Living on the wrong side of town isn't easy for any of the residents in the Sonyeondan apartment complex.

Jeon Jungkook is a boxer, trying to prove himself with every fight that he's not the person he used to be. Living across the hall is Kim Taehyung, an optimist with a fragile heart and scars that are kept deeply hidden. Falling in love was the last thing either of them was expecting.
There’s a breeze that floats in through the window of my small, studio apartment. It settles over the room, rustling the drapes and the edges of my bedsheets. I sit at the end of my bed, back arched, hands clenched one over the other as my elbows rest on my knees. Head down, still.

My mind is racing a million miles a minute, and even though I will it to slow, it seems to move even faster. I pick my head up and open my eyes. Twenty-five minutes. The clock on the stove across the room reads 23:35, its red light a small shred of brightness amongst the shadows of the darkened apartment.

I stand. Grab my backpack, throw it on. Click the lamp off on the table near the door. Take one deep breath of stale air and grab the doorknob.

Twist.

And then I’m booking it down the stairs, racing downward from the third floor, eyes on the door at the foot of the staircase. I can hear sounds on either side of the wall as I pass doorways; tenants drinking, laughing. A television blaring the sounds of a variety show. Male voices calling to one another.

My feet hit the bottom step and before I can take another breath I’m out the front door and taking long strides down the street. I can feel it pulsing through me already - the sensation of adrenaline, my heartbeat racing with anticipation. I walk three blocks to the edge of the main road that runs through town, and turning there, I pass old shops and marketplaces that have all seen better days. Neon lights flicker in their windows - sounds of babies crying drift as I pass lofts belonging to poor, young families.

I think it’d be hard to raise a child here. It’s hard enough to live alone - to live in a place like this and to have something so small depend on you for safety is something I will never understand.

Ever since I moved to this part of Seoul, I’ve known to watch my back.

My pace picks up as I head down the street. There’s a song stuck in my head and I start whistling it a bit loudly, punching the air to the beat. I spin. Jab right twice, then hit the warm air with a left
hook. Boxing the air is easy. I wish all fights were; I wish winning came that effortlessly for me. Tonight, of all nights, I wished the wind as my opponent.

Especially because tonight, 600,000 won was on the table for the winners.

The muffled sound of yelling slips through the propped open back door of the bar. I can see its yellow light spilling into the darkness. Yanking the door open, I jog down the hall, passing men holding beers and getting fired up. Some of these men are still in their suits, ties undone as they come down from a long day. Others wear dirty cutoffs, their bodies dirty from working laborious jobs like construction work. There are others I pass others who I recognize – fellow boxers. Acquaintances, opponents.

A smile spreads on my lips. I’m ready. I can feel it.

One door on the left reads locker room and I push it open; I’m greeted by a wave of rolling steam, the echoing sound of yelling and laughter. There are a few others in here preparing for their fights.

I turn down one of the halls and find my locker. My shoulders shrug off the backpack and I place it on the bench. Clicking the locker open, I pull out my boots, guards and gloves, and unzipping the backpack, I pull out my clean shorts, socks and wraps. There is a peacefulness and art in the preparation of your body, donning these elements in a specific order and pulling on what feels like armor.

I’ve been doing this for nearly a year, but I’ve been training since I was a boy. I was always angry then, deep inside. I was always hurting – and this is how I learned to deal with it.

I pop my mouthguard in and move my tongue to help settle it on my teeth. I bite down. Turning to the right, my eyes lock with my own in the mirror and give my reflection a big mouthguard grin, then one small thumbs up – a wink – and then I pull the gloves on.

My fists inside the gloves feel powerful.

Suddenly, I feel a punch to my right shoulder. It’s not a heavy punch, meant to injure, but rather playful. I turn to the right, finding no one, but when I turn to my left, my eyes land on a man taller than me, with broad shoulders and a teasing smile. Full lips, eyes that crack at the corners with internalized laughter.
“Mr. Worldwide Handsome,” I laugh, but it’s muffled from my mouthguard. He grins at the nickname, then motions for me to open my mouth and I do. He pops it out before standing back.

Jin hits my shoulder again and slides into a seated position on the bench beside me. “You’re ready to get your ass kicked tonight, Jungkookie?”

“You’re kidding me.” Subconsciously, I roll my eyes. “I’m not going down tonight. I don’t care who I’m up against… I can’t lose.”

“It’d be more fun to watch if you did,” Jin says, sighing. “Anyway. I just came for the free popcorn.” And with that, he pops a piece into his mouth from the bag he’s been holding.

I almost laugh, shaking my head. Since the beginning, there has been an unspoken agreement that Jin will always come to support my matches, and I will always come to support his.

A bell sounds. *Five minutes.* Glancing back down at Jin, his eyebrows rise before falling back into place, a knowing grin plastered on his small, full mouth.

Standing, he holds up my mouthguard and I open my mouth, letting him pop it back before my tongue settles it into place.

“Go get ‘em, Mr. International Playboy.”

Finally, a real laugh leaves my lips and I shake my head again. “You don’t have to tell me twice,” I mumble, and when he raises a fist, I bump it with my own.

And then I’m off to the ring. My boots are strong, laced up tightly and making loud claps as each step hits the ground. I can feel the power rising inside of me, seeping from my feet, seeping from my fists, bubbling in my throat and rising to my head. The closer I get to the curtains at the end of the hall, where I can see bright lights glaring through the cracks, I can feel myself fighting a smile.

There is something about the moments right before a fight that is like an adrenaline boost shot directly into my veins – like everything moving in slow motion around me and I’m moving a million miles a minute. A disconnect from everything but my own sense of self. A high.
I stand at the precipice – it’s just me alone in the hallway, and I can hear the announcer’s voice ringing tinny through the shitty speakers in this shitty little boxing bar. My eyes flicker shut. 

_Breathe._

A shiver runs down my spine and when I open my eyes, I can feel the shift. I can feel the fire burning in my stomach.

I whip the curtain open and the deafening applause cuts through the air like a never ending blow.

My opponent is already standing in the ring; it’s a man, bigger than me with a hard jaw. His shoulders are squared, muscles rippling the skin of his back. His fists punch one another, and he raises them in the air, walking around the ring as the audience hollers around him. Pride.

This is who I must defeat tonight.

At the end of the day, it’s just a job. It doesn’t pay that well, so you don’t just have to fight to live. You have to win.

Walking through the narrow rows of people, I approach the ring and squeeze beneath the bottom rope, popping up and jumping three times. I jerk my chin, whipping the hair from my eyes and pinning my chin to my chest, looking up at my opponent and trying my best to intimidate him. I haven’t fought this man before, but I have seen him at the gym. He’s good.

I hope I’m better.

“Let’s hear it for the 6’ powerhouse of Seoul, Choi Kang-Dae!”

The crowd erupts. I punch my shoulders, shake my head. Powerhouse my ass.

“And over here,” the referee shouts into the microphone, dangling from the ceiling; he steps toward me and stretches a hand in my direction. “Weighing 78 kilograms and undefeated his last seven matches, the golden boy of Seoul: Jeon Jungkook!”

Instinctively, my arms raise into the air and I’m grinning. I tuck a hand behind my ear for dramatic
effect, listening to the roar of the crowd increase in pitch.

The ref moves away from the microphone, brings us closer to him, and we both square our shoulders as we stare one another down.

“Now I want a nice clean fight from the two of you,” the referee states. “Do it to him before he does it to you… Now touch gloves and let’s get this match started.”

I raise my glove first, and when he punches it, there’s a weight to it and is like a beginning taste of the power packed in those gloves. It’s heavy; my defenses flare.

“Back to your corners,” he instructs, and we turn, taking a few steps backward. The microphone cord swings through the air and as we stare one another down again, the referee speaks into it: “Let’s begin – on my count! 3… 2… 1… Fight!”

I can already tell that my opponent’s muscles have more power behind them than mine. However, just from looking at him, I can tell he’s not as quick on his feet as I am. I know that much of my strength lies in my speed – and that’s how I’m going to win.

He moves forward like a brick, sturdy to a fault, and when he ducks narrowly to both sides, the tightness of his left arm reveals his lead. I duck to the left as his right arm jabs, then again as he swings his left arm.

That’s when he takes his first hit; my glove strikes him hard on the shoulder. I can see it in his eyes, the anger that I’ve taken the glory of the first hit. I go for another one, but this time he ducks.

I swerve to the right, and when I advance, I see him back up. This is my chance; I continue dodging blows, and even bounce back before he tries an uppercut. But I’m getting him into a corner, and that’s when I’ll strike again.

Before he knows it, his back is up against the ropes; he glances backward, once – but that’s all I need. I start wailing on him, getting him swift in the jaw and letting him feel it seep into his bones for a brief moment before I start hitting his chest, shoulders, and the sides of his head again. His arms pull up defensively, and somehow he manages to land a hit as I bounce left and right. It hits me in the face, on my left eye. This is the first hit I’ve received yet, but I can tell I don’t want to get too many of them. He’s strong, and I can already feel a bruise wanting to form.
I hit him three more times before I’ve accrued 9 points and the ref calls the first round. I bounce on my heels, sweat rolling down my chest and pooling at the bottom of my back, along the waistline of my shorts.

“First round winner: Jeon Jungkook!”

The crowd crows.

I grin, hopping back to my corner. A staff member is there, offering assistance as I reach for water. They hold the bottle as water streams into my parched mouth. It dribbles down my chin and I wipe it away quickly before turning back around to see my opponent, Choi Kang-Dae, drinking water before a staff member wipes the corner of his mouth. On the white towel, I see the color of rust.

Keep it up, I think. You only need to win the best of three. You can take him. You can win.

The next round begins with the ding of a bell; the referee ducks from our path quickly and watches as Choi advances on me immediately, wasting no time. He wants to corner me the way I cornered him – but I can already read his moves, his motivations. I duck away, bouncing from one corner to the other, then moving toward the middle before he can follow my moves. I duck as he swings again and land my first point, square to the middle of his chest. He’s angry, and I can feel the aggression rolling off him in waves before he hits me again. It was sloppy on my part; I let it happen. His left fist rises, and instead of moving my head, the suddenness of the moment gets away from me and he pummels me in the throat. The air rushes from my lungs, and as I try to back up, he hits me again – this time in the side. Then again, in the shoulder.

I have to take back the round; air rushes back to my chest and my eyes widen. Relief. I breathe in deeply, ducking as he tries to hit me again, and from my crouched position, I see an opening.

Uppercut. Right arm jab. Left face. Right face. Three times as he crumples, straight to the chest.

When I make my final hit, he’s close to falling, and I hear the ref blow his whistle just as it lands. Throat.

He’s on the ground, gloves planted firmly as he tries to stand; I can hear a staff member moving toward him, trying to help him up as the referee approaches me with a knowing grin. He takes my wrist, and as I lift my head, I feel the roar of the drunken crowd rising in the air.
“The winner, eight for eight – Jeon Jungkook!”

My mouthguard smile is wide. Boxing doesn’t feel too glamorous when you’re losing, but it’s these brief moments of pride that make it all worthwhile. Feeling the sense of accomplishment, of capability. Being a winner, and earning it all on your own.

It’s immeasurable.

Closing my eyes, I breathe in. A moment later I’m hopping out of the ring and jogging back to the locker room. On the way, standing along the aisle, I see Jin. He’s cheering, and as I pass him his hand claps me on the back of the neck – and his hand squeezes tightly.

I look back at him and clap him back quickly on the arm before continuing forward. Back in the locker room, I take my boots, gloves and wraps off, pull off my shorts and grab a towel. The hot steam of the locker room shower soothes my body, which provided me a swift fight tonight. I’m grateful for the power and the speed I’m able to achieve. I’m grateful I can do this for myself, something that I can only rely on myself to achieve.

My eyes close and I tip my head back. The water trickles down my forehead and drips from my chin, trickling down my chest and legs. It feels good to win.

I towel off, put my clothes back on, and after I pull my backpack on I leave the locker room and head to the office. Down the hall, the owner’s office is noted by the glow of a hazy yellow light. He’s smoking inside; when I walk in, grinning, the old man doesn’t say anything. He simply sighs, puffing his smoke before taking a small envelope from the side of his desk. On the front, it reads “winner.”

“That’s me,” I joke.

“Alright kid,” he says warily. “Don’t get too cocky.”

“Thank you very much,” I say, bowing a little before taking the envelope from his hand and raising it in the air in a wave. “See you next week!”

“Tread safely, Golden Boy,” he warns, but I’m already out the door before he can say anymore.
For a moment, I debate on whether or not to stay with Jin and watch the other fights of the night. It runs late, usually until 2 or 3 here. It’s nice getting your fight out of the way first thing; although it’s usually just proper manners to stay for the other fights. It can also be enlightening, to watch the way others fight whom you might also be pitted against one day.

Tonight however, I’m too tired. The adrenaline that had been rolling around inside me is now fizzling. It would just be easier to head back to the complex, and maybe I’d see Jin tomorrow at the gym. Part of me can’t wait to hear what he has to say about the fight, but it can wait until tomorrow.

Heading out the back door, I shove the envelope of my winnings into my hoodie pocket and slip out into the nighttime. The cooling change of seasons feels good on my warm, sweat-soaked skin and the beads of water still clinging to my hair. I run a hand through it, grabbing the back of my neck and smiling downward. I’m in no hurry back now, the urgency of the fight drying up with each passing second.

It’s just me, and the night, and the money that’ll pay this month’s rent. I smile fondly at the few stars I see twinkling overhead. The city lights make it hard to see stars at all. It’s comforting to see a few, anyway.

My footsteps start to slow, and I’m only just a few blocks from the apartment complex. I pass a convenience store with a flickering open sign hanging in the front window, and in the distance I can hear a dog barking.

And then, I hear something else.

Footsteps.

In boxing, there are rules. No hits below the waist. No wrestling, biting, holding, kicking, or hitting with any part of the body besides your fists.

I know how to box. I know the rules and I know how to fight fair.

Fighting in real life is different – especially when it’s five on one. Especially when you’re being jumped.
I feel a hand grab my backpack and jerk me backward. Someone’s feet kick my legs out from under me and I falter, tripping. A different pair of hands grabs my wrists and holds them behind my back, so tightly I can feel the burning of my skin on theirs as it twists roughly.

“Hey!” I shout, and just as I do, bam. A sucker punch to the jaw. Then another. And another. Then, finally, one swift punch to my gut.

I cough, choking, knees bending as I lose my balance. I can feel my body being dragged to the alley next to the convenience store, my knees being cut on the rocks and broken glass in the street.

“Find the money,” one of them says sharply. I look up, blinking hard as more hands steady my shoulders. I try and rip away, but the more I fight, the tighter they hold, the more violently they bash me against the head. One of them kicks me; I see black shoes, black sweatshirts and black masks covering the lower half of their faces. I can’t tell who any of them are, if I know anyone or if they know me.

They know I have money – they must have seen the fight.

“Get the fuck off me,” I spit, and the sharp taste of blood fills my mouth as one more kick lands to my chest.

“Where’d you put it?” one of them shouts at me sharply. I just cough. I can hardly see, my vision is blurred. One of them hits me again and I hear the question come once more. I shake my head – please, don’t do this. I can’t stand. I can’t move. All I can do is take the hits.

One of them reaches into my hoodie pocket, their hand curling around the envelope. When he pulls it out, he must realize that yes, this is the money, this is the winner’s prize. And it’s ours now.

“I got it,” he says, holding it up in the air as the others stop rifling through the emptied contents of my backpack. My eyes blink open and I can see him opening the envelope, rifling through the cash inside, and taking all of it. He looks down at me, tosses the empty envelope, and laughs as it hits me in the face.

They all laugh, and the man holding the money stops – folds it, sticks it into his pocket – and casting me one last look, throws his boot up and kicks me hard across the face.

My vision fades, and then is consumed by a cold, empty blackness.

Chapter End Notes

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The Alley – Taehyung

Chapter Notes

Just as a reminder, this chapter is going to be written from Taehyung’s point of view! I hope you guys enjoy it! <3

A bell chimes above the door, rustling me from my hazey daydreams.

“Hello,” I greet a middle aged man, stumbling into the convenience store, clearly drunk. He raises a hand to wave slightly, his cheeks puffy and red. I watch from the front of the store as he makes his way to the back and grabs a bottled water, cracking it open and taking a long guzzle from it, water dripping down his chin and getting on his suit.

He returns to the front of the store and I ring him up, totaling him. He hands money over and thanks me, his words slurred before exiting the store. The bell chimes again.

I sit back down on my stool behind the counter and sigh, resting my elbow on the counter and putting my head down. It’s been a long night at work - one made even longer thanks to Hyo Jin, who promised to show up on time today. I peek at my phone, checking the time.

24 minutes late and counting.

I close my eyes and go back to my happy daydreams. I’m a student at Seoul University, walking around campus with Jimin, worrying about my latest photography project due. We grab coffee and talk about how great college is, promise to meet up for drinks after class and head our separate ways.

Lately, I’ve had this bad habit of living in my daydreams more than my own life. I’m so accustomed to it now that it’s always a harsh slap to the face when I open my eyes and it’s after midnight and here I am, working at the convenience store.

No Seoul University for me. No photography project to worry over. No coffee or drinks with Jimin. No school at all.
The bell overhead chimes again and Hyo Jin rushes in, out of breath, her hair a wild mess on top of her head. She bows to me three times, apologizing as she does. Even if working longer because she’s always late is annoying sometimes, I also can’t bring myself to be mad at her. She’s supporting herself through school, working part-time here and also takes care of her younger sister.

“It’s no biggie,” I reply, waving a hand in front of my face. She sighs with relief and comes around the counter, getting things set up for a long night of studying.

I used to work the third shift, but since Hyo Jin prefers it so she can study because there are so few customers, I switched with her. I don’t mind much. It doesn’t matter when I work, so long as I get all my hours in. The pay’s not great, but it gets me by every month. I’m more fortunate than most, if I’m being honest.

“Have a good night, Hyo Jin,” I tell her sincerely and she flashes me a smile, pushing her glasses up her nose.

“You, too! Be careful on your way home.”

I nod, opening the door and heading out into the night air. It’s getting colder here, the air more crisp and windy. I don’t mind the cold, though. I tuck myself further into my warm coat and put my hands into my pockets, keeping my head low as I start my walk back to the apartments.

Seoul is a pretty city; I can see lights and mountains beyond the road I’m walking. The sky above only has a few stars, but the light pollution keeps it looking slightly purple. I admire it, staring up at the sky as I walk. Back in Daegu, where I grew up, I could always see more stars because I lived far enough outside of the main city.

My heart aches a little, thinking that.

I’m not homesick, not really. The kind of heart ache when you’re just sad, I think. Painful memories that I try to keep pushed way, deep down sometimes resurface, reminding me just how far I’ve come in a few short years. It gives me a dull hope, something to cling to, that in a few more years, I’ll really be okay.

I let out a shaky sigh, my breath visible in the air in front of me. To my right, I see a group of 5 guys walking out from a dark alley, all laughing. The one in front has a big envelope, which he smacks against the palm of his other hand as he turns to show it off to his friends who all cheer
behind him.

“Let’s go get some chicken and beer!” he proposes, which is met with more yelling in excitement. “I’ll buy!”

I watch them disappear around the corner before I approach the dark alley. I walk past it every night on my way home from work, and usually, it just gives me the creeps. Tonight, though, I can feel the hair on the back of my neck stand on end as I walk by it, wanting to rush past it. Ignore it. Run away.

But then I hear it.

A groan.

I stop, my heart pounding in my chest so hard that I can hear it in my ears. I swallow against the lump that’s forming in my throat, my body seizing as I try to figure out what to do. Do I run home and pretend like I never heard anything? Or do I brave the scary unknown and see what waits for me there?

Another groan fills my ears, seeming to echo off the water puddles and buildings, all wet from fresh rain.

My body lurches forward into the alley, my ears knowing that sound all too well. Pain.

“Hello?” I say, my voice shaking as I step further into the darkness. My eyes strain in the dark, searching, though not adjusting as quickly as I need them to. I pull out my phone and turn on the flashlight, looking around for the source of the sound and pause when I hear shuffling movement. I turn around quickly, pointing my phone in that direction and shining the light on the source of the sound.

There’s a body on the ground, crumpled over themself, trying to move their legs to sit up.

I rush forward, kneeling in front of him and gently taking his arm to help him sit up. His head falls against my shoulder, practically knocked out but still trying to fight through the haze. I push his hair back from his forehead and my hand comes back with scarlet red. My heart thumps in my chest again. Blood.
“Shh, it’s okay,” I tell him in a whisper when he groans again. “I’ve got you.”

I help him move so he’s sitting up and leaning against the nearby wall so I can get a better look at what I’m dealing with. Using my flashlight from my phone, I look over his hands, bruised and scraped up a little, but nothing too bad. It’s his face that I’m worried about the most. An obvious black eye forming, a swollen lip with blood dribbling down his chin, bleeding from somewhere in his hair that’s dripped down the side of his face creating a horrific sight.

But even with the bruises and blood, it’s a face that I know. One of the boy who lives in the apartment across the hall from mine.

I don’t know him, really. But I’ve seen him in the halls, leaving when I’m coming home or vice versa. Occasionally we greet each other with a slight bow when the other is getting the mail. As I look at his busted up face, I realize with a slight pang of guilt that I don’t even know his name.

I see his backpack on the ground nearby, the contents spilled all over the damp pavement. I hurry and pick everything up, neatly setting it all back into the backpack before sliding the straps over my shoulders in the front so the backpack is against my chest and stomach.

“Okay, let’s get you home,” I tell him, to which I get no response, and I take his hands and pull them over my shoulders, carefully hoisting him onto my back. He groans in pain and I breathlessly apologize as I slowly get to my feet, my legs shaking under the extra weight. It’s all I can do not to curse or drop him or both.

As gently as I can, I slide my hands under his thighs, holding him up as I take one step forward. I let out a labored breath, praying to any god who will listen that I can get him back home before my legs give out on me.

His arms dangle limp over my shoulders as I take one step after another, feeling like I’m about to die as a sweat breaks out over my forehead. He makes a few soft sounds when I have to readjust his weight a little, but is otherwise out cold for the duration of the trip. I’m thankful, because it’s downright embarrassing how out of shape I am.

When I arrive back at the apartment complex, I take a shaky step onto the first stair and pause, glancing over my shoulder to look at him, making sure he’s okay. His face is so close that I can feel his breath, almost close enough for his nose to touch my cheek. But he’s still out, so I look forward again, let out a quiet breath, and take another step up. I repeat this process until we’re
inside the building, and I look at the stairs and immediately want to die.

*It’s okay, Tae. You can do this. It’s only three flights of stairs.* I try to psyche myself up as much as possible, but my legs are really getting weak. Every time I make it up a couple of stairs, I have to stop and readjust him, my arms beginning to ache from his weight. It’s a mental battle at this point, just trying to force my limbs to keep going even though they are practically screaming at me to just drop him.

Somehow, and I’m really not sure how, I make it up three flights of stairs with him on my back. I’m positive that my entire mind blacked out during the second flight, because as I stare at my apartment door, I’m both shocked and so relieved that I could cry.

I input my passcode and wait for the three note chime to go off, signaling that the door is unlocked. I push the door open, stumbling inside, tripping up on a pair of shoes that I left in the center of the floor in my hurry to get to work earlier. We fall against the wall slightly, and once I regain my balance, I fling my shoes off and step up into the main room of my studio apartment, dropping the boy onto my bed, so relieved to have his weight off of me that I slip and fall onto my bottom in front of my bed. I let out a hiss as I rub my elbow that hit the edge of the bed frame and then I carefully remove the boy’s backpack and set it down at the foot of the bed.

I remove his shoes and set them down by the door, taking this time to also slip on my house slippers before stepping into my bathroom to grab my first aid kit.

Deep in my memories, I can see my hand reaching for a similar first aid kit, my hand that of a child’s. My small fingers fumbling with bandaids, avoiding the mirror, the door locked, heart pounding.

I shake my head and grab the first aid kit, wrapping my fingers around the handle. I make it a point to look at myself in the mirror, seeing that my face shows no sign of hurt or pain.

*I’m fine. I’m fine. I’m fine.*

I close my eyes and breathe deeply for a moment, calming my nervous heart. Then, I open the door and head out to the main room of my small, practically empty, apartment. All I have is my bed, a small bookshelf that holds my main toiletries, trinkets and camera, and a small hanging rack with the few articles of clothing that I have.
I guess you could call it minimalism, but honestly? I would rather spend any extra money I have on food than on anything else. Except my succulents. I have 5 now, lined up in a row in the window sill that gets the best sunlight. They’re my babies, each carefully potted in fresh soil when I purchased them.

It’s the little things in life.

I set the first aid kit down next to the bed and gently help move the boy so he’s laying in a more comfortable position, his head propped up on my pillow. I pull my blanket up around him, tucking him in to warm him up, especially after laying on the damp pavement outside.

I start with his head, finding the cut that’s responsible for the bleeding. Using a cloth, I gently clean away the blood from the cut and his face before applying some pain ointment with a q-tip. Then I gently disinfect the scrapes on his hands, the cut on his lip, and apply a band-aid over the cuts that need them. The only band-aids that I have on hand are Pororo ones, so he looks a little childish with them on, but they get the job done.

My fingers brush the hair from his forehead, gently, softly, and I watch as his eyes move behind his closed lids. My heart aches for him, wishing that I could take away the pain he’s feeling – the pain of the punches and bruises and cuts, but also the pain of being left behind the way he was. My fingertips move down his bruised cheek and I frown, feeling how plump and and swollen it is.

I grab a washcloth from the drawer and run it under hot water, ringing it out and folding it neatly before placing it on his forehead. He sighs in his sleep, comforted by the warmth.

Next, I sit on the edge of the bed, taking one of his hands in mine. It’s cold, his knuckles bruised and scraped. His wrists have markings on them that are inflamed and red – the kind of wounds that show he was restrained. I gently rub my hands over his, letting him soak all the warmth from my hands. He needs it more than I do.

For a long minute, I look at his bruised and battered body, and I can see a small body with the same blackeye and cuts, curled into fetal position on his bed. There are stars out the window and tears on his cheeks. A young child – too young to know the pain that he feels.

I think this boy here now is very much the same as the young boy from my memories. Too young to know the pain of this cruel world, yet somehow, knowing it all too well.
While sleeping, he looks so serene and soft and beautiful, even with the bruises and cuts and swelling. A freckle under his bottom lip, soft wrinkles around his eyes from smiling, and long eyelashes. I want to touch him again, if only to ease his mind and body that the world doesn’t always have to be so cruel.

It can also be overwhelmingly beautiful.

I shake my head and give the boy one more look before I gently tuck his arms under the blanket, too, to keep them warm. I reorganize my first aid kit and put it away in the bathroom.

I grab an extra jacket to use as a blanket and shut off the lights in my apartment, my body so tired and exhausted from the physical exertion of carrying someone. Then I grab the other pillow from my bed and hug it close to my chest, a long yawn prying my lips open to release itself. I rest my head on the edge of the bed, curling my knees up around the pillow in my arms, making myself as small as I can under my coat.

I peek one eye open and look up at the boy sleeping in my bed through the darkness.

“Goodnight,” I whisper, before burrowing further into my pillow and coat and closing my eyes again.

It doesn’t take long for my daydreams to turn into actual dreams, and I fall asleep to the soft sound of someone nearby snoring quietly.
Hi guys!! Here is chapter three, thanks for sticking with us c:> The story is starting to rly pick up n get gay now lmaooo *J-Hope voice* Enjoy it! Enjoy it! (°‿°)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Before I even open my eyes, I can hear it: the sound of someone breathing.

Waking up in the morning is among my very least favorite things to do, and if I had things my way, I’d never have to wake up at all. (That sounds a lot more morbid than I mean it to but… I said what I said.)

As my eyes squint open, I can see the daylight creeping in through the window – a window that is not mine. This place is unfamiliar, yet still similar to my own apartment in a strange way. The exposed brick on the walls, the smell of sawdust from renovations a landlord began and never finished. As the rest of my senses begin to awaken, I also realize that in addition to waking up in an unfamiliar place, my body also was in excruciating pain from head to toe.

Well, maybe not my toes. Maybe my toes were the only part that didn’t hurt. But everything else, yeah. A solid 1/10.

My eyes start to adjust to the light and as I do, I also realize I am in a bed. Again, not my bed. Not my apartment. This is a huge problem. What happened last night?

That’s when I remember: this isn’t just the pain from a fight. This is the pain of a mugging.

And just as I’m about to try and sit upright, I hear the breathing coming from my right shift. I turn my head slowly, eyes moving from the floor to a foot to a leg to a torso to a face.

There is a boy sitting in a chair, squeezing tightly onto a pillow with his lips parted just slightly. I see his tired body, which may have been sleeping just moments ago, begin to reawaken. First, his neck, which moves ever so slightly. His jaw, which shifts, and his hands that curl into fists around the pillow at his chest.
His toes curl, and then suddenly, his eyes open, meeting mine as the sunlight pouring in through the window frames his face.

This is when I realize:

*I know him.*

“Ah, good morning,” he says slowly, speech slurring slightly as his back straightens and his grip on the pillow eases.

I squint up at him. “You… live in the apartment across from mine.”

“Yeah…” he says softly, trailing off. “I recognized you.”

*So, I think, that means… I am in your bed? How did I get here?*

As though reading my mind, his eyes suddenly widen and he moves from the chair, then crouches nearer to me slowly. “You have to be really careful not to move too much, okay? You were hurt very badly last night when I found you.”

I’m reminded again of the events of the previous night and I close my eyes, groaning, and leaning my head back into the pillow.

I am suffering.

“Yeah,” I start, raising an arm painfully to cover my eyes as I recount what all in fact happened. “I… got jumped last night. I was leaving a fight and some guys from the bar grabbed me. Took my money.”

“I’m so sorry to hear that,” he tells me honestly. “Was it a lot of money?”
“Enough for rent,” I sigh. “I can make it back I guess. Wasted energy getting it in the first place, though.” I pull my arm from my eyes and I see the boy, still crouched beside where I lay, offering a sympathetic, sideways kind of smile.

“What’s your name?” he asks me suddenly.

I look from him to where my toes are, under the blue, quilted covers of a duvet, on top of a mattress lying on the floor of the apartment belonging to the person who may very well be the reason I’m alive.

“I’m Kim Taehyung,” I hear him say. His voice is deep, but gentle. Delicate, but strong. When I look back at him, his eyes find mine and stare unmovingly into me.

My lips part briefly, pausing for a moment before replying: “I’m Jeon Jungkook.”

At this, his lips break into a wide grin, that stretches across his face and makes my stomach knot.

“It’s very good to finally meet you,” he says. Sincerely.

My chest tingles.

“Thank you for rescuing me,” I say. I owe him the sincerity he has given me. I owe him that and so much more. “I would still be there now if not for you.” As I say this, I try propping up on my elbows, and manage to do it with some difficulty.

Taehyung winces at my discomfort. “Please be careful. Your head was bleeding, your hands, lips, knuckles, knees were injured, cut and bruised as well. You will probably be finding bandages on yourself for days.” He grins again.

“Thank you,” I say again.

“It’s nothing,” he assures me.
It is not “nothing,” I think, but he is not facing me anymore. His eyes are glazed over as he stares ahead at the red door to his apartment.

There is a kindness in this space that I can feel in the way everything has been touched. The sheets are clean and smell of fabric softener. On the small table beside the bed, there is a picture in a frame of a woman holding a child. There are succulents along the windowsill, pots and pans hung with care above the stove, and on the kitchen table, I can see the glare of several photographs laid out, as if in careful deliberation.

I wonder who Kim Taehyung is.

“I have to be to work soon, but I can make breakfast if you’d like,” he says in an even tone. “I don’t have much, but I can make toast.”

“You don’t have to do that,” I say. “I’m intruding, I should get home.”

He looks over at me again, standing, and shakes his head with a soft smile. “You’re not, I promise.” Then, pausing, he jokes: “If I thought you were intruding, I’d just send you home. I know where you live, you know.”

I laugh, even though it hurts to.

“Okay,” he starts, standing from his place beside the bed and clapping his hands together. “Breakfast time.” I watch as he moves, a quick pace across the room to the kitchen on the opposite end of the space. He goes about grabbing a cutting board, bread from the cupboard, a knife, and then proceeds to rummage around in his refrigerator.

“Shoot,” he mumbles; I hear jars clinking together as he searches for something, but to no avail. Eventually he stands back, one hand on his hip, and shuts the refrigerator door. I tilt my head slightly, confused at his actions. Taehyung then moves from the kitchen and approaches the door where he starts to slip off his house slippers and pull on his tennis shoes.

“Um, I will be right back,” he says. “I’m going to run to the store really quick for jam. I didn’t realize I was all out.”

“You don’t need to run to get jam on my account,” I tell him. “I’m fine, really. I don’t need
anything.”

But it seems he cannot be convinced otherwise, and as he ties his other shoe he looks up at me and smiles a little. “Just hang tight, I’ll be back very soon.”

“You really don’t have to do that,” I try telling him again, but he holds up a finger.

“Fifteen minutes,” he says, and then, pulling a knit hat on and slipping his oversized coat over his narrow shoulders, he nods once at me before heading out.

When I am left alone in this place, I can feel it. There is a shift in the air as though the presence that belongs here is missing and I feel very out of my element. Although I’ve only just met him, I can tell that Kim Taehyung is a peaceful person; his plants on the windowsill are thriving from excellent care, the few photos he has in his apartment are all carefully framed. He has pride in his home. Everything is in its place. I wonder what he would think of my home, if he would think it was dirty or too plain. Even in this minimalist space I can tell that he is the one who lives here; it all feels like a reflection of his character.

I wonder what he would see if he saw the space where I lived.

Being alone, I’m also suddenly very aware of the pain my body is in. My back hurts, my head aches – I can feel bruises forming on my jaw, my shoulders, my chest and legs. I then think of the inconvenience that Taehyung has been faced with since finding me the night before. He is even out buying jam for me.

I don’t deserve this care; a guilt suddenly blooms in my chest and, throwing the covers back, I try to stand. It isn’t impossible, though it is painful. I cross the room to where my bag rests over the corner of a chair, throw it over my shoulder, tie my hoodie around my waist and pick up my shoes from beside the door as I let myself out. I can’t tell if I feel more guilty leaving before saying goodbye to Taehyung or allowing him to continue caring for me when I have not done anything to deserve it.

Kim Taehyung is giving, and I am greedy – and I need to stop the cycle now while I still can.

Perhaps staying in bed for a while would be beneficial for me anyway. Across the hall, I enter in the code for the lock and step back inside my space. I can see now, interestingly enough, that the interior is a mirror image of Taehyung’s; a window on the opposite side, the kitchen at one end and
the bed on the other. Mine is just a sloppier version, a less personalized version.

I wonder if this space feels less lived-in because of my upbringing – and the fact that I’ve spent the last year running away from it.

I drop my bag at the door, clicking it closed with my heel, and immediately cross the floor to get into bed. I pull the covers up over my shoulder, rolling onto my side and thanking the lord for the fact that the sun doesn’t directly shine into my apartment. I can sleep as long as I want to today – no matches, and no necessary training. All I have to do is wait for my body to heal.

As I close my eyes before falling back asleep, a thought occurs in my head that further tightens the knots in my stomach: my bed is fine, but I miss the way that Kim Taehyung’s felt.

I finally get out of bed again around six o’clock, and by this time I am starving. I force myself up out of bed and cross the floor to the kitchen, where I pull out the ingredients to make a quick kimchi fried rice.

This day came and went so quickly; as I crack open the eggs and start frying them up on the stovetop, I glance out the window. I can see the sun hanging low in the sky, through the trees and across town. The sky is orange, and the air has a strange colorful quality to it. I feel like I’m still stuck in a dream.

Before I add anymore ingredients, I catch sight of a flash of color on the back of my arm. I look back at my elbow and am surprised to find two Pororo band-aids criss-crossed on the joint. I wonder how many more I will find when I go to shower, and I also wonder why Kim Taehyung owns these.

Adding the kimchi to the pan, I grab a little and pop it into my mouth cold. The saltiness and spice of my own homemade kimchi is hot in my mouth. I start humming aloud, some television jingle that got stuck in my head. Stirring, humming, eating, wondering what the boy across the hall is doing. I find myself thinking that it’s interesting, the only other person in this whole building who I’ve met is Jin, and until meeting Taehyung, I didn’t think there was anything wrong with that. Now, I wonder who else lives here, occupying the same space as we do. I wonder if Kim Taehyung has met the others, if perhaps they are all friends.

My chest falls. I throw the rice in the microwave and pop up onto the counter beside the stove,
stirring the kimchi and egg around in the pot before sighing. I lean my head back against the cupboards, remembering the way I’d left earlier. The guilt swirls in my stomach and I try to put it to rest, taking another small bite of cold kimchi.

That’s when I hear a knock on the door.

Three quick knocks, and that’s it. My body freezes; nobody has ever knocked on the door before. Strange, I know, but even Jin doesn’t knock. He just lets himself in or slaps the door with his hand, twice, calling through it for me to let him in if I don’t want to get my butt whooped.

I lean forward on the counter, listening. It sounds like something is rattling outside of the door, and suddenly I’m crossing the floor. My hands plant themselves firmly against it, my eye looking through the small peephole to check if I can see anything.

Across the hall, the door shuts.

My eyes widen. I can’t open the door fast enough; what could be on the other side?

As the door swings open, I see a small brown paper bag sitting on the floor, the top curled over tightly. Just a bag, nothing more. I look from the bag at my feet to the door across the hall, wait for a moment to see if he’ll return – and then I bend down, picking it up, and head back inside.

I race to the small bistro table set up against the window, taking the bag and un wrapping the top, careful not to dump the contents of the bag haphazardly. I reach my hand inside and pull out a jar, mostly full, labeled *Scar Ointment*. There are directions on the side of the label, how to apply, ingredients and more. I set it down on the table, looking at it for another moment before reaching back into the bag and pulling out two rolls of gauze. I place the rolls carefully beside the jar of ointment. Reaching back in, I pull out a tube of something that I think is a topical treatment for pain.

Although the bag feels empty, part of me hopes that something more is still left inside, and when I reach my hand back into the bag my fingertips chance upon something. I pull it out only to realize it is a folded piece of paper.

A note.
My heart pangs.

It’s folded in quarters; I unfold half of it, then unfold it again. The penmanship on the note is a bit messy, which surprises me. He has the handwriting of someone much younger than he is. I smile at this.

Jeon Jungkook,

I’m giving you an ointment I used on your wounds last night. I hope the scar on your head heals, but if it doesn’t it’s at least kind of cool looking. I picked up another ointment at the convenience store earlier, you can apply it to parts of your skin that hurt. It’s supposed to help with bruising and swelling, so hopefully it works! I haven’t tested it or anything so you can be the guinea pig.

Also I hope I didn’t scare you off earlier. I wasn’t going to eat you, I swear.

Take care!

Taehyung

My thumb brushes over the page where his name is written. I can feel the indents in the paper where he’d pressed the pen. My whole chest swells, an emotion moving to my throat that seems to choke me. I breathe in deeply, then set it back down on the table before moving back to the stove, stirring the kimchi and eggs into the bowl of rice.

I can’t stop looking back over my shoulder at the ointment on the tabletop. I can’t stop thinking about the boy across the hall, and what he must be doing right now. If he is making dinner. If he is thinking about me too.

I hope I get to see Kim Taehyung again.

Chapter End Notes

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Hope you guys liked the chapter - we wanna know whatcha think!! Maybe leave a comment if ya feelin fresh lol THANK!!!!
THE BRUISES – TAEHYUNG

Chapter Notes

Hi guys! Happy Thanksgiving, hope you're all having a nice holiday with your friends + families! Hope y'all like this next chapter (;

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Taehyung!”

A huge grin spreads across my face, my arms opening out wide. I can hear him laugh from a distance, the sound like music to my ears as I close my eyes. 3… 2… 1… There’s suddenly weight thrown into my arms, a body pressed against mine as I clasp my arms around him and stumble backward a step, laughing and feeling the happiest I’ve felt in a while. Warmth spreads throughout my entire body, healing any sadness I’ve felt over the last few months since I last saw him.

“Jimine!” I shout, reaching up to ruffle his blonde hair, pulling away slightly to grin at him. “I’ve missed you!”

Jimin laughs again and grins so big that his eyes squint closed. He picks up his duffle bag that he’d dropped at his feet and throws an arm around my shoulders as we start to walk together, our paces matching up evenly. I put my arm around him, too and immediately start interrogating him about college and his life that I’ve missed out on since he left for Seoul University.

“What’s your classes like? Do you like your roommates? Are you learning a lot?” I ask as we make our way away from the bus stop. “What’s the campus like? How are your teachers?”

Jimin laughs, his hand squeezing my shoulder. “Wow, so many questions!” he replies in his usual happy tone. “Let’s just drop my stuff off at your place and go grab drinks and I’ll answer anything you want. Cool?”

“Cool,” I reply, clicking my tongue and giving him a thumbs up.

It’s only a few blocks from the bus stop to my apartment and we gush about how much we’ve missed each other the whole walk. Jimin squeezes my cheeks and affectionately calls me his baby, cooing that I’ve lost weight. I retaliate by pinching his cheeks and telling him that he should stop
eating ramen so late at night, because it’s making his face puffy.

He shouts and playfully slaps my arm and I grin back at him cheekily.

“Wow, so this is where you live?” he asks as we climb the stairs to the third floor of my building.

I feel a slight tingle of embarrassment at the nape of my neck as we reach the top floor. My eyes glance at Jungkook’s door, wishing he would open it and greet us so I could tell Jimin about how we’re close friends and that I’m not lonely at all, don’t worry. But he doesn’t and it would be a white lie, anyway, so I can’t blame him.

I wonder how he’s been doing. I haven’t seen him once, not even in passing, since that morning a week ago.

“It’s not much but… it’s close to everything and it’s cheap and my job isn’t far so…” I input my passcode and open the door to my apartment, letting Jimin in first to look around. “I got some guest slippers for you to use when you visit.”

Jimin smiles and thanks me, slipping off his shoes and replacing them with the house slippers and I do the same, showing him where to set his bag. I give him the grand tour - show him where I keep spare towels, shampoo and such and also introduce him to all 5 of my babies, thriving in the window sill. When I get to the kitchen, it’s pretty empty.

“I order take out a lot,” I tell him, which isn’t a lie. “There’s a place close by that delivers 24 hours and they make awesome jja jang myeon! You’ll love it.”

“It’s nice here. I’m glad you’re not living in some super scary neighborhood. I was nervous when you told me about moving here on your own at all, actually.” Jimin lays out on my bed, sighing as he hugs one of my pillows. “I mean, this area isn’t like, crazy nice but I also don’t think you’ll get mugged here.”

“Well…”

“You got mugged?!” he shouts, sitting up immediately.
“Not me!” I hold up my hands quickly shaking them. “But the guy who lives across the hall from me did. Pretty bad, too. I’ve been kind of nervous walking home from work at night ever since…”

Jimin frowns, patting the spot on my bed next to him. I sit down and he hugs me tightly, and for a moment, I close my eyes and feel the comfort that only a childhood friend can bring - especially Jimin, who has calmed my sad heart and comforted me more times than I can count. He’s the only one in this world that really knows me and it’s nice to have someone that understands that.

I’ve been trying really hard to be independent, but it doesn’t really get easier.

“Let’s go get drinks and some dinner, okay?” Jimin says and I nod. “Do you know of any good places around here?”

“Yeah, some guys that live on the second floor work at a bar not far from here,” I reply, getting to my feet and holding my hand out to help him up. “They’ve got good food.”

We head out of my apartment, both excited to drink and eat and catch up. As we start walking down the stairs, I can’t help but glance over my shoulder one more time at Jungkook’s door, wondering what he’s doing or if he’s home.

“Come on, Tae!” Jimin calls from the bottom of the stairs. I shake my head and follow him, catching up with him at the bottom of the first floor.

As we walk the couple of blocks from the apartment building to the bar, Jimin links his arm with mine and asks about what kind of people live in the building. I tell him about the three that work at the bar - Namjoon, who is the bartender, Hoseok, who is the waiter and Suga, who is the cook. I also tell him about Jungkook, though I don’t go into detail about how hurt he got because I don’t want to scare Jimin.

The bar is a hole in the wall kind of place. It’s not usually very busy and it feels more like you’re going out to a friends house to eat and drink beers.

“There he is!” Hoseok greets us at the door. “Tae! It’s been a while! Where have you been?”

He hugs me and I laugh. “Sorry, just been busy with working the late shift lately.” He nods, understanding, and then turns to Jimin. “This is Park Jimin, my best friend. He’s in staying with
me for the weekend.”

“Wow! Nice to meet you Jimin!” Hoseok says and Jimin laughs when he hugs him. “Sit wherever you guys want. What can I get you to drink?”

“Two beers, please,” I order for us as we pick a table near the bar. Namjoon waves to me and then does a quick bow to Jimin as Hoseok wanders over to him to get us beers. “That’s Namjoon. Suga’s probably in back cooking. He’s not super social usually.”

Jimin nods and bows back to Namjoon before taking the seat across from me at the table. Hoseok is quick to bring us our beers and take our order for chicken and some side dishes. I take a long drink from my beer, feeling the cool liquid drop to my stomach, and let out a happy sigh. Jimin does the same.

“It’s been a while since we’ve had a beer together,” he notes and I nod, wiping away foam from my top lip.

“Okay, now tell me all about college,” I say, putting my elbows on the table and giving him my full attention, blinking my eyes at him twice. He laughs and sets his beer down and bops me on the nose once.

“It’s fun, I really like it,” he replies as Hoseok brings us some side dishes like kimchi, fried egg and sesame broccoli. “It’s stressful, but so far I’m managing alright. My roommate is fine but he isn’t around much, so I’m alone a lot.”

I frown hearing this. “Haven’t you made any friends in your classes?”

Jimin shrugs, “A few, but none that are really close yet. Mostly just other people from my major going out drinking once and a while.”

He pauses to eat some kimchi and drink some beer to wash away the spice. “It’s not bad, though. I do like my classes and professors a lot and I’m learning so much! I wish that you were there with me, though.”

My heart hurts, thinking of all the hours I spent daydreaming about walking around campus with Jimin. I wish that I was there, too...
“I’m glad you like it, Jimin,” I tell him, reaching across the table to pat his hand. “And don’t worry! You’ll make new best friends in no time!”

We spend a good hour at our table drinking a couple of beers and eating all of our food when Hoseok brings it to us. We laugh about old memories of growing up, like the time we almost got into a fight with the rival school’s gang because I knocked some of their bikes over and talk about our hometown with a tone of nostalgia and muted sadness.

“I still can’t believe you did me so dirty like that,” Jimin laughs, shaking his head, his beer poised in his hand mid-air, ready for another drink. “You know that I was trying to befriend her to practice my English and you had her call me a fool.”

I’m laughing so hard that tears are free falling, recalling a memory of a foreign exchange student that had sat next to Jimin at school. I’d told her all kinds of phrases in Korean to practice with Jimin, most of which were ‘Jimin’s a fool’ or curse words that took him by surprise. While I thought it was funny, she really didn’t and had requested a seat change almost immediately after.

“Hello, welcome!” Hoseok greets as a few new customers walk into the bar. “Oh, I know you! You live in our apartment building!”

I look up, curious, as I take a drink of my beer and spot two guys at the entrance. One is really tall with broad shoulders and a kind smile, and the other is Jeon Jungkook. I practically spit my drink out and Jimin chastises me, using his napkin to wipe the beer that dripped down my chin in my surprise.

“Sit anywhere you’d like!” Hoseok tells them, motioning them inside further. “What do you want to drink?”

“Two beers,” the tall one replies politely.

Jungkook and I make eye contact and I offer a small smile and slight wave of my hand in his direction. He looks back at me, his eyes flickering from me to Jimin then back to me. He lifts his hand in response, though it feels a little awkward for some reason.

His face looks remarkably better than the last time I saw him. His bruises are faded, his black eye no longer swollen, and his cuts no longer covered with Pororo band-aids.
Jimin looks at Jungkook and his friend, then back at me and I see Jungkook’s friend do the same to him.

“Who’s that?” Jimin and Jungkook’s friend ask at the same time.

Jungkook and I both look unsure how to exactly answer that, so we both falter for a moment. I regain my composure quicker than he does, and I turn to look back at Jimin. “My neighbor,” I supply.

“Oh! You guys are neighbors?” he says, clapping his hands together. “Why don’t you guys join us for a drink then? I’m Park Jimin, Tae’s childhood friend.”


Jimin and I both laugh and he grins, sitting down next to Jimin. Jungkook follows suit, taking the empty seat next to me as Hoseok brings their beers over. The bar is starting to get a little busier, so he’s too busy to stay and talk for long before he’s off taking more orders. Jimin and I offer our two new friends the rest of our food that we couldn’t finish and they happily oblige.

“So what do you guys do, exactly?” Jimin asks Jin and Jungkook. “You both have bruises on your faces.”

“We’re boxers,” Jin supplies as he takes a drink of his beer. “At an underground bar. Pay is decent, plus we get some free drinks when we’re fighting so, it’s a win-win in my book.”

“Boxers?” Jimin glances at me and I duck my head, reaching my chopsticks forward to grab a piece of chicken. “Wow, that’s so interesting! I don’t think I’ve ever been in a fight in my life.”

“What do you do then?” Jin asks and Jimin tells him about college at Seoul University, which makes him clap his hands and say, “Wow! That’s a great school, you must be really smart!”

“He was class president throughout all of school,” I inform him proudly. Jimin grins at me and we clink our beer glasses together.
I can feel a pair of eyes on me and I turn to look at Jungkook. He’s been quiet since walking in, though it seems like he’s quiet a lot. When he sees me turn to look at him, he looks back over at Jin and listens to him telling Jimin an animated story about a fight he won last night.

“How are you feeling?” I ask him, my voice low so not to interrupt Jin and Jimin.

Jungkook looks back at me, his brown eyes wide and surprised. “I’m fine, thanks to the medicines and creams you got for me.”

I smile, and slowly, he does, too.

“I wasn’t sure if you got them or if someone stole them before you came home,” I reply, nervously scratching the back of my head. I notice that his leg keeps bouncing under the table. “I’m glad.”

“Tae, have you gone to see them fight before?” Jimin asks, leaning across the table to look at me with wide eyes, his hand covering mine. It’s worry playing on his features, I know, but I laugh it off and shake my head.

“No, I’ve only just met Jungkook last week,” I tell him honestly, “and I just met Jin at the same time as you.”

“You should come see us fight,” Jin says, nodding his head as he finishes his beer. “If you wanna try fighting, I know a guy.”

Jin lifts his empty beer glass and sighs. “Empty,” he informs us before getting up and going to the bar to get another.

Jimin laughs and looks at Jungkook and I. “He’s cute,” he says. “I’m going to get another beer, too. You want another Tae?”

I lift my almost empty glass and nod, finishing the last of my drink. Jungkook’s is still mostly full, but he’s been focusing more so on the food so it’s not surprising. With Jimin and Jin gone, no longer here to be loud, I turn back to Jungkook.
“So did you report your mugging incident?” I ask, leaning my elbow on the table to hold my head up so I can get a better look at him.

“No,” he replies, pursing his lips. “I didn’t see their faces or anything so… I doubt it would do any good. Besides, I’m sure they spent the money already, anyway.”

“What about CCTV? I’m sure they could figure out where they went or do something…” I frown, wishing that I could give him some kind of revenge but having no power to do so. “I’m sorry.”

His eyes meet mine again and he smiles a little. “It’s okay, it is what it is.”

Then, “Thank you.”

I blink twice. “For what?”

“Saving me. Carrying me home and cleaning me up,” he lists, holding up his fingers. “For letting me sleep in your bed when you had to sleep in a chair. For going to get jam to make me breakfast.”

I’m about to wave it off and tell him not to worry about it, and then he adds, “For everything.”

It’s so sincere and I don’t want to make him feel bad about it, so I just smile at him and my hand instinctively reaches up to ruffle his hair. “You’re welcome. Anytime.”

Jungkook and I finish off the rest of the chicken and talk about nothing too serious for a while. Jin and Jimin are still at the bar, both sitting there with their beer glasses full, talking with Namjoon and Suga while Hoseok runs around to all the tables, clearing the mess of the other groups that have already finished drinking and gone home for the night.

“I don’t think they’re bringing your beer back,” Jungkook informs me and I watch as Jimin finishes his and starts immediately on the extra one he had set aside.

I sigh, “That’s so Jimin.”
Jungkook laughs and I find myself leaning toward him, grinning. His laugh is soft and sweet and so unlike what I was expecting to hear from a boxer with bruises on his face. He looks at me again from behind his dark hair and for a moment, we both just look at each other. I can’t quite read his expression, but it’s somewhere between happy and nervous.

“So… Pororo?” he says, his voice quiet, just a few levels above a whisper.

I pull back a little, blinking a few times, and realize that I might be a little drunk. My mouth is dry.

“Yeah,” I say, “I, uh, I don’t know. That’s all they had when I bought band-aids last time. I really wasn’t expecting to have to use them on anyone.”

He smiles, wrinkles around his eyes making themselves more prominent. My whole chest feels tight and I reach across the table to grab Jimin’s water glass, drinking the rest of it just to try and get rid of the weird lump in my throat.

Wow, I think as I set the empty cup back down on the table. I must be drunk.

“Your friends are drunk,” Hoseok informs us as he clears away empty plates and glasses. “Want me to call a taxi for you guys or can you handle them?”

I look at my phone showing that it is getting late. Jungkook tells Hoseok that we can handle them and then finishes his beer in one long drink before getting up from the table. I grab Jimin’s phone that he left and stuff it into my pocket, following Jungkook up to the bar to retrieve our intoxicated friends.

My foot stumbles against the leg of a chair, tripping me, and I fall forward slightly, my hands reaching out to catch myself. They make contact with Jungkook’s back and shirt, holding onto him as I regain my balance. He turns his head to look at me over his shoulder and I flash him an innocent smile, pulling my hands away.

“Sorry, I tripped,” I explain with a little laugh. He nods and starts walking again, and I follow.

At the bar, Jin and Jimin are both laughing so hard about whatever they’re talking about that
they’re crying, and Namjoon is laughing with them. Suga has a small smile on his lips and when he sees me poke out from behind Jungkook, he waves.

I bow to him, my hands clasped together in front of me. “Hi, hyung.”

Suga’s the most level-headed guy that I know. He was the first one of the group that I met when I moved here and has been like an older brother to me ever since. Without knowing every detail of my past, he’s been there for me. It’s like he understands if I’m having an off day without asking; usually on those days, he leaves a home cooked meal in front of my door for me to eat later.

“Taetae!” Jimin says excitedly, wrapping an arm around my neck and hugging me closer in a semi-headlock. “I can’t believe you have all these friends and didn’t even tell me!”

I struggle to free myself from him and settle for linking our arms together to keep him from headlocking me again. Jimin might be small, be he can be mighty. My neck is sore already.

“You didn’t tell him about us?” Namjoon asks, feigning hurt.

Jin turns to look at me now, definitely intoxicated, with his eyes unfocused. “Wow, I can’t believe this!”

“Jin, you just met him tonight,” Jungkook reminds him with a laugh.

“Oh,” Jin says, nodding his head as if this makes sense. Jimin laughs at him and then Jin bursts out laughing again, which makes the rest of us shake our heads.

“Come on, Jiminie. Let’s get you back to my place so you can get some sleep.” Jimin looks at me and pouts his lips, not wanting to leave. His eyes then brighten and he grabs a pen from Namjoon’s apron and a fresh napkin, writing down his name and number and sliding it over to Namjoon.

My eyes bulge.

“Keep in touch!” he calls as I pull him from the bar stool. He stumbles from the sudden movement and crashes into me. I grab a nearby table for support, stumbling backwards myself a little. “Ow,
“Tae! That hurt!”

“Sorry,” I say, putting his arm over my shoulder so that I can steer him. Drunk Jimin likes to wander a lot and I learned that the hard way when he almost walked into oncoming traffic.

Jungkook also manages to finally get Jin up and moving. We pay the bill and wave goodbye to the guys before stepping out into the cold autumn night. Jimin immediately complains about the temperature, turning to burrow into my side as much as he can. Jin stumbles but is able to walk, and he ends up ahead of the rest of us.

“Park Jimin!” he calls and Jimin lifts his head to look at him. “Come here! Look at this!”

Jemin leaves my side and runs over to Jin to see whatever he was looking at. It makes them both laugh again - they both have sort of high pitched laughter, the kind that makes you want to laugh with them - before they keep on walking together, talking and telling jokes back and forth.

That leaves Jungkook and I again, walking a few paces behind them. Jungkook has his hands in the pockets of his black hoodie, which doesn’t look nearly warm enough, and I’m layered with a sweater and my coat. I think about sharing my coat with him, because it’s oversized enough that we could probably each wear an arm, but then I think that might be weird to suggest to a new friend.

As we walk by the convenience store that I work at, I point it out to Jungkook.

“You know, it’s kind of lucky that my coworker was late that night,” I tell him as we keep walking. “If not, I would have already been home when it happened and I wouldn’t have found you at all.”

“So how did you manage to get me home that night?” Jungkook asks as we pass by the alley where I found him. I look at him, noticing how dark his eyes are as he looks into the alley. I step in front of it, blocking his view of it.

“I carried you on my back,” I tell him, slapping my shoulders for emphasis. “I also almost killed us both going up the stairs. You’re really heavy, you know?”

Jungkook’s mouth is set in a straight line and he doesn’t laugh at my comment like I had hoped he would. “I’m sorry.”
“Don’t be! I needed the exercise.”

Again, he doesn’t laugh. I purse my lips now. “Wow, tough crowd.”

His eyes look at me again, moving up from his shoes on the pavement. I decide that humor isn’t going to fix it, so I settle for putting my arm around his shoulders and start walking again, pulling him along with me. I can feel him tense up for a moment, but after a few steps, he seems to relax a little. Up ahead, Jin and Jimin have their arms around each other, stumbling and singing loudly to each other, trying to harmonize but instead creating a note so high that their voices break.

“You know what we should do?” I say suddenly, turning to look at Jungkook. We’re eye level, our faces close to each other’s. I notice his eyes widen a little before settling back on his heels to look at me. “Rock, paper, scissors up the stairs. Whoever makes it to the top first wins and loser has to buy ice cream.”

Jungkook smiles now, looking over at the stairs ahead of us, then back to me. “Deal.”

We shake hands on it and then, I release my hold on him and we go to the stairs. We chant out ‘rock, paper, scissors’ and throw out our hands. I win with paper and take a step up. We repeat this process, slowly making our way up the stairs. I win four times in a row, putting a distance between us that makes me laugh when Jungkook pouts. Actually pouts.

Cute.

“You’re competitive,” I say, watching his expression change to a smug grin when he wins again with paper and takes another step toward me.

“I’m a boxer, remember? Gotta win to live.”

We play until we’re almost to the top of the stairs. I’m losing by three steps now, but he’s still got two left before he wins so I still have a fighting chance.

“Rock, paper, scissors,” we chant and I throw rock. Jungkook throws out scissors.
“Yes!” I shout, taking another step closer to him. We go again and I win again, taking another step up. We’re almost on the same step. The desire to win is burning in both of our eyes now, each of us competitive in a way that I hadn’t been for a long time. “I have a feeling you’re going to be buying me an ice cream, Jungkook.”

“We’ll see,” he says with a smug grin as he wins again, taking one more step up.

We chant ‘rock, paper, scissors’ again and Jungkook wins, making it to the top successfully. He throws his arms up in the air in celebration and I laugh, watching him shout with excitement. Jin and Jimin are sitting down on a bench under a street light watching us, bored of our antics. They’d protested to our game at first, but when they realized that they had no power, they just went to sit at the nearest bench and wait for it to be over.

“Guess I’m buying ice cream!” I say as I reach the top of the stairs. Jungkook is still grinning and my heart lurches in my chest - his smile is so cute oh my god! - so I clear my throat and walk to the nearby shop. I get one for all four of us, handing them out one by one.

I give Jungkook’s his last and our fingers brush one anothers as I do.

The four of us walk back to the apartments together now, all happily eating our ice creams. Jimin is finally starting to sober up, but Jin still seems iffy. We make sure he gets into his apartment before continuing up the stairs to the third floor.

Jimin inputs my passcode and lets himself into the apartment, informing me that he’s going to shower before going to sleep. He bids Jungkook a good night before the door closes, leaving me and Jungkook alone in the hallway, silence filling the space between us.

“Well,” I say, breaking the quiet around us.

My eyes catch sight of his knuckles. Outside, it had been too dark to really notice the bruises that still remain on each of his knuckles on his right hand, but here, in the hallway, I can’t seem to look away.

“If I kiss it, it’ll get all better,” a kind voice from my past reminds me. “There! Isn’t that all better now, Taehyung?”
I reach forward for his hand, taking it and holding it between both of mine. I examine the light smattering of bruising still on his knuckles, the scrapes healing and mostly gone by now. Still, my heart is sad, remembering how hurt these hands were when I found him in the alley.

I gently kiss his bruised knuckles, wanting to make the bruises disappear completely.

“Goodnight, Jeon Jungkook.”

Chapter End Notes

Hope you liked it! Leave us a comment and let us know what you think!!! <3
The next day, I can’t focus. I’m at the gym training, doing my usual workout circuit, but everything is tinted now. It’s hard to keep my mind occupied on anything aside from that night, and the way Taehyung’s hand felt holding mine. The way his lips felt gentle against the bruising on my knuckles.

My face heats up and I shake my head, returning to the punching bag and throwing all force into it in a feeble attempt at forgetting – or at least putting to the side.

Thoughts of that night interfere with everything I do. I wonder if anyone else notices. I feel like I’m not on the ball as I usually am. A few guys at the gym greet me, remarking on the fact that my bruising looks to be healed and that for a while there I was looking pretty rough. The bruise around my eye is the most noticeable mark, and that’s almost completely gone by now. But, even so, even as they all normalize this repetitive motion of coming in to train, I can’t get him out of my head.

Or that boy he was with.

I punch even harder at the bag. When Jin and I had arrived to the bar and I saw him there with Jimin, I could feel my heart dropping. I know that I have no right to feel so possessive of someone I barely even know, but I can’t help it. Jealousy pooled in my mouth and kept me from speaking for a long time. I didn’t want to offend them with my own irrational thoughts.

Jin surprised me that night, too. Sometimes, I think Jin comes off as arrogant to those we meet in public, or even just at the gym. However, the night before he was the Jin that I know, the Jin that is kind and proud of others for their own accomplishments. He really hit it off with the others, all of whom seemed to enjoy our company. I was surprised, the way the few of us in the bar all seemed to feel like a family. Maybe not a family – maybe I don’t really know what that feels like. But we felt like a group. Friends.
It’s been a long time since I’ve had friends.

Behind me, I feel a tap on the shoulder. I’m in the middle of pummeling the punching bag in front of me when I turn and see Jin looking back at me with an amused expression.

“You got some beef with that bag?” he asks. I take a breath, trying to formulate a reply, but come up with nothing and simply laugh instead. “Let’s spar. The ring’s open.”

I nod at him, glancing down at my gloves and feeling the hand wraps inside to make sure nothing is loose before practicing. I punch my fists together a couple of times and hop up into the ring, following close behind Jin. With no referee, we are both just on an honor system, but it’s not like we don’t know the rules.

“Now I want a nice, clean game,” Jin jokes, pulling on his gloves and adjusting the straps. “No funny business. No punches to the groin.”

That’s an inside joke. Once, when I was first starting and had just met Jin, he was practicing with me and I’d accidentally hit him right in the sweet spot. *Foul*, he’d choked out, holding his crotch as he crouched down in pain. I’d felt terrible but had lost it cracking up, shooting back with *Why aren’t your wearing your guard?*

“No groin hits,” I say, tapping two fingers to my forehead. “Roger that.”

Jin’s mouth goes into a straight line as he walks to the middle of the ring. “Aaaaand in this corner! The golden baby boy of Seoul that got his ass beat in the street: Jeon Jungkook!”

I mock the cheers of thousands, pumping my fists in the air as I whisper-scream.

“Aaaaand in *this* corner!” Jin goes on. “63 kilograms of raw energy… The savage from Seoul, Kim Seokjin!”

I let my arms fall and mock the sound of crickets: “Chirp chirp.”

“Prepare to meet your maker,” Jin says, holding up a fist which I punch lightly as we both retreat
into our corners. “1, 2, 3… Fight!”

Jin ends up winning, of course; I’m close behind him, but he’s been fighting for longer and I think that, because we’re friends, sometimes our matches don’t really feel very serious. It’s like a break, hanging out with a friend, rather than training for the very event our profession depends on. It’s hard to want to fight him seriously, anyway – fighting someone who feels like a brother just seems wrong.

When we finish, we leave the ring and let a few guys standing around watching (and most likely judging us) have their turn. I take a few long sips of water from my bottle and wipe my forehead with a towel. Sitting on the bench at one end of the room, my eyes look out at the light coming in from the outdoors. It seems darker than usual, and as a car drives by on the street, a large spray of water jumps from the curb.

It’s pouring.

Strange, because this morning, it looked like it was going to be a regular sunny day. Fall weather sometimes teeters between the two, but such a stark contrast from the predicted weather this morning makes me suddenly wonder if I have an umbrella stowed in the locker room.

And then I think of Taehyung. I wonder if he is working, and if he forgot his umbrella.

The clock on the wall reads 18:00. I stop a moment, stand, and debate.

In the end, I already know what I’m going to do because as soon as the thought crossed my head, I’d already made my mind up.

Without another word, I head to the locker room and start digging in my locker for what I hope is a spare umbrella I’d brought months ago. Bingo; my hands land on the red and white striped umbrella and pull it out, smiling as I do.

I place it next to my bag so as not to forget it, and then rush through my post-workout routine. I do a few stretches, just standing in front of the locker, then I unwrap my hands and rinse off quickly in the shower. Pull my clothes on, pop on my hoodie, throw my backpack over my shoulder and with umbrella in hand, I’m taking off.
Jin sees me leaving as my reflection in the mirror passes his; he’s lifting weights, and looks up to see me speeding off, clearly on a mission.

“Woah, where are you going?” he asks, turning around.

For a moment, I almost say exactly where it is I’m off to – but part of me wonders if it seems weird, to be doing all of this for the transparent reason of wanting to see Taehyung again.

“I have to… run to the convenience store,” is the explanation I land on.

“What for?” he asks. “I was going to see if you wanted to get ramen or something.”

“Ah, no, sorry,” I grin, continuing walking slowly toward the door. “Raincheck.”

Jin shakes his head, rolling his eyes as he turns back to the mirror.

“See you, hyung,” I call, to which I see him forcibly keep down a smile before throwing a peace sign up into the air.

The door jingles as I leave the gym, and as soon as I step outside, I realize that if I didn’t have an umbrella, I’d be soaked through after five seconds. The bottoms of my pant legs are wet from the rain pouring down and splashing up from the pavement, and as I speed off in the direction of Tae’s shop, I find myself wondering if I am legitimately crazy or not. What if he’s still got to work for another six hours? What if he just got there and is soaked already?

I know the way to the shop where Taehyung works, and I’ll always remember the alley nearby. After dodging puddles and trying to evade traffic splashing me, I see it. The neon light hanging above the store flickers. I see it through the darkening air, through the haze of the downpour. In the distance, there’s lightning.

I decide, screw it – and just start booking it. Before I know it, my hands are on the door and I’m walking inside, trying to force my umbrella shut at the same time.

“Ah, you know it’s bad luck to have your umbrella open inside.”
Before I even turn around, I know the voice. The low, even tone that feels soft and gentle. My umbrella pops closed and I lock eyes with the cashier – Tae. His eyes go wide; I don’t think he knew it was me.

“I thought that only applied to opening them indoors,” I say, shaking it off on the rug and walking through the aisles to the front counter. “It doesn’t count if you just run in from outside.”

“Jungkook!” Tae shouts, his expression brightening as he throws his hands into the air. “What a surprise!”

“Are you working hard?” I ask, shaking my sleeves off as I reach the counter, dangling my umbrella from one finger. I can feel water droplets dripping from the bottom and plinking down on my shoe.

Taehyung sighs, leaning forward with his elbows on the countertop. His hair seems affected by the rain; usually wavy, many sections now appear to be curled. “I don’t know what else to do. I’ve only got a half hour left of my shift and no one’s come in since the rain started. It’s nice that you decided to stop by, I’ve been bored out of my mind.”

I can’t help but smile at this. “Poor Tae-hyung.”

He smiles softly.

“I didn’t realize it was supposed to rain today,” I say inconspicuously.

“Neither did I!” he says, eyes widening as both hands slap down on the counter. One thing I have noticed about Kim Taehyung is that he is unintentionally animated; from head to toe, his body seems to move on its own accord depending on which emotion strikes him. It’s really… cute.

“Yeah, I, uh, thought you might not have brought an umbrella with you today for that reason.” I look anywhere else but at him as I say so.

Tae’s fingers tap against the counter. “Yeah, I didn’t actually.” He grins. “If you don’t mind waiting…”
I look up at him then, my eyes wide, lips parting. “Oh, no – no, I don’t mind at all.” Then I smile widely, pointing to the top of his head. “Your hair might thank me.”

Suddenly, he grabs my finger, holds it for a second, then pretends to bite it. I don’t understand why, and I don’t know why I think it’s funny, but for some reason it is and I find myself laughing.

What a strange boy.

“Want a piece of candy?” he asks, grabbing one for himself behind the counter. “They’re cola flavored.”

I shrug, reaching an open hand out. “Sure.” I watch as Tae reaches back into the bag and pulls out a piece for me, then drops it into my hand. “I haven’t had one of these in a while,” I tell him honestly. “My parents never really let me have candy as a child.”

“But as an adult…?” he asks, as though wanting me to continue. He unwraps his candy piece and pops it into his mouth.

“*But, as an adult, I can’t afford them,*” I grin.

Tae looks unaffected. “I always have a budget for candy. It’s one of the main food groups, you know.”

“Oh, really?” I ask, laughing. “Maybe you have too much of a sweet tooth for a boy your age.”

“Nope. I’m pretty sure this is a you problem.”

And then you know what he does?

He fucking *winks.*
I can feel the back of my neck turning hot. I pretend that it isn’t.

The next half hour flies by. Tae pulls two chocolate milks out of the refrigerator and we sit next to each other on the counter, drinking milk and watching the rain pour outside. No one bothers us; here, in this heavy downpour, it’s like we’re in our own secret place, surrounded by the rain that hides us in this corner of the universe from the rest of the world. Tae gargles his milk. He makes me laugh so hard it comes out my nose. We keep eating candies; Tae unwraps mine for me before handing them over.

It’s small gestures like this that make me feel odd. Not bad, not good – but strange, because it has been a long time since someone has ever made me feel cared for in such a way.

I keep looking at his hands. I keep looking at my feet.

When the door opens, it’s not a customer, but Kim Taehyung’s co-worker. She bows, and Tae chastises her for being late. She apologizes profusely – she must always be late – but then Tae laughs, hopping off the counter and telling her it’s fine. His hand falls on top of her head, rustling her hair. She looks down at her shoes, and I can tell she is trying not to smile.

I can feel it happening again – the jealousy, rising in my throat like bile.

But then, that same hand reaches out to where I sit on the counter. A silent offering to help me down. I look at Taehyung’s coworker and the look on her face when my hand slides into his; part of me feels bad. Part of me feels like I knew it would hurt her feelings. Part of me feels like, if it were me, I’d want to tear my own head off.

The other part of me didn’t care. The other part of me just wanted to see what it would feel like to hold his hand.

On the floor by our feet is the now dry umbrella. It’s still raining outside, coming down in gray sheets that turns the earth to an ocean. I pick it up, worried that we may still become soaked despite the umbrella – and that’s when I see it.

An entire display of umbrellas, situated right across from where we’d been sitting the entire time. My breath catches in my throat; there’s no way Tae didn’t see them. There’s no way he would have let me believe I was saving his ass by showing up like a knight in shining armor to take him home safely if he’d known there was a whole rack of umbrellas at his disposal this entire time.
My gaze shoots beside me at Tae, who is already looking at me. I must have a ridiculous look on my face because he raises his eyebrows and holds in a laugh.

“Hyojin, good luck with all of these customers,” he deadpans, shooting a look back at his coworker and offering her a peace sign. She rolls her eyes and says something as I cross the floor, eyes down, not listening. I feel stupid. I probably shouldn’t have come here at all.

I open the door and pop the umbrella open; holding it open, I let Tae walk out first under the safety of the umbrella. His shoulders hunch sharply, neck bending as his eyes dart around him at the rainwater hitting the pavement; his forehead wrinkles, eyebrow furrowing as his square mouth falls open.

“It’s raining cats and dogs,” he states, his voice raising slightly to be heard over the rain as I step out of the shop after him. The door closes behind me and I bring the umbrella closer to our heads. I can already feel the cool water soaking through my shoes, the ground threatening to turn into one huge puddle.

“Sure is,” I agree as we start walking in the direction of the apartments. “All kinds.”

“Poodles,” he says. Tae kicks his boot through a puddle and watches as the water shoots ahead of us. “Chihuahuas.”

I grin. “Lions, tigers...”

Tae holds up a finger, turning sharply toward me with his full attention. “No bears,” he says.

“Bears aren’t a cat or a dog,” I justify. “I wasn’t going to include them.”

Tae turns then, facing forward again. I glance over at him and see the corners of his lips turn upward. “I was just checking,” he says quietly. “So what did you get up to today?”

“Just training,” I explain, wondering how much to divulge. I worry that it will come across as either narcissistic or boring to talk too much about boxing. What I’d rather talk about is how Tae drinks his tea, or what kind of soil Tae uses to grow his succulents. But, I decide to at least partially
answer his question. “Jin and I go to the gym and train most days. We did some sparring today.”

Taehyung nods. “Do you like boxing?”

I shrug. “I think so.”

“You don’t know?”

The rain keeps pouring; I can see the rain slowly soaking up Taehyung’s pant leg. “I like it just fine. It’s hard work that I’m good at. I like fighting.”

Tae shoots a quick glance at me before looking ahead again. “You don’t seem like a very aggressive person.”

I’m not sure what possesses me, but suddenly I stop, hold up a fist and jab it toward him. When he sees me, he jumps – startled – then raises his hands to cover his mouth. Kim Taehyung’s laugh is warm.

“You don’t want to fight me,” Tae says sternly. “How old are you again? I could kick you into next week.”

“Kicking is a foul,” I grin.

“Your face is a foul.”

Now it’s my turn to laugh. “Ouch! Burn.”

Tae presses his first finger to his thumb and makes a sizzling noise. Roasted.

“By the way,” he says, kicking another puddle, “I’m glad you showed up today. You saved me from walking through all of this mess.”
I don’t say anything for a moment, thinking of the entire umbrella display that had been positioned in front of the counter. “I have a feeling you’d have been okay,” I reply slowly.

“I wouldn’t have bought one,” Tae says, and without even having to address what he’s talking about, we both know. “I can’t just take things from the store, either. I would have just walked through this.” He smiles. “I don’t mind the rain usually – it’s just getting colder is all.” His elbow nudges my arm. “So thank you.”

“It’s nothing.” I keep walking.

After a few moments of silence, I see out of the corner of my eye Tae reaching his hand toward me, and then situating itself on my shoulder. I don’t say anything, and neither does he. However, I can feel his energy like a rolling wave, pouring out of him and into me he tries to show his gratitude. After a few more moments, he looks at me, and when I look back at him his eyes immediately catch mine. I forget that I need to keep walking, and my footsteps slow considerably.

“You are kind, Jungkook,” he says genuinely. I can feel it coming from deep inside of him, from his heart.

All I can do is nod, and in my head, I think: You are the one who is kind, Kim Taehyung.

Eventually his hand drops from my shoulder and he sighs loudly. “Have you eaten yet?”

“Unless your candy counts.”

“It doesn’t.”

“Well then, no.”

Tae makes a soft sound, thoughtful. For a moment I wonder what he’s thinking, but there is something about Tae that is transparent; perhaps not all of him is, but there is so much of him that can be easily read. His expressions give him away. His easy smile, the way his eyes zone in on exactly the thing he wants: and right now, it happens to be ramen.
There’s a small ramen stand that, if it wasn’t raining, could be seen a block away from where we’re walking. You can’t see it, because the rain is still coming down in buckets, but you can almost smell it.

Tae’s chin falls, but his eyes stay forward, lips parting.

I beat him to it.

“Let’s get ramen.”

His eyes go wide, and from the corner of my eye I see it: the boxiest smile I’ve ever witnessed in my entire life.

“Jeon Jungkook, you are a mind reader!” And then he shoves me.

My arm gets drenched. “Hey!”

“Sorry!” he laughs again, taking hold of the umbrella and guiding it back over my head. “I’m just so hungry. Perfect timing, Jungkook.”

My stomach growls a little. I guess I probably should eat something, especially after the workout. We head down the street, our feet moving a little faster than they had been before. When we get close enough, the overhead light of the ramen stand seems to glow.

Just before we make it in, a bus passes on the road and we get splashed by a huge puddle. Without even thinking, Tae and I both yelp loudly, jerking away from the street… But the damage has already been done.

“A lot of good this did,” I mutter, cursing this damn umbrella. Worthless piece of crap.

“Hey,” Tae says, laughing as he runs a wet hand down his wet face and then through his hair which is now also wet. “That umbrella is precious. It brought you into the store earlier, and now we’re getting ramen.”
I swallow hard.

Tae ducks into the stand first and I follow behind, shaking off the rainwater from the umbrella as I close it and toss it by our feet. We each take a seat at the countertop; surprisingly, there’s a few others here as well. They’re already eating, and look like they’ve been sitting under the shelter of the ramen stand to get out of the rain. One by one, the other customers look up from their bowls and across the counter at us, drenched from head to toe.

“’I’m hungryyyyy, ” Tae groans, stretching across the counter widely before sitting back upright, arching his back and letting out a content sigh. The people with their ramen look away.

I shiver. It’s getting colder and the wet sweatshirt around me gives me a feeling like I’ll catch a cold. Tae doesn’t seem to mind the chill, or the fact that his clothes are sticking to his skin. I run a hand through my hair and feel the water droplets fall out, looking away as soon as I notice it.

When the chef comes over, Tae orders himself a big bowl of black noodles with an extra egg, and I decide to get the same.

“Do you ever come here?” Tae asks, turning toward me on his stool. He folds his arms across his chest and leans forward on the counter.

“Yeah, all the time,” I tell him, smiling. “I come here after boxing matches sometimes.”

“Ah,” Tae says, like he knows. “A treat if you win?”

“Or a treat if I lose.” He laughs. “You gotta find some way not to feel so bad for yourself.”

Tae’s eyes move to watch the chef as he cooks our noodles and prepares other ingredients. “It probably tastes good after all of that,” he muses, more to himself than to me. “After… getting punched, and beaten on for so long.” He winces. I wonder if he’s putting himself in my shoes, if he’s ever imagined what that feels like.

“It does,” I agree. “But I’m sure it’ll taste just as good now.”
“It’ll be warm,” Tae adds, and I smile.

I shake my head. “Not just that.”

Tae glances at me. “Then why?”

Just as I start to open my mouth, right before I can tell him because I’m with you, two bowls of spicy ramen are placed in front of us, chopsticks resting horizontally on top. “Enjoy,” the chef says, and we thank him, immediately breaking the chopsticks in two and going in.

We’re both silent as we eat, except for every once in a while when Tae moans. “Delicious,” he says. I nod, continuing to chow down, glancing up at him every few bites just out of curiosity. Before I know it, I’m at the bottom of the bowl, not quite sure how I got there and yet not mad.


Tae does burp. “Wow,” he acknowledges, then laughs, leaning back and holding his stomach. “Oh wow that was good.” His tongue keeps flicking out of his mouth, running over his lips. I cross my legs, trying to stop them from bouncing up and down.

We pay for our food, and by the time we’re done, the rain has considerably slowed. We’re still totally wet, except I can see a few of Kim Taehyung’s hairs starting to go wavy as the top dries.

When we stand, I go to pop open the umbrella – but when I offer it to Tae, he just watches me a moment. Quiet, contemplative. Then shakes his head, pulls back the curtain and walks out into the rain. I watch him as he takes three long steps out into it, the slow rain sticking to his skin. Little droplets form along his forehead, dribbling off his chin as his arms spread wide, face turned up to the sky. He closes his eyes.

My breath catches in my throat.

And then I follow him.
I don’t open the umbrella.

I run out into the rain after him, and when he looks up to see me chasing after him, he laughs. “And we were so worried about getting wet!” Tae’s mouth is a boxy smile that shows off both rows of teeth – the most unabashed and pure smile I have ever seen in my life. Jin usually just laughs at me when I’ve done something stupid; Tae laughs at nothing. At everything. Tae’s happiness permeates.

He’s the first person I have ever met with a lust for life.

Tae shouts to the sky a loud woo, and I can’t help but do the same. Arms outstretched under the gray, stormy sky.

When we get back to the apartment complex, each of us dripping up the stairs, we turn to face each other before going into our own separate places.

“Make sure you get out of those wet clothes,” Tae tells me.

“I will,” I laugh. “Always trying to take care of me.”

“I’m your hyung,” he states, puffing his chest out a bit. Proud. The back of my neck warms and my stomach bursts with a sudden flash of something. I’m not sure what.

I guess butterflies.

I don’t know.

He holds up a hand to say goodbye, but I mistake it for a high-five – and just as I hit mine with his, I hesitate. I don’t pull away as soon as I should. I want to keep touching his hand for just a moment longer.

Tae smiles – his fingers lace through mine.
Breath catching in my throat – I do the same.

“See you soon, Jeon Jungkook.”

His hand falls from mine, and when he smiles at me, I can’t help smiling, nodding. And then we leave.

Later that night, I hear three loud bangs on my door. When I answer it, I know exactly who to expect.

“What’s up, Worldwide Handsome,” I greet. Jin just pushes past me and into my apartment.

“I’m trying a new recipe which is asking for table salt,” he explains.

I watch him with a blank expression as he goes on, rifling through my cabinets with reckless abandon in search of the simplest ingredient known to man. “And you don’t have table salt because…”

“Don’t ask questions,” he explains. “Just tell me where the salt is.” Jin spends another brief moment scanning the open cupboard in front of him, then whips around to face me with his hand pointed into a finger gun.

“Or what?” I ask.

“Or…” he trails off, clearly trying to think of something good. This is a stickup, after all.

“Either you tell me where the salt is, or I’m going to quit pretending to be interested at all in cooking and we just go get drinks,” he decides.

I look at him a moment longer before shaking my head, laughing under my breath. “Fine. You
want to get drinks?"

“Well, if you’re not going to tell me where the salt is then I guess we have no choice,” he says, as if it’s my problem.

Staring blankly at him another moment, I open my mouth, starting to point to where my salt and pepper shakers are located on the small bistro table near the window, but he stops me, cutting me off before I can say a word.

“You know, nevermind. Who needs to learn new recipes when the old ones will do just fine? Come on, let’s go get drinks.”

So that’s how we end up at the counter sitting in front of Namjoon, who stands long and lanky, drying glasses with a small dish towel. The bar isn’t very busy – it’s just a Wednesday, not really a cause for going out, especially for people with normal 9-5 jobs. Hoseok is in the back, supposedly mopping, but I hear the pinball machine going off and I know Namjoon does, too.

“You guys have been coming in here a lot more often lately,” Namjoon remarks, turning the glass he’s been working on upside down and stacking it on the shelf beside the bar.

“I’m trying to become an alcoholic,” Jin deadpans.

At this, Namjoon looks up, his mouth a hard line. He’s not reacting to Jin’s shit. I take a sip of my drink so I don’t laugh.

“You know, Taehyung doesn’t usually come here on Wednesdays,” I hear suddenly called from the back room, followed by the sound of plates clinking.

“Quiet, Suga,” Namjoon shouts back.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Jin stiffen.

“Why’d he mention that?” Jin asks. I just shrug.
Namjoon scoffs. “Suga says things that he thinks are funny, but they’re actually not really his business.” He says it loud enough for the boy in the back to hear; this is followed by the sound of a plate clinking so loud, it’s shocking that it didn’t shatter.

I swallow hard. For some reason, I think they’re talking about me.

Thankfully, the moment is blown over as Hoseok returns from the back, seeming to have had his fill of pinball and is ready to get back to work. He wheels the mop back into the wet area behind the bar and begins scrubbing.

“You guys coming to the party on the 31st?” he asks offhandedly, glancing up as he mops.

Jin leans back in his chair, one hand on his beer. “What kind of party?”

“The Halloween kind,” Namjoon answers. “Hoseok is very excited about it.”

Hoseok looks back at him. “And you aren’t! You got your costume three months ago!”

“Roasted,” Jin smirks, taking a sip of his beer and sitting it back down on the countertop. “What are the stipulations of said party?”

“Costumes only,” Hoseok states, putting his mop down and walking over to us. He leans his elbows on the counter and Namjoon shakes his head. I can sense his frustration at Hoseok’s lack of urgency regarding closing time, but he’s too much of a pushover to reprimand him.

I think Hoseok knows this.

Jin raises his hand. “Question,” he states.

Hoseok leans back, pointing to him, eyebrows raised in mock curiosity.
“Uh, if I come as say, myself…” He asks.

“That is not a costume,” Hoseok states. “Not even close. You need to try. If it doesn’t look like you tried, you aren’t allowed.”

In the back, I hear a cough, then a small: “Really laying down the law.” I imagine Suga smiling.

I raise my hand, and when am permitted to inquire by Hoseok, ask: “Who’s coming?”

“Usuals,” he responds quickly. “Mostly just our customers, a few wildcards. If you mean who from the complex is going…” He taps his chin. “All of us. I think Taehyung mentioned bringing a friend.”

“Oh,” I say suddenly. I’d been listening for a name.

Beside me, Jin takes a long drink, and when he’s finished the bottle, he sets it down on the counter with a certain edge to his attitude. A brief moment passes, and I can sense him about to say something. Words on the tip of his tongue.

I wait.

His tongue runs over his lips and he glances over at me.

“What is going on with you two?”

“Nothing,” I reply, words leaving my mouth before I can even fully process the question. All I know is that I need a mile between this question and me, and my mind will let me say anything to widen the gap. “We’re just neighbors. He’s a nice guy.”

“How’d you know I was talking about Taehyung?” is his follow up.

I’m getting flustered but I don’t want to look like I am. “I just figured you meant him – Hoseok mentioned him specifically.”
“Hm.” Jin stares at me for a moment more, then leaves it at that. I wonder if I’ve actually dodged a bullet or just prolonged a bomb.

“We’ll be there,” Jin says finally, but he’s not in the goofy mood he’d been in earlier. We can all sense it. Hoseok nods, smiling at him anyway, then leaves to continue mopping.

There’s a minute of silence before Jin nudges me with his elbow. I glance to my left at him, and see the corners of his mouth turn upward. He’s trying.

“Guess we’ve got to get costumes.”

Chapter End Notes

Hope y'all enjoyed this ish!!! Blease leave a comment if u can find it in ur hearteu...
We thrive by hearing from u all... THANK U <3
phew, this is a long chapter it just kind of got out of hand lmao enjoy it, enjoy it!

Snap. Snapsnapsnap. Snap. Snap-

“Would you quit it?”

I lower my camera, my finger still poised over the shutter, to look at Suga. He gives me a hard look, the kind that could kill if looks could, well, kill. His eyes are dark and annoyed, his mouth set in a thin line, clearly stating that if I take one more picture, he’s going to react across the table and grab my collar.

I let an easy smile fall on my lips. “I’m just trying to capture the moment, hyung,” I inform him and he rolls his eyes, turning back to his current project: Hanging Halloween decorations around the bar before opening. “Jeesh, you know, you’re supposed to support my hobbies and interests. What kind of hyung are you?”

“The kind that will destroy you if you keep taking unflattering pictures of me,” he retorts and I laugh, throwing my head back a little.

“They’re not unflattering. You look good.”

“Ooo, let me see!” Hoseok shouts, dropping his end of the banner that they were trying to hang together. He jumps down from the bar and Suga sighs, now more irritated than before, as Hoseok sits next to me at one of the tables, looking over my shoulder at my camera. “Wow, Suga! You do look great!”

I click to the next picture, which is an up-close one of Suga, who hadn’t been paying attention to me at the time. His mouth is hung open slightly, his nostrils flared as he listened to whatever Namjoon had been saying in that moment. Hoseok bursts out laughing at his expression, slapping my shoulder as he does.
“Hoseok, are we going to hang this or not?” Suga says, impatiently tapping his foot on the bar. Hoseok keeps sniggering as he makes his way back to the bar, reaching up for Suga’s hand to help him back up.

They finish hanging the banner, which simply reads out “Happy Halloween!” in big creepy lettering. The rest of the bar is full of these kinds of decorations - orange and purple and black streamers hang across the ceiling, all the tables have black tablecloths covering them, and even the bar has a spooky orange lighting around the liquor bottles. Namjoon is busy organizing all the strange snacks that they’ve put together, like witch hat cookies, some blood red punch that has a ton of alcohol in it, and sausages wrapped up like mummies.

“What are you dressing up as again, hyung?” I ask as Suga and Hoseok get down from the bar. I lift my camera and take a snapshot of Hoseok throwing peace signs behind Suga’s head with a goofy grin on his face.

“Nothing,” Suga says, his hand going up to block my view before I can take another picture.

“He’s going as a chef,” Hoseok informs me, giving me a thumbs up. “I got him a hat and apron. He just thinks he’s going to win the fight of not wearing it.”

I cover my mouth to hide my laughter, watching as Hoseok puts his hand on Suga’s shoulder, following him into the kitchen to get a few more decorations from the back. I turn my attention to Namjoon, who is towel drying a few glasses at the bar, and take a seat in front of him, lifting my camera up to my eye to snap a picture.

Namjoon is nice, he has a lot more patience than Suga does and is a lot more calm than Hoseok is. He smiles, not looking up, and his dimples pop in his cheeks. I snap another picture.

“What about you? What are you going as tonight?” I ask curiously, looking over the pictures that I took during the hour that I’ve been hanging around, helping decorate for the big Halloween party later.

“A samurai,” he replies, looking up at me with a big, cheesy grin. “I’ve got a sword and armor. It’s gonna be dope.”

Hoseok and Suga emerge from the back kitchen carrying some more things - plates, platters and
another punch bowl that all have a spooky look to them. I’m both amazed and impressed at the amount of effort that they’ve put into this Halloween party. But I should have known, since Hoseok and Namjoon love Halloween, and even Suga likes it a little, though he pretends not to care about anything at all.

“Well I’m going as a pumpkin,” Hoseok beams, proud of his costume. “What about you, Taehyung? What are you dressing up as?”

It’s embarrassing to say that I didn’t have much money to put toward a costume. It’s embarrassing even if I know that all four of us are pretty poor, since they live in the same apartment complex that I do (maybe even worse, since the three of them share one apartment).

“A ghost,” I reply and they just look at me. “What? It’s spooky!”

“You’re one of the most creative people I know and you’re just going as a ghost?” Hoseok comments and I can feel my cheeks heating up with shame. I don’t tell him that if I had money, I would go as The Joker, or maybe a cool superhero. “Well, I’m sure it’ll be great! Knowing you, you’ll put some cool twist on it or something.”

Namjoon nods his head in agreement. My stomach churns, because now I feel like I’m going to let them all down. I think of my costume upstairs in my apartment, laying on flat on my bed so not to wrinkle before the party. A white sheet with two circles cut out for my eyes.

“So,” Namjoon draws out the ‘o’ sound, watching as Suga and Hoseok walk away to set out the food neatly, “is Jimin coming tonight?”

This catches me off guard, but I can’t help but think of the last time Jimin was over. He would not stop talking about Namjoon from the bar this, Namjoon from the bar that. Of course, he was drunk then and drunk Jimin talks about literally anything once you get him going. So I didn’t really pay much attention.

Until now, anyway.

I raise an eyebrow, smug, as I look at Namjoon. “Why? Should I invite him?”

Namjoon licks his suddenly dry lips and clears his throat, his fingers nearly dropping a glass. He
fumbles for a second, then sets it back down on the countertop. “I mean, it would be cool, if you
did. Isn’t he your best friend?”

“Uh huh,” I reply, grinning. “You like him.”

It’s not a question, but a statement. I can see Namjoon starting to sweat - he doesn’t really do
confrontation. He’s (luckily) saved when Hoseok accidentally knocks something over, creating a
huge mess of punch on the floor. Suga just looks up at the ceiling for a long minute, as if calming
himself down before physically bringing harm to a sheepishly smiling Hoseok. Namjoon takes this
exact moment to grab a handful of towels and shout, “Oh, no! Looks like I better clean that up!”

I watch the three of them start to clean up the mess on the floor, Hoseok apologizing as Suga just
retreats to the kitchen to make more punch, Namjoon using towels to soak up the red mess.

Suga returns to the bar with all the ingredients of another punch in the making. I lean my elbows on
the bartop, my hands holding my face up as I watch him intricately mix and measure everything
together. Behind me, I can hear Namjoon and Hoseok talking about how all of their towels would
be stained red for the rest of time.

“We invited Jin and Jungkook,” Suga tells me. “They came in last night.”

“Oh?” I say, leaning forward a little more at the mention of their names. “Are they coming tonight,
then?”

“Yeah, they both said that they would come.”

I nod, smiling at the news. I’ve been excited for the party all week and had danced around the topic
with Jungkook a few times. But the truth is, I’ve been too scared to invite him. What if he hates
Halloween? What if he didn’t want to hang out with us at this bar again?

Or maybe I’m just nervous asking him to hang out, in general. He’s super nice, but he can be hard
to read sometimes.

“So what’s going on between you two?” Suga asks and my eyes widen in surprise, my mouth
falling open slightly. Now, I’m the one caught off guard as Namjoon comes back around the bar to
finish cleaning up the glasses and organize them for tonight.
“W-what do you mean? Nothing’s going on,” I tell him and he snorts, finally looking up from the punchbowl to look at me. “What? It’s the truth. We’re friends and neighbors.”

“Sure.”

My stomach churns and I stare at him, putting my hands down on the bartop. “I mean it.”

“Okay.”

But it’s not okay, because Suga’s using such a condescending tone. Like he knows something that I don’t.

“Why?” I ask now, leaning in until I’m really close to him and he’s pushing me away slightly. “Did he say something about me?”

Suga looks at me again and squints. “No, he didn’t. Unless you count him asking if you would be at the Halloween party tonight, which is a yes.”

I sit back again and pout. “Then why are you suggesting that there’s anything between us?”

“Because I saw how you guys were when you were here last time together,” he replies with a simple shrug of his shoulders. “You were whispering to each other and talking, totally ignoring your other friends when they came to the bar. Plus, you like, fell on him.”

“I tripped!” I shout, throwing my hands up in frustration. “There’s nothing between us. We’re just friends! I mean, he’s super cute and I like hanging out with him, but I doubt he thinks of boys like that. Let alone boys like me…”

“I don’t know, Tae. He seemed just as into you as you seemed to be into him.” Suga goes back to stirring the mixture together before wiping his hands on his black apron to look at me again. “But, hey, if there’s nothing, then sorry I brought it up. It just seemed like something.”
I feel weird as Suga walks back into the kitchen. Weird because trying to imagine that someone like Jungkook liking me makes me feel butterflies in the pit of my stomach. Weird because I didn’t even realize that I could like him, either.

Weird because Suga somehow has completely unraveled me with this very thought.

I spin in the barstool and hop off of it, turning back to Namjoon and Hoseok (who is using a mop to clean the rest of the punch).

“Well, I’ll be taking my leave now,” I say, saluting them as they all look up at me. “I’ll see you tonight, boys. And don’t worry, Namjoon, I did invite Jimin. I’m going to pick him up from the bus stop right now, actually.”

Namjoon smiles a little, his dimple popping on one side, as Hoseok looks over at him, gasping and feigning shock. I’m guessing that Namjoon has been talking about Jimin a lot, too, because Hoseok looks like he knows something.

Outside, the air is cold. I burrow myself further into my thick winter coat, tucking my camera away in my bag safely. It’s the only thing in the world that matters to me - that’s worth anything. Once it’s secure, I pat the bag twice and start on my way to the bus stop, knowing that Jimin will be arriving within the next ten minutes.

Seoul is really pretty in autumn. Even if there aren’t a lot of trees, there are enough to add color to my walk; reds and yellows and burnt oranges. The sidewalks are dusted in fallen leaves, which crunch under the soles of my converse as I skip to the bus stop, my bag lightly bumping into my hip with each movement. It’s cold, but it’s better than the summer’s sweltering heat.

I take a seat at the bus stop and check my watch. It’s almost 14:00, which means he should be here any second.

There are only a few other people at the bus stop, waiting. On the bench, next to me, are two girls wearing high school uniforms, both leaning into each other and looking at a phone, laughing. There’s a man in a business suit standing off to the side, his phone placed at his ear, talking too quickly for me to pick up much.

An elderly woman makes her way to the bus stop and I stand up, offering her my seat on the bench. She thanks me as she slowly eases herself down, allowing me to hold her arm to help her. She
smiles at me and my chest warms, because she reminds me of my grandmother.

From a distance, I can see a bus driving towards me. When it stops, several people get off while the rest of the two high school girls and the man in a business suit are waiting for their turns to board. The elderly woman stays seated, stretching out her legs a bit. She must be waiting for the next bus.

“Tae!” Jimin shouts, waving his arms over his head as he jumps off the bus. I grin and open my arms wide for him, as usual, and he laughs and runs towards me.

“Taehyung, I’ve missed you!” Jimin shouts, jumping into my arms. I stumble backwards a step, as I always do, but manage to hold us both up, hugging him back. His familiar scent fills my nose and I sigh in relief, just so happy to have my best friend back by my side.

We pull away and I glance at his two bags, holding my hand out for him to give one to me.

“How was your trip here?” I ask, peeking inside to see containers of food. “Also, what’s all this?”

“Well, I brought some side dishes for you. Last time I was here, I noticed how empty your fridge was,” he replies with a grin. I sigh and turn to hug him again, feigning tears at the kind gesture and he laughs, patting my back, too. “Also, I can’t believe you invited me to this party so last minute. I had such a hard time finding a costume!”

“What did you get?” I ask curiously as we reach the apartment building. “I’m going as a ghost.”

Jimin laughs, “Cute. I’m going as Mickey Mouse when he’s a wizard.”

“Like from Fantasia?” I ask, furrowing my eyebrows as I try to imagine Jimin wearing that costume. Normally, he would pick something more like a cute cat or maybe a jedi from Star Wars. “That’s gonna be cool!”

“Yeah, it wasn’t my first choice, but it’ll do!” he replies as we start to climb the stairs. “Who else is going to this party, by the way?”
“Oh, you know, Hoseok, Suga, Jungkook, Jin,” I list, watching as he looks at me closely, his ears practically raised as they listen in for the one specific name he’s hoping I’ll mention. “I think that’s it.”

“Oh-oh,” his face falls and I almost feel bad, “Namjoon isn’t going?”

“I didn’t mention him?” I reply, my tone sweet and cutesy, and his eyes narrow at me. “Nah, he’ll be there. He’s dressing as a samurai with swords. He seemed really excited when I told him that you were coming, too.”

“Really?” Jimin perks up instantly and I laugh, putting my passcode and letting us into my apartment. “What did he say? Taehyung, I need every detail!”

“Wow, you really outdid yourself.”

I’m standing in the center of my studio apartment, wearing a white sheet over my clothes with two eye holes cut so that I can see. It’s simple, but effective. Underneath, I’m able to move freely and wear comfortable jeans and a sweater to keep warm. Honestly, this costume might just be the best one I’ve ever worn.

Jimin, on the other hand, is less impressed.

But he’s also dressed as Mickey Mouse from Fantasia, so I don’t think he’s got much room to judge.

He’s dressed in the burgundy velvet robes, with the signature blue wizard hat and of course (and this is what has me laughing so hard that my sides are physically in pain), he couldn’t forget the Mickey Mouse gloves, which are about 5 times bigger than his hands, making them giant. Absolutely insane.

“Oh shut up, like you got room to talk,” I laugh, pointing at his gloved hands again. Jimin glares at me before throwing a mighty punch to my shoulder, which is actually pretty powerful with that giant Mickey glove on. I stumble backwards and land on my bed and he laughs. “Maybe you should try fighting with Jungkook or Jin tonight. Bet you could take them with those gloves on.”
Jimin laughs again and I stand back up, fixing my sheet so that I can see out of the eye holes again. “How are you going to be able to drink and eat? You don’t have a hole for your mouth.”

“How are you going to hold anything with those giant gloves on?” I retort and Jimin lifts his hand to punch again but thinks better of it. I grin at him and grab my wallet, slipping it into my back pocket. “Alright, we ready?”

“I think so,” he says, adjusting his gloves again. “Ugh, my hands are sweaty already.”

We step out into the hallway and the same time that Jungkook is stepping out of his apartment. I lock eyes with him for a moment before a huge smile breaks out across my face, taking in his own costume.

He’s wearing all black - black jeans, boots, sweater - but he’s also covered head to toe in toilet paper (though he missed some spots for sure). Jimin looks at him and sighs, muttering something about us having the two most basic costumes ever before he starts walking down the stairs, but I laugh and hold my hand up for a high five, the sheet getting caught on my fingers.

“Nice costume, man,” I tell him with a light laugh. “Simple, yet effective.”

Jungkook laughs under the toilet paper that’s wrapped around his face. “You, too.”

We follow Jimin and meet up with Jin at the main doors on the first floor. He’s dressed in black slacks, a button up shirt that has a pink gingham pattern, and a blazer, all of which doesn’t really match together. But somehow, with his hands in his pockets, he’s kind of pulling it off.

“What… are you supposed to be?” Jimin asks slowly, looking at him and squinting, trying to figure it out. He glances back to us for help but Jungkook and I both shrug, unsure.

“I’m Worldwide Handsome, you know?” Jin shouts, pulling his index finger and thumb out in front of his chin. He’s waiting for a reaction, but all three of us are silent. “Wow, you guys suck. I have the best costume here and you’re sleeping on it.”

“Did you see Jimin’s gloves?” I ask, changing the subject.
“Taehyung, stop making fun of the gloves,” Jimin sighs as Jin looks down at his hands, as if just now noticing. How he didn’t see them right away, I’m not sure. They’re pretty obvious. “I’m sweaty and doing my best and you are not making this easier.”

Jin bursts out laughing, spitting in Jimin’s face a little and Jungkook starts to laugh next to me, too, pointing at Jimin’s hands. All the laughter makes me laugh again, even though my sides are still sore from laughing so hard earlier. Jimin stands there, the centre of attention, trying not to laugh. But it’s only a few seconds later that his facade breaks and he’s smiling so big that his eyes close and then, he’s laughing, too.

It feels good. My chest is warm.

Jin finally stops laughing, wiping tears from his eyes and Jungkook lets his hand fall back to his side. It brushes lightly against mine under the sheet, and we both snap our heads to look at each other before I offer him a sheepish smile, apologizing for standing too close.

“Let’s go!” I shout, hopping off the last stair and putting my hands up on Jimin’s shoulders to steer him forward. “Namjoon is going to love your costume, Jimin. He’s going to laugh so hard.”

Jimin starts to try and take the gloves off, but Jin links his arm with his, making it impossible to remove them. Jungkook follows along by my side, the four of us laughing and cracking more jokes about Jimin’s costume choice as we walk to the bar.

The bar isn’t far, so our walk is relatively short. But we are also the only ones dressed in costumes, which elicits some pretty weird stares and judgemental whispers as we pass people on the sidewalks. It’s times like this that I’m glad to be a ghost - covered in a sheet, my face invisible from the shame of looking a bit like a fool.

Jin is eating it up, though.

“Yeah, happy Halloween,” he greets everyone that we pass. And I do mean everyone.

“Jin, you’re so embarrassing,” Jimin laughs, slapping his arm with his massive glove. It knocks Jin forward and takes all of us by surprise, including Jimin. “Whoops, sorry. Guess I don’t know my own strength.”
Jin glares for a moment, then slowly reaches up to rub his shoulder. “Damn Park Jimin. That’s some powerful hands you got there.”

I snort and Jungkook laughs quietly next to me. “He hit me earlier, too. Nearly knocked the wind out of me.”

“That’s your own fault!” Jimin shouts, throwing his hands up in the air. Jin and I both dodge out of fear, but Jungkook doesn’t move and for that, he faces the consequences. A smack right in the face. “Oh, shit, Jungkook! I’m so sorry!”

Jungkook holds his nose as he looks up at him, eyes wide in surprise (and maybe fear, I’m not sure). I put a hand on his shoulder in worry, leaning in so I can look and he moves his hand away from his nose to let me examine him.

“Well, it’s not bleeding,” I report and he flares his nostrils a little, wincing. “You okay?”

“Yeah, I’m good,” he says, leaning back a bit and fixing his toilet paper over his face. “You weren’t kidding. Those gloves could kill a man.”

Jimin sighs and looks down at his own hands, “I need to get it together.”

Jin laughs again at that and throws an arm around Jungkook’s shoulder, steering him into the bar. I pat Jimin on the back comfortingly as we follow them inside, where music is already playing loud enough to hear the bass beat outside. Inside, there’s more people than usual sitting around, all dressed up in costumes.

Hoseok greets all of us, dressed in a giant inflatable pumpkin suit, complete with a hat and orange leggings.

“Taehyung, I can’t believe you weren’t joking when you said you were coming as a ghost,” he tells me with a slight frown. “How are you going to drink and eat? You don’t have a mouth hole.”

“That’s what I’m saying,” Jimin agrees, standing next to Hoseok to look at me.
“I’ll just hold my drink under the sheet,” I reply with a shrug, the sheet flowing around my legs from the movement. “Wow, Namjoon looks amazing!”

Jimin turns his head so fast, I’m surprised it doesn’t physically cause him pain. We walk up to the bar to greet Namjoon, dressed head to toe in armor, with a long sword strapped to his side. He’s also wearing a wig with long hair that’s in a ponytail and eyeliner to make his eyes pop.

Jimin and I take a seat for a few minutes, both of us ordering a beer.

“You look great,” Jimin says, leaning forward on his elbows on the bar. “I should have worn something like that, but Tae didn’t tell me until super last minute. Now all I’m left with is regret.”

“Thanks, Jimin,” Namjoon replies, a tinge of pink dotting his cheeks as his dimples pop again. “I think you look great, though. Those gloves are dope.”

Jimin beams, his whole body moving closer. Namjoon slides us each a beer and we thank him, asking about how the party’s been so far. It becomes quickly quite clear that Jimin really is wanting to talk with just Namjoon, so I grab my beer and saunter away, leaving them to flirt without the third wheel.

I glance around the bar, looking for Jin and Jungkook to talk to and find them sitting at a table together. Hoseok is standing at their table, most likely taking their order.

I’m about to walk over when I feel a hand tap my shoulder.

“Oh, wow,” I say as I turn to face Suga, wearing a chef hat and a red apron that reads “Kiss the Cook” in big, block letters. His face looks displeased, and I bite back a laugh. “You look great, hyung. Hoseok mentioned that he got you some sort of costume.”

“Shut up,” he replies, but his tone has a sigh to it more than bite. “You’re one to talk.”

“Hey, mine may be cliche, but it’s also a classic.”
“Whatever you say.” His tone is uncaring, so I don’t bother defending myself anymore about it. I pull my beer under the sheet to take another drink of it, momentarily losing my eye holes as the sheet slips from my movement.

“Are you off work?” I ask as Suga reaches up to help me move the sheet back down.

“Yeah, just finished.”

“Wanna get a beer and join us then?” I ask and he shrugs, but smiles a little, almost like he was hoping I would ask him to join us. “Come on, let’s get you a beer.”

I walk with Suga back to the bar so he can get a beer and find Jimin is finished with his first and ordering his second. Namjoon is laughing at something he said and Jimin grins at him, blushing like crazy.

Once Suga has a beer, I have my second beer and Jimin has his, we all walk over to the table to finally join Jin and Jungkook, who are laughing about something Jin said. I sit next to Jungkook and Suga takes the seat next to me while Jimin sits next to Jin across the table.

“Should we play a drinking game?” Jimin asks, glancing around the table. He’s ditched the gloves, letting them fall to the floor under his chair so he can grasp his beer glass like a normal person.

“Yeah!” Jin shouts, raising his glass to clink with Jimin’s. “What about the Image game?”

Everyone nods in agreement and we ask Hoseok to bring a pitcher of beer over so we can refill our glasses as needed. Jin goes over the rules briefly for Suga and I, who haven’t played this game before.

“Basically, we each get a turn where we say something we think about someone. It can be general like “the most likely to get married” or something,” Jin explains as Hoseok sets the pitcher of beer in the center of our table. “And everyone points on the count of three to the person they think matches the statement. The person who gets the most votes has to drink.”

“Okay, I’ll go first!” Jimin shouts, slamming his hands down on the table. “The person who has kissed the most amount of people.”
I look around the table at all of my options. It’s clearly not me (I’ve never even had one kiss), and I doubt it’s Jimin who’s only had 2 boyfriends in his life so far. I squint at Suga and Jin, then Jungkook, trying to decide who between the three of them would have had the most amount of kisses.

“One, two, three!”

I point at Jin, as does most of the people at the table. Jin is pointing at Jimin and when he realizes that everyone else is pointing at him, he burst out laughing but lifts his glass to take a long drink.

“Wow, okay, I see how you guys are,” Jin says. “Okay, my turn then. The person most likely to be alone forever.”

“Ouch, that’s mean,” Jimin says, but he’s giggling.

“One, two, three!” Everyone throws their fingers out, pointing at Jin again, except for Jin himself, who points to me, surprisingly.

Everyone laughs, because we clearly just picked Jin on purpose again for a joke. But I stare at his finger, pointed directly at me, and my heart feels sad for some reason. Like maybe it’s a vibe I give off.

Unlovable .

Jimin seems to sense how tense I get, even though I brush it off with a small smile. His hand reaches for mine under the table, giving it a quick squeeze, just like he always used to do if kids were being mean in high school.

“Tae won’t end up alone,” Jimin says, matter of fact, sticking up for me. “Me and him have a pact to get married if we both don’t find love by the time we’re thirty.”

“I was just joking,” Jin replies, waving his hand in front of his face. “Sorry, Taehyung. I didn’t mean it.”
“It’s fine! It’s just a game, I didn’t think anything of it,” I lie with a light laugh, reaching for my beer to take a drink. But I can’t shake how weirdly sad I feel now.

Jin got the most votes, so he has to say one again. “The person who gives meaning to the saying ‘if looks could kill.’”

Everyone looks around the table and we slowly count to three. Everyone points at Suga, including himself, and he smiles as he reaches for his beer to take a long drink. He doesn’t smile a whole lot, but whenever he does, it’s gummy and cute and happy. Despite his harsh appearance that he puts out, Suga is actually the biggest softie that I know.

“The person who is the best dancer,” Suga says.

“One, two, three!” we all shout, pointing our fingers out. I point to Jungkook, along with Jimin. Jin points to himself, which is somehow, not surprising. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Suga’s finger pointing at Hoseok, who seems touched as he comes over to refill our beer pitchers.

Jungkook looks around, seeing that he has the majority and laughs, shaking his head.

“Best dancer? Why?” he asks, lifting his beer glass to take a long drink from it, finishing it off. I grab the pitcher from the middle of the table to refill it for him.

“You just seem like you would be a good dancer,” I reply, shrugging my shoulders. “I don’t know. Are you a good dancer?”

He seems to consider this for a moment, his leg bouncing next to mine under the table. “I’m… alright,” he finally decides. “I don’t dance much.”

Jungkook thinks for a minute, trying to come up with his own statement to make for us to vote on. Finally, he grins and says, “Most likely to win at arm wrestling.”

This seems to be about Jin, because he smirks from across the table as we all count to three and cast our votes. I vote for Jungkook, but the others vote for Jin and he laughs as he goes to take another drink of his beer.
“You guys are doing this to me on purpose to get me drunk!” Jin proclaims and Suga nods knowingly while Jimin feigns innocence at the statement, weakly shouting, “No, of course not!”

We play a few more rounds, all of us continuing to point at Jin no matter what until he slams his hands on the table and yells about us not playing the game right. We all laugh at his outburst as he settles back into his seat, his cheeks red from the alcohol.

“Okay,” Jin says slowly, “the person who is most likely harboring a crush on someone here.”

I blink, looking at everyone at the table to gauge their reactions. I’m shocked that everyone seems to have one - Jimin’s cheeks flush as he glances at the bar nervously, as if we all know about his crush on Namjoon (though, at least me and Suga are aware of it); Suga also reacts a bit, his eyebrow raising as he looks around, tapping his fingers on the table; and Jungkook beside me tenses, his leg starting to bounce as he lifts his thumb to his mouth to bite at a hangnail suddenly, his eyes darting at all of us at the table.

_Everyone here has a crush on someone here_, I think, raising my eyebrow with a smug smile. _Wait a minute… who does Suga like?_

“One, two, three!”

I point at Jimin, because I know it’s a safe bet. Jin points at Jungkook, who looks at him with an expression that I can’t really place well because of the toilet paper, but maybe slight anger? Jimin points at Suga, who is also pointing at Jimin. Jungkook didn’t point at all this round.

“Jimin has the most,” I say, patting his back as he sighs and lifts his glass to drink.

We play the Image game for a full hour, until everyone at the table is at least feeling some kind of buzz, myself included. Jin got the worst of it, so he’s looking a little worse for wear, swaying in his seat to the beat of the music that’s playing. Suga is sitting quietly, zoning out as he looks off in the distance. Jimin abandoned us to go to the bar to get another beer when our third pitcher ran out, but stayed to talk to Namjoon for a bit.

Beside me, Jungkook looks to be the most level headed among us.
I lean my elbows on the table, putting my head in my hands, my vision disappearing as the sheet shifts again and my eye holes end up on my head. Beside me, Jungkook laughs and the sound makes me smile down at the table, even if he can’t see my face.

Also, wow, my face feels really hot.

As if hearing my thoughts, Jin says, “Wow it’s hot in here.”

I look back up, readjusting the sheet over my head with a light sigh. My costume, as it turns out, is kind of annoying. Despite the comfortable clothes that I’m wearing underneath, sitting with a sheet over your head is sort of warm, definitely gives your hair static cling and makes it difficult to see, even if your eye holes were perfectly cut circles (I worked really hard on making them perfect, actually).

“Hey, I’m going to go stand outside,” Jin says, getting to his feet and gripping the edge of the table to steady himself. Jungkook reaches a hand out, ready to catch him if need be, but he swats it away once he’s regained his composure. “So if anyone asks. I’m outstanding.”

Our table is silent. Jin’s high pitched laughter fills my ears, but I realize quickly that no one else is laughing. I lift my sheet a little to chance a glance at Suga, who is glaring at Jin, and Jungkook, who has his face in his hand, sighing.

“More beer, you guys?” Hoseok asks as he approaches our table. It’s getting late now, so it’s a lot less busy in the bar now and he’s got more time to walk over and talk with us. He leans into Suga, his elbow on his shoulder as he sighs. “Man, tonight was really busy in here. My feet are killing me!”

“Sit down for a minute,” Suga tells him, pulling Jimin’s empty chair closer to him so he can sit. “It’s slow now, anyway. We can wait for more beer.”

Oh, is that who Suga likes? I think, watching the two of them as Hoseok sits down and smiles at him gratefully. Suga smiles, too, looking down at his beer in front of him. A shy smile, one that I’ve never see him use before.

“Hey, Hoseok,” Jin says, his voice already wobbling with laughter, “why do cows have hooves instead of feet?”
Hoseok looks at him hard for a moment, deep in thought as he pours the rest of the pitcher into Suga’s glass, topping it off. “I don’t know. Why?”

“Because they lactose!”

Jin bursts out laughing again and Hoseok furrows his eyebrows for a second before he claps his hands together in realization and starts laughing, too. Namjoon and Jimin return to our table with a new, freshly filled pitcher of beer. I whoop from under my sheet and Jungkook laughs at me, helping me to refill my glass for me.

“Hey guys, wanna see something cool?” Namjoon asks, reaching for his sword and pulling it out before any of us have a second to answer his question. We’re all surprised to see that it’s a real sword, but also a little alarmed. I sit back so I can watch, and have to lean against Jungkook’s shoulder a little to get a better view.

He starts swinging his sword around, twirling it in his hand, making all kinds of sound effects as he does. Hoseok and Suga both look very nervous, each of them reaching across the table to hold each other’s forearms tightly, while Jimin is staring with his mouth open in shock. Even Jin looks impressed and entranced.

But then Namjoon drops the sword, almost slicing his arm off in the process.

And then chaos ensues.

Hoseok grabs the sword and sets it up on a table, far away from Namjoon’s searching hand. Suga immediately puts his hand on his hip and starts yelling that Namjoon should not have had a real sword to begin with, that he could have really hurt himself or hurt someone else. Jimin holds Namjoon’s arm, checking him over for injuries, cooing over him and his ruined costume, which has a big slice in the shoulder and arm area now. Jin disappears for a minute, walking to the food table to get some more snacks.

I look over at Jungkook and find him staring down at me before I realize that I’m still leaning on him. “Whoops, sorry. Just doing my best here.”

Jungkook laughs, “What?”
“I don’t know.”

“Are you drunk?” he asks, but his tone is amused and I realize that this is the most I’ve really talked with just Jungkook tonight. I pat his cheek lightly before pinching it and pulling at his cheek with a giggle.

The best part is, he just lets me, staring at me with a content expression on his face.

“I like hanging out with you, Jungkookie,” I tell him honestly, letting his cheek go and nodding to confirm what I said. Just in case he doesn’t believe me. “I like being your hyung.”

Jungkook smiles now and opens his mouth to say something but Jimin comes over to wrap his arms around my shoulders from behind, hugging me tightly. “Hey, Taetae. Guess what?”

I look up at him, patting his arms that are around me affectionately. “What?”

“Our song is playing.”

I listen hard over the loudness of Suga and Hoseok scolding Namjoon while Jin tries his best to defend him a little, though he’s still laughing about the whole ordeal. Over the speakers, I start to hear the unmistakable beat of what is indeed our song.

Gangnam Style by Psy.

“Oh my god!” I shout, turning to face Jimin. “I haven’t heard this in so long!”

“Let’s dance!” Jimin shouts back, grabbing my wrists and pulling me to my feet. I wrestle one free and grab Jungkook’s, surprising him.

“Come on, Jungkookie!” I tug on his arm until he stumbles out of his seat and Jimin is pulling both of us.

There’s not really space in the bar to dance per say, but there is an area that doesn’t have tables that
will work just fine. Jimin lets go of my wrist to start dancing, his hands up in the air, laughing as if he’s embarrassed. I keep hold of Jungkook’s wrist and take his other, putting both of our arms up to wave them around and sway to the beat, laughing.

We jump around, making complete fools of ourselves, but it doesn’t matter. Because we’re all laughing, and it’s not long before we all hold each others hands and form a circle, spinning around while shouting the lyrics as loud as we can.

When we’re spinning around, I notice that Jungkook’s mummy costume starts to unravel. He notices, too, and sends me a slightly panicked look as he tries his best to keep it together. But with every movement, the toilet paper begins to rip and fall away, landing at our feet like confetti. His hands grasp at it against his chest where it’s tied together, but in moments, everything falls away aside from what he’s holding to his chest.

I laugh when he’s only got a few squares of toilet paper left on him and pluck one off his shoulder, tossing it away for him.

It’s not long before Hoseok and Namjoon are joining us, jumping around, shouting the lyrics and doing the craziest dances I’ve ever seen. Namjoon wriggles his body around, flinging his limbs out in a way that makes Jimin laugh until he’s doubled over. Hoseok, on the other hand, is actually fantastic. He dances like he’s had a choreography for this song for years - his movements are jerky in a graceful way.

We all whoop loudly as Hoseok completely takes the makeshift dance floor by storm. His limbs are moving in ways that I never imagined mine could, lithe and quick as he snaps his head and hips to the beat of the song.

When it ends, he laughs when we all clap for him, including the last few customers also still in the bar. He bows dramatically before walking away to get back to work, pulling Namjoon along with him (and Jimin, who follows after, still laughing about his dance moves).

I turn back to face Jungkook and he’s staring at me. His eyebrows are pulled down slightly, a little bit of a frown on his lips as his brown eyes meet mine.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” I ask, tilting my head to the side in question.

“We’ve been here all night and I haven’t seen your face,” he replies, his frown deepening.
I blink, once, twice. Then, “Well, okay.”

I pull the sheet off of my head, my hair standing up from the static cling of wearing it all night. When his eyes fall on my face, I grin at him and my heart flutters when his frown breaks into a smile, his eyes crinkling and his nose scrunching in what I would consider the cutest smile I’ve ever seen in my entire life.

*Oh, wow,* I think as I lick my dry lips and blink a few times, my heart fluttering in my chest.

“What we both got rid of our costumes,” I tell him, tossing the sheet to a nearby table. “We’re just regular dudes at a Halloween party. Hoseok might kill us.”

Jungkook laughs at that, his eyes moving up to look at Hoseok, busy at work behind the bar with Namjoon. “Somehow, I don’t think he’ll mind. Our costumes weren’t exactly original.”

“True,” I reply with a knowing nod of my head, “we’re quite the pair, aren’t we?”

Two days after Halloween, I send Jimin back to college, waving like mad at the bus stop.

After the party, we had all went home together, laughing and singing loudly to Gangnam Style, our arms around each other’s shoulders. Hoseok had also made us take a group picture in front of the apartment building, promising to frame it and give us all copies. Since Jungkook’s costume fell apart at the bar, I had pulled my ghost sheet over him to include him in my costume. We’d pressed together, each of us taking one eye hole and throwing out peace signs, making the others laugh at us.

We all exchanged phone numbers and even created a group chat for the seven of us, having a great time taking selfies with funny filters on them for everyone to set their pictures for each other.

Now, I yawn as I slip my shoes on, getting ready for a long evening of work at the convenience store. Hyojin called in sick (rare, she’s never sick, just usually a little late), so I offered to take her night shift for her, figuring that it must be serious. Plus, I could use the extra money.
It’s nearing 23:30 at night when I step out of my apartment, still pulling my shoes all the way onto my feet. At the same time, I hear another door click closed and I look up to see none other than Jeon Jungkook.

“Jungkook!” I greet him happily with a big smile. He returns it, shuffling a black duffle bag over his shoulder. “Where are you headed?”

“To watch Jin’s fight tonight,” he replies. “He came to my last one, so it’s only fair that I cheer him on. Otherwise no one does.”

“Ah,” I say, as if I know how it is at boxing matches, “well tell him that I said good luck!”

“Yeah, sure. I’ll make sure to tell him.” He looks at my attire and name tag pinned to my shirt. “You off to work or just coming home?”

“I’m going in now to work over night,” I reply as we start walking downstairs together. “Hyo Jin called in sick, so I told her I would take her shift.”

“Oh, wow. So you’ll be there all night?” he asks with wide eyes. I nod in response and he bites his lip, “By yourself?”

“Yeah, except for the usual drunk customer coming in for a snack. Pretty boring stuff.” Jungkook looks like he wants to say something, but I feel like he means to blow off Jin and hang out with me. “But it’s no biggie, I’ll have lots of time to play games on my phone. It’s usually pretty chill working overnights.”

He nods, as if he understands this.

We reach the bottom floor and head outside, walking together for just a block or two, talking about who Jin’s going up against, and if Jungkook thinks he’ll really win. I ask if Jin’s a good fighter, because he just seems like he wouldn’t take it seriously - he’s too funny. But Jungkook assures me that he’s great at fighting, maybe even better than him.

“I have a lot to learn from him still,” Jungkook admits, reaching up to scratch the back of his neck.
I smile. “I’m sure you’re great, Jungkook. I bet you win all the time!”

He smiles, too, and then we’re at the crosswalk. I have to go straight, but he has to turn left.

“Well,” I say, raising my hand to wave, “goodnight Jungkookie. I hope Jin wins.”

“Yeah, thanks. I hope you have a good shift at work.”

I wave before starting my way across the street, jogging when the light turns to red. Just as I reach the other side, Jungkook calls out my name, and I turn to see him jogging over to meet up with me, despite the cars honking at him.

“Whoa, are you crazy?” I ask, watching him just barely dodge a car. “You should have waited for the light to turn green!”

“Sorry, I just-”

He doesn’t say anything, just sucks in air like a short gasp. I cock my head to the side and look at him, raising an eyebrow in question.

“What?”

“I was, um, wondering if you were free tomorrow night,” he says, pursing his lips. “I have a fight and it’s kind of a big one and…I don’t know. It would be nice to have someone cheering for me, maybe.”

I blink at him, slightly surprised by his question. “Tomorrow?” He nods enthusiastically, and I can see his hands picking at his coat sleeve nervously. “Well, I…I don’t know. I’ve never seen a f-fight before.”

My hands are shaking, so I shove them into my pockets to hide them from him. I feel hot, even if it’s cold enough to snow outside. The thought of watching Jungkook get beat up and hit and
kicked… my stomach churns uncomfortably.

But then I look at him, watching as his face falls.

“Right, sure, of course,” he says, trying to keep his tone from sounding disappointed. But I can hear it. I can *feel* it down in my bones. And that makes my stomach flip uncomfortably, too. “Don’t worry about it. It’s not that big of a deal.”

He turns to walk away but I catch his hand with my shaking hands.

“Wait,” I say, trying my best to put a smile on my face, “I’ll try to come. Send me the time and place. I’ll try to make it.”

He grins and his body shifts forward to hug me tightly and I laugh, but it’s forced.

Because I want to make him happy, but my heart doesn’t think I can do it.

I care far too much about Jeon Jungkook to be able to watch someone hurt him.

Chapter End Notes

So btw, we did this fic as our NaNoWriMo this month (we’re too busy to each do one separately with school and work) and at this point, we have gone well above and over the needed 50k! This is gonna be a long fic, we have so much planned honestly and we hope that you guys like it! Let us know what you’re thinking - comments fuel us!!!
I’m punching the bag in the practice gym, wondering what the hell I did to get myself into this mess. God damn liquid confidence. God damn stupid mouth, asking him something like that and expecting, expecting, expecting.

My fists pummel the punching bag.

“What’s going on?” Jin asks. He tries to sound aloof but I can tell he’s concerned.

“I’m just training.” I state simply. “Nothing else going on.”

He squints at me. “You’re a bad liar, Jungkook.”

“Cut it out,” I say, grabbing the bag back from him and steadying myself once again. “Don’t let me hold you up.”

“Seokjin!”

I glance quickly over my shoulder in the direction of the voice, and when I turn back my eyes quickly flash to Jin before returning to the punching bag. “Your partner is waiting.”
Jin rolls his eyes, arms stretching high above his head before conceding, probably understanding that whatever it was, I didn’t want to talk about it.

“Don’t push yourself too hard,” are his last words before I hear the sound of him pulling himself up into the ring.

He’s always telling me that – don’t overwork yourself. I guess he feels like he has to tell me this for some reason… because I always try to take myself up to that line, getting as close as I can without falling over the edge.

A few hours pass. By the time it’s noon, I’m starving; I’ve been working as hard as physically possible, and when I have to stop, it’s only because my vision starts spotting. I take a seat in the locker room and down an entire bottle of water, refilling it, then downing another. I run my head under the sink, the feeling of my skull cooling sending shivers all over my body. I breathe deep. I let it out.

I think about Taehyung. I think about the way his face looked when he’d pulled the sheet over his head – the flush of his cheeks, the clarity of his eyes, his mouth with the corners turned upward, lips parted.

My hands grip the aged ceramic sink. I wonder why my heart beats faster when I think about him.

I wonder how long I can keep this up.

The edge is right there. I can see it.

Everything in my chest pangs at once and, turning off the water, I stand hunched over the sink, thinking how stupid I was to let myself feel anything at all.

Jin knocks (read: slams his fists in rapid succession) on the door to my apartment just as I’m
packing my bag to leave for the fight. I open the door, knowing damn well who it is before I do, and as it swings open, Jin pretends to punch me in the face.

I double back, clutching my eye in extreme(ly fake) pain, face scrunched before I put my palm out in front of me, signaling for mercy.

“It’s a K.O. folks!” Jin shouts, then whisper-screams as though an audience were here cheering in his honor.

Straightening, I shake my hair out of my eyes and arch my back, righting myself. “You coming tonight?” I ask.

“Duh-doy.”

I nod, glad to at least have him there, despite everything. If nothing else, Jin is the most loyal friend I’ve ever had.

Jin fails to close the door behind him, and through the crack in mine I can see the light on in the apartment across the hall. Seeing this, my heart sinks.

“Who are you fighting tonight?” Jin asks.

“An older guy from out of town, late 30’s. American.”

“You’re gonna kill it.”

I shrug. “Hope so.” I pull on my hoodie and throw my backpack on over it. “You never know.”

Jin smacks me on the back of my head and I wince audibly. “Cut it out – you put that kind of thinking out there, that’s exactly what’s going to happen, boy.”

Not knowing what to say to that, I don’t say anything at all. Jin has a point, and I know it. I shake my head again, shaking my hands as I let out the jitters, and after I slip my tennis shoes on, I nod in
the direction of the door. He grabs the handle and, letting me out first, slams it shut behind us.

Jin follows close behind as we take the stairs down. I make sure not to look at Kim Taehyung’s door on the way.

Two hands on my shoulders squeeze once, twice. “I know you’re not telling me something,” Jin huffs, his breath blowing in the air and forming little clouds above my head. The wind rolls over us. “Whatever it is, just try not to think about it, alright? Just focus on what you gotta do.”

“Okay,” I say, and I mean it. No matter what, I will do this for myself.

We walk to the bar, joking along the way. We play rock paper scissors to see which of us owes the other a drink afterward, and of course, Jin loses. He claims it’s my youthful tricks that won me best two out of three, and I tell him it’s not my fault he’s such an old man.

Jin holds the back door open and we let ourselves in. There’s a bouncer here tonight who recognizes us and gives us a nod, which we return.

“Alright, I’m getting us drinks,” Jin says, clapping his hands together. “Yours will just be a preemptive victory drink.”

“Don’t drink it before I get to it,” I warn him.

He scoffs. “I would never.”

“You’ve definitely done it before.”

“New year, new me,” he shoots back, and I can’t help but laugh. “That was the old me. New Jin is Worldwide Handsome and doesn’t steal drinks.”

“Oh, sorry,” I grin. “I don’t think I’ve met him yet.”

Jin knocks me with his shoulder and takes off down the hall. I watch him as he raises a hand in the
The lights are bright tonight. New bulbs, maybe. Maybe I’m just a little intimidated, but I can’t let myself entertain those kind of thoughts too long. My fists punch together a few times and I grit my teeth against the mouthguard.

There’s a good turnout tonight; a couple hundred men are packed into the tight space, yelling and spilling their drinks as some walk around and take bets. The air is smokey from cigarettes and a general heat that hangs heavy in the room.

“You all know him – 9 for 9, the Golden Boy of Seoul… Jeon Jungkook!”

I pull myself up into the ring, and when I rise, I hear the sound of cheering high in the air. I turn, facing them all, my eyes scanning for a face – a face that I don’t see. I swallow hard, shaking my head again, breathing deep.

“And in this corner – the Bald Eagle of the West… Ares Jackson!”

There’s a lot of booing. I wonder what they’d think if I tore him down, right here in front of everyone. I wonder if they’d praise me for it. I think they would.

Then, suddenly, I hear one voice scream – above the crowd, above the drunken chants and raucous laughter swirling in the air.

“Jeon Jungkook!”

I can’t help it – I know we need to meet in the middle to touch gloves, but when I hear my name, I spin around. I take a step forward, squinting against the brightness of the spotlight in the ring.
And then I see him. He’s standing on my side, hands still cupped around his mouth as they lower slowly.

*He came.*

The smile that overtakes my face is unbroken. My eyes crinkle, the relief spreading through me. I raise a hand, waving down at him – and then, there it is. The boxy smile returns, shoulders raising as his arms fold, one hand covering part of his face in slight embarrassment.

“Kim Taehyung,” I mouth, and he waves back.

I can feel the curious stares of the crowd fixating on us both, watching in confusion as I greet the boy in the audience from my place in the ring. Even so, I can’t bring myself to be bothered. I am up so high, I wonder if even a loss could knock me down.

Giving myself one more look, I nod at him, then turn back to face my opponent. This is the first time I’m really getting a good look at him; his peachy white skin is glowing, bald head shining beneath the harsh lights. His eyebrows (what eyebrows?) are sunk low, mouth drawn into a hard scowl. His shoulders are wide, probably even wider than Jin’s. His muscles are enormous, and I don’t think he got those on his own.

Icy blue eyes glare at me from across the ring.

He looks like a monster.

I sharpen my expression to the best of my abilities, narrowing my own eyes and holding my fist out to bump his. He slams his fist into mine, with more force than is generally called for. The referee gives him a look, but says nothing.

“A clean game,” is all he says this time. “Back to your corners.”

We do as instructed, and when we hear the referee shout “FIGHT!” into the microphone, my vision tunnels, focusing on one thing and one thing only.
I am staring in the eyes of a man who wants to pummel me, whose mind is focused on his fists and how much power he can take out on me. I am staring at him, but in my mind, all I can think about is who else is staring at me – someone not in the ring, someone who makes me actually believe that I can win.

The first round is more difficult than I want it to be. I dodge a few of his punches and even land one of my own, but then he swings a hard right hook at me, getting me on the left shoulder. I wince, jumping backward, shaking my head. The roar of the crowd is like white noise in my ears.

Somehow, this blow has shaken me. My mind swarms, flustered, and before I know it, my opponent deals another blow – straight to my jaw.

Fuck.

I stumble back, teeth gritted hard. I don’t taste blood, but the power behind this man’s gloves is unreal. This man with his steroid muscles and oiled chest, with no business fighting a kid like me but who has no problem doing it anyway. I can hear the crowd ooh ing, and I realize I need to right myself.

I jump back, dodging two more punches, then punch him in both his left side and right cheekbone.

In his face, I can see it: he can feel it.

I’m able to land a few more punches before the referee blows the whistle and gives me the first round. We dart back to our corners, refueling; I take a long gulp of water, and when I glance over my shoulder, he’s doing the same. I can feel the steam rising off him, this man who is more beast than anything.

Into the audience, I look down. I see Tae, my eyes locking onto his. There’s an expression on his face that I can’t read. Reaching an arm up, I wipe my forehead, taking another drink of water and trying to understand the emotion swimming in his eyes.

He looks nervous. I want to assure him: I am going to win. Don’t be afraid. But now isn’t the time for that, so he will just have to wait and see.
I put the bottle down, then turn back around, ready to fight.

At the referee’s call, the second round begins.

This time, I underestimate his speed; a man at such a size shouldn’t be able to move as quickly as he does, but when he strikes, I hear him let out an audible grunt. His left glove collides with my chest and I nearly have the wind knocked out of me. I scowl, angered now. I dodge two of his hits, then try taking one of my own. He’s too quick though; he seems even angrier after losing the first round. It rolls off of him in waves, the aggression rising in the air along with the heat.

He calls me something in English that I can’t determine, but I’m sure I can guess. I dodge another hit, but before I can strike, he takes another. This time, his glove collides with the side of my face – not just once, but twice.

I double back, falling a little as my back hits the wall of the ring. My lip is split. The blood holds there for a moment, just before dribbling down my chin. It burns, but I don’t focus on it. I focus on not letting it happen again; he goes to wail one more punch on me, but I spin quick and evade his attack.

He says something else in English, and now I’m angry. I just want him to shut up – I want to show him that a 22 year old can kick his ass and that I’m not afraid of a little blood.

My tongue runs over my lips, and just as the taste of rust hits my tongue, the referee calls the round, awarding it to my opponent.

“Jungkook! Fighting!” I hear being called, and without looking, I know it’s Jin. I wipe my forehead, walking back to my corner for more water. I take a sip, glance back at Kim Taehyung – and when our eyes lock, I see it for the first time.

Fear.

Raw, unwavering. There is something that jumps to my throat, something I don’t have a name for. It feels like… like I shouldn’t be doing this. Like maybe Taehyung is wondering why he came.
I wonder if it’s because he sees the blood. I wonder if he can see the bruises threatening to form on my jaw, on my cheeks.

_This needs to end_, I think. _Now._

Tae stands out in the crowd like a sore thumb. I think about this as the next round begins, as I dodge blow after blow. I think about it when I am awarded this round, and as we prepare to go into the fourth. The longer it goes on, the harder it is for me to meet Kim Taehyung’s eyes in the audience. He is soft, kind. This crowd is hungry, angry, dirty and smokey and crowing for a messy fight.

When I think of Taehyung now, all I think is how I want to protect him from this.

I lose the fourth round, and then the fifth; I’m bruised, battered, and blood is running from my nose. My opponent doesn’t look too hot either. At this point, it’s whoever can win the best of 9 or deliver a knockout. If I could cross my fingers in these gloves, I would. I send one silent wish out to anything listening: _Please let this end. Please let Tae forgive me._

The sixth round begins, and I let my eyes slip shut briefly. I focus myself, center. When they open, I dodge an uppercut, jumping back and spinning to the side, getting in one of my own. His chin jerks upward, and I can feel it. I’m close.

I try it again, this time with my left. It lands.

He growls, but I don’t hesitate.


He doubles back, then stumbles again.

My eyes narrow and I feel it, rolling through my veins like an unheard chant, looping and looping until I pull my arm back and land my final punch square in his face. _Win. Win. Win._

Breathing heavily, I pause. I watch as my opponent slides, one arm which had been gripping the
wall of the ring slipping as he hits the ground.

It takes a moment before I realize that my arm is up in the air, risen high by the referee; slowly, the
overwhelming cheering from the crowd slips into my senses, rising from nothing to all consuming.
I’m breathing deeply. I wonder if these people can see it in my face, I wonder if they can see that
something is wrong. I wonder–

And that’s when I see Kim Taehyung.

Crouched on the ground and standing not far from the base of the ring, the hands which cover his
eyes are trembling. He’s frozen. Those who stand around him ignore him; they all cheer, clapping
loudly and chanting my name.

I don’t think. I just react.

Peeling my hand from the referee’s, I leap steadfast out of the ring, landing on the ground in the
crowd on nimble feet. The pain in my body is second to the adrenaline I feel, more than I’ve ever
felt in any fight. The need to protect.

As I race to him, the crowd – surprised – parts before me. I can see him.

“Taehyung.” His name comes from my mouth, dry and hoarse, and when I reach him, I bend down.

“Tae,” I repeat. “Tae, what’s wrong?”

He can’t speak. He can’t move. His fingers part and I see that behind his hands, tears come pouring
from his eyes.

I don’t say anything. My arms, tired from a fight, have never held anything more carefully. I wrap
one arm around his torso and slide the other under his legs, bringing his body against mine and
lifting him up.

It isn’t just his hands that shake; his whole body does. My mind’s reeling; I don’t know what to do.
I can feel every atom in my body vibrating, confused and scared, and all I know is that I’m going to
keep him safe. I have to.

As quickly as I can, I weave through the crowd and race to the locker rooms.

As soon as we’re past the main doors, I can hear him breathing. It’s sharp, the way he inhales and exhales in one choppy, wavering breath after another. He’s struggling, but slowly, his arms move to wrap around my neck. I can feel tears on my bare skin, I can feel his hands gripping my shoulders.

“Shh,” I try to tell him. “It’s okay, it’s okay.”

I kick the door open and see a few of the other boxers inside, preparing for their fights. I give them a look and they know – we need space. They hurry to finish their business, and as I set Tae down on a bench against a wall of lockers, the door slams shut, leaving us in silence.

My ears are ringing. I can’t focus on anything but Tae, his mouth a shaking line.

I bend down in front of him, between his legs. I don’t waste time; my arms extend, hands reaching upward, taking his face. His arms are limp at his sides, palms face-up. His eyes are pinched, and when his mouth opens briefly, a shaky breath leaves his lips.


Finally, he does. His eyes bore into mine and my stomach turns over. I have never felt this kind of weight before. Tae’s hands turn over, and he raises one toward me. I watch as his fingertips, soft and gentle, trace the crack in my lip, running over the parts of on my chin where blood stains my skin.

“I’m sorry,” he says. His voice is small. I’ve never heard him sound like this; I’d never imagined Tae could ever look like this. “I’m sorry, Jungkook.”


“I can’t,” is all he can say.
I shake my head. “It’s okay.”

Raising both arms, I act on instinct. I ignore the fact that my chest must still be covered in sweat. I ignore the thoughts in my mind keeping me from him, and at once, my arms are around him, pulling him to me, holding onto him as tightly as I can as though holding together something threatening to fall apart.

His fingertips dig into my back, face tucked in the crook of my neck.

I can’t pretend to know what is happening. All that I know is that this goes beyond a fight – that what Tae is feeling now is deep-rooted. I don’t want to think about where it is coming from. I don’t want to think about the expression on his face, about the pain in his hands as they cling to me. I don’t want to know why the boy who saved me suddenly feels so small in my arms.

My throat is raw. One of my hands finds itself in his hair, holding steady for a moment before my fingers are running through it. I close my eyes.

I’m not sure how long we sit like this. Eventually, his tears begin to quiet, to calm. The trembling of his body fades, and his grip on me begins to lessen. I rub his back, and he sniffs loudly.

Pulling away, he wipes his eyes with his wrists. “I didn’t know that would happen,” he tells me. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t know.”

“You don’t have to apologize,” I say, my voice even. “I… never wanted to see you like this.”

He opens his mouth, perhaps to apologize again, but I look at him hard, like I mean it. His mouth closes again.

I lift a hand to his eyes and wipe a stray tear from his cheek. My thumb moves slow as it brushes against his skin, and out of the corner of my eye, I see his hands bunch into fists.

“I should go,” he says.
I stop him. “Let me walk you.”

His eyes watch me, soft. “No… you should be here. Don’t let me take you from what you love.”

Something inside of me feels wrong. Like this statement feels tilted, like the scale is shifting. I wonder what it means.

I shake my head, my eyes moving from his eyes to his knees, where my palms now rest.

Slowly, I start, “You saved me once, Kim Taehyung.” My tongue feels slow, numb. The words don’t want to come, but I force them anyway. “I want to follow you along. I need to make sure… I need to make sure that you get home safely.” Then, quietly: “With you. That’s the only place I want to be right now.”

He doesn’t say anything. My gaze lingers on my hands for a moment longer, but when my eyes slowly rise to meet his, I realize that something I have said has made a difference. Tae’s expression is no longer as pained as it had been; something in his eyes tells me that, even if in some small way, I have soothed him.

Taehyung extends one open palm to me, and without thinking, I put mine against his. Our fingers lace, just as they have done before – except this time, I don’t feel the need to pull away.

We sit here for a minute longer before I stand, helping him up as I do. He hangs his head, but I tap him under the chin and smile a little. It’s not your fault, I think, and I hope he understands.

The walk back to the apartment is slow. As we walk, I remember Jin, and think of my beer, waiting with him. It’s a thought that flickers in and out almost as soon as it’s come, because at my side is Taehyung. My arm is around his shoulders, doing my best to steady his pace and keep him safe. Close.

We walk the stairs and I wait as Tae inputs his passcode on the door lock. It beeps once and he opens the entry to his apartment. It’s been a while since I’ve seen it, the first and only time I’ve ever been inside. It looks the same, just as cozy and lived-in as I remember.

The quilt on his bed is in a ball at the end, and a pillow that looks squished has been left haphazard in the middle of the mattress. I wonder if this is how he sleeps.
Tae lets out a soft sigh. “Lie down,” I tell him, and he does. I close the door and move to the sink, grabbing a glass out of the cupboard and filling it with water.

When I turn around to bring it back, I see Tae has already peeled his pants off, which are now in a messy pile on the floor. When I see his hands move to peel his shirt up, I look away. I don’t know why. I look down at the cup in my hand. I look at the floor, at my feet – at anything else. I only look back when he’s slid down onto the bed, pulling the comforter over himself.

I walk back over to him, noticing the way he rolls over onto his side.

“Here,” I say, crouching as I hand him the glass of water. He takes it wordlessly, leaning up on his elbow a bit and reaching for the glass. He takes a long sip, then hands it back to me. I place it next to him on the floor, but wait a moment before I stand.

My hands reach for the edge of the blanket and I pull it upward, covering Tae completely and evenly with it. Under the blanket, I can tell he’s clutching the squished pillow. Something happens in my chest – a screw twisting, tightening.

“I’m sorry,” he murmurs once more, eyes shutting.

I don’t know how many times he will tell me this; I wonder if he thinks my answer will ever change. “Please,” I reply, my voice soft. “It was my fault. Just breathe, get some sleep.”

My hands ache to brush the hair from his eyes, but I don’t. I’ve already done too much. Instead, I stand. I move to the door. I should just go home. I should try to sleep, too. I can pick my winnings up tomorrow. I’ve seen too much tonight. My heart doesn’t know what it should feel.

Just as I’m about to leave – hand on the doorknob, door creaking open – I hear Tae’s soft voice coming once more from his place in the bed.

“Jungkook,” he calls. He sounds so tired.

“Yes,” I answer.
He sighs, quiet for a moment.

“Do you like the way that it feels?”

My head tilts. “The way feels?”

“To get punched.” He pauses. “To get hit.”

I don’t know what he means, but I try to understand. “I… It’s just a job,” I decide finally.

“There are lots of jobs,” he says. I’m not sure what to say, and when my silence rings in the air, I hear him pull the blanket back up over himself.

Kim Taehyung doesn’t say anything more.

I leave without another word, the door closing behind me softly on the way out. As I enter back into my apartment and pull off my clothes, getting into bed, my fingertips reach to touch the crack in my lip.

*It makes me feel strong,* is what I wanted to tell him. *It makes me feel like I can control something.*

But I know that this is not the answer Tae wanted.

I fall asleep – restless, tossing, turning – and all night, I try to forget the way Tae’s tears felt on my neck.

Chapter End Notes
I don’t sleep.

Instead, I toss and turn all night, dream me running from raised fists and trying to dodge sharp blows to my face, one after the other. In the distance, I can hear a familiar voice from my past yelling my name, but I’m too scared to answer back. I wake in a cold sweat, shooting up from bed, the image of a strong clenched fist about to rain down on me again while I beg and plead and apologize for any wrong I might have done. There’s a copper taste in my mouth and as I stumble out of bed to get some water, I realize that it’s blood.

I bit my tongue in my attempt to keep my cries silent, because that always made it worse.

Once I’m in the bathroom, I grip the sides of the sink to steady of myself and look at my reflection in the mirror. My hair is sticking to my forehead from the sweat, my eyes are bloodshot and there are dark circles under them. But I don’t have any bruises or cuts that are visible.

*I’m fine. I’m fine. You’re fine, Taehyung,* I remind myself, breathing in and out deeply, trying to stop my body from shaking.

I turn the water on and splash cold water on my face, then rinse my mouth out, watching the muted red color disappear down the drain. My entire body feels like a train wreck. Part of me wants to climb back into bed and sleep it off, but the other part of me is too afraid to fall back asleep, wondering what kind of new hell awaits me there in the form of repressed memories.

Instead, I slowly let myself sink down to the floor in the corner of my bathroom, pulling my knees to my chest and resting my chin on top. I make myself as small as I possibly can, holding myself together as my brain tries to fall apart on me. Everything hurts and I want to cry, but if I cry, I know that will make it worse. So I grit and bear it, holding tightly to myself, and I stay like this for a long, long time.
Let me kiss it, Taehyung. There, see? All better now.

It’s not all better. I’m not all better.

Will I ever be?

Before I can spiral too much farther down that rabbit hole, a loud knock on my door shakes me from my thoughts. Slowly, I untangle my limbs from each other as I get to my feet. My legs are a little wobbly as the blood rushes back down to my feet, but I force them forward as I walk to the door. I notice my hand shake a little as I reach for the handle to open it, revealing Jeon Jungkook.

“Hey,” he greets, but his face falls when he sees me. I feel guilty, but I don’t know what to say so I just offer a meek smile, trying my best not to look as bad as I feel (though I definitely do). “I, uh, made some breakfast and I figured I would see if you… you’re okay.”

My eyes move from his bruised face, the split lip, the swelling around his eye, and down to his hands. In them are tupperware filled with some food - rice, kimchi, some veggies and a thermos that has soup in it.

A loud grumble leaves my stomach. Jungkook laughs a little and I smile, embarrassed as I open my door wider for him to come in.

“You didn’t have to do all this for me,” I tell him as I sit down at my small table. He starts unloading everything, taking the lids off and handing me a pair of chopsticks. “Wow, this is a lot of food. Are you eating with me?”

“Y-yeah, if that’s alright.”

“Of course it is,” I reply, pulling the other chair out and closer to me so he can sit down. “Thank you, Jungkook. I feel like I keep inconveniencing you.”

“Not at all!” comes his reply, and his tone is so sincere and genuine that my heart flutters just a little bit. “After all, you have done a lot for me. This is - I just - I owe you a lot, Tae. Thank you.”
I look at him, my chopsticks poised in front of my open mouth, full of rice. Then I lower them slightly and blink, unsure of what Jungkook could possibly think he owes me for when it’s been him that’s been kind toward me the most.

He smiles at me and places a piece of kimchi on top of the rice on my chopsticks.

I take a big bite, chewing thoughtfully. His eyes are still watching me, so I flash him a thumbs up and make sure to let out a sigh, “This tastes amazing, Jungkook. I didn’t know you could cook!”

“I’m alright,” he replies, but I catch the way the corners of his lips twitch upward into a smile, proud. “So, um… are you okay? I couldn’t sleep last night because I kept thinking that I scarred you at the fight since you’d never seen anything like that before and I just wanted to say that I’m sor--”

“It’s not your fault, Jungkook,” I tell him, my words firm. I swallow against the lump rising in my throat, and it feels like there are hands there, squeezing the air out of my lungs. I set my chopsticks down so he doesn’t see my hands start to shake again. “I really hope that you can forget that, but I promise you, it was not your fault.”

His eyes are confused and I can tell he wants to ask: Why?

But I can’t tell him. I can’t.

“I think… it might be better for me to support you from here.” I look down, because I can’t stand to see disappointment in his expression, and pick up the chopsticks again to get a big bite of rice. “I’m sorry, it’s just that I…”

“It’s okay,” he says and he means it.

He wants to say something else, but he decides against it and instead takes a bite of his soup and then his rice. I make sure to place a piece of kimchi on top of his rice before he shoves it into his mouth.

So many unspoken words. If I wasn’t so broken and damaged inside, maybe I would be able to talk to him and explain what happened last night. But for now, my body is still reeling and I can’t process everything at once - it’s too much and the words always seem to fail me when it comes to
this. Maybe if this was a different life, he would have asked, and I would have been able to tell him.

I take another big bite of kimchi, the spicy saltiness burning the wound on my tongue from where I bit it earlier, but I don’t mind. This kind of burning pain I can handle, can control, can understand.

We don’t bring up what happened last night again, even though I know that Jungkook is still wondering. Instead, we talk about other things like video games (we both used to play Overwatch), cooking (he’s a good cook and I’m downright terrible; he promises to cook for me again), and what our plans for the day are (I have work later in the afternoon, while he just was going to exercise later with Jin).

After we finish eating, I wash the tupperware for him to take back, even though he tells me not to worry about it. But it’s the least I can do for all that he’s done for me, so I do it, anyway.

He steps up next to me with a towel to dry them after I finish washing them. Our shoulders touch, and I watch as he pushes the sleeves of his black hoodie up his arms. His arms are strong, but I find myself looking at his knuckles, which have what seem like permanent bruises on them.

I think of the knockout punch he delivered to the guy last night and my body shudders.

But then I think of those same hands gently stroking my hair, wiping my tears away and tucking me into my bed last night. His hands are some that I should (and normally would) fear, because of the damage that they can deal. But to me, they are the softest hands I’ve ever known.

“Thanks for breakfast and checking on me, Jungkook,” I say, my voice quiet as he slips his shoes back on to head back to his own apartment to get ready to go exercise.

“Sure, anytime,” he replies, shifting the tupperware in his arms. “And you’re sure that you’re okay?”

I smile and nod, “I’m fine now.”

He still looks unconvinced, so I add, “Thanks to you.”
I wave as he leaves, thanking him again. He nods and offers me a smile, which I return, and I wait until his door is closed before I let mine fall shut again.

Once I’m alone again, I sit down in my bed and sit there with my eyes closed, hoping for some peaceful sleep before I have to get ready for work. Surprisingly, with a full stomach of Jungkook’s cooking, I manage to sleep for the next few hours and am relieved to wake up from a dreamless sleep feeling much more awake.

Getting ready for work is quick for me. Brush my teeth, run my fingers through my wavy hair (sometimes, on days where it’s really bad - like today - I tie a red bandana around to keep it out of my face), get dressed in the typical t-shirt and jeans with my nametag and I’m ready to go. It takes a maximum of ten minutes, though I’m aware I look about as bare minimum as possible.

I pull on my winter coat, knowing that the air outside will be cold enough to chill me to the bone, and head out. The walk doesn’t take long, but today, I’m really dragging so I take my time getting there. I let myself look up at the sunset, watching the sky colors turn from blue to a gradient of purple, orange and yellows. It would make a beautiful photograph, but I left my camera at home.

“Good evening,” I say as I step into the convenience store. It’s my manager, who usually works the morning shift, and he smiles when he sees me. “How was your day?”

“It’s been a busy morning,” he reports as he stands up and switches things around to make my evening shift easier. “Hyojin is coming in tonight. She took some medicine and is feeling much better now. She said thank you for covering for her the other day.”

“Oh, it was no problem,” I reply, waving a hand in front of my face. “Have a good rest of your night. Get home safely!”

He grins and waves, pushing the door open while he slides his winter coat up onto his arms. I sit down in the stool behind the counter and toss my coat and bag on the floor next to me, exhaling a deep breath as I look around.

Everything is stocked, cleaned, and ready to go for my shift.

I put my head down on the counter and prepare to be bored for the next 8 hours.
Time seems to never end at the convenience store.

I sit at the counter for a few hours, playing games on my phones when I don’t have customers. It gets busy for a little bit when most companies work days end, but overall, it’s a Tuesday so it’s pretty slow. I make it through a good 15 levels in my game before I run out of lives and sit back with a sigh, stretching my arms above my head and hearing my back crack.

I squint at the clock on the wall. Only 3 hours left before I can go home and go back to bed.

My phone buzzes with a text.
I smile, setting my phone back down on the counter.

Lately, Jungkook has been coming around the store a lot more whenever I’m working. I’m not sure exactly how it started, but it always goes like this: he texts me, asking if we sell something that I’m positive he knows we sell, then immediately runs over to buy said thing and then hang out for a few hours. I’m not sure if it’s because he’s really needing these items, or if he’s bored, but I’ve been benefiting from it a lot.

In fact, the shifts where Jungkook doesn’t come to visit me are usually bad days at this point. Who was I before Jeon Jungkook weaseled his way into my life, heart and home? I’m not quite sure.

I tap my fingers on the counter, watching the door, waiting for him to arrive so I can greet him.

Just as I’m about to start to worry that he changed his mind and decided he doesn’t need to run 10 blocks just for banana milk (there are closer places of business to our apartment complex that sell it, after all), the bell over the door chimes and in strolls Jungkook wearing a black hoodie with the hood up, jeans and a loose fitting coat.

He grins when he sees me and I flash him my biggest smile back, happy to have company and someone to talk to.

“Slow night?” he asks as he grabs a 6 pack of banana milks and sets them on the counter, pulling out his wallet to pay.

I nod, yawning as I ring it up for him and take his money. “Yeah, mostly. It got busy for a minute but now that it’s late, everyone is already at home so it’s been pretty mind numbing in here.”

Jungkook opens the banana milk and stabs the straw through the small foil before taking a drink and smacking his lips as if this banana milk refreshed his entire body. He hands one to me and I take it gratefully, putting the straw through and taking a drink.

I’m definitely more about the strawberry milk, but banana is pretty good, too.

Jungkook comes around the counter to sit on the floor next to my stool, which is where he usually sits when he plans on staying for a while. Watching him sit cross legged on the floor next to me, adjusting his coat as a pillow behind him, I find myself smiling, a warmth spreading through my chest.
Kindness and gentleness. That’s what Jungkook is to me. The most kind and gentle friend I could ever ask for, even more so than Jimin. Jungkook who doesn’t mind doing boring things, so long as we get to do them together. Jungkook who appreciates the ordinary moments of life, no matter how mundane, as long as we’re side by side.

I realize that it’s been a long time since I’ve felt such happiness blooming in the center of my heart. It’s like every crack I’ve ever gotten from heartbreak or sadness is being filled with fresh flowers and sunlight.

I want to tell him this, but I also don’t know how to word it exactly. The words “thank you” don’t quite cover it.

“Wanna eat ramen together after I finish work tonight?” I ask, looking down at him as he settles into a comfortable position. He glances up at me and then gives me a funny smile, only showing his two front bunny teeth and pulling his chin back to show off his double chin, making me laugh.

“Deal,” he says, clicking his tongue and giving me a thumbs up. “Hey, did you get the texts in the group chat about this weekend?”

“The party on the rooftop?” I ask and he nods. “Yeah, I don’t work late that night so I’ll be there. Are you coming?”

“Yeah, Hoseok put me in charge of bringing the beer.”

“Ooo, you got the tough job,” I tell him and he gives me a questioning look. “You have to buy enough beer for all of us and then carry it all to the rooftop. You’re going to need another set of hands for that.”

“Ah,” Jungkook says, realizing how many trips it would take to get all the beer Hoseok told him to get from the store to the rooftop, “yes, I guess that would suck to carry it all by myself. What are you in charge of bringing?”

“Nothing,” I say, “yet. Hoseok might throw something at me last minute, but otherwise, I’d be happy to give you a hand with the beers. Maybe we can ask Jin, too, since he’s got bigger muscles than I do.”
Jungkook chews on his bottom lip for a moment then says, “Well, maybe. I’ve got pretty big muscles. I can probably carry a lot of the beers, so if you help, we can probably make it happen in one trip.”

I squint at him in disbelief but I don’t want to burst his bubble of confidence in his own strength so I just decide on, “Okay, if you think so.”

We spend the next couple of hours talking and joking around, watching funny videos on his phone and taking selfies with funny filters to send in the group chat. Only a handful of customers come in and buy anything, and even then, it’s just a couple of items so they’re in and out quickly. As my shift gets closer to ending, I make sure to clean all the counters down and mop the floors real quick while Jungkook picks out our ramen flavors.

By the time Hyojin arrives (actually on time, though looking not 100% at her best health), I’ve got the whole place sparkly clean and Jungkook’s got two bowls of ramen at the counter and some hard boiled eggs to go with it.

“Hyojin, are you feeling better?” I ask, helping her take her backpack off so she can get settled behind the counter.

“I’m okay,” she tells me, but her voice sounds hoarse, like she’s been coughing a lot. “Thank you so much for taking my shift for me. I really appreciate it. If you ever need one of yours covered, please don’t hesitate to ask! I owe you.”

“It’s no big deal! Anytime, I’m happy to help,” I reply honestly. “But you still sound a bit sick. Do you want me to run to the pharmacy and get you some medicine?”

“Oh, no, no! That’s okay!” She puts her hands up quickly, her cheeks turning pink and I worry that I’m embarrassing her or stepping on her toes. Or maybe she just thinks Jungkook is cute, since she keeps glancing over at him. “I’m okay, but thank you so much, Taehyung-ah.”

“Oh, well, if you need something, please text me. I’m not far!” I tell her and she nods and laughs, thanking me again. “Oh, and can you ring us up for these? We’re going to eat them here before we head home.”

“Of course!” she replies, ringing up the items. Jungkook moves to take out his wallet but I bump
him out of the way with my hip and use my card before he has the chance.

“My treat,” I tell him, handing the ramen bowls to him in a stack with the eggs on top. “Go ahead and sit down outside. I’ll grab some hot water for the ramen.”

Jungkook obediently does as I say, bowing slightly to Hyojin on his way outside to sit at one of the tables with plastic chairs. She hands my card back to me and once the door closes, looks at me again.

“Are you two… dating?” she asks curiously and I almost choke on my own spit. Her tone doesn’t sound mad or judgemental, just curious. “He’s been coming here a lot lately.”

“N-no, we’re just good friends and neighbors,” I reply, shoving my wallet back into my pocket. My face feels hot as I grab a styrofoam cup and fill it with boiling water for our ramen. Hyojin hands me my coat from behind the counter and I slip it on, thanking her and wishing her a good night before stepping outside to join Jungkook at one of the tables.

I pull out the chair next to him and sit down as he pulls open the lid for our ramen bowls. I pour half the water into his and half into mine and we hold the lids closed to let the noodles cook for a few minutes.

It’s cold outside. Cold enough that we can see our breath in the nighttime air around us when we talk and laugh. I blow air out, watching the cloud and Jungkook does the same, and we both laugh.

It’s not really anything, but it’s little moments like these that make my heart happy to know Jungkook.

We open the lids to our ramen, fully peeling them off. I break my chopsticks unevenly and open the sauce packet, squeezing it out over my noodles and stirring it all together. Jungkook slaps the chopsticks against the side of the table and then breaks them evenly, showing them off to me while I roll my eyes and mumble under my breath about him being good at everything. He grins proudly, puffing his chest out as he stirs his noodles around.

We each take a big bite, slurping the noodles up. I breathe loudly through my mouth, trying to cool the hot noodles as they burn the roof of my mouth and Jungkook laughs at me, but he starts doing
the same, his chopsticks already swirling around to get his next bite ready.

There’s just something about eating cheap, hot ramen outside when it’s cold. I can feel my entire body warming to the pit of my stomach as I take my next bite, sitting back to moan, “Ugh, this is the best ramen I’ve ever had in my life.”

Jungkook laughs again, “The best you’ve ever had? This is like, bottom of the barrel.”

“It’s just because it’s so hot and I’m so cold,” I reply, shaking my head and grinning at him. “Doesn’t it just taste better out here?”

He nods in agreement, understanding, as he reaches over for a hard boiled egg. Without another thought, he slaps the egg against my head, causing me to jerk back and look at him. He starts peeling the shell off, a smug smirk on his lips as he does. I grab an egg and go to do the same to him but his arm catches my wrist before I can and he laughs as I struggle to crack the egg on his forehead.

“You’re too strong for your own good,” I tell him and he laughs again, the sound innocent and soft. I watch the crinkles around his eyes deepen as he shows off all of his teeth in a big, bright smile.

Eventually, he lets me crack the shell of my hard boiled egg on his head after I pout and wriggle my shoulders toward him, sticking my bottom lip out until he cringes and squeezes his eyes shut, my aegyo too much for him to handle seeing. I grin triumphantly as I slam the egg down against his head and he reaches over to rub the spot, watching as I peel the shell from my egg with a happy dance in my chair.

“Let me try your ramen,” he says, reaching his chopsticks forward to dip into my bowl. I push it closer to him so he can try it without making a mess and he slurps the noodles up, nodding as he chews. “Mm, mine are better. Wanna try?”

I nod, pulling my own chopsticks out to grab his bowl and pull it closer to me, making sure to grab a huge bite. He doesn’t say anything, though, and just lets me do as I please. I’ve found that I can get away with a lot from Jungkook. He didn’t seem like to the type to be such a softie, but I guess first impressions aren’t always what they seem.

We continue eating our ramen, the only sound between us the slurping of the noodles. I drop some sauce on my hand and realize that I forgot to grab napkins from inside, but feel too lazy to do so.
My eyes glance over and land on Jungkook’s black hoodie.

Slowly, a mischievous smirk grows on my lips as I nonchalantly reach over and wipe my hand off on his sleeve. If he notices, he doesn’t say anything as I pull my hand back, now clean, having used him as my own personal napkin.

I keep watching him, wondering if he’s aware or not, when he finally speaks.

“You know, there are napkins right inside,” he says, his eyes looking up to meet mine. I grin innocently at him, and he laughs, looking at his sleeve now. “You’re lucky I’m wearing black so it doesn’t stain.”

“I wouldn’t of done it if you were wearing white,” I reply, waving my hand dismissively toward him.

He squints at me, a smile tugging at the corners of his lips, but doesn’t reply.

We finish our ramen and eggs and make sure to clean up after ourselves before we start the walk home. We each have our hands in our coat pockets, but we walk close enough that our shoulders touch. It’s comfortable to walk alongside him, and the silence around us is peaceful as we look at the stars in the night sky, no matter how few there are visible.

It’s a sort of cloudy night, and there’s a strong breeze that starts to blow once we’re half way back to the apartments, making it that much colder. Fallen leaves fluttering around in the air around us, our hair dramatically flying around on top of our heads. Our hair is a mess by the time we reach the building, rushing up the stairs to get inside, away from the wind and cold.

“Wow, it kind of looks like it might snow or something,” I say as we look out the glass door, now safely inside and starting to warm up.

“I think it’s supposed to next week,” Jungkook says absently, his eyes watching leaves outside float around and dance in the wind. “Do you like the snow?”
I look over at him, pursing my lips in thought for a moment. “I like snow and cold weather because I can bundle up and use my electric blanket to keep warm, but I think I like summer the best.”

He nods, “I like the winter. It’s sort of bittersweet.”

I’m still looking at him, watching his brown eyes scanning the sky outside through the glass. I wonder what he means by bittersweet. Does he have bad experiences with first snows or Christmas? Does the winter time make him sad, even if he likes the cold?

I realize that there’s still a lot about Jeon Jungkook that I don’t know and the thought of getting to learn more about him, piece by piece, makes me giddy with anticipation. Like solving a puzzle that’s absolutely breathtaking.

As I watch him, I wonder about so many things in his life. Like the small scar on his cheek, or the way he sometimes looks down at his bouncing leg under the table, or picks at his sleeves nervously. The way he smiles with his entire face, or the way he looks at me when I’m talking. His bruised knuckles and soft hands, the tender touch yet lethal blows. All these little things that add up to make Jungkook.

I wonder how many more pieces of him I’ll find as we continue to grow closer and closer. I wonder if he wonders the same about me.

As we walk upstairs to the third floor together, our shoulders touching and our hands brushing against each other’s now and again, I can’t help but think about how happy I am for the first time in such a long time. How even the simplest of moments, just like this, make me feel more than I have in months.

Jeon Jungkook is creating a beautiful garden in my heart, taking root and blooming so brightly that I’m completely caught off guard.

When he turns to tell me goodnight, he smiles, and I swear, my heart skips a beat or two. He turns away before I do, and opens his door, but pauses to wave one last time, an easy smile still on his full lips.

The door closes and I have to catch my breath.
Jeon Jungkook is quite literally the best thing that has ever happened to me, and I can only hope that he feels even a fraction of that toward me.

Chapter End Notes
“Listen. You want to box? That’s fine. But you’re going to do it by the book.”

Standing in front of the bar owner, I keep my head down. “I know what I did was wrong.”

“You’re damn right,” he goes on. “You wait to leave the ring until the match has officially ended. You don’t leave to rescue some soft boy in the crowd who didn’t have any business being there in the first place.”

What I want to tell him is that I know I shouldn’t have done it – I should have waited for the referee to announce my win, I should have waited to make sure that my opponent was alright – but I blatantly disregarded the rules of the ring the night that Kim Taehyung came to my boxing match.

The worst part is, I wouldn’t hesitate to do it again.

I guess it’s for the best that Tae doesn’t come back.

“I apologize,” I tell him.

“Next time this happens, you won’t get a next time. We clear?”

I nod, keeping my head down.

“Alright,” he says finally, sighing, the aggression easing from his tone. The old man deflates and what’s left is a man, worried for my wellbeing as well as the reputation of the sport his bar supports. He takes a step back to his desk, grabs a few things from it, then hands what’s in his right hand over to me. An envelope I recognize.
“Your winnings from the other night,” he states.

I take it from him, bowing as I do.

“Now,” he says, right hand falling to his side, “now that I’ve said what I needed to say, you better sign up for this.”

And then he hands me a clipboard. I look up at him for the first time since being chastised for my lack of professionalism, and he raises his eyebrows expectantly. I take the clipboard from his hands and read what it says along the top.

Twentieth Annual Boxing Rumble.

There’s a list of what looks to be forty names on the list already, and I wonder how many fights will need to occur to determine a winner. My hand is reaching for the pen before I have time to think – and that’s because, beneath the headline, in great bold type, it reads: Prize of 3,000,000 won.

“Didn’t take much convincin’, huh,” the owner says with a laugh, his large belly bouncing as he does. “Good. You’re a crowd favorite, I think.”

I shake my head. I don’t know about all of that. My eyes scan the list for any names I know, and at once, I stop. Kim Seokjin is written in fast, clean penmanship in the second column. I wonder how long this list has been going. I wonder, if we both made it to the end, if we’d both have to fight one another.

This thought is fleeting though, because in the end, I realize full-well that I will most likely not make it. There’s so many names on here, many that I recognize but many more that I don’t; I think I stand a good chance against some, but with all of the wildcards on the table it’s hard to say.

“I’ll work hard,” I tell the bar owner, and he nods approvingly.

On the walk back home, somehow my feet end up dragging me to the convenience store where Tae works. Tonight is the barbeque on the roof, even though it’s fast approaching 0 celsius, and I have
to stop somewhere for beer. (Granted, I know I could stop closer to the apartments for it, but I’d be lying if I said this place didn’t have its perks.)

Through the front window, I see the back of his head bouncing up and down. From outside I can hear a song playing through the speakers, something catchy from my childhood. To My Boyfriend. My fingers start tapping against my thigh as I approach, and I realize that Tae’s head bobs to the beat perfectly.

Just as the chorus begins, I grab the door handle and thrust it open.

Tae’s head whips around and I look straight at him. Call me call me call me, give me a call. I can’t help it. My whole face cracks into a giant, cheesy grin and a muffled laugh leaves my lips.

Kim Taehyung grabs his head in disbelief and starts cracking up.

“What the heck are you doing here?!” he shouts over the song, which I suddenly realize is playing much louder inside. “You didn’t even text!”

“I know!” I yell back, walking down an aisle toward the cooler in the back where the beer is kept. “I was just passing by and thought I’d say hi!”

The music turns down a little, and when I glance over my shoulder, I see Tae messing with an iPod Shuffle – a true relic of the early 2000s. “Are you a DJ now?” I ask, opening the cooler door and pulling out several bottles of beer. I walk them back over to Tae and start setting them up along the counter before heading back and repeating the process.

“This was my music collection as a child,” Tae defends himself. “You know you used to love this song.”

“Everybody did at one point,” I shrug, giving in. “I won’t hold it against you.” Tae laughs, and my chest squirms.

He clears his throat on my third trip back to the counter and holds up the price scanner, pausing to look at me before he does so.
“Hm?”

“Are you really carrying all of these back yourself?”

“That’s the plan,” I shrug. “Unless you want to help.”

“I’m on for another 45 minutes,” he states.

I look around in the empty store. “I can wait.”

Tae sighs, clearly still not fully believing the fact that I was going to attempt to haul all of these back myself, and starts the long process of ringing up all of the drinks as I bring them to him. In the end, we fill five giant paper bags with alcohol, and even then I wonder if it’s enough. Suga is coming, after all.

Once all of the beers get bagged up, Tae and I pass the time by skipping through songs on his iPod, laughing when goofy shit starts playing through the speakers and singing along like we had in 2001. We have thumb wars, and I use a scrap piece of paper to draw him looking ripped (a la Goku). At this, Tae can’t stop laughing – maybe that’s why I draw Jimin in the same style immediately after.

Because I don’t want him to stop smiling.

Eventually, when Tae’s coworker shows up for the next shift, we are free to leave. Taehyung introduces me to the guy whose name I don’t care to remember, and we try to figure out the best way to carry the drinks.

“You get two, I’ll get three,” I tell him.

“No way,” Tae says. “I’ll get three, and you get two.”

“I don’t think you want to do that,” I warn, but Tae is already grabbing one bag and placing it in the crook of his left arm like an infant. An infant that weighs close to 30 pounds.
“Jesus,” he says, lifting the other two. I watch him, standing still for a moment, poised before the door of the shop, and I wait.

Three seconds later, he cracks. He sets the bags down and very nearly lets the third drop from his arms. I’m there with the quickness and snatch it from him before he can bust open all of the glass bottles and ruin our night – but I can’t stop laughing.

“You tried so hard,” I manage to get out, and he just stares back at me with his eyes filled to the brim with suffering.

Tae’s eyes turn to the ceiling. “Why am I so weak?” he asks. Silence.

“It’s okay,” I tell him, patting him on the back as I grab up two of his bags and two of my own as well. “Just get that one and we’ll be fine.”

“This is embarrassing,” he states. “I’m mildly offended you would publicly shame my muscles in this way.”

“Your muscles shame themselves every day.”

Tae can’t help but laugh at this, and as he picks up his own bag, he holds the door open for me and we head back to the apartment building, side-by-side.

When we get back, we make the climb to the fourth floor and exit the door at the top to the roof. A gust of chilly air greets us, and holding the door open, Taehyung’s face scrunches. “Cold!” he shouts, shoulders rising to protect his neck. “Jungkook, remind me again why we thought this was a good idea?”

“We didn’t,” I clarify, walking through the doorway onto the roof. “Hoseok did.”

“I can hear your disrespectful tones from here,” Hoseok says – and I notice he’s already on the roof, huddled with the others around the grill in the far left corner while Suga cooks shish kabobs. “If you don’t like hyung’s party then you can just drop off the drinks and leave.”
“Hoseooook!” Tae grins, running across the roof to him, struggling with the bag of drinks and giving him a firm hug from behind. “Your parties are always fun – even with the cold.”

Hoseok can’t help but smile at this; as I approach the group, I see his eyes slip shut and he leans back into Tae’s hug. I think their friendship is really special – although Tae’s relationship with everyone seems to be special. Tae’s a unique kind of person who cares so much for the ones he loves that you can feel it.

He cherishes everyone.

This thought passes through my mind, and in turn, my cheeks warm.

“Oh, wow,” I hear Jin say, watching as I tote the bags full of beer across the roof. “You really did that, huh. Those look heavy.” Jin makes absolutely no move to help me.

“Somebody had to,” I shrug, smiling a little. I set the bags down at their feet and make a fist, showing off my muscle (completely hidden beneath my coat).

“Wooooow,” Jin says again. “Amazing. You are amazing, Jungkook.” His sarcasm is palpable.

I narrow my eyes and see his mouth stretch to a wide, pinched smile.

I see that Jimin is already here too, which makes me feel happy for some reason. He’d only known Kim Taehyung until a few weeks ago, but feels comfortable enough around everyone now to show up on his own to hang out. He’s grinning, standing close to Namjoon and Suga. I watch him bend down to rest his chin on Suga’s shoulder, watching with full attention as Suga rotates the shish kabobs on the grill.

“Hey, pass me a drink, Jungkook?” Namjoon asks, and when I look up he has a hand outstretched. I bend down, pulling a few out of the bag, then proceed to hand him one as well as everyone else. Suga is the quickest to reach out for a drink, his open hand shooting out behind him, eyes not moving from the food cooking.

Tae struggles to get his open; before I grab one for myself, I reach over and take his from him,
popping the top off on my belt buckle.

“Woah, that was cool!” Tae exclaims, but unlike Jin, his tone is sincere. My eyes meet his, and I see the expression on his face. He’s glowing.

*Cute,* I think. *Dangerously cute.*

“Oh, Jungkook!” Jimin exclaims, holding his drink out to me after I hand Tae’s back. “Please help me with mine!”

I go to reach out for it, but a hand usurps it before I can grab it; I look to see Namjoon with the beer in his hand, pulling out his keyring and using the bottle opener on it to pop open Jimin’s. Glancing quickly at Jimin, I see him smile, biting his lip as he does.

These fools are completely transparent.

“Listen, boy,” Suga says to no one in particular, moving the meat to the side of the grill with his tongs. “These are done. I need a plate.”

Hoseok, of course, is already standing by with a plate, ready to assist. He watches carefully as Suga plates the shish kabobs, and moves the plate quickly when he sees Suga starting to lose control of one of the sticks. Suga glances over at him, his expression unreadable.

I grab a beer for myself and pop the top open, then take a sip. It’s cold; the chill from the alcohol and the chill from the nighttime air send shivers down my spine. I burrow further into my jacket and consider going back inside to grab a hat.

This thought completely slips my mind as soon as I see Tae glance in my direction and start toward me. My stomach turns, and with a rush of anxiousness, I run my fingers through my bangs and shake the hair from my eyes. Tae sidles up to me, his shoulder bumping mine. He takes a sip of his drink, then glances over. I just watch the ground.

“I think Namjoon is going to make a fire after this,” Tae says simply. “They have some wood to make a little one in the pit.”
“That’s technically illegal,” I state.

“Oh, yeah. Definitely.” He winks at me.

“Guess it’s a good thing we live in an area cops like to avoid.”

Tae laughs loudly. “Yes! For once, our lack of safety is working in our favor!”

“Yeah! Being poor!”

“Yeah!”

We high five, grinning.

“Alright, let’s eat!” Hoseok exclaims, raising the plate in the air, displaying it proudly. “Thank you Suga for cooking for us!”

“You all owe me money for this,” he says dryly in response. “This is what I get paid to do.”

“You get paid in love and respect,” Namjoon says, smiling jokingly. “You did this out of the goodness of your heart.”

“What goodness,” Suga asks, but it is more of a statement than anything.

“Suga, you have a good heart,” I say suddenly – and am surprised by my own voice. It seems the others are too, because they all look over at me. “You’re kind,” I elaborate, and Hoseok smiles softly.

“You are kind, Suga,” he says, nodding in agreement.

“To Suga!” Jin shouts, raising his bottle.
Suga’s expression looks pained. “Please… stop…”

“We will not stop!” Jimin shouts back, his arms wrapping around Suga’s shoulders, squeezing him tightly. “Thank you for the food!”

“Thank you, Suga!” we all shout.

Despite his words, Suga’s lips crack to a smile that eventually broadens, showing off his gums. I’ve never seen Suga smile like this before, and it takes me by surprise the gentleness of it. I glance at Tae, and see the way he grins now, watching the scene unfold. It’s a soft reflection; he takes a small sip of beer and his lips part, tongue darting out quickly before closing his mouth again.

I look away. Distracting myself, I go in for a shish kabob and take one on the top. It honestly looks delicious; the chicken, peppers and onions smell tasty, and even in the dark I can see they’ve been seasoned well.

Blowing on the chicken at the top, my entire mouth wraps around it and I pull it off with my teeth. It’s so hot, but it’s cooked perfectly; the roof of my mouth is on fire, and I open my mouth with each bite in attempt to cool it down. It was worth it though – the flavors are amazing. I see the others start to grab their own sticks as well, and one by one, we all end up moaning about how delicious it all is.

“These peppers,” I say, eyes widening as I eat one off the shish kabob.

“I can’t tell if it’s so good because it’s actually good, or if it’s just because I’m starving,” Jin wonders aloud.

“It’s good because it’s good,” Tae confirms – but when he does, I notice a look in Jin’s eyes as his stare turns upward to Tae. There is something in his look that reads as… annoyance.

This is not the first time I’ve witnessed Jin acting this way to Kim Taehyung, but I’m not sure when something in him changed. My memory of the first night we all drank together was nothing but pleasant; I remember us all laughing together.
I wonder what happened – but I don’t let myself wonder too long, because for some reason, the thought saddens me.

For anyone to look at Kim Taehyung in such a way feels like a personal blow.

“You’ve outdone yourself, hyung,” Hoseok says, wrapping one arm around Suga’s shoulders and leaning downward to rest his head against Suga’s.

“I can hear you chewing,” Suga says, but makes no move to push him away.

We all eat our fill, and then some; Namjoon and I each eat two servings, while Jin eats three and must be stopped before going in for a fourth.

Across the roof, I notice as Jimin struggles to finish his first serving. He pulls at the chicken on the bottom, sliding it off the stick and taking a few steps toward Taehyung. He offers it to him, and I watch as Tae’s eyebrows raise. He says something that I can’t hear, and then Jimin extends the food to him. Tae’s mouth opens and Jimin pops the food in, watching him with a specific carefulness. Tae chews a few times, then gives a thumbs up, grinning. His hand falls on Jimin’s shoulder, squeezing once, then says something that looks like thank you.

Jimin’s thumb moves to the corner of Tae’s mouth and wipes it. He fingerguns Tae, and Tae does the same, interchanging both hands and popping them off three times.

Something in my chest burns. I look away, my brow furrowed. I don’t know why I feel like this. The exchange creates a dark thought in my head – that maybe Park Jimin and Kim Taehyung have a history. That maybe there is something going on between them. That Jimin can touch Tae like this and get away with it, while I have to stop myself from getting too close.

This sort of constant restraint is painful.

Perhaps it’s just jealousy.

I have to remind myself that it isn’t Jimin’s fault. I can’t be angry for things I can’t change – and besides, he knew Taehyung first. I’m trying to let Tae into my life, but for years, Jimin and Tae have been in each other’s. They have a strong bond. I can’t be mad when it comes to history.
I shouldn’t be mad, anyway.

Not long after we all finish eating, Namjoon starts the fire. There’s a small metal fire pit that smokes first before a piece of newspaper catches a pyramid of twigs, then starts the wood crossed one over the other underneath it all. Namjoon gives a small “woo!” in victory, and Jimin comes up quickly behind him to squeeze his shoulders.

“Fire, man!” Hoseok shouts, rushing to a pile of bag chairs located near the grill and bringing them over. Everyone comes to sit after Hoseok and I take our seats across the fire from each other, and Namjoon sits beside him. Taehyung, coming from seemingly nowhere, sits down on my left, and Jimin sits between Namjoon and Taehyung. (Of course.) Suga plops down beside Hoseok, and Jin follows in after him, sitting between the two of us after distributing another round of beers for everyone.

Tae taps my shoulder with his bottle, and I grin, standing to help him with his cap again. I pop it off on my belt buckle, and he whoops quietly, pumping his fists excitedly before I hand it back to him.

Jimin doesn’t ask me again – instead, he hands his right to Namjoon, who smiles softly as he gets the cap off for him.

“Let’s play a game!” Hoseok says, sitting up a little straighter in his chair. The glow of the fire illuminates his face with a hot orange. “Does everyone know how to play Sam Yuk Gu?”

Namjoon apparently has never played, since he says that he has but asks for a refresher, and I can see it in his face that he’s lying. He’s not very good at subtlety, I think.

Hoseok goes on to explain the rules: that we take turns counting in sequence around the circle – 1, 2, 3, 4… – but when your number is associated with a 3, 6 or 9, you have to clap, otherwise you’re out. It’s fairly easy; I remember playing the game at summer camp when I was a kid. I was always one of the last ones playing, and I knew it upset the other kids.

Ah, summer camp. It should be fond memories associated with the summers of my youth, but it was more a feeling of isolation than anything. A feeling of being put somewhere by my parents that meant they didn’t have to look after me. A feeling of being unable to connect with anyone, of otherness.
I shake my head; the memories spinning darker thoughts in my head. My grip on the bottle in my hand tightens, and I bring it to my lips, taking a long gulp and swallowing half the bottle at once.

“I’ll start.” Hoseok says finally, crossing his legs in the chair and holding his hands out in front of him. We all follow suit, sitting up straighter in our seats and positioning ourselves for speed.

Then the counting begins; at first, it’s easy. The numbers go around and around, and everyone claps when they need to. However, on count 16 when Suga is supposed to clap, he misses it, clapping a moment later as an afterthought.

“Ohhhh! Suga is out!” Jin says, laughing. “Worldwide Disappointment!”

“I’m not good at games like this,” he states indifferently. Hoseok pauses, hand reaching over to squeeze the back of his neck softly as if to say It’s okay.

“Again!” Jin says, clapping his hands to get everyone back in the game. We continue going around, Jimin and Namjoon the next to go, and when they do, Namjoon clinks his glass against Jimin’s. I watch the look on Jimin’s face as he does, his eyebrow raising upward a little. The corner of his mouth quirks.

“We’re pretty good at this!” Tae says, looking over at me. “I’m feeling good. I could win.”

“You won’t win,” I say simply. “I’m going to win, and there can only be one.”

“You’re both wrong,” Jin says pointedly at us. “I’m going to win.”

The next round plays out, and as fate would have it, Jin loses.

“This game cheats!” he shouts an agony, and we all laugh, our voices echoing over the empty street below and filling the night air. The wind picks up a little, but the fire keeps burning and warms us. I slam the rest of my drink, and Jin orders everyone to do the same. I guess everyone is going to earn a hangover tonight.
We keep playing until it’s just Tae and I left, and when it is we turn our chairs to face one another.

“One.”

“Two.”

“Three.” I clap.

The counting continues, and we make it up really high. Stupidly high. The rest of the group who have been out of play, most of them for multiple rounds, all sigh dejectedly.

“When is this going to end?” Suga asks over the sound of Tae and I counting back and forth.

“I don’t know,” Namjoon answers. “They’re both too good at it. It’s almost not a game anymore.”

I hear him say this, and as I clap my hands at number 166, I decide I’m going to end the game. I’m usually quite competitive – however, Tae is really trying hard. I can see it in his gaze, the way his eyes bore into mine. He’s focused, and he wants to win really badly.

On purpose, I forget to clap.

The group goes nuts.

Tae stands, raising his hands in the air as he lifts his empty beer bottle. A winner.

“Good job, Taehyung,” I say, tapping his side with the end of my bottle before setting it down beside me.

“Thanks Jungkook,” he says, smiling. “I also know you let me win, but my resolve is stronger than yours, so I still feel like a winner.”
“As you should,” I grin, shaking my head. Kim Taehyung is unbelievable.

Tae glances back at the bags of alcohol, which have been moved much closer to where we all now sit, and silently goes to grab us more. When he hands me mine, he slows, eyes squinting a little.

I tilt my head to the side.

“Love shot,” he says suddenly.

Now I’m really confused. “Hm?”

Tae cheeses. “Let’s do a love shot!”

“What is a love shot?”

He sighs exasperatedly, ushering me to hurry up and open our drinks. “It’s… you know! When you do the thing…” He crosses his arms awkwardly in front of him, trying to demonstrate. His right arm reaches around the left, pretending to hold a drink as I open his bottle. He tips the invisible drink to his lips, then looks at me as if to say Got it?

I squint hard. I don’t got it.

“We don’t have liquor, so it’ll have to be just a really long drink… But I’ll just show you,” he decides, then stops me before I sit back down with my drink. “Hold your beer,” he instructs. I do. “Now hold it like you’re going to drink it.” I do as I’m told, bringing the bottle to my lips.

He takes his drink, proceeding to weave his arm through mine, wrapping around in a way that now makes me realize what a love shot is. It’s like at a wedding, when the married couple takes a sip of champagne. We raise our beers to our lips, and when my head tilts back to drink, I glance across at him. His eyes are closed, focused entirely on the task at hand, and I wonder what the hell I did in this universe to end up where I am right now. What a lucky break I’ve gotten. What an unbelievable life I’m now living.

We drink our beers as long as we can, until Tae needs to come up for air and breaks the link of our
woven arms. He gasps when his mouth pops off the end.

“Why is the air colder than these beers?” is his immediate follow-up statement.

I laugh loudly; something about this random fact that pops into Tae’s head is so entirely on-brand with who he is as a human being that I can’t help but crack up at the absurdity of it. Only he would bring that up, completely ignoring the intimacy of what we just did.

Looking around, I see the others and know they’re aware of what just took place, but they’re all involved in their own conversations now. I happen to notice that Suga has more than a few empty beers at his feet, though I’m not sure when they’d all been put away… Such a sneaky little man.

We all sit around the fire for a long time, just talking and drinking together. In a way, it’s comforting; being surrounded by these people who all let me into their lives, accepting me with open arms as a friend. In a strange sense… even though I haven’t known them long, it feels strangely like how families must feel. I wonder if this is how it is to be a part of a family, to love and accept one another, and to lift each other up without judgement or hesitation.

My eyes keep following Taehyung, the beer definitely a factor in my obliviousness to others. I don’t know if they can see that I’m acting different. All I know is that I can’t stop my eyes from tracing the contours of his face, of charting every freckle on his skin like a map. His eyes, the way the light up when someone says or does something funny, or the way he bites down on his lower lip in embarrassment when he does something silly.

He spills beer on himself around drink five, and that’s when I know I’m not the only one feeling the effects of the alcohol. Tae excuses himself, heading back inside with a slight stumble; I watch after him, eyes waiting until the door closes to look away.

Jin coughs. I glance at him, and he’s looking at me. His expression is harder than it usually is, and he looks as though he’s trying to calculate something. Piecing information together, probably attempting to formulate an answer to the signs. I hold his eyes for a moment longer before I look away, tongue running over my chapped lips and taking another long drink of my beer.

Hoseok and Suga decide to reheat some of the shish kabobs; I hear Jin get up too, following them to the grill. I swear, that boy’s stomach is a bottomless pit. When they get up, my gaze slowly turns to Jimin and Namjoon, and I’m shocked to see Jimin’s hand reach over to Namjoon’s and lace their fingers together. Namjoon’s eyes look down to their hands, held tightly, resting on his thigh; he looks off, down and away at nothing at all… but I can see a smile, soft on his lips.
Jimin says something quietly to him, but I don’t catch what it is. Not wanting to interrupt this moment or bare witness to something private, I stand up from my seat and move to stand along the side of the roof.

The street below is quiet. Streetlights glow on the road and I can see people walking down along the sidewalks. I wonder if they know we’re up here.

“Jungkookie,” I hear, and when I turn around, Kim Taehyung is standing there, another beer in hand and wearing a new pair of pants. His eyes look into mine with a soft intensity I can’t quite place.

“Need help with that?” I ask, and he says nothing, simply handing it over and leaning an elbow along the edge of the roof. He watches as I go to pop the cap off on my buckle again, but it slips and I look up at him, a little embarrassed.

Tae smirks. “Not so easy after you start drinking, huh.”

“My hands aren’t working right,” I laugh, trying it again. With some effort, I manage to get it off, and Tae cheers.

“You’re so talented, Jungkook,” he tells me.

“It’s just about the least interesting thing I know how to do,” I reply, not feeling like this “skill” is really all that special. Anyone could do it.

“When you do that,” Tae starts, pausing to take a sip of his beer and continuing after it’s left his lips, “your face gets all serious.” Then he imitates my expression, hardening his mouth and narrowing his eyes as he waves the beer around his buckle.

“Aw, I really look like that?” I ask, running a hand through my hair and tilting my head away, embarrassed.

“You… you look like that,” Tae grins. “Except cuter.”
I stop, looking up at him with wide eyes. He doesn’t seem apologetic in calling me cute. His back is arched, chin tilted up proudly as his eyes fall on me.

I don’t know how to respond, so I drink. I take a really long sip, hoping that Tae will say something to fill the silence.

And of course, it is right at this very moment that I feel it: snow.

The first snow of the year begins as I stand across from Kim Taehyung, drinking a beer and trying to figure out how to behave when the boy I like stands here calling me cute.

*I like him, I think suddenly. I like Kim Taehyung.*

It’s the first time I’ve admitted it to myself, truly, without running from the words before they’re allowed to be thought at all. The alcohol makes repression more difficult.

“Do you see it?” I ask at once, pointing upward at the sky.

Tae looks up, and when he sees it, he quite literally jumps into the air three times and plants the biggest, cutest smile on his face. “Snow!” he shouts, and I can sense the others looking over at us, then up to the sky as it falls, slowly, cascading from a faded atmosphere.

Tae reaches a hand up, feeling little flakes touch down on his palm. “Every year, I wait for the first snowfall,” he says thoughtfully. “It means we’re closer to spring. But… I think the winter is beautiful in its own way. Snow can be beautiful too. A moment like this… it’s magical, you know?”

I watch him, watch his calm expression. The wind blows his hair into his eyes, and when he makes no move to move it, I can’t help from reaching my hand upward and pushing it out of his vision. He looks over at me, his gaze warm. The corners of his lips turn upward into a gentle smile.

“You are a kind person, too, Jungkook,” he says. I’m not sure where this statement comes from, and I wait for him to elaborate. “You said earlier that you thought Suga was kind. Sometimes… his hard edges make it difficult for people to see this. You brought beer for everyone tonight, you
came to help me at your boxing event – even though you had just done something so exhausting, and you carried me off.” His words are slurring, and I notice him leaning heavily on the railing. Still, he continues: “You made me breakfast, and you always visit me at the shop.”

I nod, my mind fuzzy and my chest feeling as though it could burst at any moment. I feel some invisible force willing me to be closer to him, but my feet can’t move.

“I am so happy,” he says, and then his eyes are on mine. “I am so thankful… that we met at this point in our lives.”

A moment passes; the wind picks up, bringing with it a small flurry that seems to spin circles in the air around us. My eyes don’t move from his. My hands… what do I do with my hands?

“I’m happy too,” I say finally, and watch as his eyes slip shut, mouth curving again into a soft smile. “I’m so happy lately, I don’t know what to do with myself.”

“I know,” he laughs, reaching a hand out and grabbing my arm, squeezing once. “I’m the same.”

His movements are slow, uncalculated now as the alcohol starts to wear on him. I can see it in everything he does, the way his eyes blink slowly, or how he can’t seem to stand up straight. He seems tired; I know he worked long hours earlier, and this is all probably hitting him at once. I wonder how long he has been tired for. I wonder how hard he pushed himself so that he could spend more time with us – with me.

“Jungkook,” he says softly.

“Mm?”

His eyes open, and as he sets his bottle down on the ledge, his hand moves to pull something from his pocket.

A camera.

“Please take a photo with me,” he says, his voice so small I can barely hear him.
I grin. “Okay.”

At my agreement, Tae grins hugely, turning and sidling up next to me. He tucks an arm around my shoulders, and I bring one of mine around his waist. His head rests on mine, and I can smell his shampoo. With one hand, he raises the film camera, pointing it at us with a shaky hand. It takes him a minute, and when he does take it, his hand seems to fumble with the camera; no doubt about it, this photo will be blurry.

“Jungkook–” he starts, but I’m already reaching for the camera.

“I got this,” I tell him, grabbing it and pointing it down at us. The city in the background, and the fire across the roof serving as a cozy backdrop. “Do I just click the button here?”

“Yeah, yeah,” he says, and then tucks his head closer, leaning his forehead against the side of my neck.

My heart races – and then I click the button.

*Snap!*

“Oh, so good!” he says excitedly, taking the camera back from me and holding it gently in both his hands. He brings it close to his chest and tilts his head upward, facing the sky with closed eyes. “This is going to be such a good photograph, I know it.”

“Please show me,” I ask, “when you get it developed.”

He grins, then looks back at me. “I’ll make a copy for you.”

Suddenly I realize something, the thought shooting through my mind and body like wildfire. “Taehyung… this will be the first photo I can hang in my entire apartment.”

“You don’t have any other photos?” Tae asks incredulously.
I shake my head. “Really – this is my first one.”

He stops, then smiles, putting his camera back into his pocket. “Don’t worry. We will take many more pictures together.”

Tae says this like it’s nothing, like it’s so simple – to take photos, to create memories in such an easy way. I’ve never had a friend like this, never had family to take photos with. I don’t remember my parents ever taking pictures of trips. I remember hotel rooms. I remember waiting in business offices in countries far away. I don’t remember photographs. I don’t remember these kind of happy memories.

My eyes burn. I wonder, if I let myself, if I could cry.

Just then, I see a snowflake fall onto the tip of Tae’s nose. He doesn’t see or feel it, because he takes a sip of beer just as it lands and looks back at me, curiously.

“Hey,” I start, and his head cocks to the side.

I reach across, slowly – my first finger extending as I reach a hand across. His eyes widen a little, watching my movements. Ever so carefully, my fingertip catches the snowflake and I pull it back, eyes fixated on the snowflake now on my fingertip.

“This was on your nose,” I say, showing him.

Tae looks at it carefully for a moment, eyes staring, lips curved. “It’s cute,” he says quietly, and then he does something I could have never expected.

He kisses it.

My whole body tenses up, and I stand frozen in front of him. His lips, the softness of them, touching my fingertip makes it hard to breathe.
I have never felt this before.

When Tae pulls back, he looks down at my fingertip, seeing the snowflake is gone, then touching his lips. “Aw,” he says, face pulling into a disappointed grimace. “It melted!”

“This probably won’t stick,” I say finally, my mouth moving on its own as my mind is still stuck thinking about what just happened. My words feel disjointed, disconnected from me. “Tomorrow, this snow will probably all be gone.”

“It’ll be here to stay before long,” he says, face falling. “Soon, the snow will be everywhere. We won’t be able to get away from it.”

“I don’t think I’ll mind.”

He grins. “Me neither.”

I watch his smile, and the way it fades slowly from his lips; I watch his shoulders fall, chin turn downward a little. The notion of Kim Taehyung’s exhaustion reemerges in my mind and I stop now, realizing this night is ending before I can do anything about it. Like a train running away from me – there’s nothing I can do to stop it.

“Let’s get you to bed,” I offer, and his eyes open, head shaking.

“No, I’m fine,” he says, but his words are awkward as they tumble from his mouth. Even as he speaks, we both know that he’s lying.

I shake my head. “You look like you could use the sleep. Come on.” I hold a hand out to him, and after a moment of internal struggle, he forfeits, placing a hand in mine. His fingertips are cold. I squeeze them tightly, and he smiles a small, tired smile.

Without a word to anyone else on the roof, we slip through the door and head down the stairs, stopping on the third flight and walking to Tae’s door.

He inputs the wrong numeric code. “One second,” he mumbles, going back again to try. It buzzes
once more, incorrect. “Stupid fingers…”

“It’s okay,” I offer, turning around and going to my own door, punching in the code and opening it for him. “Come on, you can stay here.”

Taehyung looks back at me, pausing for a moment before nodding silently, crossing the hall and following in after me through the door. We kick our shoes off as it shuts, placing them in a haphazard pile near my other pairs of shoes.

“Pajamas, pajamas…” I mumble, opening the drawers of my dresser and pulling out two long sleeve shirts and two pairs of sweatpants. “Here,” I say, moving to hand Tae a set of clothes before realizing that he’s already taken his shirt off and is fumbling now with his pants. My face feels warm, ears burning. I look away.

“Oh, thank you,” he says, and I can hear him smiling. “Soft… You must use good detergent.”

I turn away, back facing him as I strip down and pull on my own pajamas. I turn back around and see Tae standing awkwardly beside the bed, not sure where to go.

“You can take the bed,” I offer. “You let me have yours the night you brought me home – please.” My hands motion for him to lie down, and he sits without hesitation.

But then, his mouth opens, and he looks at me with a worried expression. “You’ll stay here, too?”

“Yeah,” I smile, plopping down on the floor and reaching over to grab a pillow. “I’ll just be here.”

Tae shakes his head, reaching a hand over to stop me. His hand finds my wrist, then slides to my palm, where his fingers lace through mine wordlessly. I stop, looking back at him, and I can feel the muscles in his arms pulling me toward him.

“Stay here,” he says, and suddenly, I realize what he’s asking me.

I don’t know how to stop myself; I don’t know how to tell him no. I don’t know how to tell myself it’s wrong, because everything in my body is vibrating with need.
The need to be beside him.

Looking into his eyes, I don’t say anything. I nod. One knee presses into the mattress, and then the other, and Tae pulls me over him until my back is against the wall and I’m on my side, facing him. He lies down beside me, both of us facing one another as we pull the covers over our shoulders.

“Do you have a pillow?” Tae asks softly.

“Hm? Another for your head?”

“No,” he grins, bashful. “I just need to hold something while I sleep.” He pauses, tongue running over his lips. I see his shoulders shiver a little as he burrows deeper under the covers. “It’s just the way I’ve slept since I was little.”

I almost laugh, imagining this. “I… I’m sorry, I only have the one under your head.” Then, a thought occurring to me, I roll over onto my other side, turning away from him. I don’t know how to say it – how to offer.

Luckily, I don’t have to.

Slow moments. An arm trailing over my side, wrapping around my waist. Pulling me. His chest at my back, the feeling of breathing. I can feel his breath grazing my neck. I can feel him sighing, his chin resting against my back.

I lean into it. The alcohol plays a part – but so does everything else.

For just a moment, I wonder if I should, if it would be crossing some invisible line that neither of us have determined but has been present this entire time. I wonder if what I do next pushes us closer to it, or if it will send me toppling over the edge.

My hand moves on its own. It covers Tae’s, fingers tracing the top of his hand, palm flat against my stomach. I let out a shaky breath, and I hear him do the same. We don’t move. We just breathe.
And then, my heart racing in my chest – I let sleep drift over both of us both like a cloud.

Chapter End Notes
Y’all, I graduate from university tomorrow and life feels crazy atm but here's a chapter that I hope you enjoy! Just a little glimpse into more of Taehyung's life and past and of course, some good taekook snuggles.

btw, anyone else wrecked after that MAMA speech???? cause same.

Sunlight is what ultimately rustles me awake, coming in through the slightly parted curtains and blinding me, even with my lids closed. The first thing I register is that I’m warm. So, so warm. My toes curl out as my legs stretch, my arms tightening around my… This is not my pillow, I think, furrowing my eyebrows together in confusion. There’s a certain hardness to it, my hands splayed out against something even and soft. My fingers grip and find fabric.

I blink my eyes open slowly, seeing Jungkook in front of me. Facing me.

I inhale sharply, blinking rapidly to clear the last of the sleep from my eyes. His eyes are closed, but when I pull away, just slightly, I can count his eyelashes, if I wanted (I kind of want to). His lips are parted, just a little, letting out warm puffs of air. My arms are around him, my hands flat against his back and he has one arm draped over my middle, heavy with sleep, but his fingers are gripping at the fabric of the shirt I’m wearing.

Moments from last night surface and I remember reaching out for him, not wanting him to sleep on the floor (but really, not wanting him to be that far away from me), pulling him to sleep on the bed, too. How I’d shamelessly wrapped myself around him. How both of us had tensed before relaxing.

How I’d never slept so comfortably, so safely, in my entire life.

I don’t want this moment to end. I want to be selfish, for just another moment, as I try to memorize his sleeping face. I tell myself that it’s his warmth that keeps me from leaving, but it’s not just that - it’s his arm around me, his smell (something vanilla and soft?) filling my nose and how he stretches his own legs, one tangling between mine at the end of the bed.

I can’t help it.
Slowly, I tuck my head back under his chin, closing my eyes as my nose brushes against his neck. I will myself to commit every single second to memory, never wanting to forget this beautiful, fleeting moment as my heart pounds painfully hard against my chest.

His arm tightens around me in his sleep, pulling me even closer. My stomach feels funny and I smile, feeling light and warm and happy.

But all good things must come to an end.

My ears pick up the familiar three note chime as someone inputs Jungkook’s passcode into the door. It unlocks and my eyes snap open in surprise, my mind trying to figure out who possibly knows his door code. His parents? Siblings?

I don’t have even a second to pull away before I hear Jin’s voice, loud.

“Yo, Jungkook! You’re late!” he bellows and my mind registers his footsteps getting closer. Jungkook’s eyes blink open slowly and I wish I could stay and admire the way his eyebrows pull together in slight irritation, eyes struggling to open. “Jungkoo-”

Jin’s over us now. I look up at Jungkook and we both blink at each other for a moment before Jungkook looks over my shoulder to Jin.

“What the fuck?” Jin says, grabbing a fistful of the blankets draped over us to pull it off. Jungkook groans and I immediately retract my arms, feeling nervousness in the pit of my stomach. “Taehyung, get out! We’re late, Jungkook! What the fuck is going on between you two?”

I practically leap out of his bed, pulling my (Jungkook’s) shirt down further over myself and feeling so, so weird at this question. Jin’s eyes are squinting at me, dark and he looks so angry and his lips are set in a thin, tight line as he stares me down. I pull the sleeves of Jungkook’s shirt over my hands, feeling shame and embarrassment, but also Jin’s so angry looking that I feel nervous, too.

Like I just got caught doing something bad.

But how could anything that felt so good, so right, be bad?
Jungkook seems to be struggling to come up with words to Jin’s anger, too. “Hyung-” he starts, his voice still deep from sleep and my heart lurches in my chest.

“Get ready, Jungkook. We have practice.” Jin’s words are harsh, sharp, and straightforward. He reaches out for me and takes my elbow, pulling me to the door. My mind is reeling, trying to piece everything together as he opens the door and practically shoves me out into the hallway, my shoes then pushed into my arms quickly.

He doesn’t say anything else, just pulls the door shut with a slam that echos in the hall.

I blink a few times, looking from the door to my shoes in my arms, before I slowly shuffle over to my own apartment. My chest and stomach feel tight with some emotion I can’t really place, but as the door clicks closed and I’m back inside my own place, tears prick at the corners of my eyes.

And it’s so stupid. So stupid to want to cry over the reaction Jin had given us, because it’s not fair that he lashed out at us like that. We weren’t even doing anything, just sleeping and my heart is racing now. I feel so unwelcome, so hurt, because I’d thought we were friends but Jin just slammed the door in my face.

It’s not fair that he gets to be close to Jungkook but I can’t.

“And so he’s coming to visit me this weekend. I’m so excited, Taehyung, seriously. Thank you for taking me to that bar when I came to visit you the first time because this is all thanks to you.”

Jimin’s been on the phone with me for over an hour at this point, talking non-stop about Namjoon and how they were going on their first date this weekend and he’s just so excited, can’t wait, feels like he’s going to die, etc. But I’m having a hard time listening fully, as I lay on my bed with my pillow and I realize how painfully uncomfortable it all is compared to lying in Jungkook’s bed, hugging him.

I can’t stop thinking about how perfectly I fit in his arms, how he’d been just the right size to hug and hold all night.
I sigh now, and Jimin seems to sense that something is wrong. Finally.

“What’s going on, Tae? You’re usually way more excited about stuff like this,” he says, and his tone is gentle, not angry, even though it’s obvious that I’ve not been paying much attention to him. “What’s wrong?”

I bury my face into my pillow and sigh into the phone again.

Where do I even begin?

I have a big dumb crush on Jeon Jungkook, who is my friend, but when he smiles at me, my heart does these funny flips and I can’t help it. And when he reaches out to dust the snowflake off my nose or the leftover sauce from my lips when we’re eating together, or just touch me in general my whole body feels so hot, like I’m going to combust. How his arms and hands are so gentle with me, protective and kind.

I want to cry, because I’m thinking about Jin’s reaction again and how he and Jungkook had left and I hadn’t even seen so much as a text from Jungkook all day.

“I’m… fine,” I lie, but it’s so obvious and my voice shakes when I say it. Jimin hums softly, the sound buzzing in my ear as I reach up to wipe away one single tear that falls. I tell myself that this isn’t because of Jungkook or Jin or whatever, but because my eyes are dry and I’m laying down and they just water sometimes.

“You’re not fine, but if you don’t want to talk about it, that’s okay,” Jimin tells me honestly, understanding even without context. He’s always been this way, and I’m so grateful, because at the end of the day, we all have things that we don’t want to share. But finding someone who understands and respects that is sometimes difficult. “I’m here when you want to, though. I’m sorry you’re going through a hard time, Taehyung.”

I swallow and mumble out, “Thanks, Jimin.”

It’s quiet on both of our ends for a moment, and I sigh, rolling over to stare at my ceiling.

“So, what are you going to wear for your date with Namjoon?” I ask, bringing the conversation back to his happy news, so I don’t have to think about how confused I am toward Jungkook.
“I was thinking my blue and white striped shirt and some jeans?” he replies, his tone returning to the light and happy one. “We’re just going to get coffee and see a movie, so like, nothing fancy. But still, I need to show off my assets, you know?”

I smile a little, closing my eyes as Jimin continues to tell me about the texts between them (apparently, this has been a thing since the first time Jimin came to visit and gave his number to him on a napkin while intoxicated), and how sweet and considerate and shy Namjoon is. He sounds so happy and it makes me happy for him, because Jimin has had his share of heartbreaks growing up, and with Namjoon, it feels right. I know I can trust him not to hurt my best friend.

We talk for another hour - or, at least, Jimin does. I do my best to listen and try to act as interested as I know I should be, but my mind keeps wandering.

Back to the boy across the hall. Back to Jeon Jungkook.

When I hang up, I sit up in bed and sigh loudly, feeling frustrated. Every part of me knows that I can’t have him, that I’m greedy to want more than I already get. Jungkook is one of those rare people that you meet at the right time in life that drastically changes everything, turns your boring life into something beautiful, and that reaffirms that life doesn’t have to be all bad, even when things look pretty bleak.

All those flowers in my heart are blooming in full, and I think that every single sadness has been worth it to lead me here, to him.

But I know that he’s not mine, and that the reaction we got from Jin shows me just how little I actually have of Jungkook.

I stare at my phone, willing it to light up with a text from him. Something. Anything.

But it never comes, and the day fades into night, and it’s time to go to sleep and forget about the fact that hugging my pillow doesn’t make me feel half as safe or comfortable.

“Your total will be 3,000 won,” I tell the customer, doing my best to have a positive tone to my
voice. But it’s Wednesday and it’s cold and cloudy outside, and my shift has been long today. I can’t even think about the fact that it’s been four days since I’ve talked to or seen Jungkook. “Thank you, have a nice day.”

The bell chimes over the door as the customer leaves and I, quite literally, deflate onto my stool and sigh. My shoulders feel heavy today, my eyes tired from lack of sleep. It’s been a rough couple of days, to say the least. Between all the weird Jungkook and Jin drama from the weekend and Jimin getting ready for his Big Date with Namjoon this weekend, I’ve been thinking too much to get an adequate amount of sleep.

My phone buzzes on the counter and I reach for it quickly, my fingers gripping it and pulling it closer to check the name at lightning speed. I audibly groan when I see Suga’s name on the screen and not Jungkook’s.

I can’t believe I’m this upset to not have talked to him in four days.

The bell chimes over the door and I look up, my eyes going wide in surprise. My stomach drops and I swallow, feeling the familiar but uncomfortable feeling of nausea rising in the deepest part of my soul. My fingers start to shake a little, dropping my phone back onto the counter as I get to my feet, the stool falling onto the floor behind me from my sudden movement, clattering. The sound is deafeningly loud in the quiet store.

“Hello, Kim Taehyung.”

In front of me are two men, both dressed in all black. Black button-down shirts, black blazers, black slacks and black shoes and socks. One of them is taller, and he has rings on almost all of his fingers - chunky, big, gold rings - and has a toothpick in his mouth, flicking around as he smirks at me. The other is shorter, plumper, with large fists and tattoos visible on his neck. When he smiles at me, I notice that a few of his teeth are gold, and also that his smile is void of any kindness - in fact, it makes the hair on the back of my neck stand on end.

My mouth is dry and I feel sick. My shaking hands move to grip the counter, trying not to show them how bothered I am to see them.

“It’s been a while, hasn’t it?” the taller one says, stepping up to the other side of the counter, leaning against it, closer and closer until I can smell his cheap, overpowering cologne. “How’s your dad doing?”
The shorter one laughs at that, coming over to examine a display near the counter. “You know, it’s been a while since we’ve gotten any payment from you. We just wanted to make sure you were still alive.”

“Right,” the taller one agrees, nodding his head as he stares at me with dark eyes, “and see why on earth you’ve not paid us for two months? You know that we’re busy people, Taehyung.”

My eyes look away, because I’m scared and I don’t want him to see that I’m scared. But when I look out the window, I see Jeon Jungkook, walking toward the convenience store, and my stomach drops even further, as if that was possible. My heart is beating in my ears, my eyes wide, as I realize that he can’t come here. Not now.

He can’t be part of this messy part of my life. I can’t let that happen to him.

I turn to look back at the taller one now and try to clench my jaw, try to look tough and brave, even if my knees are shaking. “I’ve been saving to make a bigger payment,” I tell him, lifting my chin a little. “I’ll wire you the money tomorrow. It’s enough to make up for what I missed last month, too.”

He takes the toothpick out of his mouth and grins. His teeth are yellow. “Ah, good, very good,” he says, patting the top of my head like I’m some kind of child. “But you see, there will be interest for being late, Taehyung. And if you pull a stunt like this again, we’ll be forced to take more… drastic measures.”

I swallow hard, knowing what he means.

“Poor Taehyung,” the shorter one says, leaning against the counter now, too. “You’re a good kid. Too bad your dad ruined your life.”

“Oh, yes, we sympathize, of course,” the taller agrees, nodding his head and closing his eyes, trying to look like he really is pitying me. I feel so sick, my eyes darting from them to the door, where Jungkook is reaching to pull it open, looking at me and the two men in front of me with a confused look on his face.

“I’ll pay you tomorrow,” I tell them, my voice rising in panic. “Now please leave, or else you’re disturbing this business. I need this job to pay you back.”
“Tsk, tsk,” the shorter one says as he shakes his head, “now he’s even kicking us out? My, you sure don’t seem to know who you’re talking to, do you, kid?”

I give them a hard look, hoping against all hope that they don’t see my body shaking like a leaf as I do. Instead, they both start laughing, just as the bell chimes and the door is pulled open by Jungkook.

“We’ll talk to you tomorrow, kid,” the taller one says, patting my head again and ruffling my hair. “Remember, don’t forget about the interest.”

And with that, the two of them head for the doors. As they pass Jungkook, they’re polite enough, and I wonder how many people like them that I’ve passed on the streets without knowing that have been polite enough to side step out of my way.

Loan sharks.

Before Jungkook can reach the counter, I turn away to pick up my stool. My hands are shaking so bad and I feel wetness in my eyes but I have to get it together, because I can’t show him this part of me.

If they found out about Jungkook, they could use him against me or try and get him to sign a contract or worse, hurt him.

I pick up my stool and set it down before sitting down, because my knees are trembling and I’m so close to losing it. Before Jungkook makes it to the counter with his couple of purchases - chapstick, some strawberry milk and basic cold medicine - I wipe my eyes to get rid of any potential tears.

“Hey,” I say weakly, not able to meet his eye as I ring up his things.

“Hey,” he replies, his voice low. “You okay? Who were those guys?”

“No one,” I lie. “Your total is 7,460 won.”

He hands me some money and I make change for him, handing it back as I put his purchases into a
bag. Before I let go of the bag, he reaches forward and gently takes my hand. I don’t mean to, but I pull it away quickly, still shocked and nervous and I look at him, an apology already on my lips.

“I’m sorry, Jungkook,” I say and my lip trembles and I hate it. I don’t want to cry in front of him, this is so embarrassing. “Sorry, I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” he tells me honestly, his brown eyes worried as he watches me fumble with the sleeve of my shirt. “Tae. Look at me.”

Slowly, I let my eyes travel up to meet his. Worry is sketched across all of his features, his eyebrows pulled together, eyes soft and lips puckered slightly, as if wanting to say something but not knowing what.

“Who were those guys?” he asks again, his tone stern. “They didn’t look like customers, and they mentioned something about interest. You looked scared.”

“O-oh,” I say lamely, looking back down again, “you heard that?”

“Yeah.”

How am I going to down play this so he doesn’t try to get involved or worry about me? How did I let this happen? I’ve always been careful not to let that part of my life run into the small parts that make me happy. Parts like Jimin, or the bar, or my fun nights with Suga and Namjoon and Hoseok and even now, Jungkook.

None of them are supposed to know about this part of me.

“They’re loan sharks,” I say quietly, hearing him take in a sharp breath from across the counter. “My dad… left a lot of debt behind, and since I’m the only other family…”

“So you have to pay back your father’s debt?” Jungkook asks, his voice sounding sad. “What about your mother?”

“She died. A long time ago.”
“Oh, shit, Tae, I’m sorry-”

“It’s okay,” I reply, looking back up at him and shrugging my shoulders. “It’s fine. I’m used to this all, and they don’t usually stop by since I’ve been paying them back steadily. But, you know, they check in every once in a while.”

That’s a lie. They only check in if you’re not paying enough for their liking, or if you miss a payment. Until last month, I’d never missed a single payment. But I’ve been trying to save as much as possible to make larger payments, in hopes that I can diminish the large debt at a quicker pace.

The sooner the debt is gone, the sooner my real life can begin and I can join Jimin at University.

“That must be really tough, Tae,” Jungkook says now and his tone is low and soft. “Is that why you aren’t going to school like Jimin, because you’re forced to pay off this debt?”

I nod slowly, sighing as I run my hand through my hair. “Yeah, pretty much. It’s okay, though, once it’s gone, I’ll go to school. I’m just a late bloomer, is all.”

Jungkook doesn’t smile, but neither do I.

“Hey, don’t worry about me,” I tell him, reaching across the counter and put both of my hands on both sides of his cheeks, squishing his face. This, somehow, does make me smile. “This is just part of my life right now, but I’ll get through it! Don’t worry about hyung!”

Jungkook gently pushes my hands away, but now he’s smiling, too. His cheeks are slightly pink and my eyes want to believe that it’s a blush, but I can’t let myself think that.

“So why have you been MIA for the last couple of days?” I ask, changing the topic, because I really can’t bear to think about my current situation any longer than I need to. Let alone have Jungkook finding out about all my personal baggage. “I haven’t seen you since…”

I don’t know if I should say it out loud. Somehow, it feels taboo, like I want it to remain a soft and sweet memory but talking about it will tarnish it. Did Jungkook feel the warmth in the pit of his stomach, too? Did he hear my heart beating in time with his?
I’m being greedy again, I think and I reel myself back a bit.

“Yeah, I, uh, meant to visit you after.” He reaches up to scratch the back of his head, his hair getting messed up in the process. He smiles at me sheepishly and I lean my elbows on the counter and hold my face up in my hands to look up at him. “I’m sorry about Jin. I shouldn’t of let him kick you out like that. It wasn’t… fair.”

“Oh, that’s okay,” I tell him, even if it isn’t and it’s all I’ve been thinking about for the last four days.

I can feel my face getting hot, and his looks red, too.

*Should I bring up sleeping together?* I think, watching him reach into his bag to pull out the chapstick and unwrap it, breaking the seal of the plastic. *Should I pretend like that never happened? Or should I tell him that I’ve never slept so good in my entire life?*

I chew on my bottom lip anxiously, unsure of what to really say next. Things feel weird between us, and I know that I’m not the only one thinking about that morning.

*Should I apologize for making him lay in the same bed as me and then forcing my clingy self on him?*

I open my mouth, thinking maybe that I should, but it’s at the same time that Jungkook hands me a strawberry milk, the straw already in and ready to drink.

“Here,” he says now, “I know it’s your favorite.”

I take it gently, smiling up at him, grateful to avoid this topic for a little longer. He smiles, too, reaching into the bag to pull out another and pop the straw in for himself. I take a long drink, closing my eyes as the sweet liquid brings about a happier feeling in my stomach.

“You know, I don’t do a very good job of taking care of you for being your hyung,” I say now, pouting as I think of all the times Jungkook has come to buy things and then shared with me. “I need to buy you dinner or something.”
“You don’t have to,” he starts but I give him a look and he just smiles at me.

“I’ll take you to dinner,” I tell him, nodding my head as I take another drink of my strawberry milk. “A real place, too, not just cheap ramen. We can get barbeque and you can order whatever you want.”

Jungkook’s lips quirk upward again and he leans forward, as if he’s going to tell me something super top secret. Instead, he whispers, “Can I order soju, hyung?”

I laugh, swatting him away a little, and he grins. His eyes crinkle and his nose scrunches and my entire body is ready to completely combust and end it all, because he’s too god damn cute for his own good. It’s unfair, really. I never even stood a chance.

“Yes, you can even order soju,” I reply, an easy smile fixing itself to my face. “How does Friday sound?”

He gives me a cheesy thumbs up and I laugh again, wondering how I could go from immense fear to laughter in a matter of 20 minutes because of him.

Jungkook settles behind the counter to hang out with me for a while, filling me in on what I’ve missed the last four days (apparently, he really had a lot of practicing to do for future matches against bigger opponents than he’s ever fought before; I cringed hearing this, not wanting to think of Jungkook being hurt ever again) and I tell him about Jimin and Namjoon going on a date this weekend and how Jimin had not shut up about in for days and that I’m going absolutely insane.

“Maybe we should go to the bar for dinner and tease Namjoon,” Jungkook laughs. “He’s probably really nervous.”

“I’m sure he is, but Park Jimin won’t let that last for long,” I reply with a roll of my eyes, thinking of my best friend trying to dress to show off his assets. “He’s a chaotic gay energy, if I ever knew one.”

Jungkook laughs at this, the sound sweet in the quiet of the store around us.
“What time are you off tonight?” he asks, his eyes on his phone as he scrolls through something. I glance at the clock on the wall and sigh.

“I’ve still got a couple of hours,” I reply, my body feeling heavy at the thought. Today has been emotionally draining, to say the least. “Hyojin is coming closer to midnight.”

“Ah,” he says. “Well, I can hang out for a while, if you want. Keep you company.”

I grin at him now, “For five hours? You don’t have to stay, Jungkookie. Really.”

But my heart is begging him to stay, anyway. Even if five hours is a long time, if he’s here, I know that I’ll feel better, safer, happier.

“We’ll see,” is his response, his fingers typing something on his phone.

We’re quiet for a little bit, both of us playing on our phones. I’m just about to beat a new level in my tetris game when suddenly, a pop-up appears, blocking my view of my game and causing me to lose.

It’s a picture of Suga from the Halloween party, in his costume, mid-conversation. His face is scrunched, but the photo is zoomed in super close, giving him a double chin and one eye is winking. It’s so zoomed that it’s pixelated, but that only adds to the humor of the whole thing.

I laugh, looking down at Jungkook who is watching me with a mischievous smirk on his lips.

“Did you just airdrop me this?” I laugh again, saving the picture. “Because if that’s the game you wanna play, I have an arsenal of great pictures to send back.”

“Please do,” he says, laughing as I send him a close up of Hoseok with a filter on his face that caused him to look insane with huge eyes and a tiny mouth, his cheeks giant. Jungkook snorts as he saves the picture and we go back and forth for a little bit, laughing at all the bad pictures we have of our friends.

It’s wholesome and it’s funny and I can’t stop laughing, looking at one that he sent me of himself,
super zoomed in while he smiles with just his two, bunny-like front teeth showing, several chins appearing because he’s pulled his whole head back.

When we run out, we resort to taking new ones, using only the face changing filters on snapchat. We take selfies together, trying to out ugly each other as we do.

Before I know it, it’s almost time for my shift to end and my phone is full of new pictures to use as reaction pictures when texting anyone in the group. Sometime after taking all those selfies, it had gotten a little busy, so Jungkook had played on his phone alone while I worked, helping customers make their purchases and cleaning up empty ramen bowls from the couple that stayed to each before heading home for the night.

By the time Hyojin arrives for work (10 minutes late, per usual), Jungkook is sleeping behind the counter, using my winter coat as a blanket.

I kneel in front of him, unable to keep the smile off my lips as I look at him. Even if it was only four days ago, my heart feels happy to see his sleeping face again. The way he looks so soft and young and sweet, and how warm he looks nestled into my coat.

I almost feel bad waking him up.

“Jungkookie,” I whisper, gently shaking his shoulder. His eyes flutter behind his lids, but he doesn’t wake up yet. I laugh quietly, reaching up to ruffle his hair. “Kookie, wake up. It’s time to go.”

“Hnn,” he mumbles out sleepily, finally opening one eye to look at me.

“Come on,” I say softly, offering my hand to help him up. “Let’s go home.”

Chapter End Notes
us, showering our love and wishes for bts to have a break and be happy while also hoping that u are happy <3
I wake up early the next day and head to the gym, passing Namjoon just getting home as I do. I give him a look, and he just smiles lazily at me, probably still half awake but not awake enough to care that I've clearly just caught him doing the walk of shame. He lets himself into his apartment quietly, and I leave before I see anything else that I don't care to be involved in.

A yawn pries itself from my lips. The air this morning is cold and I could use some chapstick. The temperature drop and the dryness of sleeping in a heated apartment are affecting me. I probably should remedy it before it gets any worse.

Although, it would be an excellent way of conning Kim Taehyung into taking care of me again...

The thought passes through my mind and I smile, thinking of Tae making me soup and hanging out with me in bed while we spend a lazy day together. It's a nice daydream – distracting from the chill in the air, among other things.

Jin is probably already at the gym. He has his first match in the tournament tomorrow and he's been training hard for it. Somehow, no matter how early I get up, Jin is there earlier. His dedication is on a different level.

*Jin.* When I think about him, I feel a mix of emotions. He's been my closest friend since I came to live here, taking me under his wing and introducing me to my own potential. I can't help but notice a change in him lately though; whether or not it's my fault or his, I can't say… all I know is I've done something to upset him. Something that I'm not sure if I can take back.

And I think it has everything to do with Kim Taehyung.

“*Jin,*” I'd shouted, just as soon as the door closed. “*What the hell was that about*?”

“*It's him,*” Jin had yelled back. “*You've been completely out of it lately and I know it's because of him. You spend so much time waiting around that damn convenience store – you should be training.*”
“I know what I’m doing,” I said, trying to keep my voice even.

“You don’t know anything,” Jin shot back. He turned away, pinching the bridge of his nose, shutting his eyes. It’s like he couldn’t even look at me. Something inside of me tried to justify a cause for this kind of reaction; for me to feel embarrassed, or ashamed, it could only be one of two things.

Either Jin is truly upset with me, or he’s jealous.

“Put your clothes on,” was all he’d said, “and get to the gym.” With that, he walked out of my apartment, slamming the door shut behind him on his way out, and left me alone in silence.

I try to push this memory from my mind, but since it happened just five short days ago, it’s been all I’ve been able to think about. Jin’s expression when I’d opened my eyes to see him standing there, his expression changing from dumbfounded to angry in seconds. The way he’d looked at Kim Taehyung, prying himself from my arms, tugging his shirt down like he’d been caught doing something indecent.

This sparks a flurry of rage inside me; Jin had no right to barge in that morning. He had no right to tell Tae to leave, to physically push him from my apartment. Not only was I angry that it had happened, but when Tae had tried to apologize for it at the convenience store, I’d felt nothing but guilt.

It was a guilt that stemmed from me not doing anything about it.

In the back of my mind, this feeling of not knowing what to do – of letting things happen, of being pushed around – seems all too familiar.

Not only this, but to have learned that Kim Taehyung was in such an amount of debt, so much so that he couldn’t say… it didn’t sit right with me. As I turn the corner and head toward the gym, which I can see now just a few blocks away, I feel like punching myself. My life seemed so hard, but I wonder if I could put myself in Kim Taehyung’s shoes… I wonder what that would feel like. If I would like the person I was, or if I’d try and run from it – the way I seem to do with everything.

The sound of car wheels creeping slowly behind me jerks me from my thoughts, and when I move to walk along the side of the road to let them pass, the car doesn’t seem to move any faster. In fact,
it just seems to creep closer to me, without any intent of driving off.

My stomach knots. Please, I think, not again.

I hear an automatic window being rolled down, but I don’t stop walking.

“Jeon Jungkook,” I hear come from the vehicle.

Shoving my hands in my pockets, I say nothing. The voice speaks my name once again, and I look away, saying pointedly, “I think you’ve got the wrong guy.”

“Your mother has asked for you.”

Should have known. I shake my head, my eyes focusing on nothing in the distance. There’s no one on the street besides me and this car; if they wanted to grab me they very well could – and part of me thinks that if I try and fight them, they will do exactly that.

“I’m not going,” I say, trying to stay calm. “There’s nothing that she needs to say to me now. She can… I don’t know. Write a letter. Pick up the phone.”

“She wants you to come home today.”

Finally, I stop, looking back at the car and into the eyes of a man sitting in the backseat. In his hand are a pair of dark sunglasses. He’s older; mid-40s, thinning hair, and he’s wearing a suit that’s been pressed.

I recognize him.

“Jungkook,” he starts, but I cut him off.

“I’m busy today,” I say, voice raising in frequency. “I don’t have time for this. Can you just… tell her to call me. Or tell her to come here.”
“Your mother has requested we bring you to her,” is all he says in response. Then, after a brief moment, he finishes: “Today.”

I look from the sleek black car to the gym, just a block and a half away. I wonder if anyone in there can see me, or if anyone watching will think it strange that I’ve been speaking to someone in a car that clearly does not belong around here.

“Just for today?” I ask, and the man, pausing for a moment, nods.

My head and my heart say two different things – but in the end, if I want to make this short and painless, I need to go with them. It doesn’t matter what I want, because at the end of the day, my mother always gets what she wants.

This has always been the way that it is in this family.

I don’t say anything more. I just walk around the car, open the door, and slide in without a word. I close my eyes as my hands cross in my lap and, briefly, I wonder if Jin will worry where I am.

Two hours pass before we finally arrive. The car pulls up to the gate and the driver rolls his window down, saying something past the partition that I’m sure confirms the identity of the vehicle. I’m seated in the back, among three other large men that I’ve been trying to determine whether or not I could take if I had to run. I don’t anticipate it going that far – but it’s always good to be prepared. After all, they wouldn’t be here if there wasn’t a chance I’d try and fight back.

A moment passes and the gates open, our car pulling between the large wrought iron gates and following the cul-de-sac around until the car is parked beside the front entryway. I go to let myself out, but find that the door is locked. The other men in the car don’t seem surprised; they don’t move from their seats, but I can feel their eyes on me when the door opens.

I step out first, and they all file out soon after. Standing here in front of my family home, it’s exactly the way I’d left it; the large wood paneling on the sides of the building contrasting with the smooth slate on the front; silver singles lining the roof, overhanging large glass windows that you can see right into. The shades are drawn back, but there’s nothing to see… just a living room without a single living thing in it.
I walk up the front steps and punch in the passcode on the front door. There’s a series of locks that turn inside as I do, and I can hear them all clicking before a green light flashes on the keypad and the door opens.

It’s dark inside; despite it being almost noon, it seems as though no one is here. The halls are dark, the light is off in the kitchen; natural light shines through where the windows reflect, but as I enter, I can still tell that much of the house is still in shadow.

Part of me almost calls out my mother’s name, but I’m already certain of where she is. I take my shoes off at the door, pulling on a pair of house slippers, then make my way down the long, silent hallway. It’s eerie, but only in the sense that I’ve spent so much of my life here, in a place that feels so confining and cold. Even though to many standards my current place of residence is inferior, there’s no place I’d rather be now than in the comfort of my own small, studio apartment.

Up a tall set of wide stairs, down another hall, through the living area and down one last corridor to the last room on the right. The office.

The door is closed, but I can hear shuffling inside.

I knock twice.

“Come in,” I hear, and my hand finds the door knob. I take a final deep breath, and turn.

My mother is sitting at her desk, her hands typing furiously on the keyboard of her gigantic computer, several documents laid out in front of her. I can see a few files strewn about, some profiles on clients and others housing documentation.

I shut the door behind me and stand there, not sure what to do. I just watch her as she finishes up her work, clicking a few things and typing a bit more before she seems satisfied with the amount of work she’s completed – and then, finally, she looks up at me.

“Jungkook,” she says, her usual rigid tone softened. I’m sure this is on purpose. “Thank you for coming. Please, sit.” She motions to the chairs in front of her and I do as I’m told, crossing the room and taking a seat in a chair before her. My knees immediately start bouncing, and I don’t know how to stop – a nervous tick.
“You certainly didn’t make it easy to find you,” she says simply, and I can sense mild irritation in her tone (though she masks it well). “You’re not on any payroll and your rent must be getting paid–”

“It’s under the table,” I tell her. “I was trying to avoid… this.”

“Do you hate your parents so much?” she asks directly. Her hands fold on the table, her mouth a hard line. “You hate us so much that you had to run off and live in the ghetto.”

“I don’t hate you,” I tell her. “I hated this.” My hands motion to the extravagance of the room, of the home. Of everything.

“We only ever wanted what was best for you,” she says. She won’t look at me now.

“I know,” I tell her, but I don’t believe it. Not really.

“You need to come home.”

I shake my head; I should have known that me coming back here would result in this conversation specifically. At least my own mother doesn’t waste any time cutting to the chase.

“I can’t,” I say simply.

“Why not?” she starts, and immediately, any air of nicety that she’d been putting on falls from the table. Her expression is hard, demanding. Her tone is cold – maybe even a little cruel. “You don’t belong there. You belong here, with us. Your family. You have your future to think about.”

“I am thinking about my future,” I say, even though I’m not really sure what I’m doing with my life. Shouldn’t I be allowed to figure it out on my own? Shouldn’t I be given the opportunity that my mother and father had to explore their own futures?

“You’re wasting your life.” Each word is bitten out with a coldness, and I can see the rage bottled
up inside her threatening to spill out. “You know that your father has been working his ass off trying to run this company. I’ve been up to my neck with work, managing our properties in the north and the south. We’ve been hiring new realtors left and right but we can’t get anyone to stick. We need you here, so that we have someone we can trust managing this company’s recruiting. Our sales are dropping, and it’s because we had been planning on you to step up and work with us to keep things held together.” She pauses, letting out a short breath. “But instead, you’ve just been wasting your time in Seoul, fighting in the streets like a damn fool.”

“I box,” I clarify, but she ignores me. This is not a two-way conversation: she is letting loose everything she’s wanted to say to me since I left. I knew there would be a lot, but I didn’t know quite how much.

“You have a duty to uphold,” she says stiffly. “You leave one note and expect everything to be fine. You expect your father and I not to come looking for you.”

You ignored me while I was here, want to yell at her. You both did. But instead, I squeeze my hands so tightly my nails dig into my skin. The bruises on my knuckles ache. Something in my chest aches, too.

“Well, after a lot of digging, we found you,” she goes on, “and now that you’re here, we won’t take no for an answer.”

“I’ve told you,” I say, and now I am feeling the hot burn of anger in my own chest, “I’m not coming back. I have a life. I’m happy.”

“You’re not happy,” she says, her tone bitter. “You will come home. No matter what it takes to get you here.”

I’m not sure what she means by that, and for a minute, neither of us speaks.

Finally, she sighs, her fingertips splayed, pressed against the tabletop. Her shoulders fall, as though losing some fraction of her resolve.

“And what will it take?” she asks. Her tone is hard, and she will not look at me. “We can give you money. An expensive apartment, something still in the city if that’s what you want.”
I stand still, my hands curling slowly again into fists as the weight of this visit sinks in. I breathe – or at least try to. My head hangs, and when I finally look up at her, her eyes are wide and expectant, as though curious as to whether or not she’s hooked me.

When I shake my head, I swear: her face turns beet red.

“I will not come back,” I tell her, any resolve in my tone long gone. I stand, feet planted firmly before her. “I can’t tell you why. I think it would hurt you.” I pause, tongue running over my cracked lips. My mouth is dry. When at last I say, “Please don’t try to contact me again,” I turn on my heel and start my walk from her office.

“Jungkook,” she starts, and as I close the door, I can see her start to move around her desk from the corner of my eye. When I’m at the end of the hall, footsteps falling quickly now, I hear the door reopen and hear the heel clicks of my mother’s shoes, racing after me. “Jungkook, stop this now. You are acting like a child.”

I don’t say anything. I can’t – if I did, I know she’d never forgive me.

Maybe that’s the difference between the two of us.

Down the stairs, peeling my slippers off and shoving my feet back into my shoes – my mother tromping down the stairs in haste as I throw the door open and close it hard behind me. When I hear it open again, I’m at the end of the drive.

“How could you do this to your family?” she yells after me. “How?”

What I don’t have the heart to tell her, is that there is something specific which now keeps me in Seoul. Something I was looking for all along, but have only just realized what it is – and now that I’ve found it, I don’t think I can let it go.

It’s something that I was never offered. It’s something I was never given, something that was never felt until now.

Love.
I end up taking the train back to Seoul, walking for a few miles before coming upon the train station. I think the whole time about how my mother could send the car after me again, picking me up. When the thought reoccurs in my mind, I start running until I get tired, then I walk again. She never does send them, though. I’m not sure whether I’m grateful for this or if I’d rather she chase after me, begging me still to stay.

The train ride is long, which is great because I love spending hours on end contemplating my dumpster fire of a life.

I lean on my hand, staring out the window. I think about the day of working out I’ve lost to come here; I think about what my father will think when my mother tells him of my decision; I think about Jin’s match tonight, about how I’m sure he’ll win; I think about the fact that I’ve got to fight my first match of the tournament tomorrow night, and how I don’t even know who my opponent is.

And, of course, I think of Kim Taehyung. Somehow, everything always leads back to him. I wonder how long he’s worked today, if he hasn’t gone in yet or if he’s just getting out after the graveyard shift. I think about how some selfish part of me still wishes he would come to see my fight, but only because I want to see his face in the crowd watching me. Just the thought of having him nearby seems to ease my nerves.

God. I’m a fucking wreck.

When the train finally pulls into the station, I get off in a sea of others now getting home from work, businessmen with their suits and ties and briefcases, with their gazes that run over me like I’m nothing. I keep my head down. From far away, their lives seem meaningless; they work all day, come home at night, and what do they have to show for it? Nothing but money. I wonder if I’ll ever be able to convey this to my mother, the feeling of entrapment based solely on breadwinning, on societal expectations no one will ever be able to fully meet.

I head to the boxing bar, even though it’s several hours too early, and when I show up, I start ordering drinks. The woman at the bar seems surprised to see me, her expression worried as I go round for round, wasting hours upon hours, alone.

I’m not sure for exactly how long I’m there, but when I feel a bandaged hand on my shoulder, I look up to see Jin. My head is slightly spinning.
“Where the hell were you today?” is all he says.

I shake my head, my mind moving slowly beneath the haze of influence. I don’t say anything.

“You’re really something, Jungkook,” he shoots back, and I can sense a twinge of sarcasm in his tone. Of bitterness. “You been drinking here all day? How long?”

I shrug.

“Unbelievable,” he says, his eyes narrowing as he leans a hand on the bar and shoves two fingers into my chest. “You were the one who wanted to box. You were the one who said you’d be there for practice this morning. You’re acting like a fucking prick.”

“I saw my mom today,” I blurt suddenly. I don’t know why I say it, other than that I feel like I owe Jin an explanation. “She… sent some car to come and get me, and they got me, and then I told her I wasn’t coming home… I don’t… I don’t think I can ever go back.” Suddenly, tears spring to my eyes and I breathe in a long, shaky breath. “My parents never gave a shit about me.”

Jin looks at me a moment longer, and after a moment, sighs. He puts a hand on my shoulder. “I’m gonna call someone to take you home.”

“I’m sorry,” I tell him, my hand reaching out to grab his arm. “I was on my way. I was… I was walking to the gym.”

“I know,” he says, like he knows anything. I can’t explain myself right. He puts a palm on top of my head, shaking my hair a little. “You’re going to be okay. You’re okay.”

I don’t know what he means, but I nod, leaning back on the bar, my forehead pressing to the countertop. Beside me, I hear Jin talking to the bartender, settling my tab for me before he pulls out his phone and makes a call.

“I’ve got to go get ready,” he says. “My match is starting soon.”

“I’m sorry,” I say again, and this time, it’s because this will be the first boxing match Jin has
fought that I won’t be able to watch.

“It’s okay, buddy,” he says, and even though I’m not in my right mind, I can tell: Jin means it. He forgives me. “Just stay here. Somebody’s gonna come by and get you real soon.”

“Okay,” I say, eyes still shut.

Before I know it, someone’s putting their arm around me, lifting me up off the barstool and dragging me through a sea of people. I hear a few people shouting my name, laughing. I probably look like the biggest idiot of all time. I hadn’t meant to do this, to get this absolutely smashed at the last place I ever wanted to be. It just happened – I just panicked.

I just needed to forget about life for a while.

When we get outside, the cold air hits me like a punch to the face. I realize then that the person helping me is Hoseok. His hand is rubbing my upper arm, trying to warm me up.

“Hoseok,” I say aloud, and he grins, nodding his head.

“Yeah, Jungkook. It’s Hoseok. You’re gonna be okay, man.”

I nod, feeling tears start welling in my eyes again. A few slip out. I feel like the world’s biggest shithead. I’m grateful for the dark. I don’t want anyone to see me like this.

“Don’t feel bad,” Hoseok says, his tone nurturing. “Everybody has days like this. Everybody.” I nod, wiping my eyes with my wrist. “It’s not your fault, okay? I… heard you had a bad day. I don’t know what happened, but – you know, I think you deserved to wild out. Okay?”

I laugh at this, nodding, wiping the rest of my tears away and sniffing loudly.

Hoseok was probably the best person Jin could have ever called to come to my rescue. The battery pack of the group – somehow, he makes me feel like I’m not such a fuck-up.
When we get back, he helps me up the stairs. He notices my eyes, lingering on Taehyung’s door; he doesn’t say anything, just turns me around and has me punch in the code to my apartment. He helps me into my pajamas, jokingly tucks me in so tightly that I can’t move my arms, and by the end of it all, we’re both cracking up.

“Hoseok,” I murmur, catching him just before he lets himself out.

“Mm?”

“Thanks,” is all I can think to say.

He knocks on the doorframe twice, nodding. “No problem, Kookie.”

As soon as I hear the door close, I shut my eyes and drift into an uneasy sleep.

The next day flies by. One moment, I’m waking up, trapped in blankets and sweating my literal ass off, and then next it’s 23:00 and I’m on my way to the bar, the place I’d just been the night before. I try to forget about it, because thinking about it leads to crippling embarrassment. I can’t believe people saw me like that. I can’t believe Hoseok had to help me home – I can’t believe Jin had to deal with me that way.

I don’t know if he’s even coming tonight. Part of me wishes he wouldn’t, because all I really want to do is crawl under a rock and die.

Of course, the first person I see just so happen to see is Jin.

He’s leaning up against the wall, back flat as he stands waiting beside the locker rooms. He’s playing a game on his phone, zoned out, but as I slowly approach him, he starts, looking up. When his eyes meet mine, he looks away for a moment, shoulders falling a little. Then, he turns to face me.

“Hey,” he says. “I’m not going to make this awkward if you don’t.”
“Okay,” is all I say back to him.

“Buuuuut... I will say that you really had me worried yesterday, you know?” he says quickly. “Me, Worldwide Handsome Jin, was worried. About you.”

I don’t correct his grammar, or say anything about how I’m sorry and blah blah blah because I know he wouldn’t care. I just nod, shoving my hands into my pockets, looking down. I feel like a little kid in front of him.

“Thanks for making sure I got home, hyung.”

“Yeah, you’re welcome,” he sighs, clapping a hand on my shoulder, then bringing me in for a tight hug. “Now go win this match so we can all get home and sleep. My body is tired and needs its beauty rest.”

“Yeah yeah,” I say, clapping him a couple times on the back before we part. “I got it.”

I do win my fight – but not without taking a few hard hits. My cheek is a little swollen, and there are bruises already forming on my chest and arms. Jin decides to stay at the bar a little while longer, despite his previous claims of needing copious amounts of beauty rest; he’s being fed and handed drinks by other guys who’d seen him the night before, congratulating him on his win and talking about sports. He says he’ll catch up with me, but I probably won’t see him until we’re both at the gym a few days from now. That’s okay; I feel better just knowing that, for the moment, the air is clear between us.

I stumble home, this time not from the drinks but from how bad my body hurts. I really hadn’t meant to take such a beating, but the match ended up lasting longer that I’d liked it to. It felt really rewarding by the end of it, don’t get me wrong – but my head hurts, my face and body at the mercy of my opponent for nearly a half hour.

Taking the stairs, I stumble, falling into the rail a little, then pick myself back up and head up the rest of the way.
It’s when I reach the third step from the top that I hear the door open.

“J… Jungkook,” I hear, and when I lift my head up, there he is.

*Tae.*

My eyes slip shut. I want to melt into him. Before I can ask for help, his worried hands are on me, touching my skin, noting the way that I wince when he touches a sore, a bruise, a cut.

When I open my eyes again, he’s looking down at me, all wide eyes and parted lips before two flat palms find the sides of my face. Tae’s hold is gentle. His eyes shut, his forehead touches mine. My hands find his shoulders.

All I know is that right here, in this moment, I’ve never felt happier to be home.

*This,* I think as he takes my hand in his and leads me into his apartment, *this is what home really feels like.*

I sit on his bed, pulling my hoodie and t-shirt off as he gets out ointments and bandages. “Did the stuff that I gave you last time help?” he asks. “The topical cream?”

“It did actually,” I tell him, and he smiles to himself a little, even though his eyebrows still pull together in worry.

“Good,” he says, wiggling a tube of it across the room as he pulls it out of his first aid kid. “I got another one. I had a good feeling.”

I laugh, even though it hurts.

He hurries over to me with the box and wastes no time getting out the proper materials. When he sees up close the actual damage, this time unhindered by clothing, his expression turns darker. Scissors, bandages, ointment – the works are all pulled out of the first aid box and positioned beside him for easy access. He starts cleaning my skin, applying the pain reliever as he goes. It doesn’t immediately soothe, but eventually it starts to activate and I can feel my muscles loosening,
relaxing.

My eyes follow him, his gaze and his hands and the careful way he tends to my battered body. Whenever his hands run over my skin, I force my breathing to even.

Butterflies, I think, and without hesitation, I smile.

Tae looks up at me, and when he sees me smiling, he smiles, too.

“You need to be more careful, Jungkook,” he says, but his tone isn’t as reprimanding as it is pleading. “I hate seeing you this way.”

“I know you do,” I reply softly. “I’m sorry.”

He shakes his head. “I can’t change who you are.” Pause. “I wouldn’t try to change you, though. Even with all of this. Even though you make me worry my head off.”

I can’t help cheesing big now, and when he looks back at me, his nose scrunches. He opens his mouth and pretends to bite my head off. I throw my head back, laughing, and he bursts into a fit of giggles before shushing me so he can get back to work. I do as I’m told, watching him finish the rest of his application before he begins wrapping my knuckles, shoulders and chest with gauze, keeping the topical in place.

“Thank you,” I mumble, voice quiet. “You didn’t have to.”

“I did,” he says back, holding up a finger. “I knew your match was tonight – I had to make sure you made it home okay, so I…”

Tae trails off, and I tilt my head, curious for him to go on.

He sighs, running a hand through his hair. “I… might have waited up for you.”

My eyes go wide. “You did?”
“I told you I worry,” he says defensively.

The flurry in my chest sparks again. “I’m surprised.”

“You shouldn’t be,” he says back. “I care about you, Jeon Jungkook.”

That magnet in my chest, the one that seems to always will me closer to Kim Taehyung, suddenly switches on. Usually I’m able to stop it, to keep myself from doing anything I’ll regret later. But right here, in this moment where it’s just the two of us, I can’t stop. Even if I could, I wouldn’t want to.

Suddenly, my arms are around him. I hold tight, chin pressed firmly over his shoulder, eyes pinched shut. When I feel his body relax, when I feel his arms reaching up to hold me, tucking his face into the crook of my neck. He breathes in, and when he exhales, I can feel it on my skin.

*I will never be able to tell you, I think, chest aching. I will never be able to speak it the way I want. I wish that I could.*

We spend a while talking on his bed. I don’t tell him about my family. I don’t tell him about the night before. I hide these things because I don’t want to cause Kim Taehyung any worry. He already spends too much time thinking of all the ways I could be injured. He doesn’t deserve anything more.

When the clock strikes three, I decide I should get some sleep. He shouldn’t have stayed up so late already, not on my account. I tell him goodnight, leaving his apartment and wondering when will be the next time I see him. I wonder, too, if he could tell that I didn’t want to go.

As I pull my pajamas on, slipping into bed, a thought strikes me: a notion that I must do something good for this boy who does so much for me. I need him to understand the way I appreciate him. I need him to see that I care, that the way he cares for me is cherished.

Just as I am about to verge on sleep, I think of it.

*I have a plan – to give Kim Taehyung one perfect, happy day.*
We hope y'all had a happy holiday and are enjoying any breaks from school or work! <3
The next morning, I wake up to the sound of knocking on my door. Well, more like, pounding on my door.

With my eyes still half open, my hair sticking up on all ends as I run a hand through it while also scratching my stomach under my shirt, I stumble my way over to the door and look out the peephole to find Jungkook.

Just before he can let loose another flurry of knocking, I pull the door open and stare at him.

“Good morning!” he says, grinning at me and letting himself into my apartment. I let the door fall closed as I turn to watch him slip on the guest house slippers and head over to the table to sit down.

“That I mind you coming over,” I start slowly, blinking at him as he turns on the overhead lights before sitting down, “but… why?”

“It’s a surprise.”

I reach up to rub the sleep from my eyes, a yawn working its way out before I can stop it, and I take the seat across from him at my table. It’s then that I notice the time on the clock on the wall - it’s not even 8 o’clock in the morning. The sun is still rising, the birds are just barely starting to chirp outside, and it’s cold in my apartment.

Jungkook doesn’t really seem to mind any of this, though. He’s also dressed warmly with a black sweatshirt and a puffy coat zipped up around him.

“Jungkook, please,” I say, still trying to wake up fully, “what surprise? What are you talking about? It’s so early.”
“I know, but this way, the bus ride there won’t take us all day,” he informs me, as if this will clear away any misunderstanding that I’m having. I squint at him. “What? There’s no time, Tae! You gotta get ready. Our bus leaves in…” he pauses to look at his phone for a second. “1 hour. And we still have to walk to the bus stop.”

“Where are we going that’s requiring us to leave so early?” I ask as he pulls my arms to get me out of the seat and start moving.

“I told you, it’s a surprise!” is all he replies, following me to the bathroom as I put some toothpaste on my toothbrush.

I brush my teeth, wash my face and give up on my hair pretty quickly, deciding instead to throw on a beanie since it’s cold out, anyway. The weather app on my phone alerts me that it’s possible we could even get snow today, so I make sure to dress warmly in a sweater, with my thick winter coat and scarf.

It doesn’t take me too long to get ready, but Jungkook keeps pushing me along, rushing me.

“God, I can’t believe you’re a morning person,” I say as we finally get our shoes on, ready to go. Jungkook stops me for just a moment, reaching over to my shelf to grab my camera, handing it to me. “What? I need this where we’re going?”

“I think you might,” he replies with a shrug of his shoulders. “Now come on, Tae! We’re gonna be late.”

We head downstairs together and out the door just as the sun is starting to rise. The sky is starting to glow overhead, though the moon is still high above us, visible. My steps slow as I admire it all, looking up with my mouth open in surprise.

Jungkook reaches for me then, his fingers wrapping around my wrist, gently pulling me along.

We make it to the bus station with five minutes left before it’s supposed to arrive. There are a handful of people already there, all waiting for the same bus. Some are dressed nicely for a day of work at an office job, there are a few high school boys in uniforms talking animatedly to each other. There’s one spot open on the bench, and I gently steer Jungkook to take it, forcing him to sit down, despite his protests.
“You’re still hurt from your fight yesterday,” I reply, sticking my hands into my pockets to keep them warm. “I won’t take no for an answer.”

He pouts his lips but doesn’t fight it again. I’m awake now, after having been exposed to the cold air outside, but I’m still yearning to go back to bed. The thought makes me yawn again.

“So, really, why the surprise trip?” I ask, looking down at Jungkook as he stares ahead with his wide eyes, waiting for the bus to arrive. “Again, I don’t mind but…”

“You’re always doing stuff for me and I just wanted to do something nice for you,” he says then, turning his eyes to look up at me now. I open my mouth to protest, because I really don’t do much for him at all, despite being the older one here, but he beats me to it. “Plus, I really wanted to come here and I thought that you would be good company.”

“Ah, the truth comes out,” I reply with a laugh, making him smile. “But still, so early?”

“I told you, it takes a while to get there.”

The bus pulls up to the stop a few minutes later, and as we board it, Jungkook scans his pass and says, “For two, please,” to the driver, which makes my heart flutter even though it’s really not that big of a deal. But this is fine, just fine, I tell myself as we find a seat together toward the back of the bus.

I make Jungkook take the window seat, if only because I don’t want anyone to accidentally run into him while standing in the middle of the bus if it gets busier. He is still hurt, after all.

When I think about last night, I feel a lot of things at once. I think of the way Jungkook had looked, sitting on my bed, shirtless, bruised and battered with a swollen cheek and dried blood near the corner of his mouth. How I’d tried my best to be gentle as I fixed him up, using everything I had in my arsenal to help ease his pain; to keep him from feeling every bruise, every swelling, every punch that he’d taken that night. I think of how he’d smiled at me, despite the pain he was in, and how warm he was when he’d pulled me to him in a tight embrace.

My eyes travel to him, sitting beside me on the bus now, thinking about how perfectly I’d fit into his arms. How gentle his hands were. How he had felt so warm and comforting, but also sad, like he’d needed the hug just as much as I did.
My heart swells in my chest, feeling his leg bounce next to mine as he looks out the window at the city scenery passing us by. His hands are picking at a hangnail absentmindedly in his lap, his face leaning closer to the window. After a few moments, he has to raise his hand with his sleeve over it and wipe the steam from it.

“How long are we going to be on the bus for?” I ask, putting my hands into the pockets of my coat to keep them warm. Even though the bus is heated, the doors open often enough that it never really warms all the way up. Especially now that there’s a light layer of snow coating the ground outside.

“It’s almost 6 hours,” he replies, turning to look at me now. “It’s far, but it’ll be worth it.”

“6 hours must be… somewhere near Busan?” I tilt my head, watching as his eyes widen and his full lips pout, eyebrows pulling together. I laugh and nudge him gently with my shoulder. “You know, I used to go to Busan a lot when I was a kid. My mom would take me away on the weekend sometimes.”

“Really?” Jungkook smiles a little, turning his body slightly to be able to face me more. I adjust myself as well, pushing myself closer to him because he’s warm and despite all my layers, I’m still chilled to the bone. “Like a family trip type of thing?”

My smile falters a little, just for a moment. “Well, usually it would be just me and her that would go. My father wasn’t really interested in travel…”

“It’s the first time I’ve really heard about your father,” he notes, his tone curious.

The mention of my father doesn’t initially do much, but when I think of him, all the images are blurry in my mind. Beer bottles, raised fists, an angry expression on his face. I blink a few times, shaking my head a little, trying to repress them again. Put them back into the far recess of my mind, where I don’t have to see them anymore.

“Ah, well… he’s gone,” I finally reply and Jungkook frowns immediately, opening his mouth to apologize. “It’s fine, don’t worry, Jungkookie! There’s not much to tell about him, anyway. I was always closer with my mother.”

He nods, biting his bottom lip as if trying to keep himself from speaking again. I know that he feels awkward, like he should tip toe around certain subjects with me, probably afraid that he’ll bring up
something else that could potentially hurt me to talk about.

But really, I just want to hear him talk.

“What about you?” I ask as the bus stops and a load of people board. All of the seats are now taken, so the remaining people are left to stand and hold onto the railing overhead. “Are you closer to your mom or your dad?”

Jungkook looks at me with an expression that I can’t read as he ponders my question. He’s never mentioned his parents, so I can’t quite imagine what they’re like. Are they kind and caring like he is? Did he grow up with a mother that cooked him seaweed soup for his birthday every year? Did his father used to carry him on his shoulders and run around the house playing?

“I’m not very close with either of my parents,” he says and the entire image I’d created about his happy childhood deflates. “They’re usually busy with work, so…”

“That must have been very lonely,” I say with a sigh, looking forward. The happy images are replaced with Jungkook eating instant rice and ramen alone, and him playing games in his room all by himself. “I’m sorry, Jungkook. That must have been hard.”

He smiles at me now, though, and shakes his head. “It’s okay. I’m not lonely anymore.”

“That’s true,” I say, nodding my head in agreement. “You have Jin hyung, and Namjoon and Hoseok and Suga. Plus also Jimin really likes you, he says that you’re really funny.”

His dark eyes look at me for a moment, his gaze unwavering, before he adds, “I also have you.”

Da dunk!

I swallow and lift a hand to my chest a little before I grin at him, showing off all my teeth, despite the fact that my heart is beating about a hundred miles a minute. I feel like my body is vibrating from excitement.

“Of course you have me, Kookie,” I tell him, making sure that I sound as sincere as possible.
Because Jungkook does have me. Most of my time is spent with him these days - whether it’s from our texting back and forth late at night, or eating meals together, or him visiting me while I’m working at the convenience store, we spend time together almost every single day now. “You’ll always have me. I’ll always be on your side.”

He smiles, a real one that makes the crinkles around his eyes appear, his nose scrunch up and his bunny-teeth grin show. And oh wow, it’s really not good for my heart that is still reeling, so I look away and scoot closer to him, burrowing further into my coat so he doesn’t catch the blush starting to form on my cheeks.

We sit in comfortable silence for a few minutes, both of us pressed together in the seat to keep warm, furrowing into our coats as much as possible. The bus empties within the hour, leaving only a few people left. We move further away from the heart of Seoul and closer to the outskirts, all the tall buildings starting to make way for smaller strips of businesses, cafes and restaurants. It’s still city scenery, but it looks a lot less clustered than where we live, which is all tall buildings and narrow streets.

I let my eyes close for a little bit, especially knowing that we still have about 5 hours left of riding on a bus, and yawn into my coat. It’s a nice morning. The sun is high in the sky, despite the cold air and the snow on the ground, and it feels nice shining in through the window of the bus, warming my skin on my right side.

Suddenly, there’s a thunk noise to my right. I open my eyes and look to see what Jungkook’s doing to make that noise, and notice that his eyes are closed and his head is lolling to the right, hitting the window.

Before he can hit his head against the cold glass again, I lift a hand to block him from the hard surface. His lips part slightly, a steady stream of air inhaling and exhaling, and I smile, looking over at him sleeping.

He must be exhausted, I think, slowly adjusting us and pulling his head over to my shoulder. He seemed upbeat this morning but... We stayed up late and didn’t sleep much. Plus, he was so hurt yesterday after that fight...

I decide to let him sleep, his head resting on my shoulder. His body seems to naturally curl in toward me, his fingers gently grasping the sleeve of my coat in his sleep, clenching and releasing every now and then.

The sun keeps pouring in through the window, and I watch as his eyebrows furrow in his sleep,
noticing how bright it is.

I lift my free hand and hold it up over his face, watching as the shadow covers over his eyes and his eyebrows seem to relax, his head adjusting and moving closer to my neck. Even if it’s uncomfortable for me, I stay that way for as long as I can, shadowing over his face so he can rest peacefully, not moving an inch.

It’s not long before my arm starts to ache, the burning sensation of losing blood circulation from holding it up for too long. So I take the beanie off of my head and, using one hand, I manage to sloppily pull it over Jungkook’s head and roll it down so that the edge covers his eyes. An impromptu sleep mask.

I try not to think about his fingers dropping the fabric of my coat and resting against my hand on the seat in between us, some of his fingers slotting naturally between mine. I try not to think about his little snores and how cute they sound.

And I try really hard not think about how perfect this all feels, and how I would stay still forever, if it meant letting Jungkook rest his head on my shoulder for just a little while longer.

It’s almost an hour and a half later when Jungkook stirs from my shoulder.

I’d taken to playing games on my phone, resting my cheek carefully against the top of his head. I’ve been playing one handed the whole time, occasionally resting it on my lap, so not to move my other hand. My other hand that Jungkook’s been holding for the last hour.

But, like I said, I’m trying not to think about it.

It’s just really hard not to.

I’m in the middle of texting Jimin back (updating him on the surprise trip I’m taking with Jungkook, only for him to question my friendship with Jungkook as only friendship, which I avoid, because let’s be honest, I’m not ready to admit and talk about that one yet) when Jungkook moves his head on my shoulder, his lips smacking together as he pushes my beanie up, over his eyes.
I watch adoringly as he blinks his eyes open into the sunlight, squints, then takes turns blinking one eye at a time open until they adjust to the bright light coming in from the window. It feels like this happens in slow motion, making my heart flutter, because his waking up face is too cute. Slight bewilderment, tiredness, and unfocused eyes.

I swear, I’m not trying to be cheesy, but he looks so cute that I want to pinch his cheeks.

So, I do.

I take one of his chubby cheeks between my index finger and thumb and gently pinch, pulling it out slightly and laughing when he looks at me, his eyes still trying to figure out what’s happening. A moment later, he laughs, too and swats my hand away, sitting up from his curled over position and stretching his arms high over his head.

I try not to dwell on how much colder my hand feels without his fingers intertwined with mine.

“Did you sleep well?” I ask, ignoring another accusing text from Jimin and putting my phone into my pocket. Jungkook yawns before settling back into a comfortable position against the window, looking over at me.

“I did,” he says, then frowns. “I can’t believe I fell asleep. How long have I been out?”

He pulls out his phone and checks the time before I can give him a proper response, then gasps when he sees that it’s been almost two hours. His eyes turn back to me, already looking guilty, but I smile and shrug my shoulders.

“It’s no big deal, Kookie,” I tell him.

“But you were just sitting here alone while I slept,” he says, chewing on his bottom lip slightly. I reach out and pinch his cheek again to make him stop, worried about the cut on the corner of his mouth from the fight last night. “You should have woken me up…”

“Aw, but you looked like you really needed the sleep,” I coo at him and he purses his lips, trying to look annoyed, but it’s only a few seconds later of my cooing at him and babying him that he laughs and swats my hands away from him again.
“Yah,” he says in between laughs, catching one of my wrists in his hand just as I was reaching out to try and squish his cheeks in playfully.

We both stop and look at each other for a moment. It feels like things are moving in slow motion around us, like I’m frozen on the spot, just staring at him. My brain starts to go into overdrive mode, torn between reaching out to kiss him or pulling away and laughing it all off.

In the end, though, Jungkook makes the decision.

He drops my wrist but then puts both of his hands on my cheeks. I blink at him, still dazed.

He leans closer to me, a slow smile breaking out over his lips.

Then he squishes my cheeks together, causing my mouth to plop open in the most unattractive way imaginable. His high pitched laughter fills the air on the bus, and I’m grateful because this gives him something to laugh about rather than noticing how red my face probably is. He pulls out his phone and then switches to squish both my cheeks in using one hand as best he can, holding up his phone to take a picture. I decide to humor him, holding up a peace sign and closing my eyes, pushing my lips out, which only makes him laugh harder.

He laughs again, looking at the picture, before showing me. It’s truly unflattering, but in the best possible way. I find myself laughing too, pulling my phone out to copy his actions. I pinch one of his cheeks and pull it out and hold my phone up to take a picture. Jungkook closes his eyes and tries to smile with all of his teeth, even with me pulling on his cheek, and flashes a peace sign, as well.

I laugh, zooming in and cropping the picture before showing him. I set it as his new contact photo in my phone and he does the same with mine.

We spend the next hour or so taking funny selfies and enjoying each other’s company. But it’s not long before we’re both starving, having skipped breakfast before heading out to the bus stop this morning. Jungkook looks up places at the next exit to stop at for lunch and we decide on a small restaurant that is known for its soups and porridges.

After lunch, we board on the bus again and find some seats in the very back. Time seems to fly now, especially since we also stopped to get coffees at a cafe after eating. We play games on our
phones, talk about all kinds of things like our favorite foods and what kind of music we listen to. Somehow, we end up talking about our childhoods a little.

It all starts when I tell him the story about the English foreign exchange student we had in our class that Jimin was trying to talk to since he wanted to learn English. But she’d had an assigned seat next to me, which meant I talked to her more than he did. Of course, I wasn’t too worried about learning English, and she was there to learn Korean, so I made sure to teach her lots of good Korean phrases.

“And then, I taught her to say ‘Jimin is stupid.’ And other curses.”

Jungkook snorts, his head falling back as he laughs loudly. I laugh, too, remembering how she’d so confidently went up to Jimin and called him stupid, not knowing.

“Jimin was so shocked,” I manage out between wheezes, my hand automatically slapping down on Jungkook’s thigh as we both continue to howl with laughter. “She was so mad! She moved seats after that and told the teacher what I did. I had to sit in the hall for an entire class with my arms raised.”

Jungkook is still laughing, leaning against me as he does. “Oh my god,” he whispers, shaking his head. “What did Jimin say?”

“He still hasn’t gotten over that,” I reply with a wide grin. “He brings it up whenever he’s mad at me for something, so that he can be more mad about it.”

“Were you the class clown in school then?” Jungkook asks now, wiping a single tear from his eye as we finally manage to calm down our giggles. “Always messing around, joking around and pranking people?”

I smile a little and shake my head in response. “Nah, I was more of the weirdo kid in class. I only really had Jimin as a friend, so it just so happened that all my messing around and pranks were directed at him.”

“Wow, that’s surprising,” he says, nodding slightly. “You’re so outgoing that I guess I just assumed you would of had a lot of friends in school. Just Park Jimin?”
“Yeah, just Jimin and I. But it wasn’t bad or anything!” I put my hands up and wave them, trying not to sound like I’m sad about my school days. “If anything, I was lucky to have Jimin, at all. He made school fun. In fact, I honestly loved going to school.”

Because anywhere was better than home.

“What about you?” I ask, changing the topic away from me before the tightening feeling around my heart makes me sick. “Were you the popular sports guy in school?”

Jungkook’s lips twitch downward into a frown. “Ah, no, not exactly. I was quiet in school.”

“Oh, the silent mysterious type,” I muse, leaning forward with a smirk to wiggle my eyebrows at him. He snorts and shoves my arm lightly. “Bet the girls loved you, though. You know, every class had one boy that all the girls had a crush on at some point.”

“It wasn’t me,” Jungkook tells me, shaking his head.

“Me, either,” I reply with a shrug of my shoulders. “In fact, it was Jimin in our class. All the girls loved him. Too bad he was the gayest kid I’ve ever met.” Jungkook snorts and we both laugh again as I pull out my phone to pull up some of the texts that Jimin had sent during his date with Namjoon last weekend. “Seriously. He talked about Namjoon’s dimple for hours, Jungkook! He called me after the date and our conversation was just him talking for almost 3 hours.”

“Sounds pretty gay to me,” Jungkook nods.

The bus ride to Busan is actually really nice, but from Seoul, it’s almost torture how long we have to sit for. But getting to sit with Jungkook, uninterrupted, talking and laughing together for nearly 6 hours? Today is the best day of my life.

When the stop for Dadaepo flashes overhead at the front of the bus, Jungkook slowly stands in his seat and nudges for me to do the same. I look at the sign, then back at him, squinting my eyes as we both make our way to the door. The bus stop is across the street from a lot of cafes and small shops, but ahead of us, once we exit, is the ocean.

And it looks just the same as it did the last time I came here.
“Jungkook,” I say, frozen, as I look out at the water and the snowy sand before me. “How… did you know to come here?”

He looks confused, his eyes flickering from me to the ocean in front of us, then back to me. Unsure, uncertain, as he puts his hands into his pockets.

“I used to come here a lot,” he finally informs me and I break my gaze with the water to look at him. “I grew up in Busan. This was kind of my place, when I wanted to get away.”

“I came here when I was a kid a few times. With my mom.”

“To this beach?” he asks, eyes wide in surprise as he looks at me. I nod. “Wow, what are the chances.”

He’s about to take a step up onto the snowy sand but I reach for him, my fingers grasping his coat, making him turn around to look at me. But I’m staring ahead, off in the distance, at the water as it rolls and recedes against the shore. I imagine my mother, small and draped with a coat that made her look even smaller, holding my hand as we walked toward the water together. Purple marks on both of our skin, Pororo band aids on my cheek.

My jaw clenches, teeth locking together as I imagine her pulling me to her, pulling my coat that had a broken zipper closer together to keep me warm. My tiny fingers reached up to touch her bruised, swollen cheek, blinking. Too young to understand the cruelty behind it, but knowing about it, anyway.

I don’t realize that I’m crying until Jungkook is directly in front of me, his hands on my cheeks, thumbs brushing under my eyes softly.

“I didn’t want to make you sad, Taehyung,” he says and his voice is the softest I’ve ever heard it. So kind, gentle, honest and sincere. I stare at him, my bottom lip trembling as I will myself not to cry about this, not to make Jungkook feel so bad and not to let the hole in my heart ruin me. “I’m sorry. Do you want to leave? Let’s go find another bus and go back home--”

“I’m okay,” I tell him, lifting my own hands to cover his on my cheeks. My voice shakes and I’m not convincing, he doesn’t believe my words. “I’m just thinking about my mom, and the last time we came here together. It’s funny how it looks the same, all these years later.”
His eyes are searching mine, begging for me to open up about it. I wonder if I do if the thread holding me all together will finally unravel, ripping everything open as my heart deflates. Would I survive that? Could I survive that?

His hands are warm on my cheeks. I close my eyes and take a deep breath.

“Let’s go,” I say, opening my eyes to meet his once more. My voice no longer shakes, my eyes are dry again. I take one of his hands from my cheek to hold it tightly in mine at my side, not willing to let go of his warmth or support. “Let’s go.”

Jungkook doesn’t say anything, but he lets me keep hold of his hand as we walk down the beach, closer to the water. It’s far too cold to dip our feet in it, but the feeling of being so close to the ocean is refreshing in a way that I can’t describe. Like I can breathe again, after so long of feeling like I was drowning.

“You know, my mom was my favorite person,” I say as we stand at the water edge, our hands still intertwined. “She always did her best to take care of me, even if we were poor and didn’t have much. She protected me. And whenever things got too hard for her, she would take my hand and walk us to the bus, and a few hours later, we’d be right here.”

Jungkook is watching me, I can see him in my peripherals.

“You never know when it’s your last time doing something special with someone,” I continue, because it’s been so long since I’ve talked about my mother. So long since I’ve really thought about her, because it’s easier to repress it all. But this is a puzzle piece of myself that I’m willing to give to Jungkook. “I would of cherished it more, if I’d known. Coming here feels really special right now, because I’ve been having a hard time but didn’t have anyone to take my hand and walk me to the bus stop to get me here.”

Now, I turn to look at Jungkook and swallow hard before I say, “Thank you for bringing me here, Jungkook.”

He looks at me and the corners of his lips curve upward into a small smile; his hand squeezes mine in a comforting manner.

It’s moments like these that make Jeon Jungkook fill those sad holes in my heart with beautiful
I sit down, pulling Jungkook down with me, and we stay like that for a while. Our shoulders are touching, close to keep warm, and Jungkook moves our intertwined fingers into the pocket of his coat. We both watch the water, feeling calm and at ease from the everyday worries of life.

“Did you used to come here alone?” I ask, leaning into his side more as a light wind blows between us. There isn’t as much snow here as there is in Seoul, but the air still has a chill to it.

“Yeah, whenever I just needed to be away from whatever was bothering me,” he tells me, his body naturally leaning back against mine. Our hands are starting to warm up in his pocket now. “I would just come sit here on the beach and watch the waves for a while. I used to think about running away, but I was just a kid. Couldn’t make it that far, you know?”

“I used to run away,” I say, understanding what he means. “I never got too far, though. He always found me.”

“Your father?” Jungkook asks and I nod in response. “Yeah, my parents would always find me, too.”

I look over at Jungkook’s profile. His hair is blowing slightly in the breeze, revealing his eyebrows; his nose is a little big, but in a way that fits his face perfectly. His lips pouting slightly as he watches the water in front of us. The scar on his cheek, just barely visible, but still there, nonetheless.

“I think we were destined to be good friends, Jeon Jungkook.”

He looks at me now and smiles. “Yeah? I think so, too, Kim Taehyung.”

“I bet we would have been great friends, if we’d met earlier in life, too,” I say and he smiles a little brighter. “Even if you were quiet and shy and I was a weirdo. It’s a shame we didn’t meet earlier in life.”

“I’m just glad to have met you at all.”
I grin at him, squeezing his hand. “I’m glad to have met you, too, Jungkook.”

It’s when the sky starts to turn orange and purple over the water that I remember my camera.

I snap a few shots, checking on the lighting before I turn to Jungkook, who has his heel in the sand, making letters. I take a few candid shots of him, watching the small smile on his lips as he moves, writing words in the sand.

“What’cha writing?” I ask, walking toward him, letting my camera dangle from the strap around my neck.

“Your name,” he replies with a grin, “and mine.”

I smile back at him, lifting my camera again to take a picture when he finishes writing our names in the sand. Before I take the shot, though, I walk over to the small space between our names and dig my own heel into the sand, drawing out a swoop and a curve that meet in the middle.

A heart.

I take a picture and then chance a glance up at Jungkook. He’s staring at the sand where our names are written, his cheeks tinged pink, the corners of his lips facing upward in a small, shy smile. I take a picture of him, too. So that I can remember this moment forever, burn it into my heart and mind.

Cherish it.

“Hey,” I say, reaching out of his hand. My fingers grasp his coat first, though, so I grip it and pull him slightly, closer to the water. “Stand right here. The lighting is perfect.”

“What?” His eyes are wide as he looks at me, backing away and lifting my camera back up. “Tae, I don’t think--”
“Shh, just look out into the distance and pretend like I’m not here,” I say and he gives me a hard look but does. His profile shines against the setting sunlight, creating a beautiful portrait as the sun cascades over his features, shadows playing out over most of his face and body. “Wow, these are great. Jungkook, you should of been a model.”

Jungkook snorts at this and I lower the camera to look at him. “Hey, turn and face the water.”

He does and I walk closer, snapping a few more shots as I do of his back facing me, head lifted upward, toward the sunset before us. It looks beautiful, the way his broad shoulders are held high, his hair blowing in the slight breeze. His body looks like art on its own, even in all the layers; something about it as he keeps everything held high and confident.

I move closer, stepping just in front of him, off to the side a little. He looks at me, his expression a little uncomfortable.

“You look great but your expression is uncomfortable,” I tell him with a laugh and he sighs, but he’s more uncomfortable now, I can tell the way his shoulders slump in defeat. “Just… try thinking about someone that you like a lot. Or love.”

He glances at me then, blinking a few times before looking back out over the horizon. This time, he has a much softer expression on his face; his eyes are gleaming with admiration, his lips turned just slightly upward, his eyebrows arched in a pleasant expression. I snap the picture, wondering who he’s thinking about.

I’ve seen this expression before. In glimpses, when I look at him when we’re hanging out with everyone at the bar or on the rooftop. There for a moment, gone the next.

Maybe he’s thinking about all of us.

I hope that he is.

And selfishly, I hope that he’s thinking about me, too.

“Wow, these are going to turn out beautifully,” I tell him, breaking his soft facade as he grins at me now. “You make a great model, Jungkook. Thanks for indulging me.”
“Of course,” he replies easily.

“Hey, let’s take a picture together again!” I suggest, pulling the neck strap over my head to hold my camera outright. “I didn’t believe you when you told me on the rooftop that you didn’t have pictures hanging up. But when I saw your apartment, I realized that you really didn’t have much of anything personal. How long have you lived there?”

“A while…” he admits slowly, chewing on his bottom lip.

“Well, don’t worry, you’re going to have so many new pictures to put up that you won’t have enough space,” I tell him, tugging on his coat slightly.

He steps closer to me, his body heat radiating as his cheek brushes against mine. I take in a sharp breath, trying not to think about it as he lifts an arm to put over my shoulders, allowing for me to get even closer to him. I hold my camera out, finger poised over the button, and grin, knowing that he’s doing the same beside me.

Snap .

A memory that I’m sure I’ll cherish for the rest of my life.

It’s a few days after the day at the beach that I hear from Jungkook again.

I’m just leaving work after another long shift at the convenience store when I think of Jungkook, and how he hasn’t come by in the last three days. It’s odd because he usually comes at least once every other day, even if he doesn’t stay for long. But it’s been three days, four since I last said goodbye to him after we got home from Dadaepo.

I decide to text him, make sure he’s alive and okay.

Is this me being clingy? I wonder as I pull out my phone, finding Jungkook’s name at the top of my
recent messages (which just shows how little I actually even text these days). *It’s really not been that long… I can go weeks without talking with Jimin and never feel this sad about it.*

But Jungkook and I have sort of found a routine. One that requires that we see each other or at least text every other day. It’s unspoken, but it’s been there for at least a month now. And being knocked out of that routine is throwing off my mood.

**To: Kookie**

Heyo jk!!!! i’m just leaving work and was wondering if you’d had anything for dinner yet! if not, i can pick something up on the way for us?

I put my phone back into my pocket and slow my pace a little, taking my time walking back home in case he does text back wanting something. Instead, I walk slowly, admiring the way the fresh blanket of snow makes all the trees glisten and how it sparkles under the street lamps.

It’s still not a lot of snow, but it’s just enough to cover everything. The air is cold and crisp now, and the days feel shorter, the nights longer.

My phone chimes in my pocket and I pull it out quickly, grinning when I see Jungkook’s name flash across the top.

**From: Kookie**

No i havent eaten yet… been feeling a little sick. sorry

I frown, reading this.

**To: Kookie**

You’re sick and you didn’t tell me?!??! jungkook!!! Don’t worry. i’m gonna pick some stuff up and be over shortly!!

**From: Kookie**

You dont have to…
From: Kookie

but thank you

I smile and send him a few emojis before pocketing my phone and walking quicker, a new determination in my step. There’s a pharmacy near the apartment complex, so I make sure to stop there and get some basic medicines to help with this season’s flu that’s been going around, as well as some vitamins to help him get better quicker. Then, it’s off to the nearest food market, which is a little bit of a hike, but very, very necessary.

I shop quickly and efficiently, making sure to check my phone for all the ingredients that I’ll need to make dakjuk, the same meal that my own mom used to make whenever I was feeling under the weather.

Once I’ve gotten everything I need in my arsenal, I head back to the apartment complex with my arms full of paper bags with chicken, vegetables, rice, eggs and medicines.

I knock on Jungkook’s door with my foot, readjusting the bags in both of my arms as I wait patiently for him to come to the door.

There’s a loud thud from the other side of the door, then, finally, the door slowly opens to reveal a very sleepy, very ill looking Jeon Jungkook. His hair is sticking up, clearly not been washed for a few days, he has deep purple bags under his eyes that show his lack of good rest, and of course, the biggest sign: tissue stuffed up one side of his nose, which he doesn’t seem to notice anymore.

I almost immediately shift into mother mode.

“Oh, gosh, you look worse than just feeling a ‘little sick’, Jungkook,” I tell him, setting the bags down on the counter of his small kitchen. He lets the door close on its own and walks over to the table to sit down. “Ah! No, please, just lay in your bed, I don’t mind!”

“You didn’t have to come,” he says, his voice hoarse and tired, like he’s been up all night coughing. “I just need some sleep, really.”

“You need some medicine, sleep and a proper home cooked meal,” I reply, fishing through one of the bags to find the medicine. “Ah ha!” I pull it out and get him a glass of water before sitting on the edge of his bed next to him to hand it over. “I got you some flu medicine and vitamins. Take this for now, and I’ll start making you dinner.”
“I’m not really hungry, Taehyung,” he says weakly, his fingers taking the glass of water and medicine from me.

“I’m sure you’re not, but I’m just going to make some dakjuk for you. It’s easy to digest and will help you get better quicker.” He takes the medicine and drinks the whole glass of water, handing it back to me before laying back down in his bed, closing his eyes with a sigh.

I reach down slowly, brushing the hair from his forehead and touching it, feeling how warm it is.

“You have a bit of a fever,” I tell him sadly, pulling his blankets up over his shoulders and tucking him in gently. I take the tissue out from his nose and throw it away for him, letting my fingers work back over his forehead, pushing his hair back. “But that medicine should help with that. Just try and sleep some more, okay? I’ll be really quiet.”

I get a cloth from his bathroom and dampen it with cold water. Once I ring out any excess water, I fold it up neatly and walk back over to Jungkook, placing it on his forehead to help cool his temperature down. He sighs softly, relieved, and shifts under the blankets a little to burrow closer to them.

I turn to walk back toward the kitchen to start working on the dakjuk when I hear him softly say, “Thanks, hyung.”

I smile and go to the counter, unloading everything that I bought earlier. Once it’s all sorted, I get to work, following the recipe that I found online. I start with the rice, soaking it in a bowl with some water, then move on to prepping the chicken before putting it in a large pot with water to boil. I chop up some garlic to add to the pot and let it boil and start simmering. I start chopping up the rest of the vegetables - green onion, onion and carrot - and get them ready to add.

It’s time consuming to make dakjuk, but so worth it. Especially for someone who as sick as Jungkook is.

The scent reminds me of being a child, laying in my blankets on the floor of the living room, drifting in and out of sleep while my mother worked in the kitchen, making this exact dish. The sounds of her chopping food, pots and pans clanking together lightly.

I glance back at Jungkook every so often to find him sleeping. He moves quite a bit in his sleep;
his legs twitch, his hand falls out from under the covers, and every so often, he turns over to sleep on his side. His breathing is even and he snores just a little, probably due to his clogged sinuses. Every twenty minutes or so, I get the cloth from his forehead and dampen it again, placing it over his forehead and checking on him, worry settling in deep in my bones when his fever doesn’t seem to be going down.

It’s almost two hours later when the porridge is ready to serve. I crack a few eggs into it and mix it around, remove the chicken and chop it up for Jungkook to eat later when he’s feeling better, and then pour some into a bowl.

“Jungkook,” I whisper, gently shaking his shoulder. His eyes slowly open, blinking one at a time, before he focuses on me. “Hey, sit up a little. I made you porridge.”

“Hnn,” he mumbles sleepily, but complies. I help him sit up and adjust the pillows for him, to help support his back. I reach forward to check his fever again, noting that he doesn’t feel as warm as he did earlier, though still definitely in fever territory.

“Here, try this,” I say softly, getting a spoonful and blowing on it slightly before offering it out to him. He looks at me for a moment, his gaze soft, then opens his mouth and takes the bite. “Well? How is it?”

He pouts his lips a little, then swallows. I lean in closer, wiping the corner of his mouth for him with my thumb.

“It’s… good,” he replies. “I can feed myself, Taehyung. Thank you for making this.”

I scoop up another spoonful and shush him, leaning forward to press the spoon against his lips, making him open them and take another bite. “Oh nonsense. My little baby is sick, so I’m not going to trust you to feed yourself. You didn’t even take medicine before I came over, did you?”

I feed him another spoonful and then another before I realize that he’s not swallowing it.

“Jungkook, your cheeks are starting to make you look like a bunny,” I tell him, poking one gently. “What? Is it bad?”

He shakes his head, eyes wide before he swallows it all down in one big gulp.
“It’s… so… good,” he manages to get out between smacking his lips. “But could I have some water maybe? I’m thirsty.”

“Of course!” I set the bowl down and go back to the kitchen to get him a fresh glass of water. “You know, I’m really not much of a cook. But I followed a recipe I found online and it smells just like how my mom used to make it for me whenever I was sick.”

I hand him the glass of water and let him take a long drink of it before I’m back to spoon feeding him the porridge, delighted every time he takes a bite. My heart feels full, taking care of sick Jungkook. Knowing that his parents were busy a lot, I wonder if anyone has ever cared for him when he was sick before.

“Did your mom ever used to cook for you when you were sick?” I ask, scooping up the last spoonful in the bowl and holding it out for him. He swallows another large bite, and then sighs, leaning back against the pillows.

“Not really. She didn’t cook a lot.”

I hum out as a response, feeling sad for him. “Well, anytime you get sick, you have to let me know, okay? I’ll cook for you.” I pause, handing him his glass of water to take a drink. “I’ll take care of you.”

His eyes widen and he nods slowly, “Thanks, Taehyung. That’s very kind of you.”

I smile at him and help him lay back down, pulling his blanket up over him. Before I can stop myself, I reach down to gently run my fingers through his hair a few times, brushing it back from his forehead and then forward. It’s soft and it has the faint scent of vanilla.

“Go back to sleep now, Jungkookie,” I whisper, smiling as he snuggles into his pillow a little more, his expression softer. He still looks so sick, so miserable, and it hurts my heart. Without thinking, I let my fingers brush through his hair until his breathing evens out and is replaced with quiet snores, his lips parted slightly.

I stay a while longer, even though I know I’m overstaying my welcome. My fingers comb through his hair gently, massaging his head as he falls deeper and deeper into sleep. I want to stay here forever, make sure he rests well and gets better, but I know that I can’t.
I think of Jin, barging in through the door in the morning, and my stomach drops.

My fingers slow through his hair until I stop altogether, leaning down to place a soft kiss on top of his head before I stand up. I make sure to retuck him in, pulling the blanket over his shoulders.

Before I leave, I make sure to clean up his kitchen and store the leftovers in his fridge. Before I put the dakjuk away, I reach a spoon into the pot and help myself to a big bite. I’m hoping for that feeling of nostalgia again, memories of my mother feeding me while sick in the living room, but instead, my eyes start to water. Moments later, I spit it out into the sink and rinse my mouth out with water, gagging.

“Oh my god that’s horrible,” I whisper, so not to wake Jungkook up. I wipe the water from my chin and look back at Jungkook, sleeping soundly now, and gasp, my hand flying up to cover my mouth. “Oh my god I made him eat so much of that…”

I decide not to store the dakjuk, and instead, throw it away with a dejected sigh. I’ll have to make sure to go out and get him some real porridge in the morning, if only to make up for the sad excuse of one that I made. I feel guilt in the pit of my stomach, remembering his puffed out cheeks, not wanting to swallow it but also not wanting to make me feel bad.

Poor Jeon Jungkook, I think, looking at his sleeping form again. He has suffered so much at my hands...

I set out a fresh glass of water on the floor beside his bed, along with more medicine and some vitamins and a note to make sure to take them (as well as apologizing for the dakjuk). Then I grab his trash and head for the door, turning out all the lights so he can sleep more peacefully.

“Goodnight, Jungkookie,” I whisper into the apartment before I slowly slip out into the hallway.

I take care of his trash before heading back to my own apartment, nearly collapsing onto my bed in exhaustion. I strip my jeans once I’m under the covers and toss them across the apartment, sighing as I pull my pillow closer to my chest, wrapping both arms around it and closing my eyes.

As sleep takes over my hazy mind, I find myself thinking about the ocean and Jungkook and his fingers intertwined with mine, in the pocket of his coat at sunset.
Chapter End Notes

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Chapter Notes

Get ready for a goddamn ride, my friends.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Group Chat: Lil Hyungies

Suga:
So i heard you’re dying

JK:
I’m not dyin im just sick

JHope:
Literally everyone has been talking about how you’re about to mcfreaking lose it

Jimin:
Tae’s worried :*c

JK:
Tae doesn’t need to worry

NJ:
Tae:
He’s not dying!!!!!! Our baby just needs some sleep!!

Suga:
Or more of your soup

Tae:
That was ONE TIME

JK:
RIP Jungkook
It was the thought that killed

Counts

Tae:

ROASTED

It’s a week before I’m well again – well, completely well anyway. I go back to the gym after a few days, sniffling and feverish and a little dazed. Jin complains that I need to keep my crusty dusty breath away from him, and the other guys at the gym seem upset that I’m there. I can’t do anything about it though; I have to get my practice in somehow, and if I wait too long I’ll lose progress.

Of course, the group chat is blown up the entirety of the time. It’s a lot of us sending homemade memes to one another, roasting Tae (word inevitably got out about the dakjuk fiasco… I don’t want to talk about it) and checking in on me to be sure I haven’t died yet.

I don’t respond to all of it – between the six of them, there’s enough conversation to keep someone occupied for hours each day – but I read through all of it, and whenever they mention me passively, my heart warms.

It’s a Thursday when I’m finally well enough to show my face at the convenience store. I hadn’t wanted to get Tae sick, or anyone for that matter (I stand by the fact that going to the gym simply could not be helped). Out of respect for his own health, I stayed as far away as possible.
That, of course, didn’t stop him from leaving me snacks, drinks and remedies outside my door each day. It was a silent gift that he never announced, but without fail, something new would appear each morning.

On this particular Thursday, I spend the morning baking cookies. Tae has one of the biggest sweet tooths of anyone I know, and I know he loves chocolate chips; I load these cookies with as many chocolate chips as I can without overkill. Well, maybe a little overkill. I know Tae will appreciate them though – and I make sure to taste them first. (No one will ever make that mistake again.) (Ever.)

There’s a lot of snow on the ground. As soon as I head outside, I think of how we must have received a lot of snow last night. I’ve been falling asleep so early these days, it amazes me to be missing so much of daily life. I wonder if Tae watched it snow last night. I wonder if he watched out the window as it started to fall, as it collected along the sill and covered the streets.

My fist clenches around the brow paper sack in my hand, which has Tae Tae written in my own sharpied chicken scratch. I wonder if this was how Kim Taehyung had felt when he’d cooked for me; regardless of the outcome, it was the feeling behind it that mattered. The others can joke about it – we all do.

It doesn’t change the way it made me feel though. To feel cared for. To feel safe.

My pace quickens. I start thinking about how all I want to do is be at the convenience store already. To see someone.

I can’t stop it – the smile that spreads fast on my lips. I probably look crazy. I’ve been feeling a little crazy lately I guess.

I hope he likes them, I think. Even though it’s small, I hope it can bring a smile to his face.

It’s as I’m thinking this, crossing the parking lot to the convenience store entrance that I look up. That I see, through the window, two men.

They’re dressed in all black, their shoulders broad and jaws sharp. Sunglasses, neckties. One is leaning forward, elbows on the counter.
And the other has his hands on Kim Taehyung.

There’s a feeling that you don’t always know – something that part of you feels like you’ve never felt before. It happens in an instant, the switch that flips in your mind, that travels lightfast until it hits your heart and pours to your gut like a flood. All of the sudden, I snap; I drop the bag of sweets in the middle of the parking lot and my legs start running. Blood boiling. Vision vibrating. I don’t see anything – just red.

Before I can get my hands on the front door, I see the man slam Tae’s back against the wall; Tae disappears from vision, but I see the counter shake and I can hear a yell. His voice.

Afraid.

I slam the door open so hard it nearly breaks the glass, and two sets of eyes flash to me. My eyes just search for Tae, whose eyes find mine, wet and full of an immeasurable fear. His parted lips look chapped.

“Jungkook,” he chokes out, and without a word, I move.

I start toward the one on my side of the counter, whose mouth falls open before he tries to take a swing. I dodge it easily, and when I swerve back my fist collides twice with his nose. My knuckles feel as though I might have broken a finger, but his nose is definitely broken worse. All I feel is burning – in my hand, in my chest, in my eyes.

“Fuck you,” I bite out, using my other fist to jab him hard in the throat, and just like that he doubles over, hands to his neck.

The one who had been holding Tae turns, hands falling from Tae’s neck and clenching into fists. I’m too quick; as I see Tae slide down the wall, I leap over the counter and kick the man hard in the chest. His back slams against one of the displays, knocking almost everything off the rack as I wind my fist back for a hard punch.

He sees an opening and gets me in the jaw, just as my fist collides with his. I can’t feel how hard mine hits, all I can tell is that blood is pooling in my mouth and my lip splits back open. When my vision refocuses, I see him going to hit me again. I dodge it easily, and without thinking, I kick him in the crotch as hard as I can.
A loud yell of pain explodes from his mouth before I get him in the throat; he falls onto his back, incapacitated for a few long moments as my movements slow. I hear a click from the other side of the counter, and when I turn around, I see that the first man now has an open switchblade in his hand.

“You,” he spits. “You don’t know who you’re messing with.”

I stop. My back straightens. “You gonna kill a kid?”

He looks long at the blade in his hand before lifting it, again in my direction. “I’ve killed kids that looked just like you before.”

“I’ll get it,” Tae chokes out behind me, and without looking, I can tell he’s trying to stand. I know his legs must be shaking. I can hear the quivering in his voice, “I’ll get you the money, just give me a few months.” He swallows audibly, and I can’t help it. I look back at him, and I see his cheeks, burning red as tears trace the curve of his cheekbones. They pool on the edge of his chin, dripping down his shirt.

I wish I hadn’t looked.

My blood bursts into flames, rage taking over me blind.

“You won’t touch him,” I tell them.

The man starts pointing the blade closer to me, shaking it as he speaks. “You don’t want to fucking try me, punk.”

“Six months,” Tae begs again, taking a step forward until he starts to cross paths, feet planted between me and the blade. I don’t hesitate to grab him by the shoulders and force him back behind me. “Stop it, Jungkook,” he says directly to me, but I don’t let him move back.

If there’s anything I know I need to do, in this world or any other, it’s that I must protect Kim Taehyung.
“Six months,” he repeats, his throat hoarse as one of his hands finds the fabric of my sweatshirt, fistling the cloth in desperation.

The man who’d been on the ground behind the counter finally stands, injured but standing straight, his jaw already starting to bruise. “We will give you two months.”

“Two months,” Tae says slowly, the words falling out of his mouth awkwardly. “Two… is that enough time?”

“It better be,” the man holding the switchblade states coldly. “Don’t worry about getting back to us on that. We’ll catch up with you.”

My hands ball into fists, my knuckles on fire and bleeding raw but filled with an impossible fury, it’s all I can do not to risk saying or doing anything more.

Slowly, both men file out of the convenience store, grabbing their hats off the coffee station on their way out and lighting cigars as they cross the front lot and head down the darkened street. I lean forward on the counter, watching as they go until they disappear completely out of view, the held breath in my throat finally exhaling. The weight of everything suddenly hits, and when I turn to finally look back at Tae, I see him crumpled, turned away from me as his legs start to collapse. He crumbles to the ground, hands flattening against the floor, shoulders shaking as his breath begins to struggle.

“Taehyung,” I start, my body moving on its own accord as I race around the front, kneeling before him and taking his shoulders in my hands. His eyes pinched shut, he trembles. He can’t pick his head up. He can’t do anything.

“It’s okay,” I say, and I know it’s a lie. Nothing is okay. Nothing will be okay. “Tae, breathe. Please. You have to breathe.”

I know he’s trying. I can see him focusing on it, putting everything he has into finding the air, but his lungs shake. His throat is closing. Perhaps this is what a panic attack looks like – perhaps Tae has been pushed too far this time.

“Tae, I’m here,” I say, moving closer and running my hands around the sides of his face, moving down his neck and rubbing up and down his arms in attempt to ground him in some way. “I’m here. You are okay. You don’t have to be afraid anymore, they’re gone. They’re gone, okay?”
God–” I can’t think of anything else to say. My thoughts are no longer linear. Everything is everywhere.

In one swift movement, I pull him toward me – and my lips press firm against his forehead. My hands, holding his head, keep him there for a long moment just before I pull him to me.

Before I do anything further, I stand up, hurrying to the front door to lock it, turning off the lights to give the illusion of a closed shop. I return to where Tae sits on the floor, and pulling him into my lap, I rock him on the floor for a long time. His hands reach around my neck, his fingertips digging into my back as his breathing begins to steady – and I kiss him again on the forehead. On his temple. On his cheek, in his hair. Everywhere but his lips – everywhere but the place I never can.

It’s a long time before either of us says anything, and when it is, it’s Tae.

“He could have killed you,” he says. His voice is so small. The screw in my chest tightens. My eyes sting.

“No,” I start, slow and careful the way I choose my next words. “You could have been. If… If I hadn’t come…”

“It doesn’t make sense,” Tae says, his wet cheek pressed to my neck and I can feel his eyelashes fluttering against my skin. “You always show up when I need you.”

“I was coming here to give you something,” I say, and then without thinking, I laugh. I don’t know why. I can’t explain it – it just comes out, and suddenly, Tae does too. His hot breath grazes my neck, and I’ve never felt more relieved.

“What?” he asks, and his head repositions itself against my chest.

I tighten my hold around his shoulders. “You took care of me when I was sick. I wanted to surprise you.”

“I almost killed you entirely,” he sighs.
Laughing again, I nearly shout, “The soup was not that bad.”

“Yes it was,” he whines.

“Okay,” I concede. “It was.”

“See! You admit it.”

“I’m not a very good liar, Kim Taehyung.”

He sighs again, his fingers playing with the drawstrings of my hoodie. I watch him softly as he does. He spins it around his finger, pulling it really tight until the tip turns a purplish red, then lets go, watching as the color returns once again. It’s something so small. I wonder if he knows how much I care. I wonder if he knows… if he knows that I would do anything to be close to him.

We sit in silence for a few moments, and this time, it’s me who breaks it.

“You need to tell me what happened,” I say, my soft tone finding an edge, knowing that if I don’t make him tell me now, I’ll never know.

“What?” he asks.

“You know,” I say. “The loan sharks. The stuff with your dad. I don’t know how else to help you if you won’t tell me.”

Tae’s wrists suddenly find his eyes, and I look off. I don’t want to know if I’ve made him start crying again. I don’t want to know what his face looks like. I can’t worry about these things – there are worse things I could do, like not ask at all. Like let the loan sharks come back for him, like sit and wait in silence for two months until something worse becomes of Tae.

Something I’d never forgive myself for letting happen.

“I haven’t wanted to tell you,” Tae starts slowly, and I still can’t look at him, “because I didn’t
want you to treat me different.”

“I won’t,” I say. “I wouldn’t, and I won’t.”

“You don’t know that,” he says, and his voice sounds pained. I lean my chin on top of his head and tighten my grip on him. My arms squeeze once, tightly. Please, I think desperately. Don’t shut me out.

“Nothing is what you think it is,” Tae says finally, and I wait. He draws a deep breath, then goes on. “All this time, I let you think what you wanted about my father. I never told you how much money he owed, or how he did it. How… how he wasted all of it, and took my mother and I down with him.”

Tae sits up, prying from my arms, then sits down across from me. His eyes are on the floor, on his hands that find the ties of his boots. He looks nervous. I watch him now, his puffy eyes a sign that he wants to cry again, but he’s holding it together – for me. To tell me.

I hold a hand out to him, and without even looking, he slides his into mine. I run my thumb over the top of his hand and he lets a shaky sigh fall from his lips.

Then, he starts.

“Being a kid, I don’t remember my parents getting along. I remember a lot of yelling. A lot of nights where I’d stand in the doorway and I’d see them in the middle of a fight.” Taehyung swallows. I see his whole body forcing the words out. I see his eyes shut and pinch, then reopen a few beats later. “My friends all had normal families. Jimin’s family, they loved him, and I could see how they loved me, too. It was hard for me to wrap my head around the fact that mine was broken. And it wasn’t really ever going to be fixed.”

He takes in a deep breath, perhaps thinking of saying more, but unable to. I want him to tell me – but I let him take his own time. I let him try to tell it in his own way.

“Mom was the one who made me feel normal, though. She’d come into my room at night and tuck me in. She’d tuck in my stuffed dinosaur, too. She read to me. She was so good that it– that it just made me hate him. I didn’t even hate him for me. I hated him for her.”
I don’t know exactly what he means, but even still – I want to reach out and hold him. I know he wants space, and as his hand tightens around mine, I feel it even worse than before. I don’t move though. I just wait. I just watch his face – how his eyebrows pull together, how his eyes keep slipping shut and reopening, more wet than they’d been the last time.

He sniffs loudly. “The older I got, the more hopeless it felt. Mom stopped working. She stopped going out, almost completely. She just stayed inside all the time. Dad was like this unstoppable force in our lives that we prayed would stop, but at some point realized that no amount of wishing could stop something like a speeding train. And he was… he was out of control. He’d get angrier… and then he started drinking.”

Tae pauses, breathes. “Then everything got worse. He started staying out late, which you’d think would be better but it wasn’t. It was just a time bomb. When he’d get home from wherever he’d go, and he’d blow up. On us... on everything.”

All at once, my heart feels like it’s breaking.

Tae’s shaking hand raises to wipe his eyes, wrist digging into them in an attempt to keep the tears from his face. I can’t believe what I’m hearing. I have to stop myself from wiping them away for him. I don’t know how long he’s held this secret. I want to ask, but instead I bite my tongue. There’s a lot left unspoken. There’s a lot I want to know… a lot that I don’t know if he’ll ever be able to tell.

“It wasn’t our fault. I know it wasn’t. But how do you tell a kid that… How do you try to tell your mom that when you’re just a kid?” Something in him seems to approach a precipice, and as his mouth opens, he admits: “I didn’t tell Jimin until I was 15.” Tae’s face crumples then, shoulders bowing as he does.

“Tae,” I say, and finally I can’t help myself. I reach out for him and he reaches back, falling back into me.

“He started gambling,” he says, and his words come out like thunder now. Everything tumbles out and I try to hold it all, try to understand it all as he lets everything go. “He almost killed my mom, and when she killed herself it all broke. Everything just broke. I didn’t know how to live with someone… I didn’t know how to live with– with myself. And then when he got thrown in jail, I felt happy. Like f-for once I wasn’t going to have to worry, you know? And–”

All at once his voice breaks, and his resolve breaks. All at once, Tae is sobbing into me.
Tears well up in my own eyes; without warning it all comes out. I don’t let myself shake. I just hold him, praying that I can force them down before he sees me. I don’t deserve to cry.

“A year ago th-they started coming around,” Tae says, words drifting in between heavy, chest-shaking cries.

“Tae,” I murmur again, one of my hands finding itself at the nape of his neck, holding tightly as he shakes against me. I can feel my heartbeat in my ears. I didn’t know. I didn’t know. How could I have been such an idiot – how I would have taken so much of Tae for granted, not knowing that he had been holding onto so much. Not knowing how much more he still held, unwilling to let go.

I feel sick to my stomach. I want to go back in time and hold him tighter. I want to go back and do so much over differently.

Tae’s tears are hot and wet against my skin. “He was broke. It was their money he spent, and when he owed it back, he got thrown in jail. Like– Like he knew what he was going to get out of it. And now it’s… it’s on me. All of it. There’s so much. I don’t know how to… In two months… I don’t know what is going to happen to me.”

“I will not let anything happen to you,” I say, and suddenly, I know. “Tae. Listen to me. Nothing is going to happen to you.”

“You can’t say that,” Tae cries, shaking his head. “You can’t say it like it’s a promise when… when I know that this story doesn’t get a happy ending.”

“I’m going to win you the money,” I tell him. “I’m going to win the boxing tournament prize. I’m going to pay them back for you. With what you’ve saved, plus what I’ll win from the fight… Listen to me. You will be okay. You will be okay.” I say it for him, and repeat it for me. I have to tell myself. I have to believe it – it’s the only thing that helps stop my tears, the only thing that steadies my voice.

Tae cries for a minute more, then pulls away. When he does, his eyes find mine, and we stare back at one another for a long time, wordless. There’s something unspoken between us now, knowing what I now know and this promise to save Tae’s life. He doesn’t know how to refuse. I wouldn’t let him, even if he did.
“I’m different now,” Tae says finally. “I can see it in your eyes.”

I shake my head. “You’re still you. I just…”

He waits.

“I just,” I start again, then stop. I hang my head. “I didn’t know how deep it went. I should have done things different. I should have payed more attention.”

“You didn’t know,” Tae says, like he knows what I mean before I even have to explain. “It’s not your fault. You never could have known.”

“I didn’t pay attention. I didn’t ask sooner.”

“Jungkook.”

I look back up at him, and his sad eyes hold mine.

“You are so much of my happiness.” Something in my chest twists. “On days when the sun seems far away… there you are.”

Finally, my thumb reaches up to wipe a tear from his eye. His face is wet. His eyes look tired. I wonder how long it has been. The sun is starting to set.

“I’ll wait with you until you finish work,” I tell him.

Tae sighs, standing. Pulling himself from my hands that still reach out to hold him. “It’s okay. I need to be alone for a little while I think. It’s not you, I just – need to work. And sort things out in my head.”

“What if they come back?” I say immediately, and my stomach lurches. “There’s no way I’m letting you stay here alone.”
“I don’t have that long until I finish,” Tae says. “And besides… they aren’t coming back. You heard them.”

“Guys like that say one thing and do another.”

Tae is quiet. “Please, Jungkook.” There’s something unspoken in the air, in the way I feel like I’m looking after him, despite the fact that he’s older. “I will be fine. I just… need some time.” He lets out a shaky sigh, his chest heaving as he does.

“Please,” he repeats again, and I give in.

“Fine,” I say. “Can I at least pick you up afterwards – can I walk you home?”

He looks up at me, then straightens. His eyes slip shut for a moment and when they open again, he’s looking at me with clearer vision. “Of course.” And there’s something in the way that he says it that makes me feel like I’m doing something right. Like giving him space is giving him a moment to catch a breath. Like walking him home is exactly what he wanted me to say from the beginning. I wonder.

Tae looks at the floor. I nod, turning around and heading to the front door. “Call if you need me,” I tell him, my voice unintentionally solemn.

“Hey,” he calls to me, my foot out the door. I turn my head, looking back at him across the counter. “Be safe.”

“You too,” I reply, and he nods once, hands balling into fists as his gaze falls back to the floor.

The bells on the door jingle as it shuts behind me, and before I know it, I’m formulating a plan.

When I head back to the store at 22:00 to pick up Kim Taehyung, I see him waiting on a line of customers. By some miracle, his coworker isn’t late and is helping him get through the sudden and
unexpected rush. I busy myself, straightening the racks of snacks in the back, watching to make sure he’s okay. Surprisingly, he’s calm. I watch Tae smile at customers, taking their money as though nothing was wrong – like the loan sharks had never come at all.

Just as the last person walks out the door, I look up, and he does, too. Our eyes lock across the store, and I make my way silently to the front. Tae’s taking off his apron and folding it, placing it under the counter and bidding the younger girl goodbye.

Tae stops, grabbing his wallet and sliding it into his pocket, clapping both hands on his thighs before looking up at me again. “Ready?” I ask him, and he smiles.

“Yes.” He flips up the counter and walks through, pulling on his coat and bidding Hyojin a quick goodbye. My eyes catch her gaze briefly, and she seems to smile – somewhat knowingly. My stomach knots tightly.

I hold the door open for Tae and following him out into the night. I make sure to walk on the side of the street nearest traffic. I make sure to stay close.

“No problems, then.” I say it like it’s a fact – confirming what I’ve been worrying about since I left him.

He shakes his head, shoving his hands into his pockets. “None. Unless you consider some dude using the public restroom as a dumping ground and stinking up the whole shop for twenty minutes a problem.”

“Hm,” I say, pondering jokingly. “I guess one problem, then.”

“I guess… if you gotta go, you gotta go,” Tae laughs, and I laugh, too.

Taking a breath, I look up, tensing briefly before I spill: “I have a surprise for you.”

Beside me, I don’t even need to look to feel a change in the way Tae holds himself. Visibly brightening, his face lights up and his hands pull up from his pockets, balled up on either cheek as his shoulders hunch and he fights the urge to freeze up completely.
“Surprise?” he asks, and I can’t help it. My lips split into a huge cheese. “Jungkookie has a surprise for me?”

I try not to smile, as it only encourages him, but trying to not only makes me smile bigger. “Calm down, hyung. It’s not that crazy—”

“Where is it?” Tae squeaks.

“Back at the apartments.”

Wordlessly, Tae grabs hold of my jacket sleeve and immediately begins quickening our pace. At first it’s a power walk, but the closer we get, the faster he starts pressing, and before I know it we’re both running, Tae’s hand never leaving my arm. We’re racing up the steps, and he keeps looking at me like he doesn’t know where to go.

I start opening my apartment door, and he finally lets go of me, allowing me free hands to enter the passcode and crack the entryway open. Before I fully let it open, however, I turn back to him. My back presses against the door, eyes finding his.

“If you are too tired for this, don’t worry. My feelings won’t be hurt.” I pause awkwardly. “Or if you don’t like it, then—”

“Jeon Jungkook,” he says sharply, wide eyes boring into mine. “Open. The. Door.”

I hold his eyes for a moment longer before I give in, hand pushing the door open behind me. I step aside to let him through first, but before he even has a foot inside, his mouth drops open.

And that is because, inside my darkened apartment, I have created what might be considered the most elaborate blanket fort of all time.

“Jungkook…” Tae says, all of the rush leaving his body as his footsteps slow, entering my apartment with wide eyes as he takes in the fact that the entirety of what little square footage I have is now devoted to a sea of blankets and sheets draped over chairs, countertops and tables. In the center of it all, lights glow beneath the sheets, providing the sole light in the entire apartment.
“How long did this take you?” Tae asks in disbelief.

“How long did this take you?”

His hand runs along a sheet that billows from a chair near the door, peaking on the tip of a broom handle and peaking again, the corner tacked with a pin into the wall.

“This is unreal,” he says, and slowly, a smile spreads across his lips. I feel my ears warm.

“You like it?” I ask, and when he looks back at me, his eyes light up.

“It’s amazing,” he breathes. I smile - and when he sees this, he reaches a hand up and squeezes my shoulder. “Now, you need to show me where the entrance is.”

I side eye him, wiggle my eyebrows, and when I do he wiggles his back. We laugh – and then I lead the way.

It starts in the back corner of the kitchen, where we crouch and crawl beneath bedsheets and blankets. Tae accidentally kicks a chair near the back and one of the blankets falls, which makes him crawl faster to catch up with me. “Tunnel collapsed,” he says, eyebrows pulling together nervously.

“It’s okay,” I laugh. “There’s other ways out.”

As I start crawling again, I hear Tae make a thoughtful sound. “You made multiple entrances?”

“Not really,” I laugh, “I meant the other way out is breaking through the top.”

“I don’t want to destroy this,” Tae says. “I’ll rebuild the tunnel later.”

“I’ll just have to take it down when I go to bed tonight anyway,” I grin, shaking my head even though I know he can’t see me.
“You break it then,” Tae says. “I’ll leave first so I don’t have to see it come down.”

Something about this innocence makes my stomach turn; I bite down on my lower lip and focus on crawling. Another moment passes, and suddenly we arrive at my masterpiece.

“This is the cool part,” I make sure to inform Tae before he can see the whole thing.

“Oh, wow,” he says, following in after me. This is the part of the blanket fort I spent the most time perfecting; I’ve pinned the ceiling of the fort higher than the others so that we can sit without hitting our heads. A string of lights from the rooftop have been stolen and have been restrung here. Every pillow I own is present and accounted for. I’ve moved my little bistro table out of the way, and on the ground are cushions from the chairs, positioned right in front of the window that overlooks the street.

And, of course, next to that is the thermos of hot cocoa.

“This is magical,” he says.

“If you can believe it, I think I’ve built crazier blanket forts in my day,” I say. “This was on short notice.”

“I didn’t know that about you,” he says thoughtfully, deciding to take the cushion on the left before patting his palm on the right one, silently asking me to sit beside him. I do as instructed, then reach for the thermos and start pouring the hot cocoa into mugs. “You must have had a lot of time on your hands.”

“When you’re a kid, you have all the time in the world,” I clarify. “I used to make them by myself on summer vacations.” I pause, handing him the mug with an alligator with eyelashes on it, next to the english phrase “Beach Bum.” Tae takes it without a second thought and nearly goes to sip it, but when I see him do it I reach a hand out to grab his. My fingers curl around his hand and his eyes flash to mine.

“Too hot,” I grin, and he nods, setting it down by his feet.
“Anyway,” I continue, “it also helps when you don’t have a lot of friends. More time to get up to building stuff like this… more time to acquire useless skills.”

“I wouldn’t say this is useless,” Tae says, smiling a little as he looks around, eyes traveling the string lights as they wind around the room. “This is a worthy skill. I wish I could make something like this. Something even halfway as good.” He laughs at himself then, looking out the window. “I’d probably break it too many times in the process of trying to get it up in the first place that I’d just give up.”

I shake my head, looking out the window with him as I take my own mug and hold it carefully in my hands. The steam from both our cups rises and starts to fog up the bottom of the window.

Tae sighs. “It’s snowing.”

I nod. Just as he’s said it, I notice little flecks falling in the distance, coming down and reflecting off the streetlight. I smile.

“This isn’t the first time we’ve got to watch the snow fall together,” Tae smiles, taking his cocoa into his hands and blowing on the top before taking a small sip. “We’ve gotten lucky this year, Jeon Jungkook. We’ve gotten to see the seasons changing.”

“It’s pretty,” I say softly. “It… always feels more important when I’m with you, though.”

Tae glances over at me, and I can feel his eyes watching me. Without thinking, I pull my hood over my head and start to pull the strings to hide my face. I’ve just said something embarrassing and I want to hide forever.

“You can’t hide from me, Jungkookie!” he shouts, and suddenly I feel his hands pulling at my hood, yanking it back off my face. “I want to see what you look like!”

All at once I stop trying to fight and let him pull the hood away. He looks at me hard then, and I wonder if he sees my ears – they feel like they’re on fire.

“Don’t hide from me,” he says softly.
I glance upward, meeting his eyes. He holds my gaze for a minute before he smiles a little, then sits back on his cushion. He throws an arm over my shoulders, hand squeezing my upper arm as he does. He doesn’t pull it away, not for a long time. Instead, we just sit side-by-side, quietly watching the snow beneath the glow of the string lights, drinking hot cocoa and occasionally remarking on the look of it out there.

“Hey,” Tae says suddenly, and something about it startles me. I glance over at him, but he doesn’t look at me; his expression looks as though he’s lost in thought – as though he’s been lost there for a while without me knowing.

His eyes slip shut and his eyebrows pull together, and before he opens his mouth to speak, I think that Kim Taehyung might be the most beautiful person I have ever met.

“You know,” he starts, “I… haven’t told anyone. But there was a long time where I didn’t feel like I was really here.” Pause. “I was just kind of existing. Coasting along. I think I would have crashed and burned many times these past few months. I don’t think I would have made it here today.”

He takes one breath, and I swear – I almost hear it shaking.

“If Jeon Jungkook weren’t here, I wouldn’t be, either.”

There’s something that pulls in my chest. The feeling of being dragged, like a fist wrapped around my heart, squeezing tight and pulling me until my hand is wrapped around his, until our fingers are woven together and I feel him sigh beside me. He turns his head away, and in the glow of the lights I can see him draw in another shaky breath.

It’s all because of what happened today. It’s because of what happened at the fight, because of what he told me happened with his father. With his mother. It’s the tip of an iceberg; I know that whatever is running through his head hasn’t just come from nowhere. This is years and years of something deep and emotional and painful, something I will never understand but feel like I could – because Tae makes me want to.

Because just being near him makes me want to know him. All of him.

Even the dark parts.
“Taehyung,” I say, my other hand falling onto his knee, squeezing. “It’s the same for me. Do you know that? It’s the same.”

Look at me, I think. Let me in.

Ever so slowly, I see him turn his head to face me, and without thinking, I bring my hand from his knee up to his chest. My palm flattens against his chest. I can feel his heart beating.

“Kim Taehyung,” I say, “we’re the same.”

I don’t mean that we’re the same person, that we know the same things, that we have done the same things in our lives or continue to live the same. What I mean is that… without him, I would be some fraction of the person I am now. I wouldn’t be the me that is sitting before him, the me that has started to learn what it is to hold someone in your heart.

Once again, that stinging feeling pricks again at my eyes. I can tell that it’s there in his eyes too; when our gazes find each other’s, we both stare a moment before smiling, because… Because we know. And because it’s true.

“Ah,” Tae says finally, smiling and looking away; my hand falls from his chest and I take my hand out of his. I see his pinky finger flick something from his eye, and I press my thumb to the corner of mine to do the same. “It’s been quite a day, huh?”

“You could say that,” I laugh. “Did you know that I made you cookies?”

“You made me what?” Tae squeaks, his hands slapping his thighs and nearly knocking over his hot cocoa. “Excuse me?”

“I dropped them in the parking lot earlier,” I say, and now, I have to laugh. The idea of cookies still just chilling there in the little brown paper bag is somewhat humorous.

“Hopefully some hungry animals found them,” Tae grins. “If only they knew that the handsome Jungkookie made those cookies.”
I flush, smiling, shaking my head to move the hair in front of my eyes.

“Maybe you can make them again for me someday,” Tae says again. “I’d like to see what your cookies taste like. And… even if not, at least now I’ll die knowing you made them for me at one point.”

“Morbid,” I laugh.

Tae smiles, and after a moment of quiet, he asks, “What kind were they?”

“Chocolate chip.”

His smile widens, eyes looking out the window. Then, with a big sigh, he grabs his cocoa, leans back… and plops his head down on my shoulder.

“Thank you,” he says, his voice small and soft – like a breath.

I glance down at him, grab my mug, and settle in as we sit together, watching the snow falling through the foggy apartment window.
listen,,, i'm sorry,....,
THE GIFT – TAEHYUNG

Chapter Notes

buckle up, because this is a long ass roller coaster, my friends

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Two months.

My life feels like it has a timer now, hanging over my head, counting down the days, hours, minutes and seconds. While I try not to think about it, I know that the end of the timer means my death, more than likely, and it’s hard not to think and worry about that. Because at the end of the day, there’s no way that two months is enough time to make the amount of money that I need to pay off my father’s debts.

I think about this as I sit at the convenience store, working another late night shift. In front of me is my phone, open to a website with hiring jobs. Since the last loan shark visit, when my timer began, I’ve gotten another job working the morning shift cleaning at a company nearby. If I were able to get one more part-time job, then I would have a chance at paying off the debt within two months.

My phone screen turns dark and I sigh, already exhausted. Despite it only being one week with two jobs, most of my shifts have been back to back and my body is run down and tired. I went two days without a meal, because at the time, sleep had been more important. I worry about how I’m going to keep this up for two months, how I need to add even more stress on my body with another job, and if it’s even worth it at all.

Because at the end of the day, this will all be for nothing if I can’t pay it back in full.

The door opens, the familiar chime ringing in my ears. Slowly, my eyes lift to meet with Jungkook’s, and all the exhaustion and anxiety I was feeling moments before dissipates. He smiles at me, showing off his bunny teeth and crinkles around his eyes, and my heart melts.

“Hey,” I greet him as he saunters over to the counter. He sets a small, brown paper bag on the counter in front of me. “What’s this?”

“Well,” he scratches his neck, his eyes trained on the bag instead of on me, “I made you cookies.
To make up for dropping them last week.”

A huge grin breaks out across my face, my fingers unrolling the top of the bag to open it. Sure enough, the inside is filled with homemade chocolate chip cookies, and they smell amazing. My mouth starts watering as I reach in and take one out, taking a big bite. It’s the first food I’ve really eaten all day, and even though I’m starving and anything would taste great, the cookie is without a doubt, the best that I’ve ever had.

“It’s so good,” I moan out with a content sigh, reaching into the bag to grab one for him. He accepts it, his full lips quirked up in a sideways smile, watching me. I grab another cookie, shoving the last of the first one into my mouth. “Jungkook, you are a gift from the clouds. Do you know how hungry I was? I was about to keel over and die. I owe you my life.”

“You’re safe now, my sweet child,” Jungkook laughs out, making me laugh, too.

We eat a few more cookies together, talking about our days so far. I don’t tell Jungkook about my job hunt for a third job, because he’d already seemed upset about me getting a second one and I don’t want to worry him more than I already do. He tells me about his practice and shows me a new move he learned, while I clap and tell him how cool he looked (even if he accidentally hit the corner of the counter and had to stop to hold his hand while I cackled).

“Are you free tonight?” Jungkook asks, leaning against a display next to the counter.

“Yeah, I get off in 15 minutes,” I reply, stretching my arms out and yawning. “What did you have in mind? Please say somewhere that has food.”

Jungkook smiles at me again, and I can’t help but feel like his expression is one of fondness. The idea of it causes my heart to flutter again - a feeling that I’m beginning to like a little too much - and a smile of my own to cross my lips as I look up at him.

There aren’t many words that really can be used to explain Jungkook properly. He’s the most beautiful person that I’ve ever met, inside and out, and these days, I find myself thinking about how lucky I am to have met him. To know him, to be with him on his sad days and have him with me on mine.

What did I do in my past life to deserve someone like him in my life?
“I was thinking we could just go to the bar,” he replies with a shrug of his shoulders. “Namjoon invited me earlier when I passed him on his way to work.”

“Ah, that sounds perfect, actually! I could use a good dose of Suga’s cooking.”

*Plus, I think as Jungkook grins at me again, Suga always gives me lots of food, so I can make two meals out of one.*

It’s a win-win for me, really.

Jungkook stays with me for the last 15 minutes of my shift, even greeting Hyojin with me when she arrives, shaking off her boots on the rug by the door. Now that it’s nearing Christmas, the heavy snowfall has started, covering Seoul in a fine, white powder. It’s been snowing on and off all day today, and the rest of the week has nothing but snow in the forecast. But it’s beautiful, and when Jungkook and I bid her farewell and step out into the cold, snowy air, it feels even more special.

“I should of brought my gloves,” Jungkook muses as we start walking toward the bar, which is only a few blocks away. I glance over at his hands, balled into fists in his pockets. The one thing I always notice is that Jungkook doesn’t seem to really dress well for the weather - his winter coat is about as thick as my fall jacket.

“Here,” I say, taking one of my gloves off, heat pack still inside and warm. I take his hand and put it on for him, despite his weak protests that I’ll be cold. Then, without much more thought, I take his other hand and intertwine our fingers together before shoving them into my coat pocket.

It’s intimate, just like it was the day at the beach, but it’s comfortable. It makes butterflies erupt in the pits of my stomach, a blush creep over my frozen cheeks, and a small smile tug at my lips. When I chance a glance at him next to me, he’s looking down at our feet as we walk, but he’s got a smile on his lips, too.

With Jungkook, it’s all the small details. From the comforting hug I received after his fight, to holding hands within coat pockets, to him making me hot cocoa in a blanket fort. But most importantly of all, is the feeling that we need each other to keep going in this cruel world. To have someone to rely on, to confide in, to understand.

I’ve never felt this way about anyone before.
“Jungkookie,” I say, breaking our comfortable silence, “thank you.”

He looks confused, his eyebrows raising behind his black hair, his full lips puckering out slightly. My entire body vibrates with the need to lean forward and kiss him, but I don’t.

“For what?” he asks when I don’t elaborate right away.

“I don’t know,” I tell him with a light laugh, my air visible in the cold air between us. “Everything? I just wanted you to know how grateful I am that you’re here, by my side. Maybe it’s the snow, but I’m feeling really sentimental right now. Thank you, Jungkookie.”

He smiles, his expression teetering somewhere between fondness and familiarity. He squeezes my hand in my coat pocket, a small gesture of affirmation, understanding. I smile back at him, overwhelmed by everything Jeon Jungkook.

Snowflakes are sprinkled over his black hair like fairy dust, his nose is red from the cold weather, and his big, doe eyes are sparkling with the reflection of lights around us. I’ve never seen anyone - or anything - more beautiful in my entire life.

“Don’t move,” I say, taking my phone out from my other pocket, easily opening the camera app. I snap a picture, a close up from his shoulders up, with the snow falling in the background. It’s not the best quality, since it is a phone instead of a camera, but it’s still beautiful. “You just looked too good not to take a picture right then.”

Jungkook blushes, embarrassed, and looks away. I laugh lightly, squeezing his hand again to get his attention, showing him the picture. “See?” I say, watching him take in his own expression. “You look beautiful.”

He blinks up at me. “Beautiful?” he coughs then, turning his head away from me, his cheeks even more red than before.

I grin, “Yeah, beautiful. You don’t even look human. You’re too perfect, I think.”

He laughs, “If I don’t look human then what would I be?”
“An alien.”

He laughs again, and I grin, slipping my phone back into my pocket as we continue walking to the bar. For the rest of the walk, I keep talking about aliens, my theories on them, and Jungkook laughs as he listens, even adding his own ridiculous ideas. By the time we reach the bar, we’re both laughing hard, our faces red from the cold and the inability to stop laughing, no matter how hard we try.

I finally think I’ve gotten myself together, about to open the door, but I turn and make the mistake of meeting Jungkook’s eye, and start laughing all over again.

“Hey guys!” Namjoon greets us as we walk inside, still laughing. “What’s so funny?”

“Tae thinks there are bunnies living on the moon,” Jungkook laughs.

“You’ve never been to the moon, so how can you say I’m wrong?” I retort, making him laugh even harder. Namjoon stares us with a smile on his face, but it’s forced, confusion sweeping over his features. “Exactly. You can’t say I’m wrong.”

“You’re most likely wrong,” he finally says and I purse my lips at him, which makes him grin at me again, trying not to giggle.

“You guys want beers?” Namjoon asks and we both nod, taking two seats at the bar. It’s then that we finally let go of each other’s hands, each of us taking off the gloves and keeping them in our pockets for the walk back home.

A few tables have groups or couples sitting at them, a typical night at the bar. Not too busy, but not entirely empty, either. Namjoon fills our glasses with beer and sets them in front of us, taking our order and promising me that he’ll tell Suga it’s for me, so he’ll make it extra special.

Jungkook and I drink our beers and hang out with Namjoon, who is excited about going to see Jungkook’s match coming up. Suga even comes out from the back to give us our food, hanging out for a few minutes when he doesn’t have orders to talk, asking how I am, bragging about his food to Jungkook for when he gets sick next time (they really won’t let me live that soup thing down). Hoseok finally makes his grand entrance, taking an empty barstool next to me, off for the day. He’s dressed in his regular warm clothes, his signature knitted pouch attached to a belt loop of his jeans.
“Hoseok!” I shout, reaching over to wrap my arms around him in a tight hug. “I’m surprised you’re not working.”

“Yeah, I had a group meeting with some high school friends tonight,” he replies, thanking Namjoon when he slides a beer in front of him. “But I’m glad you guys are here! I was going to ask in the group chat, and I guess I still will so Jimin can be apart of it but I had an idea!”

“Oh god,” Suga mutters, just loud enough to be heard, making me laugh.

“Oh hush!” Hoseok laughs, swatting in the direction of Suga, making him smile as he stepped backwards to avoid it. “Anyway! My idea is that since Christmas is sort of lonely for all of us, or I’m assuming on your end, Jungkook, we should have a Christmas party together and do secret santa!”

“Ooooh, I love that idea!” I chime in, turning to look at Jungkook to see his reaction.

“Sure, that sounds fun,” he replies, smiling at me softly before letting his eyes move back to Hoseok.

“Perfect! I’ll announce it in the group chat, as well.” He pulls his phone out and immediately sends the chat a text, allowing Jimin and Jin to hear about it as well. “We can have the party at our apartment, since we have a three bedroom one and it’s a little bigger than yours.”

Jungkook and I nod our heads in agreement. Our apartments are definitely too small to comfortably fit all 7 of us.

“I can text everyone individually about who gets who for secret santa,” Hoseok continues, typing in the group chat as he does. My phone buzzes with the incoming texts, both from Hoseok and from Jimin and Jin, chiming in that they’re both in. “I’ll know who gets me but oh well! It will still be fun!”

“We should have guidelines,” Jungkook says suddenly. “Like, not to spend too much.”

“Yeah, agreed,” Namjoon nods. “We’re all poor so, maybe having a set amount to spend that you
can’t go over? Or even doing homemade gifts.”

“I love that! Homemade gifts are always the best, anyway!”

“Okay, we’ll put a limit on how much we can spend for those of us not good at crafting and art,” Hoseok says, his eyes looking at me over his glasses. I grin innocently, taking a sip of my beer. “Okay, so by tomorrow, I’ll text everyone who their secret santa is. The party will be on Christmas, since the bar is closed. Taehyung, do you have to work that day?”

“I do, but not very late,” I reply easily. “The store closes at 5, I think? So I might be a little late, but I’ll be there.”

“Perfect!” Hoseok exclaims, setting his phone on the bar to reach for his beer. “This will be great! Suga can do the cooking, Namjoon can be in charge of bringing the alcohol this time, and I’ll decorate the apartment. Taehyung, you can be the photographer so we can take a cheesy picture in front of the tree. Jungkook, can you help me with decorating?”

“Sure,” he says. “Should I bring anything?”

“Oh, Jungkookie made the most amazing cookies!” I shout, reaching down to grab the paper bag so everyone can try one. “Jungkook, you should make cookies for the party! I’ll help you, if you want.”

Everyone takes one, including myself and Jungkook, which almost empties the bag he’d brought me earlier. As we eat them, everyone tells him how amazing they taste, and I can’t help the proud grin on my face as I look at Jungkook, who’s looking at his beer glass a bit shyly, a smile on his lips.

“These are great, Jungkook! Please make them!” Hoseok says, reaching past me to clap a hand on his shoulder encouragingly. “But don’t let Taehyung help you with the actual baking part. He’s… not good in the kitchen.”

“Hey!” I shout and everyone laughs.

“Only stating a fact,” Suga jumps in, a smirk on his lips. “You almost killed him with that soup you made him, remember?”
“Oh my god,” I sigh, exasperated, and they all laugh again.

“You can help add the chocolate chips,” Jungkook tells me sweetly, his hand gently touching my knee to make me feel better. “You can’t mess that up.”

“See, this is what real friendship is,” I tell them all, hooking my arm around Jungkook’s neck and pulling him closer in a tight hug. “At least someone loves me!”

They all laugh again, moving onto the next topic. I look at Jungkook and smile, finding that he’s already watching me, and it makes me feel nervous but in a good way. His hand stays on my knee, not really moving or doing anything, but my skin feels warm there. It seems like an afterthought, like he’d done it for a moment and then just forgot to move his hand after, so I don’t read into it. But it’s nice, and it feels warm and sweet, and my body just wants to hug and kiss him again. I don’t and my heart aches, denying it what it so desperately wants.

Hoseok, Jungkook and I all walk back to the apartment complex together. Jungkook and I don’t hold hands again, but I let him keep my one glove and heat pack.

The sidewalks are slippery with fresh snow, still falling from the nighttime sky above us. Hoseok almost trips, but then turns it into a goofy dance that makes us both laugh. Jungkook immediately start to imitate the dance, the two of them twirling and making funny hand gestures. I sing a silly song as background music for them, and they laugh at my choice: a song that’s popular in karaoke that was featured in Naruto.

We bid Hoseok a goodnight on the first floor before climbing the next few flights together.

“Thanks for the cookies, Kookie,” I say with a sweet tone, grinning when he flushes again at the use of the nickname. “Goodnight, Jungkook.”

“Night, Tae,” he replies softly, waiting until I’ve put my passcode in before turning away from me.

I wave one last time before my door closes between us, and then I sit on the floor and sigh, feeling the anxiety, nerves, fear and emptiness filling me back up to brim. Having to act happy and okay in
front of everyone (especially in front of Jungkook, who I can’t bare to worry more than I already have) is exhausting.

I sit there for a few minutes, gathering the strength to take a shower before tucking myself into my bed, setting my alarm for 4 o’clock in the morning. I’ve got a long day ahead of myself, after all.

Two shifts and a job interview in between.

As my eyes close, my arms tightening around my pillow, I pray that working myself to the bone like this will be worth it. That this time next year, the debt will be gone and I can finally be rid of the loan sharks and my father. That I can finally join Jimin at university.

Then, maybe, I can tell Jungkook how I really feel and hold him the way I want to.

The next morning, I wake up to a text message from Hoseok.

From: Hoseok
You got Jungkook for secret santa! The spending limit is ₩22,450.

To: Hoseok
perfect!!!!
also why are u still up?????? it’s 4 am hyung

From: Hoseok
Ummmmmmmmmmm rude

lmfao i haven’t even gone to bed yet……
but have a good day my little bb!!!!!!

I laugh quietly, letting my phone fall to my side on the bed. Slowly, I stretch out all of my limbs before rolling out of bed, slipping my feet into my house slippers before heading for the shower. I wash up quickly, brush my teeth, wash my face and towel dry my hair as I dress warmly in a sweater, jeans, fun socks that are both colorful and fluffy, and a beanie over my damp hair. I slide my winter coat over my shoulders and head for the door, pulling on my worn out sneakers before leaving the comfort of my apartment for the day.

First, I head for the big company building, waving at the guard at the doors. I spend the next 8 hours there, cleaning every nook and cranny of the place; mopping the floors in the lobby, cleaning the bathrooms on the third floor, and cleaning the glass railings to all the stairs.

I work with an older woman named Choi Misook, who reminds me of my own mother with laugh lines and graying hair wrapped up in a scarf, and she always brings extra food for lunch to share with me on the rooftop. She tells me a lot about her granddaughter, who is just entering middle school, and how proud she is of her.

Despite only working here for a week, I’ve come to really like Misook. She has a kind heart and warm hands when she comforts me, even though she doesn’t know much about me.
“A young man like you shouldn’t be working yourself to the bone like this,” she tells me softly as we finish mopping up the lobby for the second time that day. “I hope that you can find something that makes you happy and lets you live comfortably.”

I glance at her over my shoulder with a fond smile on my lips, noticing her scrubbing at a mark on the floor, on her hands and knees. Quickly, I put the mop back into the bucket and rush over to her, taking the rag from her hands and helping her to her feet.

“Here, I’ll do this,” I tell her. “You’ll strain your back or hurt your knees.”

“Ah, Taehyung,” she says, her hand resting over her heart, “if only I had a daughter your age for you to marry. I would welcome you into my family with open arms.”

I blush at this, kneeling down on the floor to clean up the rest of the mark she’d been working at, thanking my lucky stars that she doesn’t have a daughter to try to set me up with. While I’m sure Misook would still be kind to me, having to explain my sexuality to her so early into our relationship feels uncomfortable. I’m glad to avoid that discussion, at least for a while longer.

It’s almost 1 in the afternoon when I finally leave the company, saying my goodbyes to Misook on my way out. During the break between shifts, I rush to the restaurant that I applied to for a job as a waiter, and complete my interview. The manager there is strict, but seems to be kind enough for those that do their jobs well. He offers me a job on the weekends, during the dinner time menu, and I accept, promising to be there the following weekend for my training and first shift.

Then, finally, I reach the convenience store for the last part of my day.

I practically collapse into the stool behind the counter, my feet and knees aching from all the work, walking and even running when I was almost late to my interview. My manager waves goodbye to me on his way out and I sigh in relief, letting my head fall to the counter to rest for a little bit. At the very least, my job here is easy and (usually) stress free.

I think about what to get Jungkook for Christmas, scribbling down a few ideas on a loose piece of paper so not to forget later.

He’d told me on the rooftop that night that he didn’t have any pictures hanging on the walls, and when I went to his apartment, I realized that it wasn’t just that - his whole apartment didn’t have
any personal touches.

Suddenly, I know just what to get Jungkook for Christmas. Cheap, personal, and something that I know he will appreciate.

On Christmas Eve, Jungkook texts me and tells me to come to his apartment when I get off of work (another double shift day, plus training for the third job for about 3 hours), and as I drag my feet up the last flight of stairs, ready to collapse on a bed and sleep for the next 24 hours (I wish), the door to Jungkook’s apartment opens.

“Hyung!” Jungkook says, reaching for me when I trip on the last step, almost falling face first to the floor. “You look so tired.”

“I haven’t been sleeping much,” I reply with a wave of my hand. “What’s up?”

His fingers are still wrapped around my arm from when he’d reached out to keep me from falling, and I look up at him, watching him bite his bottom lip. His eyes are wide with worry, much like they always are since the loan sharks came around and threatened me. I sigh, gently patting his hand to comfort him, wishing that I didn’t worry him.

“I’m sorry, Jungkook,” I tell him softly, letting my hand rest over his. “It’s okay, really. I’m okay. I’m just a little tired, but it’s nothing too crazy.”

“Maybe you should just go lay down and get some rest,” he says quietly, not believing my words. It hurts, because he looks at me like he wants to help me, but is frustrated that he can’t. It hurts me to know that I’m causing him worry and stress.

“No, it’s okay, really,” I try again. “What did you want to do?”

“It’s-”

“Don’t say it’s nothing,” I cut him off, and he smiles a little.
“I was making cookies for the party tomorrow and I just…” he trails off, his eyes looking down at the floor for a moment. I smile and gently tap my fingers under his chin, lifting his head again so we’re eye level.

“I want to help,” I finish for him. “You promised me that I could help with the chocolate chips.”

“But if you’re tired, you can lay down and rest,” he rushes out quickly, his words jumbling together to get them out before I stop him. I smile again and shake my head, telling him to get back inside so we can make some cookies.

On our way through the door, I give his butt a slight slap, making him laugh, pink dusting over his cheeks.

We spend the next twenty minutes or so mixing all the necessary ingredients together to make chocolate chip cookies. Jungkook does most of it, measuring everything exact and precise, while I stir it all together in a big bowl. When the mixture gets too stiff for me to stir, he gently wraps his hand around mine around the handle of the spoon to help me combine it all.

My brain short circuits, eyes traveling to look at his profile right beside me. He’s close enough that I could press my lips to his cheek, if I just leaned in a little bit. My lips and mouth suddenly feel dry, and instinctively, I lick my lips.

Right as Jungkook glances at me.

“Uh, s-so, yeah, it’s, um, pretty mixed,” Jungkook stutters out, his fingers releasing mine over the spoon. I can feel the blush at the tops of my ears, my cheeks, and my neck. I’m so warm, I can’t help but let out a light laugh and fan my face a little. “Time to add the uh, chips.”

“Right, the chocolate chips,” I nod, reaching for them at the same time that he does.

Our fingers brush against each other’s and we both pull away. My god, I think as I try to laugh again, but it’s so forced and his face is bright red, too. Oh my god.

He finally grabs the bag, ripping it open before handing it to me. I take it slowly from him, my
eyes lifting to look at him, only to find him doing the same to me. He clears his throat and I watch his adam's apple bob as he swallows, and the room suddenly feels even *more warm, oh my god*. My brain struggles to keep up with me as I start pouring chocolate chips into the batter while he stirs them in, nodding when he wants me to add more.

“So,” I try to break the tension between us, “who did you get for secret santa?”

“It’s a secret for a reason, Tae,” he replies, a small smile on his lips as he looks at me. “Why? You know who got me?”

“I do, as a matter of fact,” I reply, matching his smile with one of my own. I pour in some more chocolate chips and he stirs it all together. I can’t help but watch the way his muscles move as he stirs everything together in the bowl. “They asked me to ask you what you wanted.”

“Oh?” he asks, raising an eyebrow as he lets the spoon fall against the bowl. He takes out a baking sheet, lines it with parchment paper, and takes a small spoon out from his utensil drawer, handing one to me and taking one for himself. “Is it someone that doesn’t know me well enough to shop for me?”

My lips quirk up a that. “I guess… you could say that,” I reply, trying to throw him for a loop.

In reality, I’ve already ordered his gift: several pictures that we have taken together, or that I’ve taken of Jungkook, and some frames to personalize them a little bit more. For the finishing touch, I’ve also decided to gift him one of my succulents with very specific care instructions.

“I’d rather have something that’s homemade,” he replies as we scoop small balls of cookie dough onto the sheet together. We’re standing close together, our hips bumping every time we reach for the bowl to get more dough. “Something personal.”

“Okay. I’ll let your secret santa know,” I tell him, dropping a giant ball on the baking sheet. “Whoops, that’s probably too big.”

Jungkook laughs and separates it into two cookies before dropping his spoon back into the dough bowl and putting the baking sheet into his small oven. He sets the timer and puts the dough into his fridge to sit while we wait for the first batch to bake.
“What about you?” he asks, sitting at his little bistro table while I plop down on his bed, hugging one of his pillows close to my chest. My whole body relaxes once I hit the comfortable surface, and I’m surrounded by Jungkook’s scent as I bury my nose into his pillow. “What do you want from your secret santa?”

“You my secret santa, Jeon?” I ask, my voice muffled by the pillow, and he laughs lightly.

“Unfortunately, no,” he says, but it sounds like he means it. My heart feels sad for some reason, wishing that Hoseok had planned it so that me and Jungkook got each other. “But just out of curiosity. What do you want for Christmas?”

I think for a moment, breathing in Jungkook’s scent deeply.

“I just want a whole day to lay in bed and sleep.”

My eyes close, buried against Jungkook’s pillow, and my arms tighten, pulling it and the blankets closer to my body. I can feel my body drifting into sleep, can just make out the beep of the timer going off for the cookies before I completely give in.

And for the first time in over a week, I fall asleep feeling warm and safe and comfortable.

On Christmas, it snows.

The heavy, wet kind of snow, that Mom and I used to play in and make snowmen out of. The kind of snow that blurs the lights of the city, that sparkles in the sun rising east, and that makes me feel nostalgic for the small, happy memories of my childhood. The kind of snow that’s too much to keep up with, no matter how much you shovel and plow it away.

My eyes blink open slowly, looking out the window and watching it fall outside. There’s quite a bit gathered on the window sill already.

I look around, realizing a bit belatedly that I’m still in Jungkook’s apartment; it’s warm and there’s a faint scent of cookies and Jungkook surrounding me. I’m still clutching his pillow to my chest,
tucked under his blanket on his bed. When I focus, I can hear his steady breathing from beside me, so I roll over so that I’m facing him.

Jungkook is laying on top of the blankets, his head laying on the mattress since I took his spare pillow to hug, and he’s burrowed in his sweater, his arms crossed over his chest. He looks cold and uncomfortable, and my heart aches, realizing that he let me sleep in comfort, sacrificing his own bed and blanket for me.

I really don’t deserve someone so soft and warm in my life.

And it’s this moment that I first have the thought.

*Love.*

I slowly and silently get out of his bed, still dressed in my clothes from yesterday. I pull the blanket up and wrap it around him, tucking him in and rubbing his shoulders over the blanket to warm him up. Gently, I lift his head and tuck the pillow underneath, and then brush his hair from his forehead with a fond smile on my lips.

He’s so beautiful, and my hands have never touched something so perfect. I want to stay with him, snuggle into his chest and wrap myself around him. I want to kiss him, hold him, and lace our fingers together.

But I don’t. Instead, I quietly slip out of his apartment and head back to my own to take a shower and start the day ahead of me.

Most businesses are closed for Christmas, so I only have a short shift at the convenience store. But before that, I need to gather the rest of Jungkook’s things for his gift, which should be ready today and wrap them neatly.

Once I’m showered and ready for the day, I head out to the photography shop a few blocks away. It’s seen better days, is old and run down now, but the owner is friendly and always gives me a discount since I’m a frequent customer (be in getting my camera repaired, developing photos, or purchasing new things like a neck strap when my old one finally bit the dust). He greets me energetically, calling out a “Merry Christmas!” as I step inside, knocking snow off my boots on the rug by the door.
I bow to him politely before reaching the counter, a smile on my face. I’m excited to see how all the photos turned out, and even more excited to pick out nice frames for them to gift them to Jungkook later.

There are 3 photos that I’ve gotten developed for Jungkook: one of both of us on the rooftop during our group party, one of just Jungkook looking out at the ocean from our trip to Busan, and the last is a selfie of us again on the beach, the sunset in the background. The rooftop picture is a little blurry, since we’d been drunk and struggling, but it only adds to the happy memory of it, in my opinion. Our cheeks are pressed together, one of my eyes is closed, but we’re both smiling so happily with our red noses and cheeks from the alcohol and the cold weather.

The picture of Jungkook looking out at the ocean is beautiful. The sunlight is fading into a dusky sunset, and his body and face are darker from the angle I took the photo. But you can see his soft expression, looking out at the beautiful scenery before him. It’s soft and magical looking.

Then finally, the last selfie of us at the beach with the sun setting behind us. His cheek is pressed against the side of my head, his arm around me and we’re both grinning into the camera. He’s showing off all his teeth, the crinkles around his eyes prominent in the best way, his laugh lines, and even a small dimple.

The owner helps me pick out nice, simple wooden frames for the pictures and helps me wrap them nicely. I pay him and take the bag before heading back to the apartment to stash the gift there so Jungkook won’t see if he decides to visit me at work today.

I’m pretty sure Hoseok had a lot of plans that involved Jungkook helping today to set up, but I can’t risk it.

Once the gift is neatly stashed by my door (with the additional of one of my succulent babies, also adorned with a little bow on the pot and a sheet of paper with very specific instructions), I brave the snowy cold weather outside again to head for work.

For the first time since the loan sharks came and put that running timer over my head, I feel a little happy. Maybe it’s the sleep I got for once, maybe it’s the excitement of the Christmas party later, or maybe it’s just knowing that I’ll get to see Jungkook again later.

But I’m feeling a bit lighter today.
I’m the last one to arrive at the Christmas party.

I close the convenience store down at 5 o’clock, walk back to the apartment complex and change, grab Jungkook’s gifts and my camera, and walk down to the first floor to Namjoon, Hoseok and Suga’s apartment.

When Suga opens the door for me, a big gummy smile on display, I notice that the entire living room is decked out in Christmas. There’s a big tree with colorful lights and tinsel, stockings hung on the wall, candles lit, Christmas music playing, and string lights wrapped around the entire ceiling, giving the room a colorful glow.

“Wow,” I breathe out as Suga takes the gifts and sets them in the room before anyone can see them. It is still a secret, after all. “You guys really out did yourselves.”

“Yeah, that was all Hoseok and Jungkook,” Suga replies, shutting the door to the room with all the gifts. “You hungry?” I nod and let him willingly lead me to the kitchen to make me a plate of whatever smells so great. “How was work?”

“Slow. No one really came in for much.” Suga hands me a plate and I fill it with all the goodies laid out - rice, bulgogi, kimchi, fish cake - and start eating immediately while Suga fills a cup with beer for me. At the end of the table, there’s a big cake with strawberries on top and a plate full of chocolate chip cookies. I smile, knowing that those came from Jungkook. “Is… that mistletoe?”

Suga glances over to where I’m pointing, the mistletoe hanging on the entrance to the kitchen. Then he sighs and nods. “Yeah, sure is. Namjoon and Jimin already found themselves under it and had to kiss on the cheek when Hoseok noticed.”

“Ugh, I missed it!” I pout, shoving more food into my mouth. Suga rolls his eyes at my reaction and calls out to Hoseok.

“Taehyung! You made it!” Hoseok cheers, hugging me from the side as I finish the last bite of my food. “Oh, man. You’ve lost weight. Here, eat more my little baby!”

I laugh as Hoseok fills my plate with more food, my eyes glancing at Suga, who is watching him fondly. It warms my heart, and my stomach grumbles happily as another plate is placed in my hands with more food. I hadn’t realized how hungry I really was until I’d started eating in the first
“Show him the picture of Namjoon and Jimin,” Suga says and Hoseok claps excitedly, pulling his phone out of his pocket and flipping through a few things before he holds it out to me. It’s a picture of Namjoon leaning down to kiss Jimin on the cheek, both of their faces red from blushing. Jimin’s eyes are closed, but he’s smiling so wide that it must have hurt his cheeks, and Namjoon’s got a hand rested on his shoulder, his eyes closed as well.

“Awww!” I coo, zooming in a little to look more closely. “I can’t believe I missed it!”

“I’ve already seen them try to sneak their way over to the mistletoe again,” Hoseok replies, waving his hand dismissively. “I’m sure you’ll see it happen again tonight. I caught them 4 times.”

“Let them do it then,” Suga says, shrugging. “You keep calling them out in front of everyone.”

I gasp, “Hoseok! That’s so mean, you’re embarrassing them!”

Hoseok cackles, refilling his cup with more beer before disappearing back into the living room where the rest of the party is happening. I finish shoving the rest of the food into my mouth before grabbing my own beer and following Suga to join everyone else, too (but not before snatching up a couple of cookies).

Namjoon and Jimin are seated next to each other on the couch, and Namjoon has his arm over Jimin’s shoulders. Jin is sitting next to Jungkook on the floor near the tree, laughing and talking about something excitedly. Hoseok takes the extra chair and is sitting with his legs dangling over one edge. Suga sits on the floor in front of the chair and I head for the couch, to the empty space next to Jimin.

“Taetae!” Jimin shouts enthusiastically, causing everyone to look up for a moment. I wave a little, taking the seat next to Jimin before being engulfed in a tight hug that makes me laugh. “I’ve missed you! Ooo, are those the cookies you helped bake?”

“I barely helped,” I laugh, offering one to him and Namjoon. Namjoon shakes his head and informs me that he’s already had seven of them, and Jimin takes the cookie for himself. “I added the chocolate chips and then passed out.”
“Well, that’s probably why they taste so good then. I thought it was suspicious that these would be good if you helped make them.”

I playfully shove Jimin’s arm, making him laugh.

For a while, everyone just sits and talks, the sound of Christmas music playing quietly in the background from a speaker. Namjoon and Jimin flirt, but Jimin makes sure to include me, too, which is nice. Hoseok and Suga bring me into their conversation a lot, too, asking about work and nagging me that I’m losing too much weight again (at one point, Suga goes to bring me more food, not that I mind) and that I need a haircut. Jin and Jungkook join the group conversation, which ends with Jin telling more dad jokes that everyone cringes at (except Hoseok).

Jungkook and I make eye contact and I smile at him. He smiles back, his eyes sparkling under the lighting of the twinkling colorful lights.

It’s just one moment, though, before Jin taps his shoulder and he tears his eyes away from me to look at him when he starts in on another story.

“Let’s open gifts!” Hoseok shouts, getting up from his seat. He makes Suga get up to help pass them out.

It only takes a few minutes before the gifts are passed out amongst all of us. Hoseok encourages Namjoon to open his first; his is a small box wrapped neatly with a colorful bow. He rips the wrapping paper off and in the process, almost drops his gift completely, making all of us laugh.

“Cologne,” he says with a smile, opening the box to smell it. “This smells great!”

“Who do you think your secret santa is?” Hoseok asks, practically leaning forward on his seat in his excitement. His eyes are wide, watching Namjoon very carefully.

“Hmm, maybe you or Jimin?” he guesses, glancing from Hoseok to Jimin.

Hoseok laughs and raises his hand. “I was your secret santa, but Jimin helped me pick out your gift.”
Namjoon grins, thanking them both.

Next is Jimin. His gift is in a small bag with tissue paper. His gift ends up being several notebooks, pens and pencils, since he’s a college student and always needs a place to write notes down. There’s also a photo of Jin with an autograph, and a homemade ticket for an upcoming fight that Jin’s in for the boxing competition that both he and Jungkook are participating in.

“Well, I think my secret santa is Worldwide Handsome Jin,” Jimin says and Jin laughs, reaching forward to high five him while we all laugh. “I’ll definitely come to your fight, Jin! Thank you.”

“Okay, next is Taehyung!” Hoseok announces.

In my lap is a fairly large box wrapped in brown craft paper with little drawings on it in black marker. There’s also ribbon tied neatly into a bow on top. I unwrap it carefully, wanting to keep the paper and little drawings; I can feel everyone’s eyes watching me as I slowly slide the box out from the paper and ribbon.

I open the top of the box and look down at a pair of brand new sneakers. They’re black with white laces, just my size.

My eyes slowly look up around the room, before landing on Jungkook.

“Wow, those are nice shoes,” Hoseok says, reaching out to touch them. “You really needed new shoes, didn’t you, Taehyung? Last time we talked, you were telling me about how you needed new ones.”

“Yeah,” I breathe out, still looking at Jungkook. “Yeah, mine were really old and wore out.”

“Well? Who do you think your secret santa is?”

“Jungkook,” I say and he smiles, nodding his head. I gently set the shoe back in the box, putting the lid back on. “Thank you, Jungkook.”

I hope that he can hear the sincerity in my voice. I hope that he knows just how much this means,
because I’m positive that he broke the spending limit rule to get me these. I feel weirdly choked up, thinking about him looking for a gift for me for secret santa - how much he’s paid attention to notice my shoes. I smile at the box on my lap, not paying much attention at Hoseok starts to pressure Suga next.

All I keep thinking about is how much care was spent picking out my gift, and how warm my heart feels at that thought.

Suga opens his gift next, and it’s a cooking set with spices, a new pan and metal chopsticks and he seems excited about it until he realizes that he got it as a gift from Namjoon. “Yah, you just want me to cook for you more,” Suga says and Namjoon grins but doesn’t deny it, and everyone laughs again. “Thank you, but don’t expect anything.”

“Sure, sure,” Namjoon replies and Jimin giggles next to me, leaning over to whisper about how bad Namjoon is in the kitchen and that without Suga feeding him and Hoseok, they would have starved to death by now. “Hoseok, it’s your turn.”

Hoseok rubs his hands together before reaching into his gift bag. Since he set up the party and secret santa, he already knows who got him his gift. But that doesn’t stop him from excitedly shouting as he pulls out a knitted scarf and matching winter beanie (complete with a fluff of colorful puff on top) and then modeling it for all of us. He thanks Jimin whole heartedly, reaching forward to hug him.

“Next up is Jungkookie!” Hoseok shouts with glee, turning to look at him and focus his attention on the next gift being opened.

Jungkook smiles softly as he reaches into the bag where I carefully wrapped everything. The first thing he pulls out are the framed pictures, all wrapped individually and then tied together with a red ribbon. He unties the ribbon, then pulls away the wrapping paper.

There are three frames, three photos. I watch his expression as he looks at each of them. He smiles down at them, his hands gentle as he looks through them. When he lifts his head again, he smiles at me from his seat across the small room, knowing that they’re from me.

“Thank you,” he says. “Tae, these are incredible. Seriously, I mean it. I can’t wait to hang these up in my apartment.”
My heart swells, a blush creeping its way up my neck. “Well, I’m glad that you like them. They did turn out nice… Even the one from the rooftop party.”

“I love them.”

He passes them around so that everyone can see, and then reaches back into the bag, pulling out the succulent plant and care instructions. He looks up at me with wide eyes.

“Isn’t this from your apartment?” he asks.

“Yeah, that’s sort of just a bonus,” I explain. “Your apartment just needs some personal touches, and I love having little plants. They just make everything feel happier and more alive. So, I decided to give you one of my babies.”

He grins at me again, opening the handwritten instructions and reading them over. “I’ll make sure to take good care of it.”

“You better! If I come over and you killed it…”

“I promise to keep it alive.”

My heart hurts just a little bit when the photos reach Jin and he passes them directly back to Jungkook, not even looking at the one on top.

Once everyone’s seen the photos, Jungkook carefully places them back into the gift bag to carry back to his apartment later. Then, Hoseok is redirecting all of our attention to Jin, who is the last one to open his gift, which means he also now knows who was his secret santa: Suga.

It’s an envelope.

Jin opens it and pulls out five hand drawn pieces of paper. “Coupons,” he says, looking up to Suga who is smiling smug and proud. “For free meals, whatever and whenever I want.”
“There’s an expiration date,” Suga adds, “in the bottom corner.”

“Expires in the new year,” Jin reads aloud. “Yah! That’s in less than a week!”

Hoseok slaps Suga’s shoulder. “That’s not fair, Suga! You can’t put an expiration date on a cheap gift like that!”

“What? It won’t be cheap after I buy all the ingredients to make whatever meals he wants,” Suga defends himself, crossing his arms over his chest. “Fine, I’ll accept one coupon after the expiration date. But you have to use the others before if you want me to cook you food for free.”

Jin laughs and puts the coupons back into the envelope. “You know, I’ve been craving steak lately…”

“Just tell me when you want it.”

“Wow! What started as the worst gift has turned into the best gift!” Jin laughs again. “Thank you. I’ll use them well.”

Hoseok demands that we all do a shot of soju in celebration, pouring some for everyone. We do a small cheers, all of us together and happy to celebrate the holiday as one family, and then take the shot. After that, I round everyone up in front of the tree and set up my camera on a shelf with the timer, making sure to check the lighting before setting it up to take a group photo, just like we had on Halloween (which everyone has a copy of by now). I click the button and run to join the group, happy when Jungkook extends his arm for me, pulling me in when I barrel into him after tripping on someone’s gift on the floor.

I smile, unable to stop thinking about Jungkook’s hand on my waist, holding me close to him.

The flash goes off, blinding us all, and then the moment is frozen.

Forever.
An hour later, everyone is feeling the affects of the alcohol. Suga is sitting on the reclining chair, holding his cup as if it’s an elegant glass of wine; Hoseok is dancing to the upbeat music he switched the Christmas music out for, holding Jin’s arms and forcing him to dance with him; Jimin and Namjoon are both cuddling on the couch together, being disgustingly cute. I watch from the entry from the kitchen to the living room, holding my own cup of recently refilled beer, and a cookie in the other, feeling happy and warm.

My friends. My family.

I eat the cookie in one bite just as I feel a warm presence beside me. Glancing over, I find Jungkook, leaning against the opposite wall of the entryway, looking at me.

“I can’t believe you got me for secret santa,” I tell him, a smile on my lips and a teasing tone to my voice. “You lied to me last night.”

Jungkook smiles, looking down at his feet, almost shy. “I didn’t originally get you… I had to beg Suga to switch with me.”

My eyebrows raise in surprise. “You switched so that you would get me?” He nods. “Aw, Kookie, that’s so cute! I got lucky, since I got you right from the start. At first, I thought about maybe getting you some gloves, since you never have them when it’s cold out. But…”

He watches me, listening intently. I can feel heat in my cheeks, and before I can stop myself from letting the words tumble out of my intoxicated mouth, they’re out there in the open.

“But I like sharing gloves with you, ‘cause it means I get to hold your hand.”

\textit{Holy shit, you really just said that out loud to him}, I think, my eyes going wide as I try to cough and pretend that I’m not roasting from the inside out. \textit{Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god.}

“You know,” he says, breaking the uncomfortable silence and causing my heart to sputter, “I have gloves, I just… forget them at home sometimes.”

I look at him, blinking a few times, trying to process his words. My brain is fuddled and moving
slow, struggling to understand. If he has gloves, then why would he forget them at home? That doesn’t-

“Because I like to hold your hand, too.”

“Oh,” I say, brilliantly.

The music suddenly is paused, the silence loud in my ears as I stare at Jungkook, feeling shocked and embarrassed and… hopeful? Giddy? It starts in the pit of my stomach, working its way up and causing me to smile, just a little. But it aches, too, in my heart. In every crack of my broken soul, the flowers that have started to bloom are growing, spreading, filling every single painful split that I’ve suffered through and replacing it with sunlight and warmth.

I feel like I’m unraveling completely.

“Jungkook and Taehyung are standing under the mistletoe!” Hoseok shouts, causing everyone to look over at us. Both Jungkook and I look up, confused, noticing the green mistletoe hanging from tape on the top of the entryway over our heads.

Oh my GOD.

“You guys have to kiss!” Jimin shouts, leaning over the back of the couch with his phone out, ready to document this moment. My body feels like it’s vibrating as I look from everyone’s expectant expressions to Jungkook. “Oh this is going to be good!”

Jungkook and I both stare at each other for a few seconds, as if trying to decide if we can gather the courage to do it.

Then Jungkook makes the choice for us.

One his hands rests on my upper arm, the other coming around to my neck. It’s warm and intimate and my breath hitches in anticipation as he moves closer. When his lips finally make contact with my cheek, my knees wobble and my hand squeezes around my cup, eyes closing.
It feels like it happens in slow motion, yet it’s over in an instant.

Everyone cheers and Jungkook releases me, stepping away. My whole face feels hot and I know that it’s got to be as red as a strawberry. I try to cover it with one hand, laughing a little when everyone coos and says how cute it was and Jimin is suddenly in front of me, showing me the picture he took of the moment.

When Jungkook and I make eye contact again, he lets out the smallest sigh of relief, like he’d been holding his breath, and then smiles shyly at me. And a sense of calm happiness washes away every single bad thing that’s in the back of my mind - my father, the loan sharks, the money, all the work I’ve been putting myself through.

Jeon Jungkook is what happiness is. He is every beautiful, wonderful, happy thing.

It’s another hour later when everyone (very heavily intoxicated and giddy) dresses up warmly and heads outside to play in the snow. Jungkook makes a mad dash upstairs to his apartment to put his gift away safely and returns with gloves, just to prove to me that he does in fact have them. I had him a hot pack to keep inside, to help his hands stay even warmer, and he smiles at me in thanks.

It’s been steadily snowing since last night, and the streets, sidewalks and stairs leading up to the apartment complex are all covered in a thick blanket of snow. It’s beautiful, and there’s frost in the air when we talk and laugh due to the cold weather. The moon is bright overhead, almost full, and gives us more light than the dim street lamps.

“Taetae, help me build a snowman!” Jimin shouts gleefully, tugging my hand and pulling me away from Jungkook. His other hand is holding Namjoon’s, pulling him along with us, too. “Okay, Namjoon, you help me start rolling the ball for the bottom. Taetae, you start making the head, because you’re artsy and can do the face!”

I grin and nod, crouching down to start gathering snow to make the head. Namjoon and Jimin start gathering snow, too, forming it into a ball before rolling it along to make it bigger.

I hear shouts followed by laughter and look up to see a snowball hurled at Jin with impressive speed. Suga is cackling, but starts running away, holding Hoseok’s arm as a snowball is thrown their way. They duck behind a car packed on the street, the snowball just barely missing them.
Jungkook is like the terminator, but with snowballs.

“Hyung,” he calls out sweetly, another snowball already ready in the palm of his hand. “Hyung, come on out, I promise I won’t throw one at you! Let’s form an alliance!”

Suga and Hoseok can hear him getting closer, are quickly trying to make their own snowballs but their fingers keep breaking them in their shaky haste. Suga nods to Hoseok, and suddenly, Hoseok is darting out from behind the car - the distraction. In the next second, Suga is jumping up and throwing a snowball at Jungkook, though it misses him.

But then one snowball does hit Jungkook, and it’s thrown by Jin, who immediately starts running away while laughing.

I decide to give up on making a snowman and busy myself making snowballs until I have so many made that they are starting to topple out of my arms. Then, while Jungkook is busy chasing after Jin for his revenge, I run over to Suga and Hoseok and hand them some snowballs, forming an alliance with them.

“Okay, here’s the plan,” I say, looking around the side of the car to see that Jungkook has cornered Jin, playing with him until Jin is fake begging in front of him for his life. “He doesn’t know I’m playing, so I’ll distract him. Then you two are going to come from both sides and hit him, then, I’ll go in for the kill.”

Suga and Hoseok nod and Hoseok grins excitedly. Suga looks normal but I can tell he’s having fun in the way he nods a little quicker than usual.

“Okay, ready?” I ask and they both give me a thumbs up, though Hoseok’s looks funny since he’s wearing knitted mittens instead of gloves.

I saunter over to where Jungkook is forming more snowballs, acting innocent as I walk over. Behind the apartment complex stairs, I can see Jin making more snowballs, too, ready for his own revenge.

“Snowballs?” I ask, making Jungkook look up at me. “You sure you don’t wanna help me make the top of the snowman? It’s fun and all, but Jimin just was using me for my artistic abilities and is making me do the top by myself.”
“Aw, poor Tae,” Jungkook coos, standing up straight and rolling the snow between his hands until it’s a perfect ball shape. “You wanna join the snowball fight? You can be on my team. I’m winning.”

“How does one ‘win’ a snowball fight?” I ask, amused. Out of the corner of my eyes, I can see Suga and Hoseok getting into place, one on each side.

“By destroying everyone with the most snowballs,” he replies. “Or until they give up. Which won’t be me. I’ve literally gotten everyone with at least two snowballs in the last ten minutes.”

“But I saw Jin hyung hit you, too,” I say.

He pouts, “Well, I’ve gotten him twice. So I’m still beating him, too.”

Suddenly, Suga and Hoseok throw their snowballs, each of them hitting Jungkook. One nails him in the shoulder, snow breaking apart and splashing cold water on his face and neck, and the other hits his forearm, causing him to drop the snowball he’d been making.

It’s my moment.

I pull my hand from behind my back and throw the snowball I’d been hiding right in his chest, nailing him.

“You went for a kill shot?” Jungkook asks, his eyes comically wide as he looks at me. “Tae, I’m… I’m hurt. I can’t believe that you would do that to me.”

“Believe it, baby,” I grin, flashing him a peace sign, “I’m in it to win it.”

Before he can retort, I retreat with Suga and Hoseok, running as far from Jungkook as we can to replenish our stock of snowballs. Jin distracts Jungkook next by throwing another snowball at him and then running away, following Hoseok when he motions him over to us.

For some reason, even though I’m aware that Jin doesn’t seem to really like me, I reach up to him and take his arm. He struggles for a moment, but eventually lets me drag him to our base behind
the car for cover.

“You have great aim,” I tell Jin, just wanting him to accept me. “That’s a perfect shot!”

“Yeah,” he says, pulling his arm from my grasp. “You, too.”

“Okay, what’s the next plan, Tae?” Hoseok asks, eyes sparkling with mischief.

But there’s no time for me to come up with a plan, because suddenly, Jungkook is there, and he’s got the biggest snowball I’ve ever seen in my entire life in his arms, ready to destroy us all and probably take over the world. It’s belated that I realize he stole Namjoon and Jimin’s bottom of the snowman ball.

It’s easily half the size of me.

“Run for your lives!” I shout, getting up and taking off before I can take that kind of hit. I’m not trying to die out here, after all.

We all flee from Jungkook, laughing when he specifically starts to follow Jin. The nighttime air is filled with out labored breathing and Jin’s nervous laughter as he calls out, “Why are you targeting only me?”

Jungkook turns on his heel and starts for me, but he’s slowed down by the massive amount of snow he’s holding. I laugh and run, trying to hide behind Jimin and Namjoon who start shouting at me. Jimin kicks my butt, forcing me away from them, yelling that I did this to myself.

Jungkook is on me then, cornering me and I realize that there’s no outrunning your fate.

“Please,” I beg, clasping my hands in front of my face in mock prayer, “I’m your favorite hyung, remember? I was there for you when you were sick, brought you banana milk when you had a tough day of practice. I gave you one of my children!”

Jungkook laughs, but he doesn’t back away. Instead, he raises the snow over his head, ready to murder me. “You did this to yourself, Tae. I offered to let you be on my team - the winning team.”
“I’ll join your team now!” I plead, fake crying to try and get out of it. “I’ll be a great teammate to you. Together, we can destroy them all.”

“It’s too late for that now, Tae,” he replies, his face looking solemn.

Then, he grins wickedly and the snowball hits me like a freight train.

I fall to the ground, covered in snow, holding my chest as if I’ve been shot. I hold my arm outstretched to Suga, Hoseok and Jin, who all roll their eyes at my dramatics. Then, I let my arm fall to the ground and turn my head, closing my eyes and letting my tongue fall out of my mouth.

Dead.

“You guys, it’s cold and I’m tired,” Jimin whines from the stairs, huddled close to Namjoon. Jungkook kneels next to me and lightly taps my cheeks and pokes at my sides until I’m laughing. “Let’s go back inside!”

Everyone agrees and starts back to the apartments. Jungkook takes my hand and pulls me up to my feet, helping me dust off all the snow from the final snowball. And maybe it’s just that it’s the two of us outside by ourselves now, everyone else back inside to make hot cocoa and get ready for bed, or maybe it’s that he’s still holding my arm as he dusts off my back. Maybe it’s even the alcohol, which I’m still feeling a buzz from.

Maybe it’s all of it combined that makes me say it.

“Jungkook,” I breathe his name out, softly, and it hangs between us in the air, visible. He stops and looks at me, and we’re so close that I can smell him - vanilla, something sweet. “You’re really amazing, you know?”

He laughs quietly, “Thanks, Tae. It was just snowballs.”

“No,” I grip his hand over my arm, wanting him to understand. I’m feeling so much that my eyes start to water and this, I realize, is definitely because I’m coming down from the alcohol. “Not just that. Everything. Every single thing about you is… is beautiful and wonderful. Do you even
know?”

His doe eyes are staring at me. I can’t tell what he’s thinking.

“Do you know that?” I whisper out, staring right back because I really just need him to know. “Ever since you came around, I started to think that the world really is a beautiful place again. That life can be good and happy, even if it’s a little sad, too.”

“Tae…” his voice shakes a little.

I can’t help it. My words are failing me, words jumbling together in my mind, unable to really tell him what I want to. That he’s filled my entire being with beautiful flowers, sunlight and kindness.

That I love him, more than I’ve ever loved anybody.

That he’s saved me.

That I would be his, if he wanted.

I rest my free hand on his cheek, and I can tell it’s cold even through my glove. He doesn’t flinch away, his eyes just staring at me, trying to understand.

I close the distance between us, our noses brushing against each other’s. My lips touch his for just a moment, and I’m suddenly so warm, so impossibly warm and happy that a few tears slip from my eyes and fall down my cheeks.

It’s just a soft touch, barely even a kiss, and I pull away.

And I can’t bare to see what kind of expression he wears, so I pull away from his grasp and run inside, up three flights of stairs, and into my apartment. I ignore the fact that my gift is still downstairs at Namjoon, Hoseok and Suga’s apartment. I ignore the knowledge that they are making hot cocoa for me, not knowing that I won’t go back for it.
Instead, I let myself sink to the floor, my back to the door. I take off my gloves and reach a shaky hand to my lips, slightly chapped and still warm from where they’d just barely touched Jungkook’s.

I wonder, have I ruined the only happiness in my life?

Chapter End Notes
When I walk up the steps to return to Suga, Namjoon and Hoseok’s apartment, my feet feel heavy. After he’d run off, I saw the light go on in Kim Taehyung’s apartment; I know he won’t be waiting with the rest of them, hands around a cup of warm cocoa, face flushed from the snowball fight and the alcohol and… And…

The kiss.

I pause. Standing in front of the door to their apartment, I can hear everything happening inside. Laughter, tired voices calling to one another across the unit – but I can’t bring myself to enter. My hand rises and my first and middle finger press softly against my lips.

My heart won’t stop beating, fast and out of control and with more adrenaline flowing through me than I’ve ever felt before. I can still feel him. I can still taste the breath from his lips on mine, soft and sweet and twinged with a sting of the sugary alcohol we’d been drinking earlier tonight.

He kissed me, I think, and my eyes burn, because my thoughts are quickly piecing together what just happened and what it meant. I want to punch the wall – I want to throw a fit, to lash out, to destroy something beautiful.

And it’s all because I know that it didn’t mean to him what it meant to me. I know this. I know this. That’s why he’s in his apartment now, hiding.

Because it was a mistake.

I don’t want to go back to the party. The fingers that had once delicately grazed my lips fall, and now my hand clamps over my mouth as my eyes pinch shut tight, one hand bracing against the doorframe as my back hunches and I resist the urge to crumble on the ground. It’s worse than any blow I’ve ever taken. Worse than any cut or bruise.
When I’m finally able to pull myself back together, I stand, run my hands over my face, holding at my eyes for a moment before I head up the next set of stairs and enter my apartment, closing the door behind me softly before I crawl into bed and pull the covers over my head.

The room spins. I fall asleep with a weak stomach and my heart a mess.

I make a point not to contact Taehyung again. Not until his birthday, anyway.

On New Year’s Eve, I have another fight. I don’t have time to think about my feelings, or Tae’s, or anyone else for that matter. I just know I have to win, because this isn’t as simple as making money for rent anymore. This is about winning the prize and saving Kim Taehyung’s life.

Jin likes that I’m spending more time at the gym. Over the next few days, we seem to fall back into a routine – one I can tell he’s been missing. We spar, help each other with weight training, go for runs on the track… and it’s nice. I miss this time with Jin. I miss our friendship, and the way it used to feel simple. Because lately, it’s been feeling… strained, I guess.

There’s something that’s been going on between us, and between Jin and Taehyung, that has not sat right with me for a while. But here in the gym, all of that goes away. It’s just Jin and me, and us supporting one another like it had always been before.

Before Tae.

Before everything.

The next five days pass by and for a minute, I forget. I know it’s something about the wiring in my brain trying to protect itself, but still. Not to feel the sting of rejection for a little while is enough.

Especially when Kim Taehyung hasn’t tried to contact me at all, either.

But his birthday isn’t long after Christmas, so I know this won’t last forever.
On the morning of his birthday (not that I’m keeping track – not that it’s been on my calendar for months) there’s a soft knock on my door. I pull myself out of bed, feeling tired and sore, and when I open the door I’m surprised to see that it’s Suga.

“Oh,” I start, running a hair through my messy bedhead. “Uh, good morning hyung.” I step aside, letting him in, and at this he smiles a little. It makes me feel better, because knowing what day it is, my heart has already started this morning in the Bottomless Pit of Despair™.

“We all got a card, if you want to sign it,” he says. “I’d tell you what it’s for, but I’m sure you already know.”

I nod, sighing discreetly. “Yeah, of course,” I reply, shaking my head to clear the thoughts already spinning in my mind. When he hands me the card he’s brought, along with a pen that’s got a tiny action figure of a ninja turtle on top (Donatello), I clear my throat. “So are you guys doing anything tonight?”

“For Taehyung’s birthday?” Suga asks, crossing his arms and leaning up against the wall. “We weren’t planning anything. I think Taehyung said that he works.”

“Ah,” I say, clicking the pen open and going to sign my name, but pausing first to quickly read over the messages already jotted down inside. I’m surprised to find that I’m the last to sign.

*Happy birthday, Taehyungie!!! Our gentle baby boy is turning 23! Have a great day. -Hoseok*

*Taehyung,*

*Your birthday is just another day. I hope you spend it well. Love you. -Suga*

*Happy birthday. Jin*

*Happy birthday, Taehyung. You’ve made us so proud this year. I can’t wait to see you grow to 24. xx NJ*

*Taetae, my oldest and best friend – you are finally 23! I love you more than life itself! You deserve*
all of the good things on your special day. I promise to take care of my little brother throughout the next year as well! <3 xoxoxoxo Jimin

I can feel Suga’s eyes on me as I read over their messages, and I can feel my hands start to sweat. I don’t know how to say happy birthday to the person who saved my life in more ways than one, who has opened my eyes to what it could be like to live in a world where love is everywhere.

I don’t know how to sign this in any other way than I can, so in the end, I write:

Tae,

Today is the day we all celebrate the day you were born, but since I met you, I have felt like celebrating every day the same way. Happy birthday to the best friend I have ever had. JJK.

I hope it isn’t too sentimental. I hope that when he reads it, he knows that the kiss can be forgotten, if that’s what he wants. I hope he can feel how deep it goes; I hope he still knows that I just want to be by his side. That when you love someone, you can let them go. Even if it kills you.

And I do love you, Kim Taehyung.

I fold it quickly before I can second guess it any more than I already have and hand it back to Suga. I can tell he wants to look, but Suga is also the type of person to respect personal space. I watch as he pulls the envelope out and sticks the card into it, licking the seal and pressing his thumb along the lip to close it. I can feel a sigh of relief threatening to spill out, but I don’t let it.

“Well,” Suga says, pausing as though wanting to say something more but thinking twice on it. “Thanks,” he finally decides, and turns to leave.

“Wait,” I say suddenly, and he stops, turns back around, and his eyes are a little wider than they’d been before. “Ah, you said you aren’t doing anything for Taehyung’s birthday.”

He nods, shoving his hands into his pockets.

“Do all of you work tonight?”
“Namjoon and Hoseok have the afternoon shift, and I work until 21:30.”

I bite my lip, wondering if I should – but in the end, I do, because I know it’s important.

“We shouldn’t just let today go by.” I pause. “We should show him he’s appreciated.”

“That’s why we got a card, Jungkook.” Suga wiggles it at me for further emphasis.

I sigh. I feel like, knowing what I know, I can’t let them pass it off as just another day. Tae needs this. Tae needs to be surrounded by people that care about him.

“He needs us,” I tell him, and I hope that he understands.

Suga waits a moment, thinking. And then: “I’ll make some calls. We’ll figure it out.”

I can’t help the small smile from appearing on my lips, relieved. “Thank you.”

He nods, turning once again to leave. However, this time he stops in the doorway, just before closing the door behind him, and his eyes look off as though lost in thought.

“He’s lucky to have a friend like you,” he says, and his voice is small. Pensive. “You came into his life at the right time, Jungkook.”

I don’t know what to say. I just nod silently, then watch as he disappears behind the door, the sound of his footsteps echoing as he descends back to their flat.

__________________________

**Group Chat: Party Planning Committee**

Suga:
It’s slow at work and I’m starting this group chat back up so that everyone knows what’s going on.

JHope:
GET BACK TO WORK

Suga:
I will not

Suga:
So tonight we are going out for Tae’s birthday and no one has any say in the matter

Jin:
What about what I say

Suga:
Especially not what you say

Suga:
It is his birthday so we are going to do something fun for it

Namjoon:
I was wondering if this was going to happen or not

JHope:
We both were

Suga:
Well in reality it was JJK’s idea
Jungkook:

Jin:
I’ll kill u JJK

Suga:
ANYWAY

Suga:
So here is the plan. We are all going to surprise Taehyung at work and take him bar hopping

Jimin:
What about karaoke?! Taehyungie loves karaoke

Suga:
…

Jin:
Why @god
Namjoon:

It’s Tae’s day, let’s let him decide

JHope:

That’s lame. Deciding your own surprise party is lame.

Namjoon:

Jungkook:

I think karaoke sounds fun, Jimin

Suga:

Whatever you guys wanna do. I’m not gonna sing

JHope:

Oh you’ll sing

JHope:

You seem to forget Dark Yoongles

JHope:

That’s what I’m calling drunk Suga FYI

Jin:

Accurate
Suga:

I came here to plan a party not get roasted fuckers

JHope:

Sorry. Proceed

Suga:

Anyway

Suga:

I’m off at 21:30 so let’s meet in front of the complex at 22 and head to the convenience store then

JHope:

👍👍

Jimin:

👍👍

Namjoon:

👍👍

Jungkook:
Jin:

Motherfucker are you trying to void your christmas coupons

Suga:

That’s what I thought

When I open up the door to the complex, Jin, Namjoon and Hoseok are already in front of the building, shivering and blowing smoke clouds in the air with their breath.

“Mine was biggest,” Jin boasts.

“Mine was bigger than yours,” Hoseok disagrees, then shoves a thumb in Namjoon’s direction. “I mean, at least it was bigger than Joonie’s over here.”

“Whatever you say,” Namjoon states, but from his tone I can tell he clearly does not agree and cares quite an actual lot.

I don’t say anything, and instead blow the biggest smoke cloud ever in between the three of them.
“That was rude,” Hoseok deadpans.

“It wasn’t your fight to win,” Namjoon shoots back.

I shrug. “I won anyway.”

“Hey!” we hear up the street, and when we turn, we see that it’s Suga and Jimin walking side by side, their paces quick as they approach.

“I’m a baby dragon,” Jimin says from a distance, throwing his head back and blowing his breath into the air with a ferocity not in line with how small a human being he is.

Suga doesn’t say anything, but when they both get close enough, he throws his head back in the same fashion, a giant cloud of fog rising from his mouth large enough to rival mine.

We all stand in silence, stunned.

“That’s what I thought,” he says, and suddenly, we are all busting up laughing.

Hoseok is the one to calm everyone down. “Alright, alright -- should we head to the convenience store now? Taehyung will be getting off soon.”

“Yes,” I confirm, some excitement now turning in the pit of my stomach (mixed in now with the perpetual anxiety and longing that’s been there since the party on Christmas).

All six of us start our way to the store, and I walk quietly while observing the others. Namjoon and Jimin are walking together at the front of the group, Jimin with one of his fingers curled around one of Namjoon’s belt loops. I catch him tugging on it, and note the way Namjoon walks a little closer after he does. Behind them, Suga, Hoseok and Jin all walk together; Suga keeps looking up at Jin with an interesting mix of confusion and intrigue, and Hoseok keeps looking at Suga. His expression, I note, is soft. There’s a known fondness in the way he watches him, especially while he’s not looking, that makes me wish I hadn’t seen the look at all. It seemed private.

I think of the times I’ve looked at Kim Taehyung in front of the others. I wonder if they can see it
the same way. I wonder if Tae knows.

As we approach the convenience store, Jimin claps his hands together and stops us in the middle of the sidewalk. He turns around, making sure we have all stopped as well before he speaks.

“I have an idea,” he says. “We should have Jungkook run inside as a diversion so he doesn’t notice us all coming in at the same time and ruin the surprise.”

I balk. “Why me?” I ask, and at this, Jimin’s eyes widen a little before a soft smile settles on his lips.

“You’re close to him,” he says. “He told me you visit him all the time, it makes the most sense.”

The others all look at me, this being news to them. “Kim Taehyung gets special visits?” Hoseok asks Suga, grabbing his sleeve and grinning. They’re all smiling now -- everyone except Jin, anyway -- and I can’t help it. My neck goes hot, and then the flush spreads to my cheeks. Thank god it’s dark out, I think. Thank god they can’t roast me any further.

“Please go in, Jungkook!” Jimin tries again, his hand reaching out to squeeze my upper arm, eyes finding mine and holding them for a moment until I give in.

“Fine, I’ll do it,” I say, raising my hands in defeat. Jimin whoops, and at his side, Namjoon nods in approval, thanking me for doing my part. I look down the block, and I can see the sign illuminating in the front window even from where I stand. I swallow, then take off walking ahead of the rest of the group which hangs back for the meantime.

I don’t know what I’m going to say. My mouth is suddenly dry; we haven’t spoken in nearly a week, the longest amount of time that has gone by without seeing Kim Taehyung – let alone speaking to him – since the day I met him.

Shaking my head, I run a hand through my hair and breathe in deep – because before I know it, I’ve reached the edge of the parking lot of the convenience store. And, inside, I can see Kim Taehyung behind the counter.

At once, he looks up, and somehow it’s as if he knows. I start to cross the lot, my legs feeling like jelly, and our eyes lock.
I look down, away. *Think of something,* I beg my mind. *Just come up with something to say.* *Please.*

My hands are pushing the door to the store open, the bell jingling on the door handle as I do, and as soon as I walk in, I look up at Tae. His gaze is on me, but his eyes keep averting every half second to somewhere else in the room.

It’s… uncomfortable.

For the first time ever since meeting him, I don’t think either of us know what to say.

“Hey,” I greet, raising a hand in the air as my legs move me forward toward the counter. There’s a light overhead that is on the fritz, flickering every once in a while and disrupting the calm of the otherwise silent store.

“Hi,” he says, and I can see his mouth start to form the sound of my name but he stops himself.

I shove my hands in my pockets, feeling them start to sweat as I do. “Has it been a slow night?” I ask him.

He shrugs. “It’s… ah, it’s been slow alright.” He laughs once, shrugging his shoulders. Tae won’t look at me. “I guess I would have thought I’d at least get a text message today, but…” He holds his phone up, shaking it once. He doesn’t need to elaborate.

That’s when, all at once, I realize: Tae thinks that everyone has forgotten his birthday.

His eyes stare down at the counter and he places the phone down near the register, far away from him as his first finger starts to pick at the skin around his thumb. In this moment, Taehyung looks so incredibly tired -- as though his shoulders have been pushed down by a weight no one else could possibly understand, as though weighed down by an overwhelming silence on the day of all days you never want to be alone.

I wonder what his birthdays were like as a kid. I wonder if his mother bought him presents, cooked for him. I wonder where his father was.
Without warning, another thought comes to mind – this one of my own childhood. I remember waking up in the morning to my parents not being home, to a formal letter from my mother on the kitchen counter as our housekeeper made breakfast for me and directed me to the pile of gifts piled up in the living room.

I remember going to school, and the incredible silence there, too. Lunch alone. Being driven home afterward by the family driver; being taken back to the house to find my parents still not there. The silence of the phone as I sat beside it, hours going by that I spent staring off at nothing at all, trying to convince myself that they’d call. At some point, they’d call.

My eyes now travel back to the phone. I think of the cruel joke of all of this – of the surprise, and how it seems to have unintentionally turned into something less about Kim Taehyung than it is about everyone else.

“We didn’t forget,” is what I say suddenly, and when I do, he looks up.

Wide eyes that now hold nothing back.

“You… you didn’t?” he asks, his voice small.

I know I’ve ruined the surprise now – but I can’t help it. I think of myself and the overwhelming quiet on birthdays, and when I see Tae now, I can feel that. There is a painful disappointment in being forgotten.

I shake my head. “No… Tae. We all remembered.”

His eyes widen, mouth falling open as both hands flatten slowly on the counter.

My feet move on their own accord. I smile a little, taking a step toward him, then another. My hands fall on the counter, palms flattening against it the same way his do.

Our fingertips graze one another’s, and I feel it everywhere.
“Happy birthday, T–”

At this very moment, the door to the store bursts open, revealing the entire rest of the group, who in unison all shout: “Happy birthday, Taehyung!”

I pull my hands from the counter, shoving them back into their pockets, and step backward, watching Tae’s face as a realization of what is happening begins to settle in.

“What… what the heck!” he shouts, slamming his palms on the counter and leaning toward them all as they pour one by one into the store. “I thought you guys forgot about me!”

“We could never forget about you, Taehyungie!” Jimin giggles, then reaches toward him to grab his shoulders with both hands. “Ah – my best friend is 23!”

Tae’s smile is equal parts surprised, happy, and relieved. The pit of my stomach hurts, knowing how long on this day he spent in the dark – of how long he spent thinking we all had forgotten him. This hurts to think about, and as much as I try to push it from my mind, I realize that it won’t unstick. It keeps pulling me back to those memories of my childhood.

To more than just the silence of birthdays.

To school. To being an outcast. To being ostracized.

My throat closes and it hurts to swallow. I’ve kept those memories away for a long time; it’s the only way I know how to hold them without hurting. Compartmentalization.

“We are busting you out of here,” Namjoon says, reaching across the counter to ruffle Tae’s hair. Suga reaches across in the same manner, his fingers softly pinching his cheek. Tae’s smile is now here in full-force, the boxiness of it showing both rows of teeth as his eyes crinkle shut.

“It’s almost time for you to be getting off, right?” Jin asks, and Tae’s smile fades a little, but not entirely, as he looks over the counter at Jin.

“I’m just waiting for my coworker to show up and take over,” he says, and Jin nods, then drags
Hoseok down an aisle with trail mix where they begin discussing which type of nut is the best and why. It turns into a heated argument before long; I swear, those two get passionate about the weirdest shit.

The uncomfortable air that had existed in the store when I’d first walked in has nearly disappeared entirely. The only time I still feel it is, as Tae is talking to Jimin across the counter, his gaze occasionally drifts in my direction, and when our eyes lock I can feel the tension. There’s so much unspoken.

I can’t stop thinking about his goddamn mouth.

“Ah!” Tae starts as the door chimes again, and he raises a hand in the air. “Hyojin!”

The girl I’ve met before lets the door close behind her with wide eyes. Her mouth falls open slightly as she looks around the room, eyes darting between the seven of us.

“Are… you all…” she starts, and from an aisle away, Jin suddenly shouts loudly. We all direct our attention onto him, and when his eyes meet Hyojin’s, he winks and blows a kiss dramatically.

Hyojin’s face burns a bright crimson.

“Please forgive my friends!” Tae says quickly, bowing to her as he starts to untie the apron around his waist. “They all surprised me–”

“It’s his birthday!” Jimin says from beside her, and when she looks at him, she swallows.

That’s when I realize what Hyojin is currently unpacking: the fact that she has suddenly found herself in the middle of her place of work, surrounded entirely by seven good-looking dudes.

I can see the look on her face, and I almost feel a little bad. Hyojin is a sweet girl though, so I decide to intervene.

“We should all be going.” I call to the others, and Tae grins, grabbing his bag from behind the counter and pulling on his winter jacket.
“Thanks for taking over,” Tae says to her, and she bows, smiling back at him before redirecting her attention to Jin.

I mean, I get it. He is truly and objectively a beautiful guy… and I guess everyone has a fave.

“So,” Tae starts as we all head out into the bitter winter night, “what are we all doing?”

I make note of Hoseok, kicking Namjoon subtly in the shins, and him smacking him back as they recall Namjoon’s suggestions in the group chat. I have to force back a laugh.

“Karaoke!” Jimin grins, wrapping his arms around one of Tae’s.

Tae’s face lights up. “Ah! I love karaoke! I haven’t done that in so long…”

I smile, watching them a few steps behind. Jimin really does know his friend; I’m glad that Tae has someone like Jimin, who always knows what he needs at the right time to keep him happy. I don’t let myself think that, without me in his life, Tae would be just fine – at least, not for long.

It’s a thought that has burdened my heart since I met them. Something that I can’t shake.

Jealousy is an ugly thing.

“We can take the subway,” Namjoon offers. “Suga, Hoseok and I can cover the fares.”

“I didn’t offer that,” Suga protests. “We never even discussed—”

“Shh!” Hoseok reprimands him, pressing a finger to his lips and pinching his cheek before hanging an arm around the smaller boy’s neck. “We are their hyungs. Let’s treat them. Besides, we all live together and therefore save on rent.”

“I can pitch in, too,” Jin offers.
I nudge him, and when he looks back at me, we smile at one another. This is Jin-hyung’s way. He looks after others, even when he is not asked to. It’s how he found me – how he took me under his wing and helped me when I first came to live here.

Tae’s hand fists in the fabric of his coat, the part covering his heart, and he lets out a long sigh. “You guys, if it’s too much trouble–”

“Don’t listen to Suga-hyung,” Namjoon assures him, placing a hand gently on his shoulder. “We got you.”

We arrive to the subway station and the four hyungs argue over who will pay for whose tickets; Tae, Jimin and I wait behind them like children, and in this moment I feel very young. Namjoon returns from the kiosk and hands us our passes, and we form a line to scan them before waiting for the next subway to arrive.

“What will you be singing, Taehyung?” Jimin asks him offhandedly.

“I’ve been making a mental list on the way,” Tae grins. “It’s a surprise though.”

“I’m buying us a round of soju when we get there,” Namjoon says, then nudges Suga. “This one might need a little loosening up before he sings.”

“I’m not singing,” Suga states blandly, but I see the way Hoseok rolls his eyes and shakes his head.

“He’ll sing,” he mouths to Tae, whose boxy smile appears on his lips in earnest.

My heart bursts wide open.

We all board the subway as it pulls in, Tae first who then waits with his arm through the door to make sure we are all in before joining us to sit. It’s unbelievably empty for a Friday night, and when the doors close and the subway starts moving, I think of how lucky it is that we could all be together on this night.
The others are all deep in conversation about the best flavor of soju and what we should get for Taehyung to try when we arrive, and when I look up, my eyes meet Tae’s. I balk for a moment, not sure how to react. My wide eyes say too much, and I know this – but when all of the sudden a soft smile blooms on Tae’s lips, I feel like I could break open in one moment of relief.

I smile back. We hold one another’s gaze for a long moment until he looks away, turning to listen to the others. My hands ball up into tight fists and I shove them into the pocket of my hoodie.

We’ll be okay, I think, watching the dark walls of the subway channel as the train pushes along. It’s important that we have one another. No matter what mistakes we make along the way – if it’s what Tae wants, I will be there for him. I can stay quiet, keep my feelings away. Compartmentalize them along with everything else. I can be his friend. I can do this and put away the feeling… the way his lips met mine.

But, I think then, tucking my head down and letting my eyes slip shut, I don’t know if I will ever be able to forget it.

Taehyung convinces Suga to do karaoke. In truth, it doesn’t take much; once we get into the room and the props come out, along with shot after shot after shot, Suga’s resolve seems to disappear entirely.

“This is a new Suga,” Jin remarks from the couch as they grab their microphones and Suga slips on a pair of dramatically oversized shades. His stance is serious, grounded. He’s in a zone. I don’t know exactly what zone that is, but I want to be there, too.

“This is Dark Yoongles at his finest,” Hoseok laughs. “Yeah! Go Suga!”

When the song starts – New Face by Psy – Taehyung immediately starts bouncing around, passionately screaming into the microphone and filling the room with an unmatched energy. Suga serves as his hype man, bouncing as much as he possibly can before he becomes tired again and collapses a few times on the ground.

Everyone is dying. Somehow I find myself bent over Namjoons lap, slapping his legs as he slaps me on the back over and over, laughter pouring from our lungs into the room around us.
“Get it!” Hoseok shouts again, and then he’s standing, dancing with them. Jimin has jumped up, knees kicking in the air as the cat ears he’s wearing fly off his head. From the corner of my eyes, filled with tears from laughing so hard, I notice Jin is up dancing too. All five of them are jumping, and something happens in my heart when I see Jin and Tae laughing back and forth as Tae struggles to keep singing.

This song is so long, I think, and without realizing, think again: I wish it never had to end.

Namjoon shakes my entire body, both hands gripping my shoulders as we start to cheer them on. The song has reached its climax; the disco ball on the table casting lights of red and purple and green everywhere. Tae’s hand reaches into the air dramatically; his eyes slip closed. Suga is crouched over the microphone, screaming the lyrics – and when the song does finally end, we all stand, clapping furiously.

“Ah,” Suga says after, completely out of breath. “That was a lot.”

Tae shouts into the microphone, a loud cry that is full to the brim with happiness. Jimin’s arms wrap around his middle, pinching his arms to his body, and they laugh together before falling to the couch in a tired heap.

“How do you follow that,” Namjoon asks, and it’s a statement, not a question.

“You don’t,” Suga says, eyes closed, his body horizontal on the couch with a hand over his eyes. “That’s it. We’re done. We can all go home now.”

“It’s my turn!” Hoseok exclaims. “Jin! We’re doing a duet. Get up here!”

It keeps going like this, all of them taking turns singing. Namjoon shocks us all when he gets up there, grabbing the microphone and very literally shrieking into it. We all burst into laughter. I can’t remember the last time I cried from laughing so hard. I can’t remember being surrounded by friends like these.

Because I never was. Before this, it was all dark.

Everything in my body vibrates. We keep drinking. I’m glad we are taking the subway back. I don’t think my legs can go long without wobbling.
When Hoseok, Jin, and Jimin get up for an emotional ballad, I notice Taehyung – seated at the end of the couch, glancing up at me before sliding all the way over until he’s beside me, our arms touching. He sighs, looks over at me once and waits until I do the same. His wide smile and his hazy eyes and his hand clamping down hard on my thigh, shaking it slightly before his head falls onto my shoulder – I savor this.

I wonder if he still thinks about it. If it’s on his mind the way it is on mine.

I wonder how easy for him it will be to forget.

We’re laughing all over again before long, Tae suddenly standing and outstretching an arm as he lip syncs along to the lyrics that Jimin sings entirely too passionately. I watch them all. I’m smiling.

God. I can’t stop smiling.

I feel my foot being nudged, and I look to see it’s Jimin, standing in front of me with a microphone. “Jungkookie,” he says, words slurring slightly, “you haven’t sang yet.”

“Oh, ah, I don’t– I don’t know--”

“Sing a song, dammit!” Jin shouts, then throws an empty plastic cup at my head.

It hits me square in the face and I fall backward dramatically. Jin laughs at this.

“Go queue up a song.” Namjoon says, gesturing to the machine. “Come on, Jungkook.”

“Ah,” I sigh, then reach out to take the mic from Jimin. “Alright. Alright.”

My mind is swirling as I cross the floor. I stand in front of the machine, hands on either side as I go to pick a song from the list. I don’t know half of these, so when I find one I know well enough to sing – a ballad, of all things – I don’t hesitate. I just pick it and straighten, head tipping back as my
eyes slip shut.

“Jungkook-ah, are you alright?” It’s Suga.

“I’m getting there,” I say immediately, and they all laugh.

The music starts up, and I hear Hoseok let out a long woowoow.

“‘I Will Go to You Like the First Snow,’” Namjoon reads slowly from the screen. “I’m pretty sure this was from a drama I watched.”

“We watched it together,” Jimin corrects, and when Namjoon looks back at him, they both smile a little.

I open my mouth to sing, and it comes out like water, filling up the room with my voice until everyone falls silent, watching me. Hearing me.

I reached out with a small breath of life / It’s a love that called out to me fearlessly
I liked it so much / Watching over you, my heart fluttering / Even when I was jealous / All those ordinary moments

In the dark eternity / In that long wait / Like sunshine, you fell down to me

My eyes flutter open, and I realize I’ve been singing all along with them closed. Everyone’s face is bare, open; I see Jin, whose eyebrows have furrowed together. I see Suga, nodding, something in his eyes like knowing.

And then, I see Kim Taehyung. His lips parted, hands clamped together – watching with an expression I can’t read.

Something inside me breaks. Something in the lyrics latches onto part of my chest and I can feel it. Tearing open. Spilling.
Before I let go of you, I didn’t know / That the world I am in / Was this lonely

Pretty flowers bloomed and withered here / The season of you will never come again

The song builds. I keep going. No one says a word, for the first time since we arrived; it’s just silence, and music, and my voice that keeps rising and rising until the song reaches axiom and I feel it. My back hits the wall. My eyes close. I’m standing, but my legs. God, my legs. How am I still standing?

Some day, we’ll meet again / It’ll be the happiest day / I will go to you like the first snow

I will go to you

The music quiets. There is no sound, and for a moment I wonder what is happening – but when I open my eyes, I realize that everyone is clapping. Cheering. I see Jimin’s hands at his eyes, which are wet; Namjoon’s palm is flat against his back. Suga is bent forward on the couch, his elbows on his knees. His eyes are on the floor and he’s clapping – Hoseok is clapping, shouting something about how amazing that was and that of course I would be good at singing too, as if I weren’t good at everything else already.

There’s Jin, sitting in a chair across the room. He claps with the others. Something is wrong though. Something feels wrong about it, and I can’t place it exactly – but there’s an emotion radiating off of him that I’ve felt before.

Jealousy. Anger.

And there, sitting back at the very end of the sofa, I see Tae.

His mouth is turned down, the corners of his lips falling. Something is there in his eyes that looks like pain.

I look away. I didn’t know. I didn’t mean to upset him. I didn’t mean to put that there – it was the last thing I wanted. There’s shame building inside me, glowing white hot as it rises like bile in my throat and burns. My neck is hot. My cheeks are hot. I’m blushing and wishing I hadn’t done that, because no matter what I say to him now, it’s all out there.
And I can’t take it back.

The ride back, I’m quiet. I think everyone kind of gets it, at least in part. Something happened after I sang that song and my atmosphere changed; my chest feels heavy. I keep my hands in my pockets, watching out the window. Suga has made sure I’ve kept drinking water, says I need to sober up. I can feel the liquor fading, slowly but surely, and when we get off the subway to head home, Namjoon and Jimin stand on either side of me, arms looped through mine, making sure I can walk alright.

I can walk just fine, I think. I don’t like feeling like a baby. I can fend for myself. I don’t need this kind of help.

“That was fun, right Namjoon?” Jimin says, looking over my head at the taller boy on my left.

“I didn’t know Kookie could sing like that,” Namjoon laughs, and he squeezes my arm. “I didn’t know Suga could be so energetic, either.”

“Dark Yoongles,” Jimin corrects, and both of them laugh – but when Jimin looks back at me, his laughter fades. He squeezes my arm; I know he’s doing his best.

“Tae,” I hear Suga saying from behind us, and suddenly I’m listening in. “Where’d you get this?”

I can’t tell what they’re talking about, but I keep listening anyway.

“Oh, that’s… that’s nothing hyung,” Tae says quickly. “Ah, I can’t find my gloves–”

“Looks like you got a bad kitchen burn,” Suga says. “I mean it’s old, but–”

“It’s nothing,” Tae says again, this time with an edge to his tone.

I let the words mill over in my head. I remember seeing a scar on one of Tae’s hands, but have never thought much of it. I wonder if Suga is right, if it’s an old burn from a kitchen – but I hadn’t
known Tae worked in the food industry. He never mentioned it.

“Jimin,” I ask now, quietly so that no one else can hear.

“Hm?” Jimin replies softly, leaning in slightly.

“I just...” I start, then lower my voice even smaller. “Did Taehyung ever work in a kitchen?”

Jimin shakes his head, eyebrows pulling together, confused.

“The scar on his hand,” I say, and then at once, Jimin’s eyes widen. In one quick moment, he shushes me.

“What–”

“Shh,” he says again, and I go quiet.

My eyes watch the ground. One, two, one two. I walk and fall into a rhythm with my footsteps and my breathing and my heart beating in my ears. I wonder what it means. I wonder about this for the rest of the walk back to the apartments. I keep stealing glances at Jimin, who I know can tell I’m looking at him, but he doesn’t say anything. His lips are a thin line.

Namjoon can tell something is up. He keeps glancing down at the both of us, expression confused and a little worried.

Why is he worried? Why has Jimin suddenly closed off?

My mind whirls. Before I know it, we’ve arrived back. Taehyung offers to have Jimin stay at his apartment if he needs a place to stay, but he shakes his head and jabs a thumb in Namjoon’s direction. Tae pulls a face, nodding in a joking manner before they both laugh lightly. Jin heads up the steps first, dipping into his apartment first and shutting the door somewhat loudly. Hoseok and Suga unlock the door to theirs, punching in the passcode before Suga’s hand finds Hoseok’s, pulling him inside. Namjoon is just about to follow them, releasing my arm from his, when Jimin suddenly reaches forward and tugs him by the sleeve.
His eyes widen slightly as he turns, expectant.

“I’ll be right in,” he says softly, “just going to make sure Jungkook gets to bed alright.”

Namjoon nods, and then at once, he bends his neck downward and catches Jimin’s lips in his.

It happens for the first time right in front of my eyes, something like happiness that sharply turns to longing. My stomach hurts – a knot twisting.

I look away.

Tae passes behind me, his shoulder brushing mine as he heads up the steps. He doesn’t look back. I wonder if he saw, too.

“Okay,” Jimin says as both Namjoon’s door and Tae’s click shut in unison. “Let’s get you to bed.”

There’s a distinct edge to his tone though – something that makes me think that Jimin has something he isn’t telling me. There’s words on the tip of his tongue that he’s forcing back, and I want to know what they are.

I have a feeling it’s something about Taehyung. Something I’m not going to want to hear.

We tread up the stairs and Jimin waits for me to unlock the door to my apartment, my fingers numbly punching in the code and holding it open for him to enter.

“Sorry it’s messy,” I start to apologize as my hands go to grab dirty clothes off the floor, but Jimin shakes his head, hand reaching out to touch my arm. I look back at him and he shakes his head again.

“Jungkook,” he says, eyes boring deep into mine, “please.”
My movements slow and I let the clothes fall from my grip. I motion to the small table near the window, and we both take a seat.

“Can I get you anything?” I ask him. “Water?”

“No, that’s okay,” Jimin says. “I… this shouldn’t take too long. I can’t say too much anyway.”

My body tenses. “What… what is it?”

Jimin is silent.

I say it without thinking: “It’s about Taehyung, isn’t it.”

He’s still for a beat, then slowly, he nods.

I wait.

Taking a deep breath, Jimin’s gaze finds something on the ceiling and focuses on it. He isn’t looking at me. I see the way his hands anxiously play with the ends of his sleeves. My chest pangs.

“Jimin,” I start again. He’s quiet – closed off, but trying to somehow pull the door open inside of himself. He’s struggling. I wait again, and finally, when he looks back at me, something in his eyes has changed.

“Jungkook,” he starts, slow. “How… how much do you know? About Tae?”

“I know… I know that his childhood wasn’t very good,” I say. “I don’t know how much I can… say.”

“It’s okay,” Jimin assures me. “I’m his friend. I already know.”
I nod, swallowing. Something in the way Jimin watches me makes me think it must be safe to open up, to let go of resolve and hold nothing back.

“I know that his father was an alcoholic,” I tell him, words spilling into the air between us and hanging like a dark cloud. “I know that his mother killed herself.”

Jimin nods.

“You were there,” I say softly. “You were there for him during all of that.”

“Yeah.” Jimin’s eyes well up. “I was. And it was… God. It was… terrible.”

I swallow again, my throat dry.

“Where did his scars come from?” I’m asking suddenly, and when I see the look on Jimin’s face, it’s as though I already know. Like I knew all along. Like I should have known.

“His dad,” Jimin starts, and his voice sounds all choked up to the point I find myself putting a hand over his. His eyes pinch shut. “His dad wasn’t just an alcoholic, Jungkook. His dad hit him.”

“He…”

Jimin wipes his eyes with the back of his free hand, shoulders bowing. “Ah. To live with someone like that… Taehyung suffered a lot.” He pauses, sniffs. “Taehyung is a very strong person. But some things are too much and… people can’t… people can’t be strong forever.”

My heart feels like it’s breaking. Without thinking, my gaze falls on the door to my apartment. I wonder if Taehyung is in his apartment now, hating me. Hating the mistake he made. I wonder how I could have been such an idiot – to do damage to someone so undeserving. To hurt him worse. I think of what Tae holds onto, in his mind, in his heart. I wonder how he can still smile, even after everything he’s seen.

“Taehyung and his mom were hurt,” Jimin says, then taps his finger at the place above his heart. “Here.”
My palms are sweating. My mouth is so dry. I don’t know what to say, what to do with myself.

“His mom took so much… for Tae… And she tried to protect him, but she… God.” Tears are coming down Jimin’s face now. They dribble off his lips, down to the point of his chin and dripping down his shirt. I just watch. I can’t move.

He wipes his face half-heartedly. He sniffs loudly. “I’m… I’m trying to be quiet. I’m sorry.” He pauses, shoots a glance at the door. “I don’t want him to hear what I’m telling you.”

Suddenly I stand, grabbing clothes from the floor and shoving them along the crack at the bottom of the door. I don’t know what else to do. I go back to sit down. I take Jimin’s small hand and hold onto it with both of mine. I squeeze it tightly, and he squeezes back.

“It was abuse.” Jimin is saying this and at the same time, I don’t know if he can believe the words that all come tumbling out. “Taehyung would come to school and the kids would see it and make fun of him. He started wearing long sleeves and pants all the time, even in the summer. He would get so hot, and one time he overheated and I tried to get help but he wouldn’t let me because he didn’t want anyone to know. He wouldn’t even tell me. I don’t think he could tell me.”

I take in a shaky breath. “He told me that he didn’t tell you until he was fifteen.”

Jimin’s eyes find mine and, salt lines staining his cheeks, he smiles the saddest smile I’ve ever seen.

“Yeah.”

My chest is all in pieces, and I don’t know where to go. What to do with all of it. I want to hold him. I want to break through his apartment door and take him in my arms and… And I want to break my own heart. I want to let it shatter and I want to let Taehyung know that it’s okay – because no matter what, it’ll never be as battered as his is. And I’d do anything to change it.

“Then…” I start slowly. “The scar on his hand…”

“I don’t know what happened,” Jimin says, “but I know who gave it to him.”
And that bastard is in jail, I think. Blood boiling. While Taehyung continues to suffer by his hand.

Jimin can’t look at me now. His chin is in his hand and he’s staring out the window. The tears are slowing; I see a few slip out, but I can tell that Jimin is pulling himself back together.

“Living with that,” Jimin says, his voice so small and muffled behind his sleeve, “has been so hard on Taehyung… I have known him all my life and I’ve seen the way he’s grown from it. In many ways. But… there’s always a part of him that’s been very dark. There’s a place he goes that I can’t follow, and I don’t know… I can’t help him.”

Slowly, Jimin’s wet eyes look up at me. They’re red and puffy from crying, but an intense emotion now sits inside.

“Jungkook,” he says softly, “ever since you came into Taehyung’s life, he’s been brighter.”

I shake my head. “No, I don’t… I don’t need you to tell me this, hyung. I don’t—”

“Listen to me,” Jimin says. There’s a hoarseness in his voice now. “You’re the person he needs the most. It isn’t me, or anyone else. It’s you.”

Shame rises in my chest again. I can’t. Jimin doesn’t understand. I just shake my head in response. I can’t form words. I can’t say it out loud.

“He needs you,” Jimin says, his voice pained. “You.”

We sit there in silence for a long time. I can’t keep my thoughts straight – it’s all too much. Eventually, after the silence starts to wear thin, Jimin stands, pulling his hand from mine. I stand too. Together we walk to the door and I open it, moving the clothes from the bottom and trying not to look at the door to Kim Taehyung’s apartment directly across from mine.

“Thank you for telling me,” I say, because I don’t know what else to say.
Jimin looks up at me, his closed mouth a soft line. He almost looks as though he’s about to say something. I want to ask him, but I don’t. I can’t.

Just when I think he’s about to turn and leave – suddenly, one of his hands rises, pressing hard against my chest. His eyes are locked on mine, and that’s when I feel it. Something is about to change.

“He loves you,” Jimin says. “I know it.”

And then he’s gone. Hand falls, heel turns. Footsteps down the stairs, door opening and closing quietly behind him. I can’t move. I can’t move. My whole body is frozen, my hand on the door gripping tightly.

I let myself look at Kim Taehyung’s apartment door. It’s dark.

A moment passes and I turn around, closing the door behind me and slumping hard against it. I’m still buzzed, but the heat in my chest isn’t coming from that.

_He loves you._

He couldn’t. Kim Taehyung could never love me. I’m everything wrong with a person. I’m selfish and jealous and I make money doing the very thing that Kim Taehyung despises. I think of how I’d responded the night he asked me if I liked being hit. I think about what an idiot I was. _It’s only a job._ Thinking later that I really did it because it was the one thing that gave me control. Power.

_He loves you._

How could he love me? How could anyone love me?

I slide down the door, hitting the floor and curling into a ball, my hands fisting in front of my eyes as I breathe in deeply. My lungs ache.

I was not built to feel the way I feel for him. I was not made into a person who could ever be loved.
He loves you.

An echo.

The next day is my third match. If I win this, all that’s left is the final fight. There’s not much that stands between me and the prize, and everything that it represents.

Tae. His freedom.

My head feels like it’s spinning. I practice all morning at the gym, but all I can think about is the night before. My song. The look on Taehyung’s face. The distance between us as he walked up the steps without a word. Jimin’s visit and everything it brought.

This is what it feels like – a heart on fire.

Jin doesn’t say anything to me. We practice separately. He looks at me and I look away; I look at him and he looks the other direction. His face is changed.

There’s no beating around it now.

Jin knows.

Just as everyone else does.

I hit the punching bag as hard as I can. Inside of me is chaos, turmoil – and as the morning turns to evening, I force myself home for a shower. I go the back way, cutting through side streets I never walk because I don’t know how to pass the convenience store without looking in to see if he’s there. I walk into my apartment and strip down, getting into the shower before it’s even warmed.

Caught in a daze, I let the water roll over me, staring off at nothing at all as I try to focus my mind.
The thing about showers, and walking, and working out and everything I’ve done all day is that it leaves a lot of time to think.

And, the thing is, I don’t know what to think.

My stomach clenches, shampoo running down my shoulders and back. I close my eyes and water sprays over my face. It does absolutely nothing to clear my mind.

*Kim Taehyung,* I think, and my brow furrows. I grit my teeth. *What am I supposed to do?*

Long after the sky’s gone dark, I head to the ring. There’s a lot of people here tonight, more than there normally is – and one thing I notice, as I walk in the back door, as I peek out into the crowd and as I go into the locker room to change, is that Kim Seokjin is nowhere to be found.

This will be the first match Jin has not come to.

There is all at once a gaping hole in my chest, and the worst part is that I can’t do anything about it.

Because there’s a part of me that knows how he feels, too.

And I can’t change it – because I can’t change the way I feel.

I wrap my hands and shove them into my gloves. The match is about to begin and I’m a complete fucking mess. I walk to the sinks and press my gloves hard against the countertop, shoulders hunching. I breathe in, breathe out; finally looking up at my reflection in the mirror, I barely recognize myself. There are dark circles under my eyes that I never saw before, there’s a blankness in my expression that is unsettling.

Deep inside of me, a key is being turned.

I’m afraid of what will open.
“Jeon Jungkook,” I hear my name being called from the door to the locker room. I look over to see one of the other boxers, poking his head in. I nod at him. “You’re up.”

“I’ll be right out,” I say, and I think this confuses him – because I’m never holding up the show. I’m always ready to go, gloves on, head on right. But right now, I’m just not. I can’t shake this feeling in my stomach, pooling there like acid that’s ripping through me faster than I can comprehend.

It all hits at once.

When I look back at myself in the mirror, I try to imagine myself as someone Kim Taehyung sees. I try to see myself as who I really am, not just who I think that I am. I see a boy on the edge of turning into a man, shirtless and gloved and ready to do what needs to be done – but not because of what it gives me.

Once I thought I fought for power. Once, I thought that fighting meant that I could take back some part of my childhood that was never mine – something I’ve never told anyone, not even Tae. Fighting for pride. Fighting to prove to myself, and to everyone else, that I wasn’t weak.

Tonight, I am fighting to protect the one thing in this world that matters.

I’m fighting for the person I love.

I punch my chest once, hard. Then again. Then again, and again, and suddenly I’m seeing someone different in the mirror than I was before. I’m seeing a real fighter.

When I leave the room, for the first time since that night, I’m seeing clearly.

I know what I am going to do.

The ring welcomes me with a crowd of cheers. I don’t showboat or try to give the people what they want. I don’t raise my arms in the air, or look around to see who’s here – I focus on nothing else but the man in the ring three times my size that I am going to take down.
We meet in the middle, listen to the ref’s spiel, and after we bump fists I walk back to where I must stand. The whistle blows, and suddenly, I’m there – throwing punches with every ounce of strength I have in my body.

My first blow hits.

I think of the first time I met Kim Taehyung, and the softness of the way he sat sleeping at my bedside. I think of the way he woke up that morning, the way he cared for me – just strangers then.

Dodging two punches, I land another. Another. Another.

The bell rings and the first round ends. I’m sweating, breathing heavy but steady. I can do this. I know what I’m capable of. I know who this is for.

“Round two!”

My opponent sneaks a hit at the start, but I get him back with two more. Harder, faster.

I think of the night of the Halloween party, and our stupid costumes. I think of how we danced together and the breathless look on his face when he finally pulled the sheet off his head, of the way his eyes glittered in the barlights and how my heart had never beat so fast. Of all the people in the room, I remember the way he looked and how his smile made my chest burst open. Full of something I couldn’t name. Full of something I didn’t want to admit yet.

Another round. My breath quickens – I’m winning, but I’m not focused on it, and I can tell that this is pissing off the guy I’m fighting. It’s all on the line for him, too, and to lose three for three would hurt his pride.

Round three begins and my chest is heaving. I’m giving everything I have, and I think – no, I know – that this will end soon. Every atom in my body is buzzing with a heat that keeps me grounded, thoughts whirling through my head as we do our dance around the ring, crowd cheering, heart stuttering.

This round, I choke. I start to think of Kim Taehyung waking up beside me on the morning Jin burst through the door and shoved him out. I think of Jin, and how he isn’t here, and how hurt he must be. To not come to a tournament match – to do it out of spite, out of nothing but jealousy and
pride – I think of that morning differently.

I think of his expression when the door slammed closed, and it all makes sense.

A blow. A blow. A blow. I’m knocked three times in a row, stumbling backward, my face and shoulders battered and I can feel the soreness all over. I try to hit back, but I’m knocked a fourth time and I stumble back into the wall of the ring; hit for hit, I’m getting beat – and then it’s over.

Round four.

My mind is fuzzy and I think of finding him at the convenience store, held against the wall by his neck as the loan sharks screamed violently in his face. An invasion of the head, of the heart; I think of how his father sits in prison, safe and sound while Kim Taehyung deals with the aftermath on his own.

Tae has been hurt, so many times.

I wonder if what I am about to do will make things worse.

Suddenly, a rush of adrenaline courses through me; my eyes refocus, my body straightens.

The way his hand held mine in the pocket of his jacket. The flash of a camera as we stood together on the beach. The day we got ramen and ran through the rain.

The kiss.

In one white hot moment my body moves on its own; I can barely see straight, I’m wailing so hard. My opponent’s arms are up, trying to block his face but I’m hitting the sides of his head and his chest and shoulders, every moment spent with Tae like lightning striking me, fueling me.

And then – and then – it’s over.

My arm being grabbed, held in the air. The wildness of cheering, its sound in my ears like white
noise that I can’t quite grasp. My chest is heaving. The man I’d been fighting is on the ground in the middle of the ring, being forcibly lifted. I’ve never won a fight so fast. I’ve never felt as unstoppable as I do now.

I don’t remember much of leaving the ring. I don’t remember pulling my gloves off, pulling my clothes on, still drenched in sweat, lacing tennis shoes and bursting out the back door of the venue.

I remember the coldness of air. I remember running.

Down the streets, past the convenience store and weaving through people walking along the sidewalk, I race as fast as I can, back to the apartment complex, back to where it all began.

And then… finally. When I make it to the front door, something jerks inside me and I stop. I look up at the building, wide eyes and screaming lungs and muscles aching.

I open the door.

Heavy footsteps pound up the stairs, one by one. Flight after flight I climb, and all that I know is I am not going to turn around. I will not hide – not this time.

Reaching the top, I turn to face the door across from mine.

I raise my fist and bang on it hard, three times before letting it rest there; my other hand braces against the doorframe. My legs are aching, my breathing heavy.

Please, I think. Open the door.

Inside, I can hear him stir. Soft footsteps moving to stand, a chair being pushed back. Steps approaching the door. A pause, a breath.

The door swings open.

I stare up at him. He doesn’t say a word, just looks at me with red eyes that look as though he’d
been crying.

“Jungkook,” he starts, then starts to raise a hand to take my shoulder. “You’re hurt–”

But I don’t let him. My hand catches his before he can do anything else, before another word leaves his mouth. Two quick steps toward him.

I take a deep breath. My other hand moves, grabbing the back of his neck fiercely – and all at once, I kiss him.

I kiss him like it’s the last time I’ll ever kiss someone. My mouth is on his mouth, lips pressing tight against his lips, and the only thought in my head is how long I’ve wanted to do this – how I’ve felt this longing in the pit of my stomach since I met him, and how no one in this world is more deserving of being kissed than Tae.

My mouth opens and closes around his again. It’s warm. I can feel his arm go limp in my grasp, and I can’t help it; I take his cheek in my hand and pull him down into me, crashing like waves. There’s a whole ocean in my ears.

Finally I release him. My eyes find his, and inside of them is a look of complete shock… and something else, too.

His mouth opens, as if to say something, but I cut him off. I have to say this. I have to.

“I’ve loved you since the minute I met you,” I say, and my voice is raw. Words I never thought I could ever say come tumbling out of my mouth, clear and unrehearsed but so completely sure. “I’m sorry. I love you. But I can’t help it – I can’t help but love you.”

“J-Jungkook,” he tries. His shoulders rise, and fall, and then – and then his whole face crumples.

I look down, at the ground, at my shoes. Anywhere but his eyes. “I’m so sorry,” I say, because I know it’s wrong and I know I shouldn’t have done it, and I shouldn’t have been so stupid to think that–
“Jungkook,” he repeats, and when I look up, Tae is looking back at me, chin down, eyebrows drawn together. I see his mouth open, as if struggling to get the words out. And then, finally, he says:

“I have always loved you.”

We’re both silent for a long moment. I don’t know what to say. And then I’m shaking my head. *No,* I think. *Not like that.*

“You don’t understand,” I start again, but before I can get another word out Tae is moving toward me, grabbing my shirt, pulling me toward him as he bends his neck down and catches my lips with his.

I stumble, and so does he, and with his back up against the wall and my chest pressed against his, we are two stars in a constellation.

*We are burning.*

My whole life, I’ve felt othered – an outcast – at school, at home, inside. But right now, with my lips on his, I feel like I am worthy of being loved.

Because he sees me. And I see him.

Our lips part and our foreheads meet, and our breathing is loud and hot and fast. I realize that my arms are around his neck, that his hands are in my hair. A breath blows from my lips and my head falls to his shoulder, my face in the crook of his neck; his arms slide around my shoulders and for a long time, we stand here still. Holding each other. Breathing. Knowing.

“I love you,” he says again, and his voice breaks.

I don’t open my eyes. I can feel it – the sob forming in my throat, simmering and bubbling until I feel all at once a dampness on my shirt.

“Taehyung,” I say, my voice barely a whisper. My breath stutters – and all I can do is lift my head and try to find his lips again. Tae’s grip on me tightens and our lips press back against one
another’s – only this time, I can taste the salt on my tongue. Only this time, I’m not sure which tears are his and which are mine.

I try to remember this moment as much as I can. I try to immortalize it in my memory, to brand it in my heart. I never want to leave this. I never want to forget.

“I wanted to tell you,” he says against my lips, choking on his words.

“Me too,” I say.

And then his hands are slipping, moving to cover mine. I can’t help it – I let them turn over, lacing his fingers through mine and holding tightly.

Our lips part again. I look up at him, he looks down at me, and God. We’re both a complete mess – and we know it. Through my tears I laugh, and so does he, and then both of us are losing it, laughing so hard at the top of the steps that everyone in the complex has likely heard us. I don’t care though. I don’t care about anything right now.

I don’t care because Kim Taehyung is standing in front of me, smiling, holding my hands and staring at my red, swollen lips like he wants to kiss me again.

“You look like shit,” he says, and we both laugh again.

“I feel fine,” is all I can think to say.

Wiping his face with his wrist, Taehyung sniffs, nodding his head toward his apartment. “Come in. I’ll fix you up.”

I smile back at him wordlessly, wiping my own face on the sleeve of my hoodie, and then I follow him into his apartment where he forces me to sit at the table so he can bandage me up. It’s the same way he’s taken care of me after a fight before – and yet so completely different.

His hands press against my skin in a way that now, I don’t have to shy away from or pretend not to feel. He brings my bruised knuckles to his lips, kissing them softly for a long moment before
applying ointment. His eyes hold me differently.

The whole world seems clearer – everything seems brighter – when you’re in love.

It’s when Tae is applying ointment to the bruise swelling around my eye that he makes a sudden noise, fingers accidentally pressing hard onto the tender skin around it and I wince.

“Ah, sorry,” he says, hands falling back to his lap. “I just realized – it’s almost the new year!”

My eyes shoot open. “No kidding. What time is it?”

Tae clicks his phone open, reading the time on the screen. He jumps again, almost comically, and yells so loud I have to laugh. “Ah! There’s three minutes!”

I smile. I think about how many special moments Taehyung and I have shared together over the past several months – and how this will be the first time we are together to see the years change.

Taehyung looks back up at me, and when his eyes meet mine, our silence speaks volumes. He’s thinking it, too.

“Be more careful next year,” Tae says in an almost scolding way.

"I’ll try,” I say, smiling softly.

Taehyung sighs. He doesn’t say anything else. I know it’s because he can’t change the situation – the job, and everything that comes with it. I wonder if, when the new year starts, if I could…

I don’t know.

Find something else.
Something safe. Something that makes Taehyung feel safe.

_You have to finish what you started_, I remind myself. _The money. You have to finish this for him._

“One minute,” Tae says, his tone soft.

“Hey,” I start, and my hands reach to take his. He stares down at our hands, the way my thumbs run over the tops of his hands, tracing the scar, feeling his skin beneath mine. Soft.

“A new year means a new start,” I say out loud, and he’s looking up at me, but I don’t look up from our hands. “For both of us. We get to start this the right way.”

It’s quiet for a moment, and then I hear him swallow.

“Together.” Our eyes meet and he smiles. “The right way for us… it’s together.”

I squeeze his hands, and I can’t help it when I lean forward and kiss him one last time. Beneath my touch, Tae seems to melt, and I don’t have the heart to tell him that it’s the same for me. I just hold tighter, letting him collapse into my arms. Breathless.

As soon as it hits midnight, I see his phone light up: 00:00 flashing in bright white numbers on its screen. With his head on my shoulder, face pressed to the crook of my neck, I sigh.

“Happy new year,” I feel him mouth against my skin.

My chest fills with something indescribable – gratitude, warmth. The beating of thousands of wings.

“Happy new year,” I echo, and my eyes slip shut, arms encircling him.

_Happy New Year, Kim Taehyung._
so........... how was that for you?? LOL *praying hands emoji* bless the fuck up - y'all made it.
“This is a phone call from Daegu Detention Center. You are receiving a call from-” a pause, then, the receiver is filled with a voice from my past, “Your father,” he says, before it cuts back to the automated voice asking, “Do you accept the charges?”

My heart is pounding in my ears and I hang up immediately, my hands shaking, his voice ringing in my ears. It’s the first time in years that he’s tried to call me, that I’ve heard his voice, and I feel physically ill in the pit of my stomach. I realize that I have nowhere to turn to to vomit, if the need arises.

I can feel sweat starting to gather in my hairline, my shaking hands resting on the counter as I get to my feet. My legs feel like they’re asleep, all pins and needles, and I swallow as I walk toward the bathroom in the convenience store, leaving my phone behind. I can hear it buzzing again, the sound even louder against the counter, and that’s all it takes to push my legs forward in a sprint, throwing open the bathroom door and just barely making it to the toilet before I let go of my breakfast and dinner from the previous night in one fell swoop.

On my knees in front of the toilet, dry heaving as tears start to fall from my eyes and down my cheeks, I feel a phantom burning sensation in my hand, all the way up my arm, until it hits every single scar that I have on my body.

Oh, god, is all I can think, squeezing my eyes shut and fighting against the spinning feeling.

“Taehyung-ssi?”

I can’t bring myself to answer, my entire body weak. I want to cry, to sob, to break something - but all I can really do is rock my body slowly, trying to calm down the voice in my head, the pain in my chest, and the churning in my stomach.

“Oh my god!” It’s Hyojin, her voice is frantic. “Taehyung, are you alright? Are you sick?”
“Hyojin,” I rasp out in greeting, squeezing my knees to my chest now as a shiver runs down my spine. “I-I think I’m just coming down with something, no need to worry.”

“Can I call someone for you?” she asks, kneeling next to me and handing me a bottle of water. I take it and bow my head in thanks, opening it and taking a long drink. It stops the burning in the back of my throat, at the very least. “What about your friend, Jungkook?”

I shake my head. “N-no, it’s okay. I’ll be fine to walk home in a minute.”

She nods slowly, getting back to her feet. “Please, just, let me know if I can help, okay?” I nod and she leaves, letting the door close to give me privacy.

I lean against the wall in the bathroom, sitting on the floor, for a long time with my eyes closed. Eventually, the spinning stops and my stomach feels better, though very empty. The voice in my head stops, too, and I’m left with a dull headache.

God, what I wouldn’t do just to be able to forget that voice.

It’s a half hour past my shift when I finally emerge from the bathroom after splashing some cold water on my face. I put my coat on and gloves, taking my phone from the back counter and bidding a worried looking Hyojin goodnight.

The cold air helps. I can feel my mind starting to clear, my body still shivering but not the kind that rack the whole body from fear, but the kind that happen from the cold. It’s something to focus on, at the very least.

“Tae!”

Almost instantly, everything bad in the world dissolves as I lift my head and find Jeon Jungkook across the street, waving his arm over his head in an exaggerated motion. A small smile forms on my lips as I look both ways before crossing the street, even though the light for walking is still red. Since it’s so late, there’s no one, anyway.

“Jungkookie,” I greet, but my voice is tired and sad. He frowns when I reach him, pulling me close
with an arm around my shoulders. The gesture is comforting, like being tucked into a small and warm place; his scent fills my senses and I breathe in, wrapping my own around his middle, leaning close. “You always know when I need you.”

His fingers comb through my messy hair softly and he hums. “What’s wrong?”

“Can we just… cuddle together tonight?” I ask, feeling a little embarrassed by the desperate need in my voice. But Jungkook doesn’t hesitate to take my hand in his and start walking the rest of the way to the apartment complex together.

“Yours or mine?” he asks softly, squeezing my hand, keeping me grounded through my nightmare. I close my eyes and breathe in deep, the cold air having a specific scent that helps to further calm me down.

It’s been literally less than 24 hours since he pounded on my door, stirring me from an almost asleep state, and kissed the living daylights out of me. And also confessed that he loved me. It’s all a lot to take in, really, so all day I’ve been feeling like I’ve been in a dream-like state of euphoria. Too bad that phone call ruined the happiest mood I’d ever been in in my entire life.

I sigh, burrowing closer to Jungkook now, because I’m allowed to. My fingers grip the fabric of his shirt under his coat, and I don’t care that it’s harder to walk this way, I’m hugging Jeon Jungkook. And he’s mine, and I’m his, and I’m allowed to hug him and kiss him and hold him.

As if to prove this to myself, to the doubts deep in my mind that scream why on earth would he ever want you? I squeeze my arms both around his middle tightly, causing me to walk a little sideways.

His whole body tenses for just a moment - surprised - before relaxing and holding me closer, a light laugh filing the air around us.

“Tae,” he says, but his tone is amused, “we’re almost there.”

“Don’t care,” I mumble into his coat, feeling like my body just wants to give up and curl into his arms right this very second. “Wanna be close to you.”

“I’m right here,” he whispers back, softly, gently, kindly. Full of love.
My entire chest deflates as I let out a long exhale, straightening myself out just enough to walk normally until we reach the apartment complex. I pull him along, wanting to be there quickly so that I can wrap myself around Jungkook and cling to his comforting warmth all night.

Because I’m allowed to now.

Because we’re in love.

God, I’ll really never be over that.

We climb the stairs side by side, our paces matching up step for step. His fingers are intertwined with mine, gently squeezing every couple of seconds until I squeeze back, like it’s some kind of secret game. The whole thing is domestic and sweet, and my chest is warm and full of light and happiness. To be able to live in a world where there is love like this erases the sadness that’s filled my life since I was young.

When we reach the third floor of the building, I slowly untangle my fingers from his. “I’ll be over in a minute, just wanna change into something comfy.”

He nods, understanding, and waits until I’m back in my apartment to head into his. Even that tiny gesture is enough to send my heart fluttering and I can’t fight the lopsided grin on my face as I change out of my work clothes and into a pair of sweatpants and an oversized sweater. I brush my teeth, wash my face quickly, and grab an extra pillow from my bed before walking across the hall and knocking on his door lightly.

The door opens and he smiles, stepping aside for me to walk inside.

His apartment is starting to look more alive, like someone lives here. The succulent that I gifted him for Christmas is in the window, bringing some color to the bland room; he’s also hung the photos that I gave him on the wall over the bed, all straight. There’s one from Halloween (in which we are both standing under my sheet from my ghost costume after his fell apart while dancing), one of us on the rooftop with our red noses and cheeks pressed together in a blurry motion, one of us on the beach with matching grins so wide that our eyes are squinting, and last but not least, there’s the photo of Jungkook that I’d taken of his silhouette, looking out at the sunset over the ocean.

I smile, sitting down on his bed and looking at it closer.
“This is my favorite picture of you,” I tell him, looking at him over my shoulder to catch a light blush on his cheeks.

“I don’t know about me in it, but I like that it’s artistic and the colors,” he replies shyly, his hands in his pockets. “I like it because you took it, thinking that it was a special moment. I can tell.”

“It was a special moment,” I agree, smiling at him and patting the spot next to me on his bed. He slowly moves to the bed, sitting down across from me. “I remember thinking that you looked like art.”

He flushes at that and I grin, leaning forward to pinch his blushing cheek, ignoring the heat in the pit of my stomach. How he can pull off being so shy and innocent, while also having been the one to press me against the wall kissing me is truly something that I’ll never understand. I swallow nervously, letting my hand drop from his cheek, my eyes dropping to look at his lips.

But as much as I want to kiss Jungkook (and god, do I want to kiss Jungkook for hours and hours and never stop except to breathe), I know that what I really need is someone to hold and have hold me.

“Come here,” I whisper, leaning back against his pillow, still clutching the one from my own bed. He slowly crawls over so that he’s laying beside me, facing me, and he pulls his blanket up over our shoulders. I shiver, the cold fabric brushing against my already cold body. “It’s cold.”

“Sorry, the heater in my room doesn’t work that well right now,” he says.

“Mmm, you should call the landlord about that,” I reply, shuffling forward until my legs are tangling between his.

“I did,” he breathes. Slowly, I feel a tugging on the pillow that I’m clutching; my grasp on it loosens until Jungkook pulls it from my hands and then reaches out, pulling me against his chest, his arms wrapping around me. “That better?”

Not only is Jungkook warm enough to stop my body from shivering, his arms are also comforting as they pull me closer yet, tight and reassuring. His scent relaxes me, his nose brushing against my forehead before he gently kisses me there, his lips lingering longer than necessary.
I sigh, content, and close my eyes as I burrow into the crook of his neck. My own arms wrap around his middle, my fingers holding the fabric of his shirt.

“It’s perfect,” I whisper, smiling against his skin. “You’re perfect.”

He lets out a shy, breathy laugh and squeezes me again. “You wanna talk about it?” he asks softly, his fingers rubbing my back in a relaxing way. I can feel myself almost melting against him, wanting to wrap all of my limbs around him and be as close as physically possible.

I hike one of my legs up over his hip, wrapping myself around him, making him laugh quietly.

“My dad tried to call me,” I whisper against his skin, burying myself into his neck even more, not wanting to see his reaction. It feels wrong to bring this up when I’m so blissfully happy, wrapped around the only person I’ve ever loved so wholeheartedly. It feels wrong to let him intrude on the happiness in my life, when he was responsible for all the sadness in it thus far. “When I heard his voice on the recording, I just… I don’t know. I felt weird about it.”

Jungkook pulls away, causing me to whine, but he pulls away just enough to look at me. “Did you talk to him?” he asks. His eyes are worried, his tone gentle and supportive.

“No, I hung up.” I sigh again. “I don’t… I don’t think I could ever talk to him. I don’t know what there is to say.”

“Then don’t talk to him,” he agrees, bending his head down to bop his nose with mine, earning a small smile from me again. “You don’t owe him anything, Tae. Not your time, not your money - none of it.”

I look at Jungkook, so close to me that our noses are still just barely touching. His brown eyes seem to sparkle, his full lips have a small, sad smile on them. His cheeks are round, but his jawline is sharp at the same time. The freckle under his bottom lip, the small creases of laugh lines around his eyes. His dark hair, messy and clean, falling against his forehead and into his eyes, just slightly too long.

The most beautiful human being I’ve ever known, with the kindest and most protective heart that I’ve ever loved.
I can’t help the light tears that spring to my eyes as I stare into his, one of my hands releasing his shirt to come up and brush his hair out of his eyes. He watches my movements, eyes worried when he has to reach up to brush a single tear away.

“I don’t want you to be sad,” he whispers. “I wish I could take away all your sadness.”

I close my eyes and burrow closer again, making myself small within the confines of his arms.

“Everything that I’ve gone through until now has been worth it,” I whisper, meaning every single word so much that it almost terrifies me, “because it led me to you.”

We’re both quiet for a while, but it’s the comfortable kind of quiet that makes you feel wanted and safe and warm. To be able to have these moments with Jungkook now - to not feel guilty, like I did the morning when Jin came, or when I woke up to find Jungkook cold and uncomfortable to allow me to be comfortable - feels surreal in the best possible way. I can’t help but let my fingers trace over his shoulders and back, memorizing how it feels to touch him beneath my shaky hands.

One of his hands gently takes mine, his thumb brushing lightly over the scar that’s been there since I was 11. It’s a lot smaller now than it used to be, but still visible and puffy and ugly, spanning from the pad of my thumb up my wrist slightly. It used to span out across my entire hand.

Sometimes, I can still feel the burning.

“Ugly, huh?” I ask softly, my eyes watching as his fingers trace over it, his expression hard to understand.

“It’s not ugly,” he replies, his eyes finally moving up to meet mine. “Nothing about you is ugly, Taehyung.”

It’s a serious moment, because Jungkook never calls me by my full name. I’m always Tae, or hyung when he’s whining about something in the cute way he does. I move to pull my hand away, but he doesn’t let me, holding it softly before bringing it up to kiss the scar lightly.

Don’t worry, Taehyung. I’ll kiss it all better for you.
My breath hitches in my throat, and he hears it, because he looks at me with soft eyes. Like he knows. Like he knows.

“Did it hurt?” he whispers.

Despite not wanting to remember the moment, it’s one that I will never forget. My mind is foggy, flashes of the stove, a hand holding mine hard enough to bruise, angry yelling, burning. My throat feels like it’s sore, like it was for the entire week after it happened from my screaming.

“It did,” I reply after a moment of hesitation. “Sometimes, it still does.”

When he brings my hand to his lips again, pressing another butterfly kiss to my skin, I sigh with relief. I can remember all the times my mother did this for me, redressing the wound because she couldn’t take me to the hospital. She’d just kiss it for me, promising that it would be better from that alone.

And I had believed her.

My eyes look over Jungkook’s face, seeing the small scar there, too. My free hand reaches up to caress it softly, and he lets me, watching my face as I do. Softly, I ask, “Did this hurt?”

“Yeah,” he says, his eyes looking away from mine. “I got it when I was in high school.”

“Makes you look tough,” I tell him and he smiles, tiny creases around his eyes.

“It didn’t back then,” he replies finally, the smile dropping into a frown at the memory. I feel bad for bringing it up now, because I don’t want him to be sad. “A group of older kids jumped me. But back then, I… I didn’t know how to fight or defend myself like I do now.”

My jaw tightens, my brain conjuring up images of Jungkook being hurt, just like he had been when I found him in the alleyway months ago. My heart pangs in my chest, sad and uncomfortable, wanting to take away this painful memory for him. Replace it with happiness.
“I’m sorry,” I tell him softly, leaning up to kiss the scar on his cheek, like he’d kissed the scar on my hand. Gentle, soft, reassuring, comforting.

Beautiful, my mind fills in, like every other part of you.

“It’s okay,” he says, but I know that it isn’t from the way his voice trembles slightly, “was a long time ago now.”

“It’s not okay, Jungkook.” His eyes meet mine again, and I look at him, wanting him to know that I understand, that it’s okay to not be okay with bad things that have happened. It’s okay to feel them, even all these years later. “It’s not okay that it happened, no matter how long ago it was. Being hurt by someone, on purpose… That’s never okay. You don’t have to always be okay.”

I gently touch the scar on his cheek again, my finger tracing it. I want to tell him that it’s okay, that I know that pain of pretending like it wasn’t a big deal. But it was a big enough deal to leave a scar on his body - forever. It’s something that’s painful and sad, something that caused a small crack in his heart.

“I’m sorry that happened to you,” I tell him sincerely.

Finally, he replies, “Me, too.”

And I can’t tell if he means for his own scar, or for mine. Maybe it’s for both.

He holds me tighter then, and I breathe in and out deeply, relaxing every single muscle in my body. I’m tired, but my mind is still buzzing about so many different things, so I start tracing out words on Jungkook’s shirt, giving me something to focus on.

Jungkook smiles against my hair, “Amazing,” he guesses before I can even finish writing the word against the fabric of his shirt.

I hum, letting him know that he was right, before I start working on another word. Beautiful, I write against his shoulder. He waits until I finish and then asks me to write it again before he guesses it on the third try.
We spend a long time doing this. I write every single word I can think of that describes Jungkook to me against his body, and he guesses most of them. The ones he doesn’t guess, I keep a secret, just for myself and tease him about it until he laughs tiredly above me. I write so many words that I lose track - kind, smart, perfect, strong, incredible - and it isn’t until he stops guessing, his breathing even and quiet snores leaving his slightly parted lips, that I slowly write out the most important word.

*Love.*

Jimin comes to visit during the week when I tell him that my father tried to call me from prison.

He meets me outside of the building of my second part-time job. I can see him waiting for me through the glass windows that make up the entire lobby, and I wave to Misook as I leave, rushing out to greet Jimin. He looks tense, but his expression melts into one of happiness when I run to him, wrapping my arms around him tightly.

I wouldn’t say that I’ve taken a backseat to his and Namjoon’s relationship, because they really do try to include me (a little too much, honestly. Third wheeling isn’t any fun), but it’s just a little harder to find time with just Jimin these days. I’m nothing but happy for them both, because they make a really well balanced and cute couple. And because it’s been so long since I’ve seen Jimin so happy, which is saying something because he’s such a ray of sunshine that he’s always happy. There’s just some kind of glow to him now.

“Come on, I skipped class to take you for lunch and a drink,” Jimin announces, tugging me along the sidewalk.

“That sounds great. I’m starving.”

We walk together, laughing and shoulders bumping as we catch up from the last week. He tells me about stuff happening at college and his fake e-mail to his professor saying how he came to be very, very ill and that he couldn’t make it to class. He talks about Namjoon and his latest date - to see some underground rappers that Namjoon knows. I tell him about my jobs (all 3 of them) and how I like them well enough, and about Misook always trying to set me up on blind dates with girls she knows from her neighborhood. Jimin barks out a loud laugh from that.

“She has no idea that you’re gay,” Jimin laughs out, holding the door open for me as we step into
the bar. Today, Suga is working the bar and Hoseok greets us with a wide smile and big hugs, telling us to sit wherever we want. “She just wants you to be happy. It’s sweet, really.”

“I know,” I reply, following Jimin to the bar. “I feel like I should tell her. I’m running out of excuses to say no to blind dates.”

Suga gets us both a beer and some fried chicken to snack on with side dishes. He leans against the bar to talk with us for a while, bored while Hoseok runs between the three other occupied tables, occasionally asking Suga for another drink to be made for them. It’s early afternoon, so it’s slow. The fact that it’s also a Wednesday doesn’t help, as most people are working their regular 9 to 5 jobs.

“So Jin won his fight last night,” Suga informs us, stealing a piece of chicken and popping it into his mouth. “Hoseok and I went to watch. He said something about the next fight being against Jungkook.”

“What?” My tone is shocked, even a little startled, because Jungkook has not mentioned this.

He tries to spare me the details of fights, even as I dress his wounds and apply pain creams to keep him healthy. He doesn’t ask questions, but I can see in his eyes that he wants to, and maybe someday, I’ll be able to tell him. But for now, I’m happy to support him from the apartments, to take care of him after, even if it hurts to see him hurt, at all.

So because he doesn’t talk about fighting, he doesn’t mention much about the tournament that he’s been in, aside from vague details of “I won” or “Only a few more fights til the end, I’m definitely going to win for you, Tae.”

I’ve tried to tell him not to fight for me, but he doesn’t hear it. I know that he’s worried and scared for me, because my two month timer is dwindling down and it won’t be much longer before the loan sharks are back, asking for an amount of money so large that I can’t give it to them. That even if Jungkook does win that prize money from the tournament, it still wouldn’t be enough to satisfy the debt my father left for me.

That in the end, I’m a dead man walking.

“Yeah, even Namjoon told me about them fighting,” Jimin says, bringing me back from my thoughts. I look at my half empty glass of beer in front of me, feeling uneasy and nervous. “I think
they just are trying to not think about it.”

“It must be hard for them,” Hoseok agrees, sliding up next to me on my other side. “Being best friends and having to fight as a job. Like they both could use the money, no doubt. I’m sure it’s not going to be easy.”

All I can think about now are all the times that Jungkook told me that he still has a lot to learn from Jin, how great of a fighter Jin is. That perhaps he didn’t tell me because he doesn’t have confidence in himself to win.

“We’re all going to go see the fight, cheer them both on,” Hoseok says. “What about you guys?”

“I’ll be there with you guys,” Jimin replies, his eyes looking to me now, worried. “Tae, you probably work, so you can’t.”

He’s trying to give me an out, to stay away from the violence.

“I don’t know,” I say instead, “I mean, I’ll try and make it. We’ll see.”

Hoseok and Suga get back to work, and Jimin and I are both left to our food and drinks. But I don’t feel hungry anymore, so I just stare at the food and my beer, thinking about the entire situation and how hard it must be for Jungkook. How much weight that my own stressful situation has probably put on his shoulders, despite me knowing that I wouldn’t accept any of his money, he refuses to believe that he can’t save me.

I sigh, and beside me, Jimin reaches up to rub my back, trying to ease my stress.

“So your dad really called you?” Jimin asks, his hand massaging my shoulder closest to him for a moment. “Did you talk to him? What did he want?”

I shake my head. “I didn’t answer it. But I heard his voice, and I just… I don’t know. I got sick at work.”

“Another panic attack?” he asks, his voice low so Suga doesn’t hear as he tends to the bar. I nod
slowly, my eyes watching as I pick apart a napkin for something to do and focus on. “Oh, Taehyung. I’m so sorry.”

“I’m okay now.” A lie falls from my lips so easily these days, trying to hide my pain from those that I love, trying to protect them from the bad in the world. “He can’t do anything to me anymore. I-I just forgot what his voice sounded like and hearing it again brought back a lot of memories.”

Jimin leans forward to hug me, wrapping both his arms around my shoulders. “He can’t hurt you anymore, Taetae. He’ll never be able to touch you again, never hurt you again.”

I breathe in deep and exhale slow, trying to remind myself of the same thing. That he’s in prison, and he won’t be getting out anytime soon. He doesn’t even know where I live, if he did get out. He wouldn’t be able to find me.

“I’m so glad,” I whisper, “that I’ll never have to see him again.”

“Me too. And if he ever showed up around you again, all of us would never let him touch you.”

I think of all my friends. Of Park Jimin, who would protect me as fiercely as he possibly could, who shielded me from bullying in school and comforted me after my mom died. I think of Suga, who often cooks me home cooked meals when he thinks I’ve lost too much weight. Then of Namjoon, who always knows just what to say to lift a mood, or help when you’re going through a situation that feels impossible. Hoseok, who’s always happy and laughing, making sure that you are, too. Even Jin comes to mind, his dad jokes and contagious laughter, despite his cold eyes focusing on me. Part of me knows that he still cares.

I think of Jungkook, who didn’t hesitate for one second to get between me and the loan sharks.

And I realize that it scares me more, knowing that I have them. Especially Jungkook.

It just means that I have more to lose.

“You’re safe now, Taetae,” Jimin tells me, squeezing me tightly for a moment. “You’re safe.”
I don’t tell Jimin about the timer over my head, about the loan sharks (though he knows about the debt I’m trying to pay off), or about how hopeless it all feels these days. I let him believe that I am safe, because I’ve put him through a lot of worry and stress for as long as I’ve known him.

If only I could have kept Jungkook from knowing, from worrying.

Everything is such a mess.

“Come on, let’s get drunk and forget about the past for a little while,” Jimin says, lifting his glass of beer and clinking it against mine. I smile, lifting mine to my lips and downing the rest of the liquid, wishing more than anything that getting drunk could really keep me from thinking about everything. “Suga, keep ‘em coming! We’re going to get really drunk today.”

“You know that you are so pretty, right?” Jimin slurs, his hands squishing my cheeks, making him giggle. I laugh, spitting on him a little, but he either doesn’t notice or doesn’t care. “Ah! We should of invited Kookie!”

“Kookie!” I shout, a blush warming my cheeks as I think of him.

His fingers in my hair or on my back or on my face. His lips, soft and plush, against mine. I close my eyes and can’t help but grin, a content sound leaving my mouth against my will, remembering how nice it feels to be kissed and held and loved.

“I wanna call!” I manage, but I say it so quickly that the words kind of blur together. I whip out my phone from my pocket, dropping it and then sighing. “Why.”

Jimin slaps my arm and starts laughing, his whole body shaking as he watches me struggle to my feet to pick up my phone. I pout my lips, focusing as I unlock it, pulling up Jungkook’s contact before hitting the ‘call’ button and putting him on speaker. Jimin is still giggling when he answers on the second ring, sounding a little breathless.

“Hello? Tae?” he says, sounding like he’d just been running.
“Hi Kookie!” Jimin shouts, then giggles some more, making me laugh, too. “Where are you? Why do you sound like you’re running?”

“I was just out for a jog,” Jungkook laughs. “Are you guys drunk?”

“Pffffffffffft,” Jimin replies, followed by a fart noise that he makes with his mouth, which makes us both start dying all over again. “Taetae was sad. Wanted to make him happy.”

“I’m not sad,” I say, leaning forward to headbutt Jimin’s shoulder, knocking him off his chair. “Not sad, Jungkookie.”

“Where are you?” he asks.

“They’re at the bar,” Suga says loudly, shaking his head at Jimin who finger guns at him. “Please come pick them up. They’re giving me a headache already.”

“They’re being cute,” Hoseok replies and I grin at him, sticking my tongue out at Suga who scoffs. “Hi, Jungkook! You should come join them!”

Jungkook laughs on the phone and the sound makes my heart sing. Everyone is looking at me and I stare at them, confused, before they laugh and Hoseok ruffles my hair, calling me cute again before walking away to help the new customers walking in. Jimin is laughing, leaning on me to keep from falling again.

I stare back at Suga, who is watching me with a knowing look in his eyes.

“I make your heart sing?” Jungkook asks, laughing. “Tae, you sound really drunk. How much have you had to drink?”

_Did I say that out loud?_ I think, furrowing my eyebrows as I stare at my phone. _Or did Jungkookie just read my mind?_

“I have to ask you something super important, Jungkookie,” I say, my tone serious as I lean closer to my phone. “Can you read minds?”
“What?”

“Jungkook, please,” Suga says, but he sounds a little irritated. “They’re so drunk.”

“I’m on my way, hyung,” Jungkook replies. “Be there in a few minutes.”

He hangs up and I look at Suga again, frowning. He’s wiping down the bar, cleaning up from where a few customers were sitting a few minutes ago. Jimin starts talking to Hoseok, pulling out his phone to show off a lot of cute couple photos that he and Namjoon took in the park the other day. I slide down the bar, tripping over my own two feet and then letting out an embarrassed giggle.

“You’re mad,” I say, leaning my cheek against my hand, my elbow up on the bar to support myself. Suga keeps cleaning up, his eyes glancing at me for a moment. “I made hyung mad.”

“No you didn’t, Taehyung,” Suga replies, but his tone sounds weird.

“I’m sorry.”

He stops wiping the counter and looks at me now, and I flinch a little, feeling scared that he’s going to be mad or hate me or something. His expression is softer when I look at him again, and I frown more.

“I’m not mad at you, Taehyung. I promise.” His tone is kinder now, quiet, and I nod slowly. My body feels really heavy, so I sit back down on a bar stool and hang my head. “I wish you didn’t drink to drown your sadness, though. That’s a bad habit to start.”

“But Jiminnie-”

“I know,” he says, glancing over at Jimin and Hoseok. “But I think that he doesn’t know how to comfort the kind of sadness you have right now. You need to talk to someone, kid.”
I frown, looking away from him, not wanting to hear about it. I try to imagine what Suga would say if he knew, really knew, what I was going through or had gone through. Maybe he wouldn’t be so upset with my drinking my problems away today. Maybe he would have me get drunk with him, too.

Despite the happiness that I’ve been feeling lately with Jungkook and my friends, there’s a deep pit of sadness in my heart. An ocean of bad feelings, sad memories, and hurt.

I don’t know how to not feel that.

“Kookie, you’re here!” Jimin shouts, and I look over at the door, unable to help the big grin that finds its way to my face when I see him. His hair is damp and he’s wearing a proper winter coat with jeans and boots and a big black sweatshirt under his coat. His eyes scan the bar until they meet mine and I stumble a little, almost falling over and letting out a giggle.

Jungkook is at my side in just a few seconds, holding my arm gently to steady me.

All my sadness is too heavy, and all I want is to snuggle with Jungkook and pretend like the rest of the world doesn’t exist. Because in the little bubble of our apartments, we’re safe and happy and I’m whole and okay.

I lean into Jungkook, throwing my body weight against him and wrapping my arms around him, clinging to him.

“I called Namjoon to come get Jimin,” Suga informs him. I bury my face in Jungkook’s hoodie, my arms under his coat, squeezing around his middle. “I figured you probably couldn’t handle them both. They’re… something else.”

Jungkook laughs, the sound causing his chest to vibrate. I smile, closing my eyes and smushing my nose against his chest, right over his heart. “Yeah, I would of struggled for sure.”

“Kookie, you better take good care of Taetae,” Jimin threatens, but his voice holds not malice. “He’s been so sad. So you should wrap him in a blanket burrito and get him his favorite snacks. He likes choco pies and strawberries. Are you getting all this down? Is very important.”

Hoseok laughs, “I think he’ll be okay, Jiminnie.”
“I’ll take good care of him, Jimin,” Jungkook says, one of his hands moving to rub my back gently. “I promise.”

“Send me a picture of him in the blanket burrito later,” Jimin adds with a huff. “He loves being tucked in.”

I lift my head to throw a glare at Jimin, feeling embarrassed. But when I make eye contact with Jungkook again, even with my eyes seeing two of him, I can see that his features hold a type of softness that looks an awful lot like endearing. I smile at him before burying my face in his chest again.

“Let’s go, Tae,” Jungkook says softly, leading me to the door.

“Don’t wanna walk,” I pout as he helps me put my coat on. “I’m tired.”

Jungkook helps me button my coat up and looks at me, his expression still soft and fond, despite my complaining. I stick my bottom lip out, trying to look as sad as possible, hoping that he’ll give in.

He sighs, but I can tell that I’ve won.

“I’ll carry you on my back,” he says, finishing the last button.

I smile, smug, and we wave goodbye to everyone before heading outside into the cold weather. The wind makes it feel even worse, and the air hurts my face, making me whine as I burrow further into my coat. Jungkook lets go of my hand and kneels down in front of me, his back facing me, and waits for me to get on.

I wrap my arms around his neck, settling myself against his back. His hands slide down to my thighs, and as he slowly stands back up, he adjusts me on his back before getting a good hold of my legs. I wrap them in front of him, crossing my ankles, and he laughs lightly as I curl into him even more.

“You’re like a koala,” he muses as he starts walking.
“I just wanted to be closer to you,” I tell him, resting my chin on his shoulder, pressing my cheek against his ear, which is cold.

“I know.”

I’m so happy that I don’t even feel embarrassed.

“Did you tell Jimin that your dad called?” Jungkook asks, pausing at a red light, checking for cars coming before crossing the street. I nod, burying my cold nose against Jungkook’s warm neck, making him jump a little. “Jesus, you’re cold.”

“Just my nose,” I tell him, very matter of fact. “Why didn’t you tell me that you have to fight Jin?”

I can feel his entire body tense up underneath me, and I frown, lifting my head up to try and look at his face. I can only see his profile clearly, but I’m not sure what kind of expression he has on his features.

“I didn’t want you to worry,” he finally says.

“That’s not f-fair,” I hiccup, squeezing around him as I try to make him relax again. “I make you worry a lot! You can make me worry. I wanna worry.”

Jungkook lets out a small laugh at that, “You want to worry?”

“Because I care. I want you to know that I care and that I want to be there for you.”

“Tae…”

“No, you have to tell me the important stuff like that,” I whine, my voice sounding sad to my own ears. “That’s the rule now, okay? We tell the important stuff.”
He turns his head slightly to look at me and he smiles. “Okay, deal. We tell the important stuff.”

“And the unimportant stuff, too,” I add and he laughs, shaking his head. “You know what? Let’s just tell each other everything, that way we include the important stuff and the not so important stuff. Like, oh! You can just text me and say ‘I just saw a dog’ and I’ll be like, ‘why didn’t you send me a picture?’ and then you send a picture.”

Jungkook laughs again, “You want me to take creepy pictures of other people’s dogs that I see to send to you?”

“Yes! Well, no - not always,” I say but I’m struggling a little, laughing, too. “I just wanna know about everything with you. Okay? All the little stuff that you think aren’t really worth mentioning, too. Because I like that stuff, too.”

We’re in front of the apartment complex, and Jungkook slowly lets me know, despite my protests. Once I’m on my own two feet again, he reaches for my hand, his warm eyes looking at me, making me smile, too.

“I’ll tell you everything,” he finally concedes. “Let’s go wrap you in a blanket burrito so I can prove to Jimin that I can take care of you. Otherwise, he’ll never trust me.”

I giggle, lacing our fingers together as he leads me upstairs. I put my passcode in, opening the door to my apartment, and kick off my shoes. Jungkook follows me to my bed, waiting for me to shed my coat and change into comfy clothes. As I’m changing into sweatpants, I notice Jungkook picking my coat up from the floor and hanging it up and my heart swells.

How is he literally so perfect and sweet?

“How’s I can’t say I’ve ever wrapped someone in a blanket burrito before,” he says as I lay down on my bed with a laugh. “So, just, let me know if I’m doing it wrong.”

He pulls my blanket around me, tucking the ends up until I’m wrapped up so tightly that I can’t do much more than wiggle around. He takes the opportunity to place a delicate kiss to my forehead and I close my eyes, savoring the moment and also wishing for more.

I pout my lips out, making an exaggerated kissy face, and he laughs but humors me, leaning down
to peck my lips once.

“That wasn’t a real kiss,” I say and he smiles.

“Later,” he promises. “Get some rest, Tae.” He’s just about to leave when he comes back, his phone out. “Smile, I’m taking a picture to send to Jimin.”

I laugh, watching as he holds his phone up above his head, flashing a peace sign as he takes a selfie with me in the background. He shows me the picture before sending it to Jimin, then leans over to kiss my head one more time before he leaves.

And it’s not long before I pass out, dreaming of walking along the beach with Jungkook.

It happens on a Thursday.

The timer above my head is still tick, tick, ticking, but I know that I’ve got at least two and a half weeks left to save as much as I can. Even knowing that it won’t be enough, I’m hoping to at the very least show them how quickly I can pay them back, if they’ll let me live and give me more time to gather the money.

On this particular Thursday, I spend the morning at the company with Misook, cleaning all the bathrooms, main lobby, and several floors of conference rooms and office spaces. Then, from there, I had an almost 10 hour shift at the convenience store. But luckily for me, it wasn’t a Friday or a Saturday, because those days, I also have shifts at the restaurant as a waiter and those shifts tend to really tire me out, especially since they drag out until very late.

On this Thursday, I’m feeling pretty good as I head back home after my shift ends and my manager arrives to relieve me from work at the store. I’m feeling good, happy even, as I practically skip on my way home, humming and wondering if I should stop and pick something up for me and Jungkook to eat. But I don’t want to bother him, and I know that he’s been spending a lot of his extra time practicing at the gym, so I just decide to order jajangmyeon to be delivered once I’m home for both of us.

It’s on a Thursday evening that I’m sitting on my bed in my apartment, wrapped in a blanket in my sweatpants and sweater, that there’s a knock on my door.
To: My Kookie
I ordered jajangmyeon for us!!! Don’t overwork yourself tonight

Once I send the text, I flop my phone on my bed and get up, heading for the door to answer it, the money in my hands for the delivery boy.

What I don’t expect when I open the door to my apartment is to see the loan sharks standing there, dressed in all black, looking even more unpleasant than they had the last time I’d seen them.

My stomach sinks, my face falls, and I stumble backwards when the larger of the two puts his hand on my door and forces it open wider, allowing them entry to my home. To my only safe space. I can’t do anything as the taller one grabs a fistful of my sweater, shoving me backwards against my table, knocking it over as he sends me flying into it.

The larger of the two pulls out a baseball bat and swings it around, hitting a framed photo of the entire group in front of the Christmas tree at Namjoon, Hoseok and Suga’s apartment. Then he turns my bookshelf over, knocking over everything, including my camera and small trinkets, and I watch in horror as the lens on my camera breaks apart from the body.

“No, please!” I cry, rushing to the camera, only for the other one to grab me again and pull me straight up to my feet. “Please! You’re early! I don’t have all the money yet!”

“Oh, we know that you don’t,” he laughs, reaching his free hand up to my cheek to caress it before landing a slap so hard against it that my head turns sharply to the right with a gasp. “We’re just here to remind you what happens if you don’t have it all when we come visit you next time.”

“Please,” I plead, tears falling down my cheeks as the other man continues to destroy everything his bat can hit. All my succulents are smashed on the floor, soil spilling across the floor; my framed photos are all dropped from their spots on the wall, broken glass spewing everywhere. I can’t do anything but watch and sob, feeling a panic attack beginning. “Please don’t do this!”

“Shut him up, will ya?” the larger one says, pointing the baseball bat in my direction. “His sobbing is worse than screaming.”

A hard punch to the stomach has me doubled over, the wind knocked out of me, unable to breathe. Awful choking sounds escape my lips now, as I’m straightened out again abruptly, my entire body
trying to focus on what just happened.

“Shut the fuck up!” the larger man screams, coming over and swinging his bat full force.

I can’t think, can’t move, can’t breathe. I’m curled over on my side, on the floor, my hands reaching for my blankets, pillows - anything to ground me. When my vision finally stops shaking, I can see blood splattered across the floor and several of my books and blanket, and I realize that it’s mine. I let out another choked sound, pain in the form of a choked back scream and sob, as the full force of the bat comes down on me again, over my shoulders.

My head is bleeding steadily, some of it blurring my vision in my right eye. I hit the floor again, a rush of pain zapping from the top of my spine to my toes as a scream makes its way out of my throat.

There’s a hand in my hair, tugging my head up until I’m looking at the taller guy that’s not armed with a baseball bat. “Don’t worry, Taehyung. We won’t kill you today. But if you don’t have all of our money when we come back, we can’t make any promises.” His fingers twist in my hair, pulling harder until my mouth opens in a silent scream, my eyes squeezing shut.

You piece of shit! Worthless garbage. You never should have been born, you hear me? You were the worst thing that ever happened to me or your whore mother.

Tears are flowing freely now, all the memories resurfacing in my mind like I’m watching a movie of someone else’s life. But it’s mine and my childhood and my father’s drunken shouts at me, a beer glass in hand, or the flame of the stove or my mother trying to kiss my bruises better.

I can’t even feel their hits anymore, so emotionally gone that I can’t register anything.

The larger of the two is standing over me, the baseball bat no longer in his hands. But I can’t even feel relief from that, because that’s when his closed fist makes contact with my face.

His fist rains down on my face like thunder - splitting open the skin, leaving a bloody, bruised mess behind. He doesn’t stop for a long time, keeps hitting me as my head turns with each blow, unable to defend myself from being held down by the other. I thrash around for a while, trying my best to fight them off, but they’re bigger and stronger than I am.
“That’s enough!” the taller one shouts eventually, stopping the blows to my face. I try to open my eyes but I can’t see - everything is red with black spots lining my vision. I can’t see, I can’t breathe. “C’mon, we said we were just gonna scare the kid!”

“Shut up or you’ll be next!” the larger one practically growls.

“Shit… dude, he pissed himself!”

I’m sobbing now, as my wrists are finally released. I bring my hands up to cover my face, try to protect myself, but my entire body is shaking. I can feel warmth between my legs and I can’t even feel embarrassed about it - I’m too afraid, my entire body violently shaking as my mind whirls, trying to process it and repress it at the same time.

Where is mom? My mind shouts, remembering that she used to always save me from my father’s angry fists. Where is Jungkook? My mind shouts when I remember that my mother is dead, but that Jungkook would save me if he was here.

“Fucking disgusting piece of shit,” one of the loan sharks shouts, kicking me in the chest as I manage to turn to my side. The kick causing my stomach to jump and I choke on my gasp, my body curling in on itself, trying desperately to make myself small.

Small enough to hide where he can’t find me .

“Get the rest of the money, kid,” one of them says and I can hear the crunching of boots walking over broken glass moving away from me.

“See you in a few weeks,” the other promises.

I wait for a long time before I move, making sure that they’re both really gone before I allow my body to uncurl from its protective ball. When I do, I slowly try to open my eyes. My vision is so distorted with red, tears, and black spots from god knows how many punches I took to the face; my entire face feels deformed with swelling.

Slowly, I manage to crawl to the bathroom. My hands catch on some glass, but the cuts don’t even bother me. My body is on so much adrenaline from the entire encounter that I’m numb to the pain that I’m sure I’ll suffer through for the next several weeks. The kind of pain and wounds that
simple Pororo bandaids won’t be able to fix.

The white bathroom tiles get stained with my blood as I get to the bathroom. I can’t even completely close the door, too weak as I drag my limp body to the smallest, tightest corner that I can and tuck myself there. I make myself so small that if they came back to hurt me again, they wouldn’t be able to see me.

At least, that’s what I tell myself.

It’s okay, it’s okay, I try to tell myself, squeezing my eyes shut as I try to quiet my sobs, choking and coughing out blood. They’re gone. They won’t come back. You’re safe, you’re safe-

The only place left in this cruel world that I felt safe is now destroyed, just like my body and mind. All I can do is sob, trying my best to hold myself to stop the violent shaking. I’m freezing, and part of me knows that I should try and shower away the blood and urine, but I can’t. I can’t do anything but sit in the corner and sob and struggle through my breathing.

I want to scream, but I don’t.

I want the world to be kinder, but it isn’t.

My father’s voice is shrill and loud in my ears, my hand is burning and my entire body feels like it’s on fire. But I can’t do anything besides sob and cry and take it.

I start slowly rocking myself back and forth, letting my body shake and cry until I’m all out of tears to give. I hold my knees to my chest, despite the pain in my chest from the numerous kicks and punches I took there, and I bury my head to hide my face and let it all out.

On a Thursday night, alone and curled in a ball on my bathroom floor, my entire world seems to shatter.

Chapter End Notes

i’m........ so sorry ): ): ):
Alright y'all, this chapter is a frickin saga. It's like 15K. IT JUST HAPPENED AND I'M NOT SORRY. Also, I feel like I should add a trigger warning to this one because there's mention of serious physical injury, and also smut. So yeah... Take it away, friends.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After my six-hour workout at the gym (which involved a lot of sparring, weight training and cardio), I walk home with a little extra something in my step. Maybe it's because I feel good, for the first time in a long time. Maybe it's because that even with the looming Jin VS. Jungkook match, I know that I’m about to walk in the door of Tae’s apartment and kiss him.

I pull my phone out of my pocket, checking it for the first time in hours. I’m not surprised to see I have a missed text from Tae, but I am surprised to see that it says that he’s ordered jajangmyeon for dinner. God, that sounds good. My stomach rumbles. My meals for the day today have consisted of granola bars and protein shakes, but not a whole lot else.

My mind goes on to imagine a little of the sauce staining the side of his mouth – and I wonder what he’d do if I leaned in and licked it off. I wonder if he’d feel it. Hunger.

“God,” I say audibly, missing a step and nearly stumbling over my own two feet. I’m a mess. Lately it’s been like this with Taehyung, where we’re lying beside each other in bed after he gets out of work and he throws a leg up over my waist, and all of the sudden I’m thinking about doing things to him I never thought I could do before – things I want to do now, but don’t know how to open the door to.

Eventually, I think. Just enjoy things as they are for now. And I do. Every moment I’ve spent with Taehyung – since the big kiss, our confession, New Year’s Eve – has been something I’ve savored. Holding his hand. Sneaking kisses from him in public when no one’s looking. Running my hands through his hair after he’s gotten out of the shower. Watching him water his plants, iron his work pants, fold laundry – even these meaningless tasks are something I don’t take for granted.

Just being close to him is enough.

I feel like running back to the apartments, but I don’t. I try to enjoy the feeling of calm, of the
pretty white scenery around me, the world covered with a blanket of snow. I try to hold onto this feeling inside of me, the feeling of knowing that I’m going home to be with the person I love.

It’s only when I make it back, starting up the stairs to our floor, that something starts to feel wrong. I’m not sure what it is at first – and it’s because I look over the two sets of wet footprints heading up the stairs. I don’t pay attention to the fact that there’s little streaks of blood on the handrail.

But I do notice the door to Tae’s apartment, which is usually carefully closed – which is now just cracked. Just enough for me to think it strange. Just enough for me to do a double take before setting my things in my apartment.

I stand in the hallway between my door and Taehyung’s, and after a moment, something in my inside me snaps. I drop my backpack in the hall, my coat along with it – and without another beat of hesitation, I open the door to his apartment and let the inkling of fear sink in completely.

When the door swings open, my whole body freezes.

It looks like a crime scene.

Taehyung’s plants – my babies, the way he used to call them and care for them, so aware of the life they possessed – are all strewn about the carpet, broken pots along the floor beneath the window. His photographs which once hung on the wall are all down, shards of glass from the frames tangled and caught in his bedsheets.

The bookshelf is overturned. There, in the middle of the room, broken in fifty pieces, is his camera.

“Tae,” I choke. My voice is small. I swallow. My hands are shaking. “Taehyung,” I say a little louder, and my eyes go wide, darting around the room, and all at once I’m screaming his name, running.

I throw open the closet door, scanning, somehow hoping to find him there, my vision willing me to believe I see him – but it’s just a bunch of boots, coats. I run into the kitchen, throwing open the pantry, and still nothing.

And then, my gaze falls on the door to the bathroom.
And then, I see the trail of blood.

My body is moving on its own. I’m throwing open the door, turning on the yellow overhead light, and finally, when I look down and see him curled up between the wall and the toilet, bleeding head resting on the side of the toilet bowl, all of the color rushes from my face.

“No,” I say, because I don’t believe it. I can’t. This isn’t real. This isn’t real.

He doesn’t look up. He doesn’t even move.

I fly across the floor, fall to my knees in front of him, take his shoulders in my hands and shake him. I smell copper. Urine.

“Taehyung!” I’m yelling, frantic. My mind is everywhere. There’s – god, there’s so much blood –

And then, finally, he stirs. His head lifts a little, his gaze rising slowly until his glassy eyes meet mine… and there’s nothing there.

Kim Taehyung is a shell.

“What happened here?” I ask, voice breaking.

He doesn’t say anything. He just looks up at me with those dead eyes, chapped lips parted, and I can see his teeth are red.

I stare at him another moment before I shake my head. “Fuck.” I jump to my feet, hands leaving him, and I throw open the medicine cabinet, searching frantically; bottles of pain reliever and cough syrup fall down into the sink, a multitude of clattering poisoning the silence. I don’t pay attention to them – where is it?

I throw open the cupboard below the sink, and that’s where I find the first aid kit. It’s the same one Tae uses on me when I’m hurt – except he’s the expert. I don’t know what the fuck I’m doing. I
don’t know how to fix this.

My eyes keep flashing to him as I pull it out, opening the box; there’s some sort of gash in his hairline that is still oozing, the hair around it all matted a deep brown. I see his hands, and there’s shards of glass in his skin that form little red cuts on his palms, open-faced on the ground at his sides. Bruises around his eyes. Bruises on his wrists.

This is my nightmare. How could – how could anyone do this to him? To Kim Taehyung, the kindest, gentlest soul I have ever known; how anyone could hurt him like this makes my vision blur red.

I’m back in front of him, kneeling again, throwing everything in the box onto the floor, tearing through the layers of bandages and ointments, searching for something I can use. A bottle of iodine rolls across the floor and something in me takes over; I grab the bottle, unscrewing the cap completely, and tear a thick handful of toilet paper off the roll. The bottle gets dumped onto it, completely saturating the cloth, and when I turn back to him my hands – still shaking, now worse than before – take hold of his face as softly as I can. I turn his head to the side to get a better view of the cut, and without warning I press the cloth to his skin.

He cries out, and it’s the first sound he’s made since I found him. I feel it everywhere. His pain fills up the room, and I’m – god. I am drowning.

“Shh,” I try, face contorting as I try to ignore the way his teeth bite down on his lip, the way his hands curl up and his toes curl up and his knees pull closer to his chest, shaking him. “It’s– it’ll help with infection, I have to– I have to–”

I pull it away, and when I look, the cloth is all brown and red. Dried blood comes off in pieces, but I can’t tell where it’s all coming from.

“I’m sorry,” I say, pulling away, tearing more paper from the roll and soaking it again. I hold the fresh piece to his scalp again, and his eyes pinch shut, Tae’s cry now louder and more broken than before. His throat sounds raw. I wonder – I wonder if anyone heard. I wonder if anyone was home to hear him crying.

I wasn’t here.

_I wasn’t here._
It seems that the bleeding is stopping, at least to some degree. When I pull his hair away from the wound, I see that there’s a bruise forming, black and purple already. I see the gash, and I notice that it’s starting to congeal, which does little to ease the horror of everything I’m feeling.

Next, I move to his hands. My eyes scan the floor and I find the tweezers. I wonder how to get glass out with trembling hands. I wonder if this can actually be done.

I pour iodine onto the tweezers and start in, and when I briefly look up to his face, I see Taehyung’s stare is far away. His head is still turned to the side, not looking at me, or his hands, or anything.

I keep going, until I get out all I can see. I wet another cloth, running it over his hands, seeing the faint pink on the paper as I pull it away and feeling fear curdling in the pit of my stomach like spoiled milk.

I don’t know what to do next. I don’t see blood anywhere else, except dried down the side of his face, on his neck, on his mouth, in his mouth – and I know I have to do something about it, but what? What the fuck do I do?

The rest of him – I need to see what else.

“I’m– I’m going to try to get you into the shower,” I’m saying, but I barely register my words and I know he probably isn’t listening anyway. I pull a knee up, bracing myself, and with all the strength in my arms and legs, I lift the dead weight of his body up from the ground, carrying him; I place him in the tub of his shower, the curtain being pulled from the rod and hitting the floor in a wad as I lean his back against one end of the tub. He looks so small.

I pull his shirt off, then start to remove his sweatpants. They’re wet. My eyes are burning and I can feel myself on the verge of crying, but I swallow and keep blinking to will my tears away. This isn’t the time. You have to be strong. You have to do this.

Tae looks up at me as I get his pants and underwear over his backside, as I start to slide them down his legs. Suddenly there’s a new pain, one that manifests in his eyes; it’s something more than just physical. This isn’t how he wanted this to happen. I can feel it coming off him in waves, his weak body unable to move, his mouth unable to form the words.

“It’s okay,” I try, and then, there is a sudden recognition in his eyes of what is happening, of what
...has happened – and all at once, his whole face crumples. Tears well up in his eyes and immediately begin pouring down his face in hot, thick droplets.

“No,” he says, and tries to sit up, hands grabbing at mine as he tries to stop me, but he can’t. His body is tired. Injured.

I see spiderwebs of bruising all across his chest, down his legs. I throw his pants out of the tub, then pull my own sweatshirt off of my body, tossing it along with them. Somehow I kick my boots off, turn the shower on and feel the cool water start to fill the area. I should have warmed it first; I see him flinch back away from it as the cold water hits his skin, crying still as he lies naked and broken in the bathtub. I never realized just how small he’d gotten.

I’m useless. I’m so useless. I should know how to help him. I should know how to care for someone else without making things worse, when in reality I can’t even care for myself.

“I’m sorry,” he’s blubbering, and I just shake my head. My back and hair are soaked, pants and socks soaked along with them. I grab the bar of soap from one of the shelves and press it against his chest, scrubbing circles with it as my other hand lathers the suds and spreads it around. I rub the soap down the dried blood on his face and neck, along the lines of his stomach, careful of the bruising. I rub soap all over my hands and start to clean his upper thighs, his inner thighs, his dick – and god, his whole body is crying. I don’t feel ashamed to do it, even though I know he feels shame to have me do it for him. All I feel is a pool of sadness, filling my lungs, filling my heart.

“It was– they came back,” he starts to say between choking sobs. I hear him, but I can’t look at him. I keep working, rinsing the soap from his body before I grab the shampoo and pour it haphazardly into my hands. I bend over him and massage it into his hair, focusing on the matting happening in the back around the cut, careful not to touch it as I do.

I pull him forward, leaning his head toward the stream of water coming from the shower head. I rinse carefully, as gentle as I can. There’s a deadness inside of me that feels a lot like the look in Tae’s eyes when I found him. I can’t fathom what is happening. I can’t believe what I’m doing.

My hand grabs the knob on the faucet and I shut the water off. I stand up out of the tub, run to the linen closet and grab a towel out, unfolding it and bringing it back toward him. He’s shaking, everywhere. His eyes are closed and his head is leaning against the shower wall.

I dry him off, wrap the towel around him, lifting him up and out of the basin; his arms wrap around my shoulders and his hands weakly grab at the soaked cloth of my t-shirt.
Carefully, I set him down in his bed, in the place where I can’t see any glass. I go to tear the rest of the sheets away, but looking around again at the state of this place, I think better of it. Instead, I throw the door open to his apartment, unlock my own, then race back over to his where I take him back into my arms and bring him to the only place I know is safe. I hold him as gently as I can without dropping him, and once we’re in my apartment, I place him in my bed, pulling the sheets up around his body, pulling the comforter to his chin, running a hand through his hair as his eyes slip shut. I can see him shivering.

I go into the kitchen, wet some paper towel and bring it back to where Tae lies, wiping his mouth, running it over his teeth. His eyes flutter open as I pull the cloth out. He looks lost. I wonder if I look as lost as he does.

Slowly, I pull my soaked t-shirt, pants and socks off, squeezing them all taught into a ball and tossing them somewhere that I don’t have to look at them. I crouch, leaning against the mattress, arms stretched out, knuckles grazing the rough carpet.

“I’m going to kill them,” I say out loud, and suddenly my knees buckle. My ass hits the floor and god, I’m so tired. It all hits me at once. Water droplets from my hair drip into my eyes and I can’t bring myself to wipe them away. “I should have done it the first time. I should have been here with you today… I should have…”

“I needed you,” he says. His voice is a whisper. I know he doesn’t say it to make me feel worse, but it does. It makes it so much worse to hear it out loud, from him.

My face pulls and I throw my arm over my eyes, one hand on his side, the other clenched in a fist as I try to keep myself from breaking down at his side. I don’t have the right. I don’t get the luxury to cry for him.

“I know you did,” I say. My voice breaks. “I-I wasn’t here to save you. I’m so sorry, Tae.”

“It hurts,” he chokes out, and I can feel him move, an arm rising to his head, a shaking hand touching at his scalp before moving to cover his eyes.

“I wish,” I start, and my breath shakes. I stop, then start again. “I wish I could take it from you. I
“I don’t,” he says. I look over at him and his eyes are closed again, his hand on the pillow beside his face.

I can’t help it; I lean over him, my body curling over his middle, holding onto him even though I don’t deserve to. I don’t deserve any part of him after this, after what I let happen while I was gone.

“How do I feel safe again,” he says. It isn’t a question – because he doesn’t believe that it’s possible.

I don’t know what to say, what to do. My hands roam over his shoulders and chest until they hit the mattress, pressing down hard as I pull myself back up. My back arches over him; I’m kissing his hair, kissing his bare shoulders as the blanket slips. I take one of his hands in mine and hold it there.

My eyes are on him and then, when his open again, the same faraway, dazed look is still there.

“Taehyung,” I murmur, and without a word, he lifts his other hand to cover mine.

“I love you,” he says.

My heart shatters.

Even after everything – even after this.

“I love you,” I repeat back, and suddenly, it breaks: the dam holding back my tears is blown away and I’m crying, lying down beside him and wrapping my arms around him, face pressed to his neck.

I’m crying and I keep saying these three words and hoping that somehow I can hold these broken pieces of Taehyung together – but I don’t know if I can.
I’m trying, I think, chest aching. I’m trying.

In the morning, I wrap his hands. He lets me, just watches as I spread ointment on them and spin gauze around his palms. He sits up in bed, letting me massage the topical pain reliever into his skin, wincing but not complaining. I grab some clothes from his apartment. I know I need to clean it, but even if I do, I know it’s not his anymore. This space is not home.

Every time I enter, I see the broken camera lying in the middle of the floor – a reminder of what happened.

“Can I just stay here today?” Taehyung asks, lying in bed with the blankets pulled up to his nose.

“Of course you can,” I tell him, brushing the hair from his eyes.

He takes in a deep breath. “I was supposed to work today.”

“I’ll call your coworkers for you,” I say. “We’ll get it covered.”

I sort things out with Hyojin; she isn’t busy, but is surprised that I’m the one calling. She doesn’t know what happened, but she can tell it’s something, and she doesn’t ask me to explain.

An hour goes by and I cook him a huge breakfast that he barely touches. He picks at it, tries to eat some to appease me, but in the end it goes cold on his plate and I just toss it. I’m frustrated with myself for not doing more. I don’t know what to do though, and it’s this – knowing that I’m absolutely fucking worthless – that sends me back to the beginning.

I keep getting flashes of the night before. I can’t erase his eyes from my mind.

We watch Netflix on my phone for hours. We don’t leave the apartment, even when the day drags on into night and the sky darkens outside the window. I call and order us takeout, and we eat in bed, a sea of blankets and a tangle of limbs. I kiss him a lot. I reapply the ointment, change his bandages – it goes on like this until it’s bedtime again, and he’s curled up in my arms, facing me, his breathing steady.
“You didn’t deserve this,” I say. “You didn’t deserve any of this.”

“I don’t deserve you,” he murmurs. “I owe you so much, Jeon Jungkook.”

“You don’t owe me anything,” I whisper back. “It’s my fault. I should have—”

“Shh.” He sighs an exhausted sigh and tilts his head up, pressing his lips to mine, and we hold them there for a long moment, breathing back and forth until he pulls away and tucks his head under my chin.

And, finally, we both fall into a deep sleep.

To: Tae
I’m picking up dinner tonight, what do you want?

From: Tae
That’s okay, I probably won’t get done here for a while. I’ll just grab something on the way home.

To: Tae
I can bring you something

From: Tae
No, that’s okay. I’ll be fine

To: Tae
You sure?
To: Tae

Tell me if I’m being too clingy because I don’t want to be gross but I’m also clingy and worried about you always, so

From: Tae

You’re not being clingy. I’m sorry to make you worry all the time

To: Tae

Don’t say sorry. You can’t help it

To Tae:

It’s just how I feel

From: Tae

I worry about you too Jungkook. You don’t seem to think I have a reason to, but there’s a million

To: Tae

It’s not the same

To: Tae

Can I please just get you dinner

From: Tae

Kookie…

To: Tae

I’m buying you ramen and you can heat it up later

From: Tae
You know if you keep buying me food it’s going to be really hard to get rid of me later when you realize this was all a big mistake

To: Tae

Not funny

From: Tae

I don’t know I thought it was kind of

To: Tae

I’ll see you back at home

To: Tae

Whenever you get back

To: Tae

I’ll be up

From: Tae

Mood: Big heart eyes emoji

To: Tae

Mood: Arrow through heart emoji, two guys holding hands emoji, kissing the shit out of you as soon as you walk through the door emoji

From: Tae

Ok Ok I’m going back to work

From: Tae
I’m not going to sugar coat the fact that it is hard for me to go back to my daily routine. It’s hard being at the gym, sparring with the other guys, pushing my body to its absolute limits while knowing that Kim Taehyung is somewhere that I can’t see, somewhere I can’t be sure he’s okay. The first morning that I get up, I kiss him on his cheek, still asleep, and when I get to the gym and start my workout, I have to stop. I run to the bathroom, vomiting into the toilet. It’s anxiety. It’s the art of becoming physically sick from worry.

Three days pass by and Tae comes home in the late evenings – he must be getting put on late shifts again. Sometimes, he doesn’t get back until midnight. I think that it’s strange, because he never had to work that late at the convenience store before, but I don’t pressure him. I just accept this, whatever this is – and make sure the others in the building are aware of what happened so that if I’m not there and he’s home, at least there is someone to make sure he’s alright.

I can’t bring myself to tell Jimin. I let Namjoon do that for me.

I’m too ashamed of myself to say what happened.

“What do you think the dinosaurs were thinking,” Tae says, his hands around a cup of hot cocoa with just a little bit of whipped cream on his upper lip, “when they saw the meteor falling?”

“I don’t know if they even saw it fall at all,” I call back from the kitchen. It’s late and I’m making stir fry while Tae plays on his phone, probably reading some clickbait article to prompt this question at all. “I’m pretty sure it fell, like, at lightspeed or something. Also their brains don’t really work like human brains do so... I don’t know about cognitive thoughts. If that was something they were capable of having.”

“That’s fair,” Tae shrugs, scrolling again.

I laugh, tongs flipping the noodles and cabbage around in the pan. “Why do you ask?”
“Reading an article about some new dino bones they just found and I was suddenly compelled.”

“Ah.”

It’s a calm, quiet night. Outside the wind is blowing, dusting snow all around and flurrying in the streets. The air outside is bitter with a cold that settles in your bones – but here, inside, it’s warm. Safe.

I shut the stovetop off, making Tae a bowl and holding it down to him.

“I can eat at the table,” he says, starting to get up.

“You don’t have to,” I shrug, but he gets up, pulling the blankets with him, a human sized cocoon.

I’m about to make my own bowl when my phone starts going off – which is strange, because no one ever usually calls me. Tae and I exchange glances, and when I cross the room to pick it up, I see the phone number is unlisted.

“Probably a telemarketer,” I shrug.

“Tell them you don’t want any,” Tae says, slurping up the noodles and getting sauce on his chin.

I swipe to answer, and when I press it to my ear I assume I’ll be hearing either a robotic voice or a person trying to sell me life insurance at 22. (Although I suppose it wouldn’t be a bad idea, at the rate we’re going.)

“Hello, this is Jungkook,” I answer tiredly, looking up at the ceiling as I wait for a response.

“Jungkook,” I hear repeated back to me – and the last person’s voice I expect to hear is my father’s.

My eyes go wide. I’m silent. Tae keeps munching for a moment, but when I don’t move and I don’t speak, he looks back at me, eyebrows drawn together in confusion. My mouth hangs open, lips
parted slightly and I remember to breathe.

“Son,” I hear again.

“Hold on,” I sputter, and I pull the phone away from my ear, holding it to my chest.

“Who the hell is that?” Tae asks.

I shake my head, then move to the door. “It’s… it’s my dad. I have to take this.”

He nods, watching me as I slip out the door into the hallway and close it shut behind me. I walk down a few stairs and drop down, sitting on the staircase and leaning one shoulder against the wall. Slowly I bring the phone back to my ear and breathe in once, deeply.

“Oh, I’m here.”

There’s rustling on the other end. “It’s been a while,” he comments, words seeming to be chosen carefully. “How are things?”

“Great,” I lie, then double back. “Fine.”

“That’s good to hear,” he says, and I can see him in my mind: a man moving past middle-aged and leaning into his graying appearance. A hairline receding, tall and still built well with glasses perched halfway down his nose. I imagine him sitting at his desk at the office, penthouse suite illuminated by the glow of city lights. A photo of my mom and him beside a glass filled with pens. “You sound well,” he finishes.

“Yeah,” I say, a little taken off-guard. “Y… You, too.”

He sighs. “Well, I’m not going to beat around the bush with you, Jungkook.” He clicks his tongue and it pings sharply in the receiver. “Your mother and I want to meet you for dinner.”

“I can’t,” is my immediate reply.
“You will,” he states. An order.

The mood created before – surprisingly caring, almost gentle – is now thwarted, and I can feel anger boiling in my mind, an acid that starts to transmit a hostile decay to the rest of my body. I’m biting my thumbnail, the balls of my feet bouncing.

“You can’t make me do anything,” I say back, trying hard to keep my voice calm. When the words leave my lips, I can hear myself sounding like a child, which only makes me angrier.

“We have not seen you in a year,” he says, his tone devoid of emotion.

I almost laugh, shaking my head. “Mom sent a car after me while I was on my way to work a few months ago.”

“I haven’t seen you,” he says.

“You hardly saw me before.”

The other end is silent, and I wonder if he’s thinking about my words, finding a truth in them he wasn’t expecting.

“Your mother’s been upset,” he starts again, and at this, something in me slows. The gears start to wind backward, anger still running through me but fading at these words. “She misses you, and this is hurting her.”

I don’t know what to say.

“That’s news to me,” is all I can come up with.

“There’s a lot you don’t know, Jungkook.”
Silence hangs between us, reception connected like telephone lines with faulty wiring, threatening to break into a fire at any moment. We’re both guarded. Waiting for someone to say something.

And, eventually, it’s him.

“Meet with us,” he says.

Only this time, it’s not an order.

It’s a plea.

I swallow. My body folds in on itself, knees pulling to my chest, arm wrapping around them as I rest my chin on my forearm. I bury my face. I don’t want to. I don’t want to.

“Fine,” I say.

“Perfect. I’ll send the address. Let’s meet tomorrow, 18:00.”

“Alright.”

“Alright… Take care.” The call drops, beeping twice in my ear. I pull away, close my phone, and before I can bring myself to walk back up the stairs and into my apartment, I wait. I need a second, to compose myself and to get my mind right.

I think I’m going to need something a little stronger than hot cocoa.

The next day, Taehyung says he’s going over to Jimin’s dorm to visit. I don’t question him, because it’s the first time in a long time he’s been by to visit him. Jimin must have transferred him some money to take the trip, but again, I don’t ask. I know he’s struggling right now, saving every dime he can to pay back the loan sharks. A day out to visit Jimin will do him good.
“I don’t know when I’ll be home,” he says. “Probably late.”

I shrug. “Take all the time you need. Let me know if you need me to come get you.”

“That’s a lot to ask,” he laughs in the morning, packing a bag full of his things in his now-clean apartment, which Hoseok, Suga and I all pitched in to put back together a few days before. There’s no plants left on the windowsill, and his photos are all in a pile on the table, but it looks better now – no more dried blood, no more broken glass.

“If I’m still out to dinner with my parents, it would be a good excuse to leave.”

He laughs. “You’re lucky, Jungkook. Your parents want to see you.”

“They just want me to come back and work for them,” I say, rolling my eyes.

“What kind of business do they have?”

Suddenly I’m nervous – I haven’t told him much about my parents, or the money that I’ve come from. I don’t know why I do it, but after half a second of thought, I say: “It’s just a small business. A restaurant.”

“Ah,” he says, nodding, zipping his bag closed. “Well, that’s nice. Respectable.”

“I don’t want to do what they do,” I clarify. “Their world doesn’t belong to me.”

He looks over his shoulder at me and smiles a little. “I understand.”

I smile back at him, slow and easy like a Sunday. I move toward him, hand pressing to the small of his back as golden morning light comes in through the windows, and I rest my head on his shoulder. It’s a small gesture, but I can feel him leaning into it, and my heart clenches.

“You better get going,” I say. “Today is going to be good for you. I want you to have fun.”
He sighs. Something is muddled in his mind, but I can’t decipher what it is.

“It’ll be fuuun,” I say again, affecting my voice in an over-the-top-cute way, bumping him with my hip. He laughs softly through his nose, then bumps my hip back, shoving me off him.

I walk him to the station, watching him as he gets on the subway and giving him a little wave as the doors close. His eyes find mine through the glass window of the door and he waves back. Then, reckless abandon creeping back into his eyes, he blows me a kiss. My cheeks warm.

It takes off and I watch until the whole subway has gone, then slowly turn, making my way back home. The walk back feels a lot longer without Taehyung beside me.

Noon strikes as I open the door to the apartments, and just as I look up to enter, I see him.

Jin.

He’s got his gym bag slung over his shoulder, wearing his long puffy jacket zipped all the way up to his neck, and when his eyes lock on mine, he doesn’t look surprised. He’s not mad, or happy, or anything.

It’s a dead stare.

My chest falls.

“Hey–” I start, but he just brushes past me, wordless. The door is still open, and I turn my head to watch him walking down the street, heading to the gym at a normal pace, hands in his pockets.

It’s like I hadn’t been there at all.

I walk up the steps to my flat and everything in my body feels sad, bruised, and even a little angry. We were friends… But I don’t know what we are anymore. I don’t know if he wants to be mine anymore.
I didn’t mean to push him away – just to hold Taehyung close.

And it doesn’t feel fair that I should have to choose.

Dinner is at a fancy restaurant across town. I show up wearing the only suit I own, hair combed, earrings in both ears because I know it’ll make them angry. It’s kind of a test; they don’t know who I am, if they ever did, or where I’ve been this past year. They never really saw me anyway.

Well let them see me now.

Walking into the place, I can feel the ritz and the fashion surrounding me and know that this world is so far removed from who I am. I might look like I fit in, but inside I feel like an outsider.

I wonder what my friends would say if they saw me here. If they’d laugh – or if they’d think of me as some imposter.

The woman at the front looks me up and down, diamond earrings sparkling in her ears.

“Welcome,” she greets me, smiling. “Do you have a reservation?”

“I’m meeting my parents,” I state, hands sweating in my pockets. “Last name Jeon–”


It’s weird. No one has reacted like this to me in… God. A long time. It feels wrong. I slouch subconsciously. “Right this way, sir,” she says, immediately walking around her post and leading me into the restaurant, weaving through tables until we arrive at the very back, where a private table has been reserved, the leather back of which extends high to retain a level of privacy. Of course this is where they’re sitting.
Of course.

My mother is wearing a navy pantsuit, connected at the waist with sleeves that billow and gather at her wrists. Heels. Her eyes go wide when she sees me, perhaps without her realizing – and then she regains her composure, the stony look returning on her face. Cold.

My father sits at her side, looking up from the glass of scotch in his hand. There’s one solid, round ice cube in the glass, and it’s strange that I can’t stop looking at that – the urge to analyze it greater than the need to look at either of them.

“Hello, Jungkook,” my mother greets politely, and the server waits for me to sit before asking what I’d like to drink in lieu of our waiter’s absence.


“Of course,” she says, and I swear – she almost bows.

I feel disgusting.

“Vodka,” my father remarks. “Grown up.”

“A poor man’s drink,” my mother remarks at his side, then looks up at me. “No wine?”

“I don’t drink wine,” I shrug. “Too sweet.”

She makes a contemplative sound, shrugging.

There’s a moment of silence that passes between the three of us. It’s… tense. I try to busy myself by unwrapping the silverware and placing the napkin across my lap. I cough, taking a drink of water from my glass and licking my lips.

“You’ve gained weight,” my father says finally. “Your suit doesn’t fit properly anymore.”
“It never fit right,” I say, and I see something in my mother’s eyes… something like humor. The corners of her lips turn upward, just a little. I know she remembers it – the way the suit used to hang off my body, before when I was too thin that I looked like I was swimming in it.

Dad probably doesn’t remember.

“At least we know you’re eating,” Mom states then, and I meet her eyes again.

“Your profession must mean you’re eating a lot,” my father says dryly. “What is it you do again?” He says it almost mockingly. He just wants to hear me say it so he can laugh to himself, or confirm what he’s known all along: that his son, who was once too weak and afraid to speak for himself, has single-handedly become the world’s biggest fuck-up.

I sit up a little straighter. “I’m a boxer.”

“That is filthy,” my mother interjects sharply, and any trace of kindness that had been in her eyes dissipates. “You have no business doing that, Jungkook. You’re a Jeon. You come from money.”

“You’re bright,” my father adds, but it feels like a backhanded compliment the way he says it. He says it in a way that means: You’re throwing it away.

Mom takes a sip of her wine and says, “You’d do well back at home. With us. The company.”

I shrug. “Maybe.” Then, after a moment, add: “But I didn’t come here to talk about business. I agreed to have dinner with my parents. That’s all.”

Mom swishes her wine around in her glass, her aura cold again. My father drums his fingers on the table, then says aloud: “Where is that waiter?”

And then, as if summoned, a waiter – our waiter – walks up, to the table, slow and somewhat unconfidently as I see his hand set my vodka down on the table.
“Thank you–” I start.

But my voice quiets – eyes growing wide – as I suddenly realize.

Our waiter is Kim Taehyung.

Tae, who is not at Jimin’s dorm, who is standing at the end of our table dressed in a waiter’s uniform with a clean black apron drawn at his waist, glasses over his eyes that, in addition to the restaurant’s dim lighting, mask the fact that his eyes are circled in the remnants of old bruising.

Our eyes lock, and he stills. Stiffening. His eyes widen, mouth pulling taught, and all at once I realize: he has been keeping this from me. A third job.

“What are you doing here?”

I can’t help the words from spilling out of my mouth, both my parents watching as though a fire had just started at the end of the table. I can feel them both tense, perhaps in confusion, or shock that I’m speaking so informally to our waiter. I just look up at him, one hand gripping the table, the other gripping the napkin in my lap.

What the fuck.

What the actual fuck.

“I’m just doing my job, sir,” he says, his voice shaking a little.

Sir. It feels like being punched.

There’s an emotion inside me that feels like anger – and, blinded by this, I wonder if he’s feeling it too… because all at once I realize: he knows that this is not the place for a boy and his parents who own a small mom-and-pop restaurant. My suit is enough to give me away. The way my parents sit.

Staring into each other’s eyes, there’s hurt, mirrored back and forth between us both.
“I’ll be back to take your orders,” he says, and then he’s gone.

“What the hell was that,” my father says flatly. I can feel his anger festering. Growing.

“That was my–” I start to say, turning back to them, and without finishing my sentence – words caught on my tongue, unsure of what to call him, but knowing either way I don’t owe it to my parents to say it – they both somehow know.

“This is what happens when you live in the ghetto,” my mother all but spits. “Associating with waiters.”

“That wasn’t just association,” my father says, and I can see it. His face begins to change, skin flushing a bright crimson.

“You know him,” my mother says, and there’s an edge to her tone.

I am not registering their words. I stare at Taehyung as he walks to the back, composed wholly, and then at the last moment before he disappears into the back – I see the way his hand moves upward to cover his mouth, shoulders hunching upward as another hand grabs across his waist.

I’m angry because he lied. I’m hurt because he didn’t tell me. I want to know how long it’s been going on.

I want to know why he hid it.

“Answer the question,” my mother says, and there’s more than just an edge to her voice. It’s cutting. “Who is he to you?”

“I…” I start, but I can’t finish, because I don’t know how. Mentally I’m trying to process the fact that Tae has been lying to me, that he’s been working himself to the goddamn bone.

My mind conjures the image of him, lying in the bathtub. I could see his ribs.
The anger in my chest fizzles, and in its place is a heavy sadness.

“This is what I’m talking about,” my mother states finally, taking a long drink of her wine and setting it down on the table so hard it practically sloshes out of the glass. “You’re ignoring your duties to your family. You’re ignoring us. And you’re associating yourself with the damn help. You go out at night, putting yourself in danger – can’t you see this isn’t healthy, Jungkook? Can’t you see that–”

“Don’t pretend you know me,” I bite out. “Don’t pretend you give two shits about me.”

“If we didn’t care, then why are we here?” my father chimes in. His expression is stern and hard to read.

“Money,” I say, sitting back and looking him straight on. “It’s all you’ve ever cared about. What’s family to you if you could instead be working, securing your lofty, cushy retirement.”

“That is not what this is about,” Mom says, and the edge in her tone breaks. Her voice breaks. “Jungkook, we want you to come home.”

“What home,” I ask, and it’s a statement. A fact – that for me, there’s never been a home. I swallow. “You ignored me. My whole life, you both ignored me. I grew up in a house that was silent, and when I went to school and got– and got– bullied for years. I got the shit kicked out of me there. Did you know that?”

They’re both silent.

“I’d come home and the fucking maid would help me clean up the cuts and… shit. Where were you guys? You weren’t there. That’s it.”

“Jungkook–”

“No,” I say, and my eyes narrow. “That’s. It.”
“We were trying to provide for you,” my father says. “It might not have been the best, but we were doing what we could to make sure that you had a safe and secure life.”

“Safe and secure,” I echo, and when I lift the glass of vodka that Tae had brought to the table, I chug the whole thing. I ignore the wrinkled disgust set on my mother’s face. “I don’t know a damn thing about ‘safe and secure.’ I wonder who I learned that from.”

They’re silent. We all are. All around us are the sounds of clinking silverware, of people laughing and enjoying dinner. Here, it’s the same as always. Silent. Uncomfortable.

“I need to go,” I state, and not just to get out of this situation.

“Please,” Mom tries. “What can we give you? Money? A safe place to stay? We’ll work it out, whatever it is—”

“There’s nothing you could give to me that I want or need,” I say flatly, except I know it’s a lie. What I really want to say – love – hangs heavy in my heart. I feel it everywhere, rolling over me like a dark wave.

My response hangs in the air and I can’t help but see the look on my mother’s face… like being slapped.

“We’re trying to help you,” my father says. His tone is softer now than it was before. “Jungkook we– we don’t want you to end up getting hurt. And… we need you, too.”

“Find somebody else,” I say, taking the napkin in my lap and throwing it on the table. “Because I’m done.” And with that, I stand up, cross the room, and without any regard for rules or the wide eyes of the staff members I pass, I walk straight into the back of the restaurant to find Taehyung.

One woman, a waitress, sees me walk into where the kitchen is. There are people everywhere, shouting out orders and making food; steam rises in the air and it sticks to my skin, to my clothes.

“Sir,” the waitress says, putting her hands up in front of me, alarmed. “You shouldn’t be back here.”
I ignore her, moving forward. “Taehyung!” I shout above the noise, and many heads turn. Their expressions are shocked, to say the least. I know I’m doing a bad thing here. I know this isn’t right – but I need to find him.

“Sir, if you don’t leave someone is going to have to escort you out,” the woman says now, her tone hardening. “Please go back to the lobby.”

And then, I see him.

He’s standing in the back, arms crossed in front of him, one hand covering his eyes as a man stands in front of him, talking to him. No, not talking – shouting. He’s getting yelled at.

“Hey,” I say, pushing past the waitress and moving further into the back, past chefs and staff members to reach where they’re standing. “Hey!”

At once, both the man and Kim Taehyung look up at me. I see a look cross his face – confusion and then aggression – and when my eyes meet Taehyung’s, I can see they’re wet. His whole face is red.

“I tried to stop him,” the waitress says from behind me, approaching us now with an unsteady voice, full of urgency. “I said that if he didn’t leave that he’d need to be escorted out—”

“Sir,” the manager says, and finally I look back up at him. He grabs hold of my arm and gives me a vicious look. “It’s time for you to leave.”

“Tae,” I say, and his grip on me tightens as he starts to drag me back to the double doors leading to the kitchen. “What did you say to him?” I say, shouting now at the man with his hand on my bicep, now insistently pulling me away from him. “Taehyung, I need to talk to you.”

“I don’t know what to say,” comes Tae’s small reply, and then I’m gone – pulled through the dining hall, where all eyes are now on me. I see my parents’ reaction when I glance up at the back booth. They’re mortified.

Another man comes from out of nowhere, taking my other arm. He’s dressed in all black and he’s twice the size of me.
“Get him out of my restaurant,” the manager snaps at him, and I realize now that he is not just the manager. He is the owner.

I can feel myself fucking everything up, one second at a time.

I’m thrown out of the building, door slamming behind me as the wind whips cold air across my face.

I stand there for a few minutes, not knowing what to do, where to go. My blood is boiling. I want to run back inside and scream and yell, and demand that they let me talk to Tae. Except, after just a few minutes, I see Kim Taehyung through the all-glass restaurant door walking toward me, head down, chin pressed to his chest. He’s got his coat on, his bag slung over his shoulder. I recognize it as the same one from this morning.

“Tae,” I say as soon as the door opens, and he pushes past me. “Taehyung.” I reach out to grab him, but instead he jerks away from me as though stung.

“Why did you do that!” Tae snaps, turning on his heel, whipping around to face me. His eyes are swimming, his face a bright shade of red. “That was so embarrassing for me– I just. I just got fired, Jungkook! Do you know how hard it was for me to get this job?”

I’m consumed by anger. It runs up my throat and collects in my mouth and all at once I’m yelling back: “Oh! Was it really hard to get this job you never told me about? This third job, Tae?”

“Shut up,” he says, and then, at once, I’m slapped with guilt. “Don’t talk to me like that, Jungkook, when you’ve been lying to me, too.”

I stop.

He presses on. “‘My parents own a small restaurant’? That was a complete lie. Those people were filthy rich. I saw the way they looked at me, and– God! You lied to me!” His voice breaks and hurt pours out.

“I’m sorry,” I say, sputtering. “I didn’t know how to tell you–”
“You’re a liar Jungkook. Why couldn’t you tell me? Because you, what, thought I’d treat you different?”

“I don’t know,” I say, and my face crumples. “Why didn’t you tell me? Why didn’t you just admit you were working another job?”

“Because you would have told me not to, and… and I can’t accept your money, Jungkook!” Tae sobs. “And I just didn’t know how to say it. Because you keep saying you’ll save me and win all of this money from that boxing tournament but… but even if you do, I can’t take it!”

“Well you don’t have any other options!” I shout back, and my chest feels like it’s sinking, deeper and deeper as every word comes out wrong. “You either take it or those loan sharks are going to kill you, Tae!”

“I–” he tries, but I cut him off.

“You never even told me how much,” I say, “but I don’t think that you working three jobs is going to cut it. Your fucking life is on the line, Tae – how do you not get that? You’re working yourself to the fucking bone! You’re just barely hanging on here – I’m trying to help you!”

“I can’t–” he starts, and his hands are balled up, covering his eyes. I’m the one making him cry. I’m throwing this in his face, like he has no idea, when in the back of my mind I’m sure he’s well aware.

“It’s just money,” I’m saying now. “Don’t you get that it’s worthless – it doesn’t mean anything, if you’re not here?”

Tae won’t look up at me.

“Fuck,” I shout, my voice cutting through the air like a knife, and I find myself wiping my nose and eyes because it’s all coming out now, and I’m crying, too. I hate myself for doing it. I hate it. My heart feels like it’s breaking, and I’m the one doing it to myself.

We stand for a while in silence, waiting for one of us to say something, wiping our faces and trying
to put back the pieces of everything that now hangs broken in the air between us.

“Who are we,” Tae starts, finally, moving his hands from his eyes and looking hard into my face, “if we can’t even be honest with each other?”

It’s a sentence that hangs heavy, that settles in my heart and turns into a rock. So much of this relationship has been built on us both keeping things from one another. Our feelings, our past, and now our present. It’s been lies and lies and, looking into his eyes now, I know we’re both drowning in it.

Tae’s shoulders fall, eyes breaking contact. He looks at the ground between us, at the crack in the cement that divides where we both stand. “I don’t know how to take your money,” he says finally. “I don’t… I don’t know how to do it because… I’ve never been given anything like that. I’ve never had money.” He pauses. “I wore the same two shirts to school every day growing up. My dad beat the shi** out of me when he caught me taking money so I could eat lunch at school. I just… I don’t know how to accept anything. From anybody. And especially not you.”

“Why not?” I ask. “Why not me?”

He sighs, sniffs again. He wipes his nose with the back of his wrist. “I wanted to keep you separate from all of this. I’ve been on my own since my mom died. And it’s… it’s not that I don’t need help. I know I do. It’s just that I wanted to do it on my own… because I didn’t want anything to fall on you. I didn’t want you to be burdened by me.”

“You’re not a burden,” I say, not as just a statement, but as a truth. “You’ve never been a burden, Tae.”

He shakes his head, like he doesn’t believe it, but then he stops and shoves his hands in his coat pockets.

“I used to get beat up at school,” I’m suddenly saying out loud, “while my parents ignored me for years. And they never even found out until I told them today. Because they never asked. But it happened for years and I never thought I could tell anybody, because nobody would listen. I don’t know how to talk about things.” Instinctively, I reach upward, and my hand grabs at the cloth of my shirt over my heart. “I don’t know how to trust people with myself. I don’t even know how to talk about this without feeling… without…” I can’t say it. Without feeling ashamed.
I wonder why I say it at all – until I realize I’m doing it to keep him. I’m opening a door inside of myself, because I’m trying to let him in. I’m doing a piss poor job of it – but I’m trying.

The wind blows.

Tae looks up at me. “Who are your parents? Really, who are they?”

My throat clenches. I try to swallow, but it hurts. “They’re… they own a property management chain. They…” I trail off, not wanting to say it, but forcing the words out anyway. “They’re not loaded, Tae. They’re billionaires.”

I see his eyebrows shoot up. “Oh.”

“Yeah.”

“Do you meet them for dinner often?” The question comes slow, and it hurts to hear, because now it’s like he doesn’t believe anything I’ve told him at all regarding them. Regarding everything.

“No. This is the first time I’ve seen them in a year. Well, almost. My mom tried talking to me a while ago…”

“Oh,” he says again, then looks down. He kicks a stone with his shoe. “So… you really tried to cut ties with them, then… I get it. You don’t think they cared about you.”

I run a hand through my hair, then take a seat on the curb. Tae sits down next to me without saying a word, and I note the space between us that is usually closed. It feels farther than it is.

“I don’t know anymore,” I say finally. “They seemed pretty sorry inside. I mean, as sorry as they can be.” I sigh. Admitting it out loud is hard. “I can’t help but thinking that part of this is about how they want me to come back and work for them. I can’t tell if they’re being honest or if they’re just acting that way to get me to leave.”

Tae’s quiet for a minute, and then: “Would you?”
My heart strains and I look over at him. “I would never leave you, Tae.” I look away. “As long as you’ll have me, anyway.”

“I don’t want to lose you,” he says without hesitation. “Even though we just fought, and you – we – lied to each other. Even after all of that.”

“I don’t want to lose you, either,” I say.

He smiles a sad kind of smile, then holds his hand out to me. I take it without even thinking, and when he pulls it to his mouth, kissing the back of it, I remember the first night he did that. I remember that we were drunk, having just left the bar – and he said goodnight to me, kissing the bruises on my knuckles before disappearing into his apartment.

What a long way we’ve come since then.

“Can you forgive me?” I ask him now.

He nods, his smile a weak line as his eyebrows pull together. “Can you forgive me?”

I want to cry again, but instead, I just squeeze his hand and lean my shoulder against his. “Of course I do.”

We sit for a minute like this, our breath rising in the cold air. Eventually someone from inside the restaurant comes outside and asks us to kindly get off the property, so we get up and leave, walking back in a strange, dazed quiet that is saved only by the feeling of Tae’s hand in mine.

I get two tickets and we take the subway home. It’s busy, lots of people heading home from their work commute. We both have to stand, but Tae sticks his hand in one of my pockets and I don’t fight the urge to stick mine in it as well. Holding hands the whole ride home is nice. Holding hands after we leave the station is nice, too. At one point Tae pulls two sticks of gum out of his pockets and we decide to have a contest of who can blow the biggest bubble, and I win by a long shot (even though he starts popping mine with a deft flick each time I one-up him). We fall into a rhythm that’s easy again, and slowly we start to let the discomfort from our fight roll off us on the cold evening breeze.
“I’m sorry I got you fired,” I say before we get to the door.

“It’s okay,” Tae sighs, and I can tell he means it. “I didn’t fit in there, anyway. It was a bunch of rich jerks and the hours weren’t even that great.” He pauses, then smiles, nudging me.

“You looked kinda hot in your waiter uniform,” I say, and as soon as I’ve said it I feel my neck go hot. I look off into the distance, up at the sky. Saying something like this – it’s embarrassing.

Tae starts laughing, then tugs me closer. “Not as hot as you look in your little boxing shorts.”

My whole face is engulfed in flames. Smoke probably pours out of my ears.

“I thought you were cute from day one,” Tae now remarks.

“So that’s the real reason you brought me home,” I shoot back, then wrap an arm around his neck, putting him into a headlock. Tae doesn’t stop laughing, trying to tell me no, I swear! But he barely gets it out between giggles. I kiss him aggressively on the top of his head, then on his cheeks and the side of his mouth until I’ve got both arms around his neck and then, we’re kissing on the street, underneath the light of a lamp post.

There’s something different about this kiss though; it’s hectic, and sudden, and there’s want and need that sit side by side instead of a line being drawn between them. His hands are in my hair, and then his mouth is on my neck. My hands grip at his waist and I’m tugging, grabbing at his hips and moving them to meet mine.

God.

I can feel him.

“Tae,” I breathe, and he sighs into my mouth, then pulls away from me.

“Let’s go,” is all he says, taking my hand, and then we’re running back to the apartment building, fingers laced as we run up the stairs and throw the door to my apartment open, slamming it shut again behind us as my back slams against the door.
It’s not like before. It’s not just warm in my chest; I can feel it everywhere.

“Tae,” I say against his lips as his tongue slips into my mouth. His hands roam my shoulders, grabbing tightly at the tight sleeves of my jacket as my knees buckle and, without meaning to, my hips rut against his. Taehyung moans into my mouth and I wrap my arms around his neck.

His lips move from mine, traveling down my neck, mouthing against my skin as his breaths shorten. My lungs are heavy. My hands move to his neck, pulling him closer. Urgency.

Tae sucks at my neck, and I wonder if it will leave a mark. The thought of seeing something on me tomorrow, knowing who put it there and how it felt when he did – it sets off a fire in my bloodstream.

His lips return to mine. They’re soft, wet. My tongue darts into his mouth, in once, then out again, and then back in; it feels fast and slow at the same time.

“Jungkook,” I hear him breathe, and his deep voice is so low it’s almost inaudible. “Need– need you.”

My eyes open and I pull back to look at him. He’s looking at me with eyes that are dark and. And hungry. And mine must look the same way because he takes my hands and we cross the room, eyes never leaving one another’s, and I wait as he takes a seat on my bed, hands fisting in the sheets behind him, shoulders up to his ears as he stares, waiting.

I kneel between his legs and kiss him on the mouth, steady. “What do you want?” I ask, and it’s equal parts not knowing and teasing.

Hands that once were on the bed find themselves tangled in my hair, his fingers curling around my ears.

“You know,” he says, and I almost laugh – because in this moment, I realize that Taehyung thinks I’m smarter than I really am.

“Tell me,” I pry, and as my kisses trail from his mouth down to his collarbone, I feel him shudder.
He moans. *Fuck.*

“I want you to fuck me,” he breathes – then, breath catching, he looks down at me, suddenly serious. “I mean, if you want to.”

I nod, and after thinking about it a moment, I almost laugh again. “I don’t know how this works,” I admit. A smile slips out and when he sees it, he smiles back.

“Me neither,” he replies. “I was kind of hoping you would.”

“We’ll figure it out,” I tell him, and I’m laughing now. He laughs back, and then we topple into my bed, lying side by side, lips pressed again and it feels like the first time.

Tae’s hands slide around my waist, one dipping under my jacket as his palm presses against the small of my back. I arch forward, pressing my chest against his. One hand moves down, gliding along the planes of his back until it reaches his ass and, in a stroke of confidence, I’m grabbing at him. He moans again.

“Jungkook,” he sighs against me, rocking his hips forward to meet mine. I gasp a little, shuddering against him, and my hips press forward to his, grinding. I can feel him and I know he can feel me too, already painfully hard in my dress pants.

Tae’s hands fist in my blazer and he starts to pull it from my shoulders; I shrug it off my arms, yanking it out from under me as I move to kneel, one leg hiking over him as I unbutton my dress shirt as fast as I can. He does the same, and when we’re both down to our undershirts, I lean forward, palm flat against the planes of his stomach. I glide my hand up his chest. He lets out a shaky breath, eyebrows pulling together.

“I want to,” he starts, and I watch him as I press my thumb against his nipple over the thin white fabric of his shirt. “Mmf– Jungkook.” His eyes slip shut and he arches to meet my touch. Leaning downward, I swallow; this hunger is painful. I bend over him, mouth hovering above his chest, and without an ounce of certainty, I slip my tongue across his raised nipple. He cries out, his deep voice broken. It sounds good – so I do it again, this time with a renewed sense of confidence.

My eyes slip shut and I’m mouthing against it, one hand pressed hard into the mattress as my other slides up his shirt, pulling one side from the waist of his pants. A muffled cry escapes him and I
realize he has his hand over his mouth.

I lift a hand to his wrist and tug, pausing for a moment. “Don’t,” I say. My tone is soft. His eyes find mine and I stare back openly. “I wanna hear you.”

He hooks his teeth on his bottom lip, hand falling from his mouth and catching mine in his. Our fingers lock and he nods. Briefly, I run my thumb across the back of his hand and he does the same, and when I know he’s okay, I start to move again.

With my other hand, I tug the other side of his shirt upward, pulling it all until it bunches around his neck, and he lifts off from the pillow for me to slide it off completely.

This isn’t the first time I’ve seen his body. I saw it when I was forced to carry him to the shower, to undress him and clean off the mess left by the loan sharks. There are still bruises on his skin, and without thinking, I brush over them with my fingertips.

“You’re beautiful,” I murmur.

He scoffs. “I look like shit.” But it’s half-hearted – because even if he thinks it of himself, he knows I’m telling the truth. The way I see him is different, and I can see the way his eyes light up when I smile, taking his lips in mine and kissing him slow.

Before didn’t count, I want to tell him, heart aching, remembering his expression as I stripped him down to clean his broken body the night I found him in his apartment. This is what counts. Just this.

When all at once his teeth catch my lower lip, my knees buckle, hips bucking unintentionally as a moan escapes my mouth. I can feel him smile, then grab at the back of my tank as he pulls it halfway up my back, as far as his arms can reach. I pull away for a moment to take it off, because I know that’s what he wants.

We still, watching each other for a moment, eyes roaming one another’s bodies before his hands timidly find my bare waist, thumbs brushing across my skin. I smile.

God.
Suddenly, Tae’s hands move to the button of my dress pants; he looks up at me as he undoes the button, equal parts unsure and determined, and I can’t help but run my hand through his hair, brushing it out of his eyes as I watch him work. His lips part, staring at the zipper, slowly pulling it down and tugging my pants from around my waist. They fall to bunch around my knees.

He lets out a long breath; hands that once worked deftly now flatten, gentle, and with one on my thigh, he brushes the other over my tented boxers and cups me through them.

My eyes slip shut, rolling back into my head. He’s palming at me, over the fabric, slow and steady and fuck, it feels so good, and I’m getting hard, and every nerve in my body is all at once wired, sensitive.

“Taehyung–” I start, but then his hands move from mine and he’s unbuttoning his own pants, pulling them down his legs, yanking them off and digging his heels into the bed as he grabs my ass and drags me down onto him. My eyes widen; he isn’t just pulling, but he’s pushing, too. His hips grind up against me and my eyes fall shut again. A moan pries itself from my throat and this, this is what I’ve been wanting.

“Ah,” I choke out, my shaking hands flattening against the bed on either side of his head as my hips roll, rubbing myself against him out of need.

“Yeah,” he sighs, and his voice turns up at the end. “Ah–”

I press a hasty kiss against the side of his mouth; I can feel my underwear starting to dampen at the head of my cock, the fabric becoming uncomfortably wet. I roll against him again, this time so hard it sends a jolt of something all throughout my body. I rock back, then press down again.

“Feels good,” I’m saying, but I can hardly speak because all I can do is feel. In this moment, my tongue goes numb and both of us are nothing but breaths and sighs and moans, collecting in one tangled warmth taking over both our bodies like a flame.

“I wanna, mmf. I wanna feel you,” he breathes, hands splayed on my shoulder blades, fingers digging into my skin. Desperation.

“I–” I start, when all of the sudden his body rocks forward and he rolls me over onto my back in one swift motion. He bucks his hips to meet mine, and that’s when I feel that he’s wet too, all at
once hard and slick and rubbing against my stomach.

“I meant now,” he grins. Cheeky. He kisses my jawline and his fingers curl around the edge of my boxers, dragging them down painfully slowly; I lift my hips and he pulls them down, all the way. The cold air hits me and my eyebrows pull together, fingers running taught against his chest before they find his waistband. He watches me as I tug at them, fast, pulling them down, down, until–

We both kick our underwear to the end of the bed and pause. Looking at each other, taking in our mutual nakedness, hands wandering on one another. There’s a beauty in the newness of finally, finally seeing each other that I hadn’t expected. My chest warms.

“You’re so freaking hot,” he says suddenly, and I jerk back, laughing out loud.

“Come on!” I shout, one hand flying over my eyes. “You can’t just say that right– right in the middle of–”

“You are,” he says simply, and then he pulls my hand away and looks back into my eyes.

He looks… happy.

“This was how I wanted this to feel,” he says simply.

I smile, tender as I take his waist in my hands and brush my thumbs over his skin. “Me too.”

He scoots a little closer, then leans forward, eyes never leaving mine. He brushes his hardness against my chest, once, then twice, then– Fuck. I lift my hips, pressing back against him, and then I feel it, his cock sliding against mine.

“That,” I manage, but it’s all I can get out before Tae takes the initiative, wrapping his hand around both of us, bucking his hips as staccato breaths leave his lips and warm my neck and cheeks. I know I’m beet red, but so is he, and he realizes it too late because I’ve already seen the expression on his face before he tucks his head into the crook of my neck and stifles one loud moan against my skin.
“Fuck,” he shudders, and I don’t stop myself from reaching out, thumbs brushing hard over his nipples, pressing back and forth, pinching, pulling, until his whole body is trembling.

I can barely focus because everything feels so goddamn hot; his skin begins to feel damp, and I know I’m sweating too, but I ignore it and move one hand down to cup his ass, grabbing, and then smacking once as he fucks himself against me into his hand.

“Mm, J-Jungkook,” he tries. “I’m– ‘m close–”

It starts small, the electricity in the pit of my stomach, but it builds so fast that I can hardly capture it when it all at once begins to spread. Creeping upward. Riding through my veins like crackling waves. My breathing has gotten too loud. The need’s become too strong.

“Fuck,” I whisper, voice sharp, and I grind my hips against him senselessly. My mind won’t focus. My lips tremble.

“Jungkook, I, I,” Tae whimpers, lifting his head a little to meet my eyes. His are dark, hooded; and then, without warning, they pinch shut tight, mouth popping open, and his hips jerk forward, hard and fast as his warm cum shoots across my chest.

I don’t stop because I can’t, not yet; I’m rutting into his hand, all wet and pressed firm against him, and I’m searching for that same sense of release, bucking my hips so fast a cry breaks from my lips and then, and then–

Vision blinding, my grip on him tightens and I can feel it, cum pooling, all at once thick and warm at my waist as it collects there with his. My whole body shakes. I’ve got tears in my eyes. He runs a thumb slowly over the head of my cock and I fall back weakly. My mind is numb. The muscles in my stomach won’t stop convulsing, even though his hand has slowed to a stop, and neither of us are moving – but the room is spinning, and I can’t help it.

My eyes slip shut. I breathe.

We’re both sighing, hot breath on hot skin, his forehead pressed to the nape of my neck as we start to come down from that invisible edge. My hands are trembling, and they reach up to take his shoulders, gripping gently as if to will him closer. His lips press against my temple. I feel his chest rise and fall. At once he collapses against me, perhaps from overstimulation, or heat, or the aftermath of one moment that felt like the bursting of a star.
A hand combs through my hair, fiddling with the ends at the back of my neck. “That… that was–” he starts, then laughs lightly, breathless.

“Yeah,” I say finally, and I’m smiling. “I’m… Ah. I’d say I was sorry for it not really being how you’d imagine, like, our first time would be, but I’m not, because that was–”

“That was so good,” he grins, smiling with his whole body as his shoulders rise to his neck. He sits up and looks down his nose into my eyes.

Tae is glowing.

I’m smiling so hard my teeth show. He presses his lips to the side of my mouth, then takes my lips with his and kisses me long, hard.

“I love you,” he says simply. “I must sound like a broken record, but I’m not sorry, and I love you.”


He sighs, rolling off of me, then lifts one hand up as an offering. I turn toward him on my side and watch his eyes as my hand meets his, fingers lacing together.

“I have to fight Jin,” I say, and I realize it’s the first time I’ve said it out loud – to Tae, to anyone. “That’s… it’s tomorrow, Tae.”

“I heard,” he says. His eyes slip shut and his eyebrows pull together. There’s fear. But there’s also

“No,” I start, “I didn’t– I mean, I didn’t bring it up because I wanted to like, guilt you into going or anything. You shouldn’t go if it will upset you.”

“It upsets me either way,” Tae sighs. “I know you want to protect me. You’re always doing that.”

He pauses, opens his eyes and I can see there’s hesitation in them. There’s fear. But there’s also
determination. “I just want to support you like how you’ve always supported me.”

“You don’t have to watch me fight Jin for me to know you support me.” My chest weighs heavy. “You don’t have to put yourself through that. I… I think you’ve been through enough as it is.”

Tae looks at me a moment longer before he sits up, and he looks down at me with greater determination than before. The hand not holding mine lands on my waist and his thumb brushes against my skin. It feels like a flame.

“The others are all going,” he says starkly, “and I am, too.”

The resolve I’ve held onto dissolves in my mouth and I let it exhale from my body, nervousness fizzling a little as I say at once: “Okay.”

He sighs. There’s a moment that passes between us, quiet save for the sound of us both breathing.

“Are you scared?” he asks finally.

“Of Jin?” I ask, and he nods. “No. A little. I don’t know. I don’t know how he’s going to fight… I don’t know if we’re even friends anymore.”

“It’s my fault,” he says, and he turns his head into the pillow, expression twisting with guilt. “Jungkook, I… I can see the way he looks at you.”

My heart pangs with sharp pain; hearing him admit it out loud makes it manifest into something real.

“I know,” I whisper. “I see it too… but it isn’t your fault. It’s just… Life. It’s weird and shitty most of the time.”

“Life is shitty most of the time,” Tae laughs, a little sadly.

“But it feels better with you,” I finish. “Like maybe things could be easier someday.”
He looks back at me and smiles, then lifts his hands to my face and pulls me in, kissing me slow, soft. I wonder what it would take to stop time and hold onto a moment like this without letting it slip away entirely – what it would cost to live like this forever.

I want things to be easy for us.

I want so much it hurts – and everything inside of me buzzes with a darkened hope.

We get up the next morning, slow and dragging and a little uncomfortable. Tonight, everything is at stake. I can feel myself radiating with nerves. Taehyung helps make lunch, but I do most of the cooking while he sprinkles seasonings here and there, stirs this and that while making little comments about the smell and the sun shining outside. He’s trying to calm me down in his own way – singing, ruffling my hair, pressing kisses to the back of my neck every once in a while to remind me that he’s here.

I’m in a different world. I wonder where Jin is; I wonder what he’s doing, if he’s happy, or if he’s just as anxious as I am.

This is going to be hard.

I haven’t wanted to admit it, but I know that it will be – because no matter what happens, one of us is going to get hurt.

This story doesn’t get a happy ending.

In the locker room, I start to change and hear the door opening. I don’t look up – something inside me knows who it is by the way his footfalls hit the linoleum, the slow stride and the change in the air.

His shadow passes and moves to the lockers on the other side of mine.
I wonder why it has to be this way. I wonder if somehow, all along, this was inevitable. And if it was, I wonder why I was ever allowed to be his friend at all.

My chest aches. I leave the locker room first – the air inside too heavy to breathe for long.

When I walk down the long hallway, I straighten. *This isn’t the time to be nervous,* I think. *You have to win this for Tae. You’re doing it for him. No matter what, you have to win this – everything is riding on it. Stop thinking like a child; do what you have to do and win.*

“Jungkook!” I hear, and there’s hundreds of people packed into the standing room, all cheering as I make my way through the sea of people. “Jungkook!” I hear again, and my wide eyes search, knowing that somewhere there’s a group of five people waiting for me.

As I get closer to the ring, I see them; they’re all standing, holding tightly onto their beers as they’re pressed together like sardines from the sheer amount of bodies in this room. I see Namjoon first, his height giving him away. He’s got one hand up, raising it with an open palm and I can’t help smiling a little as I squeeze through people to make my way to them.

Under one of Namjoon’s arms, Jimin’s head peeks out. Standing directly in front of them are Suga and Hoseok, and then, just to their left, I see Kim Taehyung.

I flush. He looks nervous, a little scared, and yet somehow… proud. I know that this pride doesn’t come from what I’m about to do, but rather *why* I’m doing it.

As soon as I’m able to squeeze through the throng of people, I find myself standing before them, their arms reaching out to me for hugs, to tussle my hair, all of them yelling in excitement.

“Be careful!” Hoseok says to me, his tone warning as though he’s speaking to a child. “Jin’s got a few years on you, Jungkook!”


I laugh, hitting my gloves together out of habit. “I’m good. I got this.” My words are slurred by the
“You got this,” Tae echoes, and my eyes find his, holding his gaze for a moment before I nod. Certainty. Support. Strength.

“See you after,” I tell them all, and they nod, cheering behind me as I walk past them. I tap Tae on the shoulder as I pass him – for you – then pull myself up into the ring.

And I wait.

My eyes don’t stray from the entrance until I see the curtain pulled back. Jin steps out, all tall and broad-shouldered and muscled with a look on his face that’s hard to place. I watch him as a new wave of cheering erupts from the audience, to whom he nods and presses forward, eyes looking at the ring but not at me. Never at me.

Eventually, he too makes his way into the boxing ring, accompanied by the referee. The sound of hollering is static in my ears and I’m only watching Jin, analyzing him for as long as I can – until, all at once, he looks up.

Anger.

It’s coming off of him in waves and we haven’t even started yet. I can feel his aggression heavy in the air as the referee calls for us to meet in the middle, to touch gloves. We do; I hold mine up first, and when Jin hits, there’s power behind it. I try not to flinch, or stumble back. The ref looks at Jin with a warning gaze, but doesn’t say anything – because he knows this is going to be something else. We all do.

“Are you all ready for the final fight of the tournament?!?” he shouts, and the whole room erupts.

“Two boxers – the first! A rookie who has proven his incredible stamina and agility by making it through to the finish line... In this corner we have Jeon Jungkook!” More cheering.

“And in this corner!” The crowd is already crowing. “We have the tactical genius – the powerhouse – the one, the only, Kim Seokjin!”
Everything sounds like an explosion.

We don’t break eye contact. I’ve never seen him look like this; Jin, who is kind and funny and looks out for others, who takes care of the ones he cares about and has felt like a big brother to me since I came to live in the Sonyeondan apartment complex. This is the same man, and yet, he looks so different now. I’ve never felt smaller.

I feel sick.

The whistle blows, and it begins.

At first it’s like in slow motion; our dance around the ring, both of us shifting quickly from foot to foot, gloves up just below our eyes, and then – bam.

Jin hits me the first time.

I’ve never felt him hit like this, like there was something wrong with him, or with me, or maybe both. He delivers the punch straight to the side of my face and my vision blurs for a moment.

Bam.

He hits again, this time on the left side of my stomach, followed by – bam – another square to my jaw.

I stumble backward, eyes watering. Fuck. I have to– I have to win this. I have to do it for Tae. It’s all I have.

He tries to swing again and now, there’s a fire burning inside of me, too. I dodge him, just barely; my head dips and he leaves himself open for me to deliver a punch straight to his gut. Jin hardly even flinches. All he does is look at me with those dark eyes, watching. Waiting.

Bam.
I’m hit again. I can feel it in my lungs this time, the shortness of breath. *Bam.* My back hits the ropes of the ring and *bam, bam,* trying to breathe, *bam.*

The whistle blows. Round one winner: Kim Seokjin.

I look up at him from my corner, leaning heavily as I breathe in and out, trying to take in oxygen and remember how to see straight.

“Round two!” the referee shouts, and when the whistle blows again I’ve righted myself, staring back at him, trying my hardest to hold onto the fire in my stomach and channel it at Jin. It doesn’t matter anymore, what’s between us or what isn’t – all that matters is the money because, at the end of the day, that is what is going to save Kim Taehyung. I have to do this. I have to.

*Bam.* This time it’s me hitting Jin, a hard punch that was meant to hit his side but ends up hitting his arm instead. He winces now. I can feel it in him, the anger, the rage.

But something else is there too.

It takes me a long time to place the feeling, but it’s when he’s wailing on me – *hit hit hit hit hit* all coming down on me like rain as my back slams against the ground and my arms are up trying to cover my head – that I realize it’s guilt.

Because even though he’s mad, and even though he feels hurt – Jin doesn’t want to be doing this.

When I finally am able to stand, just before the ref is about to call for a knockout, I look back at him and see it.

There’s tears in his eyes.

“Jin,” I start, breathing heavy, bones and muscles all aching as I feel something wet dripping down my face. “Please. I have to win.”

He doesn’t say anything, just turns to his corner and takes a long drink of water before wiping his forehead – his eyes – with the back of his arm. And when he turns back to me, his expression
hasn’t changed.

But it’s in this moment that I know something… something dark and burning in the pit of my stomach that is going to ruin absolutely everything.

Jin is not going to lose.

Chapter End Notes

...It's gonna be fine.
THE HOSPITAL – TAEHYUNG

Chapter Notes

heyooo!!!

i'm so sorry that it's taken so long to get this chapter out! but i actually just moved to South Korea to teach English, so it's been an insanely busy couple of weeks for me with very little downtime to write! so unfortunately this chapter is a bit shorter than others, but hopefully you'll enjoy it! our next couple of chapters are getting to the climax of the story, so get ready!!! we're almost done!

but don't worry!!! we have LOTS of ideas of upcoming fics (;

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The crowd around me is deafeningly loud, shouting out Jin and Jungkook’s names (but mostly Jin’s right now). Everyone is there to witness violence at their hands, to see the blood spurt from their noses and their eyes swell from the punches landed there. That’s what they’re all here to see - except for me.

I’m frozen in the crowd, staring up at the ring as Jungkook takes another hit under his chin that has him falling to the ground in the ring. There’s blood flowing from his nose and it’s on his arm where he’d tried to wipe it away already; his left eye is swelling up a lot from the first couple of hits he’d taken and his hair is wet with sweat. I watch his arms shake as they struggle to get him back to his feet, too stubborn to lose until he can’t physically stand up anymore.

Panic is rising in my body, from my toes to the top of my head in a large swell like a tsunami. I can feel my throat closing, air struggling to make it through the tight airways to my lungs that are starting to burn from my staccato breaths that aren’t sustainable. My body is shaking, eyes glued to Jungkook who barely manages to stand for the start of the next round.

Oh god, please, no more, my mind cries out, tears pricking the corners of my eyes, please, he can’t take anymore!

“Round four!” the ref shouts, waving his arm between them. Beside me, I can feel Jimin grabbing my arm, but I can’t stop watching as Jungkook stumbles slightly, his fists raised as he looks at Jin.

The sight of blood pooling down his nose and his split lip is enough to knock my body forward as I suck in a sharp inhale, gulping the oxygen and smoke into my already screaming lungs until it hurts some more. I flinch when Jin’s fist collides with the side of Jungkook’s face again, right in
his eyebrow, splitting open there, too.

I can barely register that Jimin is speaking to me until he moves in front of my vision, blocking the horrific blow that Jin delivers to the love of my life’s face. My ears pierced as I hear the impact, followed by the crowd making a collective “ah” as if they all felt that, too.

I’m going to be sick.

“Jimin,” I manage, my voice broken as tears are falling down my cheeks.

Jimin’s hands are soft on my both sides of my face as he looks at me with worried eyes, turning them to Namjoon as if silently communicating to each other. “Let’s go outside, Tae,” he says, trying to reach for my hand to get me out of the bar, away from the violence.

Away from Jungkook, who needs me.

As soon as Jimin is out of my line of vision, I’m staring up at the ring, at Jungkook leaning heavily against the ropes, spitting out blood as he holds onto them. He’s barely able to stand anymore. Jin is watching him with a dark expression that I can’t comprehend, and it’s when the fifth round starts that I realize: Jungkook is going to lose, but because he thinks he can save me, he’s going to keep going until his body won’t let him anymore. Until he’s knocked out, limp, bloody and destroyed.

“Tae,” Jimin says again, tugging at my hand, but his voice sounds so far away, like I’m underwater and he’s above trying to speak to me. His voice is drowned out by the crowing crowd, the angry shouts at Jungkook to just lose already, kid! The room is spinning, my knees feel weak, and I am flooded with more than a sickening fear deep in the pit of my stomach; I feel guilt and shame beyond what I’ve ever felt. Because I let this happen to him. Because I let him believe that he could save me, and I let him think that this would fix everything because I knew that he wouldn’t let me deny his help.

Because he still thinks that winning this tournament can solve all of my problems.

Jin lands another harsh punch to Jungkook’s ribs after dodging another of his; I can see Jungkook wince from the pain of that one. Jungkook manages to get one of his own hits in, to Jin’s shoulder, but Jin comes back and hits Jungkook’s ribs again, left open when he’d lunged forward.
I wrench my hand free from Jimin and push through the crowd to get closer to the ring. Bodies are packed tightly together there, but I manage to shove people out of my way, not caring when they spill their beer on me or shout at me or grab at my shirt; I pull free and wrestle my way through the crowd, right up until I’m gripping the sides of the ring, breathing heavily as I stare at Jungkook on the floor again.

“Jungkook!” I shout, my voice breaking in the middle, high pitched and hysterical. “Jungkook!”

His eyes find mine, and though one of his is very swollen already and he can barely open it, I can see that he feels guilt. I can see it. Like he’s letting me down, like he’s helpless to help me, like it was all for nothing to end this way.

“Jungkook, please stop.” I whisper, but I don’t think he can hear me because he’s pushing himself up with a pained grunt. “No! No! Please, stop! Jin! Jin!”

Jin doesn’t stop, and neither does Jungkook. As the sixth round begins, with my desperate cries for them to stop, they meet in the middle and Jungkook delivers a hard hit to Jin’s jaw, then another to his chest. But it’s not enough, because as retaliation, Jin it hitting him in the face, sides, anywhere that Jungkook isn’t defending.

There’s blood on Jin’s gloves and my stomach turns when he pulls away and Jungkook is bleeding from somewhere in his hairline.

There’s a certain kind of animosity in this fight - neither of them relenting, both of them feeling the pain of each hit ten fold because it’s coming from a friend. And yet, the fight goes on until Jungkook is pressed against the other side of the ring and Jin is wailing on him and won’t stop, and I’m shrieking now, my throat hoarse as I fight through my tears.

This needs to end, is all I can think, please let this end.

“Jin, please stop!” I scream, but he doesn’t listen. “Please! He’s your friend, please! He’s had enough!”

It feels like something snaps in Jin then, because he pulls away and Jungkook’s head swings forward, like he’s about to pass out. I’m so relieved, despite him looking so beaten and bloodied, because at least Jin’s stopped hitting him and it feels like the fight will end here.
God. Please let it end here.

“Jungkook,” I cry out, “Jungkook!”

He lifts his head and spits out blood, his eyes dark as he stares up at Jin. He opens his mouth to say something, but then Jin’s moving forward with his fists raised again.

My body takes over, pure adrenaline and fear rushing me forward as I climb up onto the ring, trying to get up to put myself between Jin’s anger and Jungkook’s weak body. The ref is shouting, moving towards me, and then I see Jin’s head turn sharply in time to see me rushing for him, my hands outstretched, trying to grab Jungkook, to protect him - something.

“He’s had enough!” I scream at Jin, tears flowing freely down my cheeks now. The ref grabs me before I can reach them, his arm hitting my chest painfully hard to stop my velocity, knocking the wind out of me for just a moment. He’s shouting for security. “He’s your fucking friend! Look what you did to him!”

Jin’s eyes are wide as he stares at me, then he slowly turns back to look at Jungkook who sways under his weight. Just as the ref is shoving me out of the ring and into some other large man’s hands, I see Jungkook fall face first to the ground of the ring.

“Jungkook!” I scream as loud as I can as I’m carried toward the main doors. I struggle in the man’s grasp, trying to wrench myself free, to go to Jungkook, to protect him and tell him that he’s going to be okay. “Please! I have to– I have to be with him! Please! Jungkook!”

Just before I’m thrown outside into a pile of snow, I see the ref lift Jin’s arm in victory.

The snow is cold against my bare hands and cheek. I scramble up to my feet quickly, slipping on ice and hitting the pavement on my knees. The door slams shut in my face and I grab the handle, trying to wrench it open, but it’s being held shut from the inside.

All the helplessness catches up to me and I crumble back to my hands and knees, crying and weakly tugging at the door handle, wishing that I could take back everything, everything that led to Jungkook being hurt this way. I don’t care that my body is shivering from the cold, my jeans wet from snow; all I can think about is how Jungkook’s body swayed before he fell to the ground, out cold.
“Taehyung!” Even with my eyes pinched shut I can recognize Jimin’s voice. The sound of footsteps fills my ears, snow crunching under multiple pairs of boots, getting closer to me. “Taehyung!”

My hand slips from the door handle as I feel Jimin hastily take me into his arms, kneeling in front of me. I can’t do anything but cry, wailing into Jimin’s coat, trying to force myself to breathe through it. He coos at me softly, rubbing my back; I can feel vibrations that mean he’s speaking to someone, but I can’t hear what they’re saying.

“Where’s Jungkook?” I cry, wrenching myself away from Jimin to look around frantically. Jimin’s eyes are sad as he watches me; standing around me, I now see Suga, who is frowning in a different way than usual - he looks upset, not stoic. Hoseok is beside him, and his lips are set in a thin line that wobbles when I make eye contact with him. He has to turn away. “Wh-where is Jungkook? Is he okay?”

“There’s an ambulance out back taking him to the hospital,” Suga tells me, because Hoseok and Jimin look too upset to speak. My stomach drops. The hospital. “Namjoon is going with him.”

“No! I need to go with him!” I shout, using Jimin’s shoulder as I force myself to my shaky feet. “I need to– I have to be with him! Where’s the ambulance? Where?”

Suga grabs my shoulders, forcing me to stop and look at him. But I’m so unfocused, my only thought being: find Jungkook.

“Kid, you’re in no state of mind to be in that ambulance with him,” he says in the softest way he can manage. “Namjoon is calm and can talk with the doctors. You need to calm down first.”

“You can’t keep me from him!” I shout, pushing against Suga’s chest, but he doesn’t let up. His grip on my shoulder tightens, not to hurt me, but to keep me in place. “You can’t! He’s hurt! He needs me!”

I’m crying again, shaking, and in the back of my mind, I know that I’m going through some type of hysteria from the shock of everything. Suga’s hands loosen, just a little, and I lean forward and cover my face, wishing that I could finally run out of tears because it’s all too much.

Finally, Suga is pulling me into his chest, wrapping his arms around me in a tight hug. He leaves
one hand around my back and brings the other to the top of my head, gently stroking my hair in a comforting manner. He lets me cry, just holding me, until my breathing finally starts to even out and my shaking stops and my mind slows down.

“It’s okay, kid,” Suga tells me. “He’s going to be okay.”

“I want—” I pause to sniffle. “I want to go see him.”

“Okay,” he replies. “Just give yourself a few more minutes and we’ll go see him.”

“Together,” Hoseok adds and I lift my head to look at him. He looks terribly upset, no doubt from having witnessed not only two of his friends fight so savagely but also from having seen my hysterical breakdown. “We’ll go together, Taehyung.”

“I’m sorry,” I whisper, my bottom lip trembling as new tears threaten to spill over.

Hoseok’s expression softens even more and now he’s reaching out for me, wrapping his arms around both me and Suga. It’s serious, because Suga doesn’t even complain. A moment later, I can feel Jimin wrap his arms around us, too, the three of them enclosing around me in a warm and comforting hug.

“I’m sorry that I’m making you worry about me,” I say, sniffling again. “All I’m worried about is Jungkook. We need to worry about him.”

“I’m worried for both of you,” Hoseok whispers, then blinks rapidly. “Oh, Tae. You’re going to make me cry if you keep crying. It’s really going to be okay. He’ll be alright.”

“But he’s going to the hospital.”

“He’ll be okay,” Jimin says again, rubbing my back. “We’ll go see him in a little bit.”

I nod weakly, sniffling and wiping the rest of my tears away. It’s moments like these that I hate myself the most - when I need to be strong for someone else, but instead, I’m too emotionally weak to handle anything. I used to feel it for my mother, when she would have to comfort me after
having been beaten by my father; now, I feel it for Jungkook, who I know would be comforting me right now if he were able, despite him being the one to go through the hardship.

I force myself to get it together, because the sooner that I’m calm and collected, the sooner that I can be by Jungkook’s side. The sooner that I can take care of him, because he needs it more than I do right now.

“I’m going to run inside and grab Jungkook’s things from his locker,” Suga informs us, pulling away from the group hug first.

“I’ll go with you and find out what hospital they took him to,” Hoseok chimes in, giving me one final soft pat on the head before walking around back to head inside.

Jimin stays with me, one arm around my shoulders, gently squeezing every so often.

There are so many times that I can remember Jimin comforting me in this exact way. Younger, bruised and hurt but afraid to tell him what happened, or in middle school when I ran away from home barefoot in the fall after my father hit me with a beer bottle, or in high school when I was too afraid to go home so Jimin stayed with me at the nearby park and bought us ice creams. Between each of those memories, there are dozens more - sleepovers at his house because my mother didn’t want me home when my father was in one of his really bad moods or if she wasn’t there to protect me.

“Why is the world so violent, Jimin?” I ask, staring ahead of us at a streetlight, watching it turn from red to green. “Why do people hurt others?”

Jimin doesn’t say anything for a long time, instead just squeezing my shoulder gently again. When he finally does speak, it’s in a quiet and sad voice. “Sometimes, people just don’t learn how to understand their own emotions. And it isn’t the person they hurts fault. They don’t deserve to be hurt.”

I look at Jimin, wondering if he’s talking about Jungkook or me.

“You know that I’ve never hit anyone before,” I say and he nods, “but I want to hit Jin right now.”

Jimin’s expression softens even more, his eyebrows pulling together in worry. “Tae, you don’t
mean that. It was messed up and he went too far, but Jin is still our friend. He’s still Jungkook’s friend.”

My jaw clenches and I am reminded of every interaction that I’ve had with Jin in the last few months. Him yanking me from Jungkook’s bed, making me feel ashamed to have slept near him; or pointing at me when we’d played the Image game and he said ‘the most likely to end up alone’ which now feels more like it was personal than just playing a game. Any of the times he ignored me in the group’s presence, or when he didn’t even look at the photos that I’d gifted to Jungkook for Christmas.

“He’s not my friend.”

Before Jimin can reply, Suga and Hoseok return to us outside carrying Jungkook’s black gym bag. Standing behind them is Jin, who has the audacity to look upset with his head bowed, staring at his feet.

“Jin’s going to come with us to the hospital,” Hoseok says, glancing behind him to look at Jin before gently patting his shoulder. “He wants to apologize to Jungkook.”

I stand quickly, Jimin following after me, but before he can grab me, I push forward, between Hoseok and Suga, straight to Jin. I grab the collar of his coat, my fingers gripping so tightly around the fabric that it physically hurts my hands, stretching the cuts on my skin that have mostly healed. My breathing is ragged, pure rage flowing through my entire body until I feel like I’m going to explode. I raise a clenched fist, my jaw tight and my eyes wild and seeing red.

“Taehyung!” Hoseok shouts, trying to grab my shoulder to stop me.

Jin looks up and we lock eyes, and for the first time since I’ve met him, he looks truly worn down. His eyes are sad as they bore into my angry ones, and he doesn’t even try to deflect my raised fist, like he would welcome it - like he deserves it.

And god, does he deserve it.

My bottom lip wobbles pathetically and my fist lowers back to his coat, gripping it like a lifeline as a fresh swell of tears start back up.
“He was your friend!” I shout out brokenly, my voice hoarse and thick with tears. “Do you know how much he looked up to you? Missed you? Worried about having to fight you? And then you did that to him!”

“I’m sorry,” Jin whispers.

“How could you do that to your friend?” I wail, shaking him from my hold on his coat. “How could you do that to anyone?”

I’m crying hard again, loud sobs wracking my body until I’m face first in Jin’s chest. I want to scream at myself for being so pathetic, want to slap my face and tell myself to get it together. But having seen Jungkook – my Jungkook – hurt the way he was, having been forced to see him take all those hits the way that I used to have to take hits from my father... My emotional strength has whittled to nothing.

This is worse than getting beaten. I would rather get beaten every day if it meant protecting Jungkook from that kind of pain.

“Taehyung~” Jin starts, his voice soft, as if he cares. I can feel his hands hovering over my back, uncertain how to comfort me.

I wrench myself away from him, dropping his coat as if it’s burned my hands, pushing him back. The last thing that I ever want is his hands on my body. Not after what he did to Jungkook. Not after I saw what his fists could do to a person. I glare at him through my tears, my nostrils flaring as the anger rounds back, taking over the hysteria.

“What you did was disgusting and horrific,” I tell him, making sure that he feels each and every word as they leave my mouth. “He’s the kindest, sweetest person that I’ve ever known, and you just ruined him. What you did was overkill and you fucking knew it half way through.”

Jin stares at me, his expression morphing into one of pain, though it does little to calm me down. I glare at him again, struggling between the desire to punch him in the face and my morals that tell me not to hurt someone on purpose.

“You don’t deserve him. Not as a friend, not as a gym buddy. Not as anyone.”
“I–” Jin starts, but he stops, unsure of what to really say.

“Taehyung,” Jimin says, his tone surprised when I turn away and start running away from them, “where are you going?”

“I’m going to find him!” I shout back, angry at them for keeping me from him. Angry at Jin for doing this to him. Angry at myself for letting it go this far. “I’m going to the hospital.”

“Wait, we’ll go with you!” Hoseok shouts back. I ignore him and focus all my energy on running as fast as my legs will take me. “Taehyung, wait!”

As soon as I’m far enough away from them, I pull out my phone from my pocket and scroll through my list of contacts until I find Namjoon’s name. He answers on the third ring, his voice sounding a little bit frantic, which destroys all of my nerves and makes me stop, feeling like I might actually get sick in the middle of the sidewalk, a combination of all the feelings that I’ve gone through in the last half hour.

“Taehyung?” Namjoon says when I don’t reply right away.


“We’re at the Seoul University Hospital,” he supplies, just as I make it near a busy intersection. I wave my hand out, hailing a cab as quickly as I can, sliding into the backseat easily. I tell the driver the hospital, still listening to Namjoon’s voice on the other end of the line. “He’s getting a CT scan right now, so I’m in the waiting room.”

“Did he wake up yet?” I ask quietly, staring out the window as the tall buildings blur by.

“No,” Namjoon informs me, his voice small. “Are you okay?”

I close my eyes and breathe in deeply, willing myself to hold it together. Jungkook needs me right now, and I can keep crying. I need to get it together and be strong so that I can be there for him and comfort him.
“No,” I reply, because I know that I can’t lie. “No I’m not. I’m angry and I’m upset and I just really need to be there right now with him.”

“I’ll meet you at the entrance to the emergency room,” Namjoon says and we hang up.

I spend the next 15 minutes in the taxi cab, biting on my nails until there’s hardly any nail left. When we manage to pull up to the hospital, I quickly shove several thousand won at him, telling him to keep the change as I throw the door open and make a mad dash for the entrance to the emergency room.

It’s chaos when I step inside. There are nurses and doctors rushing around, people sitting in the waiting area, machines beeping loudly or not at all. Amidst it all, I manage to find Namjoon and quickly run to him, clasping a hand on his shoulder to alert him of my presence (as if the heavy breathing wasn’t an indicator).

“Namjoon,” I wheeze as he turns around and makes a move to grab my shoulders to support me. “Where is he?”

“They’re taking him from CT to a room,” he replies, rubbing circles into my back. “He’s being admitted for the night but he’s going to be okay. Doesn’t need surgery or anything like that.”

I close my eyes and exhale all the air in my lungs, relief flooding through me and crashing over everything. My knees shake a little and I stumble backwards one step before Namjoon is steadying me again.

“Taehyung, have you eaten today?” he asks, worried. “You look so pale.”

I try to think, but the entire day feels like a blur aside from the last hour or so with the fight and my hysterical breakdown afterwards. This entire night feels like it’s never ending and my body is too tired to even hold up my weight at this point.

“You’re here for Jeon Jungkook, right?” a nurse asks, and my attention snaps to her quickly. “He’s just been moved to his room. You can see him now, if you’d like.”

“Is he awake?” I ask, my voice boardline frantic.
“Not yet,” she replies, her eyes worried as they take in my appearance. “He’s going to be okay, though. He has a concussion and we’ve given him some pain meds and tended to his cuts and bruises. He just needs rest.”

“Oh thank god,” Namjoon says from beside me, his arm around my shoulders to support me. “What room is he in?”

“516,” she supplies after looking at her chart.

Namjoon thanks her and we head for the elevators, pressing the button for the fifth floor quickly. I lean against the wall, letting my head rest against it as I close my eyes for a moment. They feel sore, most likely from all the crying, though I’m sure they’re red and puffy, as well.

We manage to find room 516 pretty quickly. Namjoon lets me step inside first, and the moment I do, I’m floored by how small Jungkook looks in the hospital bed, an IV stand near his bed connected to his arm. His heart rate machine is beeping steadily. I step up to the side of his bed, taking in the swelling of his left eye that’s purple and black, of the white bandage over his eyebrow, and the bruises all over his jaw line.

I swallow back against the lump in my throat, my fingers very gently brushing against his cheek, pushing his hair back, running over his bottom lip but stopping where the split there is.

“God,” I whisper, because I really can’t believe how beat up he looks. The dark bruises stand out even more against the white of the sheets and pillows behind him. “I’m sorry, Jungkook.”

Namjoon gently places a hand on my shoulder, and I look up at him. “It looks worse than it is, Taehyung. He’s going to be okay, you heard the nurse.”

I nod, not trusting my voice, and turn back to Jungkook. Namjoon pulls a chair up for me to sit, and I do, gently interlacing my fingers with Jungkook’s and bringing the back of his hand to my lips. I place a delicate kiss there, on each of his bruised knuckles, before letting our hands rest against the mattress and placing my free hand over top of his.

“I’ll go call the others,” Namjoon says. “I’ll let them know that you’re here safely - they’ve been texting me nonstop since you called.”
“I don’t want to see Jin.”

“Okay.” Namjoon is surprisingly calm, despite how I’ve been acting and how hard it must be for him to be the level head in the situation. “That’s fine, he doesn’t need to come tonight. Jungkook needs rest, anyway.”

I nod, and a few moments later, Namjoon is out of the room to make some phone calls. I turn my attention back to Jungkook, scooting the chair closer until my knees are pressed to the side of the bed. For a while, I just stare at him, taking in every single cut or swelling or bruise; then I notice that the scar on his cheek is swollen, and it makes my heart sad. He’ll wake up and the scar that has healed from a bad memory will hurt again.

And for what?

All of this happened because Jungkook was trying to win to give me money to keep the loan sharks at bay. Because he thought that the ₩3,000,000 would be enough to get them off my back, if combined with what I had saved.

Because I never told him how much I really owed back to them, or that I knew it was doomed the moment they put that two month timer over my head. Even with Jungkook’s winnings (which I would never have taken, though he refused to hear that) and what I had saved, it would have even been half the amount owed.

₩22,556,100.

That’s enough to put a bounty over my head, enough that working three jobs wouldn’t cut it in two months. Enough that it would take me at least a year of hard work to have paid it all off.

Looking back up at Jungkook’s battered face, I feel every single atom in my body weigh down with guilt. Because it’s true that Jin physically hurt him and caused him to end up here in the hospital bed, but because I didn’t refuse his money or tell him the full truth, he kept getting up even when his body wanted to stop.

I did this to Jungkook. I hurt the person that I love.
“I’m so sorry,” I whisper. “I love you and I’m sorry.”

I wake the next morning to fingers running through my hair. My eyes slowly blink open and I squint against the bright white of the room that’s even more blinding with sunlight coming through the window. Jungkook’s hand is still holding mine, but his fingers are clasping mine back, instead of limp like they were last night.

“Tae?”

I sit up quickly, watching as Jungkook’s free hand falls from my hair and onto his lap. He’s sitting up, leaning against the pillows on the back of the bed. But he’s awake - and he tries to smile at me, but he looks sad.

“Thank god you’re okay,” I whisper, leaning forward to rest my hand that isn’t holding his against his cheek softly. I press my lips to his forehead and close my eyes – relieved. “How are you feeling? Are you okay?”

“I was feeling pretty bad when I first woke up,” he admits with a sheepish smile. “But the nurse came in to check on me and gave me some pain meds. I feel fine now.”

I move so that I’m sitting on the edge of his bed, resting our laced fingers on my lap.

“I’m sorry, Taehyung.”

I look up from our hands to see his expression shift into one of sadness and shame. He turns his face away from me, his eyebrows pulling down and his mouth frowning. I can see his adam’s apple bob as he swallows, his shoulders tense.

“Don’t be sorry, Jungkookie,” I whisper, resting the palm of my hand on his cheek again and turning his face to look at me. “I’m sorry. You didn’t do anything wrong, okay? You did more than enough. You were great. I’m sorry.”

“Why are you sorry?” he asks. “I’m the one who didn’t win you that money… Now when the loan
sharks come back I– I don’t know what we’re going to do, Tae. But I’ll think of something. I’m not going to let those bastards hurt you again.”

I let out a long sigh, turning my attention back to our hands on my lap, patting the top of his so it’s trapped between mine. For a few moments, I don’t say anything, just take in the moment of knowing that Jungkook is alright, he’s awake, and he’s going to be going home with me soon.

“Jungkook... even if you had won, you know that I wouldn’t have accepted the money,” I tell him, finally getting the courage to look up and meet his eye. He opens his mouth to protest, but I beat him to it. “And even if you had convinced me to take it, it still wouldn’t have been enough, even with what I have saved.”

He blinks once, twice. His expression changes to one of confusion. “You’ve been optimistic, especially with working multiple jobs, though...”

“I know, I didn’t want to stress you out,” I reply with a small shrug of my shoulders. “Jungkook, I owe over ₩22,000,000 to the loan sharks. It doesn’t matter how many jobs I worked, there was no way that I would be able to pay it off in two months – and they knew that when they set the deadline.”

“I don’t understand,” he says, his eyebrows pulled together as he looks down at our hands. “Then why have you been killing yourself and destroying your body working so hard? Why do that if doesn’t matter anyway, since you couldn’t pay it back?”

“I thought that if I saved up enough in two months, that I could give them enough money for them to realize that I was serious about paying it back.” I bite my bottom lip, wincing when my teeth make contact with a sore spot from where I’d already chewed it during the stress of last night. “Ah, it was more of... a bargaining, I guess. Like it would be more worth it to keep me alive to pay them back than to get blood on their hands.”

Jungkook’s mouth falls open at this, staring at me with wide eyes. Slowly, I bring the back of his hand to my mouth and lay soft, butterfly kisses there, hoping to calm him down.

This is why I didn’t want Jungkook to be involved in this part of my life.

I always hurt the ones that I love the most - it’s why they never stay.
“I’ll think of something,” Jungkook tries weakly, his dark eyes boring into mine with a new determination. “I’m going to fix this for you, Tae. I’m going to keep you safe.”

“It’s okay,” I whisper, leaning forward to gently cradle his swollen cheeks. “You can’t fix everything, Jungkookie.”

I can see tears well up in his eyes, frustrated that he knows that I’m right about this. Even if we both wish that wasn’t true. I tilt my chin up and gently kiss away the tears before they are able to fall, then let my lips travel to his nose, forehead, and finally, a gentle one on his lips. He shifts beneath me, one hand reaching up to cradle the back of my head, the other placed on my thigh, and he kisses me back.

It’s soft and tender, and lasts for just a few moments before I pull away and rest our foreheads together.

“I love you,” I tell him. “I love you more than I’ve loved anyone.”

“I love you,” he echos, his fingers gripping my shoulder tightly, trying to keep me close for as long as he possibly can. “I love you so much, Taehyung. And I am going to keep you safe. No matter what.”

I bury my face into the crook of his neck and close my eyes. “I would rather die than ever let them touch you,” I murmur into his skin. “I never want to see you hurt like this again - especially not because of me.”

Jungkook wraps his arms around me and I let my legs come up under me so that I’m lying beside him on the bed, tucked neatly into his side. I wrap my arm around his middle, hiking my leg up over his hip and cling to him the way I do every night before we fall asleep. We both sigh, content, as his fingers trail up and down my spine in a calming manner while my thumbs rub gentle circles into his side, soothing him but being mindful of the bruising.

“I almost hit Jin,” I confess quietly, absentmindedly picking at the hospital blanket with my free hand for something to do.

“What?”
“After your fight,” I explain, keeping my eyes down in shame from the rage I felt the night before. “When I saw him afterwards I… I almost lost it. I was so angry with him for hurting you like that.”

Jungkook’s fingers still against my back and instead, he uses them to lift my chin, forcing me to look him in the eye. He doesn’t say anything, just offers me a small smile that seems to convey everything – that it’s okay, that he feels like he’s in a weird place with Jin, too.

We’re quiet for a while, just holding each other in the cramped hospital bed. Jungkook’s breathing seems to even out as he slips back into sleep, and I spend the time brushing my fingers through his hair and helping him relax to fall into a deeper sleep.

My phone buzzes on the chair, and I lean over to grab it, seeing the group chat lighting up.

Group chat: Lil hyungies

**From: Jimin**

Hey, any news on Jungkook today???

**From: Hoseok**

No. Suga, Namjoon and I are about to head to the hospital.

Jin, you coming?

**From: Namjoon**

He was still sleeping last night when I left.

Taehyung stayed with him, though.

Doctors said he would be discharged later today or early tomorrow morning.

**From: Taehyung**

He was awake for a little bit

Just fell back asleep tho

If ur coming, bring us food
From: Suga

I’ll bring chicken and some sides

From: Taehyung

hyung!!!!!!! We will owe u our lives

From: Jimin

Lol taetae

I’ll get on the bus and head to the hospital, too!!!

From: Taehyung

hey, can one of u guys pick up some clean clothes for him???

From: Jin

I’ll get the clothes.

From: Hoseok

Jin!

are you gonna come to the hospital with us?

From: Jin

No, but I’ll get his clothes together

And bring them to your apartment.

I close my phone and sigh, feeling weirdly guilty about the entire Jin situation, even if it wasn’t my fault that he wasn’t going to visit. I glance up at a sleeping Jungkook and frown, wondering if he would even be ready to see Jin yet, himself. Despite the fact that I’m angry and upset at Jin for what he did to Jungkook last night, I realize that it’s Jungkook that must be feeling a lot more conflicted about the whole thing.
For the next hour or so, Jungkook sleeps peacefully. The nurse comes in to check on him and gives me a knowing look when she sees me laying beside him on the bed, but she doesn’t say anything. She writes a few notes on his clipboard and tells me that he should be discharged tomorrow morning.

It’s shortly after that that (most) of the gang shows up.

Suga sets several boxes of chicken and side dishes down on the table, while Hoseok and Namjoon step up to check on Jungkook, who is still groggy from having just woken up from his nap. Jimin greets me in a very tight hug, practically crushing my body with his.

“You had me so worried last night,” he chastises me softly. “You’re lucky that my boyfriend was here to keep tabs on you and send me updates, otherwise I would have kicked your ass for running away like that.”

I grin sheepishly at him, “Sorry.”

“How are you feeling, Jungkook?” Hoseok asks as he fixes a plate with chicken, kimchi and pickled radish pieces for him. Jungkook bows his head in thanks as he accepts the food, popping a piece of radish into his mouth.

“I’m okay,” he says. “But I’m almost 100% sure that’s because of the pain meds.”

Hoseok’s smile falters a little and Suga steps up with a bottle of coke, twisting the cap open for him and handing it to him. “Yeah, you look like shit.”

Jungkook smiles as he takes the coke, “Thanks hyung.”

“Anytime.”

Namjoon laughs and shakes his head, taking the side next to his bed. “We brought you a change of clothes for when get you discharged.”
“Thank you,” Jungkook says, looking at all of them. “It’s really not that big of a deal. But… thank you, anyway. For the food and clothes.”

“Of course, Jungkookie,” Jimin replies cheerily, plopping himself down on Namjoon’s lap. “We’re just glad that you’re doing better. Last night was pretty tense, for all of us, I think. But I’m sure it was the worst for you and Jin-hyung.”

“Why didn’t Jin come, by the way?” Jungkook asks, popping a piece of chicken into his mouth next.

“I think he wanted to give you time,” Hoseok offers, his free hand moving to my shoulder, as if he could sense how tense I got when his name was mentioned. “He’s sorry for what he did. He knows that he went too far last night.”

“He’ll come around sometime,” Suga adds, his eyes moving to me. “I’m sure he’s waiting for a time when Taehyung won’t be here, though. Since he almost punched him in the face last night at all.”

I cross my arms over my chest in a defensive manner. “I didn’t hit him.”

“You came pretty close,” Hoseok says, taking Suga’s side (of course). “But the most important thing to note here is that Jin is sorry and recognizes that what he did was wrong. He’ll come around eventually, Jungkook.”

We spend the next hour eating and hanging out, everyone mostly recounting how impressive it was to see Jungkook fight - even if he did lose. They stay until the nurse kicks them out stating that visiting hours are over, and that they come pick him up tomorrow morning at 11 o’clock, after he’s discharged.

I get to stay, though.

So we say bye to them all, promising to see them tomorrow. Once they’re gone, I clean up the room and throw away the trash while Jungkook lays back in the hospital bed, turning over to his side. He watches me move around the room until I’m turning off the light and coming to sit in the empty space on the bed beside him.
Jungkook is quick to pull me to his chest, wrapping his arms around me and sighing into my hair once we’re finally together again. I wrap mine around his middle and tuck myself under his chin, closing my eyes and letting our legs tangle together under the blanket.

“Thanks for staying with me,” he whispers, kissing my hair as we settle together.

“Always,” I whisper back. “Goodnight, Kookie.”

“Goodnight, Tae.”

Chapter End Notes

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