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**Fandom:** Stray Kids (Band)  
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**Character:** Kim Seungmin, Yang Jeongin | I.N, Hwang Hyunjin, Bang Chan, Kim Woojin, Han Jisung | Han, Seo Changbin, Lee Felix, Lee Minho | Lee Know  
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**Topple**

by [TalicTriesToWrite](http://archiveofourown.org/users/TalicTriesToWrite)

**Summary**

//plot-heavy angsty Seungmin-centric fic//

He is really just doing his best. Balancing school life with exams right around the corner and a hectic schedule of idol life is as hard as it sounds, a life that Seungmin at Cheongdam High faces alone.
When Seungmin performs badly on stage, he receives negative comments criticising and doubting his dance and vocal ability, fuelling him to work even harder to impress them and his members. But, life serves Kim Seungmin yet another punch to the face when the school bullies begin to target him and he finds himself not being able to deal with it all.

Will Seungmin be able to overcome school and idol stresses or will he topple like a domino bringing the rest of his team down with him?

After all, the brightest stars cause the biggest explosions, and with the world watching him, Seungmin is merely a ticking time bomb in the game of fate.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
Seungmin felt sweat prickle on his glistening skin as he jumped into the air in synchronization with his other eight members, shooting out his left hand at the next bass beat, creating a rainbow shape over Woojin who was mouthing the words to his part in the final chorus. Seungmin snapped his body to his next and final position, gliding his foot towards the fogged-up mirrors due to the intense body heat perspiring on the thin reflective glass. The music, their newest track that was ready to be released at Stray Kids’ next comeback faded out, the room filling with heavy pants of each member, even the stamina-filled Minho and Hyunjin who had been dancing for what seemed like an eternity.

“That’s a wrap” Chan breathed out, falling out of the complex diamond formation first. At the leader’s heaven-sent words, Seungmin plopped onto the glazed pale wooden planks with an exhausted sigh, the floors lightly damaged by the tedious and intense hours of dance training by each of the many idol groups signed under JYP entertainment.

“That was horrible” Felix groaned and sat next to Seungmin with a ‘thud.’ To winded to say anything, Seungmin replied with a faint smile and attempted to catch his breath.

Six hours of dance practice on a Sunday night is too much Seungmin thought, looking at his reflection in the mirror. His brown hair damp with sweat, stuck out at outrageous angles, making Minho, who Seungmin could see behind him laugh as the elder ran a hand through his own slightly-less unkempt dark locks.

Seungmin looked away from the mirror with a huff. He knew that he wasn’t the best dancer in the group – far from it actually – but after a few years of dancing he hoped he would have more stamina than this.

To be fair Seungmin looked around the dance studio in amusement of seeing almost all members dramatically leaning against the wall, another member or scarfing down the precious water from their plastic water bottles until the last drop. The others don’t look in great shape either.

“Come on Seungminnie” Hyunjin stretched out his hand for the lost-in-thought boy to take. “Let’s go back to the dorm.”

Seungmin pretended to frown at the nickname but gratefully accepted the help up. “I’m glad that’s over” he exclaimed as he grabbed his soft hoodie off the red leather boxy chair slammed against the matching red wall of the room.

“Agreed” Jisung sighed and over-exaggeratedly leaned on Hyunjin as they walked out of the heinous room. Seungmin laughed at his hyung’s excessive and somewhat childish antics. Although Jisung is only slightly more than a week older than him, he still seems to act younger than Seungmin himself and at times even their maknae Jeongin.

Seungmin felt relief wash over him as he left the JYP building and headed towards the black car that would take the members back to the dorm. Each Sunday evening was the worst time for Seungmin and most of the Stray Kids members – a gruelling and energy-draining six-hour dance practice, with only a few ten-minute breaks in between. As the days of school at Cheongdam High passed by, leading closer and closer to the hours of hell on earth, the tension in Seungmin’s chest would build higher and higher like a wall surrounding his lungs, only stripping down when Seungmin left the building, covered in sweat and a few new bruises.
But, the bruises showed how hard he worked, the ugly purple and green splotches on each member’s legs highlighting all their determination. Despite this, Seungmin couldn’t help but notice that when he sat down in the car, squished between Woojin and Felix, that the dots on his friends’ knees were a few ugly shades darker than the bruises on his own.

Seungmin carefully but quickly took his instant ramen out of the microwave, wincing as the hot packaging burned his fingers. Grabbing some chopsticks, he sat at the head of the long rectangular dining table, Jeongin sitting down the other end, his head buried between piles of messy notes and red corrections on papers.

The boy began to blow on the tasty looking noodles, a feeble attempt to cool them down, but steam billowed in dancing puffs of air until the grey faded into nothingness, reminding Seungmin of the steam rising into the air from his almost scolding shower he had as soon as he reached the dorm.

“Hyung?” Seungmin-hyung?”

At the call of his name, the second-youngest member of Stray Kids looked up towards where Jeongin was waiting impatiently. “Y-Yeah?” Seungmin asked, pulling his mind out of his thoughts.

“Can you help me with my math homework? I don’t really understand it” Jeongin confessed with a smile on his face, seeming to snap out of his impatient state.

Seungmin left his cup of noodles and walked over to where the younger was sitting. Pages upon pages were filled with neat calculations, many of them having large red crosses next to them in a vibrant, but unwanted, red gel-pen.

Seungmin searched the paper, trying to jog his mind back to when he slaved over the countless formulas and rules of this type of math. The time was in fact last week where he had spent hours in class where he sat learning the exact work Jeongin was doing now, revising the formulations from when the class had first learnt them in the previous year, but the harder he tried to remember how to do the calculations, the more he remembered the teachers annoyed gaze when he got each one of them wrong.

“Sorry Jeonginnie” Seungmin said with a sheepish smile, leaning away from the horrendous math work. “I can’t remember how to do those ones exactly, but I can get Channie-hyung or Hyunjin to help?”

Jeongin sighed, in the exact disappointed tone his teacher often did, but for a different reason than Seungmin’s incompetence at mathematics. “Yeah, thanks hyung. I have my practice math exam in two weeks so I’m a bit stressed.”

Seungmin ruffled the younger’s hair in return and when a sleep-deprived Chan entered the kitchen, Jeongin beckoned the elder to come help him in a flurry of hands. Seungmin sat back in his chair to eat the now cooler noodles, blocking out the useful explanation of how to solve the equations.

*I should probably do some study before I go to bed* Seungmin thought. *I have my practice exams soon and not to mention a million tests next week.* The brown-haired boy looked towards the clock, grunting in dismay at the late time of 12:17am.

*It’s too late to set up all my books and get anything productive done. I can wake up early tomorrow and finish some homework if I need to.*
Seungmin finished his ramen and threw the container into the trash, quickly washing the chopsticks he used, and the plentiful pile of other unwashed dishes left from the other member's dinners. *If everyone cleaned their own plate, then it wouldn't take up so much room on the counter* Seungmin frowned wiping the marble surface littered with rice grains, sauces and peas.

“Our classic Seungminnie” Felix said from behind him. “Cleaning anything, he touches.” Seungmin laughed at the true statement; the eighteen-year-old was some sort of a perfectionist when it came to the cleanliness of almost everything. When moving into the dorm full of young adult and teenage boys, Seungmin first felt at loss when each room was extremely messy from pillows on the floor to even dirty dishes in some of the members rooms, but with never-ending nagging from Minho and him, and even Woojin when the mess became out of control, eventually the dorms came to a cleaner state.

No members left dirty dishes in their bedrooms unless they wanted to suffer Seungmin’s wrath.

Seungmin dried his hands on a pale green towel and walked into his room, passing Changbin and Minho who were engrosses an odd animal documentary, one that the pair seemed to follow the series of. He entered his room, blinking rapidly for his eyes adjust and dilate to the contrast of light from the television to the dark room. Jisung was quietly snoring, cuddling into Hyunjin on the eldest’s bed. Seungmin smiled fondly at his hyungs’ affectionate gesture. Along with Chan, they were the two most affectionate members, often cuddling into members during both on and off camera.

Seungmin quietly got undressed, not wanting to disturb his sleeping roommates. He turned on his bedside lamp at the dimmest setting and took out his diary from under his bed. It was such a predictable place that no one even bothered to look; if they were brave enough to.

All members knew that one of Seungmin’s hobbies was writing his thoughts and feelings onto endless crème pages of the leather hardcover book. Despite the news of him owning a diary was open to both his members and the millions of STAY around the world, its contents were as private as Seungmin’s own mind. Living with the members created a great friendship and an unbreakable trust; Seungmin believed with all his heart that no member would read his most secretive thoughts without his permission.

With a deep breath, Seungmin began to write, in neat Korean like he did everyday since becoming a trainee. Even before that, when he was thirteen, he kept a diary and committed to it as a golden retriever commits to fetching a bone.

By he had finished writing it was 12:49am and the white noise from the television was off. He could still hear Chan and Jeongin’s distant murmuring as they mulled over each step for each equation. Seungmin sighed, the depths of sleep not quite reaching him, and he kicked off his heavy blankets. By the time the kitchen light flickered off, indicating that the leader and maknae’s study session was adjourned, Seungmin fell asleep to the mumbled sounds of Hyunjin’s soft sleep-induced mumblings.

Seungmin wakes up and falls easily into his routine. Clean his desk, lay out his clothes and pack his bag in his pyjamas. At Jeongin’s “Hyung! It’s your turn to shower!” Seungmin walks out of his room with his fluffy white towel, does something to annoy Jeongin as they pass each other in the narrow hall to the bathroom (just like every Monday he pinches Jeongin’s cheek), showers, gets dressed into his midnight black blazer and ties his school tie tightly around his pristine white button-up shirt.
After he is changed he styles his hair, puts on cologne, and heads to the kitchen where Hyunjin and Jeongin are dressed in their yellow uniforms of SOPA High School and sitting with a still-tired-looking Chan and an awake Jisung. He cooks a dozen eggs and turns the kettle on for his hyungs’ who have coffee each morning apart from Woojin and Minho who settle with various teas.

Then he eats breakfast, relaxes or does some last-minute homework for the short he has until the driver arrives at 7:20am, puts on his shoes and leaves, seated in the leather chair at exactly 7:21am.

Mondays, though, are slightly different to the other four days of early mornings for school. On Mondays, Hyunjin’s and Jeongin’s driver arrives to the dorm at the exact same time as Seungmin’s car does, due to the late start the members attending Seoul School Of Performing Arts get, an 8:45am start instead of 8:10am like it is on the following days of the week.

Seungmin sighs and quickly climbs into the first black car that is awaiting a passenger.

“Good morning Seungmin” the driver welcomes the student into the car. Seungmin replies with a quick greeting and the pair fall into a comfortable and familiar silence.

Seungmin likes the routine, the procedure and steps of each thing he does each day before classes, that begin and ends at set times in the same seat in the fourth row next to the large window. The doctrine of missing one simple step of his morning drill would shift the rest of the steps, making Seungmin that one minute late, arriving in the black chairs at 7:22am.

Just like in routine, Seungmin glances at the window mirror, which reflects the weekly scene behind him as his car drives away.

And maybe the familiarity of the ache in his heart soothes him when he sees a hyper Jisung and a sleepy Felix farewell Hyunjin and Jeongin in their golden uniforms as they enter the second black car parked at the curb of the dorm. Seungmin brushes it off and turns back around.

After all it’s a routine. And Seungmin likes routines.

The classes are a bore. Seungmin sits at his single desk and tries to listen to what the teacher is talking about; whether it’s the Korean War or how to identify the radical in Chinese characters. But, the alluring window next to his wooden desk often catches his attention, portraying everything beyond the continues lectures and worksheets of his fourth period; Korean Language Class.

*STAY is out there* Seungmin muses fiddling with his pencil, zoning out his Korean Language teacher’s shrill voice. *I wonder what they are all doing right now...*

The high-pitched squeak of a whiteboard marker on the clear whiteboard catches Seungmin’s attention, the repeated grating noise with each stroke of a word makes Seungmin wince along with the rest of his twenty-three classmates.

“Remember you have the practice exam in three weeks” Mrs Kim reminded the students that sat impatiently at their seats. “You are dismissed.”

At the teacher’s words, Seungmin calmly starts to pack up his books, placing them into his bags as the flood of students wash around him like a river. In his class he isn’t particularly close with any of his classmates, something he regrets not trying to do at the beginning of the year when no one knew each other. But, the regret is not deep-rooted. During March, Seungmin was far too busy and stressed with debut and long vocal sessions and even more gruelling but hopeful dance practices.
each day and night.

*Speaking of, I have a vocal session at six and dance starting at eight.* Seungmin tucked in his chair to the desk and walked out of the nearly empty classroom and down the bustling hallways.

At Cheongdam and many Korean High Schools; lunchtime is two hours, allowing time for students to eat the provided meal and to either study, work or sleep – with a few large sleeping rooms filled with forty beds that were often filled to the brim and study rooms with many students spending their time doing the set tasks.

Seungmin finds his way to his small square locker, next to his friend’s Dayun’s locker. “Hang out at lunch?” he asks the short, dark-haired girl.

“Sorry” she answers, her face written with unspoken apologies. “Seojun, Haeun and I have band and orchestra practice today.”

Seungmin weakly smiles in response. Of course, it’s Monday.

“Ah, I’ll see you in History then.”

Dayun prettily smiles in response, grabs her violin and walks down the hall, the opposite way to the cafeteria where the four friends often eat together. Seungmin watches as Dayun runs into Seojin, a tall boy with a lot of acne who has his flute tucked between his arm, as they walk together, Dayun’s head thrown back in laughter at probably a sarcastic joke the tall boy made.

By the time Seungmin finishes putting his books in his locker, the hallways have thinned out, only leaving quietness behind.

The idol walked down the empty halls, aiming for one of the classrooms in the D wing, that was often unlocked and unused at lunchtime. He had stumbled across this classroom by chance last year while searching for a place to practice singing, away from endearing eyes of students and teachers alike. From constant lunchtimes alone each and every Monday, the private Classroom 53 became more of a homey comfort to Seungmin.

Seungmin walked the halls, his expensive shoes meeting the tiled floor the only thing making a distinct sound.

*I think I will read fans letters this lunch* Seungmin thought, feeling the colourful envelopes in the inside pocket of his midnight black blazer.

He smiled thinking of Stray Kid’s last fan-meet which last week where Jisung had attempted and failed a handstand while Bang Chan, due to however many years of gymnastics as a child (the leader somehow seemed good at everything except sleeping where Hyunjin would take the crown) performed one perfectly. Due to their hectic schedules, Seungmin didn’t have time to complete reading the all the letters he received, taking them to school to cherish STAY’s thoughts.

Seungmin cautiously stopped in the maze-like halls. Around the corner were the sounds of shuffling feet, loud voices and the ‘clang’ of the sound of a body being shoved against a locker. Like in a spy movie, Seungmin stealthily peered around the corner and felt his eyes widen at the scene.

One boy, he recognised as Younghun, in his chemistry and Korean Studies classes, was held against a locker by the collar of his now ruffled and wrinkled white shirt, by four other boys, known as the delinquents of Seungmin’s year level.
As one of the boys, Hyunwoo if Seungmin recalled correctly, turned towards Seungmin’s hiding place with instincts like an alpha wolf. Despite not getting more stamina from dance, one thing that certainly improved was Seungmin’s reflexes, allowing him to whip back behind the corner like a scared dog.

What do I do? Seungmin asked himself, trying to calm his erratic heart. Classroom 53 is just up corridor, but to get there I must pass… whatever this is.

Seungmin, with his decision made, took in a deep breath and turned around the corner, trying to look as natural as possible and like he hadn’t been standing there for the past few minutes. Seungmin kept his composure, walking looking directly ahead of him, not sparing a glance at the one-sided fight that was going on just meters away.

As he got closer to the scene, he started to hear the cruel nothings the ‘gang’ was whispering into Younghun’s ear.

Just keep walking Seungmin trained his eyes to the classroom door. Don’t get involved in a meaningless scandal, just keep walking.

“Look” one of the boys growled, slamming Younghun’s back further into the shiny red surface as Seungmin passed the act. “Even idol boy doesn’t care enough to help you.”

At the mention of his name, or title, Seungmin felt the hair of the back of his neck rise. Even if Seungmin stilled mid-walk and felt the calm façade on his face drop, the proclaimed ‘idol boy’ still kept walking forward, repeating the mantra in his head.

When Seungmin finally reached the safety of Classroom 53, closing the navy-blue door behind him, he couldn’t help but feel the guilt settle on his heart. Because just like every other time Seungmin had witnessed unkindness between students in either elementary school or middle school or in JYP’s own entertainment facility between trainees, he had not ever looked back.

But maybe ignorance was routine, drilled into him by society or by Seungmin himself.

The churning of the engine of the bus and soft hum of distant chatter of same pedestrians on the 5:12pm public bus as there were daily. After school, Seungmin took public transport rather than making his driver take him to JYP Entertainment as there was a bus stop directly outside Cheongdam High and one that is only a five-minute walk to the large facility.

Of course, Seungmin was disguised in a black facemask but as most passengers wore some type of cover, he did not look out of place. He searched the seats for the schoolgirl with the bear facemask that she wore. When he met her wide eyes, he looked away.

Despite never talking to her, or anyone on the bus that he saw every weekday when he got on the bus at 5:07pm, there was a weird and indescribable bond between the passengers that sat in the same seats each time they stepped onto this bus. Seungmin was sure he wasn’t the only person that felt somehow joined to the other familiar passengers who were like strangers to each other, the only thin rope tying them together was the fact that they boarded the same bus without exception.

The student sat on one of the back seats and ignored the other students from Cheongdam, in the cluster of them unfortunately sat Hyunwoo and Yejun, two of the boys that terrorised Younghun earlier in the day. Instead of talking, Seungmin scrolled through Stray Kids twitter feed, the group
tagged in an abundance of meme-like photos of each member of the group, most with captions.

Seungmin chuckled quietly at the ones he could understand and tried to read the English caption of a particularly blurry and low-resolution photo of Jisung pre-debut, with shaggy black bangs. *Me when*… Seungmin tried to translate the words with his quite limited knowledge of the frankly confusing language that the boy in the bad photo and the ‘Aussie line’ knew so well, but with no avail.

Seungmin frowned and looked out the window at the passing by a blur of shops and people. *My next ASC hosting in three weeks, and I haven’t even looked at the script.* The new MC had procrastinated attempting to translate the meaningless flood of letters on his cue cards ever since it had arrived two days ago. Even though he had all the tools he needed such as translating apps and the three members that were fluent in English, he always felt embarrassed failing to properly pronounce the words he mulled over.

Despite Felix’s and Chan’s constant reassurance as they watched Seungmin struggle to read through the script, the Korean boy could not help but feel slightly smaller each time he asked a question. *Doesn’t matter* Seungmin sighed and clicked out of Twitter and onto YouTube, where he found their most recent performance of I Am: You. Seungmin felt his face flush at the performance. He remembered the disappointment he felt after the showcase when his voice cracked singing the chorus of the title song.

He scrolled down to the comments.

*<lmao Seungmin’s voice crack!! You can see Minho laughing at if throughout the entire dance>*

*Likes: 206*  
*Comments: 59*

Seungmin hit the ‘Show Comments’ section under the first one. He scrolled down, reading ones that were quite funny, ones defending him but then he reached one that almost made him drop his phone.

*<Yeah, I noticed it. Seungmin really needs to work harder on his voice, with care these mistakes can easily be avoided. Also, he danced so badly this video and comeback overall. Like it seems so lazy and messy compared to the other members, especially the dance line…>*

*Likes: 37*  
*Comments: 21*

*<lmao lets petition to get Seungmin better dancing haha. He seriously needz it>*

*<I Believe some of these comments are quite harsh to Seungminnie^^ but he does need to work a bit harder on his dance,,, you can see at 2:16 he had to look at Felix’s moves to remember where he was in the song, after this much training he should be able to do it in his sleep>*
Seungmin read through the twenty-three comments, his grip of his phone tighter with each one. Although there were eight defending him in this thread, saying things like ‘Fighting Seungmin!’ or ‘Give the poor boy a break, he’s probably just tired,,, we stan kings!’ Seungmin could only focus on the negative ones, each word hurting his pride, confidence and heart.

<Seungmin should just leave. The whole time he’s just a backup and his dancing and singing sucks. Sorry not sorry for not stanning OT9 but I’m just being realistic. He’s a member that both the band and us could do without.>

Likes: 15                                                      Comments: 12

Fifteen. There were fifteen likes, fifteen STAY, fifteen people wanting him to leave Stray Kids. Each click of the small ‘thumbs up’ button was a stab to his conscious, making his hands shake and head ache with pain. Fifteen.

Seungmin finally tore his teary gaze away from his phone when he heard the small creaky wheels of the old woman’s walking device that got on the bus when he got off. Wait…

The bus started to move again and with a pale face, Seungmin realised that he had just missed his stop.

Seungmin started to get up in a hurry, collecting his bags as he waved for the bus driver to stop the bus. But his futile attempt deemed unsuccessful as the bus chugged slowly along, pulling meter by meter away from his location. With a defeated huff, Seungmin sat down with a soft ‘thud’ onto the badly cushioned and colourful seat he had spent the past ten minutes in.

Fifteen, huh? Fine. I do fifteen hours extra practice! I’ll do whatever it takes… I need to work harder at dancing if I want STAY to like me again. I vow I will!

He half-heartedly slid his phone into his pocket and hit the ‘next stop’ button to alert the unforgiving driver that he wanted to get off the bus at the next stop, an unfortunate ten-minute walk from the vocal studio of JYP Entertainment.

When he looked away from the obnoxious red button, he met eyes again with the bear-face-masked girl, who looked away immediately, knowing that the Seungmin missed his stop. Seungmin sighed.

When there was a disruption in the pattern he so meticulously followed, he was not the only one who noticed the consequences.

The bus pulled into the bus bay and Seungmin, who had already gathered his bag from his quick scuffle to reach them before and moved towards the door, stepping of the bus and straight into a large dirty puddle.

Great Seungmin thought, the long pant legs of his grey trousers now a few shades darker with water.

As the bus doors began to close the laughter of Hyunwoo and Yejun could be easily heard, laughing like wild hyenas at Seungmin’s misfortune. As he turned around, he eyes still on the bus that was waiting for the onslaught of passengers to get on at the stop, he walked straight into a person.
Seungmin fell to the ground in a blur and only opened his eyes when a searing pain ripped through his leg. Seungmin winced and flushed in embarrassment as Hyunwoo and Yejun’s laughter only grew louder. He looked up towards the window where the boys were sitting and snapped his head down as soon as he saw the phone pressed against the window.

Humiliation and frustration made Seungmin close his eyes tightly as he thought about his situation. He was down on all fours like a dog, with a bleeding leg in a disgusting puddle with tears in his eighteen-year-old eyes while the school’s most notorious bullies were filming. If this got around social media, not only would the whole school know, but the whole world would recognise the rookie idol is such a miserable state.

As if this day could have gotten even worse.

“I’m so sorry!” a voice from above Seungmin exclaimed. The idol stood back on his feet quickly, his head swirling at the sudden change of point of gravity.

“It’s fine” Seungmin said quietly. After looking at the girl, most likely around Bang Chan or Minho’s age, dressed in thin trackie-pants, a singlet top for working out in, and expensive-looking training-shoes he added ‘noona’ as an afterthought.

“My! Your clothes are ruined, I’m so sorry” she gushed and did a few short bows in apology. Seungmin smiled at how frazzled and apologetic she was being and looked at the ground to hide it. He looked at her shoes, the branding looked extremely familiar.

“You dance?” Seungmin inquired, recognising the shoes as an elite dancing type of sneaker. Minho and Hyunjin both had a pair of shoes by the same company.

“Oh, yeah! Just over there” the woman smiled pointing to a run-down looking studio that Seungmin never would have noticed in the light of day. “I know the outside looks a bit shabby” she explained, rubbing her hands together. “But the floors and sound system they have are amazing!”

“Oh, cool” Seungmin said slightly awkwardly, internally screaming at himself for asking such an odd question in the first place. As an idol, Seungmin had to be competent with small talk, especially with potential sponsors and fans, but without the other members sitting beside him he felt stripped bare, regardless of his dark facemask covering his red cheeks.

“Do you dance? My name is Subin by the way” she added. Now that Seungmin had recovered from his extremely embarrassing fall, he noticed that the girl was extremely pretty, making him even more flustered.

“Yeah, a bit” he hesitantly added, wondering if he should tell her his name.

“Are you a trainee? You are handsome enough to be one” she examined gushing on. “I am! I train at YG.”

“Really?” Seungmin asked, genuinely interested now. The idol opened his mouth to ask another question, but his phone ringing stopped him in his tracks. He grabbed the phone out of his pocket and saw Jeongin’s ID flashing on the screen.

“Ah! Sorry, I have to answer this, but take care Subin-noona!” he waved to the woman while backing away in the direction of the JYP Entertainment building.

She waved in response, a wide smile with slightly crooked teeth on display and turned away, her duffel bag bouncing to the rhythm of her spirited steps. Seungmin hit the green button of 'accept'
and put the phone up to his ear to answer the maknae’s call.

“Yes?”

“Where are you hyung?”

“I missed my bus stop, so I’m just walking to you guys now” Seungmin replied sheepishly, listening to the gentle sounds of Minho singing the lyrics to one of the songs 3RACHA was producing in the background of the call.

“Silly hyung.”

Seungmin smiled into the phone at Jeongin’s words. “Yah! Where’s your respect?” Seungmin said playfully, picking up his pace to reach the vocal studio before he was too late. “Just wait until I get there, brat!”

Seungmin smiled at Jeongin’s laughter on the other side of the phone call. “Ah, it’s my turn to record, but Changbin-hyung says to get here quickly!”

Seungmin smiled again, pushing today’s less than favourable events to the back of his head. Okay Seungmin, it’s time to focus.

“Great job Seungmin-ah” the dance choreographer complimented as Seungmin and the rest of Stray Kids relaxed from their final pose of the dance. “You had more energy and precision is each movement today compared to last time I came in” he ended, moving on to correct something about Jisung’s footwork.

Seungmin doubled over, resting his hands on his knees as he caught his breath. He had received similar praise earlier that evening in vocal practice, pouring his heart and soul into each melody he sang. He peered down at the line of redness on his otherwise flawless skin. A large cut covered to the frontal part of his shin from his fall earlier today.

Woojin had pointed it out when Seungmin was getting changed out of his uniform today, but thankfully the elder didn’t notice the damp trousers that were now lying in a plastic bag as to not wet his blazer.

The cut, although long, was hopefully not deep enough to scar. If it does scar, that would be extra work and a lot of makeup for the stylist noonas Seungmin thought, draining a water bottle.

Compared to last night’s monstrous practice, two hours of practice seemed like paradise. Still, Seungmin managed to tire in the first half of the night, always slightly self-conscious of the amount of sweat he emitted compared to the other members.

“Good job everybody” Chan clapped, ending the session. Seungmin breathed out in relief. Due to the choreographer’s overall positive feedback, the members could leave the studio and return to the dorms half an hour early.

“Good job, Minnie” Felix complimented as Seungmin wiped the sweat of his brow.

Seungmin smiled at his hyung. With his vocal coach’s, dance teacher’s and members highly-sought complements, the boy felt he could forget about the ‘horrors’ of the day.
I just over-reacted earlier Seungmin thought, leaving the cramped studio and narrowing his eyes as the cold wind pierced his face. Today was okay and tomorrow will be better he mused but the hopeful words wouldn’t be able to convince a toddler, much less himself.

So, he sat, this time squished in between Changbin and Jeongin, in the crowded car and closed his eyes, but not even the simple and once comforting action would cease the storm of unease starting to rise in his stomach.
Seungmin watched the grey buildings flicker past his window with a quiet puff, bags under his eyes coloured like bruises on his tanned skin, weighing his eyelids down like stones. He had stayed up way too late writing in his diary about the situation with Younghun the previous day. The tugging guilt remained from what he felt walking away from the threats the ‘posse’ had made to the glassy-eyed boy, words spilling from the serpent-like tongues like the words on numerous papers scattered on the floor from Younghun’s book-bag. 

*I just want this day to be over* Seungmin rolled his eyes as the driver turned yet another corner empty corner, the neon lights from convenience stores hurting Seungmin’s tired eyes. As soon as the brown-haired-boy awoke, he knew by the unease in his heart that still settled in his arteries, valves and veins that hadn’t faded by a night of sleep like Seungmin previously thought, that today would be a bad day.

The vibrating of his phone startled Seungmin and he watched in quiver in tune to their debut track ‘District 9’ with confusion and slight apprehension. *Who in the world would call at seven-thirty in the morning?*

He turned over his shaking phone to reveal the familiar caller ID of his ‘*Eomma*.’

With quick hands, he answered, and pressed the silver device to his ear.

“Seungminnie” his mother’s soft voice crooned. Seungmin felt a smile light up his features, his heart pumping with an emotion opposite to unease.

Comfort.

His mother’s dependable and caring voice made Seungmin’s day better with no fail.

“Hello, *Eomma*” he smiled again into the receiver. He looked into the mirror and met his driver’s inquisitive yet embracive eyes, holding the older man’s gaze until he returned his eyes onto the busy roads. Seungmin looked away with a smile as he listened to his mother’s ramblings.

He had the same gentle eyes as Seungmin’s mother.

“Yes, I’m alright *Eomma*, I’m just on my way to school now… Of course I’ve completed my homework!” Seungmin said through gritted teeth. Truth was he had the conclusion of his essay to complete and he had planned to do it in the lunchbreak before Korean Studies.

“Okay, alright” he exsapidly sighed as his mother chastised him, on a rampage about completion times and study.

Seungmin thought he was a good liar, a great one actually. He had learnt the psychology behind the ‘sin’ when he was ten years old and had used it ever since; when he forgot his homework when actually he didn’t do it, when he hadn’t practiced his singing and told the vocal coach he did. Or, one of the lies that hurt the most, when he watched as the other members cuddled in pairs often unconsciously leaving Seungmin out, but when Felix asked him to join him and Changbin, Seungmin shook his head with a smile, repeating the same routine phrase over and over again: “*I’m alright, I don’t really like cuddling anyway.*”
Only three people could see through his hidden talent; his mother, his music teacher at Cheongdam, and finally Woojin. Although the eldest member of Stray Kids claimed to be the father of the group, his motherly senses and alertness made him the most perceptive in the group, with Changbin and Jisung a close second and third. The most oblivious of the bunch was actually the ‘Aussie Line,’ as STAYs liked to call the pair of foreign members.

“Okay, okay, I understand Eomma” Seungmin laughed and his mother’s speech came to an end.

“Remember Seungminnie, work hard, we love you.”

With that the call ended, leaving Seungmin in his state of silence again. And like a slow-moving river, the comfort that he longed for trickled into the now constant static unease.

The classes slowly trickled by until Seungmin was sitting in his fourth period class, his least favourite class of the day. Maths. Even worse than the already confusing material that Seungmin suffered through quietly, now he was stood at the base of the whiteboard, a marker in hand and a ridiculous equation in front of him. In front of the whole class.

“Seungmin? Can you solve this?”

At his harshly-spoken name, the student snapped out of his state and turned his head slowly to meet the eyes of his infuriated teacher. Blood ran to his cheeks.

Seungmin stayed quiet. This equation was one he was never able to solve yet it was so often taught. He was taught it last year, last week and even had to opportunity to learn last night as Chan explained it to Jeongin, but instead Seungmin relaxed, the consequence of it being today, this moment, as the whole class laughed like clowns. The marker lingered in the unmoving position on the board creating a puddle of dark ink under its soft tip as Seungmin wracked his brain, trying to write anything to show that he was even trying, but the puddle only grew bigger.

Mr Rhee sighed in disappointment and Seungmin stilled at the breath of air leaving the lips of the forty-year-old. He never wanted to disappoint anyone, fan of Stray kids or not, but yet again he had failed under someone’s weary gaze.

“I went through this equation with you last week, Mr Kim” Mr Rhee directed at him. At Seungmin’s shaky gaze, the experienced teacher turned away from the embarrassed boy and to the snickering class. “These types of questions will be on the exam” his voice boomed over the class, all students whether they were at the top or bottom of the class, heard the utter annoyance in his voice and the commotion stilled to a heavy silence. “Learn it.”

Mr Rhee turned back to Seungmin, holding out his wrinkly hand for the black whiteboard marker. Seungmin defeatedly handed over the tool, his fingers feeling weighed down by the disappointment and embarrassment that this pen paired with his tired mind had served him.

He looked at his polished shoes as he walked back to his desk by the window, his face still red. As he walks past the third row he hears one of the smarter students in the lower class, a girl named Sunheon whisper “That question was so easy even Hyunwoo could have done it!”

Why is this day so horrible? he thought, plunking down on his desk and resting his forehead on the well-used wooden surface. To make matters worse I have a lonely lunch and then Korean Language Studies.

“Yah, Seungmin” a voice from the table beside him. The dark-haired boy lifted his head from the
table and looked to his left, meeting the eyes of his friend Haeun who shared math class with him. “Don’t look so down, literally and metaphorically” she laughed at her own joke and slapped Seungmin’s shoulder, making him smile with the short, dyed-brown haired girl. “But seriously, I can help you at lunch today if you want, after we all eat.”

“It’s alright” Seungmin replied, not exactly sure why he was refusing his friend’s helpful offer. “I need to finish my Korean Studies essay” he dragged his hands dramatically down his face, causing the extroverted girl to giggle at his expression.

“Poor you” she squeaked sympathetically. “Mrs Kim is nasty as well and you don’t have any friends in that class.”

“Thanks for the reminder” Seungmin replied as brittle as crumbling salt and placed his head in his hands again.

Haeun just laughed again and turned her attention back to Mr Rhee as he intensely explained another equation. Seungmin was too tired to care or listen to the teacher’s explanation, his legs still sore from yesterday’s dance practice, a pitiful reminder that there was a four-hour practice tonight. Despite this a small smile remained on his face, covered by his callused palms.

*Maybe lunch won’t be so lonely after all.*

“And that’s why Seokjin wore *that* shirt to the awards ceremony! Because it was a gift from Namjoon! Isn’t that just so amazing!” Haeun gushed on. Seungmin took another bite of his bibimbap and nodded along to what his friend was saying.

“That’s so great Haeun” Seojin muttered sarcastically, his jabs something that the boy was known for rather than his towering height.

“It’s my life dream to watch them perform live” Dayun exclaimed excitedly. Seungmin smiled at the girls squeals and rushed words referring to the most popular idol group in and out of Korea, BTS.

“Hold on Seungmin” Haeun started her eyes gleaming. *Oh no. It’s never good when she has that look in her eyes.* “Da-da, are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

Dayun, or ‘Da-da’ as Haeun had named her, stopped mid spoonful of the sauce-coated rice to think, furrowing her straight eyebrows together before comically, her face lit up like a lightbulb. Then flickered off back to confusion. Whether Haeun had seen Dayun’s ponderous expression or not, the bob-haired girl took no notice.

“Haven’t you seen BTS perform live before!”

“Oh, yeah, I guess so” Seungmin replied sheepishly, not exactly sure how to reply. “At award shows and stuff.”

“O-M-G! They have also watched you perform before!” Dayun realised her mouth wide open like a goldfish. “The wonderful and glorious Kim Taehyung has seen you on stage before!”

“They’re all wonderful and glorious” Haeun added in with a playful disapproving tone. “We stan all kings not just one.”

Dayun looked like she had just offended the whole population of the United States right in front of
them, a look of absolute horror stamped onto her face.

“Of course, of course” the long-haired girl backtracked before changing the subject. “I want to become a popular idol one day.”

“Good luck with that, I’ve heard you sing at Karaoke one to many times” Seojun interjected.

“You’ve only heard me sing once” Dayun replied, confused.

“Exactly.”

“Nice one Junnie” Haeun said and fist bumped Seojun’s fist from across the table, following the light collision with an exploding sound effect. The boy looked slightly disgusted at the nickname but said nothing.

Seungmin placed a piece of red capsicum in his mouth, eating it slowly. He remembered the day that the three went to karaoke, it was the third week of the school year. They invited me, but I declined due to preparations for debut. Sometimes, just sometimes, I wonder how my relationship with them would have changed... Would we have been closer now? Would I- Would I have a nickname too?

“Well, the trainee life looks pretty hard” Dayun ruminated, chewing her noodles thoughtfully, pulling Seungmin out of his spiralling thoughts. “How was it for you Seungmin?”

Seungmin almost spat out his vegetables at the unexpected question.

His three friends had always avoided the topic of Seungmin’s idol life as much as possible, knowing from Seungmin’s reluctance to speak about it that it was something he didn’t want to define him as a person. Unlike his closest friends at Cheongdam, the rest of the school hadn’t caught on, leaving the brutal title of ‘idol boy’ dangling above his head wherever he walked. But, this was the first time they had questioned about it so openly.

Seungmin lifted his head from his tray and met the expectant and somewhat hesitant eyes of his three friends. With them, the closest tables that had heard the question were also waiting in some type of fear for an answer that would open the doors to Seungmin’s private – or public – life.

“It was a little hard” Seungmin started, choosing his words extremely carefully. “But, it was all worth it in the end” he finished with a smile that would only be non-believable to those that knew him inside and out.

“So modest, that’s our Seungmin” Haeun smiled, slapping him a little too hard on the back, causing him to choke on his capsicum. He quickly chugged some water to stop his fit coughing and after a few more hacking coughs his throat was cleared.

“Be careful with all that water Seungmin!” He heard a gruff voice call out. Seungmin, along with the rest of the table of four turned to see no other than the infamous Hyunwoo looking back at him. “Make sure not to spill it on yourself.”

Seungmin felt his cheeks flush at the comment that was obviously directed at yesterday’s accident. His other three friends looked baffled and turned towards Seungmin in confusion in synchronisation. Seungmin just stared back at his noodles and slightly shook his head, indicating that he wanted to drop the subject.

Dayun and Seojun dropped their invisible guard at Seungmin’s signal but Haeun glared at the pompous boy until she turned around, smoke billowing out of her ears. Yet, the short girl stayed
silent.

*My whole life I’ve been on the sidelines, especially with teasing… Apart from a few hurtful and somewhat racist comments made by foreigners when I was in the U.S, I’ve never been teased in Korea to my face.* Seungmin subtly touched his flaming cheeks and only blushed harder when he realised how red he was.

*I need a facemask* Seungmin thought, recalling the few days in Grade Five when he had a rash around the bottom of his mouth so bad that he wore a facemask all day at school, only lowering it slightly when eating. Instead of the backlash he thought would occur while walking the school on that snowy day, all his peers thought he was so cool and mysterious, adding to his introverted and baseball-loving ten-year-old self. His ego bloomed at the compliments and he was almost disappointed when the patchy red rash healed into nothingness.

*Facemasks can cover anything.*

Seungmin willed his blush to hide and thought about the almost endless amount of times his cheeks flamed in the past twenty-four hours. He looked up from his food tray and saw a pair of girls from the table closest to his whisper to each other, their devious eyes flickering towards the red boy every few words before bursting into a fit of giggles.

*They’re laughing at me…* 

Seungmin felt his embarrassment morph into a wicked sort of fuelled anger.

*That’s it.*

“I’m taking my leave” Seungmin said with a forced smile. Gathering his half-eaten bowl of food and chopsticks.

“What?” Haeun questioned.

“I need to do my Korean Studies essay” Seungmin said. It wasn’t exactly a lie per say, but his stupid unfinished homework was the last thing on his mind.

Haeun frowned again and Seungmin stilled at the usually bright girl’s solemn expression.

Seungmin froze.

Was she the forth person that could really read his flickering micro-expressions that unwound the gates and barriers that Seungmin had put up so carefully? Was the short extrovert in front of him, someone who he was barely close to by any means, only knowing her for less than one eighteenth of his life, really someone who could see through his almost perfect façade?

Moments ticked by.

“Okay, have fun!”

Those three words were all Seungmin needed to excuse himself from the uncomfortable blue chairs of the dining hall, away from his three friends, the giggling gaggle of girls, and the cold-hearted Hyunwoo and into the empty halls, of Cheongdam High, then finally into the security of the safehouse labelled Classroom 53.
Thirty minutes passed before Seungmin found the energy to get off his phone and use the remaining half an hour of lunch to complete his essay. Another ten minutes passed before a small ‘rat-a-tat-tat’ sounded from the other side of the door.

Seungmin tensed, his mind whirling with possibilities of who the hidden figure behind the navy door could be. *Younghun? Seeking refuge from Hyunwoo and his pack or, could it be, Hyunwoo himself? His forked tongue with more battles of insults?*

Cautiously, he crept his way over to the looming door tip-toeing as quiet as a mouse. It couldn’t be Haeun or any of his other friends behind the door, Seungmin never confided in them about his escape to the serene, or once serene classroom, whereas Younghun and his bullies saw him vanish from the territorial hallway behind this very door.

With almost shaking hands, and unease like a raging thunderstorm in his stomach he turned the circular doorknob in an anti-clockwise rotation and the quiet creak of the door opening was enough for Seungmin to take a step backwards in trepidation. Pulling the door with him.

“Seungmin” the woman, dressed in a long flowy floral skirt and black button-up blouse, said with a smile.

Seungmin felt his hear simultaneously collapse from the heat of the swirling storm and rise in relief.

“Ms Park!” Seungmin sighed in relief, his hands stopping their nervous fits of shakes.

“I haven’t seen you swing by my office much lately.”

It was true. Ever since he had finished his music and vocal courses last semester, the musician barely went to the small performing arts and music wing of the school, Wing B.

“Yeah” Seungmin answered, guilt evident in his voice. “I haven’t had a lot of free time lately.”

The thirty-year-old folded her arms and raised her left eyebrow dramatically. Seungmin felt a small smile creep onto his features at his beloved past-teacher’s antics. Through out the three years he had attended Cheongdam, he had always looked forward to the twice-a-weekly music class, for both the reasons of the activities in the one-hour period and the teacher.

During his time as a trainee, whether it was before, during or after the survival show that almost tore him to pieces, he often confided or sought out advice from the experienced vocal teacher.

“Come and find me in my office sometime, it’s quiet without your voice around” the woman said with a bright smile, her slightly crooked but white teeth on display.

“I will” he sing-songed behind her as she begun to close the heavy door.

“See you!” Ms Park replied and as the door closed Seungmin felt slightly lonelier than he had before.

As the bell indicating the end of lunch rung out loud and clear, Seungmin waited until the footsteps that stampeded through the bustling halls echoed to a faint buzz until he opened the navy door and quietly walked to Korean Studies.

Seungmin exited the harrowing entrance of the school, the gate enclosing the perimeter only a few
meters away. Korean Studies was absolute hell, Mrs Kim shrilly droning on about the confusing punctuation following verbs, even holding up students’ essays and criticising the works in front of the class. Seungmin almost cried in relief when the teacher never picked up his badly-finished essay and again when the final bell rung.

*A full five hour dance practice tonight* Seungmin thought his feet dragging at the prospect. *But, that means I can work harder, I can keep my promise to improve my dancing.* His brows furrowed in determination. *I will improve today, no matter what.*

“Seungmin-oppa!” a voice called from behind him.

Since when was he addressed Seungmin-oppa at school?

He turned and lowered his black facemask. The dark-haired girl that stood in front of him was one from the pair of girls that were laughing earlier. Seungmin tried to keep his expression as neutral as possible but he felt his eyebrows frown slightly further.

“Yes?”

“Well” the girl plastered a too-large smile on her face. “I was wondering if you wanted to hang out with me tonight? Unless you’re busy doing *idol things* or whatever.”

Seungmin shifted uncomfortably. “Yeah, sorry, I have a long dance practice tonight” he said, revealing already more than he would have liked to. “Maybe another time?”

The girl looked slightly disappointed but nodded anyway, turning away from Seungmin at the speed of lightning. The idol watched her shiny hair swing back and forth until she reached a group of friends and they immediately formed a defensive huddle as she joined them.

Even from Seungmin’s distance away, he could hear their blurred whispers and laughs from the group of five students and he pulled his facemask up with a sigh, hiding his once again flushed cheeks. *Was that just a set up? Or a dare? I don’t even know her name…*

Injustice flooded through his veins again, clogging up his heart as he walked to the busy bus stop. Two minutes early. Just like every other day. He sat in loathing of today’s events and the hell-on-earth dancing beginning in forty-five minutes that would leave him sore.

At 5:13pm the bus arrived. One minute later than the schedule. It was really a butterfly effect; the one minute lost here meant one minute less time changing out of his uniform leaving him hurried, or one minute less in the cramped room that reflected all Seungmin’s many mistakes.

Either way, one minute of his precious time slipped through his hands like sand in an hourglass and Seungmin could see that the bus timetable was wrong, another tragic victim of today, a lie.

Seungmin slipped on a white T-shirt and grey trackies, folding the white button-up shirt of his uniform and placing it with his blazer and pants. *At least I didn’t wet these today* he thought, running his hands over the seams of the darker grey fabric.

He heard Hyunjin faintly call out his name to hurry him up and Seungmin obeyed, folding his clothes faster before placing them neatly into his backpack.

When he reached the practice room, eight slightly-irritated boys looked back at him, whether they were in the middle of stretching or affixing the speakers correctly into place.
“Come on Min” Felix lured him closer with a gentle flick of his small hand. “We’re starting with the title today.”

Seungmin simply nodded and tied up his shoelaces. The title track, also known as Seungmin’s, Jeongin’s and Woojin’s worst nightmare was an upbeat, bass-undertones, meticulously and difficultly choreographed pain in the ass. Literally. Before the second choreograph Seungmin, paired with Hyunjin, had to quickly plop down on his bottom on the correct beat and then get up again before Felix’s somewhat dark rap, in three beats, and somehow make it look like gold.

Of course, Hyunjin had the ability to make every dance move, even if it looked ridiculous when Seungmin tried to do it, look like the art of the heavens. The golden boy, in both skill and uniform, was simply unbeatable in that matter; everything he did made Seungmin feel blessed just to witness it.

Although he would never admit that to anything except the secret pages bounded by the dark leather covers of his diary.

“Alright” Chan clapped his hands and walked away from where his phone, holding the unreleased music set to air for their next comeback. Despite the second eldest not being the best dancer in the group, he took control of the practices and his aura of authority made everybody in the room look up at him.

If Seungmin was completely honest, during dance practices, sometimes the leader could be uncharacteristically scary, the bright leader aura morphing into a dark cloud around the silver-haired boy. When the dubbed ‘dark-side’ of Bang Chan came out, just like when Seungmin’s cleanliness wrath appeared, no one wanted to be on the receiving side of the piercing claws.

And as Seungmin stumbled over the same step, missing the following beat for the umpteenth time, he knew it was not going to go well for him. So did everybody else, who danced uncharacteristically quietly as a storm formed above Chan’s silver hair, rivalling the churning storm in Seungmin’s stomach, that rose with the added pressure of Chan’s piercing gaze.

“Keep up Minnie” Chan yelled out over the thundering sounds of the music blasting from the speakers. Seungmin nodded at the leader through the mirror and shot his hand out to create an arch over Woojin as he mouthed the lyrics to his part.

It’s okay, I’m okay. Channie-hyung isn’t too mad yet, he’s still using a nickname to address me Seungmin thought, making eye-contact with Jisung who just gave him an encouraging smile and then shot out into his next step.

The name the leader called each member was the tell-tale sign of his temper. Once the nicknames were dropped it meant the clouds were lurching into a slow-rising thunderstorm.

Seungmin waved into his final position one millisecond behind the other seven members who had completed their part. Due to Seungmin’s lateness of his body wave Changbin also slightly missed his beat.

As the sound faded out of the room, Chan’s distraught sigh became evident to all the members and Seungmin tensed along with Changbin beside him.

The final pose was one of the signature moments in the whole song; some type of Mexican wave, cannon thing with graceful limbs flying in well thought out courses with a final step of the left foot sliding towards the mirror ‘Dance the Night Away’ style. Although it looked awesome when done successfully, Seungmin had missed his cue therefore failing the whole part for not just himself, but
everyone.

He looked to the ground.

“Sorry.”

*Please don’t make me do it again, please don’t make me do it again* Seungmin repeated like a mantra in his head. From the failed math question to Hyunwoo’s jab and Dayun’s prying question, he had been put on the spot enough for one day. Or for eternity.

The last thing he needed was to be called out by Chan and to have to repeat the same dance move again and again in front of his members until either Chan or Minho deemed it worthy.

“Let’s just move on” Chan said a few moments after Seungmin’s apology, changing the song to one beginning with a deep bass almost as deep as Felix’s voice.

Seungmin almost fainted on the spot and all members excluding the dance line and Chan looked ready for death. This song included some of the most confusing footwork Seungmin had ever seen; almost as difficult as the painful ‘I Am: You’ footwork at Hyunjin’s verse.

The song had a heavy beat with the ‘3RACHA’ line with the addition of Felix and Hyunjin spitting out fire with Woojin’s killer adlibs in the background. The rest of the vocalists; Jeongin, Minho and himself had a few short and experimental rap lines thrown into the mix of an overall pretty great song.

The only thing that wasn’t ‘pretty great’ was the dance. It was hell on earth – some places, especially Jisung and Chan’s verses for some reason, had even worse movements than the title track’s gruelling dance.

When the members saw the choreography video, they were all dubious of if they could move their feet to the high paced beat and twist their bodies into the aesthetic but bone breaking positions that the professionals somehow did in an instant.

As expected; the dance line and Chan got most of the choreography down quickly, only wavering with uncertainty in a few places, one of those being the footwork. Then, after vigorously training for one week all of the members of Stray Kids had the first half of the song generally figured out; knowing what beat to act on and what move was next.

But, knowing what came next wasn’t necessarily that same as knowing how to do it, and Seungmin knew that more than anyone.

Unfortunately, the extreme footwork was in the first half and Seungmin had absolutely no idea how to do it. An unwelcome sense of *déjà vu* washed over him, reminding him of the helplessness from this morning while standing at the math board.

“Oh Positions!” Chan ordered as the first notes of the song began.

Seungmin quickly obliged along with the seven members near him and as the pace quickened they began to move in unison.

The first quarter of the song was fine; one mistake from Woojin and one from Minho, but these were glossed over as the song continued. Seungmin performed his part fine, smiling at the mirror as if it were instead thousands of STAY watching him despite the tiredness dragging at his muscles and weighing him body down like gallons of water in his red shoes.
As Jisung began rapping, the beat became faster and heavier and more distorted in Seungmin’s ears, each note hitting him as if it was pushing him into the ground more and more, until the weight pulling and pushing him down became too much.

As Jisung continued to rap and his other eight members continued to dance, Seungmin stopped dancing before the heinous move and instead stood and watched as his friends completed the difficult footwork successfully.

Seungmin closed his eyes.

Successfully. They are all so good at this.

“Minnie?” Woojin’s voice broke through Seungmin’s self-deprecating thoughts.

“Look at me Minnie” the eldest member’s voice softly commanded.

Seungmin forced his eyes open and stared at the mirror.

His blank reflection looked back. It was almost as if it wasn’t him; an illusion, a fake, an occurrence of smoke and mirrors. He twitched a finger on his right hand. The reflection did the same.

“Seungmi-”

“I’m okay Woojin-hyung, sorry” Seungmin smiled and looked away from the mirror. “I’m just not feeling well.”

The lie slipped through his teeth before he could stop it.

He heard the concerned voices of the other members but didn’t listen to their words, his eyes trained of Woojin’s dark orbs.

He forgot who he was talking to; Woojin was the third person, the third person who had ever been able to separate Seungmin’s truths from non-truths, genuine smiles from forced.

Afraid of the inevitable confrontation, Seungmin tugged his gaze away from Woojin’s wise eyes and followed Felix’s gesture towards the small and uncomfortable chair in the corner of the room.

As he sat down he felt the weight lift from his body, but only slightly before the crashing guilt of failure slammed back down on him.

I thought you told yourself you would do better. You would try harder in dance. Where’s that ‘one hundred hours of extra practice’ gone when you can’t even make it through normal practice.

Where did all my motivation go?

Seungmin closed his eyes and reflected on what made him so willing to try harder in dance in the first place. His voice crack, the comments, the fifteen likes… It was all coming back to him.

He grimaced, his head still spinning with guilt and frustration, before getting out of his seat and leaving Changbin’s hands oddly but gently caressing his dark locks.

“I’m fine now” Seungmin addressed to the eight boys in the room, standing up from the chair. “Sorry, I was jus-”

“Nope” Chan cut him off with a smile. “You still look pale and I’m not risking anything tonight,
we’re calling this practice off early.”

Seungmin stopped himself from talking back. He was torn in half of wanting to learn and prove to himself and his vow that he could do well in dance tonight, but the other half of him was a siren’s call.

Why would I miss up the opportunity to finish this horrible, horrible dance practice? Why am I even considering arguing when Chan-hyung has obviously made up his mind? Besides, if I kept going, I would just look like an idiot when Jisung’s rap came along again and I still don’t know the footwork, therefore letting everyone else know that I don’t know it and they would know I was lying when I said I felt dizzy… Seungmin’s thoughts raced on before he shrugged his shoulders in some sort of relief mixed with defeat and turned away from the deceptive mirrors.

“Thank god we ended early, my legs are about to fall off” Jeongin said to Hyunjin in the background. Seungmin smiled at the maknae’s words and the nine members collectively finished up in the practice room, grabbed their bags, and piled into the already waiting car.

Seungmin flopped down onto his bed, clean from his shower with his still slightly damp locks hanging down wildly on his face like Jisung’s bouncy hair. He groaned as he landed; the slightly harder than comfortable surface slightly winding him.

Get up Seungmin. You have to clean your room, get your uniform out of your bag and hang it up, and finish your homework.

He stifled another groan and tore himself away from his warm sheets, hearing Jisung’s amused chuckle to his left.

“You feeling any better Seungie?” he asked as Seungmin tiredly began unpacking his bag.

“A little bit” Seungmin answered, keeping his reply as vague as possible. He folded his shirt.

“That’s a relief” the elder sighed, toeing off his socks and collapsing into his blue-sheeted bed. Seungmin’s heart lurched at the empathy in his hyung’s voice. Guilt made the storm in his stomach start again. He hung up his blazer.

“I thought you were going to faint on us” Jisung laughed faintly. Seungmin kept quiet.

He folded his pants.

“Move Minnie” Hyunjin said with a yawn, appearing from the doorway, his shirt and wet towel slung over his shoulder. Seungmin obliged, quickly grabbing his dirty laundry before Hyunjin’s wet feet could touch it. He focused his gaze away from Hyunjin’s forming six-pack.

“I am tired” Hyunjin said, flopping down on the bed beside Jisung. The blonde boy let out a soft grunt as Hyunjin’s weight clipped his side, but the pair immediately curled together in comfort.

Seungmin continued to clean his room, moving onto the disarray of pencils on his desk.

“Don’t clean to much if you aren’t feeling well” Hyunjin chastised him from the bed.

“I’m feeling a bit better now” he answered, stacking is papers neatly. Outside their calm room, Seungmin could hear the screams of Felix and Jeongin, presumably play-fighting from the living room with Minho’s irritated voice creeping through the thin walls of the dorm.
“Those idiots are at it again” Jisung scolded, but the love in his voice was not unnoticed; all members loved their surrounding members to their heart’s content.

Seungmin pulled out his diary and began to write, his pliant Korean strokes lining the crème paper as he wrote about today’s events, including all his frustrations, issues, thoughts and achievements. There were more of the first two than the latter.

When he finally finished, Felix and Jeongin were not to be heard, only the blurred slow and deep voice of Changbin and Minho’s odd Korean-subbed animal documentary faded through the walls into the three boys’ bedroom.

Hyunjin had migrated into his own bed, leaving Jisung, who was slightly snoring, looking smaller than ever. Seungmin felt his eyes close as he carefully wrapped himself in the thick duvet on his bed and he settled into the mattress with a sigh.

With all his problems written and stored in the confides of his diary under his bed his brain felt empty enough to give into the temptations of rest, and so Seungmin did, letting the black fog take over his body into a forgiving slumber.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry, this took so long, I was in China.

Comment your thoughts!

~Talic
“Seungmin! Seungie, get up!”

Seungmin blinked his eyes open with a groan and rolled to his side. Minho’s voice, deeper than usual due to the early hours of the morning rang through his ears again. Seungmin smooshed his face into the pillow.

“Min, come on!”

“Okay, okay” Seungmin grumbled, flicking away his hyung with a sleepy hand.

Wait – Minho? Why is he waking me up?

At the alarming thought, Seungmin shot up out of bed, sitting vertically upright like a pole, only just missing Minho’s forehead as the older tried to stir him again. He reached towards his phone, charging on the bedside table beside him.

“Shit” he breathed.

On his phone laid several messages from his driver.


<There is a lot of traffic this morning, will be there in ten minutes – Mr Yoo>
Sent: 7:18am

<I have arrived. Sorry for the delay – Mr Yoo>
Sent: 7:27am

<Seungmin I am waiting for you outside – Mr Yoo>
Sent: 7:33am

<Did you take public transportation this morning? If so please reply – Mr Yoo>
Sent: 7:35am

<Seungmin? As you are not answering I will message Bang Chan. Please let me know if you are safe and if you will be driven to school this morning – Mr Yoo>
Sent: 7:39am
The time now was seven-forty-one. Exactly twenty minutes late.

“Shit, shit, shit, shit” Seungmin murmured, as he leapt out of bed, not caring about how messy it was.

“Language” Minho snickered, moving out of the younger’s way as he rampaged through the shared bedroom.

“What’s going on?” Jisung groaned as Seungmin threw coat hangers out of his closest in order to untangle them from the coat hanger his shirt was on. Of course, this just had the opposite effect and made the hangers more jumbled than before.

“Seungmin’s running late for school” Minho explained coyly to the sleepy boy.

Seungmin struggled to complete all buttons of his shirt before he turned to look at Jisung, who was now flattened by Minho. Hyunjin’s bed next to the blonde-haired boy’s was empty.

_I swear I set an alarm for this morning before I put it on charge_ Seungmin thought, hastily throwing a pair of underwear in his bag. There was no time to run into the bathroom and change his precious under-garments and there was no way in hell he would strip naked in front of his hyungs. He would have to change at break. Seungmin scrunched his nose at the idea of changing in the small bathroom stalls.

_I don’t even have time to shower._

He disregarded Jisung’s soft ‘goodbye’, grabbed his phone and mints, and rushed into the living area where Chan, Woojin and Changbin were sitting.

“No eggs?” the leader asked with a small smile.

Seungmin tried to shoot him a smile back but was more focussed on shoving an apple in his bag for a snack before vocal practice that afternoon.

“Take this” Woojin said and threw a muesli bar at Seungmin. With quick hands the younger caught it, his experience from baseball giving him fast reflexes.

“Thanks, hyung, bye” Seungmin rushed out the door and into the black car waiting impatiently outside.

“Sorry I’m late Mr Yoo” Seungmin sighed and quickly threw himself and his bag into the back seat.

“No issues” the man responded simply and started the car. Seungmin twiddled his thumbs with impatience. “Although in this traffic we won’t make it to Cheongdam in time for your first class.”

Seungmin fell limp against his chair. Getting to the hellhole called Korean Studies class on time at a 7:35am start seeing as it was now five minutes past that, was wishful thinking, especially as Mrs Kim was probably taking attendance at this very moment while Seungmin wasn’t even a block away from his house.

_Mrs Kim crows on and on about the importance of punctuality. Although I haven’t been late to one of her classes before, she’ll probably scold me for my ‘tardiness’ and make me go to reception and get a late pass._
Seungmin groaned and wished for the car to magically attach rocket boosters that would get him sent to school in a matter of microseconds but that was just unrealistic. Immature.

Even if the rush-hour traffic managed to part like the Red Sea, Cheongdam was still an eight-minute drive, past the blurry grey nameless buildings and one or two nature reserves that old people were often in.

When Seungmin finally arrived, through the hell-like gates of school he was immediately met with a short glare from the receptionist as he explained why he was late. He used the excuse that saved him every time; his career.

“Our dance practice went overtime” Seungmin explained through his teeth as the receptionist looked tiredly at him. He plastered on his best apologetic smile, scratching the back of his head in faux-embarrassment. “It was my fault.”

“I know your idol career is important but education for a teenager like you is also necessary. Do I need to talk to your managers about scheduling?”

Seungmin kept calm. “I don’t think that’s needed but thank you” he stole a glance to the business cards on the table, before tailoring a “Ms Guk” and the end.

The receptionist looked own t her keyboard and signed him in. “Try to make sure you’re on time tomorrow.”

He nodded and adjusted his backpack over his shoulder. Because he kept a mature and smart façade whether it was viewed through his actions or his grades, he could trick his way out of almost everything as everyone believed him with no questions asked.

_I did everything right there_ he analysed, walking to his locker. _Used a believable excuse, feigned embarrassment, blamed myself for making the ‘dance practice’ go overtime which many people subconsciously hate to do, and created a connection between myself and the receptionist by using her name where others would not bother._

He shuffled around in his locker before pulling out his books for his classes, ignoring the stare of a student as they walked past. He closed his locker door quietly as not to disturb the numerous lessons surrounding him.

_This day started bad, but it’s about to get even worse._

With a deep breath, he pushed open the heavy door of his Korean Studies classroom.

The creak of the door alerted the idol’s presence as he awkwardly shuffled into the classroom, trying to keep the guilt of his face as Mrs Kim’s black eyes glared him down.

“Seungmin!” she barked, her curled hair bobbing on her head in annoyance. “You are tardy!”

Seungmin just nodded as he was scolded for being ‘fickle towards such an important class like Korean Studies’ and ‘ignorant to the precious time on this trivial earth’ and slumped over towards his seat.

_As long as I don’t do anything wrong this lesson or cause any distractions, Mrs Kim won’t hold this against me_ he thought, laying out his neat notes on his table. As soon as he organised himself and took hold of his favourite silky-smooth pen, he peered towards the board and wrote down all the points he missed from being twenty minutes late.
It was ten minutes past eight when he first felt it. A small nudge to the back of his chair.

What was that? Seungmin questioned, fighting the urge to turn around and check his surroundings. He stilled for moments, waiting for the soft vibrations to crawl from the back metal legs of his chair once more but when there was nothing he relaxed albeit confused.

He focussed back on the whiteboard.

It happened again.

Seungmin swung his head around again to see the floor where his chair was dutifully standing. There was nothing, no dropped water bottle clanging into his chair or no disturbance at all. Just floorboards.

He frowned in thought and turned back to his notebook.

The nudge came back, harder than before, vibrating his chair like a small magnitude earthquake would. After the first one died down, it came back again, hard enough that Seungmin knew he wasn’t imagining it. He heard it.

He turned around again, looking higher than last time. His face fell as he recognised the boy sitting there uncharacteristically engrossed in his work with a smug smile on his face and feet tucked behind his chair out of view. Yun Yejun.

Seungmin held back his glare but when Yejun looked towards the board, directly meeting Seungmin’s eyes, the challenge was clear. Cockiness and confidence swam in the depths of the brown hardened eyes.

“Seungmin!”

Mrs Kim’s shout made the idol jump in his chair. He felt his cheeks turn red at the snicker that came out of his classmates’ lips.

“You were already late and missed a lot of material; pay attention!”

As composed as he could Seungmin turned around and faced the front of the classroom, looking away from Mrs Kim’s dark stare. She cleared her throat and continued to explain the classwork.

Another, now identified kick, hit the thin back legs of Seungmin’s chair, making it shake in its place as if it was cockily reinforcing the message the teacher had just blurted out.

Seungmin took a deep breath and set his jaw as the kicks came in stronger and faster, timed like ticks of a metronome, each one shaking Seungmin’s hand, causing his writing to become shakier and shakier, ruining the efforts of his meticulous writing.

Just ignore it Seungmin, a few annoying kicks aren’t going to kill you. He looked towards the clock. Twenty minutes and you’re out of here.

When another large kick came his way, it sent his pen sprawling over the page, the biggest mess of ink on the paper so far. Seungmin exhaled, becoming even madder when a jolt in his chair made his breath hitch in his throat.

Is ignoring it really the right option? He thought, seething silently. If I just tell him to stop or get Mrs Kim on him, he won’t do it again… But what if that blows this out of proportion and he annoys me outside of this one class?
Seungmin took another deep breath as the kicks came in the same steady pace.

*He probably just wants someone to react to him. Therefore, I won’t. I’ll sit here like the good student I am and mind my own business. He’ll get bored of it eventually, how long can he kick my chair for anyway?*

Déjà vu unexpectedly washed over him like a tsunami wave drowning its helpless victims, and Seungmin was taken back to the quiet green of his third-grade classroom.

Seungmin patiently listened as his teacher read out the interesting storybook about frogs and lily pads. ‘Circle time’ or story time only happened once a week for twenty minutes as in the other times all students had to study the confusing trigonometry equations or learn how to create ‘factor-trees.’

*Circle time with its riveting stories and worthy morals were Seungmin’s favourite time of the week, but inevitably many of the more boisterous children got extremely bored.*

The story entailed details on how many frogs could fit on one lily pad before it sunk beneath the mass amount of the green creatures.

“Kevin! Let me see your watch again” Taejung exclaimed, reached over to grab at the slim wrist of the foreign boy. The pale-skinned and popular Kevin obliged, holding out his arm for the Korean to see the large green ‘Ben-10’ styled watch.

*Objectively it was a piece of junk; the too-large and unrealistically flashy hunks of translucent jade plastic was less-than-attractive, but as he was the first boy to get the garment in the class, everyone wanted the time-telling device.*

Seungmin tried to focus back on the story Ms Bang was telling as now there were three frogs on one lily pad but the rushed whispers coming from the boys on the far side on the circle caught his attention again.

As soon as they dissolved into fits of giggles, a small circular light was shined onto one of the quietest students of the class, Kim Minjoon. The white light travelled further up the boys clothed body before arriving at its destination; the eyes.

As Minjoon attempted to blink the unfading blinding light away, Kevin and his posse burst into another wave of laughter.

*The ray reflected by the watch’s shiny surface stayed at Minjoon’s face, making Seungmin’s stomach cripple into unease.*

*Should I do something? Why hasn’t Ms Bang noticed? I can tell Minjoon knows the light is from Kevin’s watch, so why is he not doing anything about it?*

Taejung laughed again as Minjoon shook his head in an attempt to escape the light, but Minjoon’s eyes still stayed attentive to the teacher, not even once acknowledging the group with the classroom ‘weapon.’

Seokhyung, one of the more sensible of the three eight-year-olds, directed Kevin’s wrist so the light travelled from Minjoon to one of the more popular but intelligent children, a boy named Gun Jaesong. As soon as the light hit his face he shook his head and sneezed in a cute kind of way before smiling at the posse.
Rather than keeping the light on his face at the boy’s reaction, Kevin lowered his green watch and smiled sheepishly, somewhat caught in the act.

The circle of light stopped moving, now fluttering permanently on the ground.

Seungmin, having watched the two completely opposing reactions, now had his focus directed on the pair of boys.

‘They reacted so differently…’ he thought as the story came to a close. ‘What way is really the better option to react to something like this? Ignore or confront?’

Seungmin watched as a tear quietly slid down Minjoon’s cheek.

In total four frogs was the turning point for the lily pad; before the luscious green circle of support cascaded into the bubbling dark water, sinking only itself as the frogs leapt to the next pad then onto the sandy shore of safety.

Seungmin looked away from Minjoon as the child continued to sob, hiding his tears from confronting eyes with his dark and baggy shirt sleeves.

After all, there were only three bullies, and there were four frogs that drowned the helpless lily pad.

Seungmin was pulled out of his thoughts as another kick, significantly larger than the other ones, vibrated his chair, making it wobble unsteadily.

“Hey-” Seungmin started, beginning to turn around to face the boy, his flashback riling him with a bitter taste of his prior injustices.

The word caught in his throat as the final blow was delivered to his chair. The thin legs scraped on the floor before giving in completely, shooting out sideways due to the attack, sending Seungmin crashing to the ground.

*Shit* Seungmin grimaced as he landed with a loud ‘bang’ as he slammed into the floor, sending all his books and stationary with him in an attempt to catch himself from his plummeting fate. A sharp pain travelled up his right hip and he screwed up his eyes in pain. The tinkling on his final pencils cluttering and rolling on the scratched floor rang in his ears as he felt his face heat up once again that day.

“Seungmin!” Mrs Kim’s sharp bark cracked through Seungmin’s pride like a whip, drawing more than just the thirty students-still-seated-gazes. It drew also their laughs.

“How dare you fall asleep in my classroom!” she yelled as Seungmin begrudgingly picked himself off the floor, sweeping his books and stationary with him. He stared at the floor in embarrassment as she continued to scold him.

“You have distracted the whole class and are continuing to do so by blocking your peers’ views by not sitting down” her voice hardened like steel as her sharp eyes glared into his soul. Seungmin slammed his sore bottom into the chair, ignoring the pain shooting up his spine in some last feeble attempt to remain composed.

A loud snicker directly from behind him made Seungmin flush a scarlet red. Mrs Kim shot him a final glare before silencing the rest of the class with a loud scratch from the pressure of the
whiteboard marker on the shiny white surface, sounding similar to the piercing sound of fork prongs dragging on a plate.

*Should I glare at Yejun? I can’t deal with the stress of him teasing me* Seungmin pondered despite how childish the thought was. *No, I cannot do anything that could be twisted by the public into a scandal, even if it’s such a small thing as a word or two.*

Seungmin picked up his pen, ignored Yejun and the giggles of his classmates, and focused on his work.

*It doesn’t matter about thirty minutes of turmoil of mine, the team and Stray Kid’s reputation are more important than anything.*

*Now, let’s focus.*

Dayun squealed as she, with Seojun and Haeun watched some video of a dramatic anime with a pianist boy and a dying violinist duo. Seungmin had never had time to waste on such futile things as watching shows, especially now that he had to work even harder to recover his image and prove to STAY he was a valid part of his team.

He looked down at his legs. The hideous scar still blemished his once-perfect skin, along with faint bruises littered across his puffy knees.

*Don’t think about that now, let’s just enjoy lunch.*

He took another bite of his food, leaning away from Haeun as she laughed with her whole body, throwing herself forward at one of the characters in the peaceful looking anime. He took another bite, unable to stop the weight tugging his feeble heart as his three friends laughed together. When he looked up from his lap he saw a boy snap his head quickly away from him.

*Who is that?* Seungmin shuddered as the black-haired boy left the cafeteria. *Did he recognise me? I wonder if he’s seen the video...* Seungmin thought to the fan-cam that had shattered his heart.

*Does he agree with those fifteen people?* Seungmin couldn’t stop another shiver that rocked his whole body, making his right hip, which he hadn’t been able to bring himself to look at, ache in protest of the involuntary movement.

*It doesn’t matter, no matter who they were, I have to prove that I can sing, I can dance, I can be part of Stray Kids.*

When Seungmin walked into his final class of the day, notebooks in hand to write down today’s lesson he knew something was wrong. Instead of the usually spotless desks in soldier-like rows inside the classroom, he saw a single white paper booklet.

It was obvious what the papers were.

*Shit.*

“Mr Kim” Mr Rhee welcomed with a curt smile. “Sit at your desk and remove all your books to the back of the classroom.” He turned towards the rest of the class, who were shuffling into their desks, in their stiff hands one pencil and one eraser. “Today is a test worth ten percent of your final
grade.”

Shit, shit, shit Seungmin’s brain fired as he quickly and awkwardly to dump his heavy load of textbooks to his cube at the back of the square room. I completely forgot this exam even existed; I know literally nothing, and this is worth ten percent of my mathematics graduation grade.

He plonked down on his chair for what seemed like the millionth time this day. He placed his head in his hands. I’m so absolutely screwed.

“This is a non-calculator permitted exam. Any notes, written formulas or cheating will result in a score of zero on this and your next test.”

Seungmin gripped his mechanical pencil harder, feeling his handshake with the effort. Even without cheating, he would get a zero on this test.

“You can now start.”

Seungmin numbly exited the school with lead weighing down his shoes. He scuffed his trainers all the way to the bus stop, got on the bus and sat down with a huff. He didn’t even care that Yejun and Hyunwoo were snickering in his direction or that the schoolgirl with the bear facemask was looking at him from time to time, probably noticing his sour mood.

I’ve failed, I’m sure of it. I can’t believe I forgot all about this, god-dammit Seungmin! If only you had paid attention in class or to when Chan was teaching Jeongin how to do that same fucking question that was on the test.

He couldn’t even be bothered to put in his earphones and blast some of his music from his private Spotify playlist; the one that wasn’t open to STAY or even the other members. It was his playlist for when he felt like this, so horrendously sad to the point he wanted to curl up in his neatly-made bed and stay there. It was soft ballads, the type of music JYP told him he was good at singing during the survival program, but the one that Stray Kids barely ever sang.

He had written some once. Even recorded one of them. Squabbling over rhymes of tedious but melodic words until his fingers ached and his voiced cracked with tiredness.

It was too deep, too dark to full of every swirling emotion Seungmin felt when he went into his self-proclaimed ‘hermit-mode.’ Too full of hardships to release to the world, but too empty to help anyone.

Empty. After he scribbled out his teary emotions of the music page of the confines of his crème-paper diary. He felt so empty. But sometimes that was okay.

Being so empty meant he would never explode.

He pressed the obnoxious red button and when the bus lulled to his stop, he got off, the weight of his bag and heart making his steps fall heavy against the crowded pavement.

When he arrived at the vocal studio he plastered a smile on his face.

He didn’t want any questions.

Woojin, the most perceptive hyung didn’t catch his drift and still asked “Seungmin, how are you today?”
Seungmin looked at his bear-like hyung in the eyes. “Better than yesterday” he said truthfully. Despite the horrendous math test that has brought his final grade down by ten per cent and Yejun making him fall off his chair it was still better than yesterday; nothing could rival the past two days. Even Yejun and Hyunwoo being assholes was easier to bear than the plain rejection by the STAY he had encountered over the internet, anything was.

“What did you do today?” Minho asked, curiosity evident in his brown eyes. Seungmin tensed. What could he say?

“Nothing much, although I was a bit late to school” he answered vaguely, playing with his blazer sleeves. He watched as Felix and Jisung played around on the couch opposite him.

“You said you had Korean Studies first, with that teacher you don’t like Mrs Kim right? How did she react to that?” Hyunjin inserted himself into the conversation.

Seungmin bit his lip, regretting ranting all his emotions to his room-mate in the prior week when Ms Kim had yelled at his for missing a class to record an episode of ASC. *Ironic as it’s called After School Club and I missed lessons due to it.*

“Warm up everybody, Chan will be first in.” the vocal coach came in and interrupted the four’s questioning, leaving Seungmin with his mouth open like a goldfish thinking of a way to answer Hyunjin’s unknowingly prying question.

Luckily, he didn’t have to as Woojin began his vocal exercises, therefore dispersing the conversation. He began to warm up in the corner, not wanting to distract anyone. He plugged in his earphones and listened to some soft Korean ballads, the smooth voices calming his nerves. He watched Chan confidently stride into the room.

Although it wasn’t anything close to monthly evaluations or singing in front of thousands of people, a small bundle of nerves still tightened in his chest. What if he disappointed his coach? What if he hadn’t improved at all in the past few days, weeks or even months?

You had to change, adapt, to survive. ‘Constantly improve’ as JYP had once said to the team one day before their debut. Otherwise the fans would get bored, and no one wanted that.

Seungmin stepped out of his lesson, the nerves dissipated in his stomach. Just like every week it had gone perfectly fine and Seungmin had been stressing over nothing.

He sat down. He was the last person to sing today but most of the members still hadn’t noticed his return, still playing on their phones or quietly chatting with the other members. Seungmin sat in one place for a few moments, observing his members. The Chan nowhere to be seen, probably at the producing studios. Felix and Hyunjin were also not in the room.

*They’ll be in the dance practice rooms, working hard even though it’s our night off. Maybe I should go join them, I need to work on my dancing the most.*

Seungmin knitted his eyebrows in thought, zoning out from his surroundings. He followed the crowd of his members out of the room, swinging his bag over his shoulder and flowing with the river of stuffy bodies into the hall. The hall split into two, the left going towards the dance rooms and the other to the exit.

Seungmin halted.
I do need to dance more, I can’t improve if I don’t do it. But if I go, would I annoy them? Would my poor skills and off-time dancing distract them?

“Seungmin-hyung” a voice said from in front of him. Seungmin tried to calm his insecurities whirling around in his mind.

“Hyung!”

Seungmin snapped his head upwards away from the glossy floor. The hall was quiet enough to hear a mouse. Minho, Woojin, Jisung and Changbin had already gone into the elevator, leaving Jeongin, his only dongsaeng, standing in front of him.

“Are you coming back to the dorm?”

Seungmin looked towards the fork in the path, hesitantly weighing out his options. *Stay and practice or leave?*

*I need to practice but I’m so tired. The math test has really taken a toll on me, not to mention the amount of work I need to do to catch up to pass the next test... If I go home today, how much will it really affect my dancing?*

The decisions weighed down on him, the choices and expectations drowning him under their heavy weight.

As if he was a tiny, thin lily-pad.

With that he made up his mind, ignoring the loud sounds of the speakers blasting from the ‘soundproof’ rooms.

“Yeah Jeongin, let’s go home.”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry, this was so late. I just started back at school again and the workload so far is pretty tough.
I got tickets to Stray Kids Unveil Tour!!! I'm so excited and I'll try to post another chapter before the end of this month.

I hope everyone is doing well, I'd love to chat in the comments so if you'd like to, leave one, it would really motivate me :))

~Talic
Bite

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

The Thursday hustle and bustle of students in the cafeteria filled Seungmin’s ears as he placed his meal tray on the table next to his friends. His morning classes had gone fine, Yejun was not at school so Seungmin didn’t have to deal with his annoying classmate kicking his chair all Korean Studies class. Albeit this, the swirl of a storm had risen in his stomach, making him feel on edge and uneasy as he sat beside his friends.

“Seungmin!” Dayun hastily wrapped a thin arm around his shoulders and pulled him to her side. “You’ve got to see this video.” Seungmin smiled awkwardly and let himself be dragged to the girl’s side.

The video was three minutes long and the red bar at the bottom of the screen showed that it was already halfway through. He watched as her slender finger and manicured nail pressed the play button.

The clip showed a stage of Black Pink-sunbaenim dancing aggressively to one of their singles that Seungmin liked. The crowd was roaring at a deafening pitch while the four shone on stage with sparks flying around the idols.

Seungmin began to nod his head to the slightly distorted beat muffled by the screams of the concert attendees and let himself get slightly lost in the familiar chorus; anything to ease the awkward silence between the pair.

“Ya! Dayun!” Haeun yelled out. Seungmin felt Dayun jump in fright at the small girl’s loud voice and her pink nail slipped to the ‘home’ button underneath the screen. The long-manicured nail hit the circle twice revealing her search history.

For a split-second, Kim Seungmin appeared on the screen.

Seungmin looked up to the girl in confusion but all she did was hastily turn off her phone, shove it in her pastel pink handbag and avoid his eyes.

“Make sure you all ask how Seojun went on his exam today” Haeun notified setting down her tray with a clumsy clang.

“Why?” Dayun asked, confusion written in all her thin features.

“He had his important test today” Haeun explained, her mouth forming a circle as she frowned at her friend. She ran a hand through her dyed bobbed hair and tore at one of the dumplings on her tray. “He’s been studying all month for it, Dayun! It’s important to him so don’t tell him you forgot about it.”

“Oh” Dayun said anti-climatically. She took a measly bite of her rice.

*It’s probably not the best time to say I forgot about his exam* Seungmin mused inwardly, shivering at the tense atmosphere between Haeun and Dayun.

“He’s coming” Haeun hissed to Dayun who stopped picking at her food.
Seungmin turned to look at the tall boy, who walked with a slump in his shoulders and tired-looking eyes.

“How was it?” Haeun asked a smile wide on her face.

Seojun sat down with a thump and banged his head on the table.

*Ouch,* Seungmin winced.

“It can’t have gone *that* badly” Dayun chirped up at the boy’s solemn attitude. “You’re, like, one of the smartest people I know!”

“I already know I’ve lost half a mark on the final question!” Seojun groaned placing his more-than-usual acned head in his hands.

“Hey” Haeun comforted, her voice in a gentle low tone. “I’m sure you did well on the other questions—”

“Yes Haeun, but that half a mark is the difference between getting top of the class or not, and that differentiates from who gets into Seoul National University or not!” Seojun snapped. Stillness froze the group of friends at Seojun’s uncharacteristic outburst. Heartbeats filled the silence.

“Sorry” Seojun apologised, drawing his long fingers over his brow then dragging them down his face. His permanent eyebags where two shades darker than usual; Seungmin could easily believe he had stayed up the previous night and many before studying for his final exam.

The tense and tired expression reminded him of two of his elder hyungs.

“It’s alright” Dayun smiled as Haeun sat shell-shocked from Seojun’s fit of rage. “We’re here for you. Besides, we don’t even have class last period! It’s assembly meeting for our year level, so you get to relax Seojunnie.”

The drama at the table died down as Seojun began to eat. Dayun chatted about nothing, completely ignoring the whole situation while Haeun sat in thought, eating the last three of her dumplings.

Seungmin ate his food in quiet, shadowing Haeun’s actions. He felt somewhat invalid getting involved; these three had known each other since the beginning of middle school – before that even.

The whole cafeteria felt eerily quiet, most students murmuring to each other like a game of ‘Whispers’ or scraping their dishes for the last grains of rice. Seungmin wondered how many witnessed Seojun’s ‘snap.’

The only thing that could be identifiably heard was the rambunctious laughter of the school heathens of Seungmin’s year level. The cackled like hyenas in pursuit of a naïve prey.

Or maybe they were more like a pack of wolves; feared by all rather than a scrawny hyena.

It was almost as if something was bound to go wrong.

Seungmin felt the fine hairs on the back of his neck rise.

“Hey, Seungmin!” A gruff voice yelled.

He waited.
“Take a bite of this!”

He felt it before he heard it. A thick glob of slimy heavy rice was pelted at his back, the white grains exploding onto and then latching on to his black blazer. The rice leeched onto him for dear life. Seungmin grimaced as the brown sauce the grains were mixed into flooded into his blazer and through his shirt onto his bare skin. The dark waves of laughter followed.

Seungmin felt his face betray him and heat into the colour of a blooming rose at the exhibition. The students around him peered at him in silence, in wait, in expectation for Seungmin to yell just like Seojun did moments prior.

*Just brush it off, stay cool* Seungmin thought, turning around in his chair. *But don’t make any eye contact.*

Seungmin carefully picked the remaining rice off, ignoring the slight shake of nervousness of his hands and stood up. He stepped over the rice staining the impeccable blue floor.

His eyes remained cool, slightly cold even. This time they were no windows into his soul. It was a façade of course, practised *over and over and over* again until no one but the three people could see any difference.

A trick Seungmin had learnt along the way into idol-hood.

“I’ll be taking my leave now” he smiled to his friends, ignoring the eyes of fifty students still observing his every move.

He avoided his friends’ eyes as Dayun smiled at him blankly, like a lifeless doll. Seojun still had his head on the table. Haeun glared at the rice on her plate, her cheeks almost as red as Seungmin’s. But not out of embarrassment, out of anger.

He walked away, his posture stiff as a board but his eyes faux-relaxed. As he passed Hyunwoo’s table he looked at his watch, crumbling under their mockery if he even dared to meet their snake-like eyes.

*There’s still forty-five minutes till lunch ends... I can’t bear going back to the cafeteria.* Seungmin stopped walking aimlessly, stopping in the middle of the empty hallway to think. *Well, the dance room is always open... and I need to practice Jisung’s verse’s footwork before the four-hour practice tonight...*

The pure brilliance of the idea made Seungmin walk with more purpose to the arts wing. Of course! He could channel all his embarrassment into a greater purpose! One that would actually help him and his team! And those fifteen people, what could they say now that he was even practising at his school lunchtime!?

Seungmin almost felt giddy as he entered the empty dance studio. The lights flickered on one by one as he entered, closing the door securely behind him. Although he was sure the studio was barely ever used at lunchtimes, it wasn’t a haven like Classroom 53.

Seungmin sat on the wooden, scratched-up floor and turned the choreography video for the ‘dark’ song on as quiet as possible. The room was quite soundproofed after the many complaints by the nearby math classrooms, but Seungmin didn’t need anyone coming in due to the noise.

After watching the choreography for the eleventh time, trying to imprint the movement into his brain, he got up, shrugged off his blazer, and stood in front of the mirror and stared into his reflection, determination in his bright features.
I can do this.

He turned up the music louder, slowed the beat to 75% speed and practised just how he had seen the dancers in the video do and his members two nights ago.

Seungmin tripped the first few times; falling onto the bruise left by Yejun’s kicking attack on his chair the other day at one point, but after each failure, he pushed himself off the ground and tried it again.

Twenty minutes went by, Seungmin more and more sweaty and bothered with each passing minute, but there was still ten minutes left until he had to get ready the assembly that was taking place instead of the final class.

He tugged his hair in frustration and began to rewind the song to the same ten seconds he had been playing for the past what-seemed-like twenty hours.

Come on Seungmin! You’re so close and then you’ll have this footwork down perfectly. Think about how proud the members will be!

Seungmin played the clip and got into position. The beat became faster as it led to the complex move.

Three, two, one-

Seungmin focussed on where he stepped, leaning to the right then to the left, then a spin and a jump kick, left, right, left, cross kick and-

Seungmin slapped his foot onto the ground just as Jisung spat the last lyric of his verse, the ‘boom’ of his school shoes echoing around the room as the bass struck the song at the exact same time.

Successfully.

He did it successfully.

Seungmin felt an involuntary grin stretch across his face and he relished in the burst of happiness that came with finally completing the footwork. He fell to the ground in victory and lay in a starfish position for a few moments, savouring the moment.

If I knew to practice for half an hour extra helped me this much, I would have done in sooner!

Seungmin grinned, still slightly out of breath from his previous attempts.

He checked his watch. Seven more minutes until I need to begin to wrap up. I can perfect it now until I have to leave. As masters say; it must be done three times in a row to be learnt.

For the remainder of the time, Seungmin continued to practice until he was sure he had memorised the transitions and steps of the first half of the bass-heavy song.

Because it’s a longer practice tonight, I’m sure we’ll be learning the second half and practising the first half until we’ve all got it down. So, I don’t think I need to worry about the few steps of the title track I don’t know until later.

The warning bell suddenly rung obnoxiously; indicating five minutes until class. Seungmin quickly packed up and rubbed some passion-fruit-smelling moisturiser on his hands and wrists and
disconnected his phone from the Bluetooth speakers.

_I probably reek, I should have my spare deodorant with me._ To Seungmin’s luck, a stick of roll-on deodorant was lying at the bottom of his schoolbag.

Seungmin untucked his white shirt from the waistband of his pants and began to apply the ‘manly’ scent to counter the sticky smell of working out. As he turned to the other side, his shirt rode up to reveal the right side of his waist and Seungmin winced at the image. A blotchy purple and green bruise that looked like a child’s failed water-colour project spread largely across the bottom area of his mid-section.

_Damn_ Seungmin looked at the ‘battle-scar’ with an odd sense of disgust and amazement. _Yejun made me fall off the chair harder than I thought, it’s a wonder I’ve barely felt any pain from it._

The final warning bell rung one more time and Seungmin hastily tucked in his shirt again to hide the welt of his hip from interested eyes, threw the deodorant back into his bag and left the room.

He weaved his way through the labyrinth of school hallways and warm-bodied students until he arrived at the assembly hall. He took a deep breath and pushed open the heavy door.

Over one hundred students had already arrived, sitting in the red plastic chairs of the hall with their bags heaved onto the floor around them, saving seats for their friends. Seungmin scanned his eyes around the hall until he quickly found Seojun; the tall boy easy to pick out in a crowd.

He awkwardly made his way towards his friends, passing Hyunwoo and his pack with ease as they were too interested in a most-likely-sexual game one of the boys had on his phone to look at Seungmin as he shuffled past.

“Hey, Seungmin! How ya feeling?” Haeun grinned as Seungmin slumped into one of the remaining seats. The group was oddly split into two rows of chairs, Dayun and Seojun in the front and Seungmin and Haeun behind them.

“I’m good-”

“I’m _so_ happy we have this boring assembly instead of class” Dayun interrupted, swinging around in her chair to converse easier with the group. “The teachers are just going to talk about stuff we already know – it’s the biggest waste of time ever!”

Seojun grumbled something in response and placed his head on the chair in front of him.

Seungmin opened his mouth to respond, but the crackle of the microphone stopped him and the murmurings of the students around him.

“Attention students” a teacher, Mrs Soon, the ‘wellbeing’ teacher of students in their final year, cleared her throat at the front of the room.

Seungmin could already tell this was going to be a long meeting.

“As you know, in the upcoming months you will be sitting your final exams. For those students that completed a subject early, this news will be even more relevant to you.”

Seungmin looked towards Seojun who wasn’t paying attention to Mrs Soon at all.

“Each day outside of school, you _must_ be completing an at least an average of five hours of study, otherwise you _will_ fall behind and achieve a less than stellar score for your final exams. At
Cheongdam we expect over six hours per day.”

At least five hours?! I can barely squeeze in three Seungmin frowned in surprise. He looked around to see Haeun’s reaction, but her face stayed completely neutral. So did almost every other student’s.

Is every other student doubling my time? I find three hours a night hard to do sometimes… how the hell did I get so behind?

“From early life, I’m sure your parents enrolled you in tutoring and after-school programs to train you in studying, at this time it is crucial you are tutored as well as completing the required homework each night – more even.”

I’m also not tutored, I don’t have time for that with vocal, language and dance lessons almost every day.

Seungmin glumly sat back in his chair at the realisation that he was well and truly behind compared to his schoolmates.

I promised my parents to do well and school and go to university after school – it was the main condition of becoming a trainee at JYP. Now that I’m an idol, don’t I need to prove to them that I can do this? Both be a good student and a good idol?

Seungmin thought back to his math test. And his dancing lesson two nights ago.

Right now I’m failing at both.

“If you aren’t studying as much as you should be” Mrs Soon paused for effect. “Then you need a reality check, and if this wake-up call isn’t enough” She stopped again.

“Then find something that is.”

Seungmin sighed at her somewhat anti-climactic words. He didn’t know what he was expecting; definitely not fireworks to come shooting out of the stage, but definitely not something he’s heard all his life.

It’s fine I’m not studying that much Seungmin reasoned as he sat up from his chair, following the herd of students out the hall. I’m an idol; I don’t have as much time as others so, therefore, I can’t study as much as I want to be. If I have a B average at the end of the year and don’t fail anything then that’s fine right?

He quickly entered his complex locker combination and swung open his locker. It was tidy, as to be expected, not a single folder or paper out of place. He carefully but hastily rammed his books on his bag and heaved it over his shoulder, his dance clothes and trainers weighing the bag down.

I should ask Channie-hyung. He was my upperclassman at some point when he was enrolled here. But, would he know exactly what I feel like? He was never both in school and an idol at the same time. My best option is to probably talk to Hyunjin or Jeongin, but I don’t want to appear… weak to them or anything.

Seungmin lightly bit his plump bottom lip out of habit, deep in thought as he exited the school gates and started walking towards his bus stop.

The only thing that they think I look weak in is my dancing; tonight I must prove to them I’m not going to be left behind. He ran through the complicated movements in his mind.
I’m sure I’ve got it perfect this time. It has to be.

The bus came exactly as scheduled and Seungmin sat next to one of the ‘stop’ button, so he wouldn’t forget to press it this time. Exhilaration ran through the channel of his veins, flooding into his heart and filling it with an odd sense of anticipation for the four-hour dance class he had always bitterly hated.

The bus chugged around slowly, and Seungmin thought of the dumb children’s song the Aussie pair always sang together when on a bus, in their thick Australian accent. He laughed quietly to himself at the odd memory and experimentally hummed the tune softly under his breath. It sounded bubbly and light-hearted when they sang it, but for some reason his baritone and ‘nasally’ voice made it sound solemn.

“Hey Seungmin” a voice whispered in his ear while a hand a-little-too-harshly clapped him on the back. Seungmin looked at the hand. It was veiny with chipped and dirty nails. Small scabs and light scars were also present on the tan skin.

Seungmin looked towards the voice and came face to face with one of the most notorious bullies in the school; Hyunwoo.

“Sorry about earlier, buddy” Hyunwoo smirked at him with his with set sharp fangs. “My spoon slipped.”

Seungmin reddened at the indication of the ‘rice incident.’

Act normal, play cool.

“Oh-h” Seungmin stuttered nervously which he immediately cursed himself for. “It’s no issue, really” he said, adding an awkward smile at the end of the sentence.

“Good” Hyunwoo nodded, his eyes dark. Seungmin held the boy’s intimidating gaze for a few moments until the other looked away nonchalantly. “You might want to press the button, don’t want to miss your stop like last time.”

Seungmin swallowed and pressed the button, turning away from the younger. How could Hyunwoo act so indifferently but so threatening at the same time? It made Seungmin feel stupid even just breathing the air around him.

As the bus pulled up to his stop, Seungmin tapped his card and got off. Even when the bus rolled away, he still couldn’t shake the lingers of Hyunwoo’s predatory gaze on his back, so vulnerable as if it were merely a target.

Seungmin arrived at the studio, later than almost everyone else as per usual. He didn’t like being unpunctual, but his school timetable allowed him no room to get to the entertainment facility any earlier. He placed his heavy bag down at the side of the room; out of the way of the nine members so there would be no accidents like one time where Woojin caught his foot on Hyunjin’s bag strap and fell to the ground.

Seungmin took off his shoes and his long socks and observed the room. Six of his hyungs plus the choreographer were scattered around the too-familiar practice room, Minho and Woojin chatting in one corner while Chan helped Jisung plug his phone into the simple speaker system that despite practising here every day for over a year Jisung could still never understand.
“Where’s Jeongin and Hyunjin?” he asked Felix curiously, who was scrolling through his phone with his left hand and stroking Changbin’s straight hair with his other.

“They’re not here yet” Felix pointed out distracted by the older boy resting his head in his lap. Seungmin couldn’t help but slightly grimace at the obvious and open affection between the pair. He used affection as a joke, especially targeting the youngest member, and although he didn’t mind a cuddle once in a while, Seungmin found constant clinginess rather ‘cringy.’

The door slammed open and in walked the two boys in their sunshine uniforms. Only one of the members didn’t look as colourful as the vibrant yellow on his blazer.

“Ah, you’re here” Chan said as the SOPA students arrived, much later than usual. “Get changed quickly and then we are going to start learning the second half and touch up the first part of the song we did last time.”

Hyunjin smiled at the leader while Jeongin just rummaged through his bag, searching for the baggy blue shirt he often wore in practice.

Seungmin pulled out a grey shirt he had rammed in his backpack earlier. He at winced his poor choice of colour; his sweat would show up in buckets against the light cotton fabric.

Seungmin got changed quickly, glad for a high-speed ‘Dance The Night Away’ dance chorus by Felix to keep the other members' attention while he stripped from his white button-up school shirt and into his grey one. He carefully folded his dirty shirt and school shorts despite Minho’s slightly impatient look and began to warm up to the hip-hop tune that came on from Jisung’s ‘good vibes’ playlist. As he stretched his long legs, avoiding his bruised thigh and hip from ‘falling’ off his chair, he snuck a glance towards the maknae of the group.

Jeongin stretched with vigour, but an uncharacteristic frown danced of his high cheekbones and perfect eyebrows. Seungmin met eyes with Hyunjin across the room and nodded his head in question towards the youngest.

Hyunjin shrugged in response, indicating that he too didn’t know why the maknae was so different from his usual bubbly self.

Seungmin felt the storm uneasily rise in his stomach again.

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“Okay” Chan clapped his large hands and signalled for Woojin to change the music. “Let’s start with brushing up the first half and get the footwork down, then we can move onto learning the second half.”

Seungmin quickly flashed back to his impromptu dance practice at lunch and mapped the footwork in his head. He bounced nervously in one place, he could do this. He just had to do better than last practice, especially with the tension in the air thicker than usual due to Jeongin’s unusual mood.

It took a few more moments under choreographer-nim’s watchful eye for the nine members to waltz into their first position. Seungmin waited.

The deep bass started and Seungmin moved his hands and arms in time of the punk rock electronic opening. He looked away from choreographer-nim and at his own reflection, this time the mirror showing his true self.

I can do this.

He danced on beat to the thunder-like sounds of the chorus, occasionally moving to the centre and
mouthing his lines, but otherwise, he stayed focus. He couldn’t let down his hyungs again.

Seungmin glanced at Woojin and Changbin’s expressions in the mirror as Jisung’s verse started, only lines away from the retched confusing footwork. They both had looks of unsureness on their faces; just like Seungmin last class, they both didn’t know the footwork.

The idol breathed through his nose as the footwork came closer and closer, pressure looming over and crushing him under its sordid black boot. The beat became more distorted in his ears as Jisung continued to ‘rap’ his verse, a sense of déjà vu making the room spin, but Seungmin pushed it away and forced himself to only listen to the bass marking each move.

And then it began.

Seungmin channelled all his energy into the excruciating steps and jumps as the beat sounded heavier and heavier. With a final flick of his right ankle and a jump into his next position, the verse ended, transitioning into the bridge.

Seungmin knelt on the floor, exhilaration pumping through his veins and euphoria making his head feel light. He looked in the mirror up at his group and smiled when he saw Bang Chan and the dance lines’ proud gazes on him.

“How the hell did you learn that so quickly?” Changbin chuckled, his hands resting tiredly on his hips, a small smile laden on his ‘v’ shaped face.

“I practised at lunch today” Seungmin exclaimed sheepishly, lifting himself of the floor and brushing down his pants.

“Nice work Minnie” Chan smiled like an approving father and turned towards the choreographer. “Hyung, can you please run through the footwork for the members that don’t know it? I really want to try and get this down today.”

Seungmin sighed in relief, happy for the short break even though practice had barely started. He sat on the polished floors and looked at the group again. Bang Chan was at the other side of the room, pacing in a small circle as he scrolled through his phone while Hyunjin was slumped on a chair reading a pamphlet from his school.

He sipped his water methodically as he watched the choreographer explain the movements again to Woojin, Changbin, Felix, Jisung and Jeongin, Minho standing on the side and observing the teaching. Jeongin looked focused, as he usually did in classes, but the frown on his face was certainly not emitting an aura of brightness like Jeongin usually did.

The second youngest watched the learning process for a few more minutes, cementing the footwork further into his brain so the first time of the night wasn’t just a fluke, but as the clock ticked by, he grabbed his phone out of boredom and opened the first Stray Kids he found online.

He laughed as it was one of the many ‘seungmin annoying jeongin videos’ online made by a well-supported STAY. He clicked on the link and waited for the video to load, then scrolled to the comments to check the action in the community.

Many of them where in English, but he could understand the general paragraphs that were usually followed by ‘heart’ or ‘laughing face’ emoticons. He stopped at one of the few Korean comments.

<These videos are so funny kekeke! I love Jeongin but Seungmin is just too annoying and these videos prove it,,, he needs to calm down he does need to stop irritating Jeongin and the other members so much for the sake of Stay Kids lmao! On a serious note though, if he continues to act
childishly like this these videos will be all new STAY see and as ‘stray kids’ name is in the title it could shape the whole band to be immature and irritating, dampening all their reputation, especially when all members especially Channie put so much effort into the group. Anyway~~~ STAN SKZ <333 (but maybe not Seungmin kekeke)>

Likes: 568 Comments: 43

Seungmin’s heart plummeted. The comment, saying he was too annoying, had five hundred and sixty-eight likes.

Let’s think rationally Seungmin he thought, trying to calm his feverish heart. Most STAY who watched this were international fans and don’t understand Korean. They probably just saw the ‘Stan SKZ’ which was conveniently written in English and the love hearts at the end and assumed it was a more positive comment. Not one saying that I’m going to inevitably ruin Stray Kids’ reputation. Great.

“Minnie!”

Seungmin jumped and fumbled his phone, quickly adjusting his grip to hold the sleek device tighter so it didn’t fall onto the floor. Minho slid down the wall to sit beside him, pushing his black locks out of his sweaty forehead.

“Looks like the choreographer doesn’t need my help” he smiled his signature grin, but it faltered as Seungmin didn’t answer.

“What’s reading?”

Seungmin pulled himself together and tried to turn off his phone, but his sweaty palms made it difficult to press the small rectangular button.

Minho moved closer to the phone.

Shit shit shit shit Seungmin thought and tried to angle the screen away from the older, but of course, it backfired and only made it more assessable to Minho’s calculating and curious gaze.

As Minho’s cat-like eyes flickered across the screen, reading the characters, Seungmin’s panic rose, and finally, after a few startled seconds, the damned device switched off.

“It’s nothing hyung” he smiled, the grin stretching too wide, making his cheeks hurt.

“Aren’t you sure? That looked like a hate-comment, why were you reading that?”

Seungmin looked into his hyung’s eyes, faking truthfulness, but immediately regretted it when he saw the raw emotions swirling like a storm in Minho’s conflicted eyes.

"Are you..." Minho looked away, struggling to find his words. Seungmin waited. "Are you okay?"

“I’m okay, hyung” he lied, words spilling out of his mouth. “I just stumbled upon it, so there’s nothing to worry about.”

At least half of whatever garbage he said was true, it wasn’t like he intentionally went out of his way to find negative comments and further degrade his already plunging self-esteem.

Minho opened his mouth to answer but the choreographers clap signalling that it was time to get back to work stopped him.
Seungmin escaped quickly, throwing his phone on his bag and fleeing to his position for the dance again. He sighed in relief. He was barely near Minho in the first half of the dance and that just meant Seungmin could avoid the confrontation easier.

Am I really childish? I’ve always been complimented on and prided myself on my maturity, but maybe STAY is right. I really should tone my teasing down a little bit, especially towards Jeongin.

Seungmin pushed his troubling thoughts aside and tried to focus on the music blasted from the speakers and the next position that the choreographer was beginning to teach.

He had to learn well; he couldn’t be an annoyance anymore.

Seungmin felt the sweat drip down his toned legs and soak his white socks, but he didn’t care, too lost in the heavy beat to shake the droplets off. The members were collectively reaching the end of the agonising night with only fifteen minutes left until they were finally finished. For the past three and a half hours, they had been learning the second half of the dance, slightly easier than the first except for the small dance break that the choreographer had skipped over, ‘leaving it for another day.’

“Jeongin-ah!” Chan called, snapping Seungmin out of his ‘try-hard’ (as Felix claimed) stance. Seungmin bit his lip and looked towards the youngest, who was one second behind the rest of the synchronised team.

The maknae had been distracted and frowning all night, to the extent that even Minho was too scared to call him out on his mistakes. Of course, their leader was either too fearless or oblivious to be frightened by Jeongin’s scary expression.

“And one, two, three, four!” The choreographer began to chant and Seungmin zoned in again. Up next, after Changbin’s rap, was one of the biggest transitions Stray Kids had ever done, sliding into completely different areas in a criss-cross sort of fashion.

Okay Seungmin, three backward steps to the right, a spin then, then a jump into another three on the diagonal to the left – oh wait, was it three or two?

Seungmin quickly looked around, trying to remain unnoticeable, but the eighth count was looming ahead and approaching sooner and sooner-

Time was running out, he had to make a choice.

Seungmin fell to the ground with a ‘bang’ as he collided with another wriggling and sweaty mass of another member. Seungmin shot out his arms to catch himself but not even his quick baseball-trained reflexes could save him from gravity’s lull to the hard and unforgiving wooden planked floor.

He had chosen the wrong one.

He groaned out loud as his already injured hip protested slammed onto the ground, sending a sharp and searing pain through the right side of his body. If the slam of his body into the floor didn’t attract enough panicked faces, the loud noise similar to a strangled cat that came out of Seungmin’s mouth certainly did.

“Minnie!” he heard Hyunjin ask and Seungmin pushed himself to a sitting position, despite Woojin’s wide hand on his chest lightly pushing him back down.
“Did you lose consciousness? Does your head hurt?” the choreographer gently asked, taking control of the situation and kneeling beside Seungmin.

“No, it’s fine, I didn’t hit my head or anything” Seungmin said truthfully. “I fell on my hip so I’m okay” he reassured his Woojin and Jisung who were closest to him.

“Let us see your hip” Changbin said.

Seungmin froze. He had fallen on his right hip. The same hip with the large bruise from yesterday’s incident. They would know that the bruise had formed way too early and too severely to be from the collision and would immediately be suspicious as to where it was actually from. And that wasn’t a question Seungmin was willingly going to answer.

“I’m sure it’s fine guys-”

“Jeongin.”

Seungmin stopped talking and his head plus the other members snapped to the leader who looked fuming with lightning strikes going off around his cloudy hair. Chan had dropped the nicknames. He was truly and utterly frightening.

“Jeongin, you should have been more aware of your surroundings. You have caused Seungmin to get hurt from your mistakes” Chan’s voice was dark, but low. He had never raised his voice at a member, never in the two years of knowing them. Seungmin didn’t know what was scarier; a quiet Chan or a loud one. He, along with the other members could only imagine what a Chan driven to the point of raising his voice would be like.

There was a short silence as Jeongin stepped away from the group, a divide forming between the group as Jeongin’s frown grew deeper.

“None of this would have happened if he knew what he was doing!”

Jeongin’s raised voice echoed around the small room, no doubt that it could be heard in the room next door where the younger trainees where practising.

Seungmin sucked in a large breath but he felt like a winded and helpless deer or the path of a car, still sitting on the floor. Jeongin was right; he had messed up the steps and caused the collision. He hung his head in shame. It was his fault.

“Yah, where’s your respect?” Woojin asked, his voice also edges away from a grizzly bear’s growl. “Don’t talk to Seungmin like that; even if he did mess up the steps, you should have been paying more attention, so you didn’t cause him to hurt his hip. Even now you should be apologising and helping him rather than glaring at him and blaming it all on Seungmin.”

At this Jeongin’s frown was replaced with a sense of shock and realisation dawned on his features.

“I’m sorry Seungmin-hyung, I’ve had a bad day, even though that is not an excuse, and I didn’t mean to take it out on you” he looked away from Seungmin and up at all the members. “All of you.” He bowed in apology, a sort of submission.

“Please forgive me.”

“I-It’s okay” Seungmin got up off the ground and rushed over to the youngest member, his frown now transformed into a solemn and watery expression.
Chan sighed, recovering from his rare outburst. “Let’s go back to the dorms, we only have ten minutes left anyway.” He bowed to the choreographer. “Thank you for coming to help us.”

Seungmin followed in the short bow with his other members, noticing Jeongin’s bow slightly deeper than the other members, more apologetic for the trouble he caused.

Had a bad day huh? Seungmin thought as he collected his things to leave the practice room.

Well, you’re not the only one.

Seungmin followed the rest of the team out of the building, the small argument in the practice rooms almost completely brushed over. He looks over in surprise as a heavy weight, which Seungmin recognises as an arm, is slung over his shoulder and pulls him into the other boy’s side.

“How’s your hip?” Jisung breathily asks, looking straight forward as they walk out of the building.

“It’s alright” Seungmin drags his words on, wondering what his hyung’s intention is. Jisung never avoids eye contact when talking unless he is feeling uncomfortable.

“You know you can tell me anything, right?”

Seungmin falters in his steps.

What? How does he know about Yejun, or today? He hasn’t seen my hip otherwise he would have certainly notified Channie or Woojin-hyung before now.

“Hey, calm down” Jisung adds on gently when he notices Seungmin’s reeling mind. Seungmin forgot that although he sometimes doesn’t look it, Jisung is one of the most perceptive members in the group.

Seungmin can hear the newfound concern in Jisung’s voice and it only makes him panic and freeze up more. He is sure the elder can feel how tense his shoulders are.

I need to get out of this, and fast.

“Sorry, I’m still a little worked up about Jeongin… it’s so out of character for him to yell like that, don’t you think?” Seungmin attempts to deflect the conversation away from himself, but one look at Jisung tells Seungmin that the older isn’t buying his weak change of topic.

“Yeah” Jisung softly agrees but turns away again. “Look, Minho told me about the negative comment.”

Seungmin relaxes. This is much easier to talk his way around it than the rice incident or chair incident or any other embarrassing moment that has happened the past few days.

“Don’t worry about it hyung, mean comments are just part of the job” Seungmin reprimands, an over-dramatic sigh escaping his lips.

Jisung laughs a breathy laugh, still tired from dance practice. “Aigoo, our little Seungminnie’s so mature!”

Seungmin smiles and lets the older pinch his red cheeks, ignoring that the words that were supposed to be a compliment target exactly what he was criticised for.

“But seriously” Jisung adds, hugging Seungmin closer to his warm body. “Me and everyone else is always around if you want to talk, okay?”
Seungmin just smiles and bites his tongue, waiting for the elder to clamper over the bodies of the other members to get to his seat in the back of the car. Seungmin sits beside Felix and looks out the window, zoning out of the conversation the other members are having beside him.

It’s halfway through the ride back to the dorm that Seungmin realised the odd metallic tang in his mouth was blood.

Chapter End Notes

Heyyy! Sorry this chapter is later than usual (it's longer than usual though!!)

How did everyone like it? We're getting into the deep end soon so strap in.

ALsO I've seen a lot of writers explain the symbolism/title of the chapter in the notes so as a test run/experiment I'm going to do it for this chapter. This will have no spoilers too!

Chapter Title: Bite

- The Rice Incident - Hyunwoo tells Seungmin to 'take a bite' of the rice before throwing it at him.
- Assembly - the realisation that Seungmin is not studying as much as the other student is a surprise; regarding the maths test he did, his lack of studying bit him in the butt.
- Seungmin bites his lip when he is nervous/in thought
- Jeongin uncharacteristically bites back at Chan and Seungmin
- Seungmin bites his tongue when Jisung tells him 'he can tell him anything' - holds himself back
- The blood in his mouth at the end of the chapter - Seungmin bit his tongue too hard - is bottling up his feelings and causing him trouble.

Also

- Seojun's outburst foreshadowed Jeongin's - both were out of character

I don't know if all that stuff was self-explanatory or if it helped you guys in my decisions for this chapter. If you like me doing this then tell me haha.

Also there will be a schedule to this story

NEXT UPDATE DUE DATE : 15TH APRIL

TBH most chapters will probably be posted on the due date so sorry if monthly chapters aren't good for you

:((

I currently have a lot on at school including my first final exam (eek!) on the 28th and a speech in front of my school I'm unwillingly doing (rip myself) in three days so yay. In three weeks I have holidays so I'll try to post two chapters in April, but we'll see.
Question Of The Chapter ((If you feel like answering)):
What are your opinions on Seungmin's school friends?? (Haeun, Seojun and Dayun)

Thanks for reading!

~Talic
Seungmin woke up with a start. Low light streamed through the slit of the open curtains and Seungmin suppressed a groan as he rolled over in his bed.

*What time is it?* Seungmin thought, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes. He clumsily reached down and tugged his phone off the charger. The screen’s bright light upon turning it on made him wince and he closed his eyes immediately, recoiling from the contrasting sudden eruption of brightness. Slowly he peeled his eyes open again.

4:32? Seungmin sighed at the outrageously early time and rolled over again, praying for sleep to take him again. He opened his eyes again to look across the room. Hyunjin’s bed was empty.

Seungmin sat up in alarm, adjusting to the low light in the room. *Hyunjin? Where is he?*

He scanned the room again and sighed in relief when he saw a body-shaped silhouette slumped over the desk in the corner of the room. Of course, his hyung had been studying hard into the night – he had fallen asleep to the sound of pencil on paper.

*Silly hyung, he is studying so much these days* Seungmin mused as he quietly slid out of his cocoon of bedsheets. He soundlessly grabbed one of the neatly folded blankets in his cupboard and fluffed it out, before placing it over the elder’s shoulders.

*I really should do more too.* Seungmin looked at his schoolbag where his math books were laying untouched since he had brought them home. Yesterday he had been too tired to do any work; dance practice was always both physically and mentally draining, but now he had the time…

*No, the most important thing is making STAY proud, and that means I need to work on my dancing.* Seungmin checked the time again. *I can go dancing now… I’m sure the others won’t mind, and it means I will have at least an hour to practice.*

With that, Seungmin made up his mind, quickly changed into some exercise-appropriate clothes and rammed his school uniform in his bag, left his bed unmade as to not wake either Hyunjin or Jisung, filled up his water-bottle and slipped soundlessly, like a black cat, into the night.
Sweat dripped off Seungmin’s pointed chin as he tried to follow the beat of the title song for the umpteenth time that morning. He was struggling over the same part; the damned footwork that he hadn’t learnt correctly in class. Seungmin flopped to the floor like a plank of wood when he failed the footwork again.

He checked the time and gritted his teeth in frustration. He had arrived at the practice rooms forty-five minutes ago, meaning he had to go back to the dorms in fifteen minutes otherwise he would be late to get ready for school. And in the three-quarters of an hour he spent here, he still couldn’t do the one thing he set out to achieve.

\textit{I need to get this done today} Seungmin growled, moving the small cursor to the tedious ten seconds of the footwork. \textit{I did so well with yesterday’s practice, so why isn’t today going as well?}

Seungmin raised himself up of the floor, ignoring the slight dizziness and headache pulsing behind his ears and prepared himself again. The beat hit and Seungmin began, but as soon as it started Seungmin stopped, almost tripping over his tangled mess of long limbs.

“Dammit!” Seungmin growled and fought the urge to throw his phone at the mirror that highlighted his imperfections. Instead, he just gripped it harder and exhaled sharply. His head spun impossibly more than it did moments prior.

He clutched his head in frustration, willing the ache to leave as he massaged his temples. He was sure one of the trainees had passed by the door and looked at him weirdly as he looked as if he was freaking out on the dance room’s floor, but Seungmin couldn’t find it in himself to care.

\textit{No Seungmin, just breathe. This move is far less complex then the yesterday’s footwork by a long shot, I just need to clear my head and focus.}

He hit the small ‘rewind’ button on the choreography video until it reached the chorus. Again.

Left, right, right, diagonal backwards step, spinning jump, right – how hard can it be?

Seungmin grimaced as the beat came faster than expected, already one step behind the music. His stomach lurched at the twisting and rumbled in hunger, but Seungmin pushed it aside. He turned the music on again, this time turning the volume as high as it could go.
As the loud beats filled the room, he found himself lost in the motions and ear-splitting noise, not keeping track of time at all. It was a wonder no one had complained yet; maybe some had approached the door but as soon as they saw Seungmin, covered in sweat and frustration evident on his usually smiling features, they turned-tail.

As the music started again, Seungmin felt an unnerving calm wash over him. It was simple; the surrounding of the familiar room, the beat listened half-to-death, the moves – he knew exactly what to do, but executing it was a completely different matter.

He bounced in place in anticipation as the beat began to thud back through the speakers again.

Left, right, right, diagonal backwards step, spinning jump –

_Finally!_ Seungmin flicked his hair out of his eyes, sweat swinging from his scalp at the movement. A sense of euphoria filled him as the rest of the chorus played, surrounding him with the positive energy it radiated. Finally, he was not behind on any choreography, finally he wasn’t a burden to STAY or his team – finally he could rest.

Seungmin waded over to the speakers, ignoring the slight dizziness as he turned of the machine with trembling hands. _Since when have I been so shaky?_

The idol ignored his somewhat concerning symptoms, grabbed his bag, turned off the light and headed towards the shower room. The hallways were plastered with images of western celebrities that JYP found inspiring, one he could recognise as ‘Madonna’ conquering the passage.

He hummed a tune he had heard on the bus yesterday as he methodically unpacked his favourite body wash out of his bag and grabbed a clean towel from the rack. It all made him feel younger; as a trainee he would constantly shower at the entertainment facility rather than at the dorm as it gave him more time for himself.

He quickly undressed, wincing at the state of his exercise clothes and turned on the shower to a boiling temperature before he stepped inside, the steam making it almost hard to breathe. The comfort of the water that turned his skin pinker was all so familiar, and Seungmin felt himself relax into the slight initial pain and raise his voice as he melodically sung the words of a gentle pop song.
After a few minutes, his now clean skin felt as if it was being rubbed raw, and with the smell of pomegranates fragrant in the air, Seungmin hesitantly turned the shower off. His relaxing time was over; now he would need to walk back to the dorm and get ready for school.

Seungmin dried himself off and wrapped the body wash in a plastic bag he kept in the side pocket of his backpack so it would not leak onto his clothes, applied some deodorant and reached in to pull his uniform out of his bag.

His fingers recognised the thick texture of his school-pants but next to them was no thin and slightly-papery feel of his white school shirt. *Are you kidding me?* Seungmin thought, grabbing his bag so he could inspect it more easily. The confiding space of the cubicle made it awkward for Seungmin the keep his towel up and dig in his bag, but even after triple checking the red backpack the shirt was nowhere to be found.

Seungmin looked blankly at the black exercise shirt hanging dejectedly on the doors hook.

There was only one option.

Seungmin cringed as he slid back into the sticky shirt, trying not to think about the grotesque scent it would leave on his once-clean skin, and he tucked it into his school pants, in an attempt to disguise the fact that it was an extremely casual workout shirt. The sweat on his clothes stuck uncomfortably to his body and he winced at the slug-like texture pressing unwillingly pressed to his back.

*At least I didn’t wear grey* Seungmin almost laughed at his misfortune and escaped the enclosure of the shower cubicle. *Now, what’s the time?* Seungmin turned on his phone and the laugher bubbled down in his throat. It was already 7:04.

*Shit shit shit* Seungmin scrambled out of the mens bathroom and hurriedly walked out of the facility. The walk home would take him at least twenty minutes, and he still had to pack his bag, make his bed and change his shirt.

Seungmin looked down at the thin black material. Perhaps there was a silver lining to forgetting his school shirt, this one was already dirty…

And with that, Seungmin pushed the headache which had grown considerably with stress to the side and began to run.
Seungmin panted heavily at the door, leaning on it as he regained his balance to combat the overwhelming dizziness that stuck him since that morning. He grabbed his keys with shaking hands and fiddled with the lock until he managed to open the door.

The clock on the wall read 7:13.

“Seungmin! Where have you been?”

Seungmin blinked sheepishly at the call and staggered over to the counter to rest from his sprint to the dorm. “Sorry Minho-hyung” he replied still trying to catch his breath. He quickly glanced around the room. Five concerned faces stared back at him.

“Do you know how worried we were when you weren’t here?” Woojin chastised. “And look at you, you look like you’ve just run a marathon!”

“I’m sorry hyung, I was just getting in some early morning practice” Seungmin returned with a smile. “Don’t worry I’m okay, sorry for not leaving a note.”

“Make sure you tell us next time” Chan said pointedly, ruffling Seungmin’s hair as he walked towards the door. “Changbin, Jisung, let’s go!”

Seungmin looked amusedly as Jisung sprinted towards the door with Changbin, sipping a dark coffee walked slowly behind, as if it was a turtle and hare race.

The clock had ticked to 7:18.

“I need to get ready for school!” Seungmin announced to no one in particular and toed his trainers off at the door, before racing into his shared bedroom to collect his bag.

*Pencil case, folders, math book... what else do I need?*
“Don’t forget your Student ID” Hyunjin added helpfully, sliding the card over the desk.

“You’re still studying?”

“Yeah, I have a test tomorrow” Hyunjin pouted before breaking out into a soft smile, his eyes scrunching up like crescents.

*He’s been studying non-stop! And the test isn’t even today… I really need to lift my game, don’t I…*

“Wait, why are you still here, aren’t you and Jeongin going to be late for school?” Seungmin asked confusedly, pausing for a brief second.

“School starts late today, there’s an art showcase in the morning” Hyunjin replied, glancing at the time. “I should really get going soon though, thanks for reminding me Minnie.”

Seungmin grumbled in reply and swung open his cupboard door, aggressively sliding the collection of shirts out of the way as he scrambled to find one of his school shirts, he had so stupidly forgotten that morning. He skimmed through the shirts; some collared, some casual, some old, some new, but there was no sight of any uniform.

“Dammit” Seungmin muttered under his breath and turned to face his roommate. “Hyung, where are my shir-”

Hyunjin stopped shuffling his papers and looked up and Seungmin’s gaze and Seungmin stopped mid-sentence. *How the hell can he look so… ethereal this early in the morning?* Seungmin shook his head to get the thought away and glanced back at the clock. 7:20.

“Go check the laundry” Hyunjin smirked, already knowing what Seungmin was looking for. “And Minnie-”

Seungmin paused under the doorway.

“Thanks for the blanket.”
“No issue hyung” Seungmin replied, turning around and smiling at the elder. Only then did he see the eye bags tainting the dancer’s clear skin. “See you later.”

Seungmin walked briskly out of his room, a new form of nausea coming over him. Of course, he hadn’t eaten yet. Seungmin balanced himself as he entered the kitchen which was surprisingly full for the early hours of the day.

“Seungmin! Catch!” Minho warned before throwing an apple at the boy. Seungmin, with his trained reflexes from years of baseball caught the ball-shaped food easily, immediately taking a large bite of the slightly sour fruit.

“What do you have on today?” Woojin hummed as he skimmed through some papers on the table.

“Not much hyung” Seungmin replied quickly, munching through his breakfast at an almost animalistic speed. Outside the window he saw Mr Yoo pull up in the black car, with Jeongin and Hyunjin’s driver close behind.

“Jeongin, can you get my shirt for me?” Seungmin asked his only dongsaeng. The red-haired boy pouted at him, the age difference not too large, but still obliged as the maknae’s duty to help his hyungs.

I swear if I have a pop quiz today in any subject, I’m ruined Seungmin thought, sliding past Felix to put the apple core in the bin. Wait... Isn’t Mr Rhee giving our class our math test back today?

Seungmin’s stomach dropped at the realisation and he almost ran into Minho, who was cutting up a sweet potato on the counter.

“Here hyung!” Jeongin called, his backpack on his shoulders and Seungmin’s clean shirt dangling in front of him.

“Don’t crumple it!” Seungmin chastised but there was no malice behind his words. He reached out his hand to pinch the younger’s cheek to tease him, but the video from yesterday made him abruptly change course and instead settle for half-heartedly ruffling Jeongin’s dyed hair.
“Hyunjin-hyung!” Jeongin called, pulling away from Seungmin’s grasp. “We need to leave now!”

It’s already 7:23??

Seungmin zoned out from Hyunjin’s reply and instead hastily unbuttoned the school shirt, his fingers still annoyingly shaking. I just ate! Why is my body still not cooperating?

Finally, he undid the column of buttons and threw it on the sofa, giving him two hands to rip the black exercise shirt off him body. It slowly peeled off like a band-aid, the sweat now cooled down, exposing his bare skin even more to the cool temperature of the room.

Ugh gross! I’m going to have to last all day in this state! Maybe I can shower at recess or lunch? Seungmin thought, shaking out the damp shirt in front of him, holding it away so he wouldn’t smell its pungent scent.

Seungmin turned around and the room suddenly felt icy cold at the silence in the room, the sounds of Woojin skimming through his papers or Minho chewing his apple gone. He suddenly felt extremely exposed, and he held the black shirt over his developing abs in embarrassment, feeling his easy-to-go-red cheeks heat up when the four members eyes were trained on him.

“Um, guys?” Seungmin asked awkwardly, trying to ease some of the tension that had filled the once peaceful living room.

“Seungmin-ah” Felix’s deep voice rumbled across the room. Seungmin shivered as he turned to face the boy, whose cute face had an uncharacteristically dark expression. “Where did you get that bruise?”

Seungmin cautiously looked down. It was the bruise from when Yejun had kicked his chair over, but somehow it had grown larger and darker, spreading almost all the way up to Seungmin’s ribcage. Like it had infected him and was spreading with the mission of turning his whole body a mottled purple.

Shit.

“It’s from yesterday” Seungmin stammered, quickly hiding the large bruise with his school shirt. He tried to ignore Jeongin who quietly looked as his feet. “It’s no big deal, it doesn’t hurt.”
“I thought you said you landed on your hip, so why is your whole waist bruised?” Woojin asked, his eyes were dark, and face was sunken. It was like he already knew the truth which Seungmin could never tell. The truth that the bruise wasn’t from yesterday’s dance practice.

“Besides” Minho began. Seungmin braced himself for his next onslaught. “A bruise from yesterday wouldn’t be that size or colour” he pointed out, concern shaped into accusation sharp on his features.

Seungmin slipped on his shirt.

“What’s going on?” Hyunjin asked picking up on the tense atmosphere around the five members as he entered the living room.

“It’s nothing Hyunjin-” Seungmin began, shrinking under the wrath of his hyungs’ prodding glares.

“Seungmin, come here and let me see it, okay?” Woojin said, his voice gentler than Minho’s.

Seungmin looked at the eldest, then the door, then the clock.

7:25.

“Look, I promise it’s from yesterday, okay? I must of fell harder than I thought” Seungmin kept ranting, buttoning up the top of his shirt. The look on Woojin and Minho’s faces looked sceptical. Seungmin kept playing along.

“Can we talk about this later?” he asked, flashing a guilty smile and grabbing his heavy schoolbag where he had discarded it beforehand. “I really need to get to school now” he babbled on, edging closer and closer to his escape. “See you at vocal training!”

“Seungmin-” Woojin sighed, but Seungmin had already put on his shoes, and with an apologetic look towards Felix, who had confusion written all over his face, he closed the door.
That was close Seungmin thought, jogging towards the black car parked closest to the house. They don’t believe me at all Seungmin pondered as he waved for Mr Yoo to start driving.

What will I say to them tonight?

He looked in the car’s mirror and saw Jeongin and Hyunjin, accompanied by Minho leave the confinement of the dorm. Seungmin tried to ignore the worried glance Minho took at Seungmin’s leaving car but the prick of guilt on his heart only highlighted his deception towards them.

The car turned the corner.

The storm in his stomach rose again.

With a sigh he reached onto his pocket and pulled out his phone in an attempt to distract himself from the subtle ache in his chest. He scrolled through twitter then Instagram before stumbling onto a post that caught his attention.

‘How to Organise Yourself to pass your Final Exams’

- Make space for studying – eliminate most hobbies and social media, remember it’s only for one or two months! You should spend seven hours a day studying at least for optimal results.
- Try to spend two hours a week doing exercise – you need to be in top form for your exams! And by completely ruining your sleeping schedule or doing no exercise, will only weaken you immune system. You can record yourself saying the notes and listen to it while working out so you don’t waste time!

Well I can’t do either of those – my idol schedule goes before anything else and that leaves barely any time.... And I can’t listen to math formulas when I exercise! I have to practice dancing to the song, it’s not like running or lifting weights.

- Make a study/planner – Use this to plan your studying times and sleeping times so you can study more effectively. Write it down nicely and put in on your bedroom door so you know what to do each day before and after school.

Well, there’s something that I could try Seungmin thought, looking at the reference images below. Pictures of tables filled with different coloured pastel pens and cute flowery stickers on fine
cardboard backgrounds inspired Seungmin to try the ‘organising technique’ that ‘achieved great results.’

He quickly began to make a draft on the back of one of his worksheets, not bothering to rule the lines of the columns or rows – he could do that in the final product. He spaced the boxes for seven columns and labelled each for a separate day of the week.

"This is perfect!" Seungmin thought as he scribbled in the times in hourly decimals down the side, starting at 5:30am and ending at 1:30am. With this I will finally be able to fit in both time for studying and time for my lessons. He looked at all the blank spaces on the page.

Who knew there was so much time in a day?

I wonder if Hyunjin knows about this Seungmin wondered, but at the thought of his hyung he felt the ache return in his heart which had subsided in the methodic listing of times just moments before. He doesn’t even need it! Staying up late to study, getting up early to study - he’s just so amazing, isn’t he? Seungmin thought bitterly, his pencil scratching deeper into the page than before, leaving sharp blunt lines across the white paper.

What is wrong with me? Seungmin threw the pencil down, the fire rising in his blood as Mr Yoo carefully glanced at him from the front seat. Why am I so... annoyed? When I make this table, I will be fine.

Everything will be fine.

Seungmin’s skin still prickled in unease and he thought about this morning and how the members found out about his bruise. He touched his side, wincing at the slight pain as he pressed deeply into the purple skin that was barely protected by his white shirt. Really, it’s all appearance and doesn’t hurt that much.

His phone ringing started him out of his silent brooding and he quickly flipped it over to reveal the ID of ‘Hyunjinnie-hyung’ on the large screen. It’s as if he knew I was thinking about him Seungmin blushed at how cheesy that sounded and quickly swiped the ‘accept’ button.

“Yes?”
Jeongin’s pleasant laugh could be heard through the speakers of the phone and Hyunjin was audibly cooing at the maknae’s antics. They continued to talk and joke about whatever it was – the sound becoming less distinct as a loud noise similar to the sound of tuning a radio cut across the line.

“Hyung?” Seungmin asked in confusion but the SOPA students continued to talk as if the hadn’t heard him at all.

*Did he just accidentally butt-dial me?* Seungmin questioned as he clicked off the phone and ended the call, prematurely cutting of Hyunjin’s boisterous giggle as Jeongin presumably did something that the elder found hilarious.

*I think he just did.*

At the now empty silence in the car, devoid of his friends’ laughter, even if Seungmin wasn’t intended to hear it, Seungmin felt considerably lonelier than one minute ago. They were having so much fun, as they had been every morning since the members moved into the dorm and the pair discovered they both attended the same school. While they had been doing that, Seungmin realised, he had just been sitting here completely and utterly alone.

*And every Monday on the second week, Jisung and Felix accompany them, for God’s sake, down the footpath and into the car* Seungmin growled as he launched his phone into the soft chair.

*Minho did the same for them today! It’s as if…*

*It’s as if Hyunjinnie and Jeongin are the only students the other members care about.*

*Don’t be stupid Seungmin* he rationalized, trying to get the false fact out of his head, but it was as if the words had been burned into the ridges and grooves of his brain with a hot poker, branded into his perilous mind.

*But, the one thing that cannot be denied is that I cannot survive another week in this forsaken car.*

“Driver-nim” Seungmin began, making the older jump slightly at his unexpected gravelly tone of voice. “Starting from Monday, I would rather take public transportation to school, if that’s alright.”

Mr Yoo looked surprised at Seungmin’s declaration, and the student couldn’t help but feel slightly
bad for his sudden decision.

“Is it something I’ve done?” the driver asked hesitantly.

“No, no, of course not” Seungmin backpedalled, praying not to offend the kind man that had been beside him since his trainee days. “I just want to go to school a bit earlier to do more study, and…” His voice trailed off as he struggled to think of a compelling enough reason to set the elder’s mind at rest.

“If you would like, I can come earlier-”

“No, really” Seungmin interrupted, hoping to not come off as ungrateful. “One of my friends catches the bus too and I don’t get to see him in class so I would really appreciate the time spent with him.”

Mr Yoo looked in the hind mirror and met Seungmin’s determined stare. He stared quizzically into the younger’s eyes.

“Only if you’re sure Mr Kim” he said gruffly. “I’ll inform management of your decision this afternoon.”

“Thank you” Seungmin said quietly as the black car rounded into Cheongdam School’s street. The idol carefully repacked his bag, placing his makeshift timetable between the pages of his folders and exited the car, but held the door open.

“Thank you, Mr Yoo, I’ve really appreciated you driving me all these mornings and-”

“Don’t say it so finally” the driver chuckled, his laugh sounding raspy and breathy like a child with asthma after running three kilometres. “I’m sure we’ll see each other again, I will still drive the rest of you boys to training and events.”

Seungmin felt his cheeks go red. Of course, Mr Yoo was a driver for Stray Kids not just him.

“Well then, I’ll see you another time?” Seungmin smiled, a genuine grin on his face.
“Yes, and don’t hesitate to call me if you need anything, you have my number.”

Seungmin closed the door and stood at the curb and watched the black car drive off, Mr Yoo giving a cheerful salute as he faded away into the rest of the traffic, becoming just another car on the bustling road.

Seungmin held tighter on his white backpack straps and entered the gate of Cheongdam High.

It was time to face the day.

Seungmin had been working on the timetable the whole day, even “going to the bathroom” during his English lesson to use the photocopier to perfectly replicate the columns measurements and meticulously straight lines and borders of the timetable, with flawless Korean writing of the days of the week, the times of the day and the hours he was in school. These hours were fixed, stagnant, unchangeable, so Seungmin did not have to waste time re-ruling the lines again for next week.

There were still blank spaces on the four weekly timetables he had made for him to write in his scheduled dance practices, recording sessions, vocal and language lessons, as well as the two most important aspects; studying for school and extra practice for dancing. Now that he had everything laid out, he just had to arrange hours to do both of them and fit it in effectively to his day.

But currently, in fourth period history, Seungmin was still going over his draft for the weekend, writing it all down on a separate sheet of paper as to not accidently ruin the proper timetable, that was stored safely in his locker.

*On Fridays, I have an hour in between the vocal lesson starting at six and the language lesson at nine, and on Saturday Chan wants me to come in for a “voice check-up recording session” whatever that means* Seungmin furrowed his eyebrows in thought and nibbled on the end of his pencil, glaring holes into the scribbled mess of his timetable.

*Those organisation blogs made this look so easy* the student rolled his eyes and pushed the limp sheet of paper away. Although he and Dayun weren’t too close, history was definitely more boring without the perky but slightly petty girl sitting beside him.
She seems like the type of person to be good at this time of thing; she probably does bullet-journaling or something equally as wasteful to both time and the environment with all those pictures printed out then cut up and pasted on other pieces of paper.

The bell’s obnoxious ring signalling the end of the lesson, interrupted the teacher from her explanation and Seungmin quickly packed up his books and bundled them into his arms. He escaped the classroom into the way-too-busy halls jam-packed with students racing to get to the front of the cafeteria line.

_Dammit! Since when did Cheongdam have so many students?_ Seungmin questioned as he squeezed around a female student in a younger year level than him. _Almost there, almost out of this too narrow hallway just-

Seungmin let out a grunt as a student with dangly chain earrings harshly ran into him, shoulder-checking him too hard to be unintentional into a nearby locker. _Ouch!_ Seungmin grimaced as the force of the boy’s weight made him drop all of his books onto the unclean school floor.

Seungmin glared at the back of the boy’s head as he continued to walk away, not even turning to apologise for running into Seungmin. His shirt collar was sticking up and tie was wrapped loosely around his neck. Seungmin watched as another student jumped out his way to avoid the ‘shoulder-checker.’

_Shit! My timetable!_ Seungmin scrambled to reach the already crumpled paper, but it slipped out of reach when a student accidentally kicked it out of his grasp.

He quickly stood up when a schoolbag almost swung into his face and he groaned in resignation. He would just have to wait until the herd of thunderous students passed _then_ get his timetable, whether it survived or not.

The idol let out a breath when most the students split into the hallway towards the canteen and he could finally retrieve his pencil case and history book which had rolled a few meters away in the hassle but were thankfully unharmed.

Seungmin eyed a ripped paper of the floor. The timetable was a different matter.

He walked towards it dejectedly, but before he reached it, a large hand plucked it off the tiled floor.
Seungmin froze. *Has Mr Nudger come back for more?*

“I believe this is yours?”

Seungmin looked up.

A boy with large glasses and crooked teeth smiled back at him.

“Ah, thank you Younghun” Seungmin bowed and accepted the paper that had a battle scar of a rip straight through the centre.

“I hope it wasn’t anything to important” Younghun stuttered out and Seungmin felt himself soften at the boy’s nervousness.

“All I hope it wasn’t anything to important” Younghun stuttered out and Seungmin felt himself soften at the boy’s nervousness.

“Nothing too big, thank you by the way.”

The other just slightly smiled in return and walked away, heading towards the study room that Seungmin had never once bothered to enter. Seungmin looked at his timetable.

*Thank god that was the draft* he winced at the ruined paper. *Well at least it’s still readable.*

Seungmin stuffed the paper into one of his folders. *I have an hour this lunchtime, don’t I?*

He swivelled to look at the hallway that lead to the cafeteria.

*I’ll eat later, for now let’s work on the final timetable.*

With his mind made up, Seungmin followed the way Younghun had went just moments ago, towards the study room. There was always time to try something new, and Classroom 53 was on the other side of the school.
Just walking there would already waste so much of his precious time, wouldn’t it?

“Please wait patiently as I return your math tests you completed earlier this week” Mr Rhee announced, taking the exams out of his folder. Seungmin felt his stomach clench. He knew he did badly in this test, and it was the first exam that counted towards his final grade. He peered to his right where Haeun was sitting, her leg bouncing rapidly in apprehension.

A silence fell over the usually loud classroom as Mr Rhee handed the test back to one of the students sitting at the front of the classroom.

Seungmin looked out the window that he was seated next to. Everything out there was so open, so strikingly different to the tense atmosphere in the fifth period classroom.

“Seungmin.”

At the call of his name, he stopped looking at the window and came face to face with the disappointed eyes of Mr Rhee.

Oh shit.

“Your result is ridiculous” Seungmin heard Haeun suck in a breath beside him and he felt his cheeks immediately redden, bursting into a ball of bright embarrassed flames. “I thought you understood this?” Mr Rhee questioned and Seungmin snapped his eyes to his desk.

“I thought-”

“Speak up!” Mr Rhee snapped and Seungmin glared holes into the table. Just like every math lesson this week, his stupidity had caught everyone’s attention. No one in the room moved.

“I thought I did” Seungmin replied weakly. Mr Rhee sighed again, his weariness making Seungmin’s bones feel heavy.
His eyes began to pathetically water.

“I know you’re busy, but this result is simply unacceptable” Mr Rhee lowered his voice and Seungmin could hear the pity as clear as the sky outside the window.

“There’s tutoring after school on Wednesdays. Do better on the next test or you will fail this course in the most important year of your life. Do you understand me Mr Kim?”

“Yes sir” Seungmin shakily answered and untensed slightly when the older man moved away from his desk and licked his fat sausage-like fingers to pass out the next exam.

“Stop staring out that window and start paying attention. That’s a start for you.”

Seungmin hesitantly flipped over his paper and willed his eyes to clear so he could actually see his devastating result.

A big red angry 59% was scribbled at the top of the page.

_Fuck. This is worse than I imagined._

“Hey, you okay?” Haeun leaned over and asked gently.

“I’ll be right” Seungmin smiled, trying to cover up his disappointment. “How did you go?”

“Oh – I got an eighty-seven” she whispered. “That’s kind of a dick thing for me to say, right?” she laughed and Seungmin couldn’t help but laugh along.

“Don’t worry, I asked.”

“Here’s a tissue” Haeun smiled, pulling one of the colourful tissue-wallet she carried everywhere.
Seungmin looked down again, embarrassed for being called out for his emotional outburst.

“And don’t worry about it” she gestured towards the test that Seungmin had already flipped over to hide the low mark, but Seungmin knew she was also referring to his childish wet eyes. “It happens to the best of us.”

She reached out and patted Seungmin’s shoulder in support, before pulling away and packing her pink pencil case.

Right Seungmin noticed looking at the big clock at the front of the classroom. One minute till this heinous class ends.

As he packed away his books, quickly so he wouldn’t have to be trapped in an awkward but inevitable conversation with Mr Rhee, he thought about the red mark on his paper.

I must do better on the next one whatever it takes, I owe it to Mr Rhee, to myself, to– to my parents. I’ve finished my timetable for the weekend... If I wake up early next week I can study before school, or hell even at school now that I’ve lied my way out of going in the car in the mornings. I know I can do better than a fifty-nine per cent, but now I just need to get a good grade to even out my average mark to an eighty.

It’s what’s expected of me, it was the main condition of becoming a trainee...

Surely, I can uphold one promise, surely, I can do one thing without lying my way around it. Surely, I can make them proud...

I can wake up early tomorrow to practice dance, then we should have the schedule as planned. I’m meeting Mrs Park tomorrow for a vocal check over at school before the team vocal recording lesson, and then I can study at night. It’s perfect – If I just use my free time studying like Hyunjin does, then I’m bound to do better in all my subjects, especially maths.

I owe this to STAY, to my members, to the teachers, to my parents...

I can live up to one promise, can’t I?
Ah! This chapter is complete! I actually completed this yesterday, so it felt strange not posting it after quickly reading through it again. In future, do you guys want me to post the chapter immediately after I finish it or wait till the 15th?

A lot happened this chapter! TBH I don’t love the start and there are a few scenes at the beginning I’m not very happy with, but honestly I’m not good enough at writing to write everything the exact way I want to? IDK it happens.

This chapter is supposed to be the turning point of Seungmin’s mental processes regarding using his time to study and practice. I tried to portray his shift of belief at the end, but I don’t know how well that comes across?

Symbolism relating to Chapter Title: Time! ((fun fact – this chapter was originally called ‘Reality’ because Seungmin has a reality check that he needs to study in both the forms of his failed math test and seeing Hyunjin study so much, but I changed it last minute))

- The timetable he creates – sets unchangeable boundaries on what he is supposed to do when. This shows that Seungmin is getting serious and doesn’t want to waste any more time.
- The time of hiding his bruise from the other members is up! Classic Seungmin accidently exposing himself.
- The last time he is going in the car to school
- The first time he got up early to dance (in this fic at least) and first time going to study room (change in mindset for both of these) Also he didn’t go to Classroom 53~~ He’s changinggg
- This is kind of far-fetched, but at ‘Who knew there was so much time in as day’ when he is creating the timetable, it shows the timetable begins at 5:30am and goes until 1:30am (does that make sense?) and although that is not fully 24 hours, it actually includes two days (I feel like I’m explaining this really badly). This highlights the beginning of Seungmin’s distortion of time and motions towards what he will do in that time (hint: it’s not sleeping.)
I can’t really think of any more symbolism but there might be stuff I’ve missed.

Also the whole ‘SKZ finding out about the bruise’ scene also reflects on an earlier chapter. Seungmin uses the shirt to hide it and stuff and he is hiding the truth as he continues to get dressed. The short sentences of ‘Seungmin put on his shirt’ is similar to when he was folding his clothes back in Chapter 2 rather than answering Jisung’s questions about how is he feeling. It changed from him almost fainting and getting hurt to actually hiding a wound.

About my personal life – I’m on school holidays (yay) and all my tests went surprisingly well (so did my assembly speech!) For my first final exam (which goes towards my mark for graduation) I got an A! So that’s always good, I did better than I thought.

Question of the Chapter: What’s your opinion on Seungmin deciding to catch the bus to school rather than the easier option of getting driven? Why do you think he did this, and do you think it was a good decision or not?
NEXT UPDATE: MAY 15TH

Thank you for reading!

Special shout out to my commenters ;))) you know who you are, and you are extremely appreciated <33

Talic

P.S - Sorry for roasting all bullet-journalers? IDK my repressed hatred of them must have come out, Sigmund Freud is shook. So is every Instagram organization blogger.

P.P.S - Do you like these long notes? I feel like I ramble on a lot haha... Does anyone actually read this lmao?
The blaring of his alarm woke Seungmin up and snapped him out of his peaceful dream that was already fading from his memory. He quickly pressed ‘snooze’ on the alarm as not to wake his two roommates and sat up groggily, rubbing the tiredness out of his eyes.

It was four in the morning. And he had only had three hours of sleep.

All the members had gotten back late last night – amidst the heavy traffic at the unusual hour and Chan making Changbin repeat the same rap line over and over again, all the members were almost dead when they stumbled back into the dorms at twelve-thirty.

Well eight of them at least.

And then Seungmin had to act like it was a normal night and finish up his homework then write in his diary like he had been doing every night for years. He only begrudgingly went into his warm nest of clean blankets at Minho’s sharp bark of protest hearing Seungmin move around his chair from the other room.

Seungmin sat up and silently folded his sheets back onto the bed.

But last night hadn’t been normal.

Vocal practice had been horrible.

Seungmin shuffled his feet awkwardly as Jeongin stepped out of the recording studio, the maknae’s face flushed with effort. Now that they were beginning to record the songs the 3RACHA line had slaved over for the past months, almost half the vocal practice lessons had been transformed into recording lines for the songs or picking apart line-by-line of the lyrics, where to sing in falsetto and where to take a breath between lines.
He had already recorded his lines earlier that night - thank god. Now it was eleven thirty, two hours later from the time the ‘class’ was supposed to end and way past Jeongin’s bedtime.

“Alright” Chan sighed, scribbling on his paper as he crossed Jeongin’s name off. “Bin, you can be the last for the night.”

The second eldest of the rap line nodded and took off his heavy-duty earphones that he had been listening to Jeongin’s voice through just before. Seungmin gulped at Felix’s and Woojin’s eyes trained on him, as they had been with the addition of Minho’s the entire night.

Unlike promised, Seungmin hadn’t ‘found the time’ to talk to his sweltering and pulsing bruise with the ‘3RACHA’ members yet, and as each member stepped in and out of the vocal room his nerves grew. He had promised his hyungs he would tell Chan-hyung, Changbin-hyung and Jisung before the day ended.

Otherwise, Woojin would.

“Alright, ready?” the leader asked, raising his eyebrows at the rapper. Changbin cleared his throat and did some of what looked like warmup ‘yoh’s’ in preparation, making Felix and Jeongin giggle from the other side of the room at Changbin’s exaggerated facial expressions.

“Okay, just as we practised yesterday” Jisung smiled at Changbin helpfully at his play on the instrumental track, while also pressing on a button that allowed the rest of the room to hear his verse, not just the people wearing headphones.

The room quietened down in anticipation, leaving room for Changbin to fully focus on his lines and go into his self-dubbed ‘dark-mode’ as he did when he spat out his lines.

Seungmin waited with his breath caught in his throat. Although it was something we wouldn’t admit, he loved hearing the flow and gravelly voice of his hyung when he rapped.

Only the preparation breaths of Changbin and Chan’s chewed-on pencil tapping methodically on the table to keep track of the beat echoed in the room.

And then Changbin began.
It started well, of course, as expected, Changbin rapped so quickly that halfway into his quick-paced rap that Seungmin could not keep up with it. It seems, neither could Changbin.

The rapper tripped over his syllables and stopped in his tracks, leaving the instrumental to fade out in the background.

“Alright, let’s take that one from the top” Chan encouraged, and Changbin cleared his throat. Seungmin couldn’t help but notice Chan’s eyes stayed glued down to the lyrics, his eye bags dark with tiredness.

Beside him, Hyunjin stifled a yawn and flicked through his notes. ‘That’s right’ Seungmin thought. ‘He has a test tomorrow.’

Seungmin listened as Changbin attempted his rap verse again. And again. And again. By now Seungmin had settled back into the tattered couch and Changbin’s voice was beginning to sound scratchier, but more determined to nail his part. On the other hand, the leader was beginning to furrow his eyebrows together, his pencil tapping more rapidly on the desk.

It had been half an hour.

“Bin, why don’t we try this again tomorrow-” Chan began tiredly but Changbin fiercely interrupted.

“It’ll only take one more take” Changbin growled, obviously frustrated with himself as he paced around the small room.

“Binnie, everyone is tired and the meeting we had earlier didn’t go that well so-”

“Hyung! The meeting was this morning” Changbin growled. “Focus on the present, the now, and let me do this!”

Seungmin froze and felt Hyunjin tense beside him. There was a certain venom in both the members’ voices that made everybody, and everything stand still.
“One more” Chan relented and Jisung hesitantly pressed ‘play’ again. This time the room was silent again, but for a completely different reason – one out of unease.

Felix let out a small ‘fighting’ for the older rapper as Changbin bounced on his heels in wait.

Seungmin held his breath and prayed that Changbin would complete his verse without stumbling over the same tangled twist of sounds like he had done in all the attempts before.

But his, along with all his members’ prayers were left unanswered.

Changbin had failed again.

Changbin looked down at the floor and Jisung fumbled to stop the instrumental that they had all heard too many times.

Chan’s pencil stopped tapping.

“Chan-hyung, just one more-”

“No Changbin” Chan took of the recording headphones, leaving the pencil to make a loud ‘thud’ on the table. Seungmin hid into the couch as if the rappers’ words were directed at him. Of course, the three had gotten into arguments before, all the members knew that and knew it was best not to get involved, but every time it brought a small sense of uncomfortableness until the three made up.

But this time, Chan had dropped the nicknames.

“It’s time to go home.”

“But-” Changbin began, scrabbling towards the door of the vocal room before barging into the larger area, where all the members were.
Seungmin drew in a breath at the unusually deep frown on the leader’s face. The clouds were brewing quickly with warning rumbles of thunder echoing as he rebutted against Changbin once again.

“If you wanted to get your part done today” Chan is a scarily monotone voice, his vowels flat and drawn out in an almost mocking tone of the younger rapper’s own voice.

Seungmin watched as Woojin stood up, Jisung not far behind, but Seungmin felt as if his limbs were ice.

And then the lightning struck.

Chan stepped closer to the shorter rapper, whose pointed jaw was set firmly. “Then you should have done half an hour ago when we weren’t sick and tired of hearing the same instrumental piece because you-” he growled, jabbing a finger into Changbin’s chest “-keep screwing it up.”

The room was shocked into silence. Seungmin couldn’t help but glance to his left where Minho was sitting. The dancer’s eyebrows were drawn, his eyes were dark, and his hands were clasped together on his lap. If Seungmin looked close enough, he could see that they were ever-so-slightly shaking.

“I’m sorry” Changbin began darkly looking up predatorily at the taller boy, drawing Seungmin back onto the ‘battle’ at hand. “That your ‘little meeting’ with JYP-nim didn’t go all that well Chan, but maybe you needed that scolding to set yourself back in your own place.”

Chan recoiled visibly at Changbin’s scalding remark, and then drew himself back like a cobra waiting to strike, just like a fast bolt of lightning, again.

“Guys.” Jisung’s heavy voice broke the argument and Seungmin snapped his head up to look at the youngest member of ‘3RACHA’. “Can we just go home now?”

The squirrel-like boy’s face was puffy, and hair was messy due to him taking of his neon green beanie that he had been wearing all night. It had been discarded on the desk behind him. “Let’s just go back now, everyone’s tired-” he continued, nodding towards the members who looked anything unlike tired at the tension on the room. “And we’ll all feel better if we get some sleep” Jisung rested a hand lightly on Chan’s hand, which Seungmin had never noticed was clenched into a stoic fist.
The leader’s weary sigh echoed around the soundproof room. “Yeah, let’s go.”

Seungmin quickly jumped off the couch hurriedly with the other six members as to not annoy or set off Chan or Changbin again, and messily packed his bag, not even caring that his water-bottle lid was only half screwed on and would in result leak on his shirt.

Out of the side of his eye, he watched as Felix cautiously stepped towards Changbin and slip his ‘baby’ hand into the rapper’s as if he was afraid the short male would growl at him too. But, Changbin seemed to melt at the Australian’s touch, leaning into the younger’s comfort and they stood there silently for a few moments.

Seungmin turned to see the door swinging and watched as Chan left first, walking like a lone wolf down the dark hallway, leaving the rest of the group behind. It was oddly final, and Seungmin knew, from past large arguments the leader had with anyone, that he wouldn’t be back to the dorms until tomorrow.

Seungmin quickly flicked on his phone and checked the time. 12:09am. ‘Make that today then.’

“Has everyone got everything?” Woojin inquired, breaking the thick silence with a soft but tired voice.

Muffled ‘yeah’s from the remaining eight members ‘in it’ enough to answer sounded across the room and like a sombre parade of ants, they walked out of the entertainment company and piled into the ruddy old van waiting outside.

Seungmin looked at the furthest seat on the left, behind where the driver sat.

It was eerily empty.

It was Chan’s seat.

Seungmin finished making his bed and tip-toed outside of his room as to not wake either Hyunjin
or Jisung up. It had been a hard night for all of them.

He quickly drank a glass of refreshingly cold water from the kitchen, ate a muesli bar and filled up his water bottle. Even though the fight between Changbin and Chan had left everything the opposite of normal, Seungmin still had to follow his new schedule.

He began walking back down the hallway into his room but the door on the left made him pause. It was the door of Changbin and Chan’s shared room. Curiosity got the best of him, and he held his breath and began slinking like a cat towards the looming door.

Behind it was answers, behind it was the final part of the story – the question was whether Chan and Changbin would be peacefully asleep in that room.

He peeked through the door, wincing at the creak as it opened and peered in. Both beds were unmade and prominently empty.

So, Chan-hyung hasn’t come home yet… And Changbin-hyung… Seungmin readied his gaze on the room directly opposite the two-member room.

Somehow, he knew exactly where his missing hyung would be.

To confirm his suspicions, he quickly opened the door and almost chuckled at how well he knew his hyung. Changbin was cuddled up to the freckled and dyed blonde-haired member, sharing one blanket and one bed. Less expected, Jeongin had seemed to have crawled down the ladder of his bunk bed into Minho’s arms.

Seungmin closed the door and retreated back to his room. After last night everyone needed some comfort Seungmin thought, quickly throwing his water bottle into his bag. He eyed the eldest boy in the room who had begun to talk nonsensically in his sleep. It’s strange Hyunjin didn’t seek anyone out for comfort last night, he does love to cuddle the most out of all of us.

Quietly, Seungmin opened the doors of his closet to change into more exercise-appropriate clothes than his pyjamas. As it opened, the flutter of paper sounded like music to his ears.

He smiled.
His wardrobe was the perfect hiding place.

Everyone was too scared to touch or open it as one-time Jisung had and messed up his perfectly folded clothes, leaving Seungmin to scold him for the rest of the day and glare at anyone who would even be in a one-meter radius from it.

Inside his wardrobe, stuck with clear tape onto the inside of the door, was his immaculately written up timetable.

Last night, Seungmin had also expanded the timeframe to start at four in the morning rather than five-thirty. That meant he could get more done in a day. And almost every morning was catching a bus to the entertainment building and practising dance for as long as he stayed unnoticed, unworried, under his member’s noses.

If they knew he was waking up at four on a Saturday morning, he'd never hear the end of it. Even if it was to practice his dance – to make STAY proud of him again.

As if the gods were against him and his morning plans, his phone, which he had set down on the desk upon entering, started to blare out the obnoxious and way too loud alarm.

*Shit* Seungmin thought, scrambling towards the iPhone. *I didn’t turn it off correctly!*

When he finally reached it and frantically tapped on the orange ‘snooze’ button one hundred times to finally get the damned device to respond to him, the room was left in silence.

Seungmin breathed in relief and moved towards the door, but just as he placed his hand on the door handle a loud creak came from behind him.

And he knew who’s bed it was.

“Seungmin? Where are you going?”
“Ah, just out to practice, Hyunjin-hyung.”

“Again?” the older said incredulously, sitting up in bed. “You went yesterday, though, and we didn’t get to bed until late… Can you just stay and cuddle with me?”

“I know Hyunjinnie” Seungmin said, turning around to face the boy. The fact that even though Hyunjin, who was cutely pouting, had just woken up but still looked as if he was crafted by the gods, made annoyance prick at his heart.

He remembered the butt-dial from yesterday.

Seungmin turned around to face the door.

“I really need to go practice, hyung” he said more sternly this time. “I’ll see you later.”

“Wait, Minnie-” Hyunjin started but Seungmin had already closed the door, and with an unfamiliar weight on his heart, he walked away.

Seungmin sighed as the burning temperature of the shower water rained down on him, and he bit his lip at the initial sting of the too-hot-to-be-healthy water until his skin reddened and numbed into nothingness. He was showering in the small JYP cubicles once again, and just like yesterday, it brought back the nostalgia of being a trainee. Those days were simpler.

But now he had just finished one and a half hours of extra dance practice, just as his timetable had scheduled. He had worked until his knees began to dangerously wobble and until his eyes were too heavy to keep open. Under the flood of the water, his eyes slowly opened again, bringing him back to the world he had escaped while dancing to the same songs and making minor changes to his positioning and fluidity of his dance moves.

So, he would be perfect in front of the other members, so he would be perfect onstage. He couldn’t make mistakes again.

He had even worked on his stamina, singing each member’s lines as best he could with the exception of Changbin and Jisung’s faster than humanly possible raps while he danced. He was
improving, he could feel it in his bones, and it was all because he pushed himself a little harder, woke up a little earlier, danced for a little longer…

It was a slow process, but he knew it would yield results; the result would be perfection.

Seungmin hesitantly turned the water off, he had already been in too long and stepped out of the cubicle. When he stood in front of the long bathroom mirrors, he stared at his reflection in shock. The boy in front of him looked like a complete mess: dishevelled dripping hair, a pimple on his chin, but most noticeably the dark purple bags weighing heavily under his eyes.

Surely, I can’t be that tired Seungmin criticized leaning closer to the mirror, but the truth was plain and simple. He looked like he hadn’t slept in years. How didn’t I notice this before? The members will question something’s up…

Seungmin glanced down and looked for an excuse as if it would magically appear right beside him.

And then it did.

Left behind, on top of one of the cabinets was a large bottle of makeup, concealer in fact, in the exact tone the make-up artists applied on Seungmin’s face before he went onstage to perform.

It must be luck! Seungmin grabbed the concealer and carefully screwed to lid off, before stopping mid-action. What if this is really old? Is it even morally acceptable to take this and use it? If I put it back… then I haven’t technically ‘stolen’ it… just borrowed it…

Screw it, I need it anyway.

He applied the light cream under his eyes to hide some of the dark colour that was found there, before smearing it to blend with his skin with his fingers. After he finished, he looked in the mirror.

He looked normal; he looked like Kim Seungmin again.
There we go! Now I can just put this back and it’ll be like I was never here.

After he was done with the stranger’s makeup, he quickly changed clothes, ran a hand through his hair and made his way out of the changing room.

Chan-hyung is probably somewhere in this building Seungmin mused, stopping at the elevator which led to the recording rooms and the personal use rooms. He knew the leader would be in there, mixing beats over and over again until the song sounded exactly the same as it did one hour prior. It’s just what Chan did when he was feeling under the weather, whether due to stress or the seasonal depression.

I better not disturb him then Seungmin hesitantly shifted away from the elevator that was just waiting for him to board it. He’ll be back soon...

“Seungmin!” a sharp voice snapped him out of his internal conflict.

Is it Hyunjin? Or Woojin coming to get me?

Seungmin turned to the call of his name and it was someone completely different to he thought, down to the gender. In fact, it was one of Stray Kids’ managers, a young female called Manager Jung.

“Ah, Manager-nim” Seungmin bowed in respect as she walked up to him before meeting him with a polite bow. He looked at the large decorative clock on the other side of the room. The time read six in the morning. “What are you doing here so early?”

“I could ask the same for you” she laughed, flicking her dark hair over her shoulder. “Ah, I forgot to tell you yesterday, but your decision to change to public transportation was accepted if it means you can spend more time with your friends” she smiled again.

“T-Thank you Manager-nim” Seungmin bowed again. “I really appreciate it.”

“No issue, Seungmin-ah. Remember Mr Yoo is more than happy to pick you up if you ever need it” She replied and with a wave of her long hair, she left towards the practice rooms.
It seems the managers aren’t aware of the ‘fight’ between Chan-hyung and Changbin, if you can even call it that. Seungmin pondered as he walked out of the entertainment building and pulling his facemask up so he could walk home peacefully.

It seems they aren’t aware of my true intentions of catching the bus to school either, plus they probably haven’t even begun to question the fact that I’ve been here early for the past two days.

But then again, I guess no one knows any of this except me?

And that is how it needs to be, I’m doing this for STAY, not anyone else. Not even me.

The sizzle of the sound of frying eggs filled the kitchen. Seungmin quickly took Felix’s and Minho’s eggs out first; the pair liked their eggs slightly runny and made sure he flipped over the egg in the centre of the pan. After cooking eggs many mornings for his team, he knew exactly what each member’s preference was.

Bang Chan liked his eggs well cooked; almost burnt on each side. Seungmin moved quietly as he took eight of the eggs out.

As another twenty seconds ticked by, the leader’s egg was finished; warm and ready to be eaten. That is, whether the boy came home to eat breakfast.

He was still hadn’t returned since the fight yesterday.

Seungmin didn’t know why, but he was expecting to meet the ruffled leader out when he was dancing that morning, or already be home when Seungmin got back. But there was no sign of the curly-haired leader and the whole team was on edge.

It showed in the way Felix and Changbin often murmured quietly to each other on one side of the room and when Jeongin, rather than pushing Hyunjin’s cuddles away like he usually would at this hour of the morning, leaned into them instead.

“Breakfast’s served” Seungmin joked awkwardly from the kitchen, in an attempt to lighten the sombre mood.
Seungmin *almost* smiled as he watched seven sleepy boys filed in from either the living room or their bedrooms and form a line in wait for their food. Almost.

“Thanks Minnie” the eldest dancer smiled when he took his egg.

“What would we all do without you, hyung?” Jeongin dramatically sighed as he grabbed his plate and two slices of bread.

Seungmin smiled at his dongsaeng, stopping himself for making an annoying remark at the younger. This morning, he didn’t want to burden Jeongin by being irritating, as the video he had watched online pointed out; he couldn’t burden this morning. Not when everyone was so tired.

“One egg left, huh?” Hyunjin, who was last to be served, noticed. Seungmin looked at the abandoned slightly burnt egg.

“Yeah, let’s hope he comes back soon.”

“Even when he does, he’ll be drained” Hyunjin sighed, sticking a piece of bread in the toaster. “I hate it when fights happen, I can’t believe Jisung and I lived like this all the time when we were trainees~”

“Hey!” Jisung called from the living room, making Seungmin giggle at the fake-anger in his hyung’s tone. “Hwang Hyunjin, are you talking smack about me? Wait till you sit down at this table and I’ll~”

The sound of a pillow hitting something solid filled the house and this time Seungmin allowed himself to laugh. Of course, someone threw a pillow at the rapper’s head to shut him up.

The ‘pop’ of the toaster indicated Hyunjin’s toast had finished, and together the boys walked to the living room, where everyone was either seated on the floor, a piece of furniture or each other.

As soon as he sat down though, the mod was eerily different. Usually, Chan would be talking about the schedule for that day, as he did every morning the members had time to sit and eat together, which although was rare, Seungmin had always oddly looked forward to it.
The normalcy and sereneness of it was a cycle, it all made Seungmin feel like it was his trainee days again.

“Well” Jisung cleared his throat, breaking the silence in the room. “Chan, uh – told me there’s a schedule change for today; instead of dancing Woojin and Felix are filming a Two Kids Room at ten and then Hyunjin and Minho at eleven.”

“Is there vocal recording in the afternoon?” Felix asked from his corner of the sofa.

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure.”

Silence filled the room again and Seungmin lifted his head from his bowl to see Woojin’s narrow eyes trained on him. The eldest flicked his head to the side. Seungmin followed his gaze. It landed on Changbin and Jisung.

And then he knew.

Woojin wanted him to tell them about the bruise, the promise he had made but not yet fulfilled.

*How can I bring their moods down now when their morale after the argument is already so low?* Seungmin tried to communicate with his determined gaze and wild flurry of hand movements, mindful to not drop his plate.

After a few moments, Woojin dipped his head, as if he understood everything Seungmin was trying to say. Seungmin zoned out of the conversation that Hyunjin was weakly attempting to start and furrowed his eyebrows in thought.

*The members that know about my bruise, save for Minho, are filming this morning. That means... I don’t have to worry about anyone slipping up and mentioning it around 3RACHA.*

Seungmin took another bite of his eggs.
Of course, I’ll tell them eventually Seungmin reasoned. But now there is too much going on, and I can’t afford to be the reason for another team fight. I can’t burden everyone like that.

Seungmin watched his phone light up with an incoming message. He blinked at it dutifully before reaching out his hand to check the message.

<Seungmin, remember we have a vocal check-up today. It’s been strange without you in my music class, see you for a chat at ten. – Mrs Park>

Sent: 8:57am

“What’s going on with you MinMin? You’ve been staring at your phone for five minutes and it’s not even on.”

Seungmin looked up from his phone, which had in fact dimmed to black, and at Changbin, who was looking considerably more tired compared to yesterday.

“I’m all good” he smiled weakly, wincing at his soft bruise as he spun to stand up. “I just have a meeting with a teacher this morning.”

“Nothing bad, I suppose?” Woojin asked.

“Is with that math teacher? Or cranky Mrs Kim?” Jeongin began to guess but a small smile from Seungmin cut him off.

“It’s just with my music teacher, no big deal. I should get going now though.”

Ten minutes later Seungmin was out the door with a white backpack slung over his shoulder and was using his phone as directions to the closest bus stop that would eventually get him to school. The bus stop was a twelve-minute walk away, plus a twenty-minute bus ride, but that didn’t matter.

After all, this was just a practice run for Monday morning, where he would take public transport to school for the first time.
Luckily, he had remembered to bring some of his math homework to do during the transit, so when he got on his bus, which arrived as scheduled, he pulled out his blue folder and got to work.

Or tried to at least

*I’m just so… unmotivated to do anything* he thought, throwing his pencil down in frustration, watching it fall off his math book and onto the dirty bus floor. Luckily there was only one person on the bus to witness his childish outburst, but he still felt his cheeks burn red and lowered his head to retrieve the thankfully not broken pencil.

*There’s always something that can motivate me though… ‘Inspire’ me to do better* Seungmin sid-eyed his phone which was lying discarded on top of his bag.

*It* had worked before; made him work harder, dance harder, fix his annoying behaviours and made him watch himself in front of cameras and his other members. But every time he read another hate comment or watched another ‘Seungmin annoying his members’ compilation, he felt himself wither inside like each piercing word stabbed his heart.

Even though it hurt, it worked. Worked like nothing else before, no words from himself could motive him as much as STAY’s opinion about what he needed to practice, what he *needed* to do to be better.

He could already imagine what they would say – *his voice is disgusting, his dancing sucks!*-

*-He shouldn’t be in Stray Kids.*-

*What am I on about?* Seungmin scoffed, tearing his perilous gaze away from the device and back down at his formula sheet. *Reading hate comments is just so stupid, who would intentionally read things that make them feel worse?*

He looked back down at his math sheet. *Making all STAY is proud is extremely important, but what would everyone think, especially my parents, if I fail school because I’m too stupid to do basic formulas?*
I’m on a public bus, right now I can’t practice dance or singing, so I need to focus on what’s in front of me; my math homework.

Anything else would just be a waste of time.

“You sound even better than you did in my classes, Seungmin!” Mrs Park laughed, and Seungmin couldn’t help but follow her in a soft chuckle.

Not too loud. He didn’t want to be annoying.

“Do you want to grab a coffee?” she asked, her floral dress swirling at her feet. “Or is that weird for a student and teacher to ‘hang out’ like that?”

“No, no it’s alright, I have some time before I head back to the studio anyway” Seungmin smiled in return. He didn’t know why but he didn’t feel so burdened when he was with Mrs Park, she saw him for his voice not his dancing or his facial features or his grades. It was just his voice and his personality.

“Alright, let’s make this quick then, I must go grocery shopping before I head home.”

They settled on a café, close to Seungmin’s bus stop which smelled like the fragrant and slightly overpowering scent of lavender. Seungmin sat with a mug of hot chocolate warming his hands while Mrs Park held an iced coffee.

They talked casually, Seungmin not forgetting to drop the honorifics despite Mrs Park telling him it was ‘quite alright’ to do so. Seungmin talked about his photography, which he had a new-found love for, and Mrs Park talked about her son, who was turning three next week.

Despite the rather strange situation, they were both at peace, and Seungmin could finally let the demons haunting him the past few days slip away into the biting air as the warm drink soothed his vocal cords.

“Seungmin, can I ask you something?”
Seungmin stopped bringing his mug up to his face mid-action. He felt the fine hairs on the back of his neck prickle in anticipation.

“Of course.”

She hesitated, as if tossing the idea in her mind of whether to ask him or not, but finally she said seven words that made the beverage in his stomach turn to ice.

“Why are you wearing makeup today, Seungmin?”

“W-What?” He placed his mug down, the hot chocolate splashing out of his cup at the force.

“Your concealer’s cracking at the edges, but I just want to know if you’re alright, Seungmin.”

The idol looked up. His teacher’s eyes were concerned. Too concerned. It made Seungmin’s mask begin to crack further.

“No, I’m alright” he replied as truthfully as possible, looking down at his mug. “Exams are making me a little stressed, and right now we are currently training hard for promotions…”

“Ahh, I see” she nodded, but Seungmin noticed the way her fingers ran over her skirt, more concerned than moments ago. Maybe she was the fourth person.

A person who could read through the lines of his lies and haunted smiles. A person who could tell his truths from his lies.

But no, he couldn’t let another person in, he had to keep smiling.

“I should really get going, Mrs Park, but I’ll see you at school.”

Seungmin bowed quickly, not waiting for her reply and left, leaving a half-finished hot chocolate
Seungmin, that’s the third time your voice has cracked this session” Bang Chan sighed, running a hand through his limp and tatted curly hair. Seungmin stiffened. He didn’t want a repeat of last night.

Seungmin glanced up to the leader, sitting dully on the other side of the booth. He didn’t forget to notice that only Jisung sat beside him; Changbin was sitting beside Felix on the couch. Bang Chan looked more tired than usual. Past Seungmin would have thought it to be impossible; how could the constant bags under his eyes get even darker?

But after a ‘scandal’ that had been around or a serious argument with a member, Chan almost never slept.

“Let’s try that again.”

Seungmin nodded and tried to ignore the heat on his face. He was embarrassed of course; he never performed this badly in recording sessions, or at least not this horrible since he debuted.

Is this what STAY think I sound like all the time? He wondered, as he internally hyped himself up to attempt the chorus again.

He tried again, reading the lyrics on the paper in front of him, but they all seemed to blur together, and for a moment the world seemed the sway beneath him, making him pause again, stumbling to grab hold of the music stand to keep his balance.

“Are you alright, Min?” Jisung asked, peering into the booth. “Did you trip over one of the cords?”

Seungmin quickly snapped his head to Jisung, regaining his vision as the instrumental blared in the background.

“Y-Yeah, stupid wires” he chuckled nervously and cleared his throat. He quickly peered at his second eldest hyung, who was looking disinterestedly at a spot of the wall.
“Can you hear the demo alright?” the leader suddenly asked, snapping out of his daze. “Why don’t we bring Woojin in, just to help.”

Seungmin bit his tongue and stared holes into the floor beneath him. Of course, Bang Chan was right; he had been with Seungmin enough to know that he liked repeating the notes someone sang to him to make sure he was on-tune, but today it just made him feel annoyed.

“We’re recording my lines, aren’t we? Seungmin thought, not even bothering to listen when Woojin sang his line elegantly. If Woojin-hyung is so good at it, then why doesn’t he just do it?

Seungmin immediately punished himself for the thought – what was he thinking? Bang Chan also chose him to be in Stray Kids, and he should be thankful that they even let him sing anything with his nasally voice.

“Seungmin, are you even listening?” Chan’s exasperated sigh pulled him out of his spiralling thoughts. He gulped.

“S-Sorry I got distracted” he lied, running his sweaty hands nervously down his sides.

“Let’s just move on for now, yeah?” Chan attempted to smile at him, but Seungmin saw the way his lips wobbled. Bang Chan was forcing it.

“Wait, Minnie, before you go” Chan said into the microphone, making Seungmin freeze in his step. “We need to talk after this, so wait for me after.”

Seungmin turned to gauge the leader’s expression, to try and figure out if he was in trouble or not, but the leader had turned to call the next member up. What Seungmin didn’t miss was Jisung’s furrowed and curious gaze that followed the singer out of the room.

“I’m in deep shit, aren’t I? Seungmin thought, moving back to sit on the crowded couch. The managers tell Chan almost everything about the rest of the members, unless told specifically not to. Did Manager Jung find out about my early morning practice today? Or did Hyunjin rat me in for leaving the house… But what if it’s worse?
Seungmin pulled himself out of his thoughts when he felt a violent shiver run down his spine. Felix’s thigh was tensed into Seungmin’s and the student felt an odd sense of déjà vu spread through his body like ice running through his veins, making him stiffen further.

He looked into the recording booth.

It was Changbin’s turn to rap.

Please, don’t let this turn out the same as it did last time.

“Alright” Jisung cleared his throat, cutting through the suddenly awkward air that filled the room. “You ready, Bin?”

Seungmin tried to read Changbin’s plump lips as the rapper’s reply could only be heard to those wearing headphones and visibly winced at Jisung’s words.

Bang Chan had asked the same question last night.

The small click of the button that started the music made all members in the room take a deep breath.

Seungmin watched as Changbin started his verse, his mouth forming each different and fast-paced syllable tumbled out from his mouth. But unlike yesterday, these words were controlled, crafted into perfection by the time Changbin had most likely spent on it while Seungmin was meeting Mrs Park.

Seungmin felt Felix relax beside him when Changbin stopped after another several seconds and the small, almost unsure smile the rapper sent towards Bang Chan when he was finished, made Seungmin’s heart clench.

The leader cleared his throat and Seungmin wished he didn’t have his back to the couch so that Seungmin could attempt to figure out the leader's rather transparent emotions.

“That was perfect, Bin.”
Seungmin felt the ice in his veins melt, leaving his to sag against the sofa’s soft pillows. Everything was right again, everything was okay.

“Seungmin! Wait up!”

Seungmin stopped walking towards the van that the members in front of his were reaching and turned around. Bang Chan, with a less tense smile on his face, was running towards him.

*Right.* In all the members’ celebration that Changbin had nailed his rap and the tense atmosphere between 3RACHA dissolved, Seungmin had completely forgotten that his hyung had wanted to meet with him.

“Yes, hyung?”

“Ah” Bang Chan smiled and scratched the back of his head awkwardly, making Seungmin narrow his eyes. The leader, in all his pride and almost cartoony optimism, who wore his heart and emotions on his sleeve, looked *nervous*, as if he didn’t want to say the words on the tip of his tongue.

“Um” the leader started again, composing himself as he tucked his laptop under his arm. “The others will be fine waiting for a bit, come back into the hall with me.”

Seungmin obediently followed, moving away from the doors of the entertainment facility and under one of the shadows in the corner of the bustling entrance where Chan was.

“So” Chan began, making Seungmin stiffen in anticipation at what he was going to say. “I was just in the halls this morning and uh – Manager Jeong told me that you – uh – recently ‘achieved sub-par’ in one of your tests?”

Seungmin’s heart sunk.

Of course, Mr Rhee would tell Mrs Soon about his ‘out of character’ terrible grade and then that information would go to his ‘guardians’ then would be told to Chan. There were no secrets in management.
“Right” Seungmin managed to say after a few moments of silence. “I just failed a math test” Seungmin started, but at Chan’s startled expression, quickly back-tracked. “Well, I-I didn’t actually fail, just did slightly below average compared to the class, and I just answered some questions really badly and all that, but I’ll do better in my next test!”

“Make sure you do better in the next one, Min. Otherwise, we’re going to have to contact your parents.”

“It won’t happen again! I’ll behave myself in all my classes too and I won’t be in trouble from the teachers until after I graduate, I promise!”

“Alright, Minnie” Chan smiled, a genuine one this time. “Don’t stress yourself over one bad mark either, if you ever need help the members and I are all here to help you, yeah?”

“Yep!” Seungmin made a far-too-bubbly smile and turned to face the glass doors. “Now let’s get out of here, I’m hungry.”

“Agreed, Min, let’s go.”

“I’m so full!” Seungmin heard Jeongin exclaim as the younger plopped down onto the living room couch, directly onto Minho’s lap, to which the elder groaned in pain.

Seungmin took a moment to breathe; on the car ride home, they had almost gotten into a dangerous accident, and it had left Seungmin on edge, as well as Hyunjin, who had been closest to the collision. But now the older was bouncing around and washing the dishes they had all used to eat the too-healthy-to-be-actually-tasty dinner with Changbin as if none of it had happened, while Seungmin was still a bit shaky.

On the positive side, recording had finished early; it was only nine o’clock which left Seungmin an extra half hour to study some math equations. After all he had now promised Chan he would do better in maths, and he was still hesitant to ask the older members for help despite the leader’s words.
He took off his itchy woollen sweater and threw it to the side, wincing as he stretched the bruise on his side, and relaxed into the pillows. He could allow himself five minutes to rest, then he would do some practice exam questions Mr Rhee had given the class ages ago.

“Not like you to be so messy” Felix joked loudly swinging himself beside Seungmin on the large sofa. Seungmin forced a laugh at the Aussie’s joked but couldn’t help his hand reaching to retrieve the jumper.

I have gotten messier recently. How annoying.

“Maybe you should invest in bundles” Minho added, making Felix and Jeongin only laugh harder. Seungmin turned to face Minho to give him a brief smile, but he stopped when he met Minho’s eyes. There was something swirling in those dark depths, almost like the elder knew something Seungmin didn’t like they were pitying him.

Seungmin quickly looked away and excused himself from the conversation, moving towards the bathroom to wash his hands to remove any lingering grease from the food he had just eaten. As he entered and locked the door behind him, he looked at his reflection.

He looked healthy, slightly pale if anything, but completely normal. Only when he leaned closer, he saw what Mrs Park had seen earlier, a single dried crack in the makeup he had put on earlier that morning.

As long as no one else noticed it, I should be fine Seungmin thought washing the makeup off. Now that it’s night, I can blame the bad lighting for my eyebags.

Seungmin quickly ducked over to his room, avoiding Woojin’s prying gaze to his bedroom. He flickered on the light, quickly changed into a less sweaty shirt and grabbed the books he needed to study, as well as his practice exams and sat down at the desk.

Time to get started. If I do an extra hour now, then I can study history for longer so I can do well for my quiz on Tuesday.

But Seungmin’s plans were thwarted when a quiet knock on his bedroom door stopped him from even answering the third question on the maths sheet.
“Seung?” Minho asked, before opening the door and stepping into the room. Seungmin, like a deer in the headlights, swivelled his head to his closet, which was wide open in his haste to start studying. Pasted onto the wide-open door was the thing he so desperately wanted to hide. His timetable.

He didn’t know why the idea of one of his hyungs or Jeongin finding the perfectly lined paper made his stomach churn and his mind so uneasy, but adrenaline flooded his body as Minho began walking towards the door.

“Hyung!” he forced a wide smile and stood up from the desk, edging towards the closet. “Do you want something?”

“We’re all planning to watch a movie tonight, ya know, it would be good for ‘team morale’ or whatever Hyunjin was on about” Minho explained, walking closer to the open wardrobe. Seungmin knew that stopping the other would look suspicious, so he forced himself to stand still, nodding his head to whatever Minho was saying.

“You in?”

“W-What?” Seungmin asked. Whatever movie one of the members chose would take over two whole hours, and that would eat into his time to study! How could he refuse without making Minho, one of the most perceptive on the team, question his decision?

“Movie night. Right now.” Minho stated almost scarily, before grabbing the younger and dragging him off the bedroom.

“W-Wait, hyung!” Seungmin attempted to protest, feebly hitting Minho’s stronger arms trained by years of dancing but causing no effect. Before the brown-haired boy knew it, he was squished between Felix and Woojin on the cramped but comfortable couch, with the television emanating colourful lights into the otherwise dark room.

I have so much stuff I could be doing right now, but instead, I have to try and pay attention to Jisung’s dumb comedy movie. Seungmin shook his head to rid of the thought as soon as it entered his mind. How can I even be thinking that? The team never gets together like this, I shouldn’t take it for granted! Why am I acting so selfishly?
Seungmin smiled and laughed hollowly at his member’s jokes but couldn’t find himself to fully commit to the movie that was playing just meters in front of him.

Instead, his mind wandered out of the living room, down the hall and into the second door on the right. To his bag where the crumpled paper with an angry ‘59%’ scribbled onto it, then the practice questions on his desk, discarded at Minho’s intrusion and finally to his still open closet.

Where, from nine thirty to eleven, read ‘History and Math Study’ in neat delicate handwriting.

Chapter End Notes

Heyyy. I apologise that this is almost ten days late, and I don't really know if this is an excuse but I fell back into my depression and I couldn't motivate myself to write. It is an extra 2000 words than my normal chapters if that makes it any better though!

I'm going to my first high school party tonight and I'm pretty scared lmao. Let's hope I don't die there!

In this chapter, I wanted to focus on 'outside' or external events that were not caused/linked to Seungmin impacting his and the group. This was Changbin and Chan's fight, which affected all the members until they made up.

Ok here's the symbolism of the chapter title!

MASK:

- Seungmin wears makeup, a physical mask to disguise the fact that he looks tired to his members.
- Seungmin disguises his true emotions, forcing a smile around his members.
- The crack in his makeup was a crack in his facade.

That's all I can think of, for now, I hope you enjoyed!

Question of the Chapter: Are you happy that the Chan and Changbin situation was resolved? Or would you have wanted it to drag on for another chapter? Do you think there will be any other fights between the members?

Love you everyone! <3

(P.S My mental health is better than last week, but I have exams soon so wish me some luck lol.)
NEXT UPDATE: June 22nd (I have exams from the 10th - 19th, so sorry it's not going to update on the 15th!)
Seungmin flopped onto the car’s comfortable chair with an exhausted sigh. It was Sunday night, after six hours of gruelling practice and it baffled Seungmin that he didn’t even get complimented once. He had worked hard all week, it was only on Monday that he had decided to fully devote himself to dance so he could make all of STAY like him again, but he didn’t even get one word of assurance the whole night.

Is waking up at four a.m. even worth it if I’m not recognised for it? He sighed again and dragged a hand through his sticky hair, dragging at the roots, causing a spike of pain, making him feel slightly more awake. No, it just means I should wake up earlier tomorrow and stick to my timetable. He glanced to Minho sitting beside him, scrolling through notes on his phone. And if I want to improve, it means I can’t let anyone know either, not when Jisung, Woojin and Minho are already on my case.

Seungmin tiredly peered around the car. He was lucky that only Minho could track his every move in her; the nine members were taking separate cars back to the dorms. Along with Minho, the two Australians were sitting together as well as Hyunjin squished between them. The five had lost in a battle of rock paper scissors and as a result, had to squeeze to fit on the seats of the car.

Although he wasn’t too sure if he could even fully trust the freckled Australian, sitting next to his counterpart - not after what Seungmin had found out today.

The car ride was quiet if Jisung or Jeongin was in the car, or maybe Seungmin felt less tired, he was sure the car would be full of conversation, but for once Seungmin was thankful of the serene silence.

He remembered, a time just earlier that day he had been sitting in a silence, but not one as serene as this.

“Can you think of any more questions?” Changbin chuckled nervously, sneaking a glance to the set of cameras still rolling despite the pair’s awkwardness. Seungmin shifted on the white couch uncomfortably, the pink from the vibrant wall reflecting onto his makeup caked skin. It probably looked less realistic than normal; for some reason, he was getting more acne on his cheeks and nose and that required more concealer.
“Hmm” Seungmin mused, feeling his cheeks flush at his silence and instead reached out his hand, grabbing another blueberry out of the bowl provided by the staff who were now waiting with bored expressions until either Changbin or Seungmin to say something worthy of using in the next ‘Two Kids Room’ video.

‘What’s anything interesting happening in my life now that maybe Changbin could relate to?’ Seungmin thought. Immediately the image of the nameless boy who slammed him into the locker on Friday conjured in his mind.

“Were you ever bullied at school, hyung?”

At his blurted-out question, Seungmin watched as the idol sitting next to him on the stiff couch and the filming crew sitting in their stiff chairs had opposite reactions. Changbin winced, the crew looked up from their phones as if the seven words were more interesting than anything already discussed in the last forty minutes of filming.

“Well” Changbin started slowly. Seungmin felt his interest peak, even if he tried to mask it. He had to be careful; the footage now would definitely be used either for or against him when it was released next week.

“Of course, some kids made fun of me for my amazing jawline” Changbin joked, trying to ease the bluntness of the question. “But kids are insecure at the time of middle and high school; whether that’s in taking it out on others or internalising your pain and becoming more sensitive to their words than, when looking back at it, you should be.”

The elder stopped, looking away wistfully as ruminating and reminiscing his childhood experiences. “I was… not very talkative in middle school, and I was affected easily by what others thought or spoke of me, so I was extremely emotional. But if I wasn’t then I wouldn’t have been driven to focus on music as some sort of outlet for my emotions, then I would never be where I am today, and I’m proud of who I am-” he looked at Seungmin again. “-Who we are today.”

Seungmin felt his chest grow tight at Changbin’s words. Was the snickering, the filming, the shoving and the feeling of being ripped apart something that would transform from pain to hope and success in the future? Just like it had for Changbin?

Seungmin couldn’t help but break away from Changbin’s almost wise gaze, as it stared into his own brown eyes. After all, the eyes were the window to the soul, weren’t they?
Seungmin braced himself for the question he already knew was on the tip of his hyung’s tongue.

“What about you MinMin?”

‘What do I even say to this?’

“Hmm” Seungmin drew out, stalling time for him to create a somewhat believable response that wasn’t going to expose his current situation. He moved on the couch again and felt his waist protest as he tried to move further into the sofa as if the pillows would make him disappear.

“I would say when I moved to America was the worst time in school for me” Seungmin choked out, feeling the words randomly form into syllables as he began. “Kids mocked me for my name and heavy accent a bit, and how red my cheeks and ears get in winter, but otherwise I can’t think of anything else.”

“Ha!” Changbin exclaimed, making Seungmin jump in his seat. “All negative experiences balance out, don’t they? If you hadn’t moved to America, you wouldn’t be able to speak English as well as you do now.”

Seungmin hummed, contemplating the elder’s words of wisdom.

“I guess you’re right hyung… who knew your brain was big enough to think of something like that!”

“Yah! Brat!” Changbin laughed, throwing one of the blueberries in his hand at him, in which Seungmin skilfully caught.

“I think we have enough footage now” one of the director-noona’s interrupted the next insult on Seungmin’s lips. “Thank you for coming today, boys.”

“No issue” Changbin smiled. Seungmin stayed in silence. He didn’t want to annoy the crew now; they had just spent almost an hour filming him stuttering over his words and looking at his blemished face.
“Minnie” Changbin began his aegyo parade and Seungmin over-dramatically rolled his eyes at the sight, staying still in his seat. “Changbinnie hyung wants to go now so he can get tteokbokki before Jeonginnie yells at him for being late to their meeting so can Seungminnie please get up now?”

“What are you even doing with Jeongin? And you’re late to everything anyway!” Seungmin asked curiously, picking up another blueberry.

“Exactly, Jeongin will roast me if I’m not there to show him some lyrics, so let’s go.”

Seungmin stood up with a sigh, but as soon as he did the world began to spin around him and he felt as if his head was about to explode. His feet felt like lead and were autonomous as they moved on their own, making the brown-haired stumble onto the armrest of the chair, catching himself before he faceplanted onto the floor in front of both the film crew, camera and his hyung.

“Ah, are you okay? Be careful of your waist!”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m fine” Seungmin winced, lightly pressing down on his ankle to check how badly he rolled it. “I’m probably just going to stay here and practice dancing before the class.”

“Dance practice starts in two hours, though, make sure you don’t tire yourself out Min.” Changbin said, a worried expression in his sharp features.

“I won’t Binnie-hyung” Seungmin reassured, blasting the elder with a large smile that stretched his carefully crafted façade. “Get home safely.”

Changbin just did an odd salute and walked out of the filming room, leaving Seungmin to finish the final remaining blueberries in the white bowl. As the glucose hit his system the dizziness he had faced just moments ago disappeared and he felt a wave of fatigue hit him rather than nausea.

‘Is it because I accidentally skipped breakfast this morning? Or my… changed sleep schedule?’ Seungmin dragged a hand down his face and ignored the look of curiosity mixed with concern on the staff sitting closest to him.

To avoid any prying questions he got up, and when he reached the dressing room, changed out of the clothes provided him by the wardrobe staff and into his dancing clothes. ‘At least I remembered to bring two shirts, so when this one gets smelly, I can change’ he thought, standing half-naked in the closed stall. He grimaced at the bruise still on his side, it looked almost black
now, but that only meant it would start getting better from the day on.

He chose the grey shirt – a mistake to wear around others, Seungmin knew from experience, but for two hours it would only be himself in the mirrored room. And as he walked to the trainee wing of the entertainment facility, only then did he rethink Changbin’s words, one of the few members who had not been present when Seungmin had exposed himself and his injury, and what they had meant.

Not the words about schooling, but rather what he said when the cameras weren’t rolling.

‘Be careful of my waist, huh?’ Seungmin thought, his eyebrows drawing into a frown; a common occurrence from the younger these days.

‘That means he knows.’

Seungmin fell back into the present as the car went over a large speedbump- jolting him from his comfortable position.

There’s only one person who could have told Changbin about my… injury. Seungmin narrowed his eyes at the boy on one of the front seats. And that’s you, Felix-hyung.

“Hey, Felix!”

A flicker of annoyance lighted in him like a match as a loud voice pulled him out of his analytical thoughts, and he felt the odd spark of green flame ignite in him when he realized who said it.

“Chan-hyung, Lix, what does-” the boy stopped as if thinking hard about something. “clingy mean?”

Seungmin perked his head up at the unfamiliar English word, the flame dissolving into the air, and he couldn’t help but think back to his ASC script he still hadn’t looked at. No matter how tired he was, he should still try to learn English whenever possible, and that meant by listening to either of the Australian’s responses.
Chan and Felix looked at each other as if having a silent conversation only using their eyes, which even got Minho to look up from his phone.

“W-Why do you ask Jinnie?” Chan asked, and Seungmin narrowed his eyes at the forced light tone the leader’s voice had unexpectedly taken.

Hyunjin hummed in thought, processing the confusing English letters on the phone screen in front of him. “Ah, it just says ‘Hyunjin acts so clingy towards his members... ew.’” The boy stopped scrunching his nose at the comment. Seungmin felt his gut clench, just as it had been a week ago as he waited for one of the Australian duo to respond.

“Don’t worry Hyunjinnie” Felix smiled. “It means like... affectionate... like hugs a lot.”

Hyunjin wrinkled his perfect brow as he looked from the phone to Felix and Chan again. “Is that a bad thing? Why does it say... ew.”

Neither of the pair responded.

“Don’t worry, I can just translate it” Hyunjin smiled, already clicking onto the Naver app.

“Hyunjin, it’s okay.” the leader began, but Seungmin looked over Hyunjin’s shoulder and the Korean that appeared under the English word Hyunjin had already copy-and-pasted in said enough.


At Hyunjin’s visibly tensed shoulder’s, Seungmin quickly pretended he hadn’t seen the screen and sat back in his chair, but added the word; clingy, to his English vocabulary.

“Don’t worry” he heard Hyunjin lie. “Naver isn’t loading” Hyunjin laughed, the sound echoing around the claustrophobic car.

Seungmin watched as Felix let out an almost nervous and relieved laugh, and he knew that both the
Australians knew exactly what it meant, even if they couldn’t explain it in Korean.

But now Seungmin knew, as he set his alarm for three forty-five the next morning that he wasn’t the only person to hide something, speak a white lie perhaps, in the car tonight.

“Make sure you get some sleep tonight Minnie, don’t stay up any longer, yeah?” Woojin advised as he walked into his bedroom, patting Seungmin gently on the shoulder as he moved past.

“Yes, hyung” Seungmin replies without looking up from his paper, before dropping the pen he was holding as he finished one of the twenty homework sheets he had done tonight. He let out a miserable sounding sigh once the elder had left. Instead of being the diligent and hard-working student he had promised both his parents and himself, to be, he just couldn’t focus. It was 12:23 a.m. and Seungmin was dead tired.

Perhaps he should change his alarm to go off an hour later tomorrow rather than before dawn.

If I wake up at four thirty, rather than three forty-five, I can study here rather than go dancing he pondered, picking up the next math sheet. **My math test, worth twenty per cent of my grade, is tomorrow goddammit! I especially need to pull up my grade from my last test, so tomorrow I don’t have time to dance! If I do two hours tonight, and two in the morning, I’m sure I’ll be fine… right? I even asked Chan-hyung helped me study a lot this morning too…**

Seungmin stood up off the couch, he was studying in the lounge room as to not distract from either of his roommates from falling asleep, but now he wanted to change into his pyjamas rather than the sweat-slicked shirt he had not bothered to take off yet.

No time to shower tonight Seungmin thought as he padded past the bathroom, where the loud water pipes of another member showering churned. He almost laughed at the irony of it all; just a week ago he would yell if someone sat down on his bed without showering or wrinkle his nose discreetly when another member that smelled of hours of sweat and body odour walked past, but now he couldn’t bring himself to be bothered. After all, showering every day was a waste of time, and he didn’t have time when his important math test was tomorrow.

Seungmin winced as the floorboard he stepped on creaked loudly under his feet. He couldn’t let anyone be aware of his presence, Woojin was the last member besides him to go into his room, with another exception of the member in the shower, and with a few of the team already on his case, he really couldn’t afford to screw anything up now.
He just needed one hour longer, one to study just a bit harder than before.

After I get changed, I'll be much more productive Seungmin reasoned to himself creeping past the four-membered room. I know I’ll be, I need to-

“Hello?”

His sweaty clothes somehow felt impossibly hotter.

Seungmin froze mid-step and prayed that he wouldn’t lose his balance. Years of baseball don’t fail me, years of dancing don’t fail me-

As stealthily as he could, Seungmin turned his head towards the direction of the voice, all while balancing on one foot. As soon as he saw the mass of unruly curly noodle-like hair and the broad muscular back poking out of the bathroom door, he knew it was the leader. And Bang Chan was almost hypocritical; he was the harshest and making the members fall asleep early despite him himself never doing it.

It was as if Seungmin was cast in a movie, luck that Chan wasn’t looking at him and in slow motion, Seungmin saw the leader slowly turn his head again – but this time in the direction of Seungmin’s out-in-the-open hiding place.

It was as if a black cat’s spirit channelled through him and with a leap of faith he elegantly jumped to hide behind the corridor’s corner, away from the leader’s search. He stood still and held his breath, even if he was slowly choking from not exhaling for so long, and stayed that way, invisible hands strangling him until the bathroom door closed with a small ‘click.’

With the threat of being discovered, Seungmin let out a stepped breath and instantly felt his throat constrict as he gulped for another breath of air to extinguish the burning in his lungs.

It’s okay, you’re safe Seungmin reassured himself and closed his eyes, sliding into his bedroom and letting himself finally relax as he leant against the closed door, the pent-up breath escaping him.
No one could get him now.

And it was peaceful.

Until it wasn’t.

“Sheungmin, what the fuck is this?”

Seungmin shot open his eyes at the pure anger in his roommate’s roar and felt himself recoil into the door as if the force of the words pushed Seungmin away physically.

Seungmin quickly flickered his eyes nervously over the scene. It was Jisung standing in front of his closet with the most disappointed and angry face Seungmin had ever seen of the usually smiling boy. It was as if his puffy cheeks turned to steel and his wide eyes narrowed into slits.

“Ji-Jisung-hyung?” Seungmin managed to choke out, his throat like sandpaper and his heart burning and racing like six hours of practice could never do.

“What the hell is this Min?” Jisung growled, ripping out a piece of perfectly square paper out of the bounds of tape stuck to the inside of the wardrobe’s door.

Shit.

Seungmin flinched as the paper began to be crushed under Jisung’s firm grip, almost as if the tanned hand was squeezing the life out of him rather than the ruled-lined and delicately crafted timetable.

A flare of anger suddenly raged up inside of him. How dare Jisung go through his closet and touch his personal things?

“It’s nothing hyung, what are you doing in my wardrobe though?” Seungmin glared back in return and stomped over, snatching the already ruined paper out of Jisung’s dangerous grasp. “Do you not understand privacy?”
“What did you say to me?” Jisung began, advancing slowly onto Seungmin with shaking footsteps like a rabid dog, his eyes wild and teeth almost bared in rage but a creak from Hyunjin’s broken bed made the pair both freeze. Hyunjin was still asleep. If their argument woke him up, that would just cause more another issue to plague their troubled minds.

“Look hyung, it’s nothing, I’m fine-”

“You’re obviously not fine!” Jisung whisper-yelled, his eyes blazing. “I’ve seen enough of-that to know what you’ve been doing to yourself Seungmin! Three hours of sleep each night is not enough for a student or an idol, or anyone to function! Don’t you understand that?”

“You’ve gotten less before!” Seungmin spat, making sure his voice was still quiet and level, despite the venom coating his tongue. “Channie-hyung less than you! Any hard-working person needs to sacrifice things, Jisung-hyung, and I’m sorry that I’m trying to improve, okay?”

A silence filled the room and Seungmin watched as Jisung’s face softened. Rather than anger on the others face, now there was just pity, and Seungmin didn’t know what felt worse.

“Is that really what you think Minnie? Sacrifice doesn’t equal success, it equals burnout-”

“Hyung!” Seungmin reasoned, gripping the timetable tighter in his hand. “Sacrifice and determination create improvement and that’s what I’m trying to do! Improve!”

“If you looked around you” Jisung slowed down, taking on a rather patronizing tone, which just reminded Seungmin of his teacher’s disappointment at school, making the storm in his stomach brew further. “You would see that not eating, not sleeping, affects not only yourself but everyone. Chan’s done it, Bin’s done it, hell I’ve done it – every idol has, and it doesn’t get you anywhere-”

“It will work for me!” Seungmin growled back, his voice raising once again and feeling tears form in the corner of his eyes. “It has to!”

Fully aware that he was being childish, Seungmin, with his face red, turned away from his hyung and stormed towards the door, discarding the timetable in the trash can as he left.
“Seungmin!” Jisung called him back, ignoring the stirring boy on the bed beside him. “Min!”

Seungmin ignored Jisung’s desperate voice and stomped down the hallway, as far as he could get away from Jisung, and Hyunjin, and his damned closet and the fight – away from everything, glad that Bang Chan had left the bathroom and not heard his argument.

He eyed the front door and stopped in his steps. He could just leave. Put on some shoes and run into the night – that way he would truly be away from everything, away from stress, away from his members, away and into the cold air that would calm him, lull him into a false sense of security knowing the fact that he would be forced to return to his fears just hours later. Maybe nature was cruel like that, but maybe humans were the real monsters.

Why did I get so mad goddammit! Seungmin bit his finger to stop the choked sob fall from his perilous lips – the same lips that had yelled at his hyung, for what? Finding a stupid piece of paper?

It’s not just some paper, it’s my timetable, my schedule, my path to perfection.

And now it’s gone.

Seungmin looked up at a sound from down the hallway, but it was just the door of his bedroom closing at the small slit of light from under it diminishing into nothingness. Jisung must be going to sleep now. Or trying to at least.

No, there is one thing I can still do, I can push myself to improve, I wrote my schedule and I can remember it.

Seungmin looked over to his pile of math worksheets, discarded in a pile along with his pencils and erasers. Doing them before seemed like a lifetime ago – it was so rare that members fought among each other, but with two occurrences in three days, maybe crazy was shifting into normal as if the world was on a tilt that flipped the teams’ emotions.

It didn’t matter. It had happened and now Seungmin didn’t have time to dwell on it. He had to focus, improve, and that meant by studying for tomorrow’s math test.
“Mate! Don’t tell me you’ve been studying for the whole night!”

Seungmin sleepily blinked his eyes and adjusted them to the figure that was drawing near. But by the still slightly accented Korean, Seungmin already knew who it was.

“Uh, yeah” he admitted weakly to Felix who now crouched down beside him. “I have a math test tomorrow.”

“Holy moly that looks tough” Felix smiled and patted the younger on his back. Seungmin meekly smiled and recalled that Felix never finished high school – prioritising his dream of moving to Korea and becoming an idol over his education, so he most likely hadn’t seen these difficult equations that Seungmin was completing.

“Go to bed now, yeah? Don’t make me walk you there” Felix joked but Seungmin tensed. He didn’t want to sleep in his own room, not at the possibility of confronting Jisung. At Felix’s fallen expression, Seungmin knew that the elder’s small hand felt his back muscles become rigid.

“Minnie can you come sleep with me instead?” the Australian asked a cute pout dancing on his lips. “I can’t sleep that well tonight” he laughed but trailed off at the end. Seungmin keened at his friend’s showcase of vulnerability, he couldn’t just leave him there… not when he asked for help…

“Won’t I annoy you though?” Seungmin whispered, his voice not coming out any louder. “I don’t want you to be uncomfortable…”

“Minnie, I want you to cuddle me” Felix laughed, grasping and tugging at Seungmin’s hand, causing him to stop writing. “You can do your math tomorrow, and if you’ve really spent all this time studying you need to sleep.”

Seungmin grimaced, Jisung’s words echoing in his mind, but at the Australian’s pout, relented, and stood up to follow the elder to his bunk bed. Seungmin stumbled his way around in the dark, unfamiliar to the clothes scattered on the ground around each set of beds and where desks started and ended, while Felix fluidly skipped around each obstacle, guiding Seungmin like a moth in a cave, leading him towards the light and beacon of peaceful sleep.

“I-I haven’t showered” Seungmin admitted when Felix beckoned for him to come onto the bed. He was glad he couldn’t see whether the Australian’s reaction was disgusted or not at Seungmin’s laziness and instead the elder said in an even voice “it doesn’t matter if you want you can take your
Considering Felix’s sheets the next day, Seungmin stripped himself of his now cold shirt, feeling heat rise of his cheeks at the situation. Another thing he was glad of was the dark, that way Felix couldn’t see Seungmin’s body, or bruise for that matter.

He slid carefully into the sheets, thankful that at least Felix was wearing an oversized hoodie, so when the smaller curled up to him, he wouldn’t be able to feel Seungmin’s sticky skin.

“You comfortable?” Felix sleepily asked in English, running his gently over Seungmin’s ribs in a circular motion, leaving Seungmin to marvel at the comfort the simple movement gave him. He noticed, the softness of Felix’s fingertips and the light scratch of the elder’s nails and they created soft pathways along Seungmin’s bruise, hand enough for Seungmin to feel an odd sense of pleasure but no pain as the small hand grazed over the large mottled bruise.

My bruise Seungmin thought, remembering how Changbin had known about it, most likely as the pair often spent every waking and many sleeping moments together.

“Yeah” Seungmin breathed softly in response and craved Felix’s soothing touch, as if it was healing his purple and broken waist. In Felix noticed his long pause, he didn’t mention it.

“G’night Minnie”

“Goodnight, Felix, and thank you.”

Seungmin woke up to the weight of Felix’s heavy arm draping over his shoulder, holding him down like a hostage. Seungmin groaned and pushed the Australian’s weight off him. With weary eyes, he grabbed Felix’s large phone and clicked the home button, the bright light emanating from the screen blinding him in the early morning.

5:12 a.m, later than I wanted to wake up Seungmin blinked the sleep out of his eyes, thinking back to where his phone was; on the living room couch with his math papers. I didn’t even get to finish my practice papers before the test, I don’t have time to dance today, I must study for my test.
As he moved his leg, in an attempt to untangle them from the koala-like Australian’s muscular limbs, he heard Felix murmur in protest, and pull him closer, almost strangling him in his tight grasp.

“Felix” he whispered, his voice hoarse from yelling last night. Seungmin pushed the thought away with a wince. “You’re crushing me.”

At that, the idol finally relented and moved his arms, rolling onto his back and Seungmin was finally free. He looked at his surroundings, the bed below Jeongin’s was empty. Minho must have woken early.

*Gross* he thought standing up. *I can’t wear the same shirt again, but I also can’t go back into my room…*

Seungmin suddenly felt eyes pierce into his side and looked back, seeing Woojin’s sharp gaze stare at him from his top bunk.

“Go back to sleep, Seungmin” the eldest whispered, not wanting to wake up Jeongin who was sleeping soundly on the bunk bed next to them. “You’ve only gotten three hours at most.”

Seungmin sighed but forced himself to stay standing. He had to finish those damn worksheets. “I’ll sleep more tonight, hyung. I just really need to study for my math test today.” With that he walked out of the room, using his sweaty shirt to cover himself if any members were walking around at this time of the morning.

Luckily, or unluckily for Seungmin depending on the way he viewed it, it was five in the morning, and the house was as silent as a mouse, no sign of the eldest dancer anywhere. He immediately went to the bathroom on his venture down the corridor, too scared to try his room and quickly showered, wincing as the boiling water hit his skin, but cherished the slight ache as it numbed his skin. After standing there for what seemed like the blink on an eye, Seungmin begrudgingly turned to shower off, drying himself with the spare towel and put his shorts back on.

*Alright Seungmin, if he is there; don’t wake him up, whatever you do.*

With a cautious breath, he creaked open the door and peered in. The single bed with Jisung’s tell-tale red pillow was empty, and when Seungmin crept over to it and placed a hand on the stiff mattress, it was cold. The idol sighed in relief and let himself relax; Hyunjin was a deep sleeper,
unlike Jisung, and the student wasn’t the one he was trying to avoid.

He changed into his school uniform, knowing he wouldn’t have time to dance this morning, and grimaced at his closet door, where two pieces of cute pink tape hung defeatedly, the symbol, maybe, of Seungmin’s failed efforts at success.

_Failure of hiding one simple thing from two damned members, right?_ Seungmin rolled his eyes at his own stupid mistakes, but couldn’t quite help the guilt that tug at his heart at being mean to his hyungs, making the storm that had been slowly simmering, rise and leave a shadow over his gut.

_Since when did my room get so untidy?_ He thought looking at his sheets, messy from two nights ago, and the textbooks strewn across the desk, surely making it harder for Hyunjin to be productive. Paper scraps from last night littered the floor, along with his tie for school and some dirty clothes. Never once in his whole life on living in a dorm had his room ever been this untidy, especially in a shared room.

Seungmin’s glared at the carpeted ground in disgust but found his eyes wander over to one thing. The small metal wire bin beside the desk. Inside it, face up despite the rips at the corners and the multitude of creases running through the paper, his timetable lay, discarded from the argument, last night, or rather this morning, still completely readable.

Seungmin snuck his eyes to peer at Hyunjin, still sleeping soundly in his bed and mumbling away to himself, blissfully unaware of anything that had happened in the room now or just mere hours ago. Seungmin wished for a fleeting moment, that he could be like Hyunjin, but then again, it wasn’t and wouldn’t be the first or last time the thought flickered through his mind.

_He’s still asleep… If I’m quiet, I can get my timetable and put it back up… Jisung won’t look there again, right? I can just scrunch up some paper and put it in the bin to act as a substitute, but what if Jisung tries to find t again to show Chan-hyung or Woojin-hyung?_

_I need to be careful._

Seungmin’s gaze travelled to his messy desk, and it was almost as if a lightbulb flickered above his head. He had photocopied the same timetable multiple times, so the proportions would be identical. All copies were stored in the small drawer, just meters away.

_If I’m quick, I can just copy down my the days remaining of the timetable so I don’t loose what I’ve_
already written. It doesn’t have to be perfect Seungmin reasoned, already scrambling to grab a fresh timetable out if his desk and flatten out the ruined one so he could read it.

I could even put the new one somewhere else, and if Jisung ever does take the old one away, I can change the times on it now, from 4:30 to 5:30 so the others won’t be so worried! It’s genius!

After just another few minutes, Seungmin had hastily re-written the timetables schedule, hidden the new one in the sheathe of his pillowcase, and carefully scrunched up the old one, with the ‘revised’ times and threw it in the rubbish.

It was almost as if nothing had changed.

Seungmin tore his gaze away from his handiwork at the click of the front door opening and closing and prayed with all his heart that Jisung had not returned from wherever, most likely the studio, had returned.

He would be caught in the act, red-handed, again.

After another few moments of stillness, Seungmin heard shuffling footsteps enter the four members dorm room, and the door close again.

Even if that is Jisung-hyung, it looks like I have some time now to study in the living room, as to not disturb Hyunjin.

So Seungmin did what he had set out to do, even if a paper and pen didn’t dictate his life like it had yesterday. He crept back into the living room and studied: studied through the creaking and opening of doors as life began to rouse around him, studied through the bright laughter of Changbin at another one of Woojin’s lame jokes and studied through the sound of knifes hitting chopping boards as Minho prepared sweet potato.

“Seungmin-hyung!”

At the call of his name, Seungmin looked up, immediately pulled out of his groove of studying but smiled weakly at Jeongin who was standing above him.
It’s Monday. Jeongin and Hyunjin go late to school today.

“It’s your turn to shower! But looking at you, I assume you’ve already done it?”

“Correct, Innies” Seungmin smiled genuinely at the maknae’s natural aegyo, feeling to strange urge to reach out and pinch the younger’s cheek, but halfway through the teasing action, his hand falters, like a car out of fuel and drops limply by his side.

‘You don’t need to annoy him further, not when you already do it on camera.’

There’s a moment of stillness.

“Aren’t you going to do it hyung?”

There’s a strange hesitance in the air, almost as if Jeongin is waiting for something to happen, expecting even, but Seungmin just stares at the maknae blankly, his brain too tired to properly function. What was he missing again? What was he just doing?

Seungmin looked down at his math formulas in confusion, hoping the action would trigger his memory to come back to him. There are bright red circles and ticks from the pen he was holding, using it to self-mark his answers, just moments before, and Seungmin is almost distracted by the vibrant colour.

“Hyung, are you okay?”

Seungmin looked up into Jeongin’s eyes and feels Minho look up at him from across the room at the unexpected question.

“Yeah Innies, why?”

Jeongin just stares at him, like he was an alien from outer space. “It’s nothing, hyung.”

Seungmin blinked confusedly at the younger’s back as he walked away, his schoolbag in hand.
Why do I feel like I’ve done something wrong? I didn’t act weirdly in that conversation, did I?

Seungmin quickly glanced to the clock, ticking in the corner of the room. It was 6:49, and as Seungmin was catching the bus to school today, he would need to leave at seven to make it to the bus stop in time.

With a sniff of his delicate nose, he packed away his books, a strange sense of confidence filling him despite the odd almost iron-like taste in his mouth. He had studied basically all night and felt fully prepared for the math test for once in the past three years, an achievement in itself.

Just as he is about to walk out of the living room, he hears a soft whistle from the kitchen in which Woojin and Minho are looking at him, beckoning him over as he was a measly dog.

“Yeah?” Seungmin asks unsurely when he reaches them. The confrontation itself causes a spur of indignation in his chest, his confidence slowly draining out of him as he steps closer to the meddling elders.

“Seungmin, are you alright? Did you go back to sleep when I told you to?” Woojin asked and Seungmin felt trapped as Minho walked fluidly to face him, blocking his escape from the horseshoe of the kitchen benches.

“Uh- no?”

“You look like shit” Minho stated bluntly, and Seungmin felt himself wince at the words, and the realisation that he had not put on any makeup this morning to hide his darker-than-yesterday eyebags.

“Right…” Seungmin scrapped for a reply to his hyungs’ beady eyes, following his every move. He felt out in the open, it was too early for an attack on his decisions, whether they were poor or good.

“Look” Minho started, and Seungmin looked at the dancer, who looked as if had aged since last night. “I heard about what happened with you and Jisung last night.”

Seungmin recoiled this time, flinching visibly from Minho’s words. Of course; it was suspicious that both Minho and Jisung weren’t in the dorm at five in the morning; Jisung must have told the dancer everything.
His timetable had been exposed to another member, at Seungmin had the gut feeling that Minho would do something serious about it.

He was seriously in deep shit now.

“Did he find out about the bruise?” Woojin asked, a confused frown on his face.

“No hyung” Minho replied. “It’s worse-”

“A-About the bruise!” Seungmin interrupted, earning a glare from the Minho. “Hyungs, you can tell Jisung” Seungmin panicked, he had to not let the dancer tell Woojin about the fight with Jisung, or he knew that he would get more than a disappointed glance.

“You can tell Jisung, but, just” Seungmin quietened down, grabbing both Woojin’s and Minho’s attention as they leaned in to hear him. “I don’t want Channie-hyung to know – he’s too stressed right now with creating the new album and-”

“Don’t want me to know what?”

Seungmin whipped around with a pale face. He knew that voice, it was the same in the hallway last night, but now, it was almost more innocent and bubbly, as if the Australian was about to deliver a joke and that made Seungmin feel impossibly worse.

“Hyung!” Seungmin smiled through gritted teeth and pleaded silently that neither Woojin or Minho would let any of his secrets spill. “Good morning!”

“Mornin’ Min!” Chan smiled, his dimples shining and ramen hair sticking up messily all over the place. “What am I missing?”

Seungmin stuttered again, his cheeks heating up like and explosion had gone off under his skin. He glanced carefully towards Woojin and begged that he said nothing. So far, although six members now knew about the bruise, Seungmin had managed to somehow keep it from the leader, and he was not ready for Minho or Jisung to expose him once again.
The uncharacteristic fight was more worrying than the timetable, especially now that he had changed the times to start later and finish earlier; even if Jisung had remembered some of it now he couldn’t prove it at all. But the fight… Seungmin winced onto himself almost as if it replaying right in front of him. That was just unexplainable. There was no excuse of making STAY proud if he was breaking up the group was there?

*Maybe it would be, there were those fifteen people that wanted you to leave Stray Kids, after all, I bet it has ten-folded by now* the dark side of his mind provided unhelpfully.

“We’re fine here Chan-hyung” Minho gritted out, his voice tight and strained to the point that even the usually oblivious leader cocked his head to the side in confusion and furrowed his brow.

*Welp, now’s a better time than ever, before Jisung-hyung comes home, at least.*

“I need to go to school now, bye hyungs!” Seungmin smiled, so widely that it was obviously fake despite Seungmin’s best efforts. “I’ll see you tonight at dance practice!”

“Bye, Seungmin. Let’s talk tonight, yeah?” Woojin’s voice stopped Seungmin from grabbing his already packed schoolbag and slinging it over his back. It sounded light to uninformed ears, such as Channie, or Felix, who had now just entered the room and was waddling around for a banana. But Seungmin tensed, he knew the words had so much more meaning that it’s face value.

“Of course” Seungmin smiled again, his eyes crinkling into crescents just like Hyunjin’s did, but only that only occurred when the older was wearing a genuine smile and when Seungmin had a fake one.

As Seungmin exited through the door, feeling like his heart was left inside, he quietly hoped that his promise was one he would never have to live up to.

With a sudden force, that almost made him stumble down the stairs he realised yet another promise, but this time one made to himself, that he had broken. After four years of effort, organisation and self-constraint, he had built a foundation he could look back on in years, written on crème papers and bounded by leather.

His diary.
For the first time since he had made that single promise four years ago, last night, in his mix of tiredness, confusion and rage, he had let his routine slip into oblivion, and that would leave on page, dated yesterday, blank. A page that could never be compensated, a day that’s memories would never be meticulously recorded in perfect Korean hangul.

He had failed. Yet again.

When he sat on the bus seat at 7:17, flustered from his final sprint to actually reach the bus before it left the stop, as he had not taken into account how the… conversation with three of his hyungs would affect his time, he felt the storm in his stomach wrap around and squeeze his intestines, making him almost hunch over in pain.

When he tried to subtly lean back up again, he made contact with the girl with the bear facemask.

When he had recovered from his pain and adjusted his black facemask perching upon his nose, he made eye contact with a figure slightly more unsettling, who stared back straight into Seungmin’s wide eyes.

The boy’s chain earrings dangled in the early light and he tilted his head into an easy, but menacing smile.

Seungmin had not only come to terms with the failure of his diary on the bus, or the secrets he was keeping from the bandmates he trusted with his life just a fortnight ago. In that split second, he had come to terms with something else.

Kim Hyunwoo was on this bus too.

Chapter End Notes

OOOOOOOOOOOOOO

The only thing I can think of for this chapter is a really quiet bruh.mp4 sound effect. I’m shook? Also posting this early? Go me.

How did everyone find this chapter? I think the main thing was the fight with Jisung and his timetable being exposed. It’s all going to hell now, and small hint; you know
how so far each chapter has been one day? Well buckle up because this is a lowkey spoiler it the next *reads my sheets to make sure I'm correct* two chapters will also be set on the same day!

Basically:
Chapter 7 (This one) – Sunday Night + Monday Morning
Chapter 8 – Monday Morning and Afternoon
Chapter 9 – Monday Night

So, if that doesn’t say anything about shit’s going down I don’t know what else. Sorry that you have to wait for a month between each chapter? I feel like it kind of cuts off the flow and mood of the story as even I have trouble remembering what happened last chapter lmao so I can’t imagine what it’s like for you all. Honestly, there are a lot of small connections with previous and future chapters that I feel are hard to pick up on unless you read the whole thing at once? Idk.

Title: SPARK
I literally just named the chapter then omg. It’s been through so many name-changes this story – first Changed – Illusion – Silence – Ice – and now Spark. IDEK if that’s the best choice; if you don’t vibe it you can choose out of one of the options above lmao.

- A lot of fire imagery – flicker, flame, spark, lighted like a match – also relates to anonymys – freeze, ice etc.
- The fire imagery usually described ‘hot-tempers’ and strong emotions – anger, annoyance, guilt
- Flame and sparks also relate to burning like in burnout… which relates to Jisung’s words
- ‘Play with fire, going to get burnt’ – Seungmin is messing around with basic human needs to function mainly sleep and he is over-working which is the ‘fire’ – will lead to the ‘burn.’
- Spark also relates to the spark of ideas, highlighting his twisted ideology and self-esteem issues.

Also (I hope you have noticed this!) but through the chapters Seungmin’s view of STAY has become more negative – at the start he wanted to prove to only the fifteen people that liked the comment by dancing more that he was worthy, but now he wants to make all STAY proud, or want STAY (as a collective) to like him again, highlighting how he know motivates himself by thinking everyone hates him. Did that make sense?

Sorry I feel like this is a really long note^^^

I’ve finished my half-year exams! (Australians are only halfway through the school year lol) (also lowkey not doing as well as I hoped oops, my grade averages are lowering but I’m not beating myself up too much about it because I got in a bad mental state before the exams, had my period through all exams and also got really ill during the exams so I’m cutting myself some slack.)

I’m so hyped for Yellow Wood I’m quaking!!! I wanted to post this after the 19th so I could discuss it with you guys, but leave me a comment about your favourite song and stuff after it’s out!!!

QUESTION: I’ve already told you that the next few chapters are going to be the
climax(es ;000) of the story. What do you think they’ll be? Do you think Jisung and Minho will tell the others about the fight? (Did you like how that was written btw? I tried to build up tension and used animal imagery and stuff but I know I’m not the most experienced writer out there.)

NEXT UPDATE : 15th JULY 2019

Talic <33333
As Seungmin’s eyes found Kim Hyunwoo he froze. And when those piercing snake-like eyes met Seungmin’s own, and Hyunwoo’s face stretched into a mischievous smirk, Seungmin felt the storm clouds roll again.

As if they were brewing inside of him.

The Monday shuffle of passer-by’s getting on and off the bus faded into white noise as Seungmin’s hands began to sweat. He couldn’t explain why, but Hyunwoo’s smile made him unsettled – uneasy, as if there was a sinister hint to it, that Seungmin himself couldn’t explain.

_Calm down, Hyunwoo hasn’t really done anything that bad_ Seungmin attempted to justify the boy, but the snide comments in the hallways, the laughs that echoed in Seungmin’s ears, and the way he had just urged on Yejun, _the rice incident_, or when he _looked_ at him with those eyes full of misplaced and chivalrous deity, like he was just so far above Seungmin; it all made the other feel violently ill.

As the bus pulled closer to the stop outside the school, Seungmin, felt his hand click the ‘stop’ button, and he gathered his belongings to stand in front of the bus door, waiting for it to open. Seungmin heard the loud and uncaring ‘thank you’ Hyunwoo called out as he stepped off the bus, not taping his travel card to pay for his bus fare, which if Seungmin did and was caught could lead to a Stray Kids scandal, and then heard his schoolmate’s footsteps draw near.

_Thump._

_Thump._

_Thump._

“Seungmin.”

The boy submissively turned towards Hyunwoo, losing all of his dignity at being called like a pet
“Strange to see you on the bus” Hyunwoo grinned, his teeth like a wolf’s and he slung a heavy arm over Seungmin’s shoulder.

Seungmin felt his mouth go dry and he looked at the ground, at his clean black school shoes that scuffed nervously along the sidewalk.

Since when had he gotten so pitiful? His parents taught him to walk with pride, and if anything his experiences as a globally-popular idol only enhanced his confidence, so why was he now completely avoiding to look into one boy’s pair of eyes?

Woojin will be mad if he sees my shoes scuffed Seungmin pondered. The grip around his shoulders grew tighter at Seungmin’s lack of response, as if it was choking him, wrapping around the column of his throat like a boa constrictor, before tearing into it like an alpha wolf.

Just one-hundred meters till the gate.

“Hey idol boy” Hyunwoo growled, dropping the smirk of his face into something much darker. Seungmin felt his heart rate spike, and he looked into Hyunwoo’s dark eyes for a fleeting second. “I was being nice ya know?” Hyunwoo, continued, his breath hot on Seungmin’s already red ears.

Fifty meters.

“-By calling you Seungmin just before, and I really don’t appreciate being ignored, so what should I call you now… idol boy? No, no, that’s just so plain… let me think…”

Ten meters.

Seungmin felt the breath stuck in his throat leave him as Hyunwoo suddenly jolted Seungmin sharply to the left, making Seungmin stumble over his feet.

“Hey!” Hyunwoo’s boisterous voice made the small number of surrounding students entering the gate look over – maybe out of interest, or fearful anticipation – to where Hyunwoo held Seungmin
in some sort of headlock.

“Hey! Beomwon! Look what we have here!”

*Zero meters.*

Seungmin limped pathetically to wherever Hyunwoo was taking him, feeling the flame of embarrassment wash over his cheeks at the humiliation. He felt like a dog on a leash.

The *Beomwon* figure, Hyunwoo had called for turned around, but Seungmin, despite not recalling the name, already knew exactly who it was from the sight of the back of his head.

It was the boy from Friday, who had basically slammed him into a locker and walked away without sparing a second glance.

Seungmin felt his heart stop for the umpteenth time that day, but this was worse than any before; forgetting to write in his diary, Felix’s hand dancing sensually over his bruise, the confrontation with Minho and Woojin then Chan walking in on them and even the fight with Jisung in the early hours of the day all paled in a sick and green contrast.

At least Seungmin knew Jisung would never *physically hurt* him despite his words and anger making Seungmin feel like scum of the earth, but with Hyunwoo, and now Beomwon, Seungmin truly had no idea what would happen.

And so he feared everything.

“I have the perfect name for him too” Hyunwoo announced, finally letting go of Seungmin as they reached Beomwon, who was standing unimpressed, one AirPod in his left ear while his right eyebrow was cocked. “He really does look like a golden retriever, ya know? Like the big American ones with gold fur that fetch stuff – it must be the facial structure or something, but let’s change idol boy’s name to *puppy*, how about that?”

Seungmin felt his cheeks redden again, under the mask of his facemask. One thing his facemask didn’t hide though, was the tears gathering in the corners of his eyes, just as they had been hours ago.
“Is our puppy going to cry?” Beomwon pouted the amusement swimming like fish in his black eyes, his chain earring dangling and his tie still loosely-done around his neck.

Seungmin forced himself to glare it Beomwon’s eyes and pulled out of Hyunwoo’s loose grasp with a rough pull, keeping silent. He pushed his way through the crowd of people who had gathered to watch the event at the school gate and begged that his eyes wouldn’t break and let the world see it’s tears. Not now. Not when there was so many people watching him; he wasn’t even inside the school halls – whatever happened could be seen by the whole public too.

Puppy. Puppy. Seungmin repeated the word over and over in his mind as he kept his eyes trained on the ground, and felt Hyunwoo’s stare mockingly into his back. He pushed his way through the students who stared on with wide eyes as Seungmin kept walking.

Why isn’t anyone helping me? This school – this school is shit!

Seungmin felt injustice tug on his heart as he walked away, ironically like a kicked puppy, and the weight on his heart when he saw the familiar face of Dayun in the crowd, who just turned her back to him before he looked away.

As the morning went on, Seungmin thought about his predicament again and again, reflecting on what he could have done differently to avoid all off it. But the more he pondered the more his internal resentment grew.

Why had no one stepped in to help me?

But after all, it was routine to ignore the bitter sides of humanity.

And it was routine for Seungmin to not talk about it.

“This test will be worth twenty percent of your final graduation grade for mathematics” Mr Rhee began, a large stack of booklets in his hands. Seungmin fidgeted nervously, despite his lethargy from barely sleeping, and began tapping his pencil on the table, a habit in which both he and Bang
“If you performed poorly in the last test, this is one of your only chances to maintain your grade at a standard level.”

He felt Haeun shot him an indiscreet side glance from her position next to him.

“What do you want?” he bristled, still on edge from his confrontation just before, unable to trap the biting words in his throat.

He watched as his friend’s face paled, then turned pink out of indignation, her bobbed hair bouncing as she snapped her head to face him. “I was seeing if you were okay-”

“Well don’t.” Seungmin growled, tapping his pencil, the same mechanical pencil he had used for the last math test, faster in anticipation for Mr Rhee to reach his desk with the test that would determine his future.

“Focus on yourself, Haeun.”

He watched as Haeun turned back to face the front, not even smiling at Mr Rhee when he gave her the test like she usually did. Seungmin glared at the table, not acknowledging the man who placed the test in front of him.

What is with Haeun today? She probably doesn’t even know how bad my day has been, so why is she annoyed?

“You will have one and a half hours to complete the booklet in front of you. No calculators are permitted, if caught with any contraband during this test, you will receive a zero for both this and the next test.” Mr Rhee paused to check to clock, hanging over the whiteboard.

You studied for this last night, Seungmin, you can do this.

“You may begin.”
It was done.

After the one hour was up, and Seungmin had scratched in answers for the twelve page booklet, for the first time in his life, Seungmin walked out of a math test with a proud smile on his face.

*I can’t believe I actually understood it! Every question I knew what to do!*

Seungmin felt as if he was on Cloud Nine as he bounced to his next class of the day, ignoring Haeun who tried to talk to him. He wouldn’t let anything bring his euphoric mood down, not Haeun, not Yejun who was already seated at his desk behind Seungmin’s as the idol walked into the classroom, and not even Mrs Kim who was eying him with her beady gaze as he placed his books down.

*One hour of Korean Studies, surely I can survive through this, right?*

“Allright class, settle down” Mrs Kim began despite the fact that no one had been talking. “Today we are going through correct grammar and tenses as somehow, all of you have forgotten it since you learnt it in second grade” she drabbled on. “Your essays I marked were all below the standard that I expect from my students, apart from three students, well done to them.”

Mrs Kim continued on in a boring tone her cheeks bulging as she spoke despite her thin frame, and Seungmin used all his willpower to not fall asleep like his body was telling him in her lesson. He sneakily turned to Yejun, who was immaturity drawing basketballs and penises in the margin of his notebook instead of taking the notes Mrs Kim was writing on the blackboard she insisted on using despite the other classrooms shifting to whiteboards, and Seungmin turned to face the front again before the ratty teacher could yell at him.

*As long as he’s not annoying me or kicking my chair, I don’t care what Yejun does.*

He shifted to the side of his chair to test the bruise that was still present from his ‘fall’ Yejun had caused. It was still bitterly present, and Seungmin sighed in annoyance that he had let Minho and Woojin tell Jisung about it, despite him wanting to keep it a secret from all the members.
If Minho’s told him by now, then all members but Channie-hyung know. And I wonder if Jisung will tell everyone about my timetable and our fight. Seungmin placed his head in his hands. When had everything gone so wrong? It was only last week that Seungmin had been a completely different person, with far less issues…

No, although I’m not the same person as I was before; I’ve improved. I work harder now, it’s all a good thing. Sure, there are some sacrifices along the way, such as my sleep, but I’m going to stick by what I said yesterday; sacrifice equals growth.

Seungmin snapped out of his monologue-like thoughts at a muffled cackle from behind him. Seungmin felt his ears turn red and he quickly glanced around to find whatever Yejun did to him before his classmates could see.

Has he stuck something to my back? Or maybe he’s put a weird camera filter on me and is filming me?

Seungmin glanced around panicked, but relaxed slightly when he realised the laughter, now increasing into less-stifled giggles from others in his class, was not directed towards him. He looked next to Younghun, wondering if someone was picking him, but the glasses-faced boy was buried in his work, as expected. He heard the tell-tale click of photos being taken, as well as the small ‘ding’ that indicated a video was being filmed.

Seungmin less discretely swivelled in his chair, trying to locate what or who the teasing and mocking laughs were directed at.

And then he found them.

It was a slightly chubby girl, Dam Aeyoung, who was the target of the class. Aeyoung, recognised for her larger size, was also known for her beautiful straight black hair, often braided into precarious plaits framing her chubby face that went down past her torso. She had been to Cheongdam since Seungmin had been, and he remembered the jokes made about her hair which she took so much care of, such as ‘I bet she wipes her butt with it!’ or ‘Only girls insecure about their face grow their hair that long – it’s to balance all that ugliness out, ya know?’

Seungmin of course hadn’t participated in those mean jokes, even before the burden of being an idol was placed on him, he never particularly enjoyed making fun of people, but he never actively tried to stop it either.
But now, an unrivalled fury sparked in him, roaring like a flame igniting his limbs with anger when he saw what had happened.

A jealous and unlikeable girl, Kwan Jooseob, was doubled over with laughter, up from her desk, her unnaturally dark red lips forming an ‘O’ as she spat her amusement. Around her, many students were laughing, some finding the ‘incident’ funny, or some chickling nervously, trying to fit in with the crowd, but what made Seungmin roar was the number of videos, recorded to be shared like a girls tears were the object of hilarity, being taken as Aeyoung began to bawl.

It took Seungmin another moment to find the problem, but when he did, the hot fire running inside of his veins made him still.

In one of Jooseob’s hands was a sparkly blue pair of craft scissors.

In the other was the ruler-length of one of Aeyoung’s perfectly crafted braids.

Seungmin felt this jaw go slack at the cruelty of it all – everyone knew Aeyoung cherished her long hair, but it had all been ripped away from her and everyone in the room was laughing at her for it.

Aeyoung began to sob louder, fat ugly tears streaming down his face, contrasting the joyous mood of her peers, but she didn’t speak, didn’t move. She just sat there and cried.

Seungmin swung his perilous gaze to Mrs Kim. She just stood there, her back even straighter than normal as she observed her class, which was now in a state of chaos. But just like Aeyoung she didn’t move, but not out of embarrassment, she was still because she didn’t care, didn’t care enough to do anything but watch.

Everything Seungmin had ignored, whether it was a kid being pushed over in the playground in grade one, or the laughter of a girl judging another, or that stupid watch incident in grade three, or just last week when Seungmin had walked away from Younghun being beat up by Hyunwoo and pack of crazed dogs, or even this morning when Seungmin was dragged and defaced; it all came back to haunt him as he sat on the table, while the world moved around him, laughter and sobs echoing in his ears, and the sight of phones held to film.

Seungmin looked back up to Mrs Kim, who still stood there with a stupefied expression on her ugly features.
In her position of authority, one supposed to *help students*, she just stood there and did absolutely nothing.

Seungmin’s vision turned to red.

*That’s it. No one did anything for me this morning, but I’m not going to let another person feel as humiliated as I was. It’s time to act.*

“Hey! Everyone, shut up and stop filming!” His voice boomed across the classroom, deafening to even his own ears as he pushed away from his desk in one loud motion.

It proved effective, as at once the laughter stopped like someone had hit pause of a television show, and Aeyoung’s cries turned to quiet sniffles as she looked up at Seungmin.

He felt like he wasn’t in his own body, as if he was watching himself unfold in front of him as his mask of the perfect student, the perfect idol began to crumble at his own undoing, his own words.

His own power.

“How can you all be so *horrible*?” Seungmin yelled, glaring at the pack of wolves below him, their teeth sharp with evil grins that faltered at the notion of his own speech. “Why do you all think being *cruel is funny*?”

The whispers that had started when Seungmin had first stood up fizzled out to silence.

It was time. Like Seungmin’s patience was an elastic band – after being stretched in the grubby fingers of others and himself, it had been tugged, strained and woven until it finally broke. It finally snapped.

As Seungmin glared, he felt lighter than he had in days – the storm brewing in his stomach had finally broke and his glare, the flashes of rage and injustice in his eyes was the lighting, his voice the thunder.

“And *you*” Seungmin snarled, pointing a bony finger at the teacher poised, now shocked at the
“How the fuck can you just stand there and no absolutely nothing while one of your students is being bullied?”

Seungmin felt the rage channel through him, coursing through his veins and making his head swirl but objective clear. It made him feel a sense of power he had never experienced, to be so far above those in a position of authority themselves, to be so… righteous.

“You’ve failed you responsibilities as a teacher and a figure we’re supposed to look up to” he growled again, moving to advance on the stunned teacher, paralysed like she was frozen in fear.

She’s frozen in fear? Seungmin felt his gaze sharpen again as Mrs Kim stood at the front of the room, as if her position would protect her from anything. Aeyoung is the only one who should feel scared right now, she’s the one that was hurt because of your inability to stop conflict!

“You can’t even say anything now, huh?” Seungmin laughed, feeling the resentment for his past self, the students in his class and Mrs-damned-Kim rise in his throat.

“You really are a terrible teacher.”

Mrs Kim’s eyes and lips were both wide in surprise, like a fish dumbly mouthing as she scrambled for words to say to Seungmin as he continued to darkly chuckle to himself.

That bitch he thought, turning away from her. The class looked at him, shocked into a silence at his uncharacteristic outburst. They are all terrible people.

As he began to walk back to his desk, to collect his books and leave, adrenaline of his outburst making him feel strong enough to do so, the shrill squeak of Mrs Kim stopped him once again.

“How dare you say that to me Mr Kim! Get out of my classroom at this instant, you terrible, terrible boy!”

Seungmin shot her back a glare, but with a huff collected his books and walked, with his head up out of the box of a classroom, following her words in an oppressed submission, despite doing it slowly, so it was like he wasn’t following her order at all.
Seungmin left, without looking back, slamming the door behind him, and when the sound of wood hitting the doorframe rang in his ears, then the stark silence that followed, made Seungmin stutter in his bold steps.

Only when he felt he could finally breathe, away from the astonished gaze of his peers, did the adrenaline and strength leave his body, and the guilt bring back the storm that his yells had liberated. It came back and pinched his gut harder than ever before, to the point that Seungmin doubled over and felt he was going to vomit all over the tiles of the school hallway, leaving a stain that could never be cleaned.

Or maybe the impurity of his actions, the sound of his voice, would leave a stain on his own character, that Seungmin would never be able to detach himself from.

Regret crashed onto him, and he wondered for a split second why in the world had he stood up and yelled – at his classmates, at his teacher who even though he didn't agree with at the best of times, he was supposed to respect – just why had he basically threatened them all?

What the hell has he done.

It was an action with irreversible effects and the most dire of consequences. It was bad enough to break down in the safety of his dorm, but in the eye of the public, the blatant disobedience and hatred in his voice, it would be long-lasting, permanent. It could even, if a student had caught it on film, single-handedly destroy everything his hyungs had worked towards for years – it could destroy Stray Kids.

*Fuck, fuck, fuck – what have I done?*

Seungmin despite his spiraling thoughts, groggily walked along the halls, stumbling over his footsteps and mind whirring as he thought of how he would explain this to any teacher if they caught him outside his class.

‘I have a music lesson’ he could say with a tight smile, but for once Seungmin felt too tired to even try to come up with any more excuses. He wandered around the halls, putting the heavy mathematics and Korean Language books in his locker, before he stood in the hall, staring at nothing.

What to do now.
There was twenty minutes before recess begun. Twenty minutes of valuable time Seungmin could use to be practicing in the small dance studio like he had a few lunchtimes ago, but there was no motivation, not even the persistent thought of making STAY proud of him, to do such a task.

There was only one thing to do.

Mindlessly, his feet guided him to the empty Classroom 53, a room he had not been in ages, and he breathed in relief that the door was unlocked. When Seungmin closed the door behind him, he felt safe from the outside world, away from the looks of shock and horror on his classmates and Mrs Kim’s faces, away from the expectations of his members and teachers and most importantly away from the rumors and that were almost certainly circulating about him and his ‘snap.’

Seungmin slid down the door and felt his vision go blurry, the sign of tears coming up again for the third time that day. He forced them back though – he would not allow himself to cry, not even in the safehouse of Classroom 53.

With shaking hands, he pulled out his phone and headphones, plugging them into the device before scrolling through his playlists to find the one that he craved in his most low moments. His private one – the one not even Jeongin knew about. It was filled with the songs that made him feel so full of emotion but so empty at the same time – the gentle but sorrowful piano and crescendos of beautiful pain-filled voices, striking a chord in Seungmin’s very own heart.

And for those precious twenty minutes, Seungmin wasted away, his back against the door and legs stretched out in front of him listening to the songs on repeat and not moving despite the artists’ moving lyrics. He barely heard the recess bell when it rung out strongly, just like it did every day at the same time.

Without another thought, Seungmin stood, turned down the volume of his music and left the classroom, ignoring student’s mutterings and glances thrown at him as he stalked down the halls. At recess he sat alone, in the boy’s bathroom as unhygienic as it was, not even attempting to face the scrutiny of the cafeteria.

As recess shifted into History with Dayun, who he didn’t acknowledge, then History into Chemistry, Seungmin continued the day as numb as ever. He didn’t take notes or listen to the teacher, or even daydream in class like he would have done two weeks ago. He just sat and stared.

Fifteen minutes into Chemistry, it seemed Seungmin’s actions from Korean Language Studies
finally caught up to him.

“Kim Seungmin? Mrs Soon and Mr Paeng would like to have a word” the receptionist who had greeted him when he was late to school last week, Ms Guk poked her head around the door of their chemistry classroom.

A small ‘ohhh’ rose among Seungmin’s classmates but he ignored them, moving from his shared desk with Younghun, one of the only students who had actually been present at his outburst, and bowed to his teacher before exiting the room.

He followed Ms Guk in silence, holding his books that somehow felt lighter than when he had walked in to his classroom, along the maze of passages until he reached the place that would decide his fate. The Principal, Mr Paeng’s office.

“Good luck” Ms Guk whispered before turning away. Seungmin bowed before looking back at the oak door in front of him.

He would need that luck.

Seungmin adjusted himself so his books rested in the crook of one arm, before extending the other out to knock.

_Tap. Tap. Tap._

“Well, Seungmin?” he heard a gruff voice call from inside the room. “You may come in.”

With a deep breath, Seungmin pushed open the door, met with the sight of Mrs Soon, the wellbeing coordinator of his year level and Mr Paeng leaning over the desk with careful and concerned expressions of their wrinkled features.

“Ah, Seungmin” Mr Paeng smiled warmly at him. “Put your books down and take a seat.”

With a bow, Seungmin complied and sat in the brown leather chair across from the two teachers. There was a short silence at his arrival, and Seungmin watched as Mr Paeng took a seat in his
throne-like chair across from him.

“Mrs Kim had told me of your actions in her classroom this morning, Seungmin” he said, his eyes warily on Seungmin, with an unfamiliar fondness swirling in the brown orbs. “What do you have to say for yourself.”

Seungmin gulped and thought about his what he was going to say next. Although he liked that Mr Paeng was straight to the point, he had expected a bit more time to try and lull the principal on his side, like he had been successful in doing to others many times before.

He needed to be careful.

“Obviously, my… outburst… was completely unacceptable and disrespectful” Seungmin began, keeping his voice level despite the unease rising in his stomach. “I have been extremely stressed with preparing for a comeback and recently I have been placing a lot of pressure on myself to perform better than previously, both in my career and in school.”

Seungmin tried to gauge the principal’s actions, and seeing a frown form on the elder’s face, made Seungmin backpedal with insecurity.

“B-But, none of that can justify my actions and my words to Mrs Kim. That is… rather unexplainable.”

“Seungmin” the man started, interwinding his hands into a business-like posture on the hardwood desk. “You’ve never had an episode like this before and from what Mrs Kim has told me, you were defending a student from bullying, so I am willing to be more lenient with you this time. But, swearing and acting in a manipulative way to one of my co-workers, a woman who is giving up her time to teach you, cannot go unpunished.”

The man leaned back in his chair and beckoned for Mrs Soon to sit in one of the green lounge chairs at the side of the room.

“You will go straight home after this meeting today, Seungmin, you can catch up on the work you miss tomorrow. You will also need to write an apology to Mrs Kim and give it to her in your next lesson, which I believe is on Wednesday?” Mr Paeng asked, cocking an eyebrow at the student sitting across from him.
Seungmin nodded, silently thanking God that he did not have to face her tomorrow.

“This outburst will also be on your school record” Mr Paeng decided, earning a nod from Mrs Soon sitting from the side. There was another moment of silence and Seungmin’s eyes widened in hope.

“I-Is that all, sir?”

“Of course, your parents will be informed about this right after you leave my office” Mr Paeng continued, causing Seungmin to quietly sigh. Half of him had hoped his parents wouldn’t have needed to be called despite how pitiful that hope was.

“And-” Mr Paeng paused.

Seungmin stilled.

“Your management team will be informed about this, as currently, they are your legal guardians.”

*Dammit.*

Seungmin felt his face physically fall. He had hoped his parents would be the only ones told, because just as he had experienced before; everything told to management went to Bang Chan.

“I understand” Seungmin gritted out, waiting to be excused.

“Now Seungmin, now that that’s over, I want you to tell me something” the old man leaned back in, examining Seungmin like he was the most interesting specimen in the world.

“Um” Seungmin shifted uncomfortably at the unexpected words. He had not planned for this. “Of course, go ahead.”

“What is your plan after your career in ‘entertainment?’”
“Sorry?” Seungmin squeaked out, before recomposing himself. “I’ve uh- promised my parents to go to University, but I’m not exactly sure what to study…”

“Okay, that’s okay” Mr Paeng seemed comforted by his words, leaning back into his chair. “When I see your grades, especially in mathematics with Mr Rhee, I see that you only received a 59% on your latest test. Why was that Mr Kim?”

“I-I was lazy” Seungmin admitted, looking down nervously at his hands. “I convinced myself I could do it when I obviously could not, but today I sat another math test and I’m sure I will have done well.” Seungmin confirmed, staring into Mr Paeng’s eyes, determined to prove himself right.

“Good” the principal chuckled. “You may leave now Seungmin. Collect your things and go home straight away. But don't let this be unknown-”

Seungmin froze.

Mr Paeng's eyes narrowed the swirl of fondness diminishing almost instantaneously and turning into something darker. "Both myself and Mrs Kim are very disappointed in you, Kim Seungmin. Don't let anything like this happen again, or I will not be as kind as I am now."

Seungmin nodded and gathered his belongings, before bowing to both Mr Paeng and Mrs Soon. “I’m sorry for my actions this morning” he apologised as he inched out the door.

“Get some rest Seungmin” Mr Paeng simply replied as if the half-threat had never happened, and with that Seungmin closed the door.

*What I’m going to do after being an idol, huh? I’ve never thought about that before... I’ve always focused on who I am now, never on what to do after my career ends...* Seungmin lost himself in thought as he walked back through the empty halls to his locker.

*Stray Kids could end sooner than I thought if my outburst and swearing gets released to the public, and even if it doesn’t there is no telling in what will happen... we might lose popularity just like many KPOP groups do, or maybe something will happen to one of the members...*
Seungmin sprang out of his mind as he ran into a body just as he reached his locker. He flinched, expecting Hyunwoo or Beomwon to leer over him, but instead, it was the short girl with bobbed fluffy hair he saw almost every day.

“Haeun” he snapped. “Watch where you’re going!”

Haeun visibly recoiled, frustration similar to the one she held this morning flashing on her face. “I heard what happened in Korean Studies class this morning – Aeyoung told me-”

*Of course, you know, you just have so many friends* Seungmin rolled his eyes sarcastically, but forced himself to focus on whatever the girl was saying now.

But instead of the words tumbling out of her mouth as Seungmin had expected, she just stood there, her eyebrows drawn together and expression sour.

“What did you say to me?” she asked her hands on her wide hips.

*Oh shit, did I say that out loud?*

“Yes, you did” she frowned deeper and Seungmin realised he must have done it again. When he didn’t say anything, the short girl continued on. “What’s gotten into you today? I was just asking if you were okay-”

“I’m fine!” Seungmin growled, slamming his combination into his lock on his locker’s door. The door opened and he pushed his books in. “Why do you keep asking that?”

“Well maybe, because I’m worried about you” she huffed and stood next to Seungmin’s locker, so he had to acknowledge her.

Seungmin frowned and kept packing his bag.

She pulled away with a sigh.
“Whatever, maybe you deserve the punishment Mr Peang just gave you.”

“Why do you say that?” Seungmin slammed his locker closed, making Haeun flinch as she glared at him.

“You’ve changed Seungmin, whether you want to see that or not.”

Before Seungmin could ask her what her cryptic words meant, the younger was already walking away, leaving Seungmin alone in the hall. He looked at the time. 12:37. How the hell am I going to Chan-hyung and Woojin-hyung why I am out of school so early.

Seungmin walked out of the hall, his bag slung over his shoulder and facemask hung over his chin.

How was he going to get home at this time?

The bus stop just seemed so far away.

‘Don’t hesitate to call me if you need anything’ Mr Yoo’s words, from when he told the driver to not drive him to school anymore, echoed around his head, and with heavy feet and heart, and a headache on the way, he left the empty hall into the school’s garden entrance.

With one finger on the ‘call button’ and one rubbing his temple to ease his aching head, Seungmin sat on the top stair of the school’s entrance-way. He wondered where his feeling of power, of being some type of King when he stood up to Mrs Kim and his classmates had gone as now, he sat defeatedly, kicked out of school for the day, had gone in such a short time.

One day was really all it took to change everything and Seungmin had learnt that the hard way.

Chapter End Notes

Wowow two weeks early? I decided to give you all a treat for surviving the first half
of the year, so I hope you enjoy this chapter!

Question: What’s been your favourite part of this whole story? It can be a scene or even a line or a chapter or whatever you have loved the most (DW I won’t be offended about anything, I’m just curious!)

TITLE: SNAP
- Metaphor to elastic band – Seungmin’s patience and façade are gone.
- ‘Snap’ decision to stand up to bullies and Mrs Kim
- Basically, just Seungmin yelling at his classmates

There were a lot of links to other chapters in this one! Can you find them all? It’s mainly connected to Routine and Lily-Pad.

This chapter was almost called ‘Justice’ as that is a main theme of this whole story but I went with my gut haha.

Also, I don’t know how well I’m writing this as I’m a beginner, but I want to show the difference between Seungmin’s deluded perspective on the world and reality. The main example in this chapter is how he treats Haeun, who although is caring of him and concerned, he views as annoying and takes out his anger on her, by ‘snapping’ at her when she tries to help. IDK.

I hope you are all well! Get some rest >:(((

Love you all <3

NEXT UPDATE: 15th August

ALsO I HAVE BEEN PLAYINg BTS WORLD foR 3 HOURS STRAIGHT AND PROCRASTINATING MY BTS FIC DUE IN TWO WEEKS WHICH I HAVEN’T STARTED PLS HELP ME

<3333
Seungmin didn’t know how long he had been sitting on these damned school stairs, but from the hoard of students rushing around him like a river and him as the stone, it had been enough time for the lesson he had been pulled out of to end. He was still waiting. He had called Mr Yoo, but the old man was driving ITZY around the other side of the city and promised he would get to Seungmin as quickly as possible.

As soon as possible. Yeah, I guess I’ll just sit here like an idiot until he arrives then Seungmin thought sarcastically and stared holes into the ground, blocking out the glances and whispers targeted at him.

‘What’s he doing there?’

‘Isn’t he that idol… what’s his name? Kim Seungmin?’

‘Yeah, more like Hyunwoo’s new pet-’

‘Don’t be mean-’

‘Didn’t you hear what he did today? Fully went off at Mrs Kim and his class like he was a god or something.’

‘Really? That’s so immature - Where’s his respect?’

‘What a freak.’

Seungmin closed his eyes. He was okay – Mr Yoo would come and pick him up and then he would be fine. He just needed to breathe and not let whatever anyone was saying get to him.

He’d survived worse than this.
It may have taken years or minutes for the bell indicating the start of period four, Seungmin didn’t know, but all he felt was the wave of relief when he was finally alone on the stairs again – away from all the whispers and eyes – away from the world.

With a shaky sigh, he rubbed his hairline in distress. When had everything gone wrong? And since when had been people been so difficult to understand? He felt like it was only yesterday when he could so easily relate and trick his way using psychology and logic to undermine or get close to people – it had been something he was good at his whole life. But now even facing his members, his best friends, was the last thing he wanted to do.

Luckily, he still had a few hours until he had to – most members did schedules while Seungmin and the SOPA students were at school. They most likely wouldn’t be home until the time he usually got home.

The blaring of his phone made Seungmin flinch in place and he looked at the device expecting either one of his hyungs or Mr Yoo to be on the face of the screen. Seungmin’s heart sunk when he recognized the number.

It was worse than he could have ever imagined.

It was his parents.

Hesitation lacing his every move, Seungmin extended a shaky hand to pick up the phone, press ‘accept’ and put it up to his ear.

He took a deep breath.

“Mum?”

The only thing that he received was a tired sigh. Seungmin tensed. She already knew.

“Minnie-ah, what has happened to you?”
Seungmin sat as still as stone as he heard the wails of his mother come crackly through the phone call. Maybe if he listened hard enough, he would be able to hear her cries from his childhood home.

She had broken. And it was his fault.

“Minnie, my beautiful baby boy – what have you done?” she sobbed and Seungmin felt his heart shatter. If he was next to her now, he would be rubbing his land across he berth of her bony back, but now he could only clutch his phone tighter.

“I’m sorry, mum.” he started, his voice cracking with guilt but her scream of frustration pierced him and made his ears ring.

“Seungminnie! You have – you have abused your teachers and classmates! You’ve been failing tests and I even got a phone call from your hyung Woojin saying he was worried about you…”

Seungmin winced at that. He didn’t know Woojin personally called his parents!

“And now you’ve been getting into fights?” His mother continued her voice raising with each word she spat in disbelief. “You’ve been fighting at school and in the dorms? What happened to you Minnie? What did I do wrong?”

Seungmin wanted to cry. He wanted to plead for his mother’s forgiveness and tell her that it wasn’t her fault – it was his. But he stayed quiet and kept a stony face. He just listened.

“I knew it wasn’t a good idea to send you away from home so young, all the mothers here kept telling me I had made a mistake and maybe I have! If I’d kept you home, maybe I could have helped you more and taught you respect.”

Seungmin flinched at the anger that had crept into her voice. She had taught him well – he had just been an insolent and immature child and now everyone around him was paying for it.

Maybe it wasn’t such a good idea to have sent him away from home and let him chase his dreams.
After all, if he wasn’t an idol this wouldn’t have happened.

He wouldn’t have read those fifteen hate comments.

He would still be a boy that made his mother proud.

“I’m sorry, eomma” he said blankly into the receiver and clicked off the call – cutting off his mother’s voice. The world was silent again, but this time Seungmin wasn’t thankful for it.

He would rather all his peers pointing and laughing at him or spreading around what he had done in Korean Studies. He would rather all of that because it was what a boy like him deserved. How dare he be so horrible?

He had turned into the very thing he was trying to conquer.

A beast.

And that wouldn’t just deservingly ruin his life – it would take down his members’ too. If this caught the media, it would destroy Stray Kids, as collateral damage in Seungmin’s explosion.

He was the first domino that destroyed the peace.

The one that took down the team.

It was him.

Kim Seungmin.

“-m Seungmin? Kim Seungmin?”

At the stern yell of his name, he snapped his head up to find his old music teacher, Mrs Park,
staring at him with a look of concern.

Seungmin felt his stony façade soften. He realized he was still grasping his mobile phone until his knuckles turned pale.

“Seungmin, are you okay? Why are you not in class?”

Seungmin looked down again. How was he going to explain this to a teacher who had always supported him through thick and thin.

*Just another person to disappoint, I guess.*

“I got kicked out of class for the rest of the day, Mrs Park” he said glumly still refusing to meet her eyes.

“Ah” Mrs Park lamented as she sat down next to him on the cold stairs, her black and white floral maxi skirt forming into a bunch at her ankles. “I was hoping it was another Seungmin who caused that fuss with Mrs Kim.”

“Unfortunately, not” he sighed again.

“Unfortunately, not” Mrs Park repeated. The wind blew around the pair and Seungmin couldn’t help but shiver at the cold.

He stayed still however when Mrs Park turned around to fumble for something in her oversized handbag. It took her a few moments to find what she was looking for, and when she did, she pulled it out of her bag with a satisfied ‘ah.’

Seungmin turned, curious of what could so suddenly change her mood. He watched as she squeezed a droplet of light coverage makeup on her index finger before turning to him and gently applying it under his eyes.

Right.
In the hassle that morning, Seungmin had completely forgotten to do his ‘makeup routine’ consisting of finding half-used foundation then covering his dark purple eye bags so no one would ask questions.

A small smile climbed onto his features as she carefully applied the makeup.

“There you go, Seungmin, get some sleep tonight.”

Seungmin thanked her with a smile and she shadowed a bow before getting up and brushing off the dirt on her skirt.

“See you later, Mrs Park.”

“You too, Min, you too.”

He watched again as she walked away feeling an odd pang of guilt take over his heart. He brushed it off just like she had done just moments before with her skirt.

Feelings that made him weak were just like specks of dirt; something to remove then forget about.

If he could do that just a little better and keep up his mask of content then none of this would have happened in the first place.

*I wouldn’t have to hide things from my members, I wouldn’t have fought with Jisung, I wouldn’t be sitting out here in this cold weather of a cracked step looking like a loner – or a stoner.*

Despite it all, he couldn’t help but let his traitorous mind wander back to Korean Studies: at that moment he dropped everything – his plasticity, his respect, his forced carefree attitude, and he felt… invincible.

*I know that it’s wrong… but I crave that feeling just one more time… to control.*
Maybe I should focus on controlling myself. I can’t repeat what happened today – I need to… mask my weaknesses… I can’t let my friends and my members see what has become of me.

“Oi! Puppy!”

Seungmin felt his heart stop.

He slowly lifted his head and met the eyes of Kim Hyunwoo. With Yejun right behind him.

“Puppy, look what you’ve just done – got me and my boys in trouble with Principal.”

Seungmin stayed quiet.

“Look” Hyunwoo growled, seemingly angered by Seungmin’s silence, moving to stand right in front of him. “Your little stunt you pulled this morning has made Mr Kaeng investigate my friends for poor little Aeyuong’s new haircut – and that has lead to me.”

Seungmin looked at Hyunwoo’s shoes. They were scuffed and most likely uncomfortable… maybe the younger would be in a better mood of he bought new ones-

“Dipshit!” Seungmin felt a kick hit his bruised ribs and he finally tore his eyes away from the ground and up to Hyunwoo. He watched, scared, as his classmate grabbed the collar of his shirt and pulled him up.

Seungmin tried to fight back but instead fell limp in the younger’s arms, like a ragdoll thrown around one too many times.

He, unlike just hours prior, was powerless.

“You’ll pay for this” Hyunwoo snarled, a fleck of spit landing on Seungmin’s slightly chubby left cheek as he spoke. Seungmin felt too paralysed to wipe it off, despite the horrendous number of germs it was probably contaminating his skin with.
He could no nothing but stare in surprise.

With a growl, Hyunwoo threw him back on the stairs and Seungmin felt his back creak in protest as it landed on the corner of one, making his body jolt in pain.

Hyunwoo’s footsteps faded away.

Only then did Seungmin allow himself to sit up.

He almost laughed bitterly.

*Since when has my life turned into one of a shitty K-Drama?*

*...Since when did it all go to hell?*

“Thank you for driving me here Mr Yoo” Seungmin said with a tight-lipped smile as he exited the car.

“No issue, Mr Kim. Message me when you want to be picked up” Mr Yoo said with the window rolled down.

“I’ll just stay here until the other members arrive” Seungmin explained already shuddering at the thought of seeing them again. “But I appreciate it.”

“Of course” Mr Yoo stopped with his mouth open as if he was halfway through a sentence. Seungmin quirked his eyebrow in a question. “Good luck.”

Seungmin nodded grimly and stepped off the curb to watch the old man drive away. He would definitely need that luck – he was about to walk into his own coffin – his murderers the management team.
Cheongdam High, although terrible at stopping bullying it seemed, was good at one thing – gossip. And that was how Mr Kaeng had managed to rant all about his behaviour to both his parents and Stray Kid’s management team before Seungmin even arrived there.

Now he had a message on his phone telling him to ‘meet at Office Room Five for a meeting as soon as you arrive. Urgent.’

It was now 2:07 – the time when he’d usually be in his second last period of the day – but instead he was standing outside of JYP Headquarters almost too afraid to move.

But he couldn’t just stand outside of the building forever – someone would recognise him if he waited any longer – so he went inside, climbed the stairs to the top floor to avoid any of his hyungs who may be on the elevator, ran past the practice room where he saw Minho dancing and arrived at Office Room Five.

Seungmin took a deep breath.

He really was about to walk to his deathbed.

*Here goes nothing.*

Seungmin shuffled in with one-too-many low bows and sat down at the seat left for him. The blue plastic felt uncomfortable against his school trousers, the tie around his neck felt like it was a noose – but worst of all was the people’s eyes he couldn’t even meet.

He already knew what those eyes would hold – surprise, anger, confusion – disappointment.

“Seungmin.”

With a shaky exhale, he looked up.

It was Manager Jung – the same woman who saw him practising all those mornings ago. She
seemed to have aged since then, her makeup not covering her blemishes just like how Seungmin’s makeup that Mrs Park applied was not fully covering his eyebags.

Maybe he had caused her to become so old.

“Seungmin” she repeated again, a softness leaking into her voice as she spoke. Seungmin looked around the rectangular table – there were many faces, maybe eight or nine, some familiar and some not recognisable. They were all here, interrupted in their busy schedules because of *him* and *his* mistakes.

“Y-Yeah?” he answered, hating the way his voice cracked just like how it had in that live performance that started it all.

“Your Principal has told us of your incident at school today, and we have all seen along that you are not in a good place at the moment…”

Seungmin nodded stiffly. What did he have to lie about now? Almost all his teammates knew about his bruise, his timetable was exposed, his plans foiled – he had been stripped of his secrets without his permission and been left an empty void.

A void; empty of everything except regret and frustration.

Manager Jung took a breath through her pouty glossy lips. “We have recently been informed of a bruise down the side of your waist… Do you mind letting us see it?”

Seungmin nodded again, although more hesitantly this time. He untucked his white shirt out of his pants and lifted the side of it up slightly, revealing the bruise. Despite getting it six days ago, it was still large but looked better than it had yesterday and better again since the day before that.

At the sucked in breath from one of the women to his left though, Seungmin couldn’t help but let the shirt drop back down to its place.

“How did you get this?”
Seungmin’s throat felt too dry to answer.

“Come with me Seungmin” Manager Jung said, standing up off her seat, and Seungmin numbly complied, feeling embarrassment spread through his body like wildfire as he followed the short manager into the empty hall.

_Am I in trouble?_

“I need you to be completely honest with me now, Seungmin” she said with a serious look on her small face. Seungmin jerkily nodded again.

“Is anyone hurting you?”

Seungmin felt his eyes go wide, confirming the other’s suspicions.

“A teacher?”

Seungmin shook his head. _No._

“Someone working here? In the meeting?”

_Not even close._

“A classmate?”

_Yes._

Seungmin shook his head again.

Manager Jung seemed to falter and a tense silence hung between the pair.
“A… A member?”

Seungmin sucked in a breath.

“They would never hurt me!” Seungmin yelled, surprised by his own anger. “I know it looks serious, but I promise I just fell over.”

“Okay, okay, I believe you Seungmin” Manager Jung took a step backwards before opening the door back into the soundproofed office room.

“We just have a few more questions then, if you care to come back inside…”

Seungmin pushed his way back in and plopped back onto his chair, aware that he was looking impolite. Still, he couldn’t find himself to bother to sit up straighter or re-tuck his shirt into his pants.

This is going to be a long meeting.

Seungmin walked out of the office with a heavy heart and fatigued mind. He had been asked what seemed like thousand questions and received a quick scolding for his disrespect at school before he had been allowed to leave. He was sure the managers were all worried about him – something he felt bad about – but as he staggered to an empty practice room, he couldn’t bring himself to care.

He was nervous for vocal practise later that day, there he would see his members again and they would be demanding a lot of answers too.

I have one and a half hours till vocal practice and recording begins – what should I do in that time? Study, dance? Or even write my apology letter?

Seungmin snickered at the thought. Mrs Kim had been in the wrong – she didn’t do anything while
Aeyoung was being sliced into pieces, so why should he be the one punished for standing up for someone? How could he write a stupid letter when he didn’t even feel sorry?

Sure, it was slightly disrespectful – but after thinking about it over and over on that cold staircase and in the stuffy office room, it was still the right thing to do.

And Seungmin wasn’t one to stand down from what he believed in, no matter how rude it seemed.

No – why do I feel like this? It’s like I’m having a war with myself – on one hand it was the right thing to do, but on the other hand an outburst like that goes against everything I’ve been raised to be! Why is everyone so disappointed in me if I was doing what I felt was the good thing to do?

‘Yelling and violence don’t solve the world’s problems’ Seungmin’s subconscious supplied, and he shook it off and set his schoolbag on the floor.

Society, the management teams, my school, my parents they all see what I did as a mistake and something that should be condemned, so why is half of me telling me that it was righteous – that it was powerful… and good?

If it was good, then why do I feel so burdened? So immature?

Seungmin stopped and glared at his reflection in the looming mirror opposite him. He looked similar to the leader when he hadn’t slept in weeks – half dead.

His eyes looked tired.

Seungmin took a deep breath. He had to remain strong – put on the mask that everything was okay. The members apart from Bang Chan wouldn’t know about what had happened at school today – the company provided him with that much privacy, so if Seungmin acted like the improved version of his old cheerful self he had been seeking for the last week or so, he would be fine.

He faked a smile in the mirror. He could throw himself into some dancing now to destress then return to his members with a genuine grin on his face.
He could do it. He had to.

“Seungmin, do you want to try to extend that note for half a beat longer? And sing a little louder, yeah?”

Seungmin nodded blankly and re-adjusted the headphones on his head for the millionth time to the point even Changbin seemed to be getting a bit irritated.

He was glad that the other five members had left the recording room to get snacks and coffee from the vending machine, so they didn’t see Seungmin fail.

*I hate recording* Seungmin thought bitterly as the music started again. This recording session, in fact, had been a bad one and even though Seungmin knew it, he was too tired to try and fix it. The issue was that he was being far too quiet.

*It must be to subconsciously level out my voice from my yells earlier today* Seungmin scoffed sarcastically into the mic, which ‘3RACHA’ seemed to catch, as they looked up from their sheets.

“Something wrong?” Jisung asked. Seungmin avoided his eyes, still uncomfortable around him due to their fight the night before.

“Nothing, sorry.”

“Alright, let’s just end for the day” Chan said suddenly, leaving Seungmin to look at him in shock at ending the session so prematurely.

*Usually he gives me a bit more time to figure myself out!* Seungmin frowned at the elder’s decision, but still took the headphones that had been irritating him since he had put them on, off.

“Seungminnie, can we go out for a chat?” Chan said tiredly, standing up and motioning towards the younger.
Seungmin’s heart skipped a beat. The way the leader had posed it, made it not a question but rather – a demand. He nodded and tried to look like his wasn’t going to spontaneously combust as he walked past Changbin and Jisung who were sharing a cautious look as Chan opened the door into the blinding light of the hallway.

*Please tell me he doesn’t know about my bruise or my timetable, or my fight with Jisung – god, how can I have so many loose ends in my life?*

Seungmin fiddled with his sleeves, feeling the rough fabric scrape on his sensitive fingertips as he waited in one spot as Chan closed the door, separating them from the rest of 3RACHA.

He tensed as Chan let out a heavy sigh.

He was done for.

“Min” the leader begun, softness in his eyes that Seungmin would normally take comfort in if it wasn’t for the furrow in his brows. “The management team has told me of what happened at school today and that paired with your grades and your… attitude in the dorms has got me really worried.”

As Chan paused, Seungmin took the opportunity to look in his eyes. They were worried. Just like how every other pair of eyes had been that day.

The pity was almost irritating.

Seungmin felt his skin prickle under his clothing.

Why did he feel so… annoyed?

The leader as per usual was oblivious to Seungmin’s internalized exasperation and continued. “This… isn’t like you at all, Min, is everything okay at school?”

Seungmin almost laughed at how close but far the leader was from the tainted truth. His problems
weren’t just at school – they were everywhere! Even in his own mind! Nothing was okay anymore, but even if Seungmin wanted to tell him, how could he?

So, he stayed quiet.

“I can’t help you if you don’t tell me anything, Min” Chan implored, waiting for Seungmin to say something; anything.

Seungmin just shook his head in a silent ‘no.’ If he stayed quiet enough, he could hear the sound of familiar voices echoing of the halls, slowly becoming louder and louder.

As Bang Chan turned his head to the direction of the voices and let out a sharp huff through his nose, Seungmin knew that he heard it too.

There wouldn’t be much longer until the other five members arrived. Time was running out.

“Seungmin, please” the elder turned to him, a more serious look replacing the pity in his eyes. Seungmin stepped back away from the leader who clung onto one of Seungmin’s hands, stopping it from its nervous fiddling.

The leader looked worse than Seungmin had ever seen him – it was different than the scary quiet anger the leader held during rare arguments with members - he was borderline begging.

“Tell me anything! Hyung will make it better!”

He remembered what he vowed to himself while sitting on the school stairs – what he had promised himself again during his hour of dancing – he had to be okay.

His members were burdened enough by having him on the team – he couldn’t go cry about every small thing in his life – he had to be strong.

I have to hide my weaknesses. I have to push him away.
“Chan-hyung, it’s nothing, I promise” Seungmin said with a small flawed smile.

Seungmin took another step back to widen the already broad chasm between himself and his leader.

He stared at Chan. The silver-haired boy looked like he was about to cry.

In his peripheral vision, Seungmin saw the bright and dull colours of his members’ outfits coming towards him.

The conversation was over.

But Seungmin couldn’t pull his eyes away from the leader’s. They looked so lost.

“Sorry, have we interrupted something?” Felix’s deep voice rang out, snapping Seungmin and Chan out of their cynical stare-off.

“Nothing-” Seungmin forced another smile and turned to his five friends. He pulled his hand out of Chan’s tight, desperate grasp, his hand felt cold as it fell to his side.

“-We’re fine.”

At the beginning, the car ride back was an awkward one. After his confrontation was Chan, the leader had not seemed to recover – he was quiet with his head rested against the smooth glass window, peering into the dark night as if he was searching for something. If Woojin, who was seated beside him attempted to start a conversation he would respond with monotone answers before drifting back into silence.

It had affected the whole team – as the van was quiet, a rarity which Seungmin usually welcomed, but the lack of chirpy jokes or wild banter made everyone’s eyes drift to the cause of the leader’s mood.
Kim Seungmin.

Seungmin kept his eyes down. He looked at his legs and felt déjà vu wash through his body. He wondered what colour his knees were now.

He felt a hand touch the back of his head, then hesitantly move through his dark brown locks, in a calming motion. Seungmin tensed at first, then leaned forward to escape presumably Hyunjin’s clutches who was sitting behind him. But as the fingers kept massaging his scalp, Seungmin felt himself ease into at, and fall into the elder’s large palm.

He closed his eyes with a sigh as the finger’s kept kneading through his locks, gentle but rhythmic – grounding in the simple movement. Albeit Hyunjin’s generosity, Seungmin couldn’t find it in himself to fully relax. The dark side of his heart still panged with jealousy at the other’s constant achievements – he knew it was more than wrong to be jealous of his friend, but he couldn’t stop it.

It was just there. Constantly there.

Similar to the pinch in his gut, the ache in his stomach – the storm clouds had rolled back in again and this time Seungmin didn’t know why. All he could do was bite his tongue and wait.

The loud clangs of pots and pans hitting each other, followed by Changbin and Hyunjin’s combined laughter jerked Seungmin out of his study again. He growled in frustration, glad that Jisung wasn’t in the room with him to hear it.

Ever since he had gotten home, he had ignored Minho, Woojin and Jisung alike, always finding an excuse to leave when they came into the room. It was sad really – the only member he genuinely felt he could be comfortable around was Felix, and the younger had gone out to buy lettuce with Jeongin five minutes ago.

Jeongin... I feel like everything I do is annoying him these days – those video compilations were right after all.
Seungmin focussed back on his study. It was just some last-minute history homework he hadn’t done – originally his plan was to do it during his two-hour break at lunchtime but that didn’t happen… And now he had the time because the choreographer was sick, and the management team probably wanted Seungmin to ‘rest and recover.’

He tapped his pen against the table, the sound covering his member’s joyous laughs and creating the familiar beat of the song Stray Kid’s was learning during dance. God Seungmin wished he was dancing right now – his bedroom felt like a trap, too tight and too stuffy and too dirty with Seungmin’s school uniform he had changed out of just half an hour earlier left in piles on the floor. He just wanted to escape it all – but everywhere else in the dorm wasn’t safe – he could run into one of his hyungs and there was no doubt that Minho had told Woojin about his timetable.

He felt a strange longing for cold wind to brush through his hair, much like Hyunjin’s fingers had, rather than the thick air of his heated room.

*Don’t be stupid* he scolded himself and tried to turn his attention back to studying, but after another few seconds at looking at the social impacts of the Korean War, Seungmin knew he was far too distracted to get back into the zone.

He heard the front door open and the announcement from Felix that he was home.

It would be time for dinner soon – maybe even if five minutes… Surely there was no use to try to study just for it to end so quickly, right? Seungmin felt his eyes travel to his phone, lying discarded on top of his pillow. He carefully picked it up, hearing the crinkle of paper hidden in the pillowcase as he did, and returned to his desk chair.

He could relax for a few minutes, right? Maybe he could go on his personal account of twitter and find other critiques from STAY to help improve his dancing.

*I’ll just type in my name and see what comes up, maybe I’ll find a few tips so I can do even better.*

Seungmin typed his name into the search bar and hit ‘enter.’

The first posts were nothing out of the ordinary, one with one of his recent selcas, one fanart that he desperately wanted to give a ‘like’ to, and even a comment about how his singing has improved.
Then he found something.

It was a grainy video, slightly blurry with what looked like rain on the camera lens, or on the pane of glass in front of the camera. Seungmin frowned at tried to recall the video – it was off him… kneeling on the ground? In a puddle?

He recognised his school uniform; his pant legs were dark with water and hiked up past his ankle… this all felt so familiar to him, yet he was watching the whole thing through another set of eyes.

Seungmin felt his heart stop.

He read the caption.

<Kim Seungmin of Stray Kids is not so regal now, huh? Keke so gross playing in dirty water, so immature.>

He looked at the poster and felt his heart drop even further when he recognised the characters.

Kim Hyunwoo.

He scrolled down to the comments, his breath stuck in his throat.

SKZ_is_Life: <Are you sure this is Seungmin?^^ Can someone prove this?>

Kim-Seungmin-is-a-cutie: <Plz take this down – this is abuse and cyberbullying. Reported.>

Daddy-Chan: <lmao rip Seungmin we still love u>

Seungmin read through the comments at a lightning pace – only twenty people had commented while the it had around 100 views, mainly from classmates.
Seungmin hands started to shake. He read one comment thread, left only fifteen minutes ago.

Kwan Jooseob: <Ew lol, why does he look like a dog in all that water? He’s on all fours haha>

Reply to Kwan Jooseob – Yun Yejun: <that’s why Hyunwoo calls him ‘puppy’ duh keke>

Puppy. His name was puppy based on this stupid video where he fell over and landed in a fucking puddle and stayed there like an obedient dog. He remembered the day like it was this morning – it was after he missed his stop because he was reading those negative comments.

It was the day he decided to become a better person – to improve himself. But now his mistakes were online forever, posted for the whole world to see – it was the representative of his past failures, his old weak self.

And now it was right back in front of him.

Like all his effort over the past week had been nothing. Like the extra hours, he had spent dancing and studying were wasted time. Like the secrecy, the lies, the timetable, the excuses he had told his members and managers so he could stay and practice for just another hour was worthless.

Like he was worthless.

He was nothing.

And now STAY that he had been putting in so much effort to please could see how worthless he truly was.

They already had.
He couldn’t breathe.

His chest felt tight, his hands were shaking, his stomach churned in turmoil, his vision blurred like he had tears in his eyes. Maybe he did. He didn’t know. All he knew was that he really couldn’t breathe, he couldn’t see, he couldn’t think, he couldn’t feel – his heart was racing to fast he thought it might explode.

*Is this what dying feels like? I think I’m dying – fuck I-I’m dying! I’m-*

He whipped his head around to the door as it creaked, his eyes darting from left to right. Was someone coming in? What if they saw him? What if they hated him? Why was the room getting smaller? Why were the walls slowly closing in?

With a wobbly hand, he rammed his phone into his hoodie’s front pocket, effectively turning it off and cloaking the comments in darkness. He sat on the bed, but suddenly his clothes felt too hot, sticking to his skin. He let out his first staggered breath, but as soon as it escaped his mouth, it was swept back in in a choking wheeze.

His own breathing sounded distorted on his ears and he got to two shaking feet.

He had to get out of here.

He couldn’t wait till one of the members came in and called him for dinner.

He had to go.

And he had to go now.

Seungmin grabbed a pair of shoes from his wardrobe, not caring that in his haste he almost pulled the whole shoe rack down with him, and tugged them on, not even going to attempt to tie his laces.

He felt bile rise in his throat as his chest stung in pain. He wiped his cheeks with the back of his hand and tried to swallow the acidic and sour lumpy substance back down his throat.
With a pounding headache, Seungmin pushed open the door and sprinted out into the living room. He processed four faces at the dining table but didn’t bother to speak. He couldn’t speak anyway, not when his throat felt so rough and dry and-

“Sheungmin?” A voice asked in alarm. Seungmin blinked and watched as the blurry figure rose from the table and started towards him. He stumbled away, his chest feeling tighter than ever, and gasped as his back hit a body behind him.

With a choked breath he spun around. It was Minho, looking back at him with wide eyes and eyebrows high in surprise.

Those wide, almost fearful eyes were the same eyes he had seen the whole day he saw them in his classmates, Mrs Kim, Manager Jung, Jisung, Chan-

He saw them in his own reflection when he looked back in the mirror.

They were scared.

*He was scared.*

*I-I can’t do t-this.*

The clash of a dish hitting the floor made Seungmin suck in another breath and flinch away from Minho.

Noodles and sauce covered the tiles, ruining all the members’ dinners. *He* had ruined it.

He had to get to the door.

So, like he had wanted to do so badly last night he began to sprint.
Towards the door, towards the outside world – towards freedom.

“Seungmin!” He heard someone scream from behind him, but he didn’t turn to look. He felt tears slide off his face, whipping his cheeks violently as he reached the door.

He felt a large hand claw at the back of his jumper desperately- the same hand that had held onto him outside the recording room, but with a skilful twist he jerked out of it.

He tore open the door.

And let his feet fly.

Chapter End Notes

OOOOO This was a BIG chapter!!! And ending on a cliffhanger too! But unfortunately (or fortunately if you like to see suffering) for you, next chapter will be even worse.

What was your favourite part of this chapter? Why?

I don’t know if you all noticed yet ahah but I LOVE turning seemingly insignificant/small events into something that is the ‘downfall’ of the character. For having Seungmin falling over right after the obvious ‘beginning’ of the turmoil by reading the hate comments, the fall pales in comparison, but I did mention that it was being filmed and it could get posted on social media. Did anyone even remember it?

As I love to do that so much, there is actually one more slight event that most of you probably brushed over that is really important in a few chapters time… Can you guess what it is? I’ll answer maybe to everyone if you do guess, so it won’t be spoiled :) Good luck guessing!

So, let’s jump to the symbolism: EYES

-Eyes are the window to the soul – links with Chapter 7
- Seungmin closes his eyes a lot in this chapter/in previous chapters – he’s trying to relax/is panicked
- Seungmin avoiding a lot of people’s eyes – Manager Jung, Hyunwoo, Chan etc.
- He was crying at the end :'( - his vision was blurry because he couldn’t see straight – panicking

A lot of connections to other chapters too – Biting his tongue connects with Chapter 4 etc.

Next chapter is a big one!! Please wait patiently! I’m going to try and update every
three weeks rather than four, so I have a chance of finishing this before next year,, not because I want it to be over quickly, but I like to start new years with new projects idk.

AHH, I’m so excited to write the next chapter! I remember in December last year when I was planning this whole thing out, I was so excited, but also really nervous because although I feel I have improved as a writer since then, I still don’t know if I’ll be able to capture all the emotion and tension that I want to… I hope you like this chapter though!

NEXT UPDATE: SEPTEMBER 4TH

Thank you all again <33
Shatter

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

WARNING: This chapter contains both detailed descriptions of vomiting and violence. If you feel uncomfortable with this, please be wary when reading. Thank you.

When Seungmin woke up he had no idea where he was.

The ceiling he woke up to every day had turned from a white to a dusty brown, his blanket was pink, and his back ached like never before. Seungmin sat up with a groan and clutched onto the bed beneath him when dizziness threatened to black him out. A sound buzzed in his ears and with a wobbly hand, he grabbed his phone from the floor.

The floor? Hold on where the fuck am I?

Seungmin looked down. A dark puddle of what he hoped was sweat under him had seeped into the light blue of the, now recognised, old couch and turned it darker. He shirt stuck to him like an old band-aid. The lights above him were a bright fluorescent white which made him wonder how he even fell asleep in the bright room in the first place.

The phone vibrating in his hand, made him look down and immediately wish he stayed asleep. On his home screen were millions of missed calls – the older ones from the members and the ones waking him up from management.

Shit.

Memories of last night flooded back to him. He winced and dropped his phone on the sofa, watching it spring helplessly to the wooden floorboards.

He sure as hell knew where he was now.
Seungmin ran until he couldn’t breathe. His chest ached and tears ran down his face, but somehow it all hurt less than just minutes before. Now he was out of the enclosing walls that trapped in in that hell house like we were a domestic hound at a pound, he felt almost lighter. Like he was free. Or maybe it was just that he felt lightheaded.

He collapsed on the sidewalk, not even bothering to check if there was anyone following him. When he had sprinted out of the dorm, he heard both the member’s voices and footsteps chasing him down in an almost predatory sense, but after Seungmin had turned down a labyrinth of back alleyways, he had managed to lose them.

That was a miracle in itself – he didn’t know what he could say to even explain himself.

The only thing that wasn’t a miracle was now Seungmin was well and truly lost.

‘Where the hell did I run too? I didn’t even look where I was going…’ He glared at his dark surroundings. The streets were empty – rare for the evening-time, but it was a blessing. The last thing he needed was another video of him looking defeated posted on the internet.

‘I can’t just sit here until someone finds me, but I can’t go to the dorm or the JYP Building… Not yet anyway….’

With a shaky sigh, he stood up off the gritty ground, brushing his cold legs just like he had this afternoon. He wiped his cheeks and gathered himself in a single movement. He had to pull himself together – he couldn’t be a cry-baby because that was annoying – and the last thing Seungmin wanted to be annoying even to the zero people around him.

He looked around. Somehow the run-down buildings looked slightly familiar like he had seen them once in passing. Like even though he couldn’t place the time he’d been here, it was almost like he had been here just one hour ago.

He swivelled his head towards the left, where a blue sign, lit up by a streetlamp that flickered constantly stood lonely in the dark street. Seungmin approached cautiously, almost feeling like he was in a horror movie. His feet scuffed against the cement tiles.

He looked at the ground when he reached the bus stop. He had seen this before.
He saw this exact view he saw when he knelt on the ground like a dog.

That was why it was so familiar – he literally had seen in one hour ago.

Seungmin whipped his head around, hearing the scuffle of footsteps behind him. His heart rate spiked and his hands felt clammy as he stared, with heightened senses into the shadows of the quiet buildings.

Had someone found him? A manager? A member? Hyunwoo?

But there was nothing.

Just Seungmin standing alone under a flickering light.

‘Maybe I’m way too paranoid – I never used to be so worried about the dark’ He mused and forced his shoulders to relax. The chilly air bit at his cheeks and he wished he had a scarf or facemask to cover them – to hide them from the biting air.

They were probably red by now, maybe even bruised by the sheer force of the night wind.

He burrowed into his hoodie and started to walk aimlessly – wherever his feet led him, but he didn’t have to go far.

He paused at the only building with the lights still on.

A neon, broken sign flickered at him endlessly, bathing the sidewalk in blues and reds. Seungmin squinted to look at the sign.

‘24 Hours’ it read.

It called him.
Seungmin walked almost nervously towards the shabby, building. The sound of pop music blaring from inside the building became louder as he walked closer and closer.

This building reeked of excitement. Even the air almost tasted of hard work, with the faint hint of sweat and squeaky shoes, if that was even a flavour.

When he reached the door, it felt warm.

And that’s when it hit him.

This was a dance studio, The dance studio. The one, that when he fell over, the girl – Subin-noona, pointed out to him and said the ‘sound system and floors were amazing.’

‘If it’s 24 hours… and I have some money with me’ he thought, reaching into his track-pants pocket to pull out crumpled paper notes. The idea whirred in his mind. He could escape, he could be free, he could do something useful without any of his members finding him.

He could be perfect.

Seungmin didn’t know how long it had been, but long enough that his hoddie was dark with sweat and so long that he didn’t even hear the incessant ‘pings’ from his phone anymore. Not over the mix of angsty pop music or the slow ballads he blasted over the speakers. He had even played his secret playlist – the one that made him feel so full but so empty at the same time – the songs he played when he felt so utterly hopeless.

His lungs ached for breath, but he pushed it down and ignored the pain. He was fine, just a bit tired after all. It was nothing. He just had to-

Seungmin felt his ankle roll in his trainers and with his brain dizzy from exhaustion and the questions pressing on his mind, he barely even noticed the pain on his already bruised waist when he slammed onto the well-oiled wooden floorboards.
‘Fucking hell’ he gritted his teeth and pounded the side of his fist into the floor in frustration. Sweat dribbled from his neck to the floor and the sounds of the constant drips made his ears ring and mind feel like it was going to explode.

‘What am I even doing here?’ Seungmin felt a sudden wave of tiredness wash over him and he crumpled his fist. ‘I paid all my money on me to get into this… strange but actually pretty good studio and no one in the whole world knows where I am… Does anyone even care about me anymore? I have pushed them all away…’

Seungmin felt his eyes droop, and he relaxed his side into the floor. The panic attack from earlier had subsided into nothing but a strange feeling of numbness. Like all his emotions had been in hyperdrive for those twenty minutes and now he was drained.

With a shaking hand, he pulled his phone out of the cover of his hoodie pocket and after a few tries turned off the music that made the floor vibrate every time Felix’s voice came on. It was a wonder that there hadn’t been a noise complaint from either the neighbours living above their shops or the insomnia-prone-looking receptionist downstairs.

Seungmin finally let himself breathe, but it did nothing to ease the pain in his chest. Maybe he was really dying.

Dark spots formed at the edges of his vision and Seungmin let them take him. At least unconscious he would get some rest…

“Kim Seungmin of Stray Kids!” A voice yelled, snapping Seungmin out of his blurry mind. He weakly looked towards the door, his body too numb to move. It wasn’t the members; the voice was too high for that. He recognised those shoes…

“That’s who you are! Now I don’t know if that’s some weird contemporary dance move, you’re trying out, but it’s not a look.”

Seungmin felt embarrassment wash over him, tinting his ears red, but he didn’t dare to acknowledge it. He knew that voice, those shoes…

“S-Subin-Noona?”
His voice was hoarse and at that, the woman walked into the room. Seungmin could already imagine the worried look on her face so he let his eyes close again.

“S-Shit! Keep your eyes open, man” she ran towards him and placed one on her hands on his forehead.

Seungmin flinched at the frozen fingers and groaned when his vision stopped blurring and the pain, now from everywhere – his feet, his side, his chest, his shoulders, his head – all rushed back to him.

He heard Subin cursing above him, but the words came incoherent to his aching mind. She rushed out of the practice room and a few moments later came back with the pale receptionist. The next minutes were all a blur: after some coaxing and physical support, he got to his feet and was led blindly to a small room where he was forced to drink half a bottle of water.

Then he had face-planted on some sort of bed-couch contraption and with the murmurs from Subin and the receptionist ‘Frankie’ he let his bones and mind fall into sleep.

The phone vibrating angrily in his hands snapped the idol out of his thoughts and he blinked at the screen. It was one of Stray Kids’ managers, one that Seungmin in complete honesty didn’t know that well, so maybe that was why Seungmin hesitantly hit the green ‘Accept’ button.

There was silence on the other side of the line.

“M-Manager-nim?”

Seungmin tensed as the man let out a heavy huff of relief.

“Seungmin, I’m so glad we found you.”

Seungmin felt his eyes water and he blankly nodded as the manager lightly scolded him then let the management team know of his whereabouts at which Seungmin provided him with.
“I’m just at school now” Seungmin heard himself lie into the phone as he sat on the dance studio’s sofa. “I’m sorry I caused so much worry, please let the other managers and my members know that I’m okay and safe.”

“I’m sure they’ll be calling you themselves.”

After a few more words and a promise he would let Mr Yoo pick him up after school, Seungmin stopped the call. Without the man’s voice in his ear, the studio felt oddly quiet.

Seungmin shifted in his seat. It was late – he would have to go to school soon and he couldn’t face going back to the dorms to get the uniform.

_The office will have spare clothes in case of an emergency… If I get there early, I can change into that._

Seungmin shifted uncomfortably again, the sweat on the couch making his pants wet. The clock ticked on the wall.

He was stalling.

He had one more thing he needed to do before he could leave the utopia of the secret dance studio.

It was as if the gods had responded and with a light, his phone started to ring again.

He looked at it.

It was Felix.

_I can’t do this_ Seungmin thought as he watched the phone call die out then start again. _But I have to._

He let his finger, now trembling with anxiety hit ‘accept.’
He watched as the seconds slipped by on the phone system, along with the steady ticks of the clock behind him.

Seungmin exhaled. He brought the phone up to his ear.

“İ’m sorry.”

Seungmin felt the words leave his mouth and wondered if that was the most honest thing he had said in weeks.

“Min-Minnie? Seungminnie? Are you there?” Felix’s usually deep voice squeaked and raised as he spoke and it left Seungmin feeling terrible; his stomach turning with emotion.

What have I done?

“H-Hyung” Seungmin forced himself to speak past the barrier blocking his dry throat. “İt’s me.”

Seungmin heard a broken cry in the background and all at once he heard the other member’s voices. Felix must have put the phone on speaker.

“Seungmin?” he heard Minho’s unusually strict voice come through the phone. “What happened? Where are you? Are you safe? God we’ve all been trying to contact you all night!”

Seungmin slunk down in his seat, squeaking out a small ‘sorry’ to his hyung.

“W-We’ve all been so worried” Minho’s voice cracked, and he broke off in a heart-wrenching sob.

Seungmin felt the phone leave his hand and clutter to the floor. In his whole life, when Minho was eliminated, or when STAY did something beautiful, or even when they found Jisung trying to wrench open a bottle of out-dated pain-killer pills in hysterics after Chan had kicked down the bathroom door a few months ago, Minho had never cried.
Not in front of all of them.

“I’m sorry, I’m safe-” Seungmin pleaded when he picked up the phone off the couch but only Hyunjin answered.

“Minho just left.”

Seungmin sighed and felt his eyes start to water. *Again.*

“Is anyone else there?” he choked out.

“Just me, Felix and Woojin. Jeongin’s in the shower. Jisung, Changbin and Chan are with management.”

Seungmin’s head perked up. In any other situation, Woojin would be scolding him, but now he was quiet. The silence was scarier.

“Come straight home tonight Seungmin. We really need to talk – no pushbacks or excuses this time.” Woojin said in a calm, level voice.

Seungmin nodded before realizing that they couldn’t see him and murmured a quick ‘yes’ into the phone.

“Bye Min.”

Before Seungmin could even answer to Hyunjin’s words, the phone line cut off, leaving Seungmin feeling even worse.

He really didn’t want to go home.

He got up with a sigh and gathered his belongings, rubbing the foundation he found and then took under his eyes. He had to pretend he was fine – at school at least. Once the dorm was his safe place from school, but now nowhere felt safe.
Seungmin was targeted from every corner.

But he had to rise above that. He couldn’t be weak – he had to be a better person.

As he gathered his belongings and grabbed a pencil of a table to write with as he didn’t have his usual supplies, he saw a pink post-it-note on the table.

*Have fun at school today Kim Seungmin – don’t worry about sleeping here or your extra time in the practice room – I covered it. Here’s my number, please use it if you ever need help and update me! Let’s be friends and dance together sometime^^ I’m still so embarrassed with our first meeting keke. Good luck :)*

Next to the note sat a water bottle and a muesli bar.

He smiled at the note and pocketed the food.

With one last look of his temporary physical embodiment of peace and quiet, he left and closed the door behind him.

>To: Woojinnie-hyung (7:43am)

> Made it to school by bus. I’m safe and all good. Sorry for worrying you.

> From: Woojinnie-hyung (8:03)

> Okay. Behave yourself. Remember we all love you.

Seungmin sighed and shoved his phone into the pocket of his way too tight school-pants. He felt the hairs on the back of his neck prickle as he felt eyes from all around the room on him, but he didn’t acknowledge it. Or tried not to let it show at least.
The morning had been a strange one to say the least. He caught a late bus, so at least he didn’t have to deal with Hyunwoo, and as he ate his muesli bar, he saw that the girl with the bear-facemask get on, a few stops late than she usually did. She must have been running late too. When she saw him, he suddenly felt self-conscious that he didn’t have a facemask of his own to cover his identity, so when he finally arrived at school, he grabbed a spare black facemask from the office as he picked up a spare uniform.

He was sitting in history, with Dayun to his left, but he barely looked at her, instead choosing to focus on the teacher, who was writing neatly on the whiteboard about yet again the Korean War. Thankfully this class was almost finished, and he only had a few more lessons today – English, Math, Social Studies and Chemistry.

All I can do is thank god that I don’t have Korean Studies – I don’t think I could face Mrs Kim after yesterday.

When the bell rang, Seungmin got up and trudged to his English class and didn’t pay any attention, hid in Classroom 53 at recess and sat in his seat by the window for math.

After all last night, his waist hurt more than before, he had a newfound ache in his shoulder and ankles, and his mind started to buzz like a bee was trapped in his brain, so sinking into his chair was almost a relief.

Maybe for this class, he could relax – ever since he had started working harder in math, he found himself actually being able to understand it after all-

“Class, I will now return your test grade.”

Seungmin shot up, scaring Haeun beside him.

He could not relax.

Shit. I’m not prepared to get this back today! I’ve already had such a terrible night I really can’t handle a bad grade.

Seungmin held his breath.
Mr Rhee slammed a paper onto his desk. His sagged and wrinkled face revealed nothing.

Seungmin closed his eyes and sent a prayer. *Please let it be above an eighty, please let it be above an eighty...*

He turned the white pages over.

Seungmin choked in a gasp.

His heart rate sped up and his fingers fidgeted in shock. He let out his breath and it felt like a weight had been lifted off his shoulders like setting a heavy backpack down after a long hike.

Ninety-six per cent. He had done it.

*Holy shit! It’s amazing! A miracle even!*

Seungmin felt a smile creep onto his face. Just under the scribbled 96 were two words.

*‘Good job.’*

His mood suddenly changed, flip-flopped like a pancake, turning to its other raw side. A rawer emotion; a more dangerous one

Seungmin didn’t know why, but reading that, rather than elating him as he thought, made his heart sink.

Was that all he got?

A scribbled ‘good job?’
Were two words and a stupid percentage all his struggle and effort, and stress and exhaustion and tears and lies and utter feeling of emptiness even when he got something correct all really worth two simple words?

Were two words really all worth those hours of heartache and pain?

Was his effort, was he, just that worthless?

It was just one stupid test.

And now that ninety-six per cent made him feel nothing.

Seungmin didn’t listen to whatever garbage spewing out of the Chemistry teacher’s mouth about genetic engineering and modifying, all he did was glare. Glare at the wall or the floor, the girl’s dyed hair in front of him or the slip of his math test peeking out of his math folder.

His math test had unsettled him like no other, and the disappointment of not even feeling happy about his high grade made his stomach feel even worse. Ah, his stomach. Seungmin didn’t even eat lunch his stomach was so sore; and now he knew it wasn’t a physical symptom, but rather a sense of trepidation.

A warning.

Unease.

Fear.

Seungmin shifted again, trying to move into a position to relieve some of the tension of his tight pants around his crotch area, and when the teacher finally asked for them to take down the notes,
Seungmin grabbed his chemistry book.

But when he opened it, the tell-tale diagrams of chemistry were replaced with advanced and complicated adjectives and present tense particles of the Korean language.

*What? Where is my chemistry book? I’m sure I got it out of my locker, not my Korean Studies book... Has Yejun stolen it? Has Hyunwoo ripped it to shreds?*

“Hey.”

Seungmin flinched and snapped his head around to see Younghun standing in front of him.

*It’s not Hyunwoo. You’re fine. It’s just Younghun, he won’t do anything.*

The other seemed to take Seungmin’s shocked silence for a greeting and pulled a book out of the inside of his blazer. “You left this in chemistry yesterday, I thought you wouldn’t want to rewrite all the course’s notes.”

Seungmin awkwardly accepted the notebook and watched with wide eyes as Younghun shuffled away back to his desk. Well, that solved that mystery.

*Guess I can finally write my notes now* Seungmin grumbled, flicking to an unused page. He stopped in surprise as a neatly folded yellow piece of paper flittered out of the solidly white pages. He furrowed his brow as he unfolded it, cautious of what it might be.

*Thank you for standing up for Aeyoung. Even if others disagree, it was the right thing to do.*

– YH

*A note?* Seungmin turned over the paper, expecting something on the other side, but it was blank. *From... Younghun?* Somehow the letter eased some of the pain in his stomach – with reassurance the what he did was morally correct, maybe Seungmin could recover from it.

Besides, as much as he didn’t like to admit it, it did feel... *great* to have that power, even if it wasn’t necessarily socially acceptable...
Stop thinking that! It was wrong, it was bad, it was… unacceptable, especially when anything and everything I do can be easily twisted and examined by the media.

Seungmin slumped back down on his desk and watched as the clock ticked by. It was almost the end of class and that meant the end of the day and that meant Mr Yoo would be waiting outside any minute.

Suddenly, Seungmin really didn’t want to go home.

Seungmin groaned in pain as his stomach twisted more violently than ever before and he felt a wave of nausea hit him harder than he hit the floor last night. He staggered out of his chair hearing the screech of the metal legs dragging on floor making his head hurt more and he clutched his stomach. It churned like waves in a storm, growing more turbulent in each second. He felt it rise – crawl up his throat.

He clamped a hand over his mouth and pushed past the confused chemistry teacher out of the classroom. His feet slammed on the ground as he raced towards the nearest bathroom and when he propelled open the door and slammed his aching knees into the tiled ground and let the fluid swimming in his mouth spill sluggishly into the clean toilet. There wasn’t much, but even after he choked it all out, he couldn’t help but dry-heave into the bowl, his sweat landing in droplets into the water murky water.

He rested his head forehead on the cold and now speckled toilet seat and let his chest and stomach recover. Vomit dribbled down his chin and he felt disgusting, but his stomach pain had entirely vanished. At the creak of the toilet stall that Seungmin hadn’t closed, Seungmin knew he wasn’t safe for long.

“Aw, would you look at that; Puppy’s made himself sick. How gross.”

Seungmin wiped his lips with a small square of toilet paper and turned his head to look at the boy.

He had to be strong.

“Piss off, Hyunwoo” he growled, but his voice cracked, sore from spewing up the contents of his stomach, making the other laugh.
“Hey! Yejun! Look – he can’t even talk properly! How pathetic!”

“Hyunwoo-hyung, maybe we should just leave him alone – h-he’s not worth our time.”

Seungmin raised his head in surprise. Was Yejun really sticking his neck out for him?

“If you’re too weak, Yejun you can leave” Hyunwoo spat at the younger and turned back to Seungmin. “Get up.”

Seungmin, like an obedient house pet, struggled to his feet and turned to face Hyunwoo.

“I told you yesterday you’d get your payback, yes?”

Seungmin nodded.

“Well, just this morning guess what news I got” Hyunwoo smirked dangerously, anger in his eyes, standing right in front of Seungmin. Seungmin didn’t answer, but that just angered the younger more.

“Guess what fucking news I got!” Hyunwoo yelled, dragging Seungmin by the collar of his shirt out of the cramped cubicle and slammed him into the dingy sinks of the toilet. Seungmin folded onto himself with a cry of pain and grasped onto his already injured side.

“I said answer the fucking question!”

Seungmin cowered, cornered by an enraged Hyunwoo before his world blistered into a blinding white light as his ears rung like the end of school bell. And then his face erupted into pain, like a flaming match was pressed and held against his puffy lip and cheek. Or maybe his face had shattered, cracking from the pressure of a fist driving its way forcefully through his features; shattered like a dropped glass bottle and split into a million shards.

Seungmin felt himself fall back, hitting his back on the sinks again and his head propelled into the
Then he felt the pain and he sunk down to the floor, curling into a foetal position.

When he opened his eyes, he was alone.

Hyunwoo must have escaped, or maybe Yejun begged him to leave, but it didn’t matter. Seungmin didn’t care.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone. It was only a few minutes after school had ended. Mr Yoo would be waiting. His members would be waiting.

He pulled himself to his feet, his whole body aching at the action. He ran the back of his hand over his wet lip. It came back red.

Seungmin squinted as he looked into the mirror at his bloodied face. A combination of remaining vomit and dried blood clung to his lips, and with a trembling hand he turned on the sink taps and washed his face. He looked truly terrible. His makeup had been smudged, his unwashed hair stuck out all over the place and his lip was a mess. After he washed his face, his waist protesting as he stood, a single deep cut remained, that couldn’t be erased with water.

_Goddammit_ Seungmin felt his eyes threaten to spill as he pressed another scrunched-up square of toilet paper on his lip to stop the slow trickle of blood running down his chin. _How the fuck will I explain this to the members._

He took a moment to compose himself and think of a plan. He had that spare facemask in his locker. He could get that, then get his books he left in the chemistry room, change out of his borrowed uniform at the office and then he could go out and meet Mr Yoo like he was completely fine.

After all, a facemask could cover anything, couldn’t it?

It was a mask – one that would never fail.
With one final look in the mirror, he clenched his fists, steeled his mind and walked out of the bathroom, ignoring the pain in all areas of his body. He had been defeated, but if he could just survive the walk to his locker, the car ride home, the night at the dorms, then he could put it all behind him – he had survived for the past week, he could do it for one more night, couldn’t he?

Seungmin trekked out of the car giving a short bow to Mr Yoo who he refused to talk to the entire ride despite the elder man’s attempts and trudged towards the front door. The furrowed brows came naturally to his features as he prepared himself for the onslaught he was about to waltz into.

He adjusted his facemask in the dusk light.

He had to protect himself.

*Just be dismissive, don’t get angry, just pretend you’re alright then go straight to the bathroom and lock it. I can do this, I’ve seen these people every day for the past two years and it’s not like there haven’t been fights before.*

He took a deep breath and fought the urge to knock at the door to announce his arrival. This wasn’t a stranger’s home, it was his, so why should he feel obliged to knock?

He blanked his expression and sharpened his eyes. He had to be strong.

“I’m home.”

As soon as he opened the door, he was met with a body crashing into his and by the black hair, he recognised it as Hyunjin.

“H-Hey hyung” Seungmin looked down as the boy sobbed in his arms and he hugged him back, trying to remain his façade. In habit, he reached to pull down his facemask to talk, but put his hand down at the last minute stopped and instead combed it through the others hair.

Seungmin wished this moment would last forever, but as Woojin said, there could be no
pushbacks. He looked up and standing a few meters in front of him, surrounding the sofa. It was almost as if there was a divide, a chasm between Seungmin and the other members.

He noted everyone’s positions. Changbin, Woojin and Minho were standing around the couch, Felix sat on it with his head in his hands beside Jeongin and Hyunjin was in his arms. Jisung and Chan weren’t home.

Good. They were the last people Seungmin to see.

Seungmin swallowed the lump of fear in his throat at his hyungs’ faces. They all looked worried. Disappointed. Angry.

He didn’t know what to say – how to tell them what was going on and why he left and why he showed up one day later. So, he only said one pitiful word.

“Hey.”

“Seungmin” a deep whimper came from Felix, who now was beginning to cry, tears covering his dotted freckles. “Where have you-” he stopped, a sob racking his whole body. “Where have you been?”

Seungmin looked down again, his skin feeling itchy and hot in his dirty clothes. He gently nudged the still wailing Hyunjin away from him and stepped closer to the door behind him, the feeling of wanting to run away returning him in full force.

But he couldn’t. Not this time.

“I was…” he trailed off trying to think of an excuse, but his mind came up blank.

“You weren’t here” Changbin started his voice quiet and hollow, looking dark from the dim light in the living room. “You weren’t at JYP, you weren’t at school, you weren’t at any of the cafés you usually study at, you weren’t anywhere!”

Seungmin kept his eyes nervously trained on the explosive shorter boy as he crept towards
Seungmin, crossing the canyon between them. “We spent so long looking for you and calling you and calling management!” He looked away and scoffed as if in disbelief that Seungmin was even standing in front of him. “Do you know how worried we were? Channie-hyung almost called the police, for god’s sake!”

Seungmin’s heart fell. He didn’t know it was that serious!

“I-I just t-thought-”

“What did you think?” Woojin butted in, moving to stand beside Changbin. “What were you thinking?”

Seungmin looked away again and a tense silence filled the room. Jeongin and Felix remained silent, staring sulkily at the floor as if they were being scolded, not Seungmin. Minho had left the room and from his voice drifting through the walls, told Seungmin he was on the phone, probably to either management or Chan that he was at the dorm.

“I’m sorry” Seungmin’s voice was small and shrewd as he stared at the floor, and Changbin just scoffed again.

“Sorry isn’t enough.”

The words bit him like a rabid dog, and Seungmin felt himself recoil, backing away from Changbin again. Maybe he could just leave again – then they wouldn’t be angry anymore! Yes, it was great, he just had to get to the door and-

He slammed into a stiff body, and by the defined muscles, Seungmin could tell it wasn’t Hyunjin.

Seungmin spun around, his plan soiled and his breath caught in his throat.

The whole room froze.

Chan was home.
And he was furious.

It was like a thunderstorm had entered the room, the clouds drifting from the leader’s silver hair and swirling around until the drifted above Seungmin. No, it was worse than a bad storm – the clouds twisted into thin wisps like ropes and spiralled so quickly it changed the whole room’s mood into something much more dangerous.

A tornado had formed and Seungmin was its target.

He heard the front door’s lock click in place, courtesy of Jisung behind him.

*Oh fuck.*

“Where have you *been*?” Chan’s voice roared like dooming thunder and Seungmin didn’t know if he had ever been this scared in his whole life.

Chan had never yelled. Not when he was angry or tired or frustrated or ever.

Seungmin had always wondered whether a quiet Chan or a loud one was worse.

Now he knew. And he was close to shitting himself.

“We were worried *sick!*” Chan screamed making the veins on his neck pop out. He paced, rounding on Seungmin as he stomped around the dorm. The other seven members remained frozen in fear, still like statues in their positions.

“*Look* at me when I’m talking to you Seungmin!” the leader snarled pressing his chest into Seungmin’s own harshly, making the younger snap his eyes up from the ground and stare blankly at Chan.

He didn’t allow himself to flinch when Bang Chan tugged his strands of dyed noodle-like hair and curse in English as he stepped away again.
I can’t cry. I can’t show my weaknesses. Not again.

He stayed quiet, much similar to yesterday’s conversation outside the recording rooms. I just have to push him away, push them all away. They can’t know what’s going on.

“You’re sneaking around” the leader begun, holding up one finger, and Seungmin sighed loudly and rolled his eyes, already knowing the leader was about to go off on a rant. However, that was obviously the wrong thing to do, and the storm clouds over Bang Chan’s head grew darker. “You are lying to all of us, you are failing tests, getting in fights at school and yelling at your teachers!”

Seungmin winced at that and felt his mouth sting at the movement. He heard Jisung gasp behind him and his ears reddened in embarrassment and in humiliation.

Why did he have to tell everyone about that? Seungmin clenched his fists beside him and the leader hastily stormed up to him again until his pale face was almost pressed against Seungmin’s.

“What the fuck is going on with you, huh?” Bang Chan’s jaw was clenched, and his eyes were wild like an untamed stallion.

Seungmin shrugged, crossing his arms defensively over his chest and looked away.

“Why are you like this?” the leader asked again, his shoulders broad and brows furrowed in anger, slipping into his native tongue. “Now you’re disrespecting me too? And your other hyungs. Why are you being so immature?” the Australian screamed and it made Seungmin wish he couldn’t understand the foreign language.

He felt his blood boil beneath his skin as Bang Chan spat the word ‘immature’, the newly-familiar feeling of growing power churning through his veins. How dare he? The whole reason why I’ve been working so hard to change is so I’m not immature anymore! I must be strong… and if power equals strength...

“You’ve changed Kim Seungmin.”

Seungmin closed his eyes.
‘You’ve changed.’ Two words that Haeun said to him yesterday and what his very own leader said to him today. He felt strength run through his veins, adrenaline making him lightheaded at the very essence.

Fear drained out of his body, replaced by a hunger, a lust, a need, a change.

“I’ve changed” he began quietly savouring the words as they left his covered mouth. He opened his dark eyes and behind his mask, he grinned manically.

“I’ve fucking changed for the better” Seungmin snarled like a feral animal walking till he was face to face with the leader again. Bang Chan looked small now, and Seungmin felt as if he grew taller as he looked down on his teammate. “If you can’t see that, then you don’t know me-”

“Seungmin!” the leader regained his composition and clenched his jaw tighter so that his teeth might break. “You’re acting so immature right now-”

Seungmin’s grin faltered under its cover.

That word again.

He watched as Chan’s mouth moved but didn’t hear the words, his ears rung like they had earlier, and he dug his nails into his palm before relaxing them. It was almost an out-of-body experience when he brought his hands up, forming almost a symbol of surrender. But he knew what he had to do.

Seungmin narrowed his eyes as he placed his palms in the leader’s chest and cocked his head to the side when the leader trailed off in confusion staring at him with something akin with concern.

Fear.

Then with all of his might, he pushed.
The next moments were a blur. Bang Chan sprawled to the ground and in an instant, he felt a pair of hands rest on his shoulders. He flinched, expecting a blow to come soon and scrambled backwards but his back met the wood of the door and he yelped in pain as the doorknob twisted into his tender side.

“G-Get off of me!” he screeched as he battered Minho’s and Woojin’s hands off him. Commotion swirled around him and he struggled to get out of his hyungs’ grasp. Their strong arms wrapped around his midsection and his chest heaved and lungs tightened making it hard to breathe.

“P-Please” he said weakly and in one motion ripped the facemask off his face and gulped for air.

And then everything froze.

“S-Seungmin?” Jisung hesitantly asked, the utter dread in his voice making him stop moving. “Why is your lip bleeding?”

Seungmin brought one hand to wipe his chin and sure enough it came back red. But this time in front of all his members. He felt his façade crumble and before he knew it fat wet tears slid down his cheeks, making his cut sting from salt.

A sob twisted its way out of his sore throat, and he felt the whip of humiliation scar his skin, overriding his frustration.

Through his tears he saw his members stand like alert deer seconds before running, like he was the lion in the tall grass. They were doing nothing, just standing there, just like his classmates yesterday.

Seungmin moved first, breaking away from Minho’s now loose grip and he charged down the hallway with the sound of three member’s footsteps following him and calling out his name. He reached his door and slammed it, before clicking the lock into place so that the banging of his members behind the bedroom door were their only presence.

“How could he be so stupid? He couldn’t even keep it together for ten minutes!
He was weak.

“F-Fuck” he sniffed, ignoring his member’s pleas. He buried his head in his hands, the same hands that pushed and hurt, and wiped his lip again. He had just made everything impossibly and irreversibly worse.

“I’m so s-stupid” he cried again and struggled blindly to his feet. Disappointment and pity for himself bubbled up again, spilling more tears over the surface of his hollow cheeks. “I’m so fucking stupid!”

With a powerful swing, he kicked his bedframe as hard as he could, hobbling around as the pain from his toe spreading all the way up his leg to his heart. “Why am I so weak?” he screamed again, rage making his actions sharper as he threw his pencil case which had been lying of his desk at the wall, opening and spreading the contents of pencils and pens around the room in a satisfying movement.

Seungmin howled and he faceplanted onto his unmade bed, his face crinkling onto his hidden timetable. It was almost funny – just one month ago he hated any mess on his bed, but now here he was with snot, tears, sweat, spit and blood all dribbling onto his white pillowcase and he didn’t care at all.

He welcomed it. The hollow feeling of hopelessness as he created an abstract painting of colours on his white canvas.

He welcomed it, but he hated it.

It took a while until the constant tapping on his door faded into nothingness and Seungmin’s body-shaking sobs turned to silence. The thin walls of the dorms let him know that the other members were all talking hurriedly about him, but he felt too tired to listen. He stared at the ceiling and felt empty, the same way he felt after he received his test score in second period. Like he had purged all his pent-up emotions and was now numb.

‘You have so much to do right now, lying here is just wasting time – remember your schedule! Do you want to become a failure again?’ his mind screamed at him, but Seungmin pushed it out. He felt to bone-tired to even move, let alone go dancing or answer math questions.
He kept looking up and the untainted ceiling when he heard two small knocks on the door.

“Min?” he heard Jisung’s shaky voice drift through the door.

“Yeah?” he asked and listened to one of the members sigh in relief that he even answered.

“It’s me, Jisung, here with Hyunjin and Jeonginnie. Can we come in-”

“Just you” Seungmin interrupted and he was met with shocked silence. “The door’s unlocked.”

The bedroom door creaked open and Jisung poked his head in cautiously before slithering in and closing the door behind him, leaving the other two members outside.

“Last time we talked we fought” Seungmin sighed staring unblinking at the ceiling. “I’m sorry about that.”

Jisung’s whole body deflated and he exhaled like all the tension left his body. “Yeah, me too.”

Seungmin strained to sit out of his laying-down position and his body creaked as he did so. “Why did they send you?”

Jisung shuffled his feet as if unsure what to say. “They sent the member’s they thought you would be most comfortable with.”

“And you came? Not Felix?” Seungmin found it in himself to shoot his hyung an amused smirk. “Do they not know about our fight?”

“I guess it pales in comparison” the rapper looked away, and Seungmin frowned. Jisung had deliberately avoided half of his question, which must of meant Felix… Felix was either too distraught to come or didn’t want to see him.

“Yeah” Seungmin deadpanned and toed off his runners he didn’t have time to take off at the entrance. “You’re in here to tell me to go see everyone, right?”
“Something like that” Jisung shrugged before holding out his hands. “Do you feel ready to?”

“No time like the present” Seungmin tried to pass it off as something he wasn’t bothered by, but he knew Jisung sensed the anxiousness that crept into his voice.

“Okay, let’s go then.”

Seungmin looked into his hyung’s eyes, letting vulnerability seize him for a second. Then gathering his courage, he accepted Jisung’s hands and let them pull him onto his wobbly knees.

The storm in his stomach which had quietened after the fight rose again, but Seungmin just gripped Jisung’s hand tighter and quenched it down.

He couldn’t be weak.

He left the security of his bedroom and shuffled down the hall, his palms sweating in Jisung’s large ones, but he didn’t let himself to stop. As the pair walked down the hall, emerging out of darkness, Seungmin saw the mess he had created.

On the couch sat his teammates, his friends, in utter despair. The lamp that was usually sitting docilely on the table was smashed into pieces, pillows were thrown on the floor and Chan, his leader, who barely cried was sitting on the edge of the sofa with his head in his hands.

Woojin sat rubbing circles into his back, while Minho was pacing the room. Changbin was wiping slow tears from Felix’s face and Jeongin and Hyunjin sat staring at nothing.

Seungmin felt embarrassment engulf him and he stared at the floor, avoiding his member’s eyes when he reached them.

He felt Jisung squeeze his hand reassuringly and felt glad that he wasn’t standing alone. He cleared his throat.
This was all his doing.

“’I’m sorry” his bottom lip wobbled, and he clenched his right fist in a tight ball. “’I’m just…” he searched for an excuse but there was nothing he could even use to justify himself with.

He looked in Woojin’s disappointed eyes, and Chan’s bloodshot ones.

He felt his façade shatter for the hundredth time that day as fat tears flooded from his own dull eyes, letting go of Jisung’s hand.

“I’m just so tired.”

The other members made no ploy to move as Seungmin hunched into himself before dropping onto the floor, his legs suddenly too weak to hold him up. He clenched his fists into the carpet beneath him and continued to sob, the wails echoing off the walls and flooding back into his ears like a perpetual cycle, the sound making his heart and mind ache.

He leaned into the comforting drift of hands rubbing his back and accepted the pillow given to him by who he thought was Felix.

“Go to sleep now, Min, we’ll look after you” he heard a voice whisper softly in his ear. He just nodded, still shaking with the effort of his cries and he accepted the arm wrapped around his waist, feverishly.

“It’s alright, Min, just… let’s talk in the morning, alright?” The voice he recognised as Woojin murmured quietly to his left.

Seungmin couldn’t trust his voice to speak. Nor could he trust that he would be able to agree and hold his end of the promise. Instead, made a noise similar to a non-committal moan and just snuggled into Felix’s side further, burrowing himself in like Felix was his safety in the world of tears and treachery.

He closed his eyes, and with him members around him in a strangely comforting cuddle-pile on the living-room floor, he let himself breathe and drift off into a sleep that would only bring tomorrow closer.
If Chapter 7 and 8 were the quiet bruh.mp3 sound effect, this chapter was the bass boosted version because damn. So, a lot of stuff happened? And it’s early?? And it’s 7860 words?? Here we go:

Originally, this was actually going to be the final chapter and then I realize how stupid that was because Seungmin’s recovery would have been completely brushed to the side and not shown. Now, when I read fics, I lowkey get disappointed and bored a bit after the climax happens, so I’m really going to try and make it interesting and still angst because no recovery/reconciliations are perfect.

So, the bigger fight! Seungmin got punched (do you see the pun I made in the summary lol), and everything is exposed, and everyone was yelling and crying and wow… very intense. I hope it was okay to follow.

Symbolism Time! – SHATTER
> Seungmin’s façade breaks
> His face hurt – whole glass bottle thing
> His relationship with his friends, family and members are shattered
> Seungmin’s routine is shattered

This chapter was the main impact of the turning point of Seungmin’s initial snap!

Here’s the question for this chapter: What do you think Seungmin’s morning will be like? Another fight? Or peaceful?

NEXT UPDATE : 25TH SEPTEMBER

Thanks for reading <33

Comment your thoughts and queries below!!

Talic.
Seungmin woke up to the sensation of being choked.

He groggily blinked open his eyes and stifled a groan as he removed the dead-weight of Felix’s arm draped across his chest. Luckily, the Australian didn’t wake, but rather turned around and burrowed further into Changbin’s chest. If Seungmin felt more awake he probably would have cooed at the sight in the silence of the cuddle pile, but all he felt was exhaustion.

He felt exhausted from last night, even if that was the best sleep he had in ages.

He sat up slowly, trying to move as little as possible so he wouldn’t have to alert any members of his presence. By the darkness of the room, Seungmin could tell it was early in the morning.

*I’m lucky I’m the first one awake. If I can just get out of this… whatever it is, I can go do some study before school.*

He bit his lip as he slid his leg away from under Woojin, slowly like a snake and stopped when he felt two arms wrap around his waist, effectively dragging him back to the floor.

*Well, that’s all my progress gone* he grimaced as the heavy arm dug into his bruised side. He felt a new wave of pain roll through his body when long fingers gripped his waist further, making the soft skin revolt in dismay and he clenched his jaw tighter to trap the pathetic whine crawling up his throat.

“Hyunjin-hyung, please move” he tried but the elder was already beginning to wake from his deep slumber and grip to Seungmin stronger.

“You’re not escaping me this time, Min” Hyunjin pouted, and a sudden strike of déjà vu flow through him. Seungmin felt his heart flip-flop in his chest and stared blankly at the elder’s face. This situation with Seungmin trying to leave and Hyunjin looking at him with such innocence in his eyes felt oddly familiar. It seemed like Hyunjin felt the same too, as an almost melancholic smile fluttered onto his face.
"Can you just stay and cuddle with me?"

Seungmin felt the breath leave his lungs. He knew this – he knew those words.

It was the exact same thing Hyunjin had said to him the morning after Chan and Changbin had their fight when Seungmin had gotten up early to practice.

It was almost as if his life was on repeat – his fall in front of the bus, his lies and early morning practices, and now just seven words had all caught up to him. As if nothing had changed at all.

The same sensation he felt yesterday after receiving his maths grade fell heavily on his mind – the sense of the worthlessness of life, especially when everything kept happening again and again, over and over, no matter how hard Seungmin tried to change it.

If his life really was repeating, then Hyunjin would already know the answer he would give.

“Not now, hyung” Seungmin muttered, a biting edge to his voice that he had heard during the argument last night. “I’m busy.”

“Seungminnie–” Hyunjin started, but he had already wrenched his body out of the elder’s arms, got to his feet and stepped over the peaceful bodies of his members to the open doorway that led to the hallway – a dark passage away from his teammates.

*The last thing I need is Hyunjin making me irritated. Especially as when all the members wake up, they will all be on my back with questions and suspicions.*

Seungmin walked into his bedroom and sighed at the sight. His destruction of his bedroom had not been fixed overnight – in honesty, he completely forgot he threw his metal pencil case at the wall in his frustration. Now, his pencils, pen, erasers and highlighters were scattered all over the floor, along with his dirty clothes and pillows he hadn’t cleaned up.

*I’ll fix my pencil-case, but I can’t be bothered to clear up everything else* Seungmin pondered. He ignored the creak of his bones as he kneeled on the floor to collect his belongings off the ground and gathered them dutifully.
He checked the time on his phone. *Five-thirty. Not as early as I would like, but it'll give me enough time to do my History homework and make some eggs for the members in apology.*

Seungmin cautiously scanned his timetable, exposing it to the world of opposition as he slid it out of his pillowcase. In his worry, he peeked his head out of his door and glared down the hallway to where his members were. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight. They were all there, still sleeping peacefully as if Seungmin had never left, or had never been there in the first place. He felt a strange sense of bitterness fill his heart, and he closed the door, creating a barrier between himself and his teammates and pushed it down.

He was fine. He was strong. He just had to focus – get himself back into his routine. Seungmin swallowed down the sudden lump in his throat, and made his way back to the paper, with its neat lines and measured boxes, that guided him.

It was a Wednesday. He had written down an early morning dance practice and then an hour of math study, but as it was too late to go to JYP, and he had unfinished homework he hadn’t done in the stress of last night, he would have to compromise his timetable.

*Tomorrow I’ll do better* he promised himself, pulling his history book out of his bag. *I’ll follow my timetable tomorrow and then I’ll be fine.*

Seungmin studied until his back ached with the effort and orange sunlight blazed through the window. He rubbed his eyes tiredly and closed his history book, thankful that he had completed it before he was interrupted by anyone looking for him.

*I know if I sneak out the door now, I’ll be in so much trouble later. Maybe I can do something to apologise for being so stupid and weak last night… I have enough time to make breakfast…*

Seungmin looked towards his bedroom door. If he wanted to cook, that meant he would have to spend time with his members as the living room where they had all slept the previous night.

*I need to get over myself and be a good person. Besides cooking for the members will make them less worried about me – it was a normal thing for me to do before everything went wrong.*

Straightening his back, he walked out of his bedroom down the corridor into the living room and into the kitchen. Somehow, no one was awake, but maybe that was because it was still earlier than the time Hyunjin and Jeongin would have to start getting ready for school.
Seungmin quietly paced around the kitchen, gathering a dozen and a half of eggs and two frying pans, before cracking them onto the sizzling surface. Knowing them, they’ll probably wake up at the smell of food Seungmin smiled as he flipped an egg over.

A sense of déjà vu washed over him as he fried the eggs. The last time he did this, it was after Chan and Changbin’s fight. It was strange really – three months ago he would have been happily doing this every morning, but now it only seemed to happen after significant arguments.

*How sad.*

“Minnie? Are you making breakfast?”

Seungmin looked up to see the dyed and extremely messy bed hair of his September friend, Felix, whose voice was ten times deeper than usual due to having just woken up.

“Y-Yeah” Seungmin looked down and avoided his member’s eyes; a habit he had developed over the past few days.

“Good” Felix either not noticing or ignoring Seungmin’s inability to make eye contact and instead yawned, grabbing a carton of orange juice from the fridge. “I missed your eggs, we all did.”

Seungmin nodded in response and continued to cook the eggs, the smell of it waking up each member lying on the living room floor one by one. Soon enough, breakfast was ready and eight eager mouths were waiting at the table.

Seungmin gulped and stealthily flickered his eyes towards the bench where some members were standing and some sitting, but all gathered in a sort of unified way. He wasn’t expecting a whole breakfast in the sense that all members would sit and eat together. He had hoped that he would be allowed to escape to his room, or even to school, but he couldn’t just leave, especially after yesterday.

He tensed at let a sense of trepidation fill him for a second before pushing it down and erasing it. He could do this; it was a fifteen-minute breakfast where he could just simply not talk. Maybe last night could be forgotten – or maybe it was all just a fever-dream. If Seungmin could act like nothing was wrong and deflect every question asked to him, he could make it out of there without breaking down and embarrassing himself and being weak.
“Min, come sit down” he heard Changbin say, pulling out a chair tucked under the kitchen bench. He stepped carefully towards the huddle of his members, immediately feeling a prickle of apprehension, like a thousand small needles pricking into the base of his spine.

I can do this, it’s just a conversation – nothing can get worse than last night anyway, right?

“Yeah hyung?” Seungmin tried to say casually but it came out crackly and high-pitched like he was going through the brunt of puberty all again. He felt his ears redden in embarrassment and self-consciously licked his lips, his tongue snagging the small cut on the once smooth surface.

As he sat down on the chair, with all eight of his members looking back at him, he felt the most exposed he had in his entire life. More so now than last night as he had anger and adrenaline in his veins and a facemask to protect him. Now he had nothing.

He felt a prickle of irritation when he accidentally met Hyunjin’s eyes and he tried unsuccessfully to push it down and quell it. Ever since the butt-dial, Hyunjin had just been so… annoying. Seungmin wrinkled his nose as he thought of that very morning, where Hyunjin had been basically begging for him to cuddle – to cuddle! The very word itself sounded childish and immature and weak – everything Seungmin was trying not to be.

Just look away. Being annoyed now will only cause more problems Seungmin’s mind supplied, but he still couldn’t abandon the surge of vexation that fuelled his body and woke him up, like a hit of caffeine in the morning. It made his senses stronger, his emotions fierce and his anger sharp.

Instead of letting his seemingly-random indignation with his hyung show, he stabbed his chopsticks into his fried eggs watching as the orange yolk spilled out from the centre and run onto his plate. He did it again. There was something satisfying about how his chopsticks bluntly hit the plate with a dull ‘thud’ and how his actions had a consequence. If he pictured it as Hyunjin’s stupidly perfect face which no matter if bloated from sleep or hollow from none always looked good, then spearing it felt even better. Besides a consequence, in this case destroying his egg, was something that Seungmin, with his hours of studying and dancing had been longing for; a result, an improvement, a change.

The air was tense, only broken slightly by the repetitive ‘thud’ as courtesy of Seungmin.

Just don’t look up. Everything will be fine if you just don’t-
“Seungmin,” Minho’s gentle voice came from across the table of sorts. Seungmin stopped stabbing his egg, as it was probably almost inedible by now. He looked up to his teammate, his chopsticks still buried in the carcass of his breakfast.

He tensed, his head suddenly spiralling with questions that made him feel dizzy. The other members seemed to have a similar reaction to himself as they all whipped their head to the main dancer like he had just said something completely insane rather than a name.

Seungmin held his breath. Everything he had worked so hard for would be exposed. Minho’s one question would topple everything he had done and accomplished whether a simple step movement or that damned ninety-six per cent in his math test.

“Why do you catch the bus to school?”

Seungmin loosed his grip on his chopsticks and cocked his head to the side so fast it was almost comedic. After all the hell I’ve wreaked both in and out of this dorm, and of every question he could have asked me, all he wants to know is why I take the bus? This is almost too easy!

“For more independence” he stated, trying and succeeding to keep the quiver out of his voice. “Besides, I have friends on the bus who I don’t have classes with so I want to spend more time with them and I like the atmosphere of the bus because there are a lot of different people on it but it’s the same faces every day. Like a routine…” Seungmin trailed off his tangent when he realized he was rambling and his members’ faces were riddled with blank suspicion.

Ah. Now he looked like he was lying, which in complete fairness he mostly was.

“Doesn’t matter” he grumbled staring down at his plate again. Another tense silence filled the room again.

“Min-ah,” Chan started, tapping his chopsticks nervously on the side of his dish, just like he did with his pen when he was nervous. Seungmin looked up again, this time more fearfully. “I’m sorry that I…” the leader trailed off, searching for his words. “I’m sorry that I lost my temper last night, It was wrong and I shouldn’t have acted so – so aggressively towards you.”

“Yeah, I shouldn’t have pushed you” Seungmin mumbled his apology so quietly that he was sure only Woojin heard it.
“We were – I was – just really worried when you didn’t return home; I thought something had happened to you Minnie” the leader stopped again and searched Seungmin’s eyes for any form of response. But the younger forced himself to stay still and force back the stupid tears that began to well in his eyes.

“Yeah” Seungmin agreed, his whole body collapsing from its taught position in one breath. He reached up a hand to rub the nape of his neck awkwardly and he avoided his members’ eyes, choosing to look at his plate instead. “It was really dumb to not let any of you or management know where I was.”

Seungmin tapered off again, but this time remained steadfast in his response. He knew all eight of his members would be waiting for an answer, the answer to the mystery of where Kim Seungmin was on the night of the fight, but some things were best left as secrets. Besides, if needed he could use the shabby ‘underground’ dance studio as a hideout; an escape.

“Well, I’ve got to get going,” he said instead, picking up his plate with the dilapidated egg and dumping it straight into the trash can next to the kitchen bench. “I don’t want to be late for school” he forced a smile at his teammates, purposely ignoring their stunned expressions due to his informality in leaving so hastily.

Seungmin didn’t wait for any of their brains to catch up to speed to begin questioning him, and with that, he was down the hallway and into his bedroom.

He was safe, and this time there was no member waiting to pounce on him.

Slowly, he began to pack his schoolbag, replacing his math books with his history homework. The cycle he did every day was monotone, boring, and despite the hardships of yesterday he had to pretend he was normal like nothing had happened to almost completely destroy his team. That was his job as an idol after all.

Shit, I have Korean Studies today and I haven’t even written my apology note yet Seungmin realized, looking at his school schedule for the day. He quickly grabbed a pen and some paper and scribbled down some sort of an apology, but it was mediocre at best. When he reread it, it felt detached and unbothered – the exact opposite of what Seungmin was trying to convey.

Who knew apologising is so hard he sighed and then laughed at the irony of it all as he clicked his pen closed. With all the apologising he was set out to do for the next few days – whether to his
teachers, classmates, his management team and his members, you would think he would be a little bit better at it. But, no; he was Kim Seungmin, the failure of an idol, friend and student, that could lie his way out of almost any situation and was as fake as the smiles he casted towards the camera, but not fake enough to convince people that he truly felt sorry.

Great. Just perfect.

*May as well make my bed so I’m not yelled at for being unclean* Seungmin shrugged, ditching the apology letter in his backpack. He looked around his corner of the room – it was a complete mess to the point that Seungmin would have thought a pack of rabid dogs tore up his once-perfect bedroom. Either that or Jisung had spent the night.

But even’s Jisung’s messy side wasn’t as bad as his own. The truth made his gut clench. When had he let things go so far? The him of three months ago would have turned up his nose at the sight, not be the sole reason for it.

He compartmentalized that thought and instead tugged his sheets taught, flattened out the wrinkles in his duvet and fluffed up his pillows before laying them gently on his bedspread in a straight line. *There perfect* he thought admiring his work. It was just like how he used to do it; how it was supposed to be.

Seungmin glared at a lump in the perfect surface of the bedsheets that ruined his impeccable bed-making and placed his hands softly on the bed to flatten it. But his palms met a hard surface rather than soft duvet – and guilt washed through his body when he realized what it was.

His diary. The very same diary he had written in every day since joining JYP and the same diary that he had abandoned after years of entries. He opened the book and turned to the first blank page, somewhere towards the end of the diary. On the top of the page read Monday. Two days ago.

Seungmin sighed again and closed the book, ramming it under his mattress again. He heard his members laughing from outside his room and a strange sense of loneliness filled him. The diary was a reminder that he, Kim Seungmin, had failed. And now, after yesterday, a reminder of what he truly was, was the last thing he needed.

Seungmin blocked out the sound of the 6:55 bus rattling along the road and focused on his DAY6
playlist he was blasting through his headphones. It was early – he had left the dorm earlier than usual to escape seeing Jeongin or Hyunjin or any of his teammates for that matter and now was on one bus earlier than the one he would usually catch.

Honestly, catching the bus every morning was becoming a chore. It was so much more simple just to wait outside his house at exactly 7:21 a.m. and get driven straight to the school gate. He would be able to wake up later and still get his hour of study in, he wouldn’t have to fear meeting Hyunwoo on the bus, he could just sit back and relax and let Mr Yoo drive him.

But now he was anxious really – in the eyes of the public, with a bruised face of course despite it being hidden by his mask, so early in the morning, before he had time to collect himself in his usual daily car-ride, left him on edge for the whole day.

Don’t be ungrateful he scolded himself, turning up his music louder to stop his mind from screaming at him. Not everyone has a chauffeur to drive them everywhere and not everyone has the opportunity to even get an education, especially one as good as Cheongdam.

Seungmin sighed and rested his heavy had on the back of his chair. He was unsettled, this morning especially. After yesterday, guilt and self-loathing hung over him like a raincloud, making the world see in grey. Not even his music was enough to cheer him up today.

He looked around and exhaled– even though he had only caught one bus earlier, every face was different – there was none of the routine he had found himself falling into for the past few mornings.

As the bus rounded the corner, he hit the big red ‘stop’ button.

His body protested as he moved, and his mind howled at him, scratching his ears like nails on a blackboard.

‘Failure.’

‘Immature and annoying.’

‘Worthless.’
He wished he could silence and stop his brain with the click of one big read button too.

The first thing Seungmin feels when he walks into school is the lingering stares of other students as he walked through the halls with his facemask drawn up high. The second thing was slightly less expected; he felt his back and his bruised waist slam against a locker.

“W-Wha?” he spluttered thinking it was Hyunwoo seeking more revenge on him. When he opened his eyes, he saw that the tall boy looming over him was not Hyunwoo, but Beomwon, his chain earrings sparkling dangerously in the light behind him.

“Kim Seungmin, the one that Hyunwoo calls Puppy” the boy simply said, his voice low and deep, almost enough to rival Felix.

“What do you want?” Seungmin growled, trying to defend himself, but it came out high and shaky like a yip when someone accidentally stepped on a dog’s tail.

“You got Hyunwoo suspended for two days, you know?”

Seungmin tensed, his body rigid against the cold locker’s surface making the bruise that had been slowly healing, flame up again. “S-Suspended?”

“Yeah” Beomwon sighed and looked away, loosening the grip on Seungmin’s collar until he was barely holding it.

Seungmin frowned in confusion but stayed still in apprehension. Surely if he got Hyunwoo suspended, Beomwon should be tightening his grip on him.

“Hey, you!” A teacher’s distant voice reached his ears. Beomwon looked to the left, but his expression didn’t change – he was completely unfazed. “Stop what you’re doing right now!”
“Stay out of trouble, people are looking out to get you” Beomwon snarled and gave him a final harsh push into the locker before striding away hands in pockets, his head sticking out of the crowd of students racing to get to class due to his height.

“Are you alright?” The teacher, who Seungmin didn’t recognise asked, and he nodded slowly, not focussing on what the adult asked him next.

*He didn’t hurt me at all?* Seungmin thought, flattening down his scrunched-up collar in a few timid strokes. He could see the teacher’s mouth moving with words but didn’t listen. *Could it possibly be that...* Seungmin felt a small smile creep onto his face, hidden by his black facemask. *Could it possibly be that, whatever that was, was his way of trying to help me?*

Seungmin held his smile until the tall boy disappeared around the corner of the hallway. Although he doubted that Beomwon would stick out his neck for him by any means, Seungmin couldn’t help but think that maybe he had found some sort of ally in these hallways full of foes.

The school day passed by slowly. Korean Studies was so awkward that he didn’t muster enough courage to give Mrs Kim his poorly written apology, he sat next to Haeun in maths but didn’t talk. At lunch, he ate with Seojun and Dayun and as the thin girl poked and probed at her kimbap, Seungmin thought through to the last time he had ever seen her eat, and felt something like a worm of guilt burrow its way through his chest when he couldn’t recall anything. He looked at Seojun – his acne and his eye bags were worse than usual. Seungmin couldn’t help but wonder if the boy even slept, and the image of the 3RACHA line in the weeks before a comeback popped into his head.

Halfway through lunch he left, escaped to the library. Sitting with those two made him feel *guilty*. For the past few years upon meeting them, Seungmin had always regarded them as people who he didn’t *need* to get close to because his career as an idol was *harder* than their *lives* and more *important*. It was foolish – he had been so focused on himself that he didn’t even care to see if they were alright when they obviously were not.

But it said a lot about himself, he pondered as he sat on a scrappy quiet desk, that he had left them without saying a word.

A loud ‘clang’ from the table next to him made him snap out of his thoughts. It was nothing, just a pile of books falling on the floor, but it made Seungmin look around where he was. On the table next to his was Younghun, and Seungmin remembered the note in his chemistry book and gave him a small smile. Younghun smiled back.
At the very other side of the room sat the last person Seungmin would expect to see in such a studious place as a library. With his brooding face, sharp angular eyes, bruised knuckles and stupid dangly chain earrings sat Beomwon

Seungmin squinted to reaffirm his suspicions but there was no mistaking that the boy who just pushed him against the locker that morning was the same one studying mathematical physics. Beomwon’s desk was covered in an assortment of pens and pencils, crumpled papers and – what was that? Seungmin narrowed his eyes again and almost laughed at the sight. Three finished cartons of strawberry milk?

When Beomwon looked up, Seungmin buried his head into his notes as if they were the most interesting thing he’d seen that day.

>From: Lixie-hyung (5:24)

>Chan organised a rest for us, so no schedules today. See you at home for dinner :)

Seungmin pressed on the message as he sat on the bus, the 5:12 p.m. bus and wondered why fate had cursed him this way. He was literally one stop away from the Entertainment Company to do the practice as scheduled, and now it was cancelled!

Seungmin huffed in annoyance, his warm breath trapped in his facemask making his face itch uncomfortably. After wearing it all day, it was really beginning to irritate him, but it wasn’t like he had another choice.

He grumbled to himself as he got off the bus, this time avoiding and not falling into the puddle that had formed due to the heavy rain during his last class. Thankfully it had stopped already, so he could walk around without ending up as wet as a stray dog.

I can just go practice anyway – I missed out this morning and I don’t have any tests for the next few days, so I have the time Seungmin decided and started walking to the building.

The rest of his walk there was just as uneventful as the dance practice itself; he got changed into his dancing clothes he had brought with him, found a spare dancing room in JYP easily and began to
move his body to the sounds emanating from the loud-speaker relying only on muscle memory. After the first song, he had discarded his facemask in the privacy of his own room. The cut was still terrible, and the swelling and colour even more so.

It was like someone had started inflating his face with air and then gave up a quarter of the way, leaving just his lips and the area around the bruise puffy and uncomfortable.

As the music thrummed through his body, sending vibrations through the floor and to his heart, Seungmin couldn’t find himself falling into the rhythm as easily as yesterday at the ‘undercover’ studio. Here he felt numb, his body moving to the music with zero emotion or passion. His face said it all really – it was bruised and blank, and that made his dancing look like it wasn’t powerful despite the heavy bass pounding above him.

When ‘Side Effects’ finished Seungmin sank onto the floor. He could tell it was getting late now – the sky had turned form it’s grey-blue to a beautiful dark violet tainted with reds and oranges from the disappearing sun.

Despite his hours of dancing, he felt like he had accomplished nothing. It was like he wasn’t really in the room the whole time like he was the mirror’s reflection – two dimensional and merely a product of something else.

As the sun dipped behind the clouds even his shadow left him. Seungmin looked into the mirror and saw himself.

Tired eyes.

Bruised face.

Swollen lips.

Hollow.

A shell.
‘Voices’ started from behind him and Seungmin managed to turn it off with his phone before it could play any further. It left the room in an eerie empty silence.

Seungmin got off the ground and watched his reflection rise. He pulled his hoodie over his head and put his facemask on. The only area of his face visible was his eyes. But they were hollow too.

Seungmin grabbed his schoolbag, flickered off the lights and left the room. After all, Felix was expecting him home for dinner.

“What did you do today at school Seungmin?”

Seungmin stabbed his noodles and slurped them up quietly, internalizing his groan as Woojin asked him another question that dinner. He straightened up though, he couldn’t look irritated or weak even though he felt it. He had to wear his mask – his metaphorical one of course. He couldn’t and wear his facemask at the same time, and despite the slight pain his bruised skin felt due to the constant press of a mask on his sensitive skin, he would take it over the eight pairs of eyes glaring anxiously at the corner of his mouth.

“Nothing much,” Seungmin said truthfully. “Just had class” Seungmin paused again, thinking about what to say next. However, just as he opened his mouth to say that he made half-friends with a gangster with an affinity for strawberry milk it seemed, Hyunjin butt in.

“I had a performance today for my music class,” the elder said excitedly and turned towards Changbin. “Do you remember the rap you helped me with hyung? The teacher liked it, so I think I’ll get a pretty good score!”

“That’s great Hyunjinnie” Chan smiled, ruffling the younger’s hair in a cutesy way, and Seungmin couldn’t even hide the disgust and pure annoyance that Hyunjin had first interrupted him and then stole everyone’s attention away from him.

Seungmin rolled his eyes and glared at his bowl, the sourness he felt in the back of his throat quelling his appetite.

“Thanks for dinner, but I need to go study” he excused himself from the group, plastering an
obviously forced smile on his face.

“Min, are you sure you’re full?” Minho asked, his eyes trained on Seungmin’s retreating figure.

“Yeah” Seungmin affirmed, dumping the last of his noodles into the bin, the worm of guilt returning as he wasted food. “I need to go study–”

“Haven’t you done a lot of studying recently hyung?” Jeongin questioned, and Seungmin flinched at his words.

“I’ll just be in my room” he grumbled and exited the living room, leaving his members behind. When he reached his bedroom he burrowed into his duvet, ruining the meticulous work he had put into making everything neat earlier, and stayed there for a few minutes, letting himself recover.

_I can’t waste any more time_ he wrinkled his nose and with one last listen to hear if anyone was coming down the hall, he carefully slipped his secret timetable out of his pillowcase.

_It says here I have scheduled to do one hour of history revision, one hour of memorising my ASC script that I got a while ago, and half an hour of Korean Studies. That should be fine – it’s only eight-thirty now so if I get all of that done then I have one hour to do extra study, or maybe even catch up on some sleep._

Seungmin dragged himself off his soft bed, re-hiding his timetable, and got down to work. He had no time to waste after all, not when he had to improve, to be perfect.

At ten, just as he finished up learning the first few paragraphs on his ASC script, he heard a knock at the door.

“Seung? It’s me, can I come in?”

Seungmin threw the script, that he was already beginning to forget, back on his desk and called out a ‘yes.’

“You working?” Jisung asked as he entered and Seungmin replied with a silent yawn
lolling back on his chair. Seungmin blinked his eyes harshly when a sensation of light-headedness washed over him and it took him a moment to readjust himself and stare back at his hyung, who was now seated on the edge of his bed.

“You should get Channie-hyung or Felix to help you with that” Jisung nodded towards the script discarded haphazardly on the unclean table, covered in highlighters, a dictionary and Seungmin’s history notes.

“Nah” Seungmin said tiredly, stifling another yawn as he plopped down next to Jisung. “I don’t wanna annoy them.”

Seungmin wished, upon seeing Jisung’s slight concern, that he could bite those words back up, but he was too tired to even backtrack and justify himself.

“They won’t get annoyed with you, Min. They like to think they’re important and Australian” Jisung joked, mocking Felix’s and Chan’s accents in distorted English.

Seungmin let out a burst of genuine laughter at that and flopped back onto his pillows. “It’s alright Jisung-hyung” he sobered up and let down his strong stature for a few moments as he felt sleep call him. “I’m okay.”

“Okay” Jisung laughed with a tinge of melancholy on his tongue. Seungmin felt the elder wrap his strong arms around his midsection and the younger wriggled closer to the touch. “Let’s go to sleep for now, yeah?”

Seungmin hummed and felt the bed dip as Jisung rested his head next to his own. Their heavy breaths mingled in the warm bedroom air and with each passing moment, Seungmin felt his body getting heavier and heavier.

All he could hope for, as consciousness left him, was that Jisung did not hear the crinkle of thin paper under his head, where all his secrets lay, written in hurried ink.

Chapter End Notes

Wow! A chapter one month and 18 days after the last one! I would never! but look where we are haha. I am truly sorry that this is literally so late; I got caught up in
school and then my mental health took a nose drive for two weeks and i had no motivation to write.

To make matters worse, next chapter will probably be out late November if I actually focus on school ofr a while lol. DW I'm still planning to finish this story before the 1st of January, so I guess there will be a lot of chapters as early holiday gifts.

What did you think of this chapter? Honestly not a lot happened but it was necessary. Also I kind of love Beomwon??

TITLE: Hollow
- Basically Seungmin feels hollow and the worm of guilt is eating al his emotions
- His eyes are dull and hollow because he hasn't been sleeping enough so they lost its shine

Sorry, I'm pretty tired when writing this because I wanted to finish this chapter today but just wanted to let you all know I love you, get some sleep and hydrate yourself, comment below whatever you want, go do something brave because why tf not.

Peace out and thanks for reading - no update due date for next chapter but probs like 30th of November ;3;
Talic <33333
Seungmin walked uncomfortably towards the bus-stop and tried to pretend he was listening to Felix’s idle chatter beside him.

Everything was going wrong.

The morning had all been a blur – he woke up early to practise his vocals at JYP Entertainment, which all sounded slurried due to his swollen lip and therefore spent more time in the vocal studio to get it right, and then was running late the whole morning. Just as he showered, got dressed, ignored Jeongin so he wasn’t annoying the younger, grabbed a banana for breakfast and went to leave out the door, Woojin’s yell had made him pause.

“Min! Wait up! Felix wants to go with you!”

Thant’s when he knew he was well and truly screwed.

“Okay” he had still yelled back anyway, and nervously waited until Felix popped out of the house, his smile as bright as the early rising sun.

“Let’s go Seungmin!” Felix had grinned and Seungmin could only reply with a stout nod.

Now, on the ten-minute walk to the bus-stop, Seungmin was trying to think of anything to say to the elder but his brain was in short-circuit. Luckily, Felix seemed as oblivious as ever, a trait that both Australians shared, and kept rambling about what television show he was watching, or what funny thing Changbin said yesterday.

“And then Jisung was so confused as to why we were laughing and- Min, are you even listening?”
Seungmin snapped his gaze away from the sidewalk and looked guiltily into Felix’s wide eyes. He’d been caught.

“Sorry Hyung, I’m just a bit out of it today” Seungmin admitted, hoping that the older boy wouldn’t question or pester him for answers.

Felix said nothing and looked away from him. And somehow that was worse.

The sounds of their feet scuffing against the path, slightly out of time to the point that it was noticeable, echoed in the air. Seungmin clenched his fist tighter and re-fixed his facemask.

They arrived at the bus stop in silence.

“At least I’ll get to meet some of your friends on the bus,” Felix said weakly as the bus pulled up to the stop. Seungmin almost whacked his head off the doors in stupidity. Of course! His whole excuse for getting the bus in the first place was to see his friends – and now his lies were going to be exposed again.

“I’m not sure they’re on it today…” Seungmin feebly said as the pair sat down with no Cheongdam students in sight.

_Dammit! Even having Hyunwoo here, and not suspended, would do me some good. The boy’s an idiot, sure, but he would never punch me in front of a whole crowd of people, and not with a member by my side!_

From the way Felix’s shoulders were tensed, and his eyebrows furrowed in understanding Seungmin knew his time was up. He stiffened at the Australian’s heavy sigh.

“Why do you keep lying to us Minnie?” the boy asked sadly like _he_ was the one being called out.

Seungmin didn’t know what to say, so with a small ‘sorry’, the two lapsed back into an unresolved quiet.
They sat together until the market was in view. Felix got off the bus without another word. Seungmin watched him go.

As the bus started back up again, one stop away from Cheongdam, Seungmin thought that he had never felt so pitifully alone.

With his facemask still perched on his nose, Kim Seungmin sat through his first lesson with ease. It was mathematics – and although one month ago he would have been struggling, it seemed all those late nights made the current area of study somewhat easy, almost even enjoyable. Maybe enjoyable was a bit of a stretch, but he found himself staring out the window, wondering what STAY or his members were doing without the guilt of falling behind.

After the situation with Felix that morning, Seungmin vowed to do better that day. He would make all his apologies, be friendly and kind and everything he was supposed to be.

He couldn’t fail – not when he had already ruined so much at home.

Haeun, sitting beside him stayed uncharacteristically quiet.

*I have to do better with her than I did with Felix this morning* Seungmin re-decided, turning his attention to the short fiery girl, his friend, next to him. *I can’t just leave without apologizing.*

He pulled down his facemask in preparation.

When the bell rang, Haeun quickly began to collect her books, but as Seungmin extended a hand she paused.

“What?” she said with flames on her tongue, and Seungmin felt a slight fear travel through his veins. “Here to talk shit to me again?”

“No” Seungmin replied, hating how his voice cracked awkwardly. He cleared his throat and straightened up. “I’m sorry about a few days ago Haeun, I was acting selfishly and I snapped at you when you were just trying to help me, and I… I don’t know I’m just really sorry.”
Haeun didn’t say anything for a moment and just stared into his eyes. He felt his heart sink at her silence. Then her shoulders slumped, and she tiredly ran a hand through her bobbed-dyed hair.

“It’s alright Min, I guess I can be a little overbearing sometimes too” she joked and Seungmin just stared back at her with shock.

A nickname?

“M-Min?” his voice squeaked. He dumbfoundedly pointed to himself “You called me Min?”

“Yeah” she laughed, collecting her books off her desk. “I can’t keep calling you Seungmin, can I? It’s about time you were gifted with a Haeun-special nickname!”

He smiled and remembered when his biggest worry at school was not having a ‘Haeun-special’ name. Despite it not being a large problem now, he still gave the girl a thumbs up with a grin. “Thank you. Friends?”

Haeun laughed again. “Yeah, Min. Friends.”

So Seungmin walked out of math class with a partner.

Lunch was a slightly awkward but spirited affair.

He sat with Dayun, Haeun and Seojun, together enjoying the lunch special of beef bulgogi and a carton of strawberry milk. Well three of them were eating it. Seungmin couldn’t help but flash Dayun a few fleeting concerned glances as she picked at her meal. Haeun and Seojun hadn’t noticed the reason why the thin girl always brought extra napkins to the table, nor had they noticed how each lunchtime the white tissue would be a bundle of uneaten food.

Seungmin, however did notice it this lunchtime, cursing himself for choosing to be so blind to it before. As he never involved himself with his friends, he never knew when they were struggling – but now as Seungmin watched with a keener eye, he could see that Dayun had lost weight as
compared to the beginning of the year almost dangerously quickly.

Still, he couldn’t speak up about it now. He had learnt enough about disordered eating in the mandatory physical and mental health classes JYP had forced all the trainees to attend, and he knew that bluntly stating it would lead nowhere.

He especially could not speak up about it now, not when Seojun, who was usually quite stoic, was in such a great mood.

“So, I got an email back from Seoul National University just then, and I was confirmed as in the ten per cent of people who might be chosen for early access and full scholarship! Do you know what that means? I am so close to getting into SNU!” he threw his head back in delight. Seungmin couldn’t help the smile with the group and watched as Haeun and Seojun did their iconic fist bump across the table.

“That is so great, Seojunnie! I’m so proud” Haeun wiped away a mock tear. “I can’t believe my boy is going to Korea’s best university!”

The slightly less acne-ridden and tired looking Seojun laughed again, all forms of his usual brooding and sarcastic demeanour wiped off his face. “It’s not set in stone, but I feel like all my hard work has finally paid off!”

“What do you think Da-Da?” Haeun asked, and Seungmin watched as the thin girl took a moment to respond.

“It’s really amazing Seojun” she replied, but it sounded strained. She picked at her food again.

Seungmin tried to tune back into Seojun and Haeun’s conversation again, but in just a few seconds it had moved on to anime or sports – honestly, Seungmin was incompetent in both of them unless it was baseball so he barely knew the difference.

It was time to take his leave. After all, if he wanted to stay on track with his routine, which so far, he had been doing today, he had to squeeze in at least half-an-hour at lunch.

“I’m going to go study for a bit” he announced, picking up his empty lunch tray his drink. “See you in History, Dayun?”
The girl nodded back feebly, and the toil of concern in his chest wrapped tighter. Had her hair always looked that brittle? Had she always been that pale?

“Bye guys,” Seungmin said and smiled at Haeun’s chorus of ‘bye Min’ back to him.

He dumped his tray in the dirty tray box and wiped his hands.

*If I complete my math homework now, I can spend the time after dance practice tonight updating my English vocabulary sheet* Seungmin pondered, thinking back to his homework from previous lessons as he walked to his locker. *Next, though, I have Korean Studies and then History.*

Seungmin already felt his heart fill with dread. He still hadn’t formally apologized for his outburst at Mrs Kim yet. And there was nowhere it could be pushed back for any longer. Today was the day – and Seungmin didn’t think he would ever be ready. Although he still stood by for what he did, he had to show respect and move on, there was no other option.

*Let’s not think about that now* Seungmin shook his head as if to rid the thought from his mind. *Now I need to focus on math.*

As he turned away from his locker, with his books in one hand and drink in the other, he felt unease spike through him, as if warning him of something coming from behind him. With narrowed eyes, he whipped around to face whatever was behind him but there was no one there.

*What the hell?* He questioned and looked up and down the hallway again. There was nothing there. Seungmin hurried past Classroom 53, the room feeling somewhat childish to escape to whenever an issue worried him and instead went to the library, the constant buzz of danger staying with him the whole walk there.

However, as soon as he stepped into the library and saw Beomwon, his dangly earrings sparkling in the noon sunlight through the window, his fear died down immediately. The boy was back in the library again, this time with math homework and looked as confused as ever.

Seungmin looked back at his hands and smiled when he saw what was in his left one. *Maybe he just needs some motivation.*
He felt an odd sense of courage fill him as he walked to the boy who once shoved his against a locker for no reason at all.

“Hey Beomwon, take this” Seungmin said bluntly and threw his carton of strawberry milk at him, which the other expertly caught. Seungmin almost laughed at the other’s now even more baffled expression.

“Why?” Beomwon cleared his throat and juggled the pink carton in his hands.

“I prefer chocolate,” Seungmin said and grinned when the other looked genuinely offended. Beomwon smirked and stabbed his metal straw that he conjured out on his pocket into the carton and took a sip.

“Thanks, man.”

With that Seungmin turned away, slightly smug with himself and sat directly next to Younghun.

“O-Oh, hi” Younghun stuttered and moved his chemistry books to the side to give Seungmin some more room.

“Mind if I sit?” Seungmin asked politely, despite already settling into the space.

“N-Not at all” Younghun replied and the pair drifted into a comfortable silence as they worked.

Seungmin churned through his math questions quickly, efficiently working until he completed all the night’s homework. For the last ten minutes before until the bell for the start of the fifth period rang, he mulled over his apology letter to Mrs Kim and though of what he would say to her in a mere matter of minutes. Time, however, was not on his side as before he even thought of half his speech, the bell sounded through the otherwise quiet library.

“Thanks for the note, Younghun” Seungmin thanked, pulling himself out of his thoughts, before he left. Younghun looked up at him in surprise. “And… sorry for not stepping in before…”

Younghun furrowed his brows in thought and sparked up when he seemed to recollect the situation
where Seungmin had just kept walking and left him to get beaten up. “Ah, d-don’t worry about it” he sniffed and adjusted his boxy glasses on his slim face. “What matters is what you’re doing now.”

Seungmin stopped packing up his pencil case in surprise at Younghun’s insightful words. “Y-Yeah, I guess so” Seungmin felt his ears turn red in embarrassment at the praise. “Let’s keep in contact, yeah?”

Younghun seemed to light up like a light bulb at that. “Y-Yeah” he beamed and Seungmin felt his heart swell at the other’s excitement at the prospect. “I’d like that Kim Seungmin.”

“And I apologize for my actions that interrupted the class environment and were disrespectful to both you and my classmates. My behaviour was incessant and completely unacceptable, I hope that you can find it in yourself to accept my apology.” Seungmin hung his head lower, in a bowing position, as he spoke. “Once again, I promise that nothing like this will ever happen again, and I regret my actions sincerely.”

Mrs. Kim stayed didn’t move from what Seungmin could see of her body and that was making him more nervous. It was the end of class, which had been the most uncomfortable thing Seungmin had suffered through the whole day, and now once the other students had left the room he proposed his letter and speech to her.

His back began to strain as he continued to bow, and she continued to stay quiet. Jesus - he’d really just rather be hit with her ruler than be left like this.

“Get up Kim Seungmin” her voice was harsh as she barked out the order and Seungmin immediately complied, standing straight as if he was in the military. He waited as she glared at him. “Your behaviour was indescribably disrespectful and a complete embarrassment to yourself, your peers, myself and Cheongdam High included.”

Seungmin hung his head lower in shame, his facemask stuffed into his pocket so it couldn’t mask his reddening face.

“Howevver,” she barked loudly, almost making Seungmin jump in shock. Her face softened. “You are forgiven.” Now that was somehow even more shocking. In an instant, her face returned to the harsh lines and sharp wrinkles it held moments prior and with a blunt ‘you are dismissed’ and a quick bow from Seungmin the conversation was over.
Well if anything I’m sure I’ve got the gold medal in how many apologies one can administer a day. Seungmin attempted to joke to himself as he carefully placed his facemask over his bruised lip and chin. One class down. One to go.

Throughout History, all Seungmin could think about was one thing. Not the actual content he was supposed to be learning, but how in the world was he going to help Dayun. Helping Dayun, who he barely knew for a matter of fact, seemed like an impossible task, but after apologizing to Mrs Kim anything seemed plausible. Besides, the strange buzzing had returned, and it seemed like it was begging for him to get it done today.

He couldn’t take one more minute of waiting, so he swallowed his dignity and leaned in close to Dayun. Like Woojin always said, there was really no time like the present after all. “Hey Dayun” he gulped not even knowing where to begin this difficult conversation. “Are you like… okay?”

When she stared back at him incredulously Seungmin immediately cursed himself for being so terrible at these deep confronting type of conversations.

“Like” he started again and tried to make it as quiet and casual as possible so no one would overhear. “Recently I’ve been noticing you haven’t really been eating that much? And I just wanted to know if you were alright… and stuff?”

Dayun just continued to stare back at him and Seungmin felt his cheeks under his facemask go on fire.

She sighed and picked at her acrylic blue nails. “I’m okay, but not really, ya know?” she laughed under her breath, an overwhelming melancholy with her words. “It’s just stuff at home and I don’t know… me being insecure or whatever has been really making me want control over something.” she paused and Seungmin pretended he didn’t notice how eyes were beginning to turn watery.

“Sorry for loading this all on you” she laughed again, but it came out as choked. “It’s just no one has ever asked me something like that before.”

Seungmin nodded slowly and closed his eyes in thought. He knew he usually had to be careful about what he was saying, especially as Dayun was a fan of Stray Kids herself, but the sense to make her feel less alone overpowered his idol duties.
“I know what you mean.”

Dayun looked away from her shaking hands in surprise and Seungmin quickly covered himself up. “Like not with eating or anything, but longing to have control in life.” He paused. Was he seriously going to spill his darkest feelings to a person that admittedly her barely knew or even really liked until recently?

He swallowed the lump in his throat. “Recently…” he started, looking at his notebook in front of him. “Recently, I’ve been pretty all over the place and pushing myself too hard and not sleeping and I think the whole lack of control was the reason why I snapped in class.” ‘And out of it’ his mind provided darkly, but Seungmin pushed it down.

“So, I guess in some ways I know how you feel – this whole… self-destructive thing we seem to have going on” he attempted a joke and Dayun laughed, her eyes still teary, but happiness rather than sadness on her thin face.

“Thanks for telling me Seungmin, I promise I won’t repeat any of it to another soul!” she smiled crossing her fingers in promise.

“Dayun! Pay attention!” their history teacher, Miss Lim, snapped but Dayun seemed to pay her no mind. Seungmin marvelled at how she was completely unaffected by the scolding and how quickly the smile, so opposite to the one she wore at lunchtime, returned to her face.

He didn’t notice that smile before – her genuine smile. It was wide and bright – not tight-lipped like all the ones that he had seen before and had previously disliked. The Dayun next to him was the real Dayun. He didn’t know how he used to find himself irked by her every action that just felt so insincere.

Her smile made him feel like he had achieved first place in a strange sort of competition – it made him feel happy.

“Tell you what Seungmin, I think we should be recovery buddies then.”

“Recovery buddies?” he scoffed light-heartedly and turned away.
“I’m serious!” she squeaked, grabbing his arm, and muttering a quick cheery ‘sorry’ to the student beside them that told her to be quiet. “I could try to eat a little more and you could try to ‘push yourself too far and not sleep’ a little less, and we could like, help each other!”

Seungmin laughed at how enthusiastic she seemed to be about the whole thing, so with a handshake the deal was made.

If only it had been that easy.

“Nice work on that turn Hyunjin” Seungmin heard Minho yell and he felt the buzz at the back of his head grow stronger as he danced to the pounding bass of ‘My Pace.’ The team was practising all their older songs to make sure they all knew the choreography meticulously despite the break from learning them.

Seungmin was, in fact, having a horrendous time.

His whole body seemed to protest with every bounce, leap, and spin and the hum that had been distant during school hours had gradually increased to a throbbing pulse at the back of his mind, making his head feel like it was seconds away from exploding.

It was even worse that Hyunjin, the ever-so-perfect Hwang Hyunjin was constantly getting praised, even by Jeongin who barely gave out compliments. It seemed that he himself was the only one in the room that hadn’t commented on the elder’s ‘powerful moves’ or ‘great looks’ or ‘amazing exam results.’

Seriously – he was getting sick off all the sweet sugary phrases thrown at his roommate every three minutes.

Seungmin scoffed when he heard Chan praise Hyunjin again in one session. He glared into the mirror, only focusing on his own sweaty, dull-looking reflection, and frowned sharply. He had to do better.

‘Insomnia’ started to play through the speakers and Seungmin almost laughed hysterically. When recording this, Seungmin had felt he identified with the lyrics and issues discussed to a finite beat. Ha. If only past-Seungmin could see himself now.
“Min!” Changbin’s quick yell made him stop loathing himself and focus on his surroundings. He blushed and bit his lip, despite the cut on it, in embarrassment. He had missed the starting cue.

“Felix, move your arm to the left more! Woojin, lower your balance!”

Minho’s critiques were unapologetic and scalding from his position standing at the front of the room, leaving a gap in the formation of nine dancers.

“Seungmin! Focus!”

Seungmin bit his lip harder, frustration pulsing throughout his body as he spun and tuned and moved in time to the music.

*Why is my body so slow? Why do I feel like I’m slightly out of time? Why can’t I do better than this?*

The song came to a close and Seungmin immediately grabbed his water bottle from the right side of the room to ease his throbbing mind. He looked in the mirror again – it was almost like there was a chasm between the group with him on one side as the other eight members on the other. It was stupid really – he hadn’t even noticed that he was the only one who placed his water bottle on the opposite side of the room as compared to his teammates when they had all arrived three hours ago.

It was an unconscious decision – and those were the ones that were most telling after all.

Quickly, he wiped his brow of the sweat that had formed there with the hem of his clothes– happy to be wearing a white, not grey shirt this time. Before it fluttered down though, the bruise on his waist stuck out starkly against his tanned skin. It was fading at least. He looked down to his knee and marvelled that the bruise and scar there last week were gone.

*At least something is going well* Seungmin thought, ignoring the bruise on his face, that upon remembering, started to pulsate in pain, making his scowl even deeper.

“Great job for that last part Hyunjinnie” Jisung said encouragingly from the other side of the room
and Seungmin couldn’t hide his annoyance; it exposed itself the form of a cruel, loud, huff.

That seemed to be the final straw.

“Min! What’s your problem with me today?” Hyunjin turned on him, his face in an angry state, his eyes on fire.

“Nothing!” Seungmin bit back, before taking another swig from his water bottle, hoping that Chan would just hurry up and turn on the next song.

“It’s obviously not nothing, Seungmin, you’ve been acting like a dick to me for the past few days” Hyunjin stated, walking across the line that separated Seungmin from the rest, and moving until he was only one step away. “Just tell me what I did to make you annoyed with me now!”

Seungmin felt the buzzing grow louder until it was all he could hear. The cut on his lip stung and he clenched his fist tightly to distract himself from the pain and Hyunjin’s words. His temper that had been left to sizzle all throughout practice, rose in an instant, creating a hot, dangerous mess.

“You, you, you – why do you make everything about yourself Hyunjin?” He growled, poking the other sharply once in the chest. “Seriously, it’s really beginning to piss me off!”

Hyunjin scoffed dramatically in disbelief. “Are you kidding, Seungmin? You’re the one who has been creating all of the teams’ issues in the first place!”

_Ouch_, Seungmin winced but Hyunjin’s remarks only made his resentment grow.

“Oh, _fuck off_ Hyunjin! You always act like you’re so much better than me and ‘so perfect’ just because you have a pretty face, but face it – the only thing you’re good at is being a visual promotion for Stray Kids and being over-emotional” Seungmin retaliated and felt guilt settle in as he targeted Hyunjin’s most deep-rooted insecurities.

“Hey, why don’t we just settle down-” Jisung, always the peacemaker started to say, but Hyunjin interrupted him.
“Oh my God Seungmin! You are unbelievable! What are you going to do, huh? Push me like you pushed Chan-hyung?”

Seungmin pretended not to notice the tears that were starting to stream down Hyunjin’s soft cheeks and felt his anger rise again.

“Why-” Hyunjin’s voice cracked into an ugly sob and Seungmin took a step back – a step closer to the door.

But instead he felt frozen, like a deer in headlights and Hyunjin’s breakdown was the car about to slam into him. Hyunjin sniffed again and Seungmin felt his head start to hurt, even more, the buzzing grew louder and louder and louder-

“Why won’t you stay with me, Seungminnie?”

Seungmin felt his heart stop. He knew what the elder was referring to – it was all those times he had woken up early and made excuses to leave. It was all those times he left Hyunjin alone.

He needed to defend himself.

He had only done it to be perfect – to be more like Hyunjin.

“I would have-” Seungmin broke off, searching for the right words. In a flash he remembered the van, the Australian’s looking at each other uncertainly, and he remembered the Naver App.

“I would have” Seungmin started again, feeling his eyes swell with tears. “If you weren’t so god-darn clingy!”

He spat the English word out and he knew he had said both the right and wrong thing when he saw Hyunjin’s face fall even more. That word was the sword Seungmin dug through Hyunjin’s chest – the killer.

Seungmin had won and it felt like the worst thing in the world.
But he couldn’t fathom another apology, so he grabbed his bottle and his backpack and ran.

For the second time in four days, he arrived at Subin-noona and Frankie’s 24 Hour Dance Studio. When he opened the door, with money to pay for his time, Frankie seemed surprised to see him but rather happy to.

“The small studio to the left is open – Subin-noona is coming in an hour or so if you want to see her.”

“Thanks,” Seungmin said and walked into the dance room, smelling the thick scent of sweat in the air. For some reason it comforted him – it reminded him of hard work and the safety of dancing to choreography. It was therapeutic really – the repetition the strictly timed movements and the flow of the beats leading to the climax of the dance-break – it mindless and that was what Seungmin desired.

He desired not having to think. That was what he needed right now.

So, he plugged his phone in and started to dance.

Three songs in, his phone started to ring, cutting off the happy-go-lucky upbeat sound of ‘Get Cool’, the song contrasting his current mood. It was Woojin. He slicked his hair back and quickly clicked ‘deny.’

The room cut out into silence and after a second’s delay ‘Get Cool’ started again. Just as he got back into position, the sound of the ringtone echoed into the room again.

*Now it’s Jisung* Seungmin felt his head start to hurt again. The buzzing returned.

He clicked ‘deny’ again and changed the song to MIROH, something that he could take out his anger out on.

The siren sounds came through the room again and he sighed in relief and closed his eyes.
Everything was fine, no his head wasn’t hurting, he was fine, he was fine, he was fine-

His eyes shot open as his stupid ringtone blared through the room again, interrupting his calm flow.

He only felt one thing; irritation.

Seungmin stomped over to his phone, angrily picked it up and hit accept.

“What?” he snarled into the line.

“I’ve got him” Seungmin heard someone, probably Minho, say in the background before speaking again, much closer to the phone in a no-bullshit tone. “Seungmin you need to come home now.”

“Not now Minho-hyung” Seungmin sighed pacing the room uselessly, itching to get back to practice as soon as possible. “Look I’m safe okay? I’m not at JYP so don’t come looking for me, alright?”

“That is unacceptable Seungmin, stop acting so childish and let one of the managers get you now, okay? Please everyone is worried – we can’t spend our whole night looking for you again-”

“Then don’t!” Seungmin screamed into the phone and hung up. He threw the phone down at his feet and buried his head into his hands, exhaustion making his body fall to the floor in a dishevelled ‘thump.’

Why am I so immature? I’m a failure – just like the comments said thoughts spun around in his mind and it made him feel nauseous. He felt like he was about to throw up – was he about to throw up?

The buzzing became defeating.

His phone rang again.

“Shut up!” He howled and pitched his phone across the room like it was a baseball. It smacked
against the wall, then fell to the floor with a sickening crack and Seungmin curled up on the floor at the sound.

He really hoped that it wasn’t broken – how could he explain *that* to his members.

*Maybe I can just go to sleep* Seungmin thought, the pain in his head becoming unbearable and making him drowsy. *I’ll go back to the dorms tomorrow…*

The sound of ‘Victory Song’ played in his mind and lulled him to sleep to ease the excruciating silence of the studio.

The song was all about winning but as he let himself cry, his face pressed to a wooden floor with all forms of contact shattered at his doing, he sure felt the biggest loser in the whole world.

Chapter End Notes

Heyy!

NEXT UPDATE: December 10th

CHAPTER TITLE: WINNER
- Seungmin is winning at life at school - making other's lives better and everything - making up with people, making new friends with Beomwon and Younghun and helping Dayun with her eating disorder-esc situation.
- Seungmin wins the argument with Hyunjin but it makes him feel terrible - opposite of a winner.
- Thinks about 'Victory Song' which is ironic due to last line where he feels like a loser.
- Seungmin hasn't really won at life by the end of the day as he is repeating his mistakes.

SO yeah that's chapter twelve! I hope you liked it! Thank you for the kind comments on my Note about Woojin leaving Stray Kids which I deleted to post this chapter. Basically I'm finishing this fic and will be posting some more despite his departure and supporting him all the way (although I do want some more info on it all tbh)

ANYway not to bring up old scars - personally I'm doing pretty good. As you know if you read this notes, I had my most important exam ever a few weeks ago and unfortunately, I completely screwed it up which I got pretty sad about (also was depressed abt the whole Woojin thing). Basically my straight A's through the whole year means nothing haha.
 kinda TMI but my exercise routine and healthy eating completely stopped rip but the rest of my exams which aren't important at all did well so at least that is good. I know it sounds like I've had a shitty month but right now I'm pretty happy so that's all good. I hope you all are good too!

Sorry for being a bit of a downer in these notes. I hope you enjoyed this chapter! Comment what you think - it'll really motivate me to pump out these last few chapters before the year ends!!

Love you all :)

Talic
WARNING (I feel like there’s a lot of these recently oop) : This chapter contains unsafe use of medication.

_I really feel like I’m in some sort of fucked up time loop_ Seungmin sighed as he woke up on the dance studio’s light blue couch for the second time that week. It was like everything was repeating itself and it was – he got mad, pissed off the members, ran away, did something stupid and woke up all over again.

Even worse, this wasn’t first time of going ‘AWOL.’ Once was less than acceptable, but slightly understandable, but another time just a few days later was inexplicable. He knew when he returned back to dorms, they would be even angrier and more disappointed than last time – and those tired eyes and tired sighs were what he feared the most.

_They’ll probably call the management team to deal with me after school_ Seungmin mused, sitting up off the couch and embarrassingly hiding his small circle of drool while he was sleeping with a ratty pillow. He sniffed and stretched quickly, hearing his bones crack dissatisfying in his body.

_Frankie must have carried me into here last night – I probably fell asleep in the practice room._

“Hey, Min, you’re awake.”

He looked up towards the door and saw a slightly mischievous-looking Subin standing at the door. “Stay another night and you’re gonna’ have to start paying rent!”

Seungmin laughed quietly, appreciating her attempt to get him out of his own head. “Yeah, maybe.”

“I guess this isn’t settling all too well with your members, huh?” she said, sitting beside him on the communal couch. Seungmin just quietly shook his head and they sat together in a few moments of thought.
“Do you have my phone Subin-noona?” he asked, realizing that he didn’t know the time.

“Ah yeah,” she confirmed and pulled a completely destroyed, almost snapped in half mobile out of her hoodie pocket and grimaced at the sight of it. “I don’t think dunking it in a bowl of rice will be solving this one.”

Seungmin murmured a quick and low ‘yeah’ before accepting the phone, if the shattered object could even be classified as that anymore. “I threw it at the wall.”

“Ah” Subin laughed, a genuine whole-hearted sound that made Seungmin look at her as if she was slightly crazy. “That’s where the dent is from.”

His eyes widened in apology but before he could say a quick ‘sorry’ she was already waving him off. “Don’t worry about it – Frankie always loves a good project – it’s something to keep him busy at least.”

Seungmin gathered up his little belongings that were dumped next to the sofa. His black facemask, his keys and his water bottle. He sighed at how pitiful it all was.

“Hey Noona, what’s the time?”

Subin looked at her intact phone and frowned for a second. “Uh, it’s eleven-thirty-”

“Eleven-thirty!” Seungmin shot up off the couch in an instant. “Eleven thirty! My school has already started!”

Her face paled at that. “Oh god, Seungmin! I’m sorry – it’s just I usually work on Friday’s so I completely thought it was the weekend!” She scrambled for her car keys on the side of the room. “YG doesn’t need me until tonight and I have no other dancing lessons, so I can drive you to school right now!”

Seungmin nodded his thanks and followed her, but with a brief ‘I should go back to the dorms first’ and with a waved goodbye to Frankie and some expert spy-like stealth from both the idol and the woman, they snuck out of the rather busy dance studio and into Subin’s beaten-up ride.
“Sorry for the mess” she started but Seungmin just smiled in reassurance that and told her that his room was even worse. Not long after, they hit the road, too late for the school-morning traffic and too early for the bustle of lunch-goers, and within fifteen minutes the car pulled into the street of Stray Kids’ dorm.

“Promise you won’t leak the address online?” Seungmin said, despite knowing the elder would never do such a thing.

“Not unless I get good money for it” Subin joked, but her face grew grave at the seriousness of the situation. “Min, I don’t want to pry or anything, but I’m betting you… left unannounced from your members yesterday and came to mine, right?”

Seungmin nodded, his facemask covering his downturned lips, as the car pulled up to the curb.

Subin huffed uncomfortably squirming around in her seat as she put the car into ‘park.’ “Just be safe, yeah? I know you’re going to get a lot of shit for it all and if you need me, I can be your scapegoat and your host if ever necessary, okay?” She smiled at Seungmin with a playful wink, her humourless expression wiped off her face in an instant. “I can take a few mean words from JYP management too so if you need someone to blame, blame me!”

Seungmin smiled gratefully but he already knew he couldn’t drag Subin into his already catastrophic mess. “You’ve already done so much for me Noona – thanks for letting me sleep on the couch and everything.”

“Don’t stress” she rolled her eyes over-dramatically. “I basically own the place with Frankie as we’ve been going there for so long and you’re always a welcome guest – drop by if you ever need anything.”

She took another looks at Seungmin and suddenly he felt as if she could see right through him.

“Oh my god – don’t make this sound as if it’s a goodbye or whatever guilt-complex thingy-mijig you have going up in that big brain of yours,” she said, waving her hand in a circle towards his forehead for dramatic effect. “If you don’t show your face then I’m walking right into JYP, yeah?”

“Yeah” Seungmin pulled down his mask to show his appreciative smile. “I’ll come by, and this time I promise I’ll have told my members where I’m at.”
“Okay” she grinned and reached over to give him a huge hug in their seats. “See you around Minnie.”

Seungmin pulled his mask up, half-heartedly steeling his eyes so they lost the playful attitude they had just drowned with and collected himself. He clutched onto his water bottle as he exited the car and gave a mediocore reassuring thumbs-up to Subin and watched as she drove away.

He turned towards the door, the wood appearing big and scary as it loomed over him like a monster.

It was time.

It took Seungmin a few moments to collect himself before knocking on the door, but now he was just delaying the inevitable.

He sucked in a breath to calm his fearful heart and brought his hand up to the wood.

_Knock. Knock. Knock._

There were a few dreadful seconds of silence until Woojin pulled open the door.

The dismay on his face was something that Kim Seungmin would never forget.

“He’s home” Woojin called to the people behind him that Seungmin couldn’t see and slowly the door opened. Seungmin did the walk of shame through the hallway and when he turned into the living room, he felt his eyes fill with tears.

Sitting on the couch was his members but this time they didn’t look sorrowful or scared – they were angry.

He bit his bruised lip under his facemask and stared at them – his vision tunnelling in until they
were all he could see. He ignored the management team around him. All he saw were eight pairs of eyes filled with rage, hurt, concern and disappointment.

It was almost funny really – the whole reason why Seungmin started this whole thing in the first place was so he didn’t disappoint people. Yet here he was – bruised, a runaway, and a failure to the people he actually cared about – not just the fifteen people he had been trying to please at the start.

He had well and truly fucked it up. And he was so lost he had no idea what to do to fix it.

He felt his eyes water.

“My Minnie, what have you done?”

He froze. He knew that voice from anywhere – he had grown up with it and he heard it over the phone.

He turned to his left.

There stood his mother, wrapped up in winter clothes like armour and looking more tired, old and fragile than Seungmin had ever seen her.

That’s when Seungmin let the first tear slip down.

“Eomma, I’m sorry-”

“Sorry won’t change anything!” she yelled and Seungmin flinched back at her sharp but truthful words. He pulled down his facemask.

“Eomma” he pleaded, not caring that both his members and the management team were watching him. “I promise I won’t-”

“Your word” she hissed, her eyes shiny and wet. She stopped in front of him until they were face to face, mother to son. “Your word means nothing to me!”
He felt his heart shatter.

“You need help, Seungmin! Can’t you see that?” she continued and grasped his hand tightly tears of her own leaking from her eyes. “You can’t keep doing this anymore- running away from your issues Minnie, my Minnie, it must end today, do you understand?”

Her voice was soft but urgent and that was the only thing that made him nod.

“We’re thinking you can skip a day of school today” Chan piped up from the sofa but Seungmin couldn’t bring himself to meet his leader’s eyes. “There are some specialists ready to talk to you at the company when you arrive.”

_Huh, Seungmin managed to think. They aren’t asking me for my opinion, so it looks like I’m getting ‘help’ whether I like it or not._

“After that, you’ll be driven back here and we’ll all have a talk” Chan motioned to the members on the couch and as much as Seungmin hated the thought of having to explain all his hardships to his members, the very thing he didn’t want to burden or annoy them with, he nodded.

What else could he do?

“Is that okay?” Jisung asked and Seungmin felt him closed heart open slightly at Jisung’s wide-eyed caring expression.

Currently, the only member he could bear to talk to was the elder after all.

“Sure” he mumbled in a non-committed sort of way but that served as ‘good enough’ as before he knew it, he was being led out of the living room and out of the dorm.

The buzzing in his mind returned.

It overpowered all thoughts – it overpowered all his movement. It seemed to take over his whole
body and leave him numb and breathless as he was gently pushed into the back of a car.

He didn’t bother to watch the street go by.

He sat alone in the car and briefly wondered where his mother was now, and how she had gotten to the dorms so quickly in the first place. He wondered what his members did all of last night and this morning. He found that he couldn’t focus enough on a single train of thought to have any emotional response.

All he felt was numbness and tiredness and the strange feeling of being disconnected from the rest of his body.

Like he was floaty and at peace despite the shitshow that was the daily in his life. But he was confused at the same time.

He noticed blankly that it started to rain, the droplets hitting the windows with a soft *pitter-patter*, *pitter-patter*, *pitter-patter* three minutes after it started.

Seungmin rested his forehead to the cold window and soothed the now faint buzz.

He closed his eyes with a defeated sigh and let the car take him away.

“So Seungmin, what would you like to talk about today?”

He looked up from where his hands were fiddling nervously with surprise. He sure as hell wasn’t expecting the therapist, a tall woman named Dr Song to treat him so… *nicely* after all of his outbursts and breakdowns. When he had entered the room, one of his managers guiding him there, he was expecting a clipboard, and a sofa, and a million drilling questions that left him exhausted.

The ‘intervention’ as Manager Jung had called it, was nothing like he expected, or like how the movies portrayed it.
He settled into his chair, slightly more comfortable than he had been when he first arrived but his mind was fighting a war with itself.

One side wanted to keep up the façade, the mask that had ruled and determined his life for the past weeks. It strived for nothing less than perfection and Seungmin knew, that without it, the side that made his practice and not let his weaknesses show, perfection was impossible. The other half was defeated – at a loss for what to do and how to move on. Sure, he had wrapped up his loose ends at school yesterday, but the relationship with himself, management, his members and even his mother was shattered beyond belief.

The game was done. His time was up.

Right in front of him was a person that wouldn’t judge him, keep his secrets with him, and would help him. The didn’t care that he had run away from home twice, and they didn’t care that he pushed and screamed at those closest to him – all Dr Song was there to do was to help him.

But to let her do that was to spill his fears, his worries, his secrets that he had tried so hard to keep. It was what kept him going after three hours of practice – the fear of never being good enough, the worry that he was a burden to the team, the secret that by doing this, he barely knew who he was anymore.

_I can’t explode again_ he decided and grasped his hands together in determination. And if that means all I have to do is talk, I must do it. I can’t – I can’t hurt my friends anymore…

“I just want to talk about me” he murmured self-consciously looking at the floor in front of him. “I don’t know… I know that I’m not really… okay right now?”

“Of course,” Dr Song smiled kindly at him and it made the nervousness fluttering around in his chest ease slightly. “We’re here to talk about whatever you want to Seungmin.”

“Well” he started but paused, not knowing where to start. Everything had been going wrong – the hate comments, the bullies, the insomnia, the breakdowns, the constant feeling that he was a failure… where did he even begin?

He sighed, not even knowing what to say.
“I guess it all started a few weeks ago…”

Seungmin walked out of his therapy session more drained than he had been walking in.

It had been two full hours of him spilling every secret he had tried so hard to hide. Or at least almost every secret. He had told Dr Song about the hate comments, his ‘snaps’, both the ones at school and at home, his inability to find a peaceful sleep, how messy and unorganized he was, his shitty mental state, and his runaways.

What he hadn’t told her, despite her gentle questioning, was where he ran away to, and where he stayed the night. Despite Subin offering to take the blame, he couldn’t just push her in front of the bus called JYP Entertainment Lawyers. Who knew what they’d do – maybe even end up punishing her for looking after him for two nights.

Besides, if things started to escalate again, it was always comforting to know he had the dance studio to fall back on. As a last resort.

The other thing he didn’t tell her about was his timetable, still tucked under his pillow.

That was the definition of Seungmin’s dream to be better, not perfect, but better.

One thing Seungmin was willing to give up was everything he had been feeling burdened with – from his constant fights with his members and his friends at school that he still felt guilty about to his unstable mental health.

But, the strive to be better, however extreme Jisung, or anyone else, thought it was, was another thing. And that was something Seungmin wasn’t ready to ‘let go’ as Dr Song had phrased it – that timeline and his early morning and late-night practices were his only path to success. If he told anyone about his timetable, he had worked so hard to firstly create, then secondly hide, they would just take it away from him under the guise of ‘helping him.’

And stopping him from improving wasn’t going to help him.
So Seungmin kept his lips sealed about *that part* of the shitshow called his life. After all, it was the *only* thing that *wasn’t* terrible. It was the only thing that could even give him an option to improve, and in turn not be a failure to ‘Stray Kids’ and after that *not* be a burden to his members which was actually helping *them*.

It was all planned out.

All he had to do was hide one little secret.

*I can do that can’t I?* Seungmin thought as he weaved around the halls of JYP Entertainment. He’d barely been in this wing of the large building before – it was for physical and mental health checkups and he only went just before a comeback every four months or so.

So of course, he managed to get himself lost. It was his own fault really, the buzzing had been so loud in his apprehension for his ‘therapy session’ that he hadn’t listened to the directions on how to get back to the entrance, or the training wing for that matter.

Now, he stood in the middle of the corridor at a ‘fork’ in the road and was doing a classic game of ‘eeny-meeny-miny-moe’ to choose whether to go left or right.

*God,* he sighed and looked at the same coloured wall as the last eighteen had been in bitter distaste. *What has my life even come to?*

“Kim Seungmin? Are you alright?” A familiar high-pitched voice asked and Seungmin turned to see Manager Jung jogging lightly towards him, her hair creating a halo around her round face.

“Oh” Seungmin cleared his throat awkwardly, “Just a bit lost.”

As soon as the words slipped past his lips, Seungmin marvelled at how… *calm* he felt. It was like his fear of being ridiculed by people such as his teachers, his peers or the management team had magically lifted.

After talking about everything he felt… lighter in a sense. More comfortable, more carefree.
“All these halls look the same, huh?” she smiled and Seungmin chuckled with her and wondered if she was really his saving grace of the day.

“Tell me about it, I’ve been here for fifteen minutes!” Seungmin exclaimed, once again in awe of how the joke came naturally to him.

“I’ll take you to the exit, how about that?” the short woman asked, a quirk in her eyebrow.

*Maybe not* he sniffed and at Manager Jung’s surprised face he realised he said his thoughts aloud.

“Can you take me to the dance studio instead?” he pleaded, shaking off his embarrassment and doing his best puppy-dog-eyes to persuade the elder. He quickly abandoned the act when his stomach rolled in unease at the idea of going back to the dorms and he looked away in slight shame. “I just don’t think I’m ready to face the members yet.”

Maybe it was his amazing sad face or his words of truth that made Manager Jung’s face shift from one of uncertainty to one of understanding, because soon enough he found himself walking down the halls of the practice rooms.

“Thank you Manager Jung-nim, I can take it from here” he smiled, stopping outside the Stray Kid’s practice room. With one glance at the room, he noticed that the lights were off under the door, so he thankfully didn’t have to worry about walking into any of his members practising.

“Seungmin, Mr Yoo will come pick you up in an hour to escort you back to the dorms” she started and held up a finger when Seungmin opened his mouth to butt in. “I know what you’re going to say Min, but one hour is a reasonable amount of time for you to do some practice alone. I’m putting my trust in you okay?”

He nodded, understanding the unspoken meaning behind her words – ‘don’t let me down’.

*She’s probably getting in enough glares for leaving me alone* Seungmin bowed gratefully to her as she left him in the hallway. He was glad he dressed in comfortable clothes and runners as that way he could dance for an hour without distraction.
And for his phone – it was his own idea as a trainee to leave an old iPod with all their songs on it for cases just like this. Well not specifically for the case of having a mental breakdown and throwing a phone into a wall leaving it destroyed, but same difference.

With an easy breath, he pushed open the door.

You’ve got to be kidding me.

Right in the middle of the room, practising in the darkness, was no other than Lee Minho.

Of course, Seungmin rolled his eyes, his angsty-teenage-rebellion-stoic mask coming onto his face in an instant. I forgot he practices with the lights off.

“Ah, Seungmin” the other said tightly, taking his air-pods out of his ears when he realised he wasn’t alone. “Come join me, won’t you?”

Seungmin swallowed, feeling nervous as he closed the door behind him and walked over to his hyung, who was now adjusting his clothes. From the looks of it, he’d been there for a while.

‘Probably trying to distract himself from the mess you made’ his brain supplied tauntingly and Seungmin pushed it aside, with guilt heavy on his heart.

He bit his tongue. The buzzing returned.

“H-Hey hyung” Seungmin started off awkwardly and immediately cursed his voice for cracking. “What’s up-”

“Do you remember when we were trainees?” Minho interrupted and sat in the middle off the dark room with a tired sigh, exhaustion lining his every normally bright feature.

Seungmin blinked at the odd question but kept his mask on. Sure, Minho was a strange sort of person in that sense with his seemingly random questions and behaviour, but Seungmin, a self-proclaimed ‘king’ at seeing through and tricking people, just like he had done with the school receptionist Mrs Guk when he arrived late to school all those days age, saw that there was an
underlying motive to the question.

Just like Seungmin, Minho always wore some sort of a façade. Sure, it wasn’t as self-destructive as Seungmin’s was, but on camera or when meeting new people, the dancer always seemed aloof which masked the true level of intellect, perceptiveness and logic that the elder carried.

And after all, Seungmin was the first person Minho had met at JYP once becoming a trainee, and Seungmin knew him enough to know that the question was almost like a clue, a hint to what Minho wanted him to understand.

He took a seat next to the elder. The buzzing in his mind dimmed.

“Yeah, we would always talk about tea” Seungmin laughed at the memory. “We would discuss different types of tea and what they were best for.”

“Chamomile for calming, Ginger for inflammation, Sage for ‘cognitive benefits’” Minho listed fondly, quoting the website they pondered over together when they were supposed to be training.

“Yeah, and Green Tea for its weight loss advantages” Seungmin chuckled, remembering the brutal diets all new trainees had been placed on.

Minho scoffed light-heartedly, obviously thinking the same thing. “We survived off green tea, back then.”

A moment of wistful silence connected the pair in memories.

“When did everything get so complicated?” Seungmin asked sadly, staring at his reflection in the mirror.

He looked exhausted, even without the no doubt hour-or-so Minho had spent dancing his heart out. Without Mrs Park’s makeup stick, his eyebags were beginning to show their true colours.

“Why is everything so hard these days?” he asked his reflection again. Neither it, or the real-life Minho sitting docilely beside him answered, and Seungmin supposed he was supposed to figure
that out on his own.

“It’ll get better Min” the dancer said wisely, but carefully beside him. Seungmin turned to look at him, not his reflection. “It’ll get better, all you need to do is start talking to us, yeah?”

Seungmin looked away and stared at his hands.

“I don’t think I can do that, hyung.”

His sad remark was met with nothing but a quiet and hum. But the quiet and the dark didn’t seem so... trapping like it used to. It was a reflection of their trainee days – often, before Chan asked Minho to join the team and when Seungmin was too fed up to learn some hard choreography from Hyunjin, he would go to the smallest studio where Minho would be practising and join him, no words needing to be shared.

“Let’s dance for a little hyung.”

“Like the old days?” Minho smiled, pulling his navy bucket hat down in preparation.

Seungmin managed a genuine smile back at him. “Yeah, like the old days.”

But as soon as the pair got up, the light flickered on, and the serenity Seungmin had let himself feel with Minho vanished in an instant and he turned to look sharply at the door.

His mask, that he had let slip, returned in full force when he saw who it was. It was Jeongin.

The buzz returned full force and he almost fell over from the strength of it, toppling over to the side as it rang so intensely in his ears like an alarm with never-ending batteries and no ‘stop’ button.

He needed to get out.

Jeongin, who sensed his panic started scrambling for words and rushed over to him but he barely heard anything except for “It’s just me here Seungmin-hyung, not Channie-hyung or Hyunjin.”
“I’m gonna get going” Seungmin growled hoping he wouldn’t annoy Jeongin by just being near him.

“Wait Minnie” Minho started, but Seungmin was already pushing past the youngest and out the door.

_The videos were right, all I do is annoy Jeongin. I can’t annoy him, I can’t be a burden to him, I can’t- _Seungmin let his mind ramble as he swerved down the labyrinth of halls, keeping his eyes trained to the floor.

When he looked up he found himself in a storage closet. Perfect. No one would come looking for him in here-

_Wait Seungmin frowned, his heart racing. I can’t be in here! They’ll think I’ve run away again and then everyone will be mad and then Dr Song will be disappointed in me and then I’ll have let down Manager Jung- I need to get to Mr Yoo as soon as possible, but I don’t have my phone to message him! Maybe I can just wait outside – yeah, anywhere’s better than this closet._

He guessed he was lucky as he snuck out of the building and immediately saw Mr Yoo’s sharp black car at the curb. Maybe it had been ordered to wait there the whole time in case Seungmin actually had tried to run away, but either way, Seungmin was glad and he tried to show it on his face when he got in forty minutes earlier than expected.

“Hey Mr Yoo” he said breathlessly. “Straight to the dorms?”

“You got it” the large man smiled at him in the mirror and Seungmin hoped his face was a happy gesture in return and not a grimace. He settled into the familiar comfortable seats with a relaxed sigh. And then he realised where he was going and who would be waiting there angrily for him and his mind drew all blanks.

_Ah shit._
“Care to explain why Minho just messaged me” Chan cleared his throat rather condescendingly and it took everything for Seungmin not to just walk out of the room then and there. “And I quote ‘Seungmin just ran out of the practice room because Jeongin came in and we can’t find him anywhere’?”

Seungmin shifted uncomfortably with Chan, Changbin and Felix’s eyes all on him. “I didn’t run” he weakly defended himself but at Chan’s cocked eyebrow, the first sign that he was getting angry, he slumped his shoulders in defeat. “Do we have to do this now?”

“Yes, we have to do this now” Changbin glared, fire lacing every word. “There are a lot of things we have to talk about but if you tell us why you ran away from Minho and Jeongin now, I’ll let you save the rest until group talk after dinner.”

Seungmin couldn’t stop his eye twitch in annoyance. Great. ‘Group Talk.’ Like that’s going to solve anything he mockingly thought, despite knowing how helpful the therapy session with Dr Song was just that afternoon.

“Where’s my mum?” he asked instead.

“She went back to talk to your Dad” Felix supplied, less far attacking than the other two. “He had an emergency at work, b-but he’s not hurt or anything, don’t worry” he added on when Seungmin’s eyes widened in concern.

I wonder if she would have even messaged me if I did have a phone, he thought tiredness suddenly overcoming his entire body. “Can we please just do this later?” he pleaded but Changbin and Chan’s eyes remained unforgiving as they glared at him for an explanation.

“Now” Chan demanded and Seungmin felt his stomach spin in unease as he remembered the last time the silver-headed boy was this angry.

“Look I just… I don’t know, I freaked out, okay?” Seungmin scratched his head embarrassedly and felt his cheeks flush and he wished he had a facemask to cover both it and his bruise. “Jeongin and I aren’t… the best right now…”
At the way Chan’s shoulder’s slumped, Seungmin knew he had won a small victory. “We were worried when you left and had a phone, Min, and now that you don’t have one, which we need to talk about, by the way, we need to always know where you are, okay?”

Seungmin nodded, still standing in front of the three like he was on some sort of auditioning program and feeling like he had just sung the worst song ever.

“Someone, Dayun or something left your homework at the JYP reception desk and Jisung very kindly picked it up for you,” Changbin said, picking up some papers from the coffee table that Seungmin hadn’t even noticed was there. “Go do your homework and we’ll call you for dinner.”

Seungmin nodded quietly again, not wanting to irritate the elder who was still obviously quite pissed with him and cautiously grabbed the papers out of his hand.

When he reached his room, Jisung was there sprawled on his bed and Seungmin laughed at the strange position, drawing the elder’s attention.

“I heard they grilled you quite a bit in there” Jisung smiled and Seungmin just groaned and flopped on his own bed, feeling much more comfortable now that he was away from Chan and Changbin.

“Don’t even ask” Seungmin whimpered into his blankets and Jisung just laughed and said a quick ‘I don’t have to.’

The sound of Jisung’s phone’s ding made Seungmin look away from his pillow. “Is that Minho?”

“Nope” Jisung answered and furrowed his brow, reading the message. “It’s actually an email from the management team.”

“What?” Seungmin shot up, the phone having his full attention. “What does it say? Is it about me?”

Jisung’s lack of response confirmed his suspicions.

“It just says to not to do the ‘group talk’ tonight” Jisung shrugged and threw Seungmin the phone
so he could read it.

>From: jungyusun@jypmanagementstaff.sk.com (Manager Jung)

> To: Bang Christopher (Chan), Kim Woojin, Lee Minho, Seo Changbin, Hwang Hyunjin, Han Jisung, Lee Yongbok (Felix), Yang Jeongin

> Hello Stray Kids, Good news - Dr Song reported to me that Seungmin did well in his session and has advised that we do not force him into a talk tonight and instead let him come to us in his own time. Sorry for the confusion surrounding the dance hour – I did not think he would react in that way, please inform me on how he is when he returns to the dorm. Keep me updated and contact me if necessary. There are schedules tomorrow – vocal at 10:00 a.m. and dance from 3-6 p.m. but depending on the situation tomorrow, this may be changed. Have a good night’s rest. Hwaiting!

Seungmin crinkled his nose when he realised he was the ‘situation.’

“Dude” Jisung said, distracting him from the email, his face almost as in disgust as Seungmin’s own was. “You seriously stink, go take a shower.”

Seungmin couldn’t help but laugh and he threw his blanket into the elder’s face with no mercy or hesitation. While Jisung was still trapped in the blue cloth Suengmin took the opportunity to smell himself and drew back quickly at the stench.

How did no one tell me about this? I just met my therapist wearing the same shirt I danced for a few hours in last night! His ears burned red as he gathered his towel and stripped his shirt off, not caring that Jisung had now managed his way out of the blanket and could see his fading bruise on his waist.

“How’d you get that?” Jisung asked bluntly and Seungmin realised that he and Chan were the only members who actually never saw it the morning he took his shirt off. He looked at it and was glad it looked a lot better than before – it was an uglier colour, but smaller and didn’t take up his whole side anymore.

“Fell off a chair” Seungmin replied because that wasn’t really a lie and he didn’t know if he had enough good in him to go on another spiel about bullying that day.

“Ouch,” Jisung said and Seungmin smiled, already imaging the wince on his face.
Since when did he feel so comfortable around Jisung? It was definitely a stark contrast to the rest of his members, that was for sure.

“Hey, it hurt a lot worse for me you idiot!” he joked but stopped short when the door opened to reveal Hyunjin, and all his humour evaporated in an instant.

“I’m going in the shower” Seungmin announced coldly, wrapping the towel around himself as if it would protect him from Hyunjin’s stare.

Just like he had one hour earlier in a strange parallel, he left the room without so much as another word.

His head hurt.

His head hurt when he did his homework alone in his bedroom and even when he notes the cute note Dayun left him with her number on it. His head hurt at the sorrowful event called dinner where no one talked and he barely ate. His head hurt when Woojin told him to go in his room for a while. His head hurt when he heard Jeongin’s soft cries through the thin walls and the lamenting of ‘I don’t know why he hates me, he just does.’

‘This is your fault’ his brain’s voice says and for once Seungmin doesn’t disagree.

The buzzing is loud. It’s loud when he’s trying to distract himself by rewriting his timetable in neat lines and strokes and it's loud when he does absolutely nothing and just stares up at the white ceiling.

When Jisung and Hyunjin come in at ten-thirty he pretends he’s asleep. He waited another eternity until the buzzing is too much to deal with and he silently hops out of bed in a beeline towards the kitchen’s medical cabinet.

It’s filled with everything – from bandages to antibiotics to anti-inflammatory pills to the very thing he’s searching for – painkillers.
The buzz is overpowering, and his hands shake violently when he ‘pops’ the lid off the pill container and pours a handful. At his janky motions, the medical box fell to the floor with a loud clang but he doesn’t care to clean it up.

The guilt is killing him, the buzz is destroying his mind, the anxiety is making him want to die or sleep but he can’t sleep and maybe there are some drowsy pills in here too-

No Seungmin thought, his thoughts jumbled and moves scrambled. He stumbled over to the sink, the noise ringing in his ear so loudly that it’s affecting his balance. I’ll get some water now and the sleeping pills later – surely Chan-hyung or Changbin-hyung will have some stashed in here he reached for a cup, a plastic one, and filled it up to the brim with water.

One, two three, five, no wait, one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine! Nine pills – one for each member of Stray Kids Seungmin almost laughed at the coincidence but remembers he’s trying to be quiet and instead shakes them gently in his hand.

Is this too many tablets? He wondered and started to make his way towards the packet information, but at that moment the ringing returned so loud that he almost fell over. I’m sure this will be fine…

He threw the plain white tablets in his mouth and took a gulp of water and feels some go down his throat-

“Seungmin! What are you doing?”

With a mouthful of water Seungmin turned and found Felix staring at him in shock.

“Are you taking medication?” Felix squeaks out again then looks towards to box and its contents tipped out on the floor. “Spit it out now!”

As if the demons have it out for him, a tablet hit the back of his throat, triggering his gag reflex and making him unceremoniously spit the pills and his water into the sink.

“Holy fuck Min!” Felix rushed over hitting him repeatedly on his back as Seungmin coughed the last of the water out. Seungmin managed a glance up to his friend and his face was paler than he’s ever seen it.
“What’s going on in here?” a voice sounded from behind the pair and Seungmin turned around, only to see the one and only Bang Chan standing in the kitchen in nothing more than some shorts.

He was really screwed now.

“I think he just took a shit-ton of pills!” is what Seungmin manages to make out of Felix’s frantic English before resting his head on the sink. The metal is cold against his forehead and it soothes the buzz to a soft annoyance rather than the feeling of having a full-volume static sound through a speaker taped to his ear.

This is better he closed his eyes and blocked out whatever the Australians were saying to each other.

“Min! Seungmin!” Chan shakes his shoulder so harshly that he felt the joint physically protest in its socket.

“Ow,” he feebly complained, straightening up and pouting at his leader. “That hurt!”

“Seungmin, this is no time for games,” Chan said seriously, his voice strict and firm and scary and… scared? “Did you swallow any of those pills?”

Seungmin groggily peeked towards the sink where several white pills are laying there wasted.

“There’s nine for each member” Seungmin frowned, but he couldn’t count the tablets because for some reason he was seeing double. “If there’s nine there” he pointed in the vague direction of the sink sloppily - “then I took zero.”

He doesn’t watch as Chan runs over to the sink, much more awake then he had been just before and picks up the slimy hard-shell pills. He doesn’t listen when Felix asks him questions. Although the buzzing was gone, all he felt was numb. Maybe he did swallow some pills…

“There’s five” Chan sighed in relief. “It says on the box take two every four hours, so he should be alright.”
I wonder what members I ate Seungmin thought and the idea was so ridiculously funny that he started to laugh, contrasting the mood of the room.

“Jesus” Felix groaned and Seungmin frowned not laughing anymore and not really understanding what the big deal was. The buzzing was gone, the bad thoughts were gone, he was fine, he was happy – why were they so worried? “Jesus, Min, you didn’t take any more than that right?”

He shook his head in reply and watched as the tension drained out of both Australians’ bodies.

“What were you thinking, Seungmin?” Chan started but with a few hushed words in English that Seungmin can’t decipher the leader backs down with a tired and emotional sigh.

“Come back to my bed tonight, Minnie” Felix smiled and extended a small hand, and even though Seungmin knows the smile isn’t a real one, he accepts Felix’s outstretched hand and lets the elder guide him back to the bedroom of four.

“Is Channie-hyung okay?” he asked with a tired yawn and Felix assured him that their leader ‘will be fine.’ Seungmin doesn’t believe that either, but he’s too tired to question it.

That night, he is lulled to darkness by the soothing tingle of Felix’s fingertips dancing over his skin just like it had been before, before when everything was slightly better, and Seungmin for the first time in a few nights falls asleep without the fear of being ‘imperfect.’

Chapter End Notes

HEY YOU RIGHT THERE YOU BETTER COMMENT YO FEELINGS ABOUT THIS >:(((
joking you can do what you want lol.

So what is up my human beings? I'm writing this at 10:26 p.m. and I'm tired so this is going to be a short one.

OH WAIT I FORGOT!! QUESTION: How did everyone find Levanter?? My favourite tracks are Sunshine (Jeongin only gets one part though??) and Booster. Honestly, so far I don't really vibe with You Can STAY?? ANd STOP is good but I do my workout routine to Road Not Taken (yes lads I got my mental health together enough to start exercising again yeeye) and I actually do this thing where I only listen
to Road Not Taken when I do my workout so if I want to listen to it I have to be doing sit-ups or whatever lol, so STOP for me feels like a cheat-way out of doing my exercise so yeah right now I'm not listening to it. DON'T SPOIL FOR ME WHAT MIXTAPE #5 IS PLEASE BECAUSE I WANT IT TO BE A SURPRISE. Levanter is also a bop. Personally, I will be listening to OT9 version of Double Knot, but I think Jisung and Felix did good on covering Woojin's parts.

Speaking of, Minho and Seungmin are both really shining in their high-notes that I'd say Woojin would have sung if he was in the group, so tbh it's giving them an opportunity to show their vocals more??

Anyway to the chapter: INTERVENTION (there's a lot lol)
- This is quite obvious but there are many 'interventions' throughout this chapter:
- Seungmin finally getting some god-ass therapy (which he did well in??) also the other term of intervention in the 'medical' sense
- Both two members he's not doing well with (Jeongin and Hyunjin) interrupting talks with member's he's doing well with/opening up to (Minho and Jisung) - intervening.
- Felix and Chan intervening when Seungmin is taking too much painkillers - it could have ended really badly so let's be happy that Felix was awake lol (three cheers for felix)

Also can we get three cheers for Subin because she's the real legend I love her so much.

Also IDK if it actually happened or if it was my headcanon that the first person Minho met at JYP was Seungmin and they discussed tea flavours?? Maybe I made that up?? Someone fact check me lol but if it's not true then it is the most glorious headcanon I've ever created.

What was your favourite character this chapter? How do you feel about Seungmin's Mum coming back? (and then leaving because I completely forgot that I had written that scene but let's not expose my flaws - she'll be back next chapter). please don't actually email that made-up email because I don't want jyp to sue me if it real lol im broke af

NEXT CHAPTER UPDATE : 20TH DECEMBER

YA'LL ALREADY KNOW WE FINISHING THIS BEFORE 2020 LETS GOOOO

I'm getting my wisdom teeth out tomorrow pray for me. And my exam score that I flopped oops. I'm expecting a 37 out of 50 so lets hope it's that or higher or I will be crying in the notes of Chapter 14.

Talic <33333333333

Also please leave a comment because I need the motivation to get these chapters out at a 300% increase rate compared to last month lol. IDK if my math is correct there but whatever. Comment or comment (yes or yes)
Failure

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“How many did he take?”

Seungmin woke up groggily to hear Woojin’s concerned voice drifting distortedly through the thin walls.

“He took four of the ‘extreme-strength’ painkillers, Jinnie” Chan’s tired-sounding reply sounded heavy on Seungmin’s ears.

Seungmin sniffed and sat up out of bed before slamming his scalp into the…roof?

Where am I? He thought rubbing his forehead gently to ease some of the pain that echoed through it. He wasn’t in his own room, that was for sure, but by looking at the multiple plushies pushed onto the floor, and feeling the heat of another body against his, he remembered everything from last night. I’m in Felix’s bed again he winced, clutching his now pulsing forehead that ached in pain.

Seungmin dutifully recollected last night’s events – arriving home, not doing anything, the buzzing, the pain, the kitchen, the pills, Felix and Channie…

Great. Just awesome he looked bitterly Felix’s cutesy alarm clock that was on the floor and the time read five-twenty-three. Now they think I’m a druggie and a runaway with emotional issues, exactly what I need.

“Should we tell the others?” Chan’s urgent question, louder than before, made Seungmin freeze.

There was a beat of silence and Seungmin wondered what Woojin was thinking.
“Tell the others? Of course, we ‘tell the others’ Channie! If Seungmin’s looking to – looking to turn to drugs as a way to help him, then he’s going to need all the support he can get from all eight of us!”

Even better – now he was the reason of fights between the other members.

*Can this morning get any worse?*

“Seungmin?” a fuddled deep voice said at that instant he knew he had woken Felix up.

“Go back to sleep, Lix, I’m okay” he attempted to reassure the older boy, but the more he spoke, the more Felix seemed to rise.

“Wait, wait – how’s your head feeling?”

“Uh – it’s fine, Felix-hyung. I’m alright” he forced a smile to prove to the elder that he was, in fact, alright and that seemed to satisfy Felix because he fell back into the bed with a puff.

“Go back to sleep Minnie” Felix sighed into the pillow and in a few more seconds, he was out like a light.

*Sorry Felix, but that is one thing I can’t promise you* Seungmin thought and as carefully as he could so he wouldn’t wake the elder or anyone else for that matter, he crept out of the bed to the door. When he reached the doorway, he pressed his ear to the wood, making sure Minho, Jeongin or Jisung, who had presumably crept into Minho’s bed sometime when Seungmin was asleep, didn’t suddenly awaken at his expedition to his own bedroom.

He listened for the voices of the two eldest members but only quiet filled the dorm. With a deep breath he creaked open the door, almost expecting Woojin to be standing right there in wait for him.

There was no one.

As sneakily as he could, he crept down the hallway, making sure to stop before each door and
listen in to see if Chan or Woojin, the only members he knew were awake at this time of morning, were in there and planning to come out, but apart from the shower running, there was nothing.

When he reached his own bedroom, closing the door behind him and leaning against it in relief, he felt like if there was an Olympic event for creeping down hallways, he had definitely just won a gold medal because that was intense.

When he opened his eyes again, adjusting to the darkness of the bedroom, he saw Hyunjin curled up tightly in his bed furthest away from the door, muttering nonsensically to himself in his sleep.

Perfect.

He guessed there were plus sides to having a roommate who would sleep through a hurricane even if it was right next door; it meant that he could follow his timetable to a point without living for a few hours in fear that Hyunjin would wake up at any moment.

Besides, Hyunjin was the last person Seungmin wanted to talk to – especially after their fight two days ago.

*I don’t have a phone, but if it’s five-thirty a.m. now, I have approximately three hours until everyone else starts to get on with their day, and then if I’m remembering the message Jisung showed me correctly, the voice recording session is at ten.*

Seungmin nodded to himself self-determinedly and made his way to his unkempt bed, sliding out the timetable he had made. There would have to be a few adjustments to it to fit with today’s changed schedule; the shortened hours of dance mainly as courtesy of Manager Jung, but there was also no way he could do his private dance practices he had the liberty to do when he made this – the members would never allow him to leave to go to JYP alone in the early or late hours due to the shenanigans he pulled over the last week.

But, just like everything, it could be sorted out – he had time now to get all his homework and extra studying done so he wouldn’t fall behind in classes, and he could also look over some choreography sent to his laptop while Hyunjin was still asleep.

He could do this. He could be better. Who knows – maybe he could even give making an apology breakfast to all the members another go – he sure needed all the ‘gold stickers’ of being a good person he could get.
Now all I need to do is get started Seungmin thought, his plan for the day to be as productive as possible already forming in his mind. *This is what it takes to improve; hard work, and after causing the team and management so much stress, it's the least I can do for them now.*

He had no way of keeping time as he started then finished his Math questions, Chemistry workbook, Korean Studies essay that he spent an extra half-an-hour on to attempt to get back on Mrs. Kim’s less-bad side, and go over the choreography of some of the older songs quietly.

Seungmin found the courage to stealthily check Hyunjin’s phone, which was charging by the bed, for the time and he almost smirked at how brilliant his planning had been.

It was exactly eight in the morning, a whole half an hour ahead of schedule.

*With that remaining time,* he thought, looking over his timetable once more to see if there was anything he needed to do urgently before the other members started waking up. *With it, I can try to make some eggs for everyone, or maybe even-*

“Seungmin, what are you looking at?”

“Ah!” Seungmin squeaked in surprise, immediately shoving the timetable under his duvet cover.

Hyunjin, still wrapped in the cocoon of his blanket, just cocked an eyebrow at the paper.

“N-Nothing Hyunjin” he stuttered, embarrassed at being caught red-handed. He remembered the fight in the practice room.

“Are you kidding, Seungmin? You’re the one who has been creating all of the teams’ issues in the first place!”

“*You are unbelievable! What are you going to do, huh? Push me like you pushed Chan-hyung?”*’

“None of your business” Seungmin muttered coldly, the bitter taste of the argument still in his
mouth, and slid the timetable back into his pillowcase under the guise of making his bed.

“Okay, jeez” Hyunjin said and flopped onto his bed so he was facing away from Seungmin again. “No need for you to be so rude about it.”

Whatever way to ruin my morning Seungmin wanted to bite back, but as soon as his thoughts became angry, the buzz, ever so softly returned to his mind. Holy hell, I thought I just got away from this stupid buzzing, of course, it was Hyunjin who brought it back.

Seungmin glared at the figure lying lazily and stubbornly on the bed with distaste.

‘You were the one mean to him first’ the angel on his shoulder tried to reason with him, but Seungmin ignored it with a spiteful huff.

Let’s just get out of here, before I say something stupid

Seungmin exited the room in a considerably worse mood than when he walked in, despite his completion of all his weekend homework before most of his members were even awake. He had time to make himself and the member's breakfast, and upon seeing the two dozen eggs in the fridge, he turned the frying pans (two large ones to be precise) on and started to cook.

I’ll do it in the order of who likes their eggs cooked best to least, with Chan first and me last.

He was just starting on Jisung’s two eggs, the fifth of the group after Minho’s, when Changbin, looking extremely sour walked into the kitchen.

“Do you reckon it’s a great idea to be in here alone after last night?” the elder asked spitefully and Seungmin felt himself bristle at the rapper’s sly jab.

“I’m just making breakfast” Seungmin responded, trying and failing to keep his voice level.

Looks like everyone was told then, or at least those in the large room.
“What were you thinking, Min-ah?”

Seungmin turned away from the hissing pans, preparing to snap back at the elder’s harsh tone, but when he saw Changbin’s face, his slanted eyes, they were full of pity and regret. In an instant, his fight-instant dropped, and he huffed in defeat.

“I was just... really tired, okay?” he murmured in a very teenage-like fashion. He glared down at the eggs at flinched when a speckle of burning oil landed on his skin. “My head... it was just being so loud” he admitted and waited nervously for Changbin’s reply.

“What do you mean?” the shorter boy asked hesitantly, stopping his efforts to pour himself a bowl of cereal from the other side of the counter, a few steps away from Seungmin.

“Like...” Seungmin started cautiously, not knowing how to explain the buzzing and not knowing if he was about to say too much to the rapper who had just been hostile towards him a few moments. “Like when I’m angry, or tired, or stressed, there’s a weird ringing in my head... and it hurt... so I got some pills and then – you know the rest.”

“If you took the wrong ones, Min, or too many of those painkillers, you do know that the something really bad could have happened, right?” Changbin started in a tone Seungmin wasn’t sure was troubled or just plain condescending

Seungmin sniffed defensively, tuning out the other’s lecture and wishing he had never brought it up in the first place. Of course, he knew! Did Changbin think he was stupid or something?

“Well, I’m fine Changbin” he growled dismissively, irritated that the elder was treating him like he was some brainless toddler, and he stabbed his wooden chopsticks so hard into one of Jeongin’s eggs that he was cooking that the yolk burst into a mess of orange in the pan.

Shit! Jeongin’s going to be so annoyed with me and it’s barely nine in the morning! Seungmin scrambled to save the supposed-to-be ‘sunny side up’ egg but his quick actions only made it worse until it was a mess of half-cooked mixed white and yellow.

He looked at the pan sourly. I guess I’m having scrambled eggs today then.

“Are you even listening to me?” Changbin slammed his hands on the counter next to where
Seungmin was staring at his failed eggs and he flinched, unaware that the now enraged rapper was speaking or even close to him. “God Seungmin! What are you doing?”

“Hey!” a voice from the other side of the kitchen-living-room called out and both Seungmin, who had been busy staring in shock at his member’s frustration and Changbin himself turned quickly to Woojin, who was standing with his arms crossed and an unimpressed look on his face.

“Changbin!” Woojin said sharply and in his peripheral vision, Seungmin watched the rapper deflate slightly. “Now’s not the time. Seungmin, get those eggs ready, quick! We have to leave for vocal soon.”

As Changbin, chastised by the eldest, walked away, abandoning his half-made cereal on the counter, most likely in search for Felix. Seungmin let out a breath he didn’t even know he was holding and returned to his eggs – they were all done now anyway.

Well, he made two for each member, and as he usually did his last, and there was only room for one of his in one pan, he was one egg short – only on a count of seventeen rather than nineteen. He would just have to eat one less than normal - there was no way he was going to irritate Jeongin by serving the youngest a scrambled egg rather than a fried one, and no way he was going to annoy everyone by taking up more time so he swapped his only one for the failed one and plated them up.

“Thanks, Minnie!” Jisung said with an excited smile, and Seungmin managed one back and then a smaller one to Felix beside him. When the other members expectantly stared at him, he looked down at his plate.

Damn, he hated scrambled eggs. If he wasn’t such a failure, he could have at least enjoyed his single, lonely egg-

“Thanks, Min, just how I like it” Chan said with a dopey smile, pointing a fork at his almost blackened egg, and the image of the same burnt egg in a pan, just like how it had been the morning after Changbin and Chan’s destructive argument flickered through his mind.

Seungmin pulled a weak smile back, trying to remove the images of previous, the image of him mercilessly shoving Chan to the floor in hate, and Woojin’s raised voice directed at the leader just that morning out of his head.

Sure, he hadn’t been the reason for Chan and Changbin’s fight last week, but he had been for all
He picked at his egg with a wrinkled nose before setting down his chopsticks entirely.

*I don’t think I have much of an appetite today, anyway.*

He stayed out of conversation, not listening as Chan went over the schedule or Jisung and Hyunjin cracked a few jokes. No one mentioned him, so he found it unnecessary to involve himself – besides his thoughts were preoccupied with less trivial topics.

*I’ve really been the cause for a lot of fights recently, huh? Both here and at school. I can’t seem to stop exploding at people, whether it's at Mrs Kim, Haeun, my members, management… Jeez, it seems like the only people I haven’t hurt are Frankie-nim and Subin-noona and the members don’t even know they exist!*  

He caught Minho’s perspective gaze trained on him and he forced himself to take a bite of his pathetic egg, a remnant of over-cooked yolk scraping the still healing cut on his lip and making him bite his tongue in pain.

*Speaking of conflict, everyone’s been looking at my bruises, both the one on my face and even the one on my waist, which thankfully is almost gone by now. Seungmin shifted, remembering the mottled purple that used to spread all over the side of his ribcage, waist and hip. I bet they’re all expecting me to tell them how I got the one on my face – it’s obvious it’s from a fist and not the floor or any other excuse I used for my other ones…*  

*All my members have been worrying about me for two weeks by now – and all I’ve done is push them away, whether literally or not. If I tell them about the comments that have kept me out at night, and the ‘bullying’ at school, would they even understand? Would they even believe me?*  

“Let’s get going everyone! We gotta be in the car in five minutes!” Chan clapped his hands and Seungmin took his still-full plate and scrapped his uneaten egg into the bin, ignoring the look Jeongin gave him as he passed.

*I can still stick to my schedule* the idol thought back to his timetable while walking into his messy shared bedroom. *There’s a break between vocal and dance practice and I can work on some choreography there to make up for this morning, I can’t fail this time! Not like yesterday!*  

Seungmin decided as he double-checked he had his water-bottle and a hoodie in his bag.
“Let’s go, let’s go!” the leader’s booming voice came again from outside, followed by a series of loud playful claps and Seungmin knew it was time to get going.

As he left the dorm, following Woojin to the car with a facemask covering his bruise, he could only think of one determined thought; he was going to be the best version of himself today – it was what everyone, after the hell he had put them through over the past few weeks, rightfully deserved.

“Alright, you good Min?” Jisung friendly asked through the glass of the recording booth and Seungmin gave him a thumbs-up, before snapping his gaze down when he met Changbin’s eyes.

He had only just started his ‘leg’ of the recording session, just after Minho who had nailed his vocals and his rap verse that left the others in awe, Seungmin included. As he cleared his throat again, he felt the same edge of nervousness fill him again, the same as it did whenever he had to record his lines, however after two weeks of poor performances and an angry Chan, he didn’t have his hopes high.

“Whenever you’re ready” Jisung’s fluid voice came through his heavy-duty headphones again and it only calmed a bit of the anxiousness he was feeling. He bounced awkwardly on his tip-toes to hype himself up for the fast-paced track Chan was just about to play, and the long verse he was about to perform.

Okay, let’s do this.

The polished beats started and Seungmin swallowed a shaky breath, hoping his lip would allow him to sing him lines without trouble, and when Jeongin’s line ended, he begun.

As he sung-rapped the quick lyrics, making sure to slyly check Chan and Changbin’s expression to gauge their expressions as he went on, he tried his hardest to make it as passionate as possible, while also keeping it coherent and in-time with the music.

He finished, breathless, his cheeks already tinged pink with effort, he looked up and felt nerves rush through him. Chan’s pencil wasn’t tapping on the desk anymore and it made his heart stutter in fear. Had he screwed it up? Was he going to be the reason for another argument again?

“Seungmin” Chan looked up, his emotions undecipherable in his eyes.
“Y-Yeah?” Seungmin replied weakly, his hands starting to prickle in sweat.

There was a pause. He tensed waiting for the lightning to strike.

“I think that was some of the best work you’ve ever done” Chan smiled, his dimples on display and Seungmin almost collapsed in relief, holding onto the microphone to combat the sudden installation of vertigo swirling his world around him.

“Tha-Thanks” he stuttered, a genuine grin on his face too. He looked to Jisung for approval and the youngest of the rap trio gave another thumbs up. Even Changbin looked surprised.

“I want to re-divide some of your smaller lines with Woojin and Jeongin, so I think we’re done here for today” Chan said, looking up from his chicken scratch of notes and Seungmin carefully placed the headphones back on their stand and exited the small room, ecstatic that he had done so well, that even in a time of unspoken words, lies, and bruises, Chan complimented him.

He flopped onto the couch, away from the other members who were piled up on top of each other, but closest to Woojin. As a few minutes drifted by, he found himself already eager to do something with his newfound energy as Felix went into the booth and started to record his lines. He bounced his knee in adrenaline and his mind flashed back to his timetable, where he had pencilled in the hours of dancing he should do before the actual group practice started at three.

“Woojin-hyung” he whispered quietly alerting both the eldest and Minho sitting by his side.

“You okay?” Woojin looked up from his phone and Seungmin nodded quickly to quash any worry the elder might have had.

“I was wondering if I could go practice for a bit” Seungmin started but seeing the singer’s eyes harden in refusal, Seungmin quickly added on; “Not for long or anything – I just haven’t stretched properly in a few days and stuff and I-”

“No, Seungmin” Woojin said and by the elder’s firm gaze Seungmin knew that the boy had already made up his mind.

“But-” Seungmin tried to argue but Woojin’s pointed glare made him stop.
'They don’t trust you at all’ his mind supplied and Seungmin couldn’t help but bite his lip, knowing that it was right.

“I don’t mind going to stretch my legs” Minho piped up and Seungmin turned to face the elder, light filling his eyes. Minho laughed at his expression, “If you promise not to run away again, you can come with me.”

“I’ll come too” Hyunjin offered, sitting up of the couch. “I’ve already recorded my lines anyway.”

Seungmin whipped his head around to Woojin who was now pinching the shallow bridge of his nose in indecision.

“I swear I won’t do anything stupid this time!” Seungmin tried but Woojin just looked at him warily again.

“Fine” the eldest relented and Seungmin clapped his hands childishly in joy. “Be back here in two hours, no excuses.”

“Will do” Minho mocked a salute to the eldest who looked like he was regretting his decision and Seungmin let himself be herded out of the room by the dancers, waving a goodbye at Felix who was taking a water break in the booth.

*I’m not going to fail my timetable today! Seungmin tried to rein in his glee as he practically skipped to the dance room, with Hyunjin and Minho walking considerably calmer in tow. I don’t even care that it’s them I have to dance with Seungmin peeked over his shoulder as the other two discussed something, probably him, under their breaths, but in an instant, his happiness was replaced with gut-wrenching paranoia.

But… what if I screw it up and annoy them? What if I fail my team again? I have to do well in this, and then even better in group practice, otherwise I’ll look weak, and like a burden, and I can’t afford that today, especially when it’s been so good.

“Should we get started with some older tracks?” Minho asked, hooking his phone up to the speaker, reminding Seungmin that he didn’t even have a phone on him.
Hyunjin nodded, already started stretching and suddenly Seungmin felt overwhelmed with pressure. He was about to be the only singer dancing with a group of professional professional dancers. Sure, he had a few years of training under his belt, but Minho had travelled all over the world for his dancing and Hyunjin was just so… perfect.

‘You’ll never live up to their expectations’ his mind started but the booming sound of ‘My Pace’ broke off his train of spiralling thoughts. Seungmin gulped and did some awkward warm-ups, on the opposite side of the room than the dancers.

The buzz returned. So did the light-headedness.

He really couldn’t catch a break.

“Okay, ready?” Minho asked, getting into the starting formation missing six members. Seungmin scrambled into his place on the ground, hitting his knees on the wooden planks at the movement and ignoring the way Hyunjin looked at him, he fixed his posture. He felt Minho’s eyes trained solely on him as the song started and he was already beginning to sweat under the mounting pressure, along with his and Hyunjin’s unresolved fight that took place in this exact room two nights ago.

Don’t think about that Seungmin he scolded himself, relying on muscle memory to complete the numerous jumps and kicks of the song. Just focus.

The first hour went fine, as the three danced together with no words but the ones in the song, Seungmin found himself feeling more at ease despite Minho’s constant stares or Hyunjin’s avoidance of him like he was the plague.

The trio just finish ‘M.I.A’ when Manager Jung busted in, holding her phone out in front of her. Seungmin turned to her surprised as she raced towards him.

“It’s for you, Seungmin” she addressed as Seungmin unsurely took her brightly coloured phone, the object feeling foreign in his hand. “It’s your mother.”

Oh, crap Seungmin swallows and glances gratefully towards Hyunjin as the loud music cuts out, leaving to room in silence.
He brought the phone up to his ear, hesitance underlying every movement. “Eomma?”

“Ah Seungmin!” his mother’s voice filled the other side of the line and he was glad it was calm, not furious like it was yesterday. “It’s good to talk to you, and your father is fine – just sleeping now-”

“Isn’t he supposed to be at work?” Seungmin butted in, a sense of confusion washing over him.

“Didn’t one of your members tell you that there was a construction issue with the building yesterday? No one’s hurt, except your father’s twisted ankle, of course-”

Seungmin felt his eyes widen in horror and he remembered what Felix had told him yesterday while he was being drilled by Chan and Changbin over the fact he ran out of practice yesterday. “I completely forgot!” he blurted out, feeling embarrassed by his strangely poor memory. “It’s just a twisted ankle, right?”

“Yes, yes” his mother’s soothing laugh crackled over the speaker. “Honestly I think he’s happy he got hurt – now he has a great heroic story to tell after all.”

Seungmin felt himself relax and turned away from the two members listening in on his conversation wanting it to be kept more private, and exited the room, briefly listening to the music that started up again but muffled, thanks to the sound-proofed rooms. “Well I’m doing okay Eomma, therapy was fine and stuff…”

“And have you made it up with your friends yet?”

Seungmin paused. “No” he said into the phone. “Not yet.”

“You should soon, my Minnie, otherwise everything will only get worse” she advised and Seungmin nodded before realizing she couldn’t see him and croaked out a quiet ‘yes.’

“I should get back to practice, Eomma. I’m sorry about yesterday and tell Appa ‘hi’ for me.”

“Of course, Minnie. Stay warm and stay safe.”
With that, the call clicked to an end. Seungmin paused for a minute, collecting himself before he went it, but as he sorted out his façade music from the room stopped abruptly, right in the middle of his own chorus line.

*What the hell? Minho-hyung and Hyunjin-hyung would never stop dancing before a chorus, or the whole song was finished...*

From inside the room, Seungmin heard a muffled grunt of pain, the sound so devastatingly unfamiliar that it made him freeze.

Seungmin sucked in a breath, already moving swiftly to the closed door, his heart rate accelerating in apprehension.

*Was that... Minho-hyung?*

At the realization, Seungmin quickly forced open the door, the phone call out of his mind and his heart stopped at the sight.

It was Minho, the ever-dependable, strong and observant Lee Minho, crumpled into a ball in the middle of the dance practice floor, *trembling* in pain.

“Shit!” he cursed, running over to where his hyung had fallen, Hyunjin already sprinting over from the speakers and Manager Jung looking like she had just seen a ghost. “Hyung, are you okay?”

“Yeah” the dancer hissed out through his teeth, his eyes narrowed in pain, clutching his trembling ankle. “I just slipped and landed weirdly.”

A presence from beside Seungmin alerted him that Manager Jung had snapped out of her daze and was crouching on the floor beside them, already testing the strength of his ankle.

“Tell me if this hurts,” she gently pressed Minho’s foot upwards, so that it pointed towards the ceiling and Seungmin watched helplessly as Minho sharply sucked in a breath, before holding it and nodding feverishly, indicating that, yes, he was in pain.
“Alright” Manager Jung, with her protective mode on, said before turning to Seungmin and Hyunjin with an authoritative glance. “We need to get him to medical just down the hall to check the extent of the damage and see if anything is broken. can you two support him?”

Seungmin and Hyunjin both nodded and tucked one arm under each of Minho’s shoulders.

“Okay, ready?” Seungmin said quietly, trying not to think that those were the exact words Minho said to them before they started dancing and trying to keep the wobble out of his voice. Hyunjin murmured a quick ‘yep’ and Minho nodded, the sheen of sweat making his forehead glossy.

“All three boys grunted in effort to pull Minho to his feet and as soon as they were standing, the made the slow journey to the door.

“I’ll run ahead and prep medical” Manager Jung offered and in an instant, she was gone.

“You know the way to the medical bay, right?” Hyunjin asked, wincing as Minho almost stumbled to the floor and half the dancer’s weight landed on his arms.

“Yeah” Seungmin gritted out and tried to not look as if he was in pain because Minho was obviously hurting more with his left ankle sticking out at a right angle. “Down this hall” he stopped, panting for air. “Then two lefts and a right.”

With combined effort from the pair of boys at odds only minutes ago, they carefully made their way down the labyrinth of JYP Entertainment, making sure the eldest dancer, who looked considerably less pale then he had moments prior, was alright at each corner.

“We’re almost there” Hyunjin choked out, seeing the sign of ‘Medical Bay’ hand over a door in the distance and Seungmin couldn’t find the strength to conjure up an answer, pain overpowering the once hostile buzz in his mind. His right arm felt like it was on fire, with pins and needles dancing up to his back, and with each jolt from Minho, another stab of pain infiltrated his body and left him biting his own tongue.

It felt like forever, as the three inched down the hallway at a snail’s pace, until the arrived in the doorway and upon seeing them, the two nurses on duty raced towards them pushing a wheelchair for the eldest dancer.
“That probably would have been more useful five minutes ago” Hyunjin joked and Seungmin chuckled in agreement, the sound so raw and true that he felt surprised when it left his throat and their morning exchange forgotten. Hyunjin, who lifted his head until their eyes met, seemed surprised too. Too tired to form a sentence, and also light-headed from the effort, Seungmin offered a small smile of reconciliation before slumping into one of the available waiting chairs, as Minho was wheeled away and placed onto a bed.

What a day Seungmin placed his head tiredly into his hands. I can’t believe Minho got hurt… I wish I hadn’t suggested this stupid practice in the first place; then this all could have been avoided.

“Kim Seungmin?” a gravelly, but kind voice asked and Seungmin snapped his head up to meet the eyes of a middle-aged man he’d never seen before.

He immediately regained his composure and did a slight bow in greeting. “Ah, hello?”

The doctor, as seen by his somewhat stereotypical white coat, nodded his head to first Seungmin then Hyunjin, before turning his attention back to the brown-haired boy. “You probably don’t know who I am, but I’m Dr. Gon, the head doctor at JYP Entertainment facilities.”

Seungmin dipped his head awkwardly again, feeling his hands prickle nervously at meeting such an important figure.

“Your management team have asked me to check over any injuries you may have sustained over the past few weeks” Dr. Gon continued and Seungmin ran his tongue over his split lip self-consciously. “Do you mind following me to this side of the room?” the doctor gestured to the empty side of the small room. “This will only take a few minutes.”

“Shouldn’t you be helping Minho-hyung?” he blurted out darkly before he could stop himself, but instead of anger, the elder doctor just chortled brightly.

“I assure you we have a well-trained medical staff attending your friend” Dr. Gon smiled and Seungmin felt himself liking the man more each moment they spent together. “Follow me, Mr. Kim, if you will.”

Seungmin shakily got up off the chair, throwing Hyunjin a ‘I have no idea what’s going on’ look
before following the doctor to the other side of the room.

“So,” Dr. Gon began and Seungmin felt anxiety course through his veins at the impromptu check-up. “Let’s start with the obvious, why don’t we?” the doctor said fondly and grabbed an old-fashioned clipboard and paper.

Seungmin gulped, knotting his plump bottom lip between his teeth again and briefly looked around Dr. Gon’s desk positioned behind them. There were vibrant pens, a calendar, two computers and something that looked like his file, with his name in bold letters at the top. If he read it closely enough he could see the first two lines; ‘uncharacteristic outbursts, trouble in an educational environment, minimal hours of sleep, bruising of body and fists.’

Seungmin looked away, his stomach swirling in discomfort as he read what others had written about him. Looks like management was going to get me here to do this one way or another.

“Mr Kim, would you mind informing me how you cut the bruise on your cheek and the cut on your lip?”

Seungmin gulped and sneaked a glance to his left where Hyunjin and Minho were, not-so-subtly listening to every word Dr. Gon was saying.

“Um” Seungmin started, remembering how his mother told him to never lie to a doctor from a young age, and knowing that there was really only one explanation for such a delicately positioned bruise. “I got it – uh – in a fight.”

“At school?” the doctor clarified and Seungmin was thankful to see that there was no trace of judgement in his almond-shaped eyes.

“Yes.”

“Alright” Dr. Gon scribbled the information down and wrinkled his nose in thought. “The management team informed me of a bruise stretching from your hip to your lower ribcage – do you mind letting me have a quick look?”

“Sure” Seungmin rolled up the hem of his shirt, thanking every god that the bruise had almost faded into inexistence. The doctor hummed to himself as he wrote something down on his
clipboard again and nodded, inferring that Seungmin could return to a normal stance.

“Alright, have you sustained any other injuries in the past two weeks?” Dr. Gon inquired. “Such as any bad falls recently, or any unusual symptoms?”

Seungmin thought back to the late-night practices where he worked so hard he fell over, and more recently both occasions where he fell and slammed his head into the floor at Subin-noona’s studio.

“Just been falling over a bit” Seungmin mumbled, hoping Hyunjin and Minho’s keen ears wouldn’t pick up on his low voice. “But, uh, I fell and really hit my head twice, like everything was really dizzy and I think I might have blacked out or something… I don’t really remember.”

“You don’t remember?” Dr. Gon asked as something had suddenly piqued his interest. “Are you having trouble remembering things lately, Seungmin?”

At the drop of formalities, Seungmin swallowed nervously and briefly nodded. It felt more personal this way, and that meant it felt more serious.

“What are your other symptoms, if any?”

Seungmin gulped again. “Um, I don’t know just pretty light-headed, and dizzy sometimes, and more… angry… and tired” Seungmin paused. “And recently my mind keeps hurting like there’s a - a buzzing or something.”

“Can you tell me more about this buzzing?” Dr. Gon asked, not looking up from his paper where he was still furiously writing.

“It’s like…” Seungmin stopped and willed the buzzing to come back so he could explain it, but he heard nothing. “I don’t know – it’s like a really loud ringing in my head, and it makes me lose my balance because I can’t hear properly” he almost curled up in mortification at how stupid and child-like he sounded, but the doctor didn’t seem to take note of it.

“Would you say you feel a bit nauseous, Seungmin?”
“Yeah, I guess so” Seungmin answered not really know what the doctor wanted him to say.

Dr. Gon stopped writing and hummed again as he read over his notes, his eyes darting from left to right as he thought.

“With the information you’ve given me Mr. Kim, I would conclude that you may be suffering from a mild concussion,” Dr. Gon said and Seungmin felt his heart drop.

_A concussion! That sounds serious…_

“Please, take a seat on this bed, Seungmin, I just need to check your vitals – it’s just a run of the mill routine check-up, no need to worry,” Dr. Gon said when Seungmin thought there might be something seriously wrong with him and it showed on his face.

Seungmin complied, casting a quick look to Minho where the older was getting a bandage wrapped around his ankle and an ice-pack held to it somehow at the same time, and to Hyunjin who was typing on his phone – probably informing the others of Minho’s injury.

“Take a deep breath for me,” Dr. Gon asked, a stethoscope pressed to his chest and Seungmin complied, hoping he didn’t smell too bad after an hour of dancing.

“Your lungs sound perfect” Dr. Gon smiled friendly, and Seungmin relaxed. At least there was _something_ that wasn’t wrong with him. “I’m just checking your blood pressure now” Dr. Gon advised, wrapping a tight machine around his bicep. “You might feel a bit of a squeeze-”

Seungmin winced as the bag-type-thing wrapped around his arm but as soon as it came, it was gone. He watched idly as Dr. Gon checked, then frowned at a machine.

“What’s wrong?” he asked at the elder’s expression, feeling his heart-rate spike at the man’s scowl.

“I might just check that one again, Seungmin,” Dr. Gon said apologetically and wrapped the machine around his arm again. The squeeze came again, and so did the reading on the machine and so did Dr. Gon’s troubled expression.
“It says you have low blood pressure, Mr. Kim, unusual for someone of your age, weight and fitness level” the doctor informed with a frown on his face. “What did you eat for breakfast this morning.”

Seungmin’s heart dropped. He couldn’t just tell a medical professional that he ate nothing despite having practised for hours! His hesitance did no go unaccounted for, as Dr. Gon looked away from the machine and towards Seungmin.

“I, um-” Seungmin babbled, his mouth feeling dry. “I forgot to eat this morning.”

“Okay,” Dr. Gon said with an expression incongruent to his words. “What did you have last night for dinner, then?”

Seungmin paused, trying to remember what he ate. *Did we have kimchi fried rice or was that the night before?* He struggled to think to the even that happened not even twenty-four hours earlier, but the spicy smell of last’s night’s dinner, which was in fact kimchi fried rice, filled his thoughts. But alas, he had only had three bites because his head hurt so much. The memory that he also didn’t eat two nights ago – ditching the members for the dance studio flickered into his mind, and he decided not to tell Dr. Gon that.

“I – uh – didn’t eat a lot for last night’s dinner too,” he said in a quiet voice and felt incredibly small when Dr. Gon looked at him in disapproval before returning to his notes and writing that down too.

“Although I am quite sure you have a mild concussion Mr. Kim, eating something with high glucose levels would definitely help with the light-headedness, dizziness and your shaking hands” the doctor pointed at his fingers and Seungmin looked down and realised that his body was *trembling*.

“Oh,” Seungmin plainly remarked and hid his hands behind his back as inconspicuously as he could.

“You have a dance practice scheduled in for this afternoon, correct?” Dr. Gon asked and Seungmin sat up, hoping that the next words out of the doctor’s mouth would not be what he feared most.

Seungmin swallowed. “Yeah.”
“I recommend that you do not participate in this practice” Dr. Gon continued kindly and Seungmin curled his lip in unvoiced disagreement. “Excess movement will only worsen to headache’s you feel, Mr. Kim, and with blood pressure so dangerously low as yours, it is vital that you re-nourish your body and give it a day’s rest.”

“Minnie, you can sit with me” Minho called out from across the room, his ankle bandaged, and crutches tucked under his arms. Seungmin tried to smile in response but nothing could hide how disappointed he felt. He was going to fail his timetable again.

“As a doctor, it is also my duty to report your health status to your management team” Dr. Gon informed and Seungmin nodded, knowing that it was in his best interest. He really couldn’t afford fainting or anything dramatic – especially not in front of his members.

“Thank you” Seungmin whispered out, his voice feeling hoarse.

“Of course, Seungmin” Dr. Gon said warmly, dropping formalities once again. “If you need anything, you know where I am.”

Seungmin nodded, more for the doctor than himself, and got out of the chair, feeling worse than he had before.

“His ankle’s not broken just sprained” Hyunjin murmured when Seungmin reached him at the exit. “Let’s hop out of here get some food for everyone and go check up on the vocal session, yeah?”

Seungmin nodded again, not even processing the pun and feeling in a daze as he let Hyunjin take him down the hall, with the ‘click-clack-thud’ of Minho following behind them.

*I’ve failed* was his only thought, dizziness making his vision swirl.

‘Click-clack-thud’ came the sound of Minho’s crutches, then Minho, hitting the floor; deafening in its own repetitiveness.

*I’ve failed. His throat felt dry like sandpaper. The door of the recording studio Seungmin barely realised they had arrived at opened*
‘Click-clack-thud.’

*I’ve failed.* He let himself be guided to the sofa and collapsed beside Felix, who was out of the recording booth and leaned into the soft pink fabric of the elder’s shirt.

‘Click-clack-thud.’

He closed his eyes that had started to brim with tears. *I’m a failure.*

He didn’t remember the dance practice he and Minho had been unallowed to participate in. He didn’t remember Jisung forcing a sandwich down his throat. He didn’t remember the way Jeongin stared at him like he was one insult away from tears as the car took to nine of them back to the dorms.

All he knew was that the numbness, the floaty-feeling, the utter lack of any emotion, that he had felt in the hall had stayed with him, crept into the night with him like it was something that he couldn’t banish.

It was better than the buzzing though. Anything was better than the buzzing.

The meal Jeongin had made for dinner had tasted like ash in his mouth, but at the prospect of possibly collapsing from malnourishment made him force every last bite down. When he was finished, he felt uncomfortably full – like he hadn’t eaten in days then binged on an entire restaurant’s menu.

Just as he had been walking back to his room, Felix had grabbed his arm and told him that Jisung and him wanted to talk, so with a nod, Seungmin had gone back into his room, taken his timetable (that he had *failed, failed, failed*) out of his pillowcase in hid it in the leather-bound cover of his diary under his mattress that he hadn’t seen in days.

Felix and Jisung had come in a few minutes later to join him in the empty room. He had heard them talking softly with the group through the walls so that no one came in to interrupt them.

It was better that way. Felix and Jisung were the only people he felt he could talk to, the only
people, maybe with the exception of Minho, Woojin and maybe Hyunjin after the meld of their friendship that afternoon, that he could trust.

“Hey, Seungmin” Jisung’s breathy voice broke Seungmin out of his thoughts and the younger turned to face him, adjusting his position on his bed that the three of them had squeezed onto.

“Yeah?”

There’s a thoughtful, apprehensive, cautious pause.

“How did you get that bruise?”

Seungmin turned his head on his pillow to look up at the white ceiling, feeling Felix’s fingers dance over where his shirt had flicked up to expose his waist, softly trailing over the last of his first injury.

“A fight” he said plainly, hoping that Jisung wouldn’t press the topic.

The elder, however, was nothing but curious. “What happened?”

Seungmin bit his lip, feeling a spark of pain ignite his body, like it was the only thing that made him feel alive.

The yells, the vomit, the bathroom stall, the mirror, the fist, being called ‘Puppy’, like he was nothing, but a house-pet all came flooding back to him. He turned on his side until he was facing away from Jisung. “I don’t really want to talk about it.”

“Minnie” Felix started softly and stroked Seungmin’s waist again, and rather than anger or irritation, a helpless feeling of tiredness filled his bones and seeped into his core. “Minnie, you gotta talk to us…”

Seungmin rolled until he was lying on his back again, so the tears that had once again started to form in his eyes wouldn’t roll down his face. “I know” he said brokenly, his voice cracking with the first emotion he felt all night.
“Maybe tomorrow?” Jisung asked and the question weighed heavily in the air.

Seungmin sucked in a breath. Tomorrow was soon, less than twelve hours away.

If he told them, would it make him weak? Or would it make him strong, just like what Dr Song had told him after he had spoken to her.

If he told them, would he still be a failure?

Maybe he would be, to his secrets, to his timetable, to everything he had worked for. But to them… to his members, wasn’t it seen as a success if he talked to them? Told them… everything?

“Yeah,” he decided, and he felt both Felix and Jisung tense beside him. Seungmin furrowed his eyebrows, the prospect of his half-baked decision already scaring him. “Tomorrow.”

Chapter End Notes

Ayyyy, one day early and the longest chapter yet (i think?) with 7831 words.

I was actually about to end this one at the 'click-clack-thud' part but I wanted some Felix-Jisung-Seungmin fluff to end it off because otherwise, that would be a bit of a depressing ending.

CHAPTER TITLE: FAILURE (not a lot of symbolism here but whatever)
- Fails Jeongin's egg in the morning - butterfly effect thing - didn't eat, light-headed, blah-blah.
- Basically his mindset surrounding his timetable - he really wants to stick to it for just one day
- The eventual failure of sticking to his timetable - makes him 'numb'/kinda dissociating??
- FINALLY his mindset change around what is a failure!! Basically, at the end he's seeing it from his member's perspectives where him opening up is a success for them and not a failure whereas for him it's vice-versa.

QUESTION: ARE YOU EXCITED TO THE FINALE?? GET ROWDY IN THE COMMENTS PEOPLE
Now a dive into my personal life - my wisdom teeth surgery went well! However, my exam result did not which is depressing lmao all my A+'s throughout the year kinda failed me. Basically I did end up with a 37 but that's like the bottom-cusp where I would even accept my result and not spiral into depression. SO it actually didn't go THAT badly, because I guess I'm okay with it?? But seeing as I was getting 40-45 on all my practice papers and all my teachers/friends really thought I would pull a 40, it's still a bit sad. Honestly, I've just accepted it by now, but I know I need to work hard next year to get into my course for university now.

Sorry, these notes are always so long haha. I'm a rambler.

NEXT CHAPTER: 31st DECEMBER YEYEEEYE

Honestly, I'm shook we even made it this far lol. I'll tell you more about my future fics next chapter :))

Lot's of love and happy holidays everybody <3

~Talic
When Seungmin woke up, he was pleasantly surprised to find that he felt lighter than he had in days, despite the weight of Felix’s head on his chest and Jisung’s arm wrapped warmly around his torso. Blinking open his eyes, he relaxed further into his soft bed, which had somehow been made bigger, and he sat up, lightly pushing the mop of Felix’s brightly coloured locks onto a pillow.

Hey eyed the lonely shape of Hyunjin who was sleeping on his own bed on the other side of the room, and after realising that he must have been the one to join his and Jisung’s beds together when the three where sleeping, Seungmin’s neutral gaze turned to one with a twinge of melancholy.

He felt… bad that Hyunjin had to see all three of them cuddling together and sleep alone, especially knowing that Hyunjin was the one who loved to snuggle with the members the most out of all nine members. Seungmin considered calling the elder over, but in fear of waking him up, which was a hard task to do on the best of days, he left it alone.

Seungmin looked down fondly as Jisung began to stir, stretching his mouth wide in a yawn and curling into the warm space Seungmin’s upper body had left on the bed.

“How was your sleep?” Seungmin asked rather bluntly, trying to hide some of his overflowing emotion, but Jisung just pinched his cheek with a giggle, and Seungmin couldn’t help but smile.

Felix, who was also beginning to stir, groaned at the overly-cutesy moment and flopped back onto the bed, his dyed blonde hair sticking out at all angles crazily and Seungmin laughed at the mere sight.

“How was your sleep too, Grumpy?” Seungmin joked, poking the Australian in the side, who just groaned again and muttered a slur of incoherent crackly English words that Seungmin had no will to even attempt to translate, especially when the elder’s voice was so deep from sleep that it was almost at an octave he couldn’t even hear.

“I think that means it was good.”
Seungmin turned away from Felix and stared at Hyunjin, who must have woken up in the span of seconds, who was now lying on his side facing the three on the bed and was the one to have just spoken.

“Y-Yeah” Seungmin agreed, his awkwardness showing so early in the morning. “Guess you’re right.”

There were another few seconds of silence before Hyunjin clumsily rolled out of bed, stretched and hustled out of the room, his blanket draped over his shoulders like a cape as he walked out of the room, giving the three of them a polite smile and wave. From outside, the voices of all the other members rose as Seungmin assumed Hyunjin entered the living area.

“Well, he’s off,” Felix said plainly, flopping back down onto the pillows again, making Seungmin laugh.

“You-” Jisung started slowly, an overly-dramatic and almost teasing bewildered look on his face. “You, Kim Seungmin, admitted that Hwang Hyunjin was right? Are we on planet Earth right now?”

“Yes,” Seungmin playfully hit his hyung on the shoulder, slightly harder than he normally would with the intended effect to make Jisung shut up. “We… talked yesterday and made up, I guess.”

“That’s great, Min” Felix piped up, his hair still sticking out like crazy. “Talking… is what is going to help you get back on track, yeah?”

Seungmin nodded, knowing it was the right thing to do, despite not really wanting to – both agreeing and talking. The looming threat, and reality of the dreaded ‘Group Talk’ as Seungmin had dubbed it, made him feel anxious and uneasy, despite how helpful and comforting both confiding in Dr Song and Jisung and Felix had proven to have been.

He swallowed back his fear, quelling the already rising storm in his stomach as he did so. It was inevitable, and thus Seungmin could only want to get it over with, rather than having to wait all day, with the same general uneasiness plaguing him.

“You ready to get some food?” Jisung asked, sitting up from the bed. “I’m pretty sure Woojin and Chan are making breakfast this morning.”
Seungmin tensed for a moment. If he went out there, he’d have to see everyone, and what if they judged him? What if he screwed up again? He had to be perfect if he was going to-

“Hey” Jisung crooned and snapped Seungmin out of his thoughts. He watched as the elder rapper leapt off the bed. “I can see that brain of yours spiralling from here, let’s go eat!”

Seungmin sucked in a breath and tried to mask his trepidation. He felt Felix’s small warm palm slide into his own and sighed in comfort.

*I’m not alone.*

With that, he wriggled out of the duvet, clutching onto Felix’s hand like a lifeline and tried to forget about his worries, his bruises, his fear of *failure.*

“You can do this, Min - it’s just an everyday morning breakfast with the team,” Felix said flashing Seungmin another wide smile.

“Yeah” Seungmin affirmed, more to himself than the others. “Let’s go.”

“So only a few of us have schedules today,” Chan said, reaching over to grab the orange juice on their little coffee table where all nine of the members sat around. Seungmin sniffed and ate another spoonful of his rice, trying to forget his doctor appointment, or should he say not-appointment from yesterday.

*If most of my dizziness and fatigue is caused by my not-eating, then I need to make sure I don’t forget to eat… or intentionally skip my meals because I don’t want to see the members, or want to be better, or whatever excuse I’ve been using.*

“Due to your ankle, Minho” the elder nodded to the dancer’s leg and the crutches beside the couch the member had been specifically given. “You will be staying here.”

Chan hunched like he was about to say something uncomfortable and by Changbin’s gaze already
on him, Seungmin knew whatever words would come out of the leader’s mouth, they would be addressing him.

“Uh-” Chan coughed strangely. “Management would rather you stayed at home today, Seungmin. Ya know… health precautions and other stuff.”

Seungmin felt his stomach sink, especially at the ‘other stuff’ Chan was inferring but nodded anyway. He glanced over to Minho who was once again teasing Jisung about the way he ate.

*A day with Minho-hyung can’t be too bad* Seungmin pondered. *It’s much better him than-*

“Jeonginnie!” Chan started and Seungmin cursed the word for his rotten luck. “Your vocal instructor is sick today, so you have the day off too.”

Seungmin side-eyed the youngest member, who looked as happy as he did about these new revelations.

“Dismissed!” Bang Chan joked and as the other members started to clear their plates from the coffee table, or the floor in many of their cases, Seungmin sat numbly on the couch, the rice tasting like ash in his throat, making him wish he never ate in the first place.

His stomach spun. This was going to be terrible.

He couldn’t even follow his timetable.

What a failure.

“Hey Lix, can I talk to you?” the leader said in English and Seungmin snapped his head up curiously towards the Australian pair, who were now chatting quietly in the corner of the room, with serious looks on their faces.

*What are they talking about?* Seungmin tried to look as discreet as possible and not like he was trying to listen in on their hushed foreign conversation.
“Seungmin, your plate?”

Seungmin flinched as Woojin stood over him and he shirked into the couch in embarrassment.

“Ah, y-yeah, thanks hyung” Seungmin stuttered, his cheeks burning red. He extended his plate to which Woojin took, but the elder raised an eyebrow at the mostly uneaten meal.

“I’m pretty sure management hinted at you needing to eat more, Min” Woojin started and Seungmin froze, his stomach twisting itself nervously into a knot.

He opened his mouth to reply but his throat felt constricted like he was choking. How the hell was he going to answer this – especially when he knew that it was true, and he did need to eat more?

“I’ll have something more later” Seungmin smiled weakly his head starting to ache again.

“Minho, make sure he eats something!” Woojin called to the dancer who was walking around the kitchen with Hyunjin and Jeongin’s help.

Seungmin didn’t need to see Minho’s assured nod, and he glared down at his hands. They were shaking again, and this time he had no idea whether it was nerves or not eating enough.

When my stomach settles, I’ll have some more rice or something Seungmin promised himself, wondering when food had started to become an issue in his life. If I forget to eat, then I’ll never improve, and I’ll just cause more trouble.

“Hey, Min” Felix, who had seemingly finished his conversation with Chan appeared in front of him, startling him.

“Yeah, hyung?” Seungmin asked innocently, tucking his hands under his bottom.

“Lucky me – I get to stay at home today, is that good with you?” Felix asked, sitting down on the couch beside him.
“What? Let me guess – Chan sent you as a type of watch-dog or something?” Seungmin joked but knowing there was more truth to his words than he wanted.

Felix just laughed, but said nothing, instead burrowing his head into Seungmin’s side until the pair were both comfortably lying on the sofa. Seungmin let it go, and let out a breath as he fiddled with Felix’s blonde locks, playing with them distantly as he watched the five members who had something on leave the dorm, waving goodbye to Minho and Jeongin who were standing at the door.

Another few minutes maybe – Seungmin didn’t keep track of the time – passed and the before long the sounds of Jeongin washing up the dishes faded into nothingness, and Seungmin watched lazily as the youngest left the living area and joined Minho in the four-person room, where Minho had left to moments earlier, his crutches making the sound of ‘click-clack-thud’ as he had left.

Seungmin and Felix lied together in silence, no words needed to be spoken.

For the first time in weeks, Seungmin welcomed the silence, of both the serenity of the environment and the tranquillity of his mind.

The mid-morning sunlight flickered through the dorms blinds, illuminating the room in a healthy glow and Seungmin relished in it, and the quiet comfort Felix’s hand that was now drawing patterns and Korean characters into his side, where his bruise had once been.

“It’s really healed a lot,” Felix said, drawing something that felt like a smiley-face where the light purple was.

“Yeah” Seungmin breathed, the air trapped, bubbling in his throat. “I have too.”

“You wanna clean that room of yours after this, Min?” Felix asked and Seungmin tried to hide the way his body tensed under Felix’s lithe frame.

In many ways, that room was like a reflection of his mental state. Its dirtiness was something that he had been avoiding to confront for days, despite the pile of clothes, and even dirty dishes piling up on his floor, that thankfully both Jisung and Hyunjin had the decency to not bring up.
Cleaning it would be like a cleanse, a new beginning, a chance to start over.

It would be a step back to his past self, that only now Seungmin was realising may have been better than his current self in many ways.

“Yeah, okay” Seungmin managed to answer and Felix seemed to like that because he burrowed into Seungmin’s chest that he had been lying on top of further.

The pair sighed in content, Seungmin fingers waving through Felix’s hair and Felix’s fingers dancing on his skin, and Seungmin felt a strange sense of calm euphoria flow through his veins.

His mind was quiet, only enjoying the moment, the present, now, today. In no way was it dreading the group talk that would certainly occur when the other members returned, nor was it thinking about the study or practising he should be doing, nor dwelling on embarrassing moments and arguments from the past two weeks.

It wasn’t screaming at him to move and not waste time.

So, Seungmin smiled. Because today, finally he felt fine.

As soon as Seungmin met those narrowed, smug eyes of the person who had made his life a living hell from morning to afternoon for the past two weeks, he knew everything was completely and utterly not fine.

Because right there, only a few steps away from him, and in addition of him, Minho, Jeongin and Felix who had all tagged along were the school’s most notorious bullies: Kim Hyunwoo, and beside him Yun Yejun and Lee Beomwon.

For the second time that day, Seungmin cursed his luck.

Of course, when he had asked Minho to let him go buy a new phone, Jeongin had piped in that he needed to go to buy something too, and that had lead to all four of the stay-at-home Stray Kids to go on an expedition, bundled up in coats and caps and facemasks to go for a five-minute walk to the mall.
Of course, right after the four of them had walking out of the phone store, with a new phone in hand and his old sim-card Jeongin had managed to save out of his old broken phone (it had been so embarrassing to even show the younger the outcome of his temper tantrum and then ask for help) they had run into Seungmin most feared people maybe ever.

Well, Beomwon wasn’t really a problem, as when Seungmin saw him standing across the crowded shopping mall the boy with dangly-earrings rose his carton of strawberry milk towards him in an almost comradery way and roughly shoved Hyunwoo when the younger had started to make his attack.

Still, Hyunwoo and Yejun were a different thing entirely.

Especially as Seungmin, of course, had frozen in place when he met eyes with Hyunwoo, his cheeks reddening and lip stinging in memory under his facemask, and now his three members saw exactly the reason why Seungmin was shaking like a coward, like a scared puppy.

“Hey, Min, who are they?” Felix asked like he was scared of the answer and Seungmin swallowed down his stupid, stupid fear and turned away, trying and failing to pretend that the huge issue was never there.

“Just some guys from school,” Seungmin said bluntly. “Let’s just go-”

Seungmin turned away, after flashing a quick smile and Beomwon who was keeping Hyunwoo and Yejun on their leashes like they were the dogs (hah!) and quickly escaped the situation, dragging Felix away as fast as he could, leaving Minho to hobble along as quickly as possible on his crutches.

*Everything is going wrong! Now Minho, Jeongin and Felix know about Hyunwoo and how easily I’m stupidly intimidated I am of him and that just shows how weak I am which is what I wanted to hide from the very beginning!*

Seungmin felt his chest start to hurt and his stomach spin and his mind throb and he really wished he had all those painkillers now because they could really help him out – and oh my god he couldn’t breathe, he couldn’t see anything he couldn’t-

“Wow, wow, Seungmin, it’s okay, just breathe, yeah?” Felix’s deep voice said, but it was distorted
and echoey like he wasn’t standing near him at all.

The world started to spin like his stomach and his eyes began to go blurry like he was on a merry-go-round at ten times speed. He distinctly noted that Felix, or was it Minho, was saying something again, but it was like his ears weren’t working.

In his vision, he saw a girl holding a phone, and a flash of a camera go off.

He heard distorted laughs in the background.

He felt rice stick to his skin like it was being pelted at him all over again.

It was happening again.

_God-dammit Seungmin! None of this is real_ his brain tried to rationalize and or some weird reason it actually seemed to work as his eyes began to clear. _You are completely fine – just walking through a mall, away from Hyunwoo, Felix is here, you’re safe, you’re okay, just breathe and everything will be fine._

Felix seemed to realise his inner panic and slipped a hand into his own. His heartbeat slowed down.

His mind throbbed and he blinked ferociously when sunlight hit face, the tell-tale sign that they had left the building and were in fact away from all his worries. His chest seemed to relax when he felt a buzz in his pocket and pulled out a phone with one shaking hand.

He smiled when he read the message.

>From: Dayunnieeeeee

_Hey recovery buddy! I heard about the phone thing so I don’t even know if you are receiving this text, but on the slim chance that you are reading this, I wanted to let you know I ate a whole ass potato for lunch today instead of a salad and love you lots and lots. Hope you are doing good too!!! <33333_
He let go of Felix’s grounding hand to type a reply back to his friend and when he finished, he found that he didn’t even need the soft reassuring small palm to make him feel okay again.

His mind stopped aching.

They called to get a driver back to the dorms, despite the short distance, because Minho’s ankle was beginning to hurt again. Seungmin had even managed an ‘I told you so, hyung!’ joke when Minho had defeatedly sat down on the curb to wait for Mr Yoo, as Seungmin had warned him of his ankle before the four of them left where Minho had merely dismissed it as ‘only lame people walk.’

After a two-minute drive, the four were safely back at the dorm and Seungmin felt the tranquillity fill him like his small internal freak-out had never happened in the first place.

Now, a few hours later after watching not one, but three of Minho’s stupid English animal documentaries usually reserved for Changbin, he was sitting back in his room, shed of his coats and facemask, and thankful for some alone time. He needed to think – mainly about what had triggered his panic-attack-esc moment and how he was going to stop those because that was defiantly not a good thing.

*It must have something to do with my anxiousness, probably triggered by seeing Hyunwoo and being in a crowded area in the public eye. At least it didn’t spiral into a full-fledged panic attack or could have gone even worse.*

Seungmin sighed and flopped back on his bed, but upon hearing the crinkling of paper, this time from under his leg rather than his pillow, he sat up.

*Right. My timetable.*

He peeked at the door. None of his roommates were home. Felix and Minho were both giving him some space. There was no way Jeongin would voluntarily come and see him.

*I know I need some form of consistency and routine to keep me sane and on the path of improvement so STAY and the members will be happy with me… but Dr Gon said I should really sleep more so I can recover, and if anyone saw this, even if I haven’t used it in days, they would certainly freak out.*
Seungmin got off his bed, snuck around to the side where the timetable was hidden and cautiously got it out and carried it, as if it was glass, to the desk.

*Getting up at three-thirty to practice at four does seem a bit ludicrous now that I look back on it* Seungmin mused, scanning the timetable where he had planned out what he was to do with each minute, each second, of the day.

It seemed like the time he followed this so strictly was forever ago even though it was just last week. So much had changed, and yet… following something to the degree, it gave him control… it made him disciplined and lead to success… it made him perfect-

He skimmed the timetable to what he had planned today.

*Dance practice is scheduled right now… Maybe I should go do some… No one would have to know, especially if I went to Subin-noona’s studio… If I went and did even just an hour, I wouldn’t be such a failure, a burden to the team-*

“Stop thinking like that!” He slammed his fist onto his desk and whipped around to the door, in case anyone heard his outburst.

*Jesus, Seungmin. Get a hold of yourself!* He scolded himself and reluctantly turned back to the paper, now slightly creased in front of him, like a measly human falling to the lull of a siren. *Maybe if I change it a bit… start at five instead of four and cut way back on all the hours, and include some free-time with the members and things, it can still give me a good outline of what I should do…*

Seungmin shook his head and pushed it away. *No way! I should throw this away! Doing anything this extreme only leads to conflict, tiredness, injury and a complete destruction of all relationships, how the hell am I going back to this after I know what happens to me when I follow this first-hand?*

Seungmin gnawed on his lip, the slight pain grounding him as he sulkily remembered what happened the first time someone found his timetable.

*“Seungmin, what the fuck is this?”*

He remembered Jisung crazed eyes filled with pain, anguish and worry. He remembered the yells,
the pity the way he ran out of the room but wasn’t angry enough to just leave, like what he did recently.

*I’ll adjust it a bit and then I’ll just leave it here for tonight, sleep on it, and wake up in the morning with a new perspective – then I can decide what I should do* Seungmin decided, feeling confident with his choice.

He heard the voices of the other members, them all returning from the company, fill the living room and with that, he abandoned his place at the desk and gathered himself.

Everyone had returned and that meant a few things – firstly Chan and Changbin were back, the two people who Seungmin was least comfortable with, secondly, he had to eat a meal, which would only worsen his stomach and thirdly, the time of the talk was nearing.

*Where the hell did the day go?*

“Hey, Seungmin! Come out, yeah?” Hyunjin’s loud voice came through the walls and with one final breath and steeling his expression only slightly, Seungmin walked out into the lion’s den.

There were all eight of his members, Hyunjin and Jeongin talking excitedly about something, Felix swinging around wildly on Minho’s crutches with Minho and Jisung cuddled together laughing at him, Woojin trying to stop Felix’s escapade in fear of their flat-screened television, and… oh no.

Seungmin bit his lip again. Of course, it was Changbin, looking over coolly, with a twinge of coldness at him. And Bang Chan… he wasn’t hostile like Changbin was, but his dimpled overly-wide smile just made Seungmin feel worse.

It seemed Seungmin wasn’t the only one with a mask after all.

“Let’s get started on dinner” the leader clapped, garnering all members’ attentions. “Who wants to cook?”

“Me! Me!” Hyunjin piped up jumping up off the kitchen bench and bouncing around like an over-excited puppy.
“You’re barred from the kitchen, Hyunjinnie, sit down” Minho called and Hyunjin deflated before returning back to his place beside Jeongin.

Seungmin sucked in a breath and prepared himself. “I-I can cook.”

All eight members turned to him like he was the last person they expected to speak and Seungmin almost instantly regretted volunteering and just as he turned to Jisung for an escape, the elder rapper’s smile was almost blinding.

“I’ll help then,” Jisung said giving Seungmin a friendly wink and Seungmin felt some of the anxiety of speaking up leave his body.

“I guess I’ll make three” Woojin sighed over-dramatically and threw Seungmin a warm smile. “Let’s start then, we have nine hungry mouths to feed.”

Seungmin waddled past the other members, actively ignoring Jeongin, Chan and Changbin by taking the long path around the sofa instead of cutting through the middle and as soon as all the attention was off him, he felt instantly better.

“Oh, what are we making?” he asked Woojin, the second-best cook in the group apart from Chan.

“Hmm” Woojin muttered eyeing the ingredients in the fridge and the pantry. “Let’s make tteokbeokki.”

The cooking went fine, well, actually. Seungmin found himself enjoying his time with the two elder members, and soon enough he was just as comfortable with Woojin as he was with his eldest hyung before he even read those first hate comments.

Soon enough, he was leading the ‘overworked and underpaid kitchen staff” as Jisung had dramatically moaned and dubbed the three of them five minutes into cooking, out to the kitchen table carrying a large pot of tteokbokki, feeling rather proud of himself and hungry for once.

But as soon as he saw Hyunjin looking uncomfortable and then lean in to whisper something into Chan’s ear, all the warmth left his body. It felt like he was transported back to Cheongdam’s cafeteria, where the bullies laughed and whispered and ridiculed him.
His grasp on the pan tightened.

He didn’t know if it was just him worrying or if the buzzing returned to his aching mind.

It was like a game of whispers, and he was the punchline. Well, it was and as Hyunjin whispered something to Jisung, and the usually happy boy’s eyes darkened Seungmin knew whatever happened next, wouldn’t be good at all.

“Is everything okay?” he asked nervously, setting the tteokbokki on the table, his voice wavering.

Chan said something briefly to Changbin, who looked so disappointed that it made Seungmin freeze. Seungmin glanced nervously at the members who were now all looking at him, despite only four of them knowing the message. By his side, Woojin stilled.

_Run or stay, Run or stay._

The words repeated like a mantra in his head, images of Subin and Frankie’s dance studio, or an isolated practice room popping up in his mind, but as much as he wanted to, he knew he couldn’t just run away. Not again.

He had to be brave.

“Is everything o-fucking-kay?” Jisung growled advancing quickly towards him and Seungmin took a step towards the door, stumbling backwards as the guilty feeling of déjà vu and fear started to settle into his bones.

“J-Jisung” Chan started, jumping out of his seat, seemingly as disorientated at the rapper’s malicious and dark tone as Seungmin was. “Maybe we should all just-”

“I thought we binned that thing, Seungmin! I scrunched it in a ball and chucked it away” Jisung snarled, the same rabid look in his eyes as before.
“W-What are you talking about?” Seungmin asked, his voice coming out loud and defensive and scared. He glanced towards the door. Suddenly the idea of leaving didn’t seem so bad after all.

“The-” Jisung sighed and clenched his fists and just as Seungmin started to prepare himself for a fist or more scalding words, the rapper seemed to deflate like a balloon.

Seungmin stared at the boy, who now looked smaller than Seungmin had ever seen him. He was almost afraid to ask. “H-Hyung?”

“The timetable, Minnie – your timetable.”

The words hit him like a stack of bricks, leaving his breathless. Of course. He had been so caught up in preparing himself to see the members, he had completely forgotten to re-hide his timetable!

Oh, for fuck's sake.

Seungmin tittered quietly, darting his eyes from member to member, who most looked confused or hurt.

Jisung’s eyes were full of betrayal.

Seungmin had failed him.

Seungmin stared back into his hyung’s watery, anguished eyes. He bit his tongue until he tasted blood.

He had nothing to say; no excuses or even apologies.

Working hard was the right thing to do… wasn’t it? He had even adjusted the hours and set time aside for himself. It was better, he was better, so why did his hyung, the person who he was closest to, look close to tears?

Why did Seungmin fail again?
“Hyung” he croaked out, his throat feeling raw and dry. “I… I don’t know what to say…”

Chan’s sigh cut through the silence. Seungmin turned to the leader, as did the other members. He looked tired, his eyebags almost rivalling Seungmin’s ones, especially as his own were uncovered by the usual mask of concealer.

“Let’s start this talk now, why don’t we?” Chan stated, leaving no room for discussion.

As Seungmin walked to the couch, finding a space between Felix and the edge of the sofa, the anxiety that had been weighing him down the whole day started to rise again, amplified with the already terrible start.

How was he going to trust and confide in his members about every embarrassing moment that led to where the nine of them were today? The angel on his shoulder whispered that telling them about the bullying and Mrs Kim and the comments and his mental state was a perfectly acceptable and good thing to do.

The devil screamed otherwise and to run away, but Seungmin tried his hardest to push that down.

There was no stopping this now.

It was time.

“Alright, Seungmin” Woojin started when all the members were seated in an almost cultish circle. “I think you should tell us all what’s going on both at school and here, and then everyone can ask you some questions. How do you feel about that?”

Seungmin nodded, feeling too shaky to respond. He really wished they had time to eat before this but then again, his stomach was turning so much that he feared if he even ate one rice-cake, it would come straight back out.

“Whenever you’re ready” Chan supported and Seungmin looked at his quivering hands. One of Felix’s hands slid into his palm and he smiled softly at the younger Australian.
"You're not alone.

“Well, you all know I’ve been… acting out a bit” Seungmin laughed at the understatement before swallowing his fear and his pride and continuing. “I just wanted to say I’m really sorry and I know it’s really bad and stuff…”

Seungmin quietened as he searched for words to explain what the hell had happened to him but it was all a confusing blur.

“Do you know what started this?” Minho suggested a place to start and Seungmin nodded thankfully at the dancer.

“Uh, yeah-” Seungmin coughed, his cheeks burning as all eight members waited for him to speak. “It was two weeks ago or something and… I just saw some hate comments… you know, the usual, but it really just stuck out to me.” Seungmin halted trying to force himself into the mindset of his past self.

The hate comments alone weren’t a good enough explanation for his behaviour, especially as all idols had read some hate online. Felix squeezed his hand reassuringly and Seungmin managed to clear his mind and his throat that was beginning to choke with pressure.

“Around this time, I also started to perform pretty badly in school but up to then I used excuses of being an idol to be lazy and… I don’t know, a failure. And I was doing similarly in dance practice and stuff so after a while, I finally promised myself I’d do better.”

“Is that what you were doing in the morning? Practising?” Hyunjin piped up and Seungmin nodded awkwardly. Everyone else was quiet.

“Yeah, I would wake up early, sometimes four, or three” Seungmin shrank under Woojin’s disapproving and bewildered look and forced himself to keep speaking. “And you know… doing an extra hour or so every day really worked – I wasn’t bad at dancing anymore and I finally felt good enough in practice so for a while it made me feel really good.”

“Is that where you got your bruises?” Changbin asked accusingly and Seungmin faltered both at the question and the elder’s rather aggressive tone.
Seungmin felt his cheeks redden and he stayed quiet. This was possibly the most... embarrassing bit. It made him feel so vulnerable... How weak was he if a few stupid bullying incidents made him completely crack?

Noticing his hesitation, Chan stepped in. “Seungmin, please try and be honest here. I know it’s difficult, but this talk will help everyone, yeah?”

Seungmin ran his tongue over his lip and meekly wrestled his grip away from Felix’s hand, wanting the affection but needing to look like he wasn’t weak and had to rely on someone else.

“Well,” he coughed. “I know this doesn’t sound good, but it wasn’t really that bad, I just over-reacted back then, but there were... are a few guys at school who... I don’t know... play rough, I guess? It’s not a big deal” Seungmin glared at the floor as he spoke wishing he could just disappear.

“Wait” Minho growled and Seungmin flinched at the dancer’s tone, his mind already reeling with escape options. He met the elder’s eyes and leaned into Felix’s side when he realised the emotion in Minho’s dark eyes was pure rage. “They did that to you? They... hurt you?!”

“It’s really not that bad” Seungmin waved his hands frantically, feeling his eyes prick at the memories of feet kicking his chair, names thrown at his back such as ‘idol boy’ or ‘puppy’ or ‘freak’, and the way his jaw slammed into a kitchen sink so hard he tasted blood.

“Not that bad?” Jisung exclaimed, standing up, his fists and jaw clenched. “They punched you Seungmin! That’s assault! Can’t you see that?”

“Hyunwoo was already punished, okay! I’m fine!” Seungmin spat out, his blood burning like fire beneath his veins channelling a strange sort of embarrassed-fueled rage that seeped into his whole being. “It’s all fine! I’m fine!”

“You’re not fine!” Minho yelled and Seungmin stood up, ignoring Felix’s protests as he did so.

“I am-” he started to rebut but Chan’s sharp ‘hey!’ made him stop.
“Minho, Seungmin calm down, okay?” the leader ordered and Seungmin angrily fell back onto the couch, his accelerated heart-beat pounding in his ears. “We can’t solve this by yelling, we all know that’s not what is going to help” Chan continued and somehow Seungmin felt some of the anger leave his body, replaced by defeat.

Chan was right. All nine of them, especially Seungmin, knew it.

“I’m sorry” Minho muttered sheepishly after a few moments. “it’s just… it makes me so mad that you let yourself be thrown around like that and you can’t even-” the dancer broke off, his voice cracking. Seungmin felt his eyes unwillingly water. “You can’t even see what’s so wrong – you’re defending them! Even after being punched in the face or kicked or however the fuck you got that other bruise!”

Seungmin sighed in defeat and willed his tears not to start sliding down his face. “I know” he croaked hoarsely and looked towards the ceiling. “But I really don’t want to cause a scene, especially after all the shit I’ve put Cheongdam through already, so please can we just leave that behind?”

It took a few seconds until the other members started to nod, not completely in favour of Seungmin’s wishes but not fully against them either. Seungmin watched as Minho scoffed and looked away, but he didn’t say anything else.

“Does anyone have anything they want to say?” Chan asked looking around the group. It was quiet for a moment and Seungmin felt hope rise in his chest. Was it over? Was he really going to get off the hook this early?

“He doesn’t sleep anymore,” a voice from the other side of the room said bluntly and Seungmin whipped his head around to see the form of Jeongin, who he barely remembered was there.

Oh shit.

“Do you want to elaborate, Innie?” Chan probed and Jeongin nodded, looking the surest of himself Seungmin had seen him in days.

“He stays up late to study, or he stays back to dance after practice is finished” Jeongin continued. “And if he does wake up early as Hyunjin was saying, then he’s probably is only getting a few hours of sleep per night, which obviously has a really big impact on his mood and his health.”
Everyone in the room seemed surprised by the younger’s speech as he had been unusually timid the past few days (Seungmin had made extra sure to stay out of his way to not annoy him further) and as it closed all eight pairs of eyes were back on him.

“T-It’s something I’m working on!” Seungmin stuttered quickly, trying to justify himself. “Kinda like the timetable thing…I guess I’ve just been wanting to maximize the time I have awake to do better and be really good.” Seungmin paused, thinking of what to say next.

“The more time I’m awake means the more time I can improve and make STAY like me again!” Seungmin rapidly explained, ignoring the way Woojin’s face promptly fell at his words. “Okay, so-” he shifted his position on the couch so he could legitimize the words he was saying easier. “I need to be better if I want to do well, right? So if I’m awake I can practice and then practice will make me perfect, not a burden to you all or anything.”

No one responded.

“Like look at Channie-hyung,” Seungmin said, gesturing his hands towards the curly-haired boy who looked surprised to be called out. “He doesn’t sleep much and he’s a great leader! If he spent less time awake, then all of Stray Kids would be slowed down because Channie produces the songs at nighttime, right?”

Seungmin stopped, his brain suddenly failing him. The eight members stared at him with varying levels of blankness or outright sorrow at his jumbled mess of a justification. Did I not explain it well enough? Or maybe it just doesn’t make as much sense as it did in my head… I guess it is a bit extreme…

“Min?” Felix asked from next to him and Seungmin looked towards the freckled boy, eager to steer the conversation away from the shameful bullying or the failed speech about time-management.

“Yeah, hyung?” Seungmin answered, feeling the nerves inside his chest start to grow again as Felix unconsciously checked his pulse, his weird way of dealing with stress and insecurity.

“Why do you catch the bus to school rather than get dropped off by Mr Yoo?”

Seungmin stopped. This was possibly even worse than the whole ‘I-am-getting-beaten-up-at-school’ talk and that was saying something. He sneaked a glance towards Hyunjin who was sitting
next to Jeongin, waiting patiently for his answer.

He swallowed. The real answer was something locked inside the jealous envy of his heart. The constant simmering feeling of not being good enough and Hyunjin being everything that he wanted. It was the little things – from the way Felix and Jisung would always go out of their way to see the SOPA students off in the mornings and not that same for him, to the talent, the looks, the dedication that Seungmin wasn’t born with.

It was even just that bright yellow blazer compared to Seungmin’s dull one.

It was everything, every single thing Seungmin resented and loved about his friend bubbled up into a jealous green fire that consumed him. And on the way to school, in the mornings, he would just sit in the car and feel alone, not like Hyunjin was as each morning he went with Jeongin.

The lonely car ride was the symbol of Hyunjin’s superiority over him. And Seungmin despised it.

But how could he say all that? It would ruin Hyunjin, make him feel bad about such trivial things like the colour of a fucking school uniform, or the positive things such as putting in some effort to study which at the start of this whole mess Seungmin didn’t even know how to do.

If he told the truth he would permanently ruin their terribly taped-together relationship that was already hanging by a thread.

The whole point of this talking session was so Seungmin could tell the truth. But all he could do now was lie.

“Just the time thing,” Seungmin said through gritted teeth, pretending to act reserved as he spoke. “If I got to school early, I could practice without you all knowing… or worrying” Seungmin admitted half-truthfully as going to the dance room is what he did if he had extra time at school. But that wasn’t the real reason as to why he forced himself to wake up earlier and lose his precious sleep and catch the crowded public bus, even if it meant facing Hyunwoo every morning.

“Okay,” Chan said, oblivious to his lies, just as the leader had almost always been. Seungmin let out a breath of relief. He was safe. He was okay. He rested into Felix’s side, feeling a bit better at getting away with it despite the guilt tugging at his heart.
But of course, life never treated Kim Seungmin well, and life punished him in the cold and bitter form of Seo Changbin

“Why are you still lying to us?”

Seungmin snapped his head up only to meet the calculating and angry eyes of the rapper, who was the person he was least comfortable around.

“W-What?” Seungmin faked, but Changbin wasn’t the only observant one in the room and as he looked at his friend’s faces, that turned from thoughtful to questioning to accusatory, Seungmin felt his heart drop. “I’m – I’m not lying!” he feebly squeaked in defence but he was too late; they knew.

“If you aren’t lying” Changbin growled, ignoring Jisung’s motion to calm down. “If you are telling the truth, then where the hell did you go off to when you ran away, huh? Why don’t you tell us that!”

Seungmin paused, his mouth hanging open. He couldn’t rat out Subin-noona! And that twenty-four-hour studio… it was his final place to just be away from everything… to forget.

“I-” Seungmin faltered, biting his lip until it protested in pain. He looked away from his lap and glared straight into Changbin’s hooded eyes. “I can’t tell you that, that is the one thing I’m not talking about.”

“Why?” Changbin snarled lifting his hands up in anger. “What is stopping you, Seungmin?”

Just as Seungmin was about to retaliate, anger flooding his mind once again, Woojin stepped in.

“Changbin,” the eldest started sternly, in a way that even the fiery rapper looked meek. “Not now, alright?”

Seungmin watched as the rapper nodded and settled grumpily back beside Chan on the sofa.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t feel comfortable telling you guys that, okay?” Seungmin apologised. “I
promise it’s somewhere I’m safe and looked after, but I want that to be my place, not – not yours.”

“It’s okay” Jisung started and Seungmin looked up in surprise. “I know what you mean – because we’re idols sometimes the public and pressure can all just be too overwhelming and you just want somewhere to be away from it all” the elder played with his sweater and Seungmin briefly remembered a group talk they had a few months after debut about Jisung’s anxiety.

“I think…” Minho started thoughtfully, looking much calmer than he did before. “I think trust is what keeps this team together, and Seungmin’s done really well confiding in us tonight, so, for now at least, I think we should also put some trust in him.”

Seungmin brightened up when the group all nodded together, well with the exception of Changbin who just gave one stiff nod before picking at his hangnails, a bad habit Seungmin knew he returned to when he was stressed.

“Minnie” Chan cleared his throat and Seungmin turned to the leader cautiously, a flashback of their fight flooding his mind. But all rage and anger were nonexistent on the leader’s face, and rather he looked upset.

“Seungminnie,” the leader started again. “As your leader, I feel… like a failed you these past few weeks. I have been focusing a lot on my own problems, that I guess you know of” Chan laughed awkwardly and Seungmin knew he was referring to the fight with Changbin and the series of negative meetings with JYP.

“I have been channelling my annoyance and stress through… outbursts and that is something that I will never forgive myself for… I’m truly sorry that I have been treating you so harshly and not considering your feelings and perspective on things and… that goes to all of you, not just Seungmin.”

Seungmin felt his eyes water again as the leader shakily smiled at the rest of the group, his regret and apology on all his features.

“I promise to work harder as your leader in the future and I hope I can work on becoming a person you can trust in and confide in no matter the situation” Chan finished and Seungmin applauded for the speech to try and make the leader, who often shouldered most the blame whether it was his fault or not, feel slightly better.
“Aw,” Jisung wiped a tear from his eye and smiled brightly, stretching his arms out wide. “Group hug, everyone?”

Seungmin giggled as he jumped off the couch, dragging Felix as he leapt onto the rapper and with the incredible weight on top of him, he imagined all the others, except Minho, were doing the same thing.

“I really love you guys” he choked out and Hyunjin’s bouncy laugh echoed around the room.

“We love you too, Minnie!” someone, maybe Felix from the deep voice responded and Seungmin felt himself smile, despite the tears that had now started to trickle down his face.

As the nine moved off Jisung who was slightly struggling to breathe after they all sat on him and moved to grab the tteokbokki pan and bowls Seungmin laughed the whole way.

He barely even realised that for once his stomach twisted in genuine hunger rather than anxiety and without a second thought, he ate his whole meal, with his best friends in the world all around him.

Sure, they were Stray Kids, but the one thing they couldn’t do was stray far away from Seungmin’s heart, and as he watched a film with them, his mind completely in the moment, in the today, not the yesterday or the tomorrow, he thought to himself that he truly loved life.

It was three minutes past eleven when the door the Seungmin’s shared room creaked open.

At the intrusion, Seungmin looked away from his diary that he had finally written in again, and quickly finished it with a cute drawing of a smiley face, just like what Felix had traced on his leg earlier that day.

“Seungmin-hyung?” the voice asked and Seungmin froze.

There was only one person in the dorm that called him hyung.
“Jeongin? Are you okay? Jisung and Hyunjin are already asleep” Seungmin whispered, tucking his diary under his pillow.

“I’m not looking for them” Jeongin replied and started to make his way towards Seungmin’s bed, which was conveniently closest to the door. “Turn off your lamp.”

“Oh” Seungmin said dumbly, turned off his bedside light, and he slowly shifted over when Jeongin lifted up his duvet to crawl into his bed next to him. “Are you alright then?”

“I just wanted to talk to you hyung,” Jeongin said softly, looking innocent and slightly sad. He looked around. “Clean room.”

There was a beat of silence.

In the quiet Seungmin remembered hearing the youngest crying through the thin walls and guilt weighed heavily on his heart. He had caused that.

“Are you comfortable?” Seungmin asked and the maknae nodded non-verbally.

More silence.

His mind raced with questions to ask, such as ‘why are you here?’ ‘do you find me annoying?’ and ‘what do I say to you?’ but his tongue felt like lead in his mouth so he stayed quiet.

“I’m sorry.”

The words were so quiet and so small that Seungmin didn’t know if he had heard it or imagined it. “What – What do you have to be sorry for, Jeongin?”

“Exactly that” the younger replied cryptically and Seungmin frowned, not understanding what was wrong.

“What do you mean?” he asked hesitantly, not knowing if it was the right or wrong thing to say.
“You call me Jeongin. You don’t even call me Jeonginnie anymore, you don’t play with me anymore, you don’t talk to me at all” Jeongin pouted, his bottom lip quivering as he spoke. Seungmin panicked as a fat tear slid down the youngest’s face and he froze trying the think of anything he could do to stop the vocalist from crying.

Just as he was about to offer a tissue, Jeongin started to sob.

_Oh shit, shit, shit._

“In the mornings, Seungmin-hyung-” Jeongin bawled, so uncharacteristically of him that Seungmin had completely no idea how to respond. “In the mornings you don’t pinch my cheek after the shower anymore and you don’t sit w-with me or Channie-hyung to do my homework at night at all now!”

Baffled, Seungmin awkwardly rubbed Jeongin’s shoulder in the way Felix did to him, to try and ease the maknae’s erratic whimpers.

“I-I’m sorry, Jeongin - Jeonginnie” Seungmin soothed. “I just… I feel like every time I’m talking to you I do something wrong and I really didn’t want to annoy you or anything so I-”

“I was always _joking_” Jeongin sniffled, cutting Seungmin off. “When I told you that you were being irritating or anything I just did it to… I don’t know… but I thought you knew I really loved your playfulness and the way you ruffle my hair or force me to hug you – even if I’ve had a bad day, because it makes me _happy_, Hyung!”

Seungmin stopped, remembering all the comments and videos that had made his distance himself from the younger. “I thought… you _hated_ it…”

“No, Seungmin-hyung” Jeongin laughed, the sound wet and choked. “I really _miss_ it now, I really miss _you_.”

“R-Really?” Seungmin asked a small flare of hope igniting in his chest.

“Yeah” Jeongin replied, his cries turned to faint sniffles. “I’m sorry for turning you away, hyung.”
“No, I’m sorry, Jeonginnie” Seungmin curled closer to the younger. “I should never have just cut you out like that, even if I did it because I thought it was best for you.”

“Not having you in my life hyung, would be like an Earth without the Sun. You really… light up my day, I guess” Jeongin said and laughed and Seungmin did too, knowing how much the younger hated cheesy metaphors such as that one.

“Since when did you become a poet?”

“Since when did you become one of the universe’s largest stars?”

“When I debuted with you by my side,” Seungmin said over-cutesy and Jeongin stuck out his tongue in fake disgust but cuddled in further to Seungmin’s side.

There was another moment of silence, but this time it was light.

“Can I stay here for tonight?” the maknae asked, in a soft and almost hesitant voice.

Seungmin paused a smile on his lips. “Of course, Jeonginnie.”

Jeongin’s response was stealing his pillow and Seungmin laughed as the maknae, who was really the boss of the dorms, spread out further on the small bed.

“G’night, Hyung.”

“Night, Jeonginnie.”

It only took a few minutes until the younger’s breaths evened out and the maknae’s body was lax against Seungmin’s own.

Seungmin smiled calmly in the dark of the room; everything was going well – he had made up with
all the members except Changbin, but it wasn’t like they had a large falling out with him in the first place. All that would take was a few ‘deep’ conversations and some fried eggs – he was lucky Changbin was easy to forgive.

But Seungmin knew the elder wouldn’t forget so well, but maybe that was exactly what he needed.

In the light, the shiny metal legs of his desk caught his eye. He scrunched his nose at the incriminating and controversial paper that was lying blissfully unaware on top of it. The timetable... it was something he felt so conflicted with... the members, especially Jisung, was so against it, but it was his last rein of control... Unfortunately, he didn't know how easy it would be to give up.

*Don’t think about that now.*

Seungmin breathed in the clean smell of his sheets and his room, the scent of Jeongin’s recently washed hair with the apple shampoo that only the maknae used filling his lungs.

He really missed this.

*I know I’m not better, not yet, but something tells me that this is definitely the right direction.*

He carefully flicked on his lamp, making sure Jeongin or his other roommates didn’t stir and he slowly reached for his diary and pen he had hidden just before.

‘*I know it will be hard*’ he wrote in his diary, not caring that the strokes weren’t perfectly straight and not minding the slight tilt of his characters.

‘*But I know I can get better, not just in my dancing, but in my mental and physical health, with the support of the management team, the doctors and my friends – both my members, Subin-noona and Frankie-hyung, and my classmates Seojun, Beomwon and Younghun, my best-school-friend Haeun and my recovery-buddy Dayun.*’

He nibbled on the end of his pen in thought.
'So today I pledge to be good, not perfect, but good. Because today was a good day.'

He looked down at Jeongin who was resting and felt his heart swell. His love for all his friends, but especially his members overpowered him for a second and he found himself having to blink the tears, of happiness, out of his eyes.

'I am okay. And for the first time in a while, I can’t wait to wake up tomorrow.'

Chapter End Notes

Holy hell we made it! This has been such a large part of my life for the past year and I wanted to say a huge thank you to everyone who read, kudosed (?) and commented. It seriously means the world and this year I've really tried to explore new hobbies (such as art, writing and dancing) and I've found that writing these stories is the thing that makes me feel the happiest.

Sorry, prepare yourself for a long-ass note ahah.

Going to be completely honest with you, this was a pretty tough ride. From the stress of doing a final subject a year early and then screwing it up and being disappointed lol to exams, writer's block, lack of motivation, you name it, it's been here. 'Topple' is my baby as my first Stray Kid's work and although sometimes it was tough as I didn't really see a lot of improvement in my writing throughout this process (very unlike Shellshocked where the improvement from the first chapter to the last was obvious).

Another really difficult thing for me this year was Woojin leaving Stray Kids and honestly, I thought many times about leaving the fandom and stuff (this sounds bad, but also because all my friends who got me into KPOP in the first place 'moved on' a few months ago so...). However as I mentioned before I feel writing is really my best way to express what I want to say, my creativity, and to accomplish and be proud of something so here we are!

SYMBOLISM: Title: Today
- a lot of the whole last chapter thing about 'tomorrow' 'tomorrow' because today he had the talk
- a lot of the fic is about Seungmin thinking about the future such as the timetable where he details every moment of the next week and stuff. It's kind of like his mindset is focussing more on the present,
- I don't know this chapter doesn't have a lot of symbolism because it's wrapping up all loose cords and stuff and making up between characters (I loved writing the final scene so much more than I thought omg) PS even though this was to 'finish' the story,
I wanted to give it the idea of its a 'never-ending story' (see what I did there lol what a bop) because there are still some unfinished elements such as he doesn't make it up with Changbin, and he still doesn't fully forgive himself or let himself no stress plus the timetable The whole school situation is left up to your imagination and stuff - idk.

I really loved writing the last scene??? Like how we got to see what he wrote in his diary idk it was hopeful and a classic I loved that. Um, what else... are you guys happy with the ending? Leave a comment below about it and your opinion of the whole story :))

NOW here's what my 2020 is looking like: I'm graduating late next year so I do need to focus on school a lot. Another reason I struggled with Topple was the monthly due date, I know how annoying it is to read something that updates slowly so to save you all that stress, I'm going to be taking a different route of writing for a bit and try one-shots rather than long chaptered fics.

On this note, I've already started my series 'A Collection of Stray Kids Oneshots' and have posted my first work there 'Breathe.' I would really appreciate if you go follow it and then you can see more of my writing. These one-shots will all be a bit darker than 'Topple' was with deeper themes, especially regarding psychology. 'Breathe' is a bit of an extreme example ahaha but I also really want to experiment with my writing style too, because ngl, I feel 'Topple', even though I do love the plot and character work/development, sometimes I feel it's a bit basic lol.

Next posted will be my baby (like I lowkey love her more than Topple don't tell Topple lol) is a currently 30k+ very angsty epic canon (can I say this for real-life?) time skip Jeongin-centric fic story about friendship that I should be posting before February. (It sounds lame but I promise it's going to be sick)

Alright, I'm heading out. Thank you so much for my dear reviewers that were here the whole story, such as Token (:)), Larynx_Blues, sunshinelixie, aspencreek, YEEHAWDAVE, Demi_dings, kousoyo and Alba_Kuro.

Thanks so much you guys, you guys commented so much and that is really what made this possible because if you guys didn't comment I probs would have lost motivation for this back in April.

Also, does anyone like how the last sentence of the summary kind of linked in with the whole Seungmin&Jeongin conversation? IDK i thought it was cute

Okay I'm on 4 hours of sleep (for all those that wished me luck for my party I wanted to let you know it was great thanks you all)

Thank you for following or reading the story of Seungmin in 'Topple!' Stick around for some works I'll be posting soon <3

For the final time if your journey with me ends here :'))

Love,
~Talic

End Notes
I hope you enjoyed the first chapter of 'Topple'!!! It's a bit slow this chapter, but as we delve deeper into the story, it'll pick up the pace.

This is my first work in the Stray Kids fandom, and since I finished my BTS story recently, I decided to plan and write this!

It'll be pretty plot-heavy,,,, and a bit of angst,,,, sorry!!!(?)

Constructive criticism is welcome. Comment your opinion of this!

Thank you for reading!

~Talic

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!