge as the place they want to end their lives. There’s nothing special about it really. Taehyung has crossed it a few times, and it’s as exciting as any other bridge in Seoul connecting both sides of the Han river – which is not at all. And isn’t it ironic that he ponders this, yet still has decided to come here anyway, because it feels an appropriate place to say goodbye to his old life?

He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a small, clear plastic bag, tied together at the top. Its contents are barely recognizable, and an outsider would probably say it holds nothing but electronic waste.

Taehyung knows better, though. He knows that, staring at this bag, he’s looking at all that’s left of
the damning video files. Two USB sticks – the one Mr. Kim sent to BigHit when the blackmailing began, and the one he hid in his safe, uncut and uncensored versions of the secret videos he had taken – smashed to pieces with a hammer he had snuck out of Yoongi’s tool kit when no one else was home. It’s been thirteen days since Taehyung had been laying in that hospital bed crying and Jungkook had pressed that USB stick into his palm. Sometimes Taehyung had to take it out and look at it – not once letting it out of reach after receiving it – just to make sure that none of it was a dream.

He still remembers how bewildered he had been when he had realized just what he was holding in his hand – how sheepish Jungkook had looked when he had pleaded with Taehyung not to be mad at him, claiming that technically he had not broken their pinky promise because all scheming that had taken place to get his hands on it had already happened before Taehyung had asked of him that there’d be no more interfering from his side from this point out.

“I haven’t looked at it, but this is the only USB that was in the safe, so it has to be it,” Jungkook had said after pressing it into Taehyung’s palm.

And Jungkook had been right, the USB was it as Taehyung found out when he finally found the courage to plug it into the computer in the studio four days after Jungkook had given it to him, and was faced with more video files than he had expected. He didn’t click on any of them except one just to verify. The first ten seconds of the video were enough for Taehyung to know that this was exactly what they’d been searching for.

“I don’t understand,” Taehyung had said, all shaken up in his hospital bed, voice rough from crying, “how?”

The answer to that was Kim Eun-Ji. Jungkook, in a bout of teenage idiocy – because how else could you describe his reckless actions that had ultimately saved Taehyung? – had in fact, and to everyone’s astonishment, informed her about her father’s doings. He had gotten a stern lecture for that insane decision from Namjoon a few days after the dust had settled, but it’s not like anyone could actually be mad at him for going through with such a stupid idea, because in the end it had saved Taehyung, even if Jungkook’s reasonings behind why he had told Eun-Ji were incredibly dumb. His entire plan could have backfired so easily, ruining all of Bangtan Sonyeondan in the process. But it hadn’t. They’d lucked out.

“I just thought that she really loves her dad, and if we let her know that he’s going to jail anyway, she might be willing to help us find the videos so that he will only go for fraud and not for secretly filming his meetings with an underage prostitute. Either that, or she would be so disgusted with his actions that she’d help us anyway.”

“You really didn’t think this through all that much, did you?” Yoongi had asked harshly as Jungkook had told them all again a few hours after explaining it to Taehyung when handing over the USB, blushing and ducking his head because he knew that what he had done had been wrong, even if it worked out fine in the end. “You could have ruined everything.”

“Give him a break,” Jin had ordered Yoongi as Jungkook had looked close to tears in the middle of Taehyung’s hospital room. “He only wanted to help, and it didn’t go wrong. It’s because of him we’re lucky enough to have the videos. He knows he’s done something stupid, and there’s still plenty of time in the future to reprimand him, but for now we should be thankful.”

Taehyung shakes his head in disbelief as he looks at the destroyed pieces of the USB stick and thinks back to that day in the hospital. It’s not entirely clear in his head, missing bits and pieces due to fatigue from being hurt and the painkillers and the added stress of the situation, but he remembers how stunned he had been at Jungkook’s confession, almost even more so than the fact
that he had received the USB. It’s been two weeks, and he still can’t believe that Jungkook had done what he’d done, because it had been so incredibly dumb.

It really was a risky move, but in the end he had been right in his assumption: Eun-Ji loved her father enough to want to protect him. She had visited Taehyung the next day, only hours before his release from the hospital, and he had been surprised to see her. Unlike before, the air between them was suddenly awkward, with no one really knowing what to say.

“Thank you,” Taehyung had croaked, the words feeling odd on his tongue with the knowledge that Eun-Ji was aware of the relationship between him and her father. She barely looked him in the eyes, a testament to how good of an actress she was two nights earlier, when she welcomed him into her home without any indication that she knew of anything.

“I wish I could say you’re welcome and feel like a good person,” Eun-Ji had answered, toying with the hem of the green shirt she was wearing, “but truthfully I did it for my dad more than anything. I know that what he did was terrible, but Jungkook said that if you get the videos, the only charges pressed against him would be for misconduct of his company…” Her eyes had gotten watery and she had swallowed harshly, before continuing, “That’s still true, right? You’re not going to report him for- “ She had broken off again, and Taehyung could see how much she was struggling with everything. “I’m sorry. I know it’s wrong, but he’s my dad and I still love him. I can’t help it.”

“I’m sorry,” Taehyung had apologized to her, something he had wanted to do for so long even if he knew that his words meant nothing. Eun-Ji simply shook her head. “But yes, the only thing he will be charged for are the crimes he committed with his company, and the physical assault at your home.” It’s a fact that sits unwell with pretty much everyone that had been in on the plan and working on achieving Taehyung’s freedom, but it can’t be changed. Revealing Mr. Kim’s hideous crimes to the public would jeopardize Taehyung’s innocence, and everything they had worked so hard for would be worthless, crumble to sand that so easily could get swept away by wind, nullifying all their efforts that have come to fruition.

Eun-Ji had nodded, her shoulders relaxing a fraction. Taehyung doesn’t even want to imagine what her life must feel like at the moment – finding out the father you’ve always loved is a monster, and your perfect family is suddenly in shambles. He had heard the night before her visit, when briefly turning on the TV in the hospital room to watch the news, that her mother was going to file for divorce, and she did not even know about the real skeletons hidden in her husband’s closet.

“Can I just ask… how did you get the USB? Did you know the code to the safe?”

The girl had smiled melancholic, the memory she was about to share with Taehyung now probably bitter-sweet to her. “Dad used to hide mine and my sister’s game consoles if we brought back bad grades from school, and one time we spied on him to figure out just where he hid them. I don’t think I was older than ten. The safe was hidden behind a different painting at that time which he later threw out when we gifted him the one that’s up now, which is why I think I didn’t remember it as soon as Jungkook mentioned a safe in the wall. One night, when dad came home drunk and mum wasn’t home, we pestered him enough to tell us the code so we could play our games – which is just our two birthdays combined. Dad told us because he just wanted to go to bed, we got our game consoles and promptly forgot about the existence of the safe upon realizing that the next time he hid them somewhere different. When Jungkook told me that the safe supposedly was behind the painting we did for his birthday, I immediately remembered again. Honestly it was pure luck.”

Pure luck. It seemed to be on Taehyung’s side now as he had listened to that story in disbelieve.

“And you and Jimin?” he had asked cautiously, and immediately regretted it as Eun-Ji hunched in
on herself. “Please don’t be mad at him. He really likes you…”

“I really like him too,” Eun-Ji had conceded, “but you know as well as I do that this wouldn’t work, even if the past forty-eight hours had never happened. We’re better off as friends for now.” For the first time, she had met Taehyung’s eyes then. “It is what it is, I suppose.”

It is what it is, Taehyung thinks to himself as he looks at the clear plastic bag and unties it. Soonshim huffs and Taehyung is quick to resume scratching the dog behind the ears.

How long had he waited for this moment? And now, that it’s finally here, it feels surreal. Taehyung is still scared that it’s a dream, that one night he will wake up in his bed, clothes and sheets soaked with sweat, and find that Mr. Kim’s presence is still looming over his head like a damocles sword. He has woken up in cold sweat some nights since his release from the hospital, dreaming of flying fists and bruising hands, but one of his members – admittedly mostly Jungkook, it’s no joke that he had kind of laid claim on Taehyung’s mattress since he had returned from the hospital, although Jin had tried to shoo him away multiple times at first, fearing that Jungkook could accidentally hurt Taehyung’s ribs at night when cuddling closer – is always close to help him calm down, to tell him that it’s okay and that the past two weeks were no dream. That Mr. Kim is in custody, that he can hurt Taehyung no more, that Taehyung is okay.

Taehyung knows that’s not entirely the truth. He’s not one-hundred percent okay, and he knows that his members know that too. He’s not going to be fully okay for a long time, if ever, but the way he is right now is good as well. Content, not constantly scared. Although that’s a lie. He is scared, but not as much of the demons from his past. He’s still scared of that fickle weird thing between him and Jungkook, the acknowledgement that they have feelings for each other but aren’t really acting on it, because Taehyung doesn’t know how and by now he suspects that Jungkook doesn’t really know either. Then there’s the debut, set for June 13, which he and the rest of the members are all equally terrified of, and before that of course the big reveal of Taehyung, which is currently planned to take place on June 1. Taehyung is absolutely petrified of that, because Jungkook and his hyungs are already familiar to the few fans they have amassed, but for all they know he’s a stranger suddenly butting into the group, a last-minute addition from an outsider’s eye, and what if they hate him?

He’s been repeatedly called an idiot or other equally as flattering names from everyone when voicing his concerns in the past few days to his absolute frustration, until Namjoon had taken him aside and asked if he’s really that worried. When Taehyung had nodded timidly, Namjoon had assured him that he would be fine, that there’s no need to be so scared, because the fans are going to fall in love with his boxy smile and with his deep voice and his unique character, and Taehyung had been genuinely taken aback by Namjoon’s heartfelt compliments that eased his mind a bit.

So Kim Taehyung, under the alias of V, will officially be announced as final member – their secret weapon, as they have started to call him after his talk with Namjoon, and Taehyung has his suspicion that the leader has had a word with his other hyungs to take his worries more serious – of Bangtan Sonyeondan at the first day of the next month. After his release from the hospital, Taehyung had been offered to change his stage name by Bang PD, but to everyone’s surprise, Taehyung had declined the offer.

“Why?” Yoongi had asked him incredulously, just like the others not being able to wrap his mind around the fact that Taehyung would want to stick with the name that he had used during his darkest times, and that had been forced upon him by his tormenter once again in his new life.

Taehyung had turned to him and his other friends, flashed them a smile and a V-sign and confidently said that, “Because V stands for victory.”
Victory. For once in his life, Taehyung has come out victorious on top. He stops scratching Soonshim behind the ears again, much to the dog’s chagrin, and shakes the broken-up pieces of the USB sticks out of the plastic bag and into the palm of his hand.

This is it. This is going to be freedom. As soon as he throws the pieces into Han river, his past will get washed away by the current, unable to ever be recovered again. All that’s going to be left behind are memories.

Taehyung looks at Mapo bridge once again. Maybe it’s over-dramatic and somewhat wrong to come to the place where so many people choose to end their lives, but in one way or another, this is also the end of Taehyung’s old life, isn’t it? It feels oddly fitting.

He takes a deep breath as he clutches the pieces in his hand and thinks back to everything that has happened. How far he’s come. How far he’ll still have to go. A brand new life, right in front of him. And before he can start to overthink everything, Taehyung throws the pieces of the USB stick into the river with as much force as he can muster up, watches them break the surface of the water and-

Oddly, nothing feels different. Taehyung sits and waits, but life around him continues as it had before. Soonshim’s head still rests on his thigh, Han river continues flowing and now Taehyung isn’t so sure anymore what exactly he had expected to happen, but he had thought that by throwing the USB stick into the river, something would feel profoundly different. That’s not the case though. Everything is exactly the same, and Taehyung might as well have thrown away the broken USB pieces in the nearest trash can.

Maybe he’s feeling a bit disappointed as he starts scratching Soonshim again and looks over the river. This was supposed to be a drastic event in his life, so he wasn’t expecting it to be so underwhelming.

He jumps as his phone vibrates, announcing a new text message, and checks it. It’s Namjoon, asking where he is and at what time he’ll return.

And that’s when Taehyung realizes that the change he’s been expecting to happen drastically and all of a sudden has happened slowly long ago already. There’s no miraculous new life now that all files of the videos have been discarded for good, because that new life had started a year ago, when six hopeful trainees had stumbled into his life – all sharing one dream – and taught him that it’s okay to rely on others at times, that there are people that can be trusted in this world, that will have his back and love him unconditionally, no matter what happened in his past. He just didn’t know it at that time. There’s no need for something new, because what Taehyung has now is more precious than anything he could ever be able to find again.

He texts Namjoon back that he’s out with Soonshim, but that he won’t return too late, knowing that the next day they’ll have more gruelling hours of practice.

“How about we play for a bit?” Taehyung asks Soonshim, and the dog perks up at the word ‘play’, tail thumping against the ground in excitement as he watches Taehyung get up off the ground and dust off his jeans. Taehyung doesn’t look back at Mapo bridge as he grabs Soonshim’s leash and leads the dog away to go find a suitable stick for throwing.

“Are you not going to shower?” Namjoon calls after Yoongi as the rapper makes his way from the entrance door straight to the bedroom the next night, as some of the other members are still busy kicking off their shoes because every muscle hurts and their feet are swollen. Exhaustion weighs
heavy on each bone and it makes it hard to move, or keep their eyelids open for that matter. Taehyung had fallen asleep on the short drive from the Big Hit office to their new dorm, only to be woken by Jungkook shaking his shoulder gently but resolutely.

“I have no lovey-dovey partner to cuddle that would mind the smell of sweat,” Yoongi remarks. He’s closing the door to the bedroom a bit too loudly, effectively cutting off Hoseok screaming that he could be his cuddle partner and causing Taehyung to jump slightly. He reopens the door to the bedroom not half a minute later when the rest of the members have dispersed over the dorm already – Jin having wielded his power of being the eldest hyung to call first dibs on the shower – and comes out with a frown. Jimin, the only one still left in the hallway, looks up at him from where he’s texting on his phone and asks what’s wrong.

“This might sound insane but… our mattresses feel different.”

Jimin barks out a laugh, but at the serious look on his hyung’s face he stops. “What do you mean?”

“I mean that the mattress on my bed is definitely not the mattress I fell asleep on last night.”

“That’s impossible,” Jimin challenges, and Yoongi tells him with a grand gesture to the room to go check for himself.

Taehyung, who has overheard their conversation from his current position in the living room, bites his bottom lip to hide a smile as he can hear Jimin shouting “What the fuck” through the entire dorm, followed right by “Namjoonie-hyung!”

So yes, Taehyung may or may not have spent the money he had earned through his meetings with Mr. Kim on decent mattresses for his members and himself. Namjoon had said to buy something that makes him happy, but Taehyung had always thought that spending this money he had earned in such ways on something that’s supposed to bring him joy felt wrong – so instead he had decided to gift his members something instead. At first he had thought of jewelry or something along the lines, but he isn’t a big spender and spending money on something so useless had felt wrong. Then he had considered taking them out for a big dinner, but they are on a really strict diet now with debut only being a bit over a month away that they all strictly adhere to, so that didn’t work out either. And then he had realized that if there’s one thing they will definitely need in the following weeks – months, or if they’re lucky enough to find a bit of success even years – it’s decent sleep. As Namjoon texts their manager – who Taehyung had approached in the morning to beg to be at their dorm in the afternoon to oversee the arrival of the mattresses while they were at practice – Taehyung thinks that maybe it was a dumb idea. He’s never really given anyone a present before, so he’s not really well-versed in it, and what if his members find it ridiculous? What if they make fun of him for it?

“Uh, Tae, why does our manager say to ask you about this?” Namjoon questions as he frowns at his phone, and all the other members – even Jin, who’s done with his shower and busy drying his wet hair with a towel – crowd around him with question marks dancing in their eyes, and Taehyung avoids their inquisitive stares as he stutters out an explanation.

“You really bought us new mattresses?” Jimin asks in awe.

“I know it’s stupid. I can give them back to the store tomorrow,” Taehyung falters as he thinks that they might scold him for spending his money so recklessly. How could he have thought that this was a good idea? He should have gone with matching jewelry as presents instead, that would probably have been so much more meaningful to them.

His doubts are cut off as Jimin hugs him and picks him up, spinning him around. “That’s
incredible. You’re the best!”

“I can’t believe you’d spend your money on us,” Jin says in disbelief, as Hoseok states that this is probably the most thoughtful gift he’s ever received.

Taehyung’s relieved.

Later that night, when everyone else is asleep on their new mattresses – which his friends repeatedly thanked him for, told him it was really not necessary to spend his money on them, assured him that this was the most thoughtful and well-needed present he could have possibly gotten them – Jungkook and Taehyung are curled up on the couch and watching anime, both incredibly tired but too content in each other’s presence to end the moment.

“I got you another present,” Taehyung murmurs as a scantily-clad girl slays a dragon. Taehyung doesn’t even know what anime they’re watching, too drained to properly pay attention. He feels the younger shift next to him, his head that had previously been resting on Taehyung’s shoulder shooting up, and doe eyes staring at him with sparkling interest. “It’s nothing big though, so don’t get too excited.”

Taehyung gets up off the couch and makes his way to the hallway, where his duffel bag sits. Jungkook trails behind him, the anime and his tiredness seemingly forgotten, and he peers over Taehyung’s shoulder to sneek a glance at whatever Taehyung pulls out of his bag.

“I mean it,” Taehyung whispers, as the others are sleeping in the next room and he doesn’t want to risk waking them up, “it’s nothing special.”

Then he hands Jungkook a small white box that the younger tears into instantly, his mouth forming into an ‘o’ as he holds the yellow mug in his hands that has printed on it in black ink, and a black heart beneath it. Taehyung can’t meet Jungkook’s eyes as he’s waiting for the teen’s reaction, wishing that the ground would open up and swallow him whole. This is how all the school girls in animes must feel like after having presented their crush with self-made chocolate and waiting for a response. It’s embarrassing.

“Fighting,” Jungkook says quietly, quoting the word on the mug, and Taehyung both regrets and is thankful for not having gone with the original words he had considered printing on it. He watches Jungkook trace the heart below the word with the tip of his finger, much like Taehyung had done repeatedly when Jungkook had first drawn a heart on his mug.

“You’ve been writing encouraging quotes on my mug, so I thought that I should step up and be a good hyung and give you some encouragement as well.” Taehyung gestures to the mug, full of insecurity, yet again thinking that maybe this was a terrible idea, “And you mentioned not too long ago that yellow was your favourite colour, so that’s why I picked that one.”

“It’s perfect, hyung. Really. Thank you!” Jungkook assures him, and in return gifts him with one of his big smiles, nose wrinkling and eyes forming to crescents as he cradles the mug to his chest as if it is something of actual worth, something precious.

The next morning, they both drink tea out of their respective mugs for breakfast. When Yoongi catches on to Jungkook’s mug, he raises an eyebrow at them. “Couple mugs, really?” There’s a mock-disgusted look on his face as he shuffles out of the kitchen with a cup of black coffee, and loudly screams “Jin-hyung, you better step up your romantic game. As of now, you and Joon-ah are no longer the cutest couple in this band.”

Both Taehyung and Jungkook hide their blushes and shy smiles behind their respective mugs.
The following days are filled with excitement, photoshoots, and their first music video shoot for “No More Dream”. They’re trying to be as professional as they can, really they’re trying hard, but the energy and exhaustion from lack of sleep is so high that they can’t help but goof around and act like complete idiots at times. At one point, during a short break in a photoshoot, Gangnam Style comes on in the background and Jimin and Jungkook start doing the choreography, much to the chagrin of their make-up team that’s telling them not to work up a sweat.

“I can’t stand that song anymore,” Hoseok groans.

“It won the daesang for song of the year at MAMA, show some respect to a legend,” Jin scolds him playfully, as Namjoon scolds Jimin, Jungkook and Taehyung – who had decided to join in on the fun – less playfully to get their act together.

“Hyung, do you think we’ll ever win a daesang?” Jungkook asks, while one of the make-up noonas is dabbing at his forehead frantically.

Yoongi snorts. “Us? The only way you’ll ever win a daesang is if you decide to escape Big Hit now and join one of the big three companies. Then you might actually have a chance.”

Jungkook looks crestfallen at that, and Taehyung wants to step in, remembering how Jungkook had told him at the IU concert that having a dream is important, and not wanting Yoongi to step all over Jungkook’s. He’s surprised though that, before he can speak up, Jungkook sputters: “And leave Bangtan behind? I would never.”

“You’re going to post it, and then you’re going to give me your phone and we’re going to head for vocal lessons,” Jin orders. “And you better hurry up, or we’re going to be late. I really don’t want to get into any trouble today.”

Taehyung swallows and looks up at him wide-eyed, phone clutched in his hands protectively. “Give it to you afterwards?”

“Yes, because otherwise you’re tempted to check it every few minutes and then that is going to get us into trouble.”

“I would never,” Taehyung mutters, but both he and Jin know that he’s right. “Do you think they’ll like me?”

Jin’s face softens, and he ruffles Taehyung’s hair, causing the younger singer to duck away in annoyance. “They’ll love you. Now hurry, I wasn’t kidding when I said we’re going to be late otherwise.”

Taehyung nods. Takes a deep breath. And then he hits ‘send’ on his first tweet, heart thrumming against his ribcage hard and mouth dry from anxiety. He hands over the phone and Jin pats him on the shoulder encouragingly, before they make their way to the vocal lessons.

When he finally gets to check twitter again, he finds that there aren’t that many responses – they are close to gaining ten-thousand followers, but not many of them actually interact with the band – but the ones he received are kind-hearted and encouraging. He asks Namjoon for help to translate the English responses, and smiles when he finds that those are equally as welcoming.

“I told you that there’s nothing to worry about,” Jin remarks. “You’re cute and handsome. Girls and boys are going to swoon over you in the future with your bright smile. They’re probably going
“to worship that mole on your nose.”

Taehyung snorts, and Jungkook – who had been sitting next to them quietly and reading a manga – looks up to glare at Jin.

“It is a cute mole,” he says with a frown, and Namjoon swats at his arm for glaring at his hyung and reprimands him jokingly for looking so jealous of the thought that other people will swoon over Taehyung now.

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Some days, Taehyung is fine. He makes it through the day without a hitch like any other normal teenager. On other days – whether triggered by a nightmare, a memory or by nothing at all – that’s not the case.

Today is one of the other days. Anxiety is thumping in Taehyung’s chest and making it hard to swallow, and he’s not sure why. It’s been a normal morning, he hadn’t had any nightmares, breakfast was a smooth affair and he had even joked around with Hoseok the first half of the car ride to Big Hit. But then it got quiet in the van, and he had looked out of the window, and out of seemingly nowhere that all too familiar feeling of anxiety had taken control over his body, making him exhale sharply. Hoseok, who had noticed, had asked if everything’s okay, and Taehyung had brushed him off by saying that it’s all good.

But nothing is good. He’s trying not to cringe whenever their choreographer’s judging eyes focus on him, and he barely suppresses a flinch when he’s called out on his mistakes, that only seem to pile on top of each other because he’s so anxious in the first place that he can’t concentrate.

During a short break, he scurries off into a corner for a few seconds of peace and quiet, facing away from the others to do some of the breathing exercises that Yoongi had taught him. He’s too absorbed in trying to stay calm to hear the footsteps approaching, and when a pair of arms wraps around him from behind he lets out an undignified squeak as he instinctively tries to free himself from the person caging him in.

“Hey,” Jimin says, immediately letting go as he recognizes Taehyung’s distress. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you. I was asking why you’re brooding in the corner all by yourself… are you okay?”

Taehyung hides his trembling hands behind his back and shakes his head slightly, and Jimin looks at him in concern.

“Did something happen?”

Again, Taehyung shakes his head, and then he clears his throat and rasps out “Just a bad day.”

The dancer nods in understanding. “Do you want some space?”

“Please,” Taehyung answers, and then Jimin leaves him, but not before making him promise to talk to one of them if it gets too much.

Taehyung shrinks into himself as he realizes that everyone has been watching their interaction, lowering his head in shame. He’s not particularly proud of his bad days, of flinching away from his members at times, of having to admit that he’s not entirely okay in front of them and that he needs some time and space.

It’s a touch and go to figure out what exactly he needs on bad days, and most of the time he doesn’t even know himself. Sometimes when he gets like this, he wants to be left alone. Other times, he
wishes that someone would just hold him close and tell him that everything’s going to be okay. As much as his friends are trying to figure out how to help him when he’s not feeling well, he’s trying to figure it out along with them.

Taehyung’s anxiety doesn’t subside as time goes on, and struggling through dance practice is a nightmare. Their choreographer must have picked up on it as well though, because he cuts him more slack now than he did before their break, and it makes it easier for Taehyung’s mind not to go into panicked overdrive whenever he has made the slightest mistake.

When they’re finished after grueling hours of hard work and packing up to return to the dorm, Yoongi asks Taehyung if he wants to join him in the studio while he’s working on some music. Taehyung is quick to agree.

He hasn’t set foot into the studio often since he’s moved out of it and back into the dorm again, but as soon as he walks in, a wave of calmness washes over him, and he curls up on the couch as Yoongi turns on the computer. Nothing bad ever happened in the studio. It’s become somewhat of a safe haven.

“Hyung,” Taehyung asks as they both listen to the beeping noises the computer makes when turning on. It’s old and takes forever, and the viruses on it certainly aren’t helping, but Big Hit simply doesn’t have the money to provide them with a new one at the moment – maybe Taehyung should have bought a new computer instead of the mattresses? But then again, his members claim that they haven’t felt as well rested in a while as they do lately, so maybe the mattresses had really been the right choice. “What do you do to make the anxiety go away?”

“I wish I could give you some actual tip,” Yoongi sighs, “but the truth is that the only thing you can do is to wait it out until it goes away again.”

Taehyung frowns. “I did have anxiety attacks in the past, but I feel like they’ve become a lot more frequent over the past couple of months.”

“Maybe that’s because when you weren’t with Big Hit yet, you were too busy focusing on your survival? And now that you’re safe and have far less worries, your mind starts to deal with everything that happened. Honestly I have no idea, that’s just a guess.”

“Yeah,” Taehyung mutters, frustrated by the situation, “maybe.”

“But Taehyung-ah,” Yoongi says, after typing in the password to the computer, “don’t beat yourself up about it too much. Anxiety comes and it goes. Just tell us when you’re having bad days, and we’ll help you as much as we can, okay?”

“Okay hyung,” Taehyung answers, and as an afterthought, “thank you.”

He closes his eyes as he listens to Yoongi start working on the computer, clicking around on the mouse and hammering into the keyboard, and tries to swallow the lump in his throat and force his erratic heart to slow down, telling himself over and over again that there’s absolutely no need to feel anxious, that there’s no threat to stress over. Eventually he falls asleep on the couch from pure exhaustion from the long hours of practicing, as Yoongi quietly curses under his breath at the program he’s working on that seems to have frozen on screen.

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They hit ten thousand followers on Twitter on June 10th, and to celebrate their upcoming debut in three days, Bang PD invites them and their closest team to his house in a better part of Seoul. It’s nice, even comes with a small garden, but it definitely doesn’t fit the twenty people it’s currently
“Let’s forget about your diet for today,” PD-nim had said in his speech, glass raised for a toast, “To Bangtan Sonyeondan’s debut. You’ve already faced many struggles in the past, and there are many more yet to come, but I’m very confident that when the seven of you work together, there’s nothing that can’t be achieved. To a successful career.”

Everyone eats and laughs and shares stories, and when they’re too full for more food, the staff moves on to soju. Taehyung excuses himself when they start to become a bit rowdy, and says that he’s going to get some fresh air. He walks into the small garden, walled in so that no passer-bys can see inside and facing away from the living room, where the small party has migrated too. He steps out of the back door that leads outside from the kitchen, and when he closes the door behind him, he drowns out the loud voices from inside and takes a deep breath.

“Do you also need a bit of quiet?”

Taehyung startles and yelps in surprise, and when his eyes have adjusted to the dark garden he spots Jungkook lying on his back on the grass, looking up at the sky.

“I didn’t know you were out here.”

“I needed some fresh air,” Jungkook answers. “Wanted to clear my head.”

“Mind if I join you?” Taehyung asks, and Jungkook simply pats the spot next to him in reply.

Taehyung lowers himself with a groan, his muscles sore, and when he’s also lying on his back and looking up, he starts rubbing his belly. “I shouldn’t have eaten so much. I honestly feel like I could burst any second.”

Jungkook hums, but he doesn’t really indulge in Taehyung’s simple conversation starter. Instead, he keeps quiet and Taehyung’s head lolls to the side so he can look at him, wondering what goes on in that mind of his.

“I wish we could see the stars from here, hyung,” Jungkook says after a few moments of silence. “You can still see the moon.”

“But the moon’s a satellite, not a star,” the younger pouts.

“And why’s a satellite not enough for you?” Taehyung asks teasingly.

Jungkook starts plucking at the grass, ripping out blades and making tiny knots into them before discarding them for a fresh one.

“We’re going to be really busy soon…” Taehyung has no fucking clue where Jungkook could possibly be going with this, but he waits nonetheless for the younger member to find his words while he continues his nervous fidgeting. “Spend all days backstage at music shows, surrounded by hundreds of people, and even if we get a moment we’ll probably just use that to catch up on sleep. I’m not dumb. I know how hard the idol life will be. PD-nim and the others have thoroughly prepared us for the physical and emotional strength we’re going to need for the upcoming time. It’s just… we’re not going to get any moments like this anymore any time soon.”

“Moments like this?” Taehyung breathes, certainly confused. The blade of grass currently between Jungkook’s fingers rips, and he throws it on the ground.
“You know… where it’s just the two of us.” It’s too dark to see, but Taehyung doesn’t need any light to know that Jungkook’s blushing. He can hear the embarrassment clear as day in his voice when he talks.

Taehyung laughs. “And what exactly would the stars have added to this moment?”

Jungkook stutters, before he turns his head away and mumbles, almost quiet enough for Taehyung not to hear: “The romantic stuff.”

Taehyung can feel his own cheeks heat up, and he swallows. The romantic stuff. They’d never really addressed it further after Taehyung had been released from the hospital. There’s cute gestures here and there, the fact that Jungkook has basically claimed Taehyung’s mattress as his own at this point, and the constant stream of teasing from their hyungs, but they’d never gotten around to discussing their relationship status, because the sudden busyness of an imminent debut had made them too exhausted to find the energy to talk about it.

And besides, Taehyung is still scared. He knows what Jungkook has said. There’s no rush. He loves Jungkook, and Jungkook loves him, but they don’t have to fall head first into it now. His therapist had called Jungkook incredibly understanding for his age when Taehyung had opened up to her about him. When Taehyung had asked her for advice, the only thing she had said was for Taehyung to choose to do whatever he is most comfortable with, which was not the type of advice he had been hoping for, because in the end it forced him to be the one to make decisions again.

But with Jungkook lying next to him like this, shy and blushing and admitting that he’s going to miss spending time with Taehyung as just the two of them, how can he possibly be scared of the younger teen?

Taehyung reaches out and grabs for one of Jungkook’s hands, intertwining their fingers together and resting them on Jungkook’s tummy. The other is slowly moving his head back around to look at Taehyung, eyes sparkling in the dark and lips pressed into a thin line – insecure.

“Why the stars though, Jungkook? Isn’t saying that I love you to the moon and back romantic enough for you?”

Jungkook’s jaw snaps open, lips forming into an ‘o’ as his eyes widen, and Taehyung has to look away, because now he can’t look at the younger anymore out of embarrassment. His eyes track the sky above them, clear of clouds but too lit up by the artificial lights of Seoul at night to see any stars. His eyebrows knit together in confusion. “Where is the moon, by the way?”

“Over there,” Jungkook answers quietly, pointing up with the hand that’s not currently gripping tight onto Taehyung’s.

When Taehyung spots it, he sighs. It’s barely visible, fresh out of a new moon, a perfect but hard to catch sickle moon. “So maybe it would have been more romantic if the moon was actually fuller, but I still mean it.”

Jungkook’s head snaps back again to stare at Taehyung. “You mean it?”

“I- uhm… you know that already,” Taehyung stammers, “why the sudden surprise?”

“Because you never actually said it.”

“Oh,” Taehyung exclaims, licks his lips and swallows as he looks right back at Jungkook. “Yeah… I do.”
Jungkook breaks out in a smile, one of the biggest Taehyung has ever seen, and looks back up at the moon. Taehyung, on the other hand, studies his side profile. He’s beautiful, radiant even in the dark. Even after everything that has happened, he still has that aura of innocence about him that Taehyung envies him for, but that at the same time he admires about him the most. He wishes he could get a piece of it from Jungkook for himself. Maybe it’s not too late for that. Maybe, by being with Jungkook, he can receive some of it back. Jungkook is so clean while Taehyung is tainted, and all this time he’s been so worried that he’ll stain Jungkook too if he comes too close, but what if it’s the other way around? What if, by being with Jungkook, instead of ruining the younger like he had been so worried about all this time, Jungkook will instead help him put his pieces back together, wash out the dirty blotches that have been etched into his soul through countless bruises on his skin?

He wonders how it would feel like to be close to Jungkook romantically. He’s only known love from movies that he didn’t believe in before, but sometimes he sees Jin and Namjoon sneak short pecks on the lips when they think no one is watching, or cuddle up and whisper to each other, snicker together and press kisses into each other’s necks in the living room when everyone else is asleep and Taehyung only accidentally sees them because he needs to pee, but keeps quiet to not interrupt them. Taehyung wonders what that would feel like, sharing such precious and intimate moments with Jungkook. Wonders how it would be like to kiss Jungkook, to feel his lips against his own. Thinks that he would really like to find out.

“Jungkook-ah,” Taehyung whispers, and the younger indicates that he’s heard him by humming. “Can I kiss you?”

Once again those doe eyes are directed at him and almost double in size, as Taehyung realizes what he had just said. He didn’t mean to vocalize his thoughts, he thinks, but on the other hand he very much meant what he said.

Jungkook’s hand is clutching his own so hard now that his knuckles must be white, and Taehyung watches his Adam’s apple bob as he swallows. And then, involuntarily, his eyes are drawn to Jungkook’s lips and he can’t take them off anymore, watches almost in a trance as Jungkook licks them subconsciously, almost misses them shaping into a “yes” if Jungkook’s voice that is trembling slightly – from what, Taehyung doesn’t know, but maybe it’s nerves, or excitement, or anticipation – hadn’t brought him back to reality.

Yes. Jungkook has said yes, and Taehyung doesn’t really know what to do now.

“Yes,” he breathes, and then they just lie there and observe each other, neither moving, neither entirely sure of what follows next.

Taehyung decides that maybe lying on his back isn’t the best way to do this, so he rolls on his side and Jungkook follows his lead to have them facing each other. Their hands, still clasped together, rest between them on the grass now, and Jungkook once again wets his lips subconsciously. He’s waiting, watching Taehyung in anticipation, and Taehyung absolutely doesn’t know what to do.

He’s nervous, so so nervous. His heart is beating rapidly fast and his mouth feels as dry as the desert, and it’s a whole new type of nervousness that he’s entirely unfamiliar with. His eyes keep focusing on Jungkook’s lips, no matter how hard he tries to make eye-contact, being drawn to them repeatedly as if they are magnets.

Eventually Taehyung gathers his courage. Jungkook has said yes. Jungkook wants him to kiss him. It’s okay. He can do this. He leans forward slowly, eyes darting frantically between Jungkook’s eyes and lips, and only centimeters away he freezes, loses all his bravery at once as soon as he feels Jungkook’s breath fan out against his lips and-
Suddenly there are lips against his own. Jungkook must have closed the gap. They feel slightly chapped and hesitant, a gentle touch that grows bolder as seconds pass and Taehyung doesn’t pull back, and then they press a bit harder, a bit more persistent, and all the tension drains from Taehyung’s body as he allows himself to fall against them, to reciprocate, and sighs without meaning to, the only thing he’s really aware of being the warm lips moving against his own, still slow and careful but also determined.

It ends way too soon, and when Jungkook pulls back first, Taehyung’s entire world seems to be spinning. It’s as if he’s in a bubble, his thoughts and feelings amplified but his brain too hazy to actually pay attention to them.

“Oh,” Taehyung mouths, because the syllable is stuck in his throat as he’s too busy trying to comprehend what just happened. They still hold hands, and Taehyung is sure that Jungkook can feel the light shaking of his fingers. Jungkook giggles of all things, turns his face to the ground to hide his flushed cheeks in the grass before he composes himself.

“Are you okay?” he asks. Taehyung is relieved that if his fingers are trembling, Jungkook’s palm is sweaty, giving away that he too is nervous about what just happened.

“Ye-” Taehyung croaks, breaks off to clear his throat, and tries once again. “Yeah. It felt really nice.”

Jungkook grins at him when he hears that and pokes Taehyung’s stomach with a finger as he snickers: “You sound like you just had your first kiss.”

“Because I did,” Taehyung answers quietly, and the teasing grin drops off Jungkook’s features, being replaced by disbelief.

“What?”

“I just had my first kiss.” He whispers it as if it’s a secret, and really it is. Maybe his best-kept one at this point, the one thing that absolutely no one has known about him up until now, simply because no one had ever asked and it’s not something you go around openly disclosing, and Taehyung can see the cogs turning in Jungkook’s brain, trying to figure out how his hyung, someone who had sold his body, could possibly never have kissed someone before. “I’ve implemented a no kissing rule from the very beginning. Of course, sometimes clients had tried, but then I’d just…”

Taehyung trails off, and presses his lips together, thinking that actions say more than words. Jungkook keeps looking on in disbelief.

“That means… you’re saying that I…”

“Yes Kook-ah,” Taehyung laughs, endeared by how flabbergasted Jungkook seems, “you were my first kiss. And want to know something else? I liked it. A lot.”

The other smiles again at that, genuine happiness radiating off of him, and he squeezes Taehyung’s hand once again.

“Want to do it again?” he offers, and Taehyung knows that he’s mostly joking, and he revels in Jungkook’s shocked expression when, for the second time that night, he leans closer, this time going all the way, and it must be answer enough for Jungkook, who melts into the kiss.
Jungkook is standing next to him and bouncing on his feet. He’s biting his lips, but immediately stops when one of the make-up noonas tells him off for it.

Somewhere in the distance he can hear Hoseok go over the choreography with Jin again. Jimin is singing to himself and Namjoon talking to the producers. Yoongi enters the waiting room and exclaves that he’s back. He’s been to the toilet for fifteen minutes, and Taehyung guesses that he went there to calm himself down in peace.

Suddenly the bustling intensifies. Final touch-ups on their hair and make-up are being done, their clothes are being picked at and then they are ushered down the hallway, surrounded by too many people, jostling and bumping shoulders in the confined space.

Taehyung’s breathing picks up and Jungkook, who’s glued to his side, must have noticed it as he cocks his head and pulls a face that forces Taehyung to grin.

Namjoon calls the members together and they huddle into a circle. Taehyung can see the fear in his eyes, but also the pride. The excitement. Namjoon’s anxiety has turned into adrenaline. This is the moment he’s been waiting for for years. This is the moment they have all been waiting for so long. And it has finally arrived.

“Guys.” Namjoon’s voice wobbles. He’s making eye-contact with all of them, one after the other, and the serious look dominating his face gives way to a genuine smile. Taehyung doesn’t think he’s ever seen Namjoon radiate with pure happiness before up until now. The feeling is contagious, and his heart feels like it’s doing a summersault in his chest. “We’ve come a long way. And I’m proud of each and every one of you. But at a moment like this, it’s important to remember that we still have a long way to go too. It’s not going to get any easier from here on out, but we’re together and we’re bulletproof, so we will stand the trials and fight our way to the top. But for now, let’s indulge in the moment and appreciate how far we’ve come. Give one-hundred and ten percent out there on stage, but don’t forget to have fun as well. This is a moment we’ll never forget.”

Namjoon extends his arm into the middle of the circle, and the others follow.

“Are you ready?” Namjoon asks, and they answer with a chorus of ‘yes’.

Namjoon takes a deep breath, and then as loud as he can, he screams “Bangtan! Bangtan!”

Chills are rising on Taehyung’s skin as the other six boys belt out “Bang! Bangtan!” at once, as if they are one person, one unity.

People crowd them again and usher them up the stage. Namjoon climbs the stairs first, and as soon as he’s up there Taehyung can hear the audience start to cheer. And suddenly his nerves are back and he falters in his steps. Jungkook, still by his side, stops with him as well and turns to look at him. His eyes are shining brighter than ever before. He’s the most beautiful thing Taehyung has ever seen.

“Hyung,” Jungkook says and laces their fingers together, “don’t worry, we’re going to be fine.”

His calm exterior is betrayed by his sweaty hands, but Taehyung doesn’t comment on it. Jungkook flashes him a smile, the one that Taehyung likes best, where his nose scrunches up and his eyes crinkle, and squeezes Taehyung’s hand tightly. He pulls him towards the stage, and with each step Taehyung’s heart and body feels lighter. He’s okay. He’s surrounded by the six most important
people in his life, and he knows that they have his back. He doesn’t know what the future will bring, but for now it doesn’t matter. They’re debuting. After all the tears, the fears and the pain they have been through over the last one and a half years, their time has finally come. They’re debuting and he has Jungkook and the others by his side, and really that is all that counts.

There’s nothing to be scared of anymore, because no matter how dark the days in the future may be, he has six friends to rely on to make them brighter.

THE END

Chapter End Notes

There's a lot I want to say, but I won't make this too long. If you've made it until here, thank you for reading. For the kudos you left, the comments, I've been writing this story for over two years, and as I've put Tae through hell and back, I was in the passenger seat right next to him in real life. But no matter how much everything sucked, there was always that nagging voice at the back of my mind reminding me that I need to update BD soon, and that familiarity in the whirlwind of life was a comfort. I know that some of you have been with this story since 2017, and I can't believe you stuck around for so long. Thank you for your patience. I know some of you only read this story in a night, and in that case sorry for making you lose sleep. There's many more stories I want to write in life, but this one and its characters will always have a special place in my heart.

Thank you to @thruspring for listening to me rant about this fic more often than not, and for encouraging me through the anxiety of writing the final chapter and the fear of it being disappointing.

I won't be writing a sequel, or a prequel, or any other installments to this story, because for me it is one entity, and it's finished being told. We all know the story of BTS after June 13. If you want to talk to me about or share your opinions on how you think it goes on from here on out, you're always welcome to in the comments, or talk to me about it on twitter @itstheshyauthor or tumblr @theshyauthor.

I'm sure I'll be back with another story soon enough. Thanks for all the love and support you gave this fic, I could have never imagined it becoming this loved by many. On that note, it's goodbye for now. :) x

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