No Galaxy

by go_higher

Summary

It would break.

Notes

I've been having way too many Minho feels lately lol. I'm so happy to see him excited and vibrant and so cheerful lately. The past year was so fascinating and relatable watching him go from being so quiet and unsure of himself to being a full on crackhead in public.

But I also love angst.... so......

Happy reading! :)

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/18407912.
Minho was used to being alone.

Not because he was particularly unapproachable or cold.

Actually, anyone would agree he was the furthest thing from the sharp and closed off boy his natural-born features often portrayed him as.

He was cheerful and bright- a lot of times playful and sometimes a bit weird.

More importantly, his heart was big and full of compassion. He loved reading and loved animals and hopefully, in the future, would get to work in a field where he could be surrounded by animals of all kinds.

Just... not in the outdoors.

Some place inside, away from mosquitoes and flying insects and terrifying cockroaches and ants with wings (like what even was that?), some place where he could be at peace. A zoo or an aquarium or a shelter.

That would be nice. And safe.

And honestly, what was the point of bugs? What purpose did they serve beyond making him want to cry?

His hatred of nature and all the marvelously terrifying creatures it had to offer aside- the reality was- Minho wasn't the sort who pushed others away.

He liked to keep them close. He liked having others to play with.

But he had grown up an only child, no siblings or kids his own age near home. In fact, his home had been so far away from school, he spent his mornings at an older hyung’s house eating breakfast instead before heading to class.

That hyung was close to him, still to this day, but he was older, and Minho felt the distance between them.

After all, the concerns of a grade-schooler were much different than someone entering their 7th year.

Summers and holidays, Minho spent at his grandparents pulling weeds and doing chores.

At home, he watched his mom cook and lent a hand and learned how to efficiently pack clothes and items into bundles. His father gave him many books and always let him sit with him in the living room armchair as they read.

But reading books, packing bundles, cooking meals, fixing the yard- none of these things were exactly a critic's top pick on life skills that would make someone proficient at human interaction. At dealing with.... everything that people were.

Easily upset, easily excited, way too reckless but way too careful, sickeningly cruel yet heartwarming
and kind.

But still- Minho wanted to be friends.

Of course, there was school and he had classmates, but they weren't friends, no matter how much he liked them.

Because Minho was friendly and Minho was kind, but between the spurts of random excitement, the comments on the weather and the day and on trivial little details others his age wouldn't even begin to think of, he was just too hard to understand.

Sometimes he was happy. Sometimes he wasn't. He didn't see the need to try and be anything other than what he was.

But his swinging moods seemed to put his classmates off, and so did his spontaneous comments.

They ate lunch with him and sometimes in the yard played games when he ran over. But he had never been invited to games or birthday parties outside of school.

When he was younger, he thought it had been because they didn't know where he lived. Or had just forgotten.

But Minho was older now, and Minho knew.


He could be as friendly as he wanted. As closed as he wanted.

It wouldn't matter.

At the end of the day, no matter how many people he came across, or how many people he surrounded himself with, no matter how hard he tried to be like everyone else, or how little he tried to match their ways, no matter how many hands he held or let go-

Minho would always be alone.

Maybe one day that would change.

Or maybe it wouldn't.

He didn't know.

But maybe- he told himself on those dark, thinking nights on his back in the bed-

Maybe that was okay.

"You're.... really kind of an alien. You know that?"

Minho blinked and tore his gaze from the package of spicy seaweed he'd been eyeing on the rack.

It was five in the afternoon, sun lowering orange and gold on the far horizon, casting light and shadow like a bath across the tiled convenience store floor and the face of Minho and his hyung.

Other students and workers, tired moms and dads, milled through the aisles around them.
Some were chatting, some were microwaving ramen, and a boyfriend and girlfriend were behind Minho at the ice cream freezers debating over the prices of two similarly-packaged cones.

It kind of made Minho want to go over and ask what they picked.

The summer had never been so hot.

His own mouth craved the sweet sanctuary of something chocolate and cold—anything to make the heat in his brain stop.

But at his hyung's offhand words, Minho's attention strayed away from the ice cream and onto the older boy.

Haejun himself was looking at a bag of rice crackers in his hand, expression oddly thoughtful, eyebrows furrowed and floppy hair parted low over his eyes.

He didn't seem to notice Minho's questioning look.

Or if he did, he ignored it, swapping out the rice crackers for several packs of spicy, sweet and roasted seaweed instead.

"I don't get you," Haejun said as he bent over, voice muffled as he rummaged through the array of snacks on the shelf's lowest rack. "What goes on in that mind of yours?"

Minho blinked again. The question had come out of the blue. "What are you talking about?"

"You."

Minho frowned. Well obviously.

Haejun straightened, some discount candy in hand, and headed for the register.

Minho followed, and for a time, the two were quiet as Haejun checked out their snacks, only the beeping of the machine filling the sudden noise in Minho's ears.

... What went on in his mind?

What a question.

Nothing.

And everything.

It was too full and too empty.

Too many feelings and not enough thoughts.

Too many thoughts and not enough feelings.

He couldn't form them into words, couldn't form them into much of anything beyond a lingering sensation of expression wanting to break free from his mind.

"Here."

Minho pulled away from his head and looked over.

Haejun handed him their bag of snacks, searching Minho's face briefly before accepting the receipt.
from the cashier and her supremely polite 'have a nice day!'.

Then they were gone.

Out the store, sitting on the curb across the street at the curve of a grassy hill.

They sat close, shoulders pressed together, looking down onto the rest of the city view below.

Smog hovered over the buildings and made the cityscape gold and gray.

Minho tugged at his shirt.

Tugged down the mask on his face.

Too tight. Too hot.

He hated it.

"You did good today." Haejun broke the quiet with ease.

He rummaged in their bag, pulled out the spicy seaweed and ripped it open. He offered Minho a strip first, then pulled several for himself.

Minho just stared at the snack sticking to his palm, all of a sudden feeling a bit nauseous and miserable at himself and life.

He wondered why.

"Your dancing is good," Haejun clarified in the ongoing silence. "They put you at the front today."

Minho made some sort of noise, distant and detached.

Their dance studio was tiny compared to most, but there were plenty boys and girls who came weekly.

Usually, Minho was in the back. Sometimes he was on the sides.

Only once, today, he had been brought up front. It wasn't anything to brag about though.

There were lots of others in their dance crew looking for a spot, working towards perfecting their techniques and stage presence so they could be picked. They rotated positions a lot, trying to see who was the best fit for where.

Apparently Minho's best position was behind everyone else. But he trusted his dance hyungs judgments.

Haejun jostled his shoulder when he didn't answer, raising his eyebrows high. "What's with the face? It's a good thing. I think they're eyeing you for the new competition."

"I guess." Minho didn't try too hard to sound excited. There was no reason to.

Competitions weren't something new. He had gone to and watched and even participated in a decent amount.

They weren't well-known, and neither was he, and though Minho danced because he loved to, because it was one of the only ways he could free the stifled expression of himself from his own
body's cage-

He wasn't good.

Maybe at one point, with the praise of his teachers and his parents, he might've thought he was.

But not even two weeks ago, he had returned to Gimpo after auditioning for Cube.

After being rejected from Cube.

After dancing on national television for a foreign segment of National Geographic claiming he wanted to be a singer and then not making it in.

He had come back to his mom who only helped him unpack his backpack and the bundle of necessities she had packed thinking of his well-being, smiling and patting his head even though she must've been disappointed.

His dad had encouraged him.

Said at least he had tried.

Minho could happily continue dancing, they would always support him, but maybe it was better off staying a cherished hobby instead.

After all, the idol life wasn't made for everyone.

After all, he wasn't particularly special.

Of course his dad hadn't said that last part.

Minho didn't think his parents ever would. They loved him greatly.

But Minho had heard the words himself, in his own head.

The reality that there were so many others out there, talented and fearless and so hungry for that life on stage and in front the world-

And that wasn't him.

He didn't want the eyes of the world on him.

He just wanted to dance.

He just wanted to feel that freedom, that happiness, that near indescribable elation that came from the art of movement.

From being alive.

Minho played with the partially-melted and somewhat gross seaweed wilting in his hand.

For a fourteen-year old, sometimes, he could be really dramatic. His aunt had a point.

Maybe he should turn to theater instead.

But as an extra. He could never land a lead.

"Hey."
A set of knuckles knocked against the side of his head lightly.

Minho stopped staring at his disgusting snack to see Haejun looking at him bizarrely soft. "...What?"

"Stop thinking so loud," Haejun said, a smile quirking at his lips. He ruffled Minho's hair. "You're a great dancer. Your hyungs know. Just keep working, Minho-ah. It'll turn out one day."

Minho didn't have very long to wonder over his hyung's words as the taller boy took the sad seaweed out of his palm and put it back in their snack bag.

Then Haejun stood and stretched his arms high above his head.

"We're dumb," he said after a moment of gazing down at the city. "Why'd we get seaweed? Should've gotten ice cream instead."

Minho looked up at him and blinked, confused.

Was Haejun leaving already?

They had only just met up again.

Maybe his attitude had been too off-putting?

Should he have joked about the dance competition instead.

Haejun cleared his throat very pointedly, staring at Minho as though he were seeing right through his thoughts.

"It means we should get ice cream. It's what you wanted anyway, right?"

Minho hesitated.

Climbed to his feet and brushed the grass off his sweats.

He tugged his mask around his neck out of habit because his hands had nowhere else to go.

He did want ice cream. Or a block of ice to pull towards his body and hug.

He wanted it so bad, the thought of not having either made him feel like his brain and body were about to melt.

"If you wanted ice cream, why'd we get seaweed?" he muttered aloud.

His voice sounded hazy and a little distant, distracted to his own ears.

Haejun slung an arm around Minho's shoulders with an eye-roll and pulled him close, turning them back in the direction of the convenience store once more.

"Because you were staring at it for almost ten minutes in the store. I thought you wanted it."

"Me too," Minho mumbled.

Haejun sighed and shook his head, cheek brushing against the top of Minho's head.

But the sound was fond, if not a bit exasperated, and he went on to mumble back-

"Don't get you at all, dummy. Don't get you at all."
"Hyung."

With a great deal of difficulty, Minho cracked his eyes open. The blurry spots swarming his vision gave away to a familiar, confused and somewhat doubling face. Jisung?

The younger boy leaned back from where he had been crouched, eyebrows pinched and lips twisted.

"What are you doing?"

Minho frowned. Somewhere the sound of an air conditioner whirred- a steady and low thrum of noise beneath the jumbled fragments of words and memories coalescing in his mind. What had he been doing? Good question. He winced, pushing himself up slightly onto his elbows.

They stuck to the wooden practice room floor as he raised the elbow of his left hand to touch his head.


"I don't know," he said.

Jisung looked at him. His expression was hard to read. "You were lying on the floor."

Minho touched a hand to his head again. His gaze shifted ever so slightly to the wall of mirrors across the room, at himself, legs sprawled and upper torso bent, mask on his face tugged halfway on. He looked awful. Like he hadn't slept in weeks. Weird. He hadn't looked like this in the mirror this morning.

Or maybe he had. And he didn't notice.

What he did notice was Changbin, standing by the speakers on the counter built into the wall. The shorter rapper was shutting the machine off, grabbing Minho's bag set beside it on top, unsmiling. Did something happen?

Minho found himself worried. 3RACHA had been in their own production studio, brainstorming for their next mini album- even though they just had a comeback- and though the three of them together were incredible, he knew sometimes arguments and differences in opinions could break out. Could make them mad.

Minho was about to ask, but Jisung was speaking first, pushing aside Minho's hand from his forehead to replace it with one of his own. "Do you feel sick?"

Minho pressed into the palm without a second thought.
It was unbearably, wonderfully cool. Thoughts went, feelings swept in instead.

Whatever the situation, whatever was going on didn't matter. For the moment, in the moment, Jisung was here, and that meant comfort, and that meant safety and that meant letting go.

He could lie down again.


Minho was forward, in someone's shirt, without knowing how or why.

His eyelids were pulling, pulling down, so much force, he couldn't keep them up. Strange. His ears were ringing but he didn't feel sick. He didn't. Just tired. Just hot. Just weak. Like he couldn't break free from the buzz in his head. The sluggish swamp around his limbs.

He heard a curse, and then another, and then a second set of hands on his head and shoulders. Someone was calling for their manager- what manager? Had one come in with them?

He hadn't noticed.

"What happened?"

"I don't know-"

_I don't know-

"-call the medic-

"-I'll call-"

Doors were opening- no closing- no-

"What's going on?"

"Chan hyung-"

Minho slipped, slipped far away. He wanted to reassure his members. Tell them something, anything. He was okay. Just tired. He was really okay. He was just-

His mind shuttered.

_I don't know._

_I don't know._

_I don't know._

Chapter End Notes
Okay, so the timeline will be moving back and forth and some points, so you guys know in advance. I hope it won't be too jarring or anything and I'll do my best so no one gets confused :)

BTS is listed because....well Minho was with them for three years as a dancer so they're going to be in here as well as canonly as possible :D

Updates will come regularly.
"I want to become a singer."

He had said it so brightly then.

Smiling into the camera, the interviewers huddled on the other side of the boom mic, light board and cameras covered in plastic as rain pattered.

The weather was abysmal, the skies grey and wind cold. But Minho had bundled himself in his favorite colored puffy coat and tightened the laces of his shoes with excitement.

Gimpo to Seoul. Bedroom to stadium. Kid to idol.

Wouldn't that be fun?

He could train and dance with others who liked what he did. He could make some real friends.

Wouldn't they like the same kind of music?

Sure, Minho listened to a lot of girl groups, but they were catchy and the dances were easy and fun and made him feel cheery.

Next to hip-hop, it was his favorite genre when he was feeling kinda down.

And his parents weren't so opposed to girl songs. Not like the hard-hitting beats and curse words his parents always said they knew were in his other songs.

Honestly Minho blamed his dancer hyungs and noonas for that. It was what they mostly danced to in the studio. But it made him feel powerful and cool and strong, and there was something thrilling about feeling the beat move through and out his limbs.

Once he became an idol, his parents would probably change their minds.

What if he debuted in a hip-hop group or something?
The thought made him smile. He thanked the interviewers politely as they waved him away, bowing fully before turning to head down the tunnel where a small crowd of other applicants had been waiting away from the rain and in the shadows.

They gave him looks as he passed, looks he couldn't quite understand. They weren't unkind, but they weren't very nice either.

Minho offered them a small smile they didn't return. He grasped his backpack straps and looked at the ground. His laces were getting somewhat soggy.

Eventually, he found a place on a small wall outside the building. He had some time before he was supposed to present himself. Some time to relax and look around and maybe eat....

Minho squeezed the tiny granola bar in his jacket pocket. His mom had given him several for snacks but he'd eaten all of them but the one on the bus ride into the city.

He pulled the bar out, the crinkled, shiny plastic gathering drops of rain immediately as he held it in his lap.

His eyes slid to the side, back to the tunnel where the others still gathered.

They weren't looking at him anymore. Not really. One or two heads turned his way a couple times but it wasn't anything.

It wasn't anything to worry about. To think about. To feel oddly left out about.

Minho glanced back down at his granola bar.

Maybe he had said something weird during his interview?

Maybe he had somehow embarrassed himself? Embarrassed them?

But he hadn't done anything strange except dance- which is what he was here to audition for.

He didn't do anything wrong.

"It's okay," he told himself lightly, quietly, so no one else could hear.

I'm okay, he thought to himself, again and again. Because he was.

Even if it was only just hitting him now how very much alone he was in this big city, without his parents or any hometown dancer noonas and hyungs. With all these strangers.

It was fine.

Minho put the granola back inside his pocket and slid off the wall. His gaze wandered to the clouded sky, roiling thick above.

If he just tried his best, surely everything would be okay.

He put a grin on his face.

Surely...

He woke in darkness.
For a moment, Minho simply laid still, staring at the blurry, shadows stretched above his head he knew to be the bars of his shared bunk bed.

His body felt oddly loose and soft. Like putty that'd been squeezed and flopped around a bit before being left out on a table for whatever use later.

He was glad, though, to find his mind oddly quiet. It felt hollow and free. Loud with silence. Loud with peace.

He had almost closed his eyes again when movement from the door caught his attention.

It opened and a figure slipped in, a fuzzy outline of black and yellow- no wait that was blond- a pale and tired face drawing closer, lips set in a frown.

Chan looked surprised to see him awake, and pulled up short at the bottom bunk's opening when he saw Minho looking at him in the shadowed dark.

There was something in his hands but Minho couldn't see what.

He did see Chan's frown twist deeper- and felt his own mouth mirror the expression.

"Minho..." the word, his name, fell soft from his leader's mouth. But that was all Chan said. And that was all he did.

Say Minho's name and gaze down at him from where he stood at the corner of the bed, watching, like he was waiting for something to happen or something else to be said.

So Minho spoke.

Quiet and unsure.

Hating to be looked at so oddly by his hyung and friend.

"What happened?"

Chan was just as quiet. "You don't remember?"

"I'm not sure." And Minho turned his gaze away from his leader, away from the present world as he tried to think back.

He had been practicing- not any choreography in particular- dancing to move, to get the unbearable itch of needing to be productive, out. He had been dancing, and then he hadn't, and then he had recalled Jisung's face and Changbin's voice and the sound of too much clutter and noise blending into one, into static, into bliss.

Beyond that- he didn't know.

"I'm sorry," he apologized, though he wasn't too sure why. He felt that maybe he should.

Surely he had caused a commotion. Surely he had gotten the attention of management and the company and the other members.

It made his insides twist.

What would they think?
That there was something wrong with him? That he was lacking?

There was so much he could improve on, so much he could be better at.

He didn't think this in a negative way- no - just as a fact.

He knew he wasn't the best or most eye-catching on stage compared to the others, but he always tried his best, gave a hundred percent.

He wasn't the same trainee who had gotten eliminated in one week.

Who couldn't rap. Who couldn't sing.

Who danced but wasn't as attention-grabbing as Hyunjin and Felix- his dongsaengs so coolly intense and kind and warm in a way Minho could never have others see him as.

But that was alright. More than alright.

Because his heart was incredibly proud of his dongsaengs for what they'd accomplished, for the good people that they were.

They deserved nothing but recognition and validation that they were good- doing good- and were loved.

Felix had been broken after he'd been eliminated. Swallowed in depression and doubt and disappointment in himself and for his family who had wished him so well. For his mother who had flown numerous times to visit and make sure he was okay.

Felix had given so much of himself and his mentality, everything that was comfort and home for a foreign country and foreign people and language, just to have it taken away.

All his hard work and struggles... the memory was more than enough to make Minho hurt.

It hurt that Hyunjin had once been hated. Malicious lies spread about.

Hyunjin, who was nothing but open and so smart and thoughtful. Who showed himself to the fans tired, happy or upset, who wore his genuine self like the part of him it was supposed to be without trying to pretend.

Hyunjin who believed that everyone should be loved and respected regardless of who or what they were, who despised dancing, but made it an incredible strength and show of self-expression and technique even watching from the sidelines or back drew Minho's attention.

Minho wasn't like them.

He couldn't express himself, couldn't comprehend, how to show himself with that ease and level of comfortableness without being awkward or too loud.

He was getting better- he knew. Being in Stray Kids, on screen, was helping bit by bit.

But too slow, how could he ever keep up if everyone continued to grow, he'd be left behind, again, he should get up, he needed to get up, keep going and going and going and-

"Stop that."

Minho felt the two words, low and soft and stern, seize a hold and rip him from his mind.
He tore his eyes from the bars of his bunk and jerked in surprise.

Chan was beside him, sitting on the bed, one leg tucked beneath the other, leaned over him slightly with a furrowed brow and searching eyes.

Minho tried not to squirm. Even if he wasn't trying to be, Chan serious was an intimidating sight.

When had his leader gotten there? How long had Chan been there staring down at him like this?

"You passed out," the other boy said, something like disapproval in his tone.

Minho winced at hearing it. Right. He must've.

He wanted to shrink back, wanted to melt into the bed and preferably the floor and then about a hundred feet into the ground.

How embarrassing that it happened. He couldn't even remember how it had happened.

"The doctor said overexertion and dehydration were probably the cause," Chan continued on. "But we don't know for sure. None of us were with you. Woojin said you left the dorm but didn't say where you were going."

Minho thought back. He hadn't- but not because he was trying to be mysterious or anything.

He had wanted to dance, and so put on his sneakers and a hat and a mask before going to do so. He had made sure to text their manager- and thought that'd be enough.

And although he had gotten side-tracked on the walk to the studios, talking to a street food owner, picking up some littered trash, waving 'hi' to a baby in a stroller- he had eventually made it there.

But how was he supposed to tell Chan it hadn't occurred to him to tell anyone his whereabouts? That Minho had known where he was going so it wasn't really a concern if no one else did since they weren't coming along.

It wasn't like anyone had asked or tried to stop him, so he had assumed it was okay.

"I told Donggyu- hyung," Minho said eventually, a bit defensively.

"I know. He messaged me."

Minho's eyebrows crinkled in bewilderment. If their manager had let Chan know then what was the big deal?

He didn't realize he had said it aloud until he saw Chan glaring at him in the dark.

"Even if our managers know you should still tell the members if they're there. Especially Woojin. You're not new to this, Minho. You know how important it is we stay in communication."

"For our safety," Minho muttered, taking the scolding he knew he deserved.

Chan was looking at him again, hard, like he was trying to figure out whether or not Minho was being sarcastic or actually agreeing.

Minho pretended the doubt didn't hurt.

"You're on rest tomorrow."
Minho startled, swung his eyes from where they'd fallen to an unremarkable place on the wooden floor, and stared at his leader.

Rest? For what?

And miss his vocal lessons?

And fall behind?

He started to sit up.

Chan put a hand on his chest and forced him back down. He didn't move his hand, and Minho found himself glaring, something in him churning, beginning to burn. He was talking, angry, before he could help it.

"Is that the company's order or yours?"

Chan's eyes flashed. His hand pressed on the younger boy's chest harder. "It's theirs and mine. You're no good to us hurt, Minho. We need you okay."

Minho scoffed, low, under his breath.

How annoying. It was annoying. He was annoyed.

At himself. At his hyung.

At the stupid hand keeping him in place and the weighing darkness of the room now settling in, heavy and restrictive and closed. It reminded him too much of when he'd injured his ankle all those months ago, before a show recording, and it had been awful, and he couldn't believe what had happened and the members couldn't either— how could he be so clumsy?

How could he be this bad?

To watch them promote as eight on stage, on screen, at a time he knew fans still said he didn't belong, what did he do, his personality didn't stand out, he brought nothing to the team—

Minho knew. He knew. He was trying. He was trying to be good.

He knew dancing wasn't enough, not when every member of his team could do three times as more, better, in their sleep.

He was trying.

"I'm okay," he had laughed and smiled when the members had run over to check.

When the manager had carried him out and the cameras had started snapping and flashing and recording, and he had stayed smiling, because showing anything else would only prove the words he had heard years ago in Gimpo from those classmates that day—

"Nothing special."

Minho batted the thought away. Batted the memory away. His annoyance dwindled as quickly as it came.

Of course his members needed him okay.
Sitting out at a time like this, again, halfway between promotions and preparations for another comeback- no, he couldn't do it.

He had to be okay.

What was wrong with him? Why was he getting upset?

It made sense for his leader to want him healthy. It made sense for Minho to take the time to rest.

He deflated as his own thoughts settled in. It made sense. Chan made sense.

Minho was the one not making sense.

As usual.

"Okay," he heard himself mumble. He could always make up vocal lessons the day after. They would probably work it into his schedule, maybe between their dance practice and his diction focus for rap.

No problem.

It would be fine.

The other members sometimes got dizzy or injured too. He wasn't the only one. He hadn't been the only one.

So long as he came back brighter and stronger, it wasn't that big of a deal.

No problem. No problem.

He sighed.

Somehow Chan's fingers found themselves in his hair, brushing Minho's bangs up and back and nails scratching at his scalp. "The others are in the living room. They've been out there while you rested. But if you're feeling better, I'll have them come back in and grab their stuff so they can shower. Is that okay?" he questioned.

Minho tried not to push his head a little bit more into Chan's hand.

He didn't want to come across as any more weird than his leader already thought he was.

If that was even possible.

The members never really knew what to make of him, even on his best days.

If he was happy, he was overexcited. If he was quiet, he was moody.

There wasn't exactly a way to win.

There never had been when it came to himself.

"What are you thinking about?" he heard Chan ask softly.


"You're a liar."
"You're nosy."

Chan exhaled, untangled their hands and pinched Minho on the thigh hard. He ignored the younger boy's yelp and told him quite earnestly, "I'm trying to understand you better. So help out a bit, yeah?"

"I'm not a project," Minho told him.

"I didn't say you were."

"What were you holding earlier?"

Chan seemed thrown by the sudden change in conversation. "I- what?"

Minho sat himself up carefully, head swimming only a bit, as he searched Chan's hands and the bed and the room. "You were holding something when you came in, weren't you? What was it?"

"Oh." Chan eyed him curiously. "It was just a rag. Iced. But I put it back in the kitchen while you were staring up at the bed."

Minho made a face at the explanation. "I wasn't staring for that long."

And Chan regarded his younger member with a look that clearly said he wasn't sure whether or not he should be taking him seriously. "It was almost twenty minutes. I thought you fell asleep."

"But... I didn't," Minho answered, more than confused. He was pretty sure he had been thinking only for a moment or two before Chan had joined him on the bed.

Twenty minutes was unsettling. And bewildering.

No, that couldn't be right.

Chan read the expression on his face with something hard to pinpoint in his own gaze. His features shifted, unreadable, ever so slightly, then the older boy was reaching out, a hand on Minho's shoulder again, guiding him down.

"Get some rest," he told the younger boy. "If you need anything, I'm here. Just knock, okay?" he imitated rapping his knuckles on the bars above them, separating their beds. "We'll start fresh tomorrow."

Minho could only nod. He watched as Chan retreated from the bed, towards the door, opening it in and out, orange light spilling from the hall into and across the bedroom floor in a triangular soft glow.

He could hear Hyunjin and Seungmin speaking with Chan, hear his name and softer murmurs rise and fall as they talked.

What were they saying?

He didn't want to know.

Or maybe he did.

Make up your mind.

Minho dragged his eyes back to the bars of his bunk bed, frowning and frowning hard.
He tried to think back to that moment, that instance in the practice room where he had fallen—where somehow, something had knocked him to the ground.

He had felt it, crawling from his ankle to his throat, closing in, dragging him in, swallowing him down.

The memory—

He shook his head. Closed his eyes.

What memory?

No, a thought—

His thoughts—

Too much.

At the time, it had been too—

The kitchen was empty when Minho stumbled into it the next morning.

10:00 AM and the dorm was muted and gray, a spitting image of the cloudy skies outside.

It was quiet, not even the sound of footsteps of murmured chatter reaching his ears. But Minho had seen the group chat and all the many messages wishing him well, and Chan’s reminder that they would be gone for the first half of the day for their lessons and practice.

Jisung had made sure to add that he would probably be staying later than the rest to finish layering their instrumentals for the track they had been working on the day before. He also messaged Minho privately and said he left food in the fridge and to call if Minho wanted to talk.

Minho was grateful, but not too sure what that meant.

Didn’t Jisung know he wouldn’t call? Why would he try and interrupt while Jisung was in the middle of work?

The younger boy needed focus and concentration.

It was no different than when Minho was choreography their dances with Hyunjin and sharing those opinions with Felix.

The amount of times the other members had been glowered at or had a shoe thrown at their heads for interrupting were too many to count.

At any rate, Minho was touched.

It felt a little different, having the members reassure and worry him. Even if it was only because they had no other choice.

Minho made a groggy beeline for the fridge, looking for the food Jisung had apparently put together. But when he stared into the cluttered and somewhat pungent-smelling fridge, his appetite all but vanished.

When was the last time this thing had been cleaned?
He grabbed one of three opened cartons of milk, sniffed- and swore.

It was quickly set on the counter with a look of disgust. Followed by several containers of food that had started turning grey and green and why were there mushrooms coming out of something that wasn't supposed to have mushrooms-

~x~

That was how the manager found Minho an hour later, sleeves rolled to his elbows, hairband pushing his bangs back, scrubbing the emptied shelves of the fridge with cleaner and a rag with enough ferocity to make the entire unit shake.

Donggyu pulled off his mask and peeled off his coat. He had gone outside long before Minho had woken to order take-out and pick food up for them to eat.

He could've had it delivered, sure, but he had wanted to stretch his legs before getting cooped up all day in the dorm.

Chan and management had been very firm in their orders to keep Minho inside. Like he was some sort of prisoner.

Donggyu understood it- safety of the idols and their health yada yada- but he knew Minho would hate the limitation just as much as him. There were five years between them, but they were similar enough that they understood one another and got along.

At least- Donggyu believed he understood the younger boy.

The dancer was comfortable to be around, a cute dongsaeng, and considerably laid-back compared to the other, younger, members of the group still going through growing pains, youth-into-adulthood years and all the angry fights and bickering that came with it.

Still- there was something.

Times when Minho's mood would swing high-to-low fast enough to give him whiplash.

Times when he'd pull Donggyu into a conversation about his weekend and they'd end up outside, in the park, on a swing, talking about the plausibility of sending animals to the moon to start a kingdom again free of human influence and mistreatment.

And then they'd end up at a fast food restaurant, eating ice cream from cups while Minho redirected the conversation again to his plans for the weekend, remembering all the small details he had mentioned hours before.

Donggyu didn't even know what happened in those instances.

He could barely recall getting from point A to point B, only knowing that the constant had been Minho, moving, talking, laughing, smiling Minho, with no indication of slowing down until he was down for the count. Asleep or resting or exhausted. Which were far and few in between.

The nine boys of Stray Kids were working always. Rest was a privilege. Something that when given, should be taken, for their own sake.
But here and now, when Minho was supposed to be resting, he was scrubbing away like a madman at their big, shared fridge.

Donggyu stepped behind Minho and ripped the rag from the younger boy's gloved hands with ease.

Minho yelped and whipped around, sprayed him in the eye and punched him in the gut. He panicked as Donggyu went down, groaning.

"Ai-hyung! What are you doing?! You scared me! Are you okay?"

"Just dying," Donggyu answered, his eyeball on fire, possibly melting.

He was aware of Minho cursing, mumbling and muttering worried as the younger boy ran over to the sink and ran cold water over a new, clean rag. Then Minho was back, crouched beside him, pressing it to his eye and holding it there with strong fingers but an even stronger stare.

"I'm so sorry."

Donggyu grabbed the rag so Minho could let go and watched the dancer shuffle back on his heels. The cool water helped and the pain was going away fast. He was basically fine. But-

"What were you doing?"

Minho still looked so apologetic. "Cleaning. The fridge was dirty."

"You're supposed to be resting."

"But..." Minho frowned, paused and reiterated, "The fridge was dirty."

Donggyu sighed and pushed to his feet. Minho always was a bit particular about smells. He couldn't make a candle to save his life, but he sprayed enough Febreeze to make them all want to die. "It's fine, I can take a look later," he said. "Put everything back in and eat with me. I brought food."

And Minho's eyes brightened. "Is it jokbal?"

~x~

It was on the couch, when they were finishing off their food, that Minho straightened up and looked away from the TV.

"Hyung, let me make it up. You want ice cream?"

Donggyu tore his eyes from the screen. "Hm?"

"I hit you. And your eye." Minho peered at him for a moment, pupils huge and dark and unblinking. "It's still red."

Donggyu touched his face, unconcerned. "It doesn't hurt."

"But do you want ice cream?"

"I think you want ice cream."
"Can I go get some?"

"Let me put on shoes-"

"Ah, hyung, I'll go get it myself-"

"You're on rest."

Minho made a face. "Is it house-arrest?"

Donggyu looked at him, barely holding back a sigh. If the younger boy got in an argumentative mood, it was hard to get through to his head.

Technically, Minho wasn't restricted to the dorms. He was just supposed to stay away from any strenuous activity for a day. He understood how frustrating it must've felt to be coddled and followed by a manager all the time, even if they were only looking out for the boys' safety.

Donggyu brought his gaze towards Minho and his earnest face again, seeking approval, before bringing them to the ceiling briefly, and debating for a long, agonizing minute. Then he exhaled, turned towards the younger boy and said, "If you're not back in ten minutes-"

Minho all but jumped from the couch, throwing fist into the air and doing a small dance.

Donggyu sat up. "Minho-"

"It's right across the street, hyung," Minho said, eyes crinkling, lips curling as he smiled. "I'll be back."

Donggyu brought a hand to the back of his head and tousled his own hair. "Alright, I'm trusting you. Don't wander."

"I got it, I got it!" Minho called behind him lightly, already heading for his room to grab a hoodie and mask with a bounce in his step.

Donggyu made sure the younger boy was properly dressed before joining him at the door and watching him depart into the massive apartment hall. Minho waddled when he walked, like he wasn't quite sure how move if he wasn't dancing- like he wasn't quite sure of himself.

It made Donggyu frown.

Maybe he should tag along anyway? There was always room for chips.

He hesitated- thinking- then stepped back and shut the door.

No.

Minho was plenty old enough, an adult, no matter how young he might've looked.

He'd been on his own plenty of times before. He'd lived alone for years when he was a teenager dancing for BTS and that dance crew he had been in before he'd ever joined JYP.

Minho was self-sufficient and capable. This was less than a five minute trip to a mart.

Donggyu snorted to himself at his own idiotic thoughts.

Hanging around these kids had really turned him into some sort of parent.
A parent who the boys harassed and stuck awful-smelling concoctions that were supposed to be homemade diffusers into his room and always begged for chicken at night when they all knew they were supposed to be dieting and didn't know the meaning of a clean room-

But a parent nonetheless.

He shook his head and went to start cleaning up the empty food containers on the living room, foot table, something like a smile tugging at his lips.

There were worse jobs.

He cleaned up and fixed the cushions on the couch- and then stopped.

Minho's phone was caught in the wedge between the middle and third seat.

Donggyu grabbed it, checking to see the battery charge, glancing only briefly at the screen as it up with several messages from Jisung and Hyunjin, asking how the other boy was. Donggyu tried to shake off the uneasy feeling that always came with leaving a phone behind.

They didn't need phones to live or buy ice cream. It was fine.

Minho would be back to get it.

They world needed to learn how to stop being so dependent on the thing anyway.

Donggyu went back to tidying up, a bit slower than before, but not before slipping Minho's phone into his pocket for safe-keeping.

Honestly, he should ask Minho how to use those filters he always uploaded on Instagram.

It was an idle thought that came and went but one that made him laugh. He liked to play jokes on his girlfriend with those kinds of things. They both agreed he was the farthest thing from photogenic and that she was too, but they always teased each other and liked to make ridiculous edits that pointlessly made their appearance worse.

Donggyu snickered. He should use that thumb filter of Minho's.

Oh god. Even just the thought....

He began laughing to himself, hard.

Truly Minho was one of a kind.

What would he do without the kid and his antics?

~X~

But Minho didn't return.

Not after thirty minutes. Not after an hour. Not after two.

Calling the other manager, heart pounding, Donggyu was terrified of what had gone wrong.
Don't worry! The other members will show up next chapter. Just laying down the groundwork-

Oh. It was Minho you were worried about??

Ohhhhhhhhhhhhh........

Okay, yeah....

Uh-huh.

Just kidding you guys, thanks for reading :) Have a good day, okay?
The weather was actually very nice.

Okay, so maybe for most people it wasn't, and it probably never would be.

But Minho wasn't like most and spent a lot of time in his head being sentimental over the small things. Like now. With the sky swamped in gray and the clouds drizzling, the air stayed brisk and the streets quiet.

It was calming.

Minho stood outside the mart, chewing on the top of his chocolate cone without much thought.

Surprisingly, foot traffic was low, and those that passed by didn't spare a glance.

It was good no one recognized him- not that he thought they would- with no camera, no selfie stick or anything otherwise about him that would point him out as an idol, he could just stand in quiet and listen to the sounds of cars rumbling, construction three streets over and feet pattering along the walk.

The cashier recognized him, but he and his members visited so often, she was more of a casual acquaintance than anything else, friendly and cheerful and bright- even on that one day when a terrible storm had hit and knocked out half the area's power, and they had come barreling in, tracking mud, loud and hooting and arguing over what to eat for dinner, and Changbin had tripped in his wet sneakers and took down an entire display of discount snacks by the entrance.

The owner might not have been the happiest, but the cashier had burst out laughing and come over to help, offering Changbin one of the snacks for free.

Minho liked her. She felt a bit like a noona, and sometimes she would come and talk if she was stocking fruit in the bins out front.

She would talk about her day and then ask about his, and then they would devolve into a conversation about hobbies or weekend plans, interesting news and gardening.

Minho wasn't particularly skilled in anything relating to plants or dirt, but he still helped his grandparents on the holidays, and his aunt had been trying to grow a flower garden since the end of winter.

When he visited her, he wanted to be able to help out.

And as it turned out, planting required just as much care and consideration as animals to keep them
growing strong and safe.

Minho gnawed down his cone to the end, the cold numbing the roof of his tongue as he grimaced and sucked in a huge breath of air. Maybe he should buy a plant. They were sort of cute, in a way, if he thought about it.

But he probably wouldn't have time to take care of it. And it would probably die.

His eyes drifted along the sidewalk idly.

He noticed, at the crosswalk, leading back to his side of the road where the dorm was, a young mother with a bundled baby balanced on one hip and three hefty bags of groceries and a purse on her other arm. She was dressed in a long, grey overcoat, dark hair pulled into a loose tail, features sharp and pale.

She looked tired and a bit frazzled- and Minho was heading her way before his mind had caught up with his feet.

"Do you need help?"

She turned her head in quick surprise, eyes roaming, taking him in from head-to-toe. She hesitated. Then looked away. The light on the opposite road had slipped to yellow. "No, it's alright. Thank you for asking."

Minho frowned. "Oh." He locked gazes with her baby, staring at him from a pair of massive, round eyes. "Are you sure? I don't mind. It looks like it hurts."

The mother hesitated again, longer this time. Her attention strayed from their walk signal now lit up in green. Her bag-riddled arm flexed and tensed beneath the weight. Minho frowned deeper and went to grab the bags right away.

He didn't care if it would come across as rude or if she might yell. It looked like her arm was about to break off.

How could she carry all these things and a baby?

As expected, she seemed startled, her eyebrows and mouth pinching, like she would yell at him if he made off with her bags.

Crimes like that here were rare, he knew, but he had witnessed it several times in the dark hours of Gimpo as he walked his way on late nights from studio to home.

But then her baby started to make noises and huff, and she glanced between her son to Minho and her groceries before her shoulders drooped and she gave him a small nod of permission.

Minho smiled brightly, moving with gusto to cross the street. "Should we go?"

She looked at him like she thought he was a bit weird.

He shrugged it off as she joined him at his side and they crossed.

A left was made and they were heading towards the inner city, his sneakers scuffing and her heels clipping and her baby gurgling in the silences between.

Eventually, he began asking how her day had been. What had she done?
Ahh- she was a stay-at-home, but took university courses in the morning. Her husband worked in business but often traveled a lot. She was twenty-seven, her name was Sooyeon, she was planning on cooking a hot pot that evening, particularly because of the rain and what do you do?

“You're young, you must be a student.”

"I'm a dancer," Minho told her instead, because it was true.

She hummed and turned her eyes back to the road ahead. "Do you normally do things like this?" she wondered after a moment.

"If they need help," Minho answered. "I don't really mind the walk." He made a funny face at her son and giggled as the baby's own pudgy face became horribly offended and confused.

Sooyeon glanced at him, a tiny smile tugging at her lips.

"Thank you. You startled me at first, but I'm glad you came over." She eyed the bags creating creases in the soft material of his hoodie. "They're heavy, aren't they? I bought too many vegetables."

"It's not that bad," Minho lied, even though it actually very seriously felt like his arms were about to come off.

Talking had been a good distraction from its burning weight, but they were going a bit downhill now and the plastic was digging in deeper with the descent.

Sooyeon actually let out a laugh at his words, stopping in the middle of the walk to regard him amused. She shifted her son and reached for the bags. "Let's switch. You can hold Cheolie if you don't mind."

Minho debated for about two seconds before nodding in agreement.

They swapped carefully, Cheolie grabbing and tugging at Minho's bangs right away with nonsensical noises and twisting expressions.

Holding a baby wasn't much different than how he cradled his cats back at home, but it was still new, and he made sure to grip tight and look at the sidewalk so he could better see where he walked.

Soon enough they made it to a side street off the main road, where an apartment complex, grey and square with water stains and peeling paint, but with several window ledges decorated in potted plants, waited to greet the odd trio.

Sooyeon looked at Minho for a moment, then said, "I'll take the bags upstairs, if you could hold Cheolie for a bit longer..."

Minho nodded and they moved inside the complex entrance away from the drizzling rain and darkening skies.

Sooyeon smiled before disappearing inside the inner glass doors and Minho waited, bouncing her son on his hip absentely and taking in the sight of the entrance.

Yellow paint, wooden-framed pictures, fake plants in weave baskets...

He gave a polite nod to the lone security guard seated behind a desk.

He was older than Minho but still young and extraordinarily buff. Minho thought he maybe served his military time already or had gone into some type of service beforehand.
There was something in the way he was sitting, something in the set of his shoulders and sharp, drawn face.

Actually, he looked a bit like Changbin. Just stronger.

And of course way taller.

The guard met his eyes and for a second all they did was look at one another. Then tilted his head and questioned, "Are you Sooyeon-ssi's nephew?"

Minho blinked, caught off guard. He wasn't used to people approaching him first. "Oh...no. I'm just helping."

The guard's expression was somewhat apologetic. "Ah...sorry. She talked about him often, and mentioned he might visit soon. She usually doesn't let others hold Sungcheol."

"Ah."

Minho didn't really know what else to say, but the older boy was still looking at him and he felt like he had to explain.

"I was helping with groceries." Cheolie squirmed in his arms, brought a chubby hand to Minho's face and started pulling. "How long have you worked here?" He managed to get out as a small set of knuckles punched him in the nose.

"Four months." The guard was definitely amused. "It's not that bad a job. And you?"

"Me?"

"You're handsome. You must be an actor or an idol."

Minho floundered at the words, mostly because Cheolie was tugging on his hair again, but a little bit because the words were embarrassing to hear.

He knew there were people who found him attractive. There had been plenty of articles on both him and Hyunjin when they'd debuted, and even a couple before when he danced beside BTS's Jungkook and fans speculated whether he and some of the other dancers were secretly trainees.

Minho often played along on screen and joke about his handsomeness to his members when they teased- and thanked his fans when they told him. But there were times when it came unexpected, and it made him speechless, if not a little flustered.

He didn't want to always be known for having a nice face.

...Though he guessed with his kind of personality, it was one of the easier things to understand about him.

He was a visual.

Easy to remember. Easy to see.

"I'm not... really anything," he heard himself say to the guard.

"Oh. Then maybe a trainee?"

The words reminded him of their survival show. He shook his head and offered a weak smile.
"Sorry."

Sooyeon returned at that moment, coming through the glass doors. She took one look at Minho- then turned on the guard.

"Have you been harassing him, Eunhyuk?"

The guard's face dropped comically as he swiveled in his seat to meet her piercing gaze. "Of course not! We were just talking."

"He looks like you’ve been drilling him."

They both turned to look at Minho. He laughed nervously under their searching gazes, bouncing Cheolie on his hip again.

"No, no..."

He was quick to assure them he wasn't scared or bothered or anything of the sort, he had just been thinking, he was fine.

Then he noticed the small paper bag in Sooeyon's hand, with slight grease stains.

She followed his gaze and her expression smoothed, lips tugging up kindly. "For your help," she said, holding it towards him. "It's warm, so you should eat it soon. I'm sorry it's not much, but it's the least I could do."

Minho shook his head quickly, wide-eyed. "No, it's- thank you so much. I'm sorry to be a bother."

Sooeyon looked at him. "I wanted to." She reached for her son, cooing, returning her baby to her own waist. There was warmth in her eyes the next time she gazed Minho's way, "Can you make it home alright?"

Minho nodded. He could always map the walk back on his phone.

He bowed to her politely, then bowed to the security guard, giving them both smiles and well wishes for a good night and rest of the week.

The guard called after him lightly. "Maybe we’ll see you on the big screen one day!"

Minho only smiled and nodded.

He hoped if they did see him, they wouldn’t think he was a liar.

Sooyeon waved Cheolie's hand 'goodbye' and he left the complex, shivering as the cold hit and rain misted into his eyes.

A small storm was coming.

The bag Sooyeon had given him stayed clutched tightly in his hand as he began to walk, trying to remember the steps they had taken to get here.

It smelled like bread and garlic and maybe even cheese, and his heart and chest thrummed with a budding warmth from the interaction with all three strangers, long or short as it might have been.

Up above the sky rumbled- and the rain began to pour.
Minho started to run and ducked into the nearest convenience store.

A bottle of water, sausage and stick of cheese paid for five minutes later, and he was sitting at one of the small indoor tables along the wall.

There was nothing in particular he was thinking about as he began to eat, opening the bag from Sooyeon and finding a cheese-toasted bakery bread inside.

Just another flash of gratefulness for her kindness.

She seemed warm-hearted, and it was clear how much she loved her son, even if she was wary of strangers.

And Cheolie was cute.

Babies weren't number one on his list of what to have in the near future, but his aunt was still unmarried and always commented when he came over about how much she wanted one so she could raise a kid as good as him.

Not that Minho thought he was particularly good.

He was only trying to lend a hand to those who needed it. He’d like it if someone did the same to him.

The train of thought reminded him. He needed to switch his bank account information over from the joint account with his parents.

He had been donating regularly to an organization for underprivileged children and education, but now that he was in JYP and a year into idol work, he could create his own account to build his own savings independent from his mom and dad’s.

He had always felt somewhat guilty having money taken from their shared account, even if he had worked many part-time jobs between his dancing gigs to help contribute.

Once he paid off the trainee debt to the company, he could really start saving and donating to the causes he wanted to. And buy his parents proper gifts.

And of course, presents for his cats.

Minho’s face crinkled at the thought, a pang of homesickness striking in his chest.

He hadn’t seen them since his last holiday. His dad always sent videos and pictures of Soonie and Doongie and Dori playing or lying around, but it wasn’t the same as getting to hold and cuddle them and getting to scratch their heads with all the love he had in him to give.

Maybe he’d video chat his mom later.

He wanted to talk with her too.

Minho swallowed down his food and gathered his trash, getting up.

The rain was coming down really hard. So hard the sky looked black- and he hesitated- wondering if he should wait it out or try and head back home.

Absently, he reached for his phone.
He recognized a little of the streets but not much. Google-mapping should take care of-

His pocket was empty.

Minho blinked- and checked his other one. Then his hoodie pouch.

Still empty.

For a second, he stood there, staring out the window and into the rain with a blank face.

His thoughts raced.

Had he dropped it? With Sooyeon while walking? While switching Cheolie for the groceries? While going downhill?

Everything was on that phone.

Family contacts, photos, notes, video choreographies, his social apps shared with his members and company, his music, his backgrounds, his edits.

Everything.

All the pictures of his cats.

Minho dumped his trash, hurried out the store and into the rain.

~x~

“You had one job and you failed.”

Donggyu contemplated shoving Jaehyun into the nearest puddle of rain.

His same-aged friend and fellow manager hadn’t stopped complaining ever since he had rushed to the dorm at Donggyu’s panicked call.

Jaehyun had remained calm while Donggyu explained the situation and showed him Minho’s phone, but then left the dorm with not nearly enough worry Donggyu thought the situation warranted, walking like they were going on a stroll in the middle of a flower field instead.

Jaehyun was always like that. Laid-back and unbothered, regarding the world with a set of half-lidded eyes that could not care any less about the people of the world.

Normally Donggyu found it refreshing.

Now it just pissed him off.

“It’s not a joke. If something happened-”

”He’s gone off before.” Jaehyun cut him off and pointed out. “He was at the park last time trying to feed birds, remember? The vulture that almost ripped his face off? He probably just got distracted.”

Jaehyun stopped, taking his sweet time in the middle of the sidewalk to scuff some muck off the bottom of his shoe.
Donggyu stared back at his friend and tried not to scream.

He hadn’t told management and hadn’t told Chan.

He had been hoping they could bring Minho back from whatever side-street he must’ve vanished down before any of the members returned from their practices and noticed.

After all, so long as they found him, it wasn’t any cause for alarm.

They could scold him and then be done with it and never let anyone else know- because Minho would get in trouble too if management discovered how absently careless he had been again.

But that plan wouldn’t work if they couldn’t find him.

“You should never have a kid,” Jaehyun commented, joining Donggyu at his side once more. He jostled shoulders with his friend, directing them towards a crosswalk and in the direction of the close-by park.

Donggyu scowled.

“I mean it. You’d either lose them or smother them so much they’d run away.”

Donggyu punched him in the arm.

They made it to the park and stuck together as they searched, checking the swings and slides before turning to the small trails encircling the field.

They were doubling back from a dead end on a short trail when his phone began vibrating an incoming call into the back of his jeans.

He answered without checking, more than a little high-strung. “Yes?”

"Donggyu-hyung, we came back for lunch and break,” Jisung’s voice brightly said. “Where did you go? Is Jae-hyung with you? We can’t find him either.”

He tried not to choke on his spit.

“Yeah. He’s with me. We went out,” he answered quickly, glancing at his fellow manager.

Jaehyun was poking at a hole in a tree with a soggy stick.

Donggyu hit the back of Jaehyun’s knee with his foot, face ridiculously stressed as he gestured to his phone. Jaehyun rolled his eyes but stopped messing around, proceeding to stare at Donggyu instead with an annoyingly blank stare.

Donggyu wanted to throw something at him.

“Did you go for food?” Jisung’s voice was asking in his ear. “Minho-hyung isn’t here either.”

"We’re all together,” Donggyu lied through his teeth with false cheer. “We’ll be back soon.”

"Cool. Oh! Can you put hyung on the phone? I kept messaging to ask how he was but he didn’t answer.”

"He doesn’t have his phone.”
“Why?”

"Do you want to talk to Jaehyun?”

"Um, no, not really-"

“Okay, we’ll be back soon. Stay out of trouble; I’ll tell Minho you said hi when he gets out the bathroom.”

“Okay-?”

Donggyu disconnected.

Jaehyun snorted.

“Smooth.”

~x~

Jisung lowered the phone from his ear and made a face. “That was weird.”

"What?” Changbin passed behind him, splitting an apple with his bare hands as he plopped onto the floor in front the living room couch.

“Hyung was acting weird.”

"Where’d they go?”

"Food maybe. I didn’t ask.”

“Minho’s with them?”

"Yeah.” Jisung paused. Looked at Changbin accusingly. “You should call him hyung.”

Changbin didn’t respond, and ate a part of his newly-split apple instead.

Sometimes he did. Sometimes he didn’t.

It wasn’t that he didn’t respect his hyung. It wasn’t that he didn’t like him.

His relationship with the older boy was weird, that’s all.

Changbin had been one of the first members to ever encounter Minho and he would never forget their first meeting.

_Packing, what to put in? He sighed. What a hassle. He wished he didn’t have to—_

_Turning around, looking up to suddenly find an unfamiliar boy with large eyes and well-kept hair staring at him from the doorway of the trainee dorm—_

“It must be hard, right?” The boy had smiled, like they were friends. Changbin had stared, bewildered as to who he even was and when he had even come in.
Did they know each other or something?

He tracked the boy’s eyes to where they had fallen on the belongings Changbin had been attempting to pack.

“Ah, no, it’s fine...”

The boy just smiled again, something oddly sweet crossing his face as he nodded. “Okay.”

Then the boy had joined the line-up for their team, out of the blue.

The other members had been wary.

They had just lost two other trainees meant to debut and now another one was coming in when they had already made and prepared for their District 9 debut?

He was a dancer. Lee Minho. A kid who had worked with BTS and had been scouted by an agent at a competition who thought he could fill the 9th slot in their team they were suddenly missing.

He couldn’t rap.

His singing wasn’t so bad, but it needed work.

It seemed ridiculous.

They were set to debut in less than half a year.

How was this kid supposed to join their line-up in a team of eight others who could dance, sing, rap and produce? Who had already been together for a long time?

Changbin hadn’t thought it maliciously at the time, just full of worry for the other boy and their team. Would the kid be able to keep up?

All they could do was work together and try to have him improve.

Like this, Changbin had become Minho’s mentor. He had spent countless hours with the older boy working on diction and rap, trying to turn it into something natural and not stilted- and not so obvious Minho was completely out of his element.

Minho was a fast learner. That much was clear.

But was it fast enough?

Changbin had watched him, listened to the other boy on late nights outside their tiny practice rooms meant for vocal rehearsal as Minho would leave their trainee dorm and go over the raps Changbin and their instructors had given him- again and again.

He was trying so hard.

Changbin hadn't known what to feel.

Minho's rap wasn’t great by any means, but it was better than their first week. Better than their second.

Then they had gone on to their survival show.
And Minho had struggled.

He had been a trainee for not even six months, lacked confidence and stage presence and power in his voice.

And when Minho had fumbled a lyric, when JYP had asked him to prove himself by rapping instead because his vocals weren’t good enough—

*At that moment, they had all known he wouldn’t make it.*

They had felt the dread.

Even if Minho hadn’t been a part of their team for very long, he had still been with them. Sleeping, eating, living—working alongside and running towards that shared goal of debut with enthusiasm and budding hope.

Back then, Minho had tried not to cry.

And Changbin had grabbed his hand as they waited for JYP’s decision, pulling the older boy behind him, as though he could somehow protect him from the elimination and the hurt that would come.

At the time, Changbin had been responsible for Minho’s progress. But over time, that working aspect of their relationship had turned into Changbin simply feeling responsible for *him.*

He wouldn’t forget how much Minho had smiled even as he cried.

He wouldn’t forget the way the older boy had told him over and over again it wasn’t Changbin’s fault he wasn’t enough.

"*I’m just not good enough. Please don’t be upset.*"

Changbin remembered those words, even after their debut. When Minho turned to him for rap and advice, wanting to get better—always better—with new passion and drive to stand out a little more to the fans.

He didn’t want to be remembered as the one who had been eliminated.

Changbin didn’t want that for him either.

Now, almost two years since Minho had first joined the company, a full year into their official debut, they were friends.

A one year difference was between them, hyung and dongsaeng, but it happened sometimes, especially while working, that the roles would meld and blend and switch.

Or in some moments, simply not exist.

Minho was his hyung in age but Changbin was his hyung in rap.

Trying to change that was a bit uncomfortable to them both. And it wasn’t really something they had ever sat down to discuss.

“I guess they’ll be back later,” Changbin commented after a very long spell of silence.

Mostly because Jisung was still looking at him offended.
“What? Come sit down if you’re not doing anything,” Changbin told him.

Jisung did, throwing himself into the couch and searching for the remote.

Hyunjin came out the kitchen a few minutes later, heading for the door.

Changbin attention swung from the TV to the taller boy. “You’re heading out?”

“Someone threw away the food I cooked last night. I’ll go out and get something.”

"Wasn’t really food,” Jisung muttered.

Hyunjin rolled his eyes. “At least I try to cook.”

“Bring me back some snacks,” Changbin intervened before they could start any bickering.

Hyunjin grunted something of an agreement, struggling to shove his feet back in his shoes- and then he was gone, dorm door clicking shut behind him.

It was silent between the pair of rappers for a few minutes.

Then Seungmin was coming out his bedroom with a furrowed brow. “Did Hyunjin just leave?”

“He went for food. Why?” Jisung asked.

Seungmin’s face twisted into something incredulous. “He was supposed to wait for me. Ah- what is this?” he complained loudly.

He hurried to the door and threw his head out, but the dancer was long gone and the hallway was empty.

His face pinched, annoyed, and he silently cursed the other boy. Whatever happened to sticking together?

Seungmin was still standing halfway in the open door when Chan and Felix showed up five minutes later, holding bags of fast food.

When had they bought that?

“What are you doing?” Felix asked when they noticed him.

“Did you see Hyunjin?” Seungmin asked back.

“Just passed him,” Chan commented. Seungmin looked at their leader in minor confusion.

"You didn’t stay behind?”

"I was going to,” admitted Chan. “But I wanted to check in on Minho.”

Seungmin stepped back inside the dorm and the other two followed. Felix shut the door. “He’s not here,“ Seungmin told them. “He’s out with Donggyu-hyung and Jae-hyung.”

Chan frowned. The disappointment was clear in his eyes.

Felix glanced at his hyung and pat him quickly on the back. “It’s okay. I’m sure he’s fine.”
"I was worried he was sick," Chan said.

The trio moved into the kitchen after acknowledging the rappers on the couch one last time.

Seungmin headed for the fridge in search of food now that he’d been abandoned by Hyunjin.

He opened it, blinked and drew away in surprise.

“Wow. Who cleaned? It smells like chemicals in here.”

He picked up a plastic container, sniffed, and threw his head back, nose scrunching.

“Is any of this even edible anymore?”

“Probably not. Just don’t touch it. We can ask Donggyu-hyung to go shopping tomorrow,” answered Chan. He sat at the table and Felix joined him, splitting open their bagged food.

Seungmin muttered something low beneath his breath but closed the fridge and stepped back all the same.

“We have to go back for dance practice tonight,” he noted out loud. He looked at their leader. “If Minho-hyung’s out with manager-hyungs now, won’t he be joining us?”

“That depends on how he feels,” Chan said carefully, picking at his fries.

Truthfully they didn’t have the time to rest.

They were in the middle of promotions, moving into their third week, and their schedule was only going to pick up as they prepared for an end-of-the-month award show before finishing their Unveil Tour overseas.

They needed to prepare and be prepared the best they could.

Successful tours abroad were the key to gaining more fans.

Successful promotion was the key to keeping them.

Plus their fan base in Korea- dedicated as it was- was smaller than their international one. Slacking off on events or schedules in their home country wasn’t something they could afford if they wanted to keep the general public’s interest.

It didn’t matter how many comebacks or albums they put out if the public didn’t know who they were.

They only way to be known was to be known.

Frustrating as it was.

If Minho was feeling well enough to walk around outside in the middle of rain, then he was probably well enough to join the evening dance session. Or at least tag along.

Chan had said he wanted Minho on rest because he hadn’t known what was wrong with the other boy. He still didn’t.

Even if the company doctor who came to their dorm to run checks on Minho had said overexertion was the probable cause, Chan had noticed signs of exhaustion and absent-mindedness in the younger
At the time, sensing something off in that first week, Chan had approached Minho to see if he was okay. But Minho had only said he hadn’t gotten enough sleep the night before and he’d be better the next day. And he was- energetic and bright like he hadn’t spent the entirety of the day before dead on the couch.

Chan hadn’t pressed for more of an explanation back then because of how tired the boy had seemed just being forced to stand for their group photos outside their music show promotions.

Then with all their schedules, Chan had gotten distracted, and had never quite followed up with that initial worry towards Minho he had felt.

But now Chan was hitting himself for not asking, for not sitting Minho down and truly talking with him about any problems or stress he might have.

He knew what it was like to carry the weight of self-doubt and worries on his back alone.

It was absolutely something he would never wish on anyone else.

Least of all his members.

This was their home.

They should feel safe and protected and warm and good about themselves, no matter what the rest of the world thought about them.

Chan sighed to himself, looking down at his burger now cold and somewhat soggy from the journey home in the rain.

Minho blamed himself too much for his own shortcomings and always thought he wasn’t enough. He could hide behind his smiles all he wanted, but Chan knew.

He knew the one who needed to do better was him, their leader and hyung.

And he would.

These boys were his family.

He couldn’t let any of them down.

“Hey, man.”

Chan pulled away from his thoughts lightly, glancing over at Felix. The younger boy was speaking in English. Seungmin was gone.

“You good?” Felix inquired, searching his eyes carefully.

Chan shook away the clouded fog of his mind and half-grinned. “Just thinking, mate. We’ve got a lot of work to do.”

“You can talk to me,” Felix told him, serious and sincere. “You know I’ll listen.”

Chan’s face softened. So did his voice. “I know.”

But he didn’t say anything more about it and Felix didn’t press and soon they moved on to other
topics, joking around.

But as they talked there was a nagging thought persisting in the back of Chan’s head. Felix’s words-

“You know I’ll listen.”

Had any of them besides Jisung ever bothered to say the same to Minho?

~X~

He had given up.

Sitting on a bench under a dripping, bowing tree, clothes soaked to the skin, chest heaving, Minho slumped on the splintered wood of his new seat and watched the clouds churn above.

He couldn’t find it.

He had searched for so long, retracing his steps, asking people who stopped when he reached out to them on the street.

But it was useless. His phone was gone.

Heat pressed at the corners of his eyes. Frustration. Exhaustion.

How could he be so reckless?

He had realized, belatedly, bent over a sidewalk gutter in the fear his phone had somehow fallen through the grate, that he had forgotten all about Donggyu and his promise to return home in five minutes.

But he couldn’t even send a message to let his hyung know where he was and that he was okay.

He’d cause trouble again. He’d make the older man worry.

Minho didn’t want that.

He didn’t want Chan or management or the company to be contacted again when they had just been contacted the night before over his fainting stunt.

But he had no idea where he was.

This park wasn’t the same as the one near their dorm. It was smaller and had far more walkways and benches- and not anything in particular for kids.

There was a single slide.

And it was a depressingly sad sight.

Probably like him.

He huffed at the thought, a small laugh brokering through, and closed his eyes.

Minutes passed and he simply sat, letting the rain cascade onto his face, letting the heavy arms of
tiredness wrap around his body and pull him in.

What was with him lately?

He’d been so sleepy for the past month and a half.

That wasn’t normal, was it?

But he didn’t linger on the thought for long and soon his mind was wandering, spreading out into a vast plane of nothingness.

It was almost calming, feeling his hair so plastered to his head, his sleeves so logged with water it turned his arms cold and numb.

He could probably fall asleep.

Or eat again.

Maybe he should try and find his way home again?

He decided to get up. But his feet refused to move and his eyes stayed closed.

His brow pinched but he couldn’t even muster the strength to lift his arms from his lap.

He was really so tired.

An indefinite amount of time passed. He stayed motionless, listening, breathing in the increasingly fresh and soil-turned air as the minutes came and went.

Then came footsteps over the grass, sweeping through, heels crunching on the gravel path with swift purpose.

Minho had barely registered the sound before a cold hand cupped the side of his face and held it.

“Hyung, what are you doing?”

That was a familiar voice. A very serious and bewildered one.

He turned his cheek into the set of long and bony fingers, frowning beneath his mask. His eyes stayed stubbornly shut.

“Hyunjinnie?” he muttered.

There was the crinkling noise of wet plastic and the hand on Minho’s face turned to two, a pair of thumbs working beneath his eyes and rubbing across to his ears- back and forth until his eyes had blearily opened.

Hyunjin looked at him, his expression so incredibly hard to read, eyebrows lowered and mouth slightly open.

He was glaring.

“What are you doing out here?” The other dancer questioned. “Where are the manager-hyungs?”

“I don’t know,” Minho answered, somewhat confused. Were their hyungs supposed to be somewhere? His words sounded slurred to his own ears.
Now Hyunjin looked annoyed.

“How long have you been sitting here?”

Minho didn’t answer because he didn’t know.

Hyunjin dropped his hands from Minho’s face, moved back and stood. He grabbed Minho’s arms and tried to pull him up, a bit angrily.

“Come on. We’re going home.”

“Stop it,” Minho protested, loud.

“Then get up,” Hyunjin snapped, louder.

To anyone walking by, they would’ve been a comical sight— one brother trying to yank the boneless body of his other off the bench he was sprawled across as they bickered in an onslaught of rain.

But Hyunjin was far from amused.

He released Minho and watched his hyung fly back against the bench with minor force.

“Are you crazy?”

"Aren’t you the one who attacked me?” Minho uttered, sitting up slightly.

Hyunjin stared down at the older boy in disbelief. He watched as Minho’s eyes went from his face, to the street behind him, to the plastic bag filled with food containers at his feet.

His hyung’s eyes glittered with sudden curiosity.

“What did you get?”

"Are you serious?”

Minho continued to eye the bag with unnatural focus.

Something seemed to occur to him then, because he blinked and leaned back on the bench to gaze at Hyunjin.

“Do you have your phone? I need to call Donggyu-hyung.”

“Was he with you?”

"He’s back at the dorm. I lost my phone.”

"How did you get here, hyung?” Hyunjin asked again for what felt like the hundredth time, patience dwindling fast.

He had overhead Jisung talking to their manager on the phone as he got ready to leave, but if Minho was here and he thought Donggyu-hyung was at the dorm, then what had even happened to bring them to the current situation?

“I was supposed to get ice cream,” Minho answered, as if that was all the explanation needed.

“And?”
"Then I lost my phone. And I couldn’t get home."

Hyunjin frowned. “We’re only thirty minutes from the dorm. You don’t recognize the area?”

"It was raining much harder before."

And sure, okay, Hyunjin could maybe agree with that.

He had never regretted leaving without an umbrella more than he had on this particular day.

And that one night Changbin had barreled into the mart and flattened a rack of snacks.

But that had been funny.

This wasn't.

In front of him, Minho wriggled off the bench and stumbled to his feet. He was shaking, from the cold or something else, Hyunjin couldn’t tell- but his nose was red and face swollen- and his features utterly wiped.

Hyunjin frowned. What had his hyung been doing lately?

He hadn’t seen him like this since the time he rolled his ankle between 'District 9' and 'My Pace' promotions.

Minho bent and picked up Hyunjin’s discarded bag, slipping it onto his sopping wet arm.

“Should we go home?” he asked.

Hyunjin looked down at the older boy, frowning. “Want me to still call hyung?”

“We should.”

And so Hyunjin made the call to their older manager, giving their location and assurance that they’d be heading straight home.

Yes, they were okay. Hyunjin had just gotten food and Minho had just gotten lost- somehow.

No, nothing seemed wrong.

Minho sneezed.

Hyunjin sighed and hung up. That took care of one thing.

He pressed close to the other dancer and began directing them both out the park and back onto the main street so they could head home.

“He’s with Jae-hyung,” Hyunjin told Minho a few minutes later as they hurried through the rain.

“They’re going to scold you when you get back, you know.”

“What was he doing with Jae-hyung?”

“Probably looking for you. Dummy.”

Minho made a face. “How can you call your hyung that?”

“Because it’s true,” Hyunjin answered, matter-of-factly. Even so, he opened his puffy overcoat and
pulled as much of Minho inside it as he could. He wrapped his arm around his hyung’s and squeezed tight, rubbing up and down. “Why are you so cold?” he wondered.

“I don’t know,” Minho replied, and he really sounded like he had no idea. “You and the other kids came back from practice this early?”

“There’s still dance tonight.”

“Oh.”

“Are you going to come?”

“I can,” Minho said. He squashed back another sneeze, body convulsing from the effort, and Hyunjin fixed him with a skeptical look.

“Sounds like you’re getting sick.”

“I’m not,” Minho retorted, even as he grossly sniffled. Hyunjin grimaced. It was impossible to pull away with how close and tangled they were now.

Minho noticed his predicament and let out a breathy laugh. “You hate hyung and his germs that much?”

Hyunjin rolled his eyes. “I don’t want them to spread.”

“The best way to protect yourself from germs is to expose yourself to them. So if I sneeze on you, I’m helping you.”

Hyunjin side-eyed him so hard his brain hurt. “Where did you hear that?” he asked incredulously. Minho turned his gaze onto the road ahead. “I saw it on TV once a couple years ago.”

“Please don’t tell me that’s something you’ve been living by all this time.”

“Well I haven’t gotten sick.”

“You had a cold two weeks ago.”

“But I got it from Hannie. Not because I was sick.”

“No, you were still sick.”

“But not because I was sick.”

“What? Hyung-” And Hyunjin stopped talking because what even was this conversation?

He shook his head at Minho, snorting in half amusement and fond bewilderment.

“Never mind. You’re strange, you know that hyung?”

And Minho giggled, high and loud, a smile pulling up his lips with ease. “I know.”

But Hyunjin only frowned, because the look of happiness that had settled on his hyung’s face wasn’t quite right.

Wasn’t quite real.
Minho might have been smiling but his eyes were void of any light, distant and removed from themselves and the world.

What was he thinking? Hyunjin couldn't help but wonder.

He pressed them closer together, held his hyung’s arm a little tighter.

Up above the rain fell harder.

The air around them grew cold.

Minho stayed smiling the rest of the walk home.

Chapter End Notes

:D
Minho had caught a cold.

Of course he had. It was obvious he would.

What had he been expecting after sitting in the rain like a nimrod for nearly two hours?

Seungmin shook his head in disbelief at the thought of his hyung. He really wondered what went on in Minho’s head sometimes.

Hadn’t he passed out only the day before?

Seungmin gazed into the pot on the stove as he spun a large spoon inside.

The smell rising off with the curling steam was downright repulsive. In fact, it was so potent, it stung his eyes and burned his nose.

His face felt itchy.

He grimaced, stepped back to get a whiff of fresh air, then reluctantly stepped back in.

Jeez.

Everything in the pot was pitch black. Was Jisung sure this was edible?

He let the soup simmer, heading for their newly-stocked fridge. Donggyu had really gone all out this time, making sure everything inside was unbearably green and protein-packed.

Chan and Changbin probably had a say in that- the health fanatics that they were.

Horrible under any other circumstance, but perfect for now, Seungmin rummaged through the bags of leafy greens in search of the fruit wrapped behind. Two apples, two bananas, one massively large grapefruit were pulled into his hands.

Seungmin deposited them by the sink, grabbed a knife from the drawer a few steps over, and began to peel and cut.

The kitchen was empty and somewhat lonely, cast in the soft, white glow of the afternoon sun from the stretch of windows on the wall.

It was quiet. The members were all engaged in their own affairs.
Sometimes it was hard to get used to. He missed the noise. It was far too common when they all
gathered together, that chaos unfolded.

They were nine brightly colored individuals, clashing, weaving, melding against and with one
another in a swell of bumbling emotions, excitement and laughter- paint on a canvas- each moment
unfolding- like a crafted scene.

Like they were seeing each other for the first time in years.

Like they were coming home after eons away.

Sometimes Seungmin wondered if he was the only one who felt it- the energy that ignited the room
when they were together.

The tug. The pull.

The winding force spinning them in orbit, reacting with proximity.

Nine or none.

They couldn’t be seven.

Couldn’t be eight.

Couldn’t be a full box of crayons with two of their brightest colors taken out.

Even if some of the members still had their doubts.

Minho could pretend all he wanted. But Seungmin remembered.

Half a year ago, sitting on Woojin's bed while the older boy was out, Seungmin and Minho had
leaned against the wall, splitting a bag of chips and box of gummy packets they had dumped all over
Woojin's sheets. In the short and comfortable silence that had fallen between them, Minho spoke, his
words deceptively casual.

"Seungminnie."

"Mm?"

“Does it still bother you?”

"What?"

Minho leaned forward and reached for an unopened packet of gummies. He was preoccupied for
several moments afterwards, brow creasing as he made an attempt to rip the side of the packet open
without tearing the whole thing in half and making a mess on Woojin's sheets.

“Ah, never mind,” he finally said.

Seungmin looked at him, fully curious. “What?”

"Forget it~,” Minho said, voice lilting. He tossed down the gummies and went for the bag of chips
instead.

“Tell me, hyung,” Seungmin insisted, sitting up a little straighter.
The other boy didn’t answer and dug into the chips with something of a distracted look on his face.

Seungmin jostled against him, bouncing the corner of his knee against Minho’s own. “Hyuuung,” he pestered. “Tell me. What is it? What is it? What is it?”

Minho tried to curl away with the chips, face pinching. “Nothing! Go away.”

“You asked me to join you first.”

“I changed my mind.”

“What was your question?”

“Don’t wanna tell you.”

Seungmin paused- making a face at the back of the other boy’s head for approximately three seconds of silence.

Then he lunged for the bag of chips.

They wrestled, bickering like a pair of kids with raised voices and protests until Minho finally ripped the bag free and hunched over, face-first into the sheets.

Seungmin latched onto his back, wrapping his arms around the older boy and forcing his full weight down.

There were crumbs everywhere.

Woojin was going to kill them.

But Seungmin ignored their future fate, squeezing Minho's sides beneath him instead.

He hoped he was being annoying.

Sometimes it was the only way to get the older boy to talk when he closed up.

“Now will you tell me?” he asked with cheer.

Minho muttered nonsensical complaints under his breath but got out a petulant and reluctant, “Fine” loud enough for Seungmin to hear, so he stopped clinging to his hyung and pulled away.

He went back to leaning against the wall as Minho straightened up.

A dramatically forlorn look was in Minho’s eyes as he gazed at the destroyed bag of chips in his hands. But his next words weren’t about them.

“I wanted to know if it still bothered you. The ranking with the fans.”

Seungmin blinked.

Minho put down the chips, ignoring the stunned look on the other boy’s face as and tried again to open a packet of gummies that had gotten stuck beneath one of Woojin’s pillows during their small tussle.

For a minute, Seungmin stayed at a loss for words. Where had this come from, so suddenly out of the blue?
A while back, in their early months of debut, Seungmin had made an off-hand comment about knowing he was the least popular member in the group and least paid attention to.

It had been spoken with some disappointment, acceptance and wide smile on his face. He had no qualms about himself.

He wasn’t visually eye-catching like DANCERACHA.

He wasn’t a part of the genius producing, composing and rapping line of 3RACHA.

He was a vocal.

Not pure-hearted and bright like their maknae- though Seungmin always tried his best to live a life that wouldn’t harm others.

Not the eldest, powerful hyung everyone simultaneously loved and feared with powerful vocals.

He was Seungmin.

But acknowledging his own weaknesses didn’t mean he disliked himself. It wasn’t like he had made the comment about himself in self-derision.

It had been an acknowledgment of the realistic fact that in a group with eight other people, there were going to be members infinitely more well-known and admired than the rest. Seungmin wasn’t so bothered.

He had supporters of his own, fans who confided in him who he wanted to help and genuinely felt care towards. So long as he could support others and felt he could help, he was okay. When it came to people, and their feelings, their struggles and hopes- numbers didn’t matter.

Even so, Minho had found him after the event. Asked if he wanted to go to the convenience store, and then while paying for a bunch of chocolate-covered pretzels, had said-

“‘It’s not true.’”

And Seungmin had dragged his eyes from the small TV hanging off the wall near the door. “Hm?”

“What you said.” Minho’s attention at the time was on pulling out the right amount of money from his wallet, but his voice had purpose. “‘Lots of people like you. You’re cute. You speak English well and you have a nice voice. You learn dancing quickly.’

Seungmin hadn’t been too sure what point the last compliment had served since it wasn’t something fans would ever particularly know unless they asked, but he had been more confused by the sudden onslaught of praise than anything else.

“‘I didn’t meant it as a bad thing,” he told Minho. “I was speaking the truth. Isn’t it how these things work in groups anyway? It’s fine.’”

He wasn’t in any sort of rush.

Of course he’d like to be recognized more, but it wasn’t like he was standing in a corner crying about it. He just had to show better sides of himself.

Minho had made a noise, not really agreeing or disagreeing.

Then they had left the store and never brought it up again.
Until today.

It occurred to Seungmin in the present that he had never actually thanked Minho for his words back then. He wondered if he should. But doing it now would be a little weird... wouldn’t it?

Seungmin shook his head and answered his hyung's question. “No, it doesn’t bother me. I’m happy,” he said.

And it was true.

Their group had accomplished so much together. They had all worked so hard, breaking into the industry, pouring out their true thoughts and feelings, supported by STAYS from so many parts of the world, gaining strength and giving it in equal, warm trade.

How could any of them be fussy about the number of fans they had when they were all a part of something so much bigger?

Minho hummed at the confidence in the response. Finally, he managed to open his newly-acquired gummy pack and get his fingers inside.

Seungmin watched for a moment as the other boy gathered all the orange ones in his palm- then shoved them in his mouth.

“Why did you ask, hyung?”

Minho glanced at him, clearly struggling to chew the candy in his mouth.

“Just curious.”

Seungmin doubted it.

Next to himself and Woojin, Minho was the third in line for least acknowledged past his looks.

It hadn’t been that long ago, just a few months ago, in their early stages of debut, when fans had begun questioning the purpose of Minho’s role in the group. When some called his voice annoying.

It hadn’t been that long ago when Minho had taken the comments with bright eyes and a smile and disappointment on his face, embarrassed at himself and for the other members that they had to see and hear what the public thought of him.

Seungmin had hated it. They all had. They knew what it felt like.

At some point, they had all had comments- in the months before and after debut- some personal, some attacking their group as a whole.

It never stopped hurting. But at least they could expect it now.

Still, Seungmin wondered.

He wondered about his hyung.

Did Minho still believe, after all this time, he didn’t belong in their team?

No. That can’t be it, he told himself. Doesn’t make any sense.

Because they couldn’t be Stray Kids without him.
Surely Minho knew.

“Fans are important, and I’m really glad we have them at our side,” Seungmin said at long last. “But I’m just as glad we have you, hyung. Things would be hard without you.”

Minho stopped playing with the new set of gummies in his hand and smiled up at him. A touch of exasperation made his face warm. “Of course I know. Who would teach you dance if I wasn’t? You’re all lucky I’m here,” he smirked.

Seungmin threw a packet of candy at his hyung’s head.

That had been then.

Things were different now.

Minho was different now. More of himself than he’d ever been in the past under the pressure of their show and early debut.

Brighter.

Cheerier.

Playful to the point he and Hyunjin were turning into a duo of real-live clowns at a terrifying speed.

But more importantly, Minho had begun to show his true self more.

He had always been friendly and laid-back, but the members had all known how he struggled to express himself and his feelings to their fans and in the public eye.

Seeing the older boy, laughing and joking, confidently a part of Stray Kids- of them- was such a relief.

Really.

Seungmin threw all the apples and grapefruit he’d cut into a bowl, plated the bananas and then went to shut off the stove.

He hadn’t planned on cooking, but he hadn’t eaten and he hadn’t noticed Minho eat either. His hyung had been by himself for most of the day, reading in his bed the last time Seungmin had checked.

Truthfully, Minho hadn’t said much of anything after returning home the day before- soaked to the bone, sniffling and trying to annoy Hyunjin by shaking the water from his hair into the other dancer’s face.

They had all been surprised. But even more surprised when Donggyu and Jaehyun, who had arrived twenty minutes prior and sat themselves on the couch, suddenly swooped in on Minho and started to scold.

Well- Donggyu had done the scolding.

Jaehyun had went and gotten a hand towel from the the kitchen before started to dry off Minho’s head.

Hyunjin hadn’t given much of an explanation aside from lamenting over his sure-to-be soggy food, and Minho hadn’t offered much besides sincere apologies and a bunch of sneezes into Donggyu’s
harassed and bothered face-

But they had all heard Chan going in on Minho five minutes later when both the dancers had gone into their shared room to change.

“Minho, we just had this conversation last night.”

“I didn’t do it on purpose.”

“What were you doing? What’s been with you lately?”

“What- I can’t help somebody else if they need it?”

“Not if you don’t know how to take care of yourself first.”

“You do the same thing.”

“This isn’t about me.”

And their voices had raised.

Seungmin had felt bad, briefly, about Hyunjin, who was most definitely stuck watching things play out. He almost wanted to go into the room himself just to drag his same-aged friend out.

But then Woojin had emerged from the kitchen and forced them all to come inside and help him make a list of groceries they could buy later that night with their managers.

It had certainly kept them occupied, but it didn’t block out the arguing, or stop any of them from noticing Chan come into the kitchen about ten minutes later, cheeks and neck flushed red in frustration, struggling to keep his face straight.

He had looked over Woojin’s shoulder at the list of completely unhealthy food and meat they’d written down. Seungmin could see the changes being made in their leader’s head as he read, but when Chan had next spoke, it was about their dance that evening instead.

“Don’t forget we have practice tonight.”

Woojin had looked at him. “Everything good?”

Chan glanced at all of their faces, exhaled lightly, and put on half of a smile. “It’ll be fine. Don’t worry about it.” He looked at their managers. “I’m going to the studio. I’ll be there until practice starts.”

Jaehyun had easily offered to join him- and off Chan and their manager had went- front door clicking shut.

Jisung had waited a good thirty seconds before dipping out the kitchen.

They didn’t need to ask. They all knew where he was going.

His presence was replaced with Hyunjin who showed up within moments of Jisung leaving.

Seungmin had looked at his friend curiously for any sort of clue as to what had gone down, but Hyunjin, freshly changed and features pinched, had merely met his gaze and shook his head the barest amount.
And that had been that.

No one brought it up again.

Though Seungmin really wanted to know what had happened.

He left the kitchen and headed for the room he shared with Minho. Minho wasn’t there but Hyunjin pointed him towards Jisung and Jeongin’s room instead.

Sure enough, Seungmin found the older boy with Jisung in the middle of the bedroom floor, trying to put together the many pieces of a plastic, mech robot. It was the one Minho had gotten for Jisung over a year ago during a gift exchange.

Seungmin was pretty sure it had been put together already. Did they really take it apart just to build it again?

By the wall, Jeongin laid on the bed, headphones in, asleep beneath his tucked sheets.

Seungmin lowered his voice and spoke.

“Minho-hyung.”

Both boys on the floor looked up.

“You actually tried it.” Jisung said immediately.

Seungmin stared. “How did you know?”

"The smell is everywhere. We’re gonna have to open the windows for a week,” Jisung replied, chuckling. He threw aside the piece of plastic he’d been trying to wrongly fit into another and got to his feet. “I hope you didn’t mess it up.”

"Then you should’ve cooked it yourself,” Seungmin retorted flatly.

“I’m not a cook.”

Seungmin rolled his eyes at his same-aged friend and looked at Minho instead. “Hyung, are you hungry? I made something for us.”

Minho gazed at him, brow furrowed. “The soup from Malaysia,” he said.

Seungmin looked at Jisung, disappointed. It was supposed to be a surprise. But the rapper only shrugged, something ominous in his tone.

"I had to tell him. We could all smell it.”

Seungmin scowled at the other's boy hidden insult, deciding to bring his attention back to Minho instead. "It's something like it. Jisung gave the ingredients, but I’m not sure how it turned out.”

Honestly what he’d made would be an insult to the country. But at least he had tried.

Minho read his face, then climbed to his feet, a resolute and sincere expression settling in. “Then let’s try it. If it’s bad we can just blame Jisungie.”

The younger boy slapped him on the arm, betrayed. “Ya, how can you say that? After all I’ve done for your health?”
Minho twisted his lips and made an ugly face at Jisung in response. “What are you talking about? You haven’t done anything.”

"Hyung, are you kidding?"

"What?"

"Fine. See if I give you a massage again."

"What massage?"

"Ya, really this hyung-"

Seungmin watched them from the doorway with pure exasperation. “Are you coming or not?”

The two looked at each other, looked behind them at Jeongin stirring slightly in the bed, then seemed to come to an agreement to annoy each other outside the bedroom instead.

Which is exactly what they did the entire time as they ate, going from pestering each other to simultaneously praising and insulting Seungmin’s hard made food.

"Waaa, this is-"

"It seriously reeks."

“You used so many peppers-"

"It’s not bad for poison."

Seungmin listened to them for approximately three minutes before falling into deep contemplation. Should he add extra salt into their bowls or get the wasabi from the fridge and force them to eat it with bread? Maybe he should toss the salt into Jisung’s drink.

He nodded. That sounded good.

He had been in the middle of reaching for it when Minho called his name.

Seungmin met the older boy’s vibrant gaze, thinking he’d been caught. But instead Minho smiled, a curl and press at the corner of his lips as it spread.

"Ahh, but actually it’s good. You must’ve worked hard. Thank you,” he said, teasing, nice.

Seungmin looked into his own bowl, suddenly embarrassed. “It’s nothing. I didn’t do much.”

"It was all me,” Jisung chimed in from beside Minho, slurping down his bowl. “Be grateful, Seungmin-ah, I’ve taught you a valuable life lesson.”

Seungmin gave him a look flat and long enough to be a ruler.

Then, without a word, went back to his food.

Jisung sputtered. “Ya! How can you ignore your teacher?”

"What teacher? You didn't do anything for real."

Minho laughed.
A sound so tickled and hideously loud as he bent over his bowl, Seungmin couldn’t even find it in him to be that annoyed as Jisung’s upped his dramatic antics.

"I should put you in detention. Make you learn how to cook.”

He huffed- and fought back a smile.

“Whatever.”

Minho’s cheery mood lasted the rest of the afternoon and into the late evening.

It was a rare off day for the members before schedules picked up with several radio show guestings and promotions on music shows again.

Minho spent a majority of his time in his room, on the phone video chatting with his mom and cooing over his cats.

For a time, Hyunjin joined him, lying comfortably in the bed on his own phone while Minho sat up and talked. Seungmin climbed on for a short time too, reading through the book that Minho was already halfway through.

Truthfully, Minho wasn’t sure why the two younger members were staying so close to him.

Especially since he spent every five minutes running a tissue under his nose and sneezing into his shirt.

Seungmin and Hyunjin were so particular about germs too- but even though they did leave his bed once the sneezing got excessive, they simply relocated to the floor and started talking, pulling him in to the conversation on the books they had liked to read growing up and in school.

Of course, Minho loved reading, so he was excited to share his recommendations and stories he thought were particularly meaningful.

But he was still confused.

He thought everyone would be on eggshells since his scolding from Chan, but everyone had acted like nothing had even happened.

Like he hadn’t passed out.

Like he hadn’t been off for the last few days, probably making things uncomfortable for them.

Why?

Because he was sick?

Because they were bored?

Minho didn’t really know, but he didn’t try to think on it for too long either.

Being with Hyunjin and Seungmin was always fun. Their conversations could go from sincere and thoughtful to playful and bickering very fast and back again.

It was a circuit, familiar and comfortable and light.
He liked it. Wanted to keep it.

Them and himself like this.

Together.

He sniffled and wiped the back of his hand across his nose. No need to get sentimental.

Their conversation shifted from books to dramas to funny videos they watched recently online and swung into a loud debate on what their future comeback concepts should be.

“There are a lot of interesting ones,” Seungmin noted. “We could do themes like Vixx sunbaenims... Being scientists or detectives or...”

“We could try a new genre,” Hyunjin commented.

“Innie wants to try rock,” Minho remembered their youngest member saying.

“Ah!” Seungmin clapped his hands together once. “That would be good. I think we could do it. We should do it.”

“Or movies. We could do Men In Black,” Hyunjin suggested.

Seungmin made a face. “With the terrifying-looking thumb aliens?”

And there was a significant pause in the room.

Hyunjin’s expression blanked.

Seungmin looked at Minho. Minho, perched on the edge of his bed holding a plushie in his lap, looked back.

Then they broke into loud guffaws.

Hyunjin waited two seconds, then clambered from the floor, all but leaping over Seungmin in an attempt to strangle the smaller dancer right where he sat.

Minho only laughed harder through his snot-

Because they all remembered the incident from before.

All of them.

Some things could never be forgotten.

“They grew back! They grew back!” Minho yelped, breathless from his clogged nose and heaving lungs, and near tears as the high-pitched laughs were shaken from his body by Hyunjin’s throttling hands.

Seungmin made an effort to stop the taller dancer, but it was useless, and he tried to gasp through his mirth instead, palm slapping at the floor.

“We said we wouldn’t fight!” Minho exclaimed as he was sat on.

"I'll put you to sleep now,” Hyunjin responded with a saccharine, wholly fake smile. “Our Minho is sick. That can’t be- He should rest- Isn’t that right?”
Minho wiped some snot on Hyunjin’s in answer and then hollered as Hyunjin tried to choke him for real.

In the middle of their antics, they failed to notice Chan until their leader was standing right behind them, clearing his throat in bewilderment.

“Uh, what are you guys doing?”

They stopped.

In unison their heads swung towards their leader as though they’d been caught in a criminal act.

Minho sneezed.

Hyunjin swatted him on the chest.

And Seungmin released his hold on Hyunjin’s leg.

The taller boy climbed off Minho a second later, finally letting the older boy sit up from where he had fallen back.

Chan glanced between the trio, amused but definitely confused. “I was going to ask if anyone wanted to grab a bite to eat, but you guys can go back to doing... whatever that was,” he said.

Hyunjin threw himself onto his own bunk, shooting Minho a stink-eye. “No, I’ve finished,” he said, petulant.

Minho chortled under his breath.

Hyunjin lobbed his pillow at the other dancer’s head from across the room.

Chan glanced at Seungmin with a questioning look, more about his offer for food than what had caused all the fuss, but the younger boy simply shook his head, smiling and said-

“Sorry, hyung, I ate before. There’s leftovers in the fridge,” he offered.

“If you want to die,” Hyunjin added.

Seungmin got up and jumped onto the other boy’s bed and onto his lap as hard as possible.

Hyunjin yelped, Seungmin made a bunch of bizarre, cawing noises as they fooled around, and Chan turned his exasperated gaze from them towards Minho, still perched on the end of his own bed.

Minho gazed up at him, unblinking, lips half-curved into a frown.

Whatever amusement that had been on his face prior to Chan entering the room was gone.

Chan found his own expression falling at the look on the other boy's face. “You hungry?” he wanted to know.

"I ate,” was the muffled response. His nose was so congested. It couldn't have been easy to breathe.

“You wanna walk with me anyway?”

Minho bent over and picked up Hyunjin’s pillow from where it had fallen to the floor, quiet for a second before he mumbled out a low, “Not really.”
Chan stared at the other boy but couldn’t find it in himself to be anything but a little disappointed. He hadn’t wanted their argument from the night before to carry into today.

He could feel Seungmin and Hyunjin’s eyes on him and suddenly wished they had some privacy.

“Are you sure? The weather’s much nicer than yesterday. The sun’s out,” Chan said, putting on a smile and adding some cheer in his voice. He stepped closer to Minho, hoping he looked as imploring as he felt. “C’mon. It could be fun.”

Minho hesitated. Then he set down Hyunjin’s pillow on his own bed and got up. He nodded. Chan could’ve hugged him in relief. He didn’t- but he really wanted to.

"I’ll be out front,” he said.

Minho nodded again and went looking for his wallet by his dresser. As Chan left the room, he heard Hyunjin ask-

“Will you bring me back something?”

"No way.”

"Mind grabbing me a drink?” Seungmin questioned after. And Minho agreed.

There was scuffling and Minho’s laughter and Hyunjin’s grumbling, and then Minho was getting smacked by a pillow and Hyunjin was getting sneezed on again and Seungmin was caught in the middle, protesting, and Chan-

Chan listened, overwhelmed from beyond the door, filled with so much sudden affection for his members, the squeeze in his chest almost hurt.

His members...

He loved to hear them. Loved to see them. Loved to be with them.

He didn’t want to be at odds.

He didn’t ever want to hurt them.

How could he call himself their leader or friend otherwise?

Minho came bumbling from their room a few minutes later, still giggling from his tomfoolery with Hyunjin, a cap on his head and grin on his face.

This time when he met Chan’s gaze, he held it. There was something earnest in his gaze. Something questioning. A minuscule sliver of doubt.

Chan grabbed him. Without a second more of hesitation, he grabbed him, threw an arm around the younger boy’s neck and pulled him in. He shook them both slightly as he cajoled them out the door and into the hall.

“Did you eat something good?” he questioned, voice pitching cutely in a way that made his members simultaneously laugh and groan.

“Seungminnie cooked,” came the answer.
"But was it good?"

"... He worked hard."

Chan chuckled. He kept his arm around Minho as they headed down the stairwell and out the door- even if it was a small hassle to squeeze through the doorways attached at the hip as they were.

“Aigoo, you’re a good hyung,” Chan praised. But really. He’d eaten Seungmin’s food before.

Minho was a hero.

Outside was blissfully warm, the skies blue and bright and wide. They walked, enjoying the air.

Despite claiming he had wanted food, Chan really had no specific place in mind to go. Truthfully, he had wanted to see Minho and had wanted to talk.

And now they were, and he felt infinitely better.

More than okay.

He had such a hard time getting to sleep the previous night, too wound up, too many thoughts, too many worries and ideas whirling in his head, unending.

What should he do? What could he be doing to make things better for everyone? For STAYS? For Minho?

He glanced out the corner of his eye to see the boy in question staring up at the clouds, snot running down his nose. He either didn’t notice or care.

Chan’s brow creased fondly and he reached over, wiping his jacket sleeve across Minho’s distracted face.

“I told you the weather was nice.”

Minho fussed and pushed his arm away, but he didn’t look upset- just extremely congested and puffed.

Chan smiled. “What do you want to eat?”

“You’re not mad?” Minho questioned instead. Any hesitance or doubt he might’ve had before had left his voice. He sounded genuinely interested.

“I’m not mad,” Chan made sure to tell him. “Yesterday I was. Today I’m not. How are you feeling?”

“Sick. Should we get kimchi rice?”

“Sure. What are you doing the rest of today?”

“I don’t know.”

“We should watch TV.”

“You won’t be working?”

“I want to rest too you know,” Chan said, only half joking. Because he was always working for their team and always working for their fans.
He felt like he couldn’t stop for even a second.

There was always something to do. Always a way to be better. A way to show more of themselves to the public and in the industry.

They had to keep going.

Minho was silent under the weight of Chan’s arm, gazing at the street ahead as they walked. Abruptly, he said-

“Then rest.”

Chan stared at the side of Minho’s head in disbelief.

Like it was as easy as that.

As simple as that.

As if shutting down his brain only needed the two words as its switch.

But before Chan could answer, Minho was knocking into him sideways, a dopey smile breaking across his face. “It's easy,” he assured him. "Should we give it a try?"

Chan raised his eyebrows. This, he wanted to hear. “You have suggestions?”

Minho’s smile turned into a grin, eyes brightening and expression lifting as he spoke. “Firstly, we should eat. Everything. We should eat everything. And get something for later. Then we should sit around-"

"Just sit around?"

"Just sit around- and watch everyone. There's lots of interesting people who come by the park. Then we watch TV. Then eat. Then sleep.”

“You really wanna eat, huh?”

And Minho’s expression flattened, eyes adopting a thousand-yard stare. “That soup was death.”

Chan laughed and lifted his arm from the other boy’s shoulder to pat his capped head.

“How you’ve suffered!”

In the end, they really did follow Minho’s plan- down to the second and third meal between variety shows and a documentary on whales.

Chan wasn’t really too keen on the dull narrator and repeat images of Baluga whales rolling over in the blue waters of the oceans, but Minho was lying on him so invested and focused, Chan had wound up leaving the remote alone.

He did fall asleep though.

When he woke, it was to the lights off and a murder-mystery playing at low volume on the screen- and seven other members packed around.
They were gathered in the free spaces of the couch and on the floor, joking in low tones and tossing popcorn at each other’s heads. Pillows and sheets from their rooms had been grabbed, and an assortment of drinks and snacks. Half-open plastic containers of take-out food were by their feet.

Chan blinked at the sight.

Didn’t they buy a bunch of vegetables? How much did these kids hate them?

Woojin, seated with both Minho and Chan’s feet in his lap on the opposite end of the couch, glanced over when he noticed Chan was awake. He pat his leader’s socked foot.

“Did you sleep well?” he asked lightly.

Taking the time to check in on himself, Chan realized that he had. His body felt fully refreshed, his mind weightless and calm now that it was warding off the last vestiges of confusion and sleepy fog.

“Yeah…”

“Good.”

Woojin looked back at the TV.

The rest of the members alternated between greeting Chan and filling him in on the plot on screen despite him not asking, a summary session that devolved quickly into hushed arguments over who was the killer and who wasn’t.

Jisung in particular was getting insistent, voice raising as he began rattling off all the evidence he’d seen. Then Hyunjin countered from his curled position over Jeongin, Changbin called them both wrong and Felix broke into laughs while trying to separate the three and their pointing, accusing arms. He got smacked in the forehead for his troubles, spurring a round of arguing from Changbin and Jisung as they tried to blame each other and then Hyunjin and then Felix for being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Seungmin just sat with a look on his face that said he knew who the real killer was and that they were all idiots.

Chan looked down, a bit worried the growing noise would disturb Minho sleeping on his chest.

But Minho was awake, his head turned as he watched their ridiculously bickering and overreacting members with a small smile on his face.

It made something in Chan unbearably fond. He pressed his fingers into the other boy’s sides, quietly drawing his attention.

Minho’s smile flickered away, replaced by a curious downward tilt of his lips as he rolled his head to peer at Chan in question.

“You good?” Chan wondered softly.

Minho’s eyes searched his own for just a second. His expression didn’t change, but his words were warm. “Of course.”

Then he looked away and went back to listening to their younger members, giggling as Jisung leapt to his feet and started waving his arms at Changbin. Woojin was just laughing.

At this point the movie might as well have been forgotten.
But Chan continued to stare at the top of Minho’s head for a time, drumming his fingers against the dancer’s back, growing lost in thought.

His members were happy weren’t they?

They were all doing well?

It shouldn’t have bothered him- but it did.

“Of course.”

Chan wished he could believe him.

“Is it what you wanted?”

Minho didn’t answer. His hyung continued to sit beside him on the bench, arms stretched behind them languidly, chin tilted towards the sky.

They sat in silence for a very long time. The clouds parted and drifted together above their heads.

“I like it,” said Minho at last, shoulders hunched as he leaned forward and talked. “It’s fun. I want to keep doing it.” He picked at his nails, cracked his fingers, all too aware of his hyung’s eyes on the side of his head.

“If it’s hard you can come back. There’s a lot you can do near home.”

Minho was quiet again.

"Aren’t you lonely by yourself?"

"I’m not alone."

"You live alone."

"BTS-hyungs are nice."

"That’s not what I asked."

"I get along with the other dancers. We get food and hang out. Manager-noona at work is really nice too."

"Have you made friends?"

"We’re all part of the same team."

Haejun sighed, drawing Minho’s focused attention from his hands to his hyung’s face. His mask was tugged beneath his chin. “Why did you call me out here, Minho?” he asked with a purpose. “It wasn’t to dance.”

Minho frowned. “I wanted to talk.”

"And you couldn’t do that with your new friends?"

"We’re all.... different ages,” Minho said, beginning to fumble for an excuse. “Everyone has different things they’re doing. Extra jobs. Schedules are different..."
He had a part-time job himself at a barbecue shop, cutting and turning meat. It was fast-paced and small and always clustered, heat pressing, grease spilling, pans and plates clattering as they all worked to cook and serve for the customers out front. But it felt rewarding and the atmosphere was one of hard work. He helped out at a shelter down the street for abandoned animals too, and that was even more pleasant.

Being a back-up dancer was pay but it wasn’t enough for living on his own and handling his expenses. Food and water and electricity and gas all cost money. WiFi too. Of course his parents helped, they worried about him so much, but he didn’t want to take from them if he could help it.

Between his jobs, there wasn’t much time to hang out with others except meals and snack runs. He was able to talk and have fun with his coworkers while at work and with the volunteers at the shelter, but that was it.

It wasn’t really by his choice to spend so much time alone. Just circumstance.

But Haejun didn’t seem convinced. He looked at Minho, his expression incredibly hard to read.

“If you’re going to stay here on your own, you should take care of yourself.”

Minho frowned at the words. What was that supposed to mean?

He did.

He looked after himself well and did all the things he was supposed to- at work, and at the studios with BTS hyungs- always on time for rehearsal and drills with the rest of the trainees and hired dancers.

He called his parents and talked with his aunt every day through texts or calls.

Wasn’t he doing everything right?

Haejun sighed at Minho’s lack of response. Minho just frowned more, tearing his eyes from his hyung to gaze down at his hands again.

Between the cracks in his fingers, he could see his muddy sneakers on the vibrant grass, green and tall and itchy with the wet and warm season of spring.

How was he supposed to feel?

He really had asked Haejun and asked to meet because he missed him. Because there was no one else he felt comfortable enough to confide in.

But... he wasn’t sad or anything.

He wasn’t upset.

He was happy. Dancing really was fun. He could spend forever doing it- just him and rhythm and sound- with others or himself.

It didn’t matter. He could enjoy the things he liked all the same.

“It’ll be fine,” he told his hyung when the silence had drawn long between them again. “It’s good. I’m good,” he smiled, brightening ever so slightly.

Haejun kept looking at him, unmoving. “And if you get sick?”
Minho faltered. Haejun’s stare was unrelenting- his question pressing.

“What will you do?”

His mind slowed. Then started and spun- answers and reasonings backed by memories and words, that time and place, falling down- going down- a pull down onto the ground, summer heat and sun-

Minho blinked his eyes rapidly to clear the thoughts, to wipe away the sounds and- he never ever wanted to remember.

“I won’t get sick,” he heard himself say.

His voice was weak.

He cleared his throat and straightened, meeting Haejun’s eyes and saying it again. “I’m not going to get sick like that anymore. I’m better.”

His hyung just gazed at him, brow furrowed, lips set in a small frown.

“I hope you’re right, Minho. I want you to be.”

But even if Haejun said that, Minho knew there was no one more than himself who wanted that sense of certainty. That reality that he was okay.

He was only sixteen.

There was still so much he could do.

Chapter End Notes

<3
Undercurrent

Chapter Notes

Don’t be startled! I changed the story summary to better fit the growing plot.

Tags will also be added and moved.

It feels like an evolving story, even to me haha 😊

I know there’s bit a lot going on... but I hope this can raise your spirits a bit.

<3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“What about this?”

Felix looked down as a half-bundled, refolded, dark blue cardigan was held under his line of sight.

He put the turtleneck he’d been holding back on the hangar rack in front and grabbed the offered shirt instead.

The material felt light and soft and wasn’t at all itchy or too thin or thick. He could wear it in spring or fall and the fit was comfortably loose.

Actually, really, looking at it now, it was exactly what he’d been looking for.

Fashionable and simple.

His eyes crinkled Minho’s way. “Ahh, as expected, you know my style hyung,” he grinned with an approving point of his finger and thumb.

Minho preened, a half smirk tugging the corner of his lips at the praise. “Of course I do. What kind of hyung would I be if I didn’t?”

They broke into somewhat demented snickers in the middle of the clothing store.

Felix drapped the cardigan over his arm, taking a look at the shirts in Minho's hands. “Did you find what you wanted?” he asked.

The older boy shuffled through the four shirts he held, all long-sleeved button-downs with different colors. “They didn’t have any more in my size,” he said, holding up a pink-striped shirt to his chest that completely dwarfed his body. “These are all big. Do you think I should get them?”

"It’s okay. You look good in bigger clothing,” Felix assured him. But really those were way too big. “You could probably ask a clerk?”

"No...” and Minho trailed off in obvious thought, staring down at the shirt he held against him. “I could just tuck it in?”

"Uhh,” and Felix looked at the older boy a little seriously. “I don’t think they’ll fit in your pants.
They’ll probably make them stick out.”

"Not if I only tuck half in."

Felix opened his mouth to argue- then stopped. That... actually might work?

He looked at Minho and Minho looked back, up and away from the shirt. They held each other’s gazes for a brief moment then returned to staring at the shirt.

“Get it and try. You can always return them.”

It was, unfortunately, a small boutique store on the corner of the street downtown they had picked to shop at. There were stand-up mirrors along the close-pressed, cluttered walls but no changing rooms.

And neither Minho nor Felix were about to try pulling on the clothes in the middle of the store with the stout noona watching them from the lone check-out desk.

So Minho nodded in agreement and they went to pay, Felix grabbing a couple more plain t-shirts on the way, and then they were outside on the sidewalk, blue and pretty plastic shopping bags hanging from their wrists and in the crooks of their elbows.

The weather had gotten increasingly warmer as the days had gone on, the skies more open and blue-ignoring the sporadic April storms.

It felt good.

Fresh.

Clean.

Like a brand new start.

Felix loved the change in the air, the newfound energy it thrummed through his limbs, giving more strength and light-heartedness to his body to keep charging through the day.

And also-

Felix glanced beside him towards Minho.

The older boy looked spaced out but incredibly content, peeking into his bags again with his lips curved downward, mouth half open.

It was the resting face Minho always made when he had been left alone to his own devices, focused on his own tasks and not really his surroundings.

Felix had seen it lots of times when Minho was mulling in his own head.

Even when the other boy was trying to take those thoughts and explain them to others, that concentrated look remained on his face.

It was interesting.

Truthfully, Felix had a lot of noise running in his head too. All of Stray Kids did.

But seeing someone else retreat into their thoughts was always fascinating to watch from the other
Did he look like that too? Was it just as noticeable?

It was alright if it was- Felix just wanted to know.

He liked knowing things. He liked getting to understand them.

He liked getting to know his hyung.

“Yongbokkie, should we eat?” Minho suddenly asked.

And Felix couldn’t help but let out a laugh.

“Should we? I feel like all we do is eat.”

Minho looked at him, half-offended. “Nothing wrong with that!”

“No, no, nothing wrong with that,” Felix agreed easily, a grin back on his face.

So they went and ate at a small street shop, sitting at a lopsided plastic table in the corner by a large window. It gave a great view of the passing cars and people ambling down the sidewalk.

“It’s cute,” Minho commented, staring down at the small porcelain in the center of their table filled with creams and sugar.

It had an elephant trunk and ears.

Felix smiled.

They ordered yakgwa and tea and split a slice of cheesecake, taking the time to enjoy the sweets and each other’s comfortable company.

Because that’s what it was. Comfortable- always comfortable- alongside his hyung.

Felix may not have understood everything about the older boy, his habits or the sometimes really strange things he’d say- like wanting to perform ‘District 9’ on the moon.

But Minho was kind and supportive, and a very good listener, even when it seemed like he had stopped listening in the middle of a conversation.

More than that- he never let the other members doubt themselves.

As much as he teased them, he coddled them, as much as he rolled his eyes and complained during choreography sessions, he taught them and watched them, proud, with a secretive smile he thought they all couldn’t see.

He looked after them. Wiped their tears.

Felix was grateful. Even though he sometimes still struggled to convey his exact thoughts and feelings into the Korean language, he was so grateful to have his members as support.

Minho as support.

As soon as Felix showed doubt in himself and insecurities in speaking or dancing, Minho was listing all the great things about him and his skills; why he stood out among the rest of the members in those
things he worried about.

Felix loved that about Minho. Loved him.

He was undeniably the hyung many members had gone to for an open ear free of judgement.

The hyung they could share their concerns with and leave however long later, maybe not completely better, but feeling as though there was someone else besides themselves who could understand them and their worries.

Conversations, once they started, were so easy hold, so easy to get lost and sidetracked in until their topics ran cold or one of them moved on.

"Hyung-"

"Mm?" Minho looked up, half a yakgwa in his mouth.

"Are you going to the gym with Bin-hyung today?"

Minho mulled over the question for a long minute. “I should,” he said after finishing the sweet. “I missed the last few days.”

“Well you were sick and we had a lot of schedules.”

"Mmm."

“So what are you gonna do?”

"Legs."

"Your thighs?"

"Running."

"Ahhh,” Felix said, leaning back with a spoonful of cheesecake.

Minho stopped digging his own spoon into the cake to look up at him, questioning, amused.

“What?”

“You’re always running,” Felix answered, just as amused. “But I never see you doing weights or squats?”

"I do squats all the time!” Minho protested. “And push-ups. You don’t need weights for those.”

"I’ve seen your push-ups, hyung, and they’re not push-ups. They’re bad.”

Minho’s eyes got wide in mock anger. “Ya! How can you say that?” he said through the spoon in his mouth. “They’re better than anyone else’s. Look at this. Look at my arms.”

And Felix looked at the older boy and his small shoulders and nonexistent arm muscles beneath his white tee. Looked at them and then back at Minho’s pointlessly offended face.

“How can you say that with Chan-hyung, Bin-hyung, Woojin-hyung and Jisung on the team?”

Minho made a face at Felix, scrunched and mocking and annoyed. “Whatever.” He went for another spoonful of cake. “They don’t have legs.”
Felix snorted.

They finished fifteen minutes later and carried on the walk home.

Normally they could ride the Metro or bus back to their area, but the weather really was great.

Why miss out?

Besides, it was nice getting to walk with a friend.

“Do you want to learn a dance tonight?” Minho questioned.

“All of a sudden?” Felix half-laughed.

“I saw a video last night and wanted to try it.”

Felix hummed deeply, gazing at the road ahead, the inside of his chest vibrating at the force of the sound. He hummed for a very long time, and fought back a smile as he felt Minho’s eyes sticking on the side of his head, petulant.

"You don’t want to?"

"Mmmmmmmmm-"

"Are you doing something else instead?"

"Mmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm-"

At this point, Felix was just messing with him. He couldn’t help it- it was so easy to do with his hyung.

“Ya,” Minho bumped into him lightly, brow furrowed, grin tugging at his lips. Like he was confused by Felix but also endeared.

And Felix, caving in at the look, breaking out a short laugh, bumped back into his hyung with a solid-

“Okay,”

Minho bumped him once more. "Okay?"

"Okay,” Felix reiterated, knocking into the other boy again.

He shouldn’t have.

Because Minho spent the next minute half-pressed against his back, chin hooked in the crook of his shoulder, stepping on the backs of his heels, mocking him with the absolutely highest-pitched voice.

“Okay, okay, okay,” he annoyingly said. "Yongbokkie said okay.”

"Stop it.”

"Okay,”

"Stop it.”

"Okay.”
“Ai- hyung- knock it off,” he complained, half-laughing in frustration. He tried and failed to shake his hyung off. Felix groaned, raised his voice, yelled and tried to run ahead. “Stoop!”

Minho latched an arm around Felix’s side and giggled something truly evil, drawing out his voice just as loud and long as Felix’s own.

“Okaaay!”

And Felix kept tripping and everyone they passed kept staring and his hyung kept mumbling whiny, garbled nonsense in his ear-

So Felix went boneless.

Minho fell.

And they both toppled to the ground.

A line of birds flew overhead.

The next time Minho stood, helping Felix to his feet and gathering their dropped bags, there was a horrendous explosion of poop splattered down half his face and in his hair.

Felix stared. “Oh my god,” he said in English.

Minho smiled and started to lift his fingers to his head. “I must be bleeding, but it doesn’t hurt-”

Felix lunged for his hand. “No-!”

There was really nothing they could do.

Felix had run to the nearest convenience store, dragging Minho along, and forced him in the bathroom to wash his face and hair.

But the smell and grime stayed, and Minho’s hair was a plastered, wet and cheap-soap sudsy mess they couldn’t fix.

Minho himself had stayed in high spirits, giggling repeatedly in the face of Felix’s own horror like there wasn’t animal feces everywhere on his head. Like he hadn’t been on the verge of annihilating Hyunjin after the other dancer had dyed his hair blue and made him wear a wig.

“Hyung, how can you laugh?”

“It’s fine, it’s not the first time. I worked at a shelter, you know.”

“You were pooped on from above at a shelter?”

And Minho had gotten a somewhat haunted look in his eyes.

“They liked the rafters.”

“No, let’s go back, and I’ll scrub it. I’ll scrub it clean.”
"I thought you wanted to dance?"

Then Felix had seriously, incredulously, looked at the older boy in disbelief. "We are not dancing with bird poop in your hair." He had thrown away the ruined paper towel he had been trying to scrub Minho’s face off with in the bin by the sink. “Hyung no.”

Minho had the nerve to look disappointed. “Alright, I got it,” he had agreed.

Felix really, truly, looked at his hyung again.

That was how they found themselves back at the dorm a whopping thirty minutes later-

Minho pulling the worn remains of a paper towel through his hair, Felix hurrying to discard his shoes and drop their bags at their room, and Changbin staring from the couch.

“What happened to you two?” he asked.

“A bird pooped on my head,” Minho answered.

For a moment, Changbin only looked at the other boy and his sad attempts to get the gunk from his bangs.

Then something thoughtful, contemplative, fell into his eyes.

“You know...”

Minho glanced at him.

Changbin dropped his gaze from Minho’s working fingers to his face. “We still have that wig. You could always—”

Felix returned at the sound of Changbin’s screams, a plastic bin of hair and face product in his hands.

Minho was on the couch, trying his very best to wipe his entire head on Changbin’s flailing body.

Felix rushed over. “Not on the couch! We all sit there, hyung!”

"Ya, ya, ya, ya, ya-" Changbin was yelling, a knee in Minho’s stomach and arms shoving the older boy’s shoulders away.

In the kitchen, watching them while eating out a bowl of grapes, was Hyunjin.

After a moment, he got up, grabbed the grapes- and went into his room.

A wise decision.

By the time Felix had managed to pry Minho off, Changbin was lying defeated on the couch, face-down, unmoving.

The home-shopping network that had been on advertising supplements played cheerfully in the background.
Minho smirked, gazing down at Changbin’s prone form.

And then he looked at Felix and smiled, eyes dropping to the bin he held like he hadn’t just killed their team’s main rapper. His eyes brightened.

“Should we go?”

Felix glanced at Changbin one last time. “Uhhhhhhhh.....”

But he didn’t really have a say.

Minho was grabbing a chair from the kitchen and dragging it down the hall to their bathroom, calling for him loudly.

“Yongbokkie, let’s do this!”

"Okay, I got it!” he called back. Felix tore his gaze from Changbin with a genuine, “Sorry hyung,” before ditching him and seeking out his other member.

Minho was already seated in the bathroom in front the sink. He looked at Felix expectantly in the mirror as he came in behind.

Felix eyed him warily, setting his plastic tub of products on the flipped toilet lid.

“Why are you so excited?” he couldn’t help but ask.

Minho gazed at him vibrantly. “It’s fun.”

Felix snorted. “Killing Changbin-hyung is fun?”

"No,” Minho made a face at him through the mirror. “This.”

Felix made a face right back but grabbed their bathroom’s hand-towel and drapped it around his hyung’s neck.

Minho could pretend to hate it all he liked, but the members knew that he loved getting pampered just as much as he loved hearing compliments, sleeping with stuffed toys and getting his stomach rubbed.

Felix stepped back and studied the scene. “Alright, hyung, if we’re going to do it this way and not in the tub, then turn around so I can put your head in the sink.”

Minho was obedient.

Felix yanked on a pair of neon washing gloves and twisted on the faucet right away.

Minho peered up at him amused as Felix began to run clean water through his hair aggressively.

“Aren’t those part of your stage costume?” he teased.

Felix didn’t even blink as he tilted Minho’s head back and let the faucet pour straight into his eyes.

"YaaaaaaaaAAAAAAH!”

Felix fixed the other boy’s head. It was payback for the comment, but also for Changbin- whose current status was unfortunately unknown.
“Oh, sorry hyung,” Felix said, unapologetically. “You must’ve slipped.”

Minho gave him a dirty look, not even close to intimidating since he only had one eye open and it was extraordinary clumped with wet lashes. "You were holding my hair,” he accused.

Felix didn’t answer, grabbing shampoo instead.

It was peppermint and lemon and his favorite brand for when he needed his own scalp to feel fresh and clean.

A pop of the lid, squeeze in his hand, and the motions became clockwork as he massaged his fingers through Minho’s hair.

His hyung fell quiet, eye fluttering shut, and soon, sure enough, the disgruntled crease in his brow evened out.

Felix slid his gaze from the other boy’s face, satisfied, and concentrated wholly on his hair.

They grew lost in time.

Felix didn’t speak and Minho didn’t either.

It felt good.

Relaxing.

Needed.

Minho tried to think back to the last time someone had washed his hair for him like this.

The stylist noona and hyung at the barbershop excluded, it had to have been years.

Not since his mom- the night before he left for Seoul- nagging worriedly all the while scrubbing his scalp so thoroughly and careful and fond.

“You have to call everyday.”

"I understand."

"Stay in the area you move. Don’t wander. Don’t travel with anyone strange.”

"I understand."

"If you get the slightest bit sick or overwhelmed you come home, understand? We will be here, understand?"

"Mom, I understaaand,” he had laughed back then.

His parents had wound up seeing him off all the way to the train station the next day anyway, but that memory was one he would always remember.

Because as worried as she’d been, his mother had been proud.

He was joining a Seoul dance crew.

He was chasing his dreams- even when he had once failed.
“Mom loves you, okay? You’ve always made me proud.”

The train had departed.

He had sat and looked out the window as his mom smiled and waved and his dad nodded his head.

Spring.

He wouldn’t see them for months again.

“Hyung, you good?”

Minho broke from the memories drifting in his head, but kept his eyes closed as Felix’s ministrations continued on.

“I’m fine.”

“What were you thinking about?”

"Nothing.”

"You sure?”

"Mmhm.”

And there was another bout of silence as Felix began rinsing the shampoo from Minho’s hair.

It made Minho think.

Not that long afterwards, the faucet turned off and he heard Felix move towards the toilet to go rummaging around in his bin.

For a time there was the sound of cracking lids and sniffing and rubber gloves being peeled off beneath soft muttering- loose English and Korean mixing as his dongsaeng debated over what to use next.

“Did it come out?” Minho couldn't help but wonder.

Felix made a noise, feet padding as he came back over. “Yeah. Thankfully. But I want to use conditioner anyway. Is that okay?”

“Do what you want,” Minho easily agreed.

Truthfully, he hated even having gotten bird gunk in his hair. But there was nothing he could do to change it, so getting worked up about it was pointless. Birds had to use the bathroom like everyone else. It hadn't been on purpose. Hadn't been like the incident they all said they wouldn't talk about a month ago.

And that was how he found a bunch of coconut cream on his head. Heavy, thick and surprisingly, overwhelmingly sweet.

“Don’t like the smell?”

He guessed he must’ve accidentally made a face. “No, it’s alright. It’s just...strong.”

"I can change it?” Felix pressed.
"Ah, no it’s fine. Just do what you were going to do. It’s okay.”

He could feel Felix’s hesitance, the sudden carefulness in his hands that didn’t used to be there.

He frowned.

Hoping to take his dongsaeng’s focus away, he asked the stray question that had been rolling around in his mind instead. The memory of his mom, that train, the smell of spring-

"Why did you become a dancer?”

Felix kept scrubbing. “What?”

Minho repeated the question.

Felix’s hands stopped. He was thinking. Minho let the silence spread and mold itself around them, waiting.

“Ah... that,” Felix said at long last. He resumed combing his fingers through the conditioner in Minho’s hair, taking extra care. “I said that one time I wanted to be a songwriter.... right?”

"Nn.”

“Right... well I wanted to work with music but at the time...I didn’t have the resources. A studio or equipment or anything. But I still liked music.”

Felix paused again.

Restarted.

Paused.

Minho opened his eyes.

Felix looked down at him, brow lowered, eyes serious as he tried to explain.

“I felt like...I couldn’t give it up. I had to do something with it. Whatever that was. Does that make sense? The way I’m saying it?”

Minho found himself nodding, noise of agreement slipping out.

“Right.” Felix gazed at him for a second longer before refocusing on Minho’s hair and taking a step back. “The conditioner has to set. Ten minutes and I’ll wash it out.”

"You decided dancing?” was Minho’s response, making a three-hundred and sixty degree turn in the chair to face his younger member.

His dongsaeng didn’t seem put off, used to their veers in conversation, and took a seat on the rim of the bathtub to look at him.

“I don’t know if I decided it,” Felix answered. “I started doing it but it was natural and more for fun than anything else?”

Minho wondered why the other boy made it sound like a question. “But you auditioned to be a dancer.”
“With JYP, yeah,” Felix agreed. “There were auditions in Australia. I thought I would try.” He flexed his hands, his gaze going from his fingers, to the floor, to the wall behind Minho’s head. “I wanted to at least give it a shot. If I couldn’t write songs right away then I thought I could build my way up, start at the basics, become a part of an idol company and work to the top. My top.”

His brow furrowed even lower. He stared at a space on the ground.

“I don’t know.... how should I say it? I felt I wanted to do this. I had to.”

He looked at Minho and shook his head slightly. “I’m sorry if it sounds weird.”

Minho shook his head right back, frowning. “No, it didn’t sound weird. You said it well,” he replied.

Even as his thoughts pulled him under.

He understood it.

He understood Yongbok well even if he himself didn’t know how to convey it.

That feeling. That need.

It must’ve been the same for all of them- the reason they were here.

No.

His thoughts dragged him.

Not all of them.

Not him, right?

Across from him, Felix stood, moving from the tub to come over and lightly touch at his hair.

The conditioner had settled, caking thick and hard against his scalp.

He felt it’s weight.

Felix moved him, turned him back around and eased his head down after warming the sink water.

“Hyung, what about you? Why did you become a dancer?”

The answer came right away.

“I like it.”

"Ah, no,” and Felix’s voice stuttered as he tried to correct himself. He stopped sifting water through Minho’s hair and started scrubbing his scalp with vigor. “I meant like how you asked me. Why did you become an idol? You said you wanted to be a singer? But you were a backup dancer for a few years right? You wanted to be an idol after that?”

Minho looked at the other boy, unblinking.

It wasn’t that the question startled him- he had just asked it himself-

But he didn’t really know how to answer.

Didn’t know how to respond without sounding.... like he was lacking.
On radio shows, in interviews, he had always answered the repeated questions from the host on how he’d been scouted and recruited into JYP.

“They saw me dancing prettily.”

Answered questions on why he had chosen to become a singer- who he looked up to.

“I enjoyed singing. I like 2PM sunbaenims and Dean sunbaenim. He has a very good and powerful voice.”

But his answers had always sounded so weak compared to the other members.

The other members who wrote told about their struggles to even get into the company, to debut, working hard, endlessly hard, full of thoughts of anxiety, frustration and depression.

Members who were so strong and determined and passionate to make their dreams of being heard and seen come true even when it seemed like the odds were against them.

Jisung.... Chan.... Felix... Woojin...

All of them.

All of them.

Minho became an idol on an off-chance. It wasn’t a dream he had been chasing for years like some of the others.

It was never something that he desired so badly enough that it had kept him up at night, working tirelessly to produce, to create tracks, to become known.

He hadn't wanted the spotlight.

Not in the way some other trainees did.

Not at first.

Minho had only opened up about it once, way back in their early days of debut in a magazine interview.

He had spoke about how being an idol was never an end goal for him (not after that first rejection from Cube- but he kept that part to himself).

He wanted to be a professional dancer, that was it. But as he went from preteen to teen to young adult, he had gotten worried.

Where would he go after this?

What would he do as an adult?

Could he stay being a dancer? Like this? With a crew, with hyungs in the industry?

Forever?

He had gotten inspired by Bangtan. He had said it so many times.

How could he have not?
He joined their list of backup dancers with his soimdance crew at the turning age of fifteen.

He had traveled and danced and performed high-energy songs, meaningful songs to the thunderous sounds of tears and applause and screams from one stage to the next.

At the time, he was just a backup dancer.

A dancer who'd been rejected once before but was doing well now; having fun.

But maybe....

He had thought it, the lone whisper passing in his head- maybe...

Here on stage, confetti spinning, lights bright and white shining down onto their heads, the heads of Bangtan and all of them, that this was what he kind of wanted too.

But it was too late.

Regret and acceptance.

That was what he had felt.

He was too old to become a trainee to debut at a young age, wasn’t he? His window-frame was up.

Among the many dancers for their Bangtan hyungs, there were already trainees who’d been practicing for years.

Already a friend of his Minho had often gone out with for late night snacks- preparing for debut in a group of his own.

Minho knew.

He knew.

It had to have been too late for him.

He had no confidence in his voice.

No confidence alone on a stage.

No formal training.

He thrived in groups bursting with energy, with a similar cause and passion- the passion at the time- BTS.

No... that opportunity had gone.

He could dance.

He would dance.

That was good enough.

It was all he was good enough to be in such an industry.

That was what Minho had believed.
But what were those odds he’d be scouted?

What were the odds the company that sought him out in the end would be JYP? Where his favorite senior groups like Wonder Girls, Apink and 2PM had been produced from?

Where there happened to be a team lacking its 9th member for an already prepared comeback ‘District 9’?

Not just him.

There were so many circumstances that had brought all of them together, in the same space, inevitably, at the same time- though their journey to that shared place had come at different costs and speeds.

He was one small piece of a puzzle.

But of a puzzle that had already been there- complete.

“Why did you become an idol?”

"Why did you become a singer?"

"Because I..." wanted to try.

Wanted to try and be more.

He had been so scared.

So nervous of going beyond that back line to the front, under the light, the center stage- but even if he had given up in his thoughts, in his mind, in his actions, told himself constant self-denials of ever standing in a place like his Bangtan hyungs and friends-

His heart hadn’t.

His eyes- on the backs of his Bangtan hyungs, under the cheers and smiles of thousands of fans- hadn’t lost that drive.

That drive that pushed and led all performers and all artists to the spotlight or isolated corners in the end.

Hunger.

“Hyung.”

Felix’s voice, soft and easy, pulled him back into the present.

Minho slid his eyes open.

When had they closed?

Felix had stopped scrubbing, hands resting lightly on either side of his head, cupped above his ears. He was watching Minho closely.

Carefully.

With hesitance.
Then he said-  
“It’s okay. You don’t have to answer.” Felix paused, being obviously careful with his words.

Minho wondered why.

He wasn’t mad or going to get upset.

“I think I know how you feel,” Felix continued. “So it’s... alright.”

Minho couldn’t help it. His eyebrows raised. “You know?”

“I know, Lee Know,” Felix said automatically. He grimaced with a grin at the mutinous look on Minho’s face and let out a laugh. “I’m sorry, hyung. It’s instinct.”

Minho’s face remained scrunched, mumbling as Felix did a final rinse to clean his hair of product and suds. “Why does everyone make fun of it? It’s not bad.”

“You’re right, you’re right,” Felix appeased, “But it’s fun to say so I think fans like to play with it.”

Minho released a grunt that wasn’t cheery or upset.

Just a flat noise of acknowledgment- like another person’s hum- moving on from the conversation.

So Felix continued on with his hyung’s hair, cleaning it thoroughly, then toweling it off with dramatic, focused flare.

They both laughed and made fun of Minho’s wild tufts, Minho protesting loudly before Felix gave in and re-flattened the hair nicely with a towel.

“What do you think, hyung? You like it?” Felix questioned, smiling wide at his hyung through the mirror.

Minho sat up, straightening the towel Felix had placed on his head.

He gazed at himself in the mirror for a short time.

Something crossed his expression, something shifted in his eyes- so unreadable and fast Felix couldn’t be sure he had seen it.

Couldn’t be sure what it was. The change was so sudden.

He was going to ask- what’s wrong?

But before he could, Minho released a short chuckle and waggled his brows, answering the question.

“It’s perfect. Like me.”

He brought a finger gun beneath his chin and grinned.

Felix slapped him on the back.

Minho jokingly got angry, Felix slapped him some more, and at long last Hyunjin banged on the other side of the door for them to come out and-

"It's been an hour! What are you doing?!"
Minho and Felix paused, sharing similar looks and eye rolls so far up they rolled behind their heads.

But they stopped fooling around to clean up anyway.

Still- as they moved around and cleaned up the small space, they left the bathroom, Minho hauling the chair behind him and knocking it into Hyunjin’s leg on purpose, making the two start to bicker and Seungmin finally come out their bedroom and tell them to *shut up*-

Felix couldn’t help but wonder what that look on Minho’s face had been about.

That evening, heading out for the practice studio with Hyunjin claiming he’d join them in an hour, Felix had stopped Minho in the middle of their apartment stairwell and said-

"Hyung. You'd tell me if there was something wrong, right?"

And Minho had looked back at him from his position down on a lower step, head twisted in confusion, eyes searching his own from beneath the cover of his baseball cap and tugged up mask.

"Did something happen?"

"No," Felix gestured a bit uselessly with his hands. "I meant in general. If you were feeling something. Bad or sick or...."

Minho looked at him for a little longer, brow furrowed low. Then his eyebrows raised and he smiled, eyes crinkling brightly.

"I'm fine."

He turned his head back front and started bounding down the steps again.

But Felix didn't move.

He didn't know why he felt so compelled to speak out next, why the light frustration coated his tone.

He only knew that it was there, suddenly, twisting deep in his chest.

"Would you even tell us if you weren't?"

Minho stilled. One hand on the banister, feet between steps- he stilled and didn't turn.

Felix waited.

Finally his hyung spoke.

"Didn't you want to dance?" he asked, voice soft.


Minho slipped his hand from the banister, and continued his descent downward the stairs.

"Then let's go."
He didn't look back or speak again.

Soon Felix was alone at the top of the stairwell, silence echoing off the walls. He heard Minho's feet on the stairs below.

But Felix couldn't get his legs to go, staring at the spot the older boy was once at, bewildered and hurt and wanting to know more than anything-

*What was that?*

Chapter End Notes

:)  

Fun fact: That magazine article Minho had was a real one. Small details and facts this time around came from there.

Yakgwa is a Korean sort of sweet, honey and glazed and something Felix likes to eat a lot.
Greetings

Chapter Summary

They were all liars. To themselves.

Chapter Notes

I’m so sorry I was gone for so long!

I went and visited my mom this past week and let me tell you Internet is nonexistent lol.

I hope you’ve all been well?

I’ll start with regular updates again❤️

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Howl in his ears.

Rain on his face.

He stood, head turned towards the sky, chest heaving, lungs burning, eyes squeezed tightly shut.

Tight so that no tears could escape.

Tight so that he couldn't see the world around him fade.

Around him the wind blew, gusts across the grassy field of the empty park, rippling the river beside in fluttering, bouncing waves.

His legs shook.

He wanted to cry.

He wanted to scream.

So he did.

The storm swallowed his voice, breaking thunder, rumbling drums, as he stood and yelled wordless noise again and again into the weeping clouds.

There was no one around to witness the shouts of the twelve-year old boy.

No one to see the lightning split and streak the sky in answer with a mighty clap and roar.

He was so small.
One voice of a billion others- better off, worse off, just the same as him.

He wouldn’t be heard.

Water struck across his face, harsh and wet and cold, and it hurt- it hurt- but he wanted to feel it all.

Wanted to feel the crying force of nature as it blustered across his skin, grabbed his clothes and threw his hair.

He had to.

It was the only way to remember.

The only way to know.

No matter, no matter, no matter what-

I’m here.

A cold bottle pressed against his cheek.

Minho blinked, startled, and swung his head to the right, looking up.

A familiar face smiled down at him, eyebrow cocked in question.

“It’s hot, isn’t it?”

“Hyunseop-hyung?”

"At least you didn’t forget me,” the older male teased.

Minho accepted the water bottle as it was pressed against his forehead again.

Hyunseop, lean and built with a sharp jaw and bright eyes, took a seat beside him on the curb, not at all caring of the fact that his uniform would probably get dirty from the curb.

The back lot of the building had few cars and more equipment vans than anything else, several of his fellow guards in orange vests meandering the perimeter with their batons idly belted or swinging from their hands.

They never actually used them but it was a safety precaution nonetheless.

He knew at the airport or in places less heavily seen by the public eye, fans could be unpredictable. Even problematic.

But here, at music show recordings, there was a wide berth of space between them and the idols, gated off and monitored by guards like himself on all sides.

Thankfully, there had never really been an issue.

It was an odd sort of job, but good pay for what it was and not particularly hard.

The handful of construction workers gathered around the entrance gate eating lunch had it much worse.

Longer hours and grittier work, surrounded by the hammering noise of tools and shouts.
At most, the loudest sounds Hyunseop had ever heard were the aggressive cries of fanboys trying to shout praises at their favorite idols.

Sometimes the occasional echoes of music and small cheers could be heard from indoors when the artists started their live performances, but it was rare.

Hyunseop had actually been relaxing with the construction workers when he had noticed Minho come out for air- but the boy hadn’t seen him- hadn’t seen anyone, really- taking a seat immediately under the bar of the ramp leading from the parking lot ground to the upper level exit.

Then he had zoned out completely, holding a small fan beneath his neck and pulling the collar of his shirt away from his body with a small resting frown.

Performance days were long- Hyunseop knew from his previous conversations with Minho before-and he had seen them himself.

Early morning arrivals and late night departures with a full line-up of artists who needed to run through their stages and block their choreography just right to get in line with the directors’ camera angles and shots.

It was a studio effort that took multiple rehearsals and extensive time for each idol group, until everyone was satisfied and the stage technicians in charge of lighting, sound and effects had learned their cues.

Stray Kids must’ve finished their practice set if Minho was out here now, and from the looks of things, it had been a high-energy rehearsal.

The kid was drenched and looked like he was two seconds from melting into the ground.

That electric fan he held was useless.

Hyunseop doubted it even worked.

So he had left the construction workers, grabbed water from a nearby cooler, and went to make sure Minho was still alive.

The kid was helpless in the heat.

Once, he had come across the younger boy in an empty storage room, lying face-down on the floor.

There was a massive fan plugged into the wall behind him, whirring on full power, but it didn’t look like it was having any effect on the sweat-drenched body plastered to the ground.

At the time, when Hyunseop had entered, alarmed and one hand ready on his radio to call for building staff or a medical hand, he had thought it was a random idol who had passed out and needed help.

But when he knelt and shook the body, and the boy’s head turned, and it was Minho, the kid had just brushed aside his worry with a bunch of nonsensical, sleep-talking jargon, and with a flailing arm, smacked him in the chin.

Hyunseop had stayed outside the room until a couple of Minho’s members had miraculously, somehow appeared- the youngest one, and an older boy, Woojin, Hyunseop remembered Minho talking about a lot.
They had poked their heads into the storage room and woken the dancer with little surprise, easing him up and out and away down the hall for their upcoming pre-recording with polite bows and greetings Hyunseop’s way.

Then they were gone.

Hunseop never got an explanation for that.

To this day he wondered what that had been all about.

Hyunseop left the memory behind, and glanced over at the boy now sitting beside him, fumbling to open the water bottle Hyunseop had given him.

“Did you eat?” he asked.

“I ate,” Minho replied, brow furrowed as he struggled. His fingers seemed sluggish.

Hyunseop reached over and twisted off the lid with ease. “You’re really no good in heat, are you?” he sighed in amusement.

Minho drank from the bottle, eyes focused on the lot in front them. He looked like he was thinking about something complicated.

It made Hyunseop want to pat his head.

So he did.

And then he left his hand in Minho’s hair, playing with the few unsweaty tufts sticking out.

“Must be a long day,” he said.

Minho leaned into him, the barest amount, unfocused as he kept staring into the lot.

Hyunseop doubted the younger boy even knew what he was doing, and he didn’t make any move to lift his hand away.

It wasn’t the first time it had happened between them- or the first time he had seen Minho spacing out.

Truthfully, it was highly unusual in their culture for anyone who didn’t know each other to initiate skinship in any sort of form beyond a handshake or bow- even more unusual for people who were just casual acquaintances like Minho and himself were.

But there was something about the kid.

Something that made him seem bizarrely like a friend he had always known, or a neighbor who had lived down the street waving hello every morning from the front door.

Friendly. Unafraid.

Strange enough to initiate a conversation when anyone else would’ve just gone along their way.

It was how they’d first met.
“Hello.”

Hyeonseop screamed.

He would later deny ever having done it, much to Minho’s amusement, but in the moment, here and now, he most definitely hadn’t thrown his sandwich into the air in fear.

He whipped around, looking at the person who’d snuck up on him in disbelief.

It was a boy, with dark hair and big eyes, blinking owlishly his way as though he were the one who’d been standing there all along and Hyeonseop had been the one invading.

“So sorry,” the kid apologized. His expression was full of curiosity. “Did I scare you?”

Hyeonseop looked at the boy and then looked around them wildly in bewilderment.

The security gate was closed and the lot was empty of all fans and staff.

He’d been on duty during the lunch break hour everyone else had been given, with only a few of his co-working guards loitering the far end of the lot on the other side.

How did this kid get in?

“What are you doing here?” Hyeonseop demanded to know, bringing his eyes back to the boy.

“Oh, I’m here for the show.”

“Fans aren’t allowed back here.” Hyeonseop straightened, his training coming back to mind as he fixed his expression sternly and looked down at the kid. “This is trespassing.”

The boy blinked once again, confusion on his face. “I’m not a fan.”

Hyeonseop stared. “What?”

“I’m a singer.”

Hyeonseop stared some more.

The kid was dressed in black sweats and a t-shirt with a baseball cap. He looked like some random school kid who’d been wandering the streets after class and made a wrong turn.

Aside from his features, which were admittedly kind of soft and pretty, nothing about the boy screamed idol.

Even dressed down or unconventionally attractive, idols tended to have some sort of air to them, some sort of presence that drew the eye.

This was... definitely not the case.

Should he believe him?

“What group are you from?”

“Stray Kids.”
“What do you do?”

“I’m a dancer.”

Ha. Caught him.

Hyunseop folded his arms across his chest.

“I thought you were a singer.”

The boy peered up at him. “I do both,” he answered. “Dancers have to sing too.”

Okay, that was fair. But-

“Why are you out here?”

“Ahh.”

And the boy got a weird look on his face, staring at Hyunseop and then at the building’s exit door behind him, and the back to Hyunseop again.

“I came out for air because it was hot. But you were sitting here eating by yourself, weren’t you?”

Hyunseop had no idea where this was going. “Ye-ess?” he replied, bafflement coating every inch of the word.

The boy nodded, once, looking incredibly pleased with the response. As though his thoughts had been confirmed.

“Right. So I came to say ‘hello’.”

Hyunseop was staring again. “But... why?”

“Because you were alone,” the kid answered, like it should’ve been obvious.

He looked past Hyunseop and towards the ground, at what used to be the sandwich Hyunseop had been eating.

Hyunseop followed his gaze, and for a moment, all they did was stare at the scattered, sad remains.

“Was it good?”

Hyunseop lifted his head and looked at the boy incredulously.

“What?”

“I didn’t have lunch,” the boy mumbled, but it was said absently, almost to himself, and he went past Hyunseop to reach down for the grimy lettuce and bread.

Hyunseop snagged the kid’s arm, alarmed. “Wait a second! You can’t eat that!”

The boy gazed at the hand gripping his elbow for a second before sliding his eyes up to his face, brow furrowed low. “I was going to throw it away.”

“But...” Hyunseop faltered. “You said you were hungry.”

Now the kid was looking at him like he was an idiot.
The biggest idiot he had ever met.

Hyunseop felt heat flushing from his chest to neck and cheeks. He dropped his hold on the boy and took a step back.

There was really nothing he could say.

The kid glanced down at the sandwich again, contemplation wiping the blank expression off his face as he said, “I have food inside. A lot from our manager-hyungs.”

He glanced back at Hyunseop, a small smile curling his lips.

“Do you want some?”

Hyunseop furrowed his brow. “I... don’t think I’m allowed...”

“Ah.”

They stood in silence for the third time.

“Do you work here a lot?” the boy then asked.

“A couple... times a week...” Hyunseop replied, faint and distracted, and so very bewildered as to what kind of angle the kid was playing at.

If he was an idol, why was he standing here talking to him?

Didn’t he have performances to prepare for?

Rehearsals or make-up or costumes to put on?

“Mmm.”

And that was all the kid said.

Hyunseop couldn’t help but stare.

The boy stared back, and in any other situation, it would’ve been rude. But there was nothing malicious or ill-intentioned in the kid’s eyes.

Actually- there was nothing- really- nothing in his eyes.

Like the kid’s brain had flown off somewhere and forgotten to come back.

Hyunseop looked at the young idol, a bit freaked out. “Um... hello? Are you okay?”

It was like watching someone’s soul slam back into their body from another world.

The boy blinked once, hard, and refocused his attention so swiftly onto Hyunseop again it caught him off guard.

“What?” His voice echoed his thoughts.
The boy gazed at him expectantly, as though it was completely normal to ask a stranger decked out in a radio, baton and uniform if they were seeing anyone.

“You seem young,” he said, like he wasn’t a kid himself.

“I’m twenty-four,” Hyunseop told him.

“Oh.” The boy’s eyes lit up in surprise. “You’re older than me.” He paused for a moment- then bowed politely. “Please take care of me.”

Hyunseop gawked at the manners soaring in out of the blue.

Where had they been the whole first fifteen minutes of the conversation?

The boy pulled himself back up and smiled kindly. “I’m Lee Minho. It’s nice to meet you! But I should probably go back inside... my members will be worried. Probably.”

He bowed one more time.

“I’m really sorry about your food. If you’re hungry later, I can try and bring something out.”

And for some reason Hyunseop couldn’t even find it in him to be annoyed.

He was more tired than anything else from the whole exchange.

“No, it’s... it’s fine.” He waved the kid off. “Just... go back inside?”

The boy nodded, as though he’d been waiting for the dismissal, and smiled once more.

He turned to go, saying brightly over his shoulder, “A girlfriend’s not that important. I’m sure you’ll find someone some day.”

Hyunseop stared for the hundredth time, not sure whether to be offended for himself or his nonexistent girlfriend who apparently wasn’t very important.

But there was no time to respond, much less say anything, as the young idol headed off and hurried back to building’s back exit to prepare for his stage.

A few minutes later, Hyunseop was still standing there, uncomprehending of what had just happened.

Then he stooped to pick up his scattered sandwich- and throw it away.

Minho had been easy to recognize from that day on- mostly because Hyunseop had taken to requesting the front entrance shift for all of the following week so he could watch the groups of idols coming in for their photos and outdoor interviews- but that was besides the point.

And yeah, the kid was an idol after all.

Quiet in front the cameras, but smiley all the same, sticking close to his members as they went
through the morning greeting motions.

When Minho passed by, head swinging distractedly around, looking at nothing in particular, his gaze had fallen onto Hyunseop.

A smile had split his lips and he had bowed in light greeting.

And Hyunseop had nodded back before his mind had even caught up to what he had done.

Since that day, they had found each other’s eyes often whenever Stray Kids came for Show Champion shows.

More often than not, Minho would pop out from the building during the back lot staffs' designated lunch hours and find him for a small conversation- at least until one of his members or a hassled manager came out to drag him away.

The rest was history.

Between comebacks they never spoke or interacted or met outside the back lot of the building. But when Minho did return, there was always a comfortable rhythm that fell between the pair.

Easy to remember. Easy to follow.

And yeah, age aside, maybe Hyunseop did consider the kid something more than just some wandering idol with too much time on his hands.

“Don’t you have to get back inside?” he questioned at long last, breaking the calm stretch of quiet between them.

Minho made a wholly disinterested noise in response. “Maybe. Doesn’t hyung have to work?”

“Yeah.”

They continued to sit together.

“I watched that movie you mentioned last time.” Hyunseop told him.

“Did you like it?”

“It was depressing. I cried.”

“I told you it would.”

“No, you said it might make me a little sad.”

“Don’t you cry when you’re sad?”

“Not when I’m a ‘little’ sad!”

“But it was a good movie, wasn’t it?” Minho insisted.

Hyunseop sighed. “Yeah.”

Because it actually was.

He didn’t think he’d ever get upset over an animated movie, but there was a first time for everything.
His thoughts wandered, made a small realization, and tracked back.

“T’im free this Sunday,” he said aloud. “What are you doing?”

Minho picked his head off Hyunseop’s shoulder. “A showcase. We go on tour next month in America.”

“Ahh,” Hyunseop pondered for a moment. “Will you have time after your showcase or before? You stop promoting here after today, don’t you? We probably won’t meet for a long time.”

Minho looked at him, curious. “Did you want to get a meal?”

“It could be nice.”

“Mmmm,” Minho thought on it for a short while.

Then he shrugged.

There was really nothing wrong with it.

“If there’s no schedule, it’s okay,” he said.

Technically that Sunday would be full from morning to night with rehearsal for their showcase and the actual showcase itself, but there was always the next day his hyung was free.

They exchanged numbers with ease and then Minho was getting up to go back inside, waving goodbye to Hyunseop before slipping into the mercifully air-conditioned halls of the Show Champion building.

He bowed to the few idols he passed in the more cluttered halls filled with bustling staff and managers, mind drifting rather than staying in the present.

There wasn’t much to do for broadcasts except finish their last round of promotions that week and film a short school series with Dingo.

And there hadn’t been much time for anything else except meals and resting in between the preparation for their overseas concerts.

Minho turned down the hallway leading to his waiting room.

It was surprisingly quiet, muted chatter and laughter drifting from some of the marked rooms as he passed their closed doors.

He lowered his eyes to the tiny electric fan in his hands, frowning.

He really needed to find a bigger one someplace.

Maybe he could ask Donggyu-hyung or Jaehyun-hyung to take him to some sort of furniture or industrial store.

Maybe a warehouse would have a fan big enough they could take.

So preoccupied with his thoughts on a fan, he didn’t notice that someone had come out their waiting room until he had lifted his head.

And got startled.
“Hoseok-hyung.”

The old and familiar name slipped out with ease, surprised and loud-sounding in the silence.

The older male glanced up, equal surprise in his eyes. He lowered his phone he’d been messaging on, expression opening in recognition.

“Ah- Lee Minho!”

It was immediately awkward after.

When he left his Bangtan hyungs and stopped active participation with his old crew in concerts, shows and competitions, he had essentially lost all contact with the idol group.

Though the seven members of BTS had always gotten along and were friendly with their backup dancers, they weren’t close enough to be called friends.

Hoseok had guided them in the practice rooms and on stage for choreographies with precision and a critical eye- and even sharper criticism.

Jungkook had danced alongside him on late nights with nine others to perfect the dance for *Begin*. They drank and rested together.

Jimin had sometimes offered small advice during the long hellish day that had been the *Not Today* MV filming.

But beyond that, it was little more than a working relationship.

Truthfully, it was more common for all the backup dancers to get along and grab meals instead, or sit and gather and joke between broadcast recordings and at end-of-the-year stage rehearsals.

He wasn’t really anything to them except a dongsaeng out of fifty that performed and traveled with them for three years.

And then he had left.

Their relationship had ended.

They had both moved on in their futures and careers.

*Still he wanted it*- acknowledgement- *I’m here, I’m here, I’m here, I’m-

“It’s been a while. How have you been?”

Minho raised himself from the small bow he had unconsciously fallen into and smiled politely at the older dancer.

“I’m okay.”

There was a bit of a pause.

Minho floundered for something more to say.

It was rare he got to be alone with anyone from Bangtan backstage these days for more than a one second bow before they were all whisked away to their waiting rooms.
“Did you finish rehearsal?” was what he finally managed to ask.

Hoseok gave a firm nod, something of a smile breaking on his face. “It was good. Everyone did well. Stray Kids did well too.”

Minho blinked. “You watched us?”


“Ahh,” Minho got embarrassed though he wasn’t sure why. He rubbed the back of his neck.

And for a moment, they stood in the quiet again.

A more significant quiet.

Marked by a history.

“Well?”

And Hoseok’s voice softened.

“How have you been feeling?”

Minho stared at the floor between them.

There was a small buzzing in his ear, white noise, settling in.

“Good.”

“Yeah?”

He nodded.

Hoseok hummed, sounding thoughtful. “I remember your leader saying you produced four albums. That’s a lot of comebacks. A lot of promotions and work for a young group.”

“Ah, yes, but I didn’t produce them, hyung did.”

He looked up and tried to clarify at the curious look on Hoseok’s face.


Minho stopped blubbering abruptly, somewhat mortified at his inability to answer a question.

Hoseok blinked.

Minho once again decided his own feet were a much more interesting view.

“We have a team, 3RACHA- the members in it write and produce our songs.”

“They’re good.”

Minho looked back up at the compliment.

Hoseok regarded him warmly, if not a little fondly. But that didn't make any sense. Why-?

“Stray Kids’ does well. You center for your new song,” he noted.
Minho straightened at the words, somewhat alert.

“Ah. Yes.” He hesitated. “Hyunjinnie does too- and-"

Minho stopped himself again.

How was Hoseok supposed to know the members of his group on a personal name basis?

What was wrong with him?

He wanted to leave this conversation now.

Or at least go back to his own waiting room and crawl into a corner and maybe die.

But Hoseok only made a light noise, eyes brightening in slight recognition at the name.

If he had noticed Minho’s short-circuiting brain, he certainly didn’t mention it.

“He’s the one who’s been MCing this past week. We met him.” Something like a huff of laughter broke from the older dancer’s lips. “I think Yoongi-hyung told him to tie his shoe.”

Minho nodded slowly.

He remembered the story.

Hyunjin had been so embarrassed afterwards he had sat on the couch of their waiting room and pulled a blanket over his head.

The memory made Minho smile a bit.

But it also caught Hoseok’s attention, because he was suddenly regarding Minho very, very carefully.

Minho’s smile left instantly.

Hoseok’s mirth did too.

He spoke, caution in every word.

“I’ve been meaning to ask, now that I can see you like this alone. About back then.”

Minho stilled slowly.

The air did too.

The noise was back in his ears, louder than before.

Hoseok hadn’t forgotten.

Why?

By now it was four years ago, something that should’ve been forgotten with everything else, with the surge of fame and new dancers and new stages and growth- away from Minho- away from him- just a dancer- a backup dancer- a kid-

“Do they know?”
The question was a roaring shout in his ears.
His heart thudded.
Once.
Twice.
Again.
The noise was swelling in his head, a wishy-washy static, growing, with no end.

*Do they know?*

The accusation was clear.

He opened his mouth, staring at Hoseok, stunned.

That day under the sun- no not under the sun- the light- it had always been light up above-

Spinning, falling, down, and down and down-

His palms grew sweaty.

He tried to remember how to speak with a throat whose walls were closing in.

Hoseok’s expression changed from questioning to bewildered to concerned. He pocketed his phone and reached for Minho’s shoulders right away.

“Minho-”

“Hyung, *there* you are!”

Both Hoseok and Minho jumped, heads swinging.

And there was Jisung, smiling wide, glancing between both dancers with some form of surprise before he bowed.

Hoseok stepped away from Minho- and after a moment- nodded in return.

“Hyung, we have to get ready for the pre-recording,” Jisung said, looking at Minho.

Waiting.

Minho fell into himself, fell into his mind from where he had gotten lost in the swell of noise and memories above, and shook his head.

He looked at Hoseok.

Hoseok looked back.

The gaze they shared spoke volumes.

But Minho tilted himself forward, murmuring a small, “*Goodbye*”, joining Jisung down the hall.

He didn’t look behind him to see if Hoseok had stayed or returned to his own waiting room.
He didn’t want to know.
He didn’t care.

Why does he remember?

An arm slipped across his waist and pulled him in close as they walked.
But Jisung didn’t say anything.
And Minho didn’t either.
Words had never been needed.

That night, as Minho fooled around with Felix in the living room, earning Hyunjin’s annoyed shouts and not-so-passive-aggressive slams of his bedroom door-
Jisung sat on his bed, staring at the floor.
Across from him, Jeongin frowned.
“Hyung. Are you okay?”
“I’m fine,” Jisung replied.
But he didn’t lift his eyes.
Jeongin’s voice softened. “Did something happen?”
“No.”
And Jisung didn’t sound particularly upset or mad.
In fact, he sounded so normal it was actually off-putting.
Jeongin didn’t believe him for a second.
But he hesitated in prying for more.
If Jisung didn’t want to talk, then it wasn’t really his place to try and force something out of him.
Still... it was weird.
Jisung had been weird ever since he had returned with Minho ten minutes late into hair and make-up for their pre-recorded stage.
Quiet.
Bothered.
Smiling only when attention fell his way and as they performed on stage.
Jeongin wondered if something had happened between them.

A fight or disagreement.

As much as his two hyungs got along- honestly an uncannily perfect match- they did get into arguments, and did annoy each other sometimes to the point of not speaking.

Those days sucked for everyone.

But they usually made up fast.

Jeongin rolled off his bed, and tossing Jisung a final unsure look, wandered into the living himself to see what his hyungs were getting up to.

Minho was sitting on top of Felix with half his weight, trying to wrestle a game controller out of his hands.

Woojin was beside them, unbothered, clearing through the race on screen and dropping banana peels left and right.

“Ai- hyung- seriously, this is cheating!” Felix was yelling.

Minho only laughed, dementedly, as he ripped the controller from the younger boy’s hands and started to repeatedly drive Felix’s character off the rainbow road and into the abyss.

Jeongin watched Felix and Minho wrestling for several minutes- then turned towards the kitchen in search of food.

Well... Minho didn’t seem to be upset.

Maybe Jisung was just tired.

It was probably nothing.

He met Chan in the kitchen, mulling over several books on the table.

He looked absolutely lost in thought.

Jeongin went over, eyebrows raised and smiling. “What’s this, hyung?”

But to his surprise, Chan didn’t smile back, shutting the book he was reading so fast the table shook.

Jeongin stopped.

Chan stared.

Something like recognition fell into his leader’s eyes then and he shook himself from his stupor.

“Innie,” he said.

Jeongin’s eyes dropped to the books.

He couldn’t see much except a few alphabet letters.

...Books in English then?

Was his hyung studying something?
No- but then why would he have reacted like-

“Did you want to get something for dinner?” Chan asked suddenly, lightly.

Jeongin shook his head, still looking at the other boy baffled. “I was going to cook.”

“Ahh, that’s a good idea!”

Jeongin had never seen a faker smile.

“What were you reading?” he asked.

Chan’s smile sat on his face and didn’t move. Even as he got up, gathering his books and tucking them beneath an arm.

“Just some light stuff from home. Boring things. I didn’t mean to take over the table. Here- you can use it,” he offered.

Jeongin didn’t care about the table.

“Hyung-”

Chan made to leave the kitchen, clasping Jeongin on the shoulder cheerfully as he passed. “Eat something good!”

And he was gone.

Jeongin followed his retreating hyung out the kitchen, pausing in the doorway to watch Chan take the time to chat and tease Woojin idly over the game as Felix and Minho repeatedly uttered under their breaths for their leader to stop talking so they could concentrate.

Not that it seemed to do any good.

It sounded like they were both losing.

Jeongin’s gaze went back to Chan, watching as the older’s boy’s eyes finally drifted from Woojin, to the TV, to Minho seated on the floor, where his gaze lingered.

Then his brow crinkled, mouth dipping to a frown.

But he didn’t say anything.

By the time Minho had finally given up on the race, struck by one of Woojin's red shells, and glanced up at Chan, their leader was smiling down at him again, wiggling his brows.

Minho made an ugly face in response and kicked the other boy in the ankle with a socked foot lightly.

Chan pretended it hurt, hopping around dramatically before leaving for his room.

But he stopped when he caught sight of Jeongin staring at him from the kitchen doorway, humor faltering.

“Hyung,” Jeongin said again, quieter than before.

And Chan looked at him, expression dimming.
“It’s nothing,” he reassured.

He offered one last smile before departing down the hall to his room.

Jeongin listened as his hyung greeted Hyunjin and Seungmin inside, listened as his hyung cracked a few jokes and asked about their day, as if he hadn’t spent the majority of it with them since dawn.

Jeongin listened and wondered when it was his hyungs had begun to lie.

In the living room, Minho glanced away from the TV and towards the kitchen Jeongin slowly withdrew back into.

Then his eyes lowered to the controller in his hands.
It builds.

The music stopped.

Nine bodies hit the floor.

"We're done... right?" Jisung gasped out. "That's... the last one...?"

Chan sat up, chest heaving, wiping the sweat off his brow with the bottom of his shirt. He nodded.

Jisung collapsed back to the floor with a loud, "Thank god!"

Woojin was already up, going to shut their speaker off as the rest of the members either stayed plastered to the ground or slowly sat themselves up.

The showcase was tomorrow- their final, biggest stop in Seoul, before they kicked off the last leg of their Unveil Showcase in the Philippines and the States.

They had practiced everything, from old songs to new, tweaking choreography, hastily making small changes and running them through once, twice, a third time- again.

Earlier, they had hidden in different parts of their dorm and the studios, picking awards for each member and thinking of their ending ments for their Korean STAYS who'd be attending.

It was a busy but productive, and truthfully, fun day.

Still- they were glad it was over.

"Alright," Hyunjin said, climbing to his feet and dabbed the sweat from his cheeks with the front of his wrist. "Let's go home."

There were mutual noises of agreement as everyone moved to get on their feet, going to their bags along the wall and couch, passing water bottles in between.

Jeongin lingered by his bag, slowly zipping his water bottle back inside.

His brow was pinched, lowered in thought.

All his hyungs seemed so ready to head back home but at least they were in a good mood.

Things had been so odd the last few days.

The last month, actually, if he thought about it.
Ever since they dove into their comeback with hectic schedules, late hours and all the traveling, something had changed.

No.

Actually... one person had changed.

Jeongin's eyes rose and fell on Minho.

The older boy seemed exhausted, but unbothered, and he rummaged through his bag.

For what- Jeongin didn't know.

But what he did know was that his hyung had been acting very strange.

On camera, he had gotten bolder, brighter, less afraid.

At home, he was the same, teasing and joking and quiet and calm.

In the moments when he thought no one was looking- pensive and withdrawn.

Troubled.

With conflicted eyes.

Minho had never been so transparent.

There had been those first months when he had first joined their team and moved into their dorm, where reading him had been so hard. Where trying to understand the thoughts in his head had been something of a lost cause for all the members except Jisung.

Because Jisung had never tried to read or understand Minho.

Even from the rocky start they all had, not knowing what to make of the new kid joining months before their scheduled debut, among all of them, only Jisung had been the one to comfortably settle by Minho's side.

And Minho had accepted it, without fuss.

At the time, it had bewildered the rest of them.

Back then, Jisung had such a short temper.

Their trainee days were full of frustrations and fights over the smallest things that seemed so ridiculous now.

But Jisung had never actually, truly, gotten mad at Minho.

He would straighten, cheeks red, eyes wide, ready to burst- then take one look at the older boy across from him, Minho- bewildered, eyes narrowed, straight-faced- and just... deflate .

Minho was the same.

Even if he ignored Jisung, even if he got in Jisung's face and glared, it never lasted.

The heat never stayed.
It was almost impossible.

To this day, they had no idea why.

Their personalities were so different.

One outspoken and vibrant and loud- the other quiet and thoughtful and kind- but both of them had hearts full to the brim with warmth, with cheerfulness and love, and a passion to do what they loved with the people they loved too.

They didn't seek explanations from one another about why they did the things they did, why they said the things they said and felt the certain ways in the situations they had found themselves in.

They were just there- in one another's space- accepting, without seeking answers, without needing or trying to figure anything out about each other.

And it worked.

Somehow, that sort of easy acceptance without questions worked and was good.

But Jeongin wasn't like that.

His relationship with Minho just wasn't like that.

Minho was hard to get.

Truthfully, it had gotten better over the past year.

But there was still that wall, that one place he couldn't breach- not like Jisung- that would give him a peek into the inner workings of his hyung's mind and moods.

What were his feelings? What was his train of thought?

Why was his hyung so playful one minute, then serious the next? Was he happy? Annoyed? Both?

Did he want to be bothered? Did he want someone to come over and talk to him?

What was he trying to say without words?

Jeongin knew his hyung was shy. He knew his hyung was smart.

He knew his hyung was mischievous and caring but terrified of heights and being in front a crowd alone.

He knew he cared about the older boy and never wanted to see Minho being upset or feeling sad or frustrated because of someone else- least of all himself for his own shortcomings.

But that didn't mean Jeongin knew him.

And Jeongin didn't know what it was about Minho that had been putting their leader and Jisung and even Woojin on edge.

His eldest hyung might not have said anything directly, but Jeongin saw the way Woojin watched Minho- how every micro-expression, every wince, the dancer made was mentally noted and written down in the files of Woojin's mind.
How Woojin had, without a word, begun leaving his bedroom door open the past three nights and would call out for Minho whenever the other boy passed by, asking to play a videogame or just hang out.

Jeongin didn't know what kind of talks they had- it wasn't his place to pry- but Minho and Woojin had been roommates the longest next to Changbin and Chan.

They were confidants, two of the eldest, a comfortable duo, not warm and soft like it was with Jisung, but calm and quiet.

If Minho had spoken about any of his recent concerns to someone, it would've been Woojin or Jisung.

But Jeongin knew Minho hadn't- because neither Woojin nor Jisung seemed to know what was going on with the other boy. Otherwise they would've stopped looking at him like he was two seconds away from being swallowed by the earth.

Chan was no better.

But if no one had any answers... If no one knew what to do...

Maybe he could try.

There wasn't any harm in trying, right?

"Hey."

Hyunjin's arm fell across his shoulder, pulling Jeongin in a bit and giving him a friendly shake.

"What are you doing? We're going," he said.

"Actually..." Jeongin glanced at Hyunjin briefly, then peeked over at Minho, now zipping up his bag, granola bar in hand.

Everyone else was heading for the door.

Jeongin steeled his nerves, straightened up a bit taller and said again, "Actually, Minho-hyung..."

Minho's eyebrows raised. He looked over, curious.

Jeongin smiled, hesitant, already having second-thoughts.

Minho looked ready to go home and shower and rest.

Maybe...

No.

Come on.

"Hyung, is it okay if you help me?"

Minho blinked, obviously not expecting the question.

And neither did anyone else, judging from the way they were all now staring at Jeongin.

"Something wrong?" Minho wondered.
"Ah, no, it's just a couple things in Boxer I wanted to go over," Jeongin answered.

It wasn't really a lie.

The choreography was hard, and he had almost let Chan fall at one point because he wasn't fast enough. It would be bad if that happened for real during their showcase performance.

"Aren't you tired?" Hyunjin asked, pulling off and away from Jeongin.

"It's only a little," Jeongin responded. He glanced at Minho again.

The older boy rolled back his neck, expression somewhat annoyed as he opened his granola bar and shoved half of it in his mouth. “Aah, you ask for the same thing every time!” he complained, muffled.

But Jeongin knew that tone of voice- and smiled. “So you will?”

Minho made a face at him, but the corner of his lips quirked up nonetheless.

His gaze traveled to the door of the practice room where Woojin and Chan stood, asking silently for approval from the two older boys looking his way.

Chan studied Minho from head-to-toe, not even trying to be discreet.

He smiled as he answered, eyes dead serious.

"Not for too long."

"An hour," Minho agreed, waving off the look as he chewed.

For a moment, all Chan did was gaze at Minho.

But soon enough, he stopped, sighing and leaving the room.

Woojin followed. Then Changbin too.

And soon the rest of the members were filing out, conversations breaking into talks of dinner and trying to figure out where their managers had gotten off to this late at night in the JYP building.

Hyunjin and Jisung were the last to go.

Hyunjin patted Jeongin on the head, telling him not to overwork, as Jisung glanced between them and Minho with something of a frown.

Then he caught Minho's eye, and Minho jutted out his chin, waving the last half of his granola bar towards the younger boy.

Jeongin watched from under Hyunjin's fussing hand as Jisung made a face and rejected the food, then grabbed Minho by the waist with one hand and pulled him in- whispering something in his ear.

Minho's expression contorted.

He frowned and stepped away.

Jisung eyed him, pointedly.

Minho gave him the ugliest look he could manage.
Jisung rolled his eyes, huffed, and called for Hyunjin.

"Let's go."

Unbeknownst to Jeongin, Hyunjin had been watching the small exchange too.

But he said nothing of it, moving away and going to join Jisung at the door.

"Don't stay late," he called back at them both.

The last thing Hyunjin saw was Jeongin's nod and Minho's annoying salute- then he stepped outside the room and closed the door, Jisung at his side.

They shared a long look.

True to Minho's word- they only rehearsed an hour longer.

Jeongin was able to fix the points he'd been concerned about, and was able to get personal advice from Minho on how to make several of their jumping transitions easier into their dance breaks.

And his hyung was focused, watching with a critical eye and expression that would've been scary in any other situation, had Jeongin not known Minho was specifically looking for awkward movements that stood out.

They wound up on the floor again at the end of the impromptu session, several feet apart.

Jeongin was on his back, trying to remember how to breathe.

Minho was on his stomach, face to the floor, for some reason playing dead.

At least it gave Jeongin time to think.

How should he approach the situation?

Being direct would... not be good, probably.

Was there even a subtle way to ask, 'What's wrong with you?' and not come across as rude?

He frowned.

But there wasn't much time to linger on the thought, because Minho was rolling over, poking him in the stomach with a socked foot.

"What?"

They had both taken off their shoes a few minutes ago so they could properly stretch out their toes. Minho had been really adamant about that.

Jeongin pushed his hyung's foot away. "Nothing."

Minho nudged him again, this time digging his big toe into Jeongin's belly button. “What is it? Something's bothering you. Tell me.”
Jeongin giggled and grabbed Minho’s foot. “Nothing- hyung- knock it off.”

"Knock it off," Minho mimicked, but he pulled his stabby toes away. "Is it the showcase?"

"No..."

"Your dancing? It's good. You shouldn't worry."

"No, that's not what I'm worried about."

Minho sat up a bit, leaning on his elbows to look at Jeongin, eyes curious and sincere.

"What's worrying you? Do you want to tell me?"

He did.

Jeongin really, truly did.

Maybe the rest of their members could dance around on eggshells, maybe they were okay with taking things at their measured, slow pace.

But Jeongin didn't want to. He wanted that sense of normality to return between their team. Now rather than later.

But his mouth refused to speak.

"Innie?" Minho was frowning.

Jeongin brought his gaze down from where it had wandered to the ceiling, looking at the other boy's face. Minho's eyes were so earnest.

So confused.

So concerned.

Why couldn't Minho be concerned like that for himself?

"No... it's... nothing, hyung," Jeongin said at long last, breaking the stillness that had fallen over them. "There's just a lot to do. I guess I've been thinking about it."

"Oh."

And Minho sat up carefully, regarding Jeongin with a look the younger boy really couldn't figure out.

Did his hyung know he was lying?

He hoped not.

He had seen Minho get mad exactly once over a lie another member had told, and that was only when it had involved Jisung and Hyunjin and a fight that had made them all upset and had had them all on the verge of tears.

But if Minho knew Jeongin wasn't quite telling the truth, he never said it directly, peering intently in his direction instead, as though he could pick apart what was bothering him with sheer mental force.

"We'll be done soon," Minho told him. "After all the tours we get to rest."
"I guess."

"Have you told Channie-hyung how you feel?"

"Ah- it's not that serious..." About me, anyway, Jeongin silently dismissed. "I'll... sleep it off."

"If it's bad enough, you'll tell one of us?" Minho said, like a question, even though his voice left no room for any argument.

Jeongin nodded. Was it possible to tell the other boy to take his own advice?

Sometimes he really regretted being the youngest.

His hyungs took care of him so well, but on the rare occasions he tried to extend the same help in similar situations, sometimes it came across as overstepping his boundaries- and talking about things he didn’t understand.

Like now.

But maybe...

"I'll be okay, hyung," he assured Minho. He took in a small breath. "Are you okay? With... everything?"

Minho blinked- then blinked again- and looked at Jeongin with big eyes. "Everything?"

"All the work."

"Ah. That's-" Minho blinked for a third time. "I'm okay."

Jeongin couldn't help the small noise that escaped in response. "Ah..."

"What is it?"

Jeongin shook his head.

Minho gazed at him, just for a second, then leaned forward and invaded his space, frowning, squishing his cheeks between two calloused hands. The ring on his thumb pressed into Jeongin's skin, hard and oddly warm.

"Aigoo, keeping secrets from your hyung? You really won't say?"

Jeongin struggled in the playful hold, kicking out with his legs.

Minho giggled and easily let go, surging in to wrap an arm around Jeongin's neck instead and wrestle him to the ground.

For several minutes they fooled around until Minho stopped letting Jeongin win, overpowering the younger boy without much effort.

They lied there, panting, both their eyes on the ceiling.

"Let's stay like this," Jeongin said, all of a sudden, in a tiny, breathless voice.

Minho, tilted his head, just a bit, to look at his youngest member, humored and confused. "Like this?"
He was holding Jeongin in a pretzel grip, legs locked around his waist and arms around his neck, loose enough so that it wouldn't hurt, but hard enough there was no room for escape.

They were bound to get cramps.

Jeongin rolled his head back to rest on Minho's neck, smiling, eyes glimmering with small amusement that didn't quite fill his voice.

"No. I mean... together."

Minho stared.

Jeongin looked back down. Wiggled his toes.

His hyung stayed speechless and unmoving for several, slow passing minutes.

Then his hold carefully unraveled from Jeongin.

Jeongin rolled away and got to his knees, peeking over at Minho with curiosity.

The older boy's face was uncannily blank.

Jeongin frowned.

"Hyung?"

Minho jerked a little and looked away from the floor and at him. He offered half a smile.

"Channie-hyung will be mad. We said we'd be back a while ago."

Jeongin deflated. Not because of Minho's words but because the older boy had once again raised the wall between them.

Minho mistook the slump of his shoulders for fear of being scolded.

"Ahh, don't worry, Innie," he grinned, waggling his brows. "I'll tell hyung I got distracted and made us work on something else."

Jeongin hesitantly smiled back.

He wished Minho would tell him the truth instead.

But aloud, he said nothing.

Aloud, he said, "Okay."

Their showcase went great.

Jeongin couldn't remember having so much fun in a long time. Not since their first week of promotions.

Their first anniversary showcase had been full of nerves and excitement, the overwhelming need to
do well and show how much they'd grown in the new comeback.

But this showcase was with a stadium full of STAYS, playing games with one another, revealing their awards, sharing stories, telling jokes, being themselves and showing off new choreography to loud cheers and supporting chants under flashing lights.

The thrill was different.

It was amazing- how different- in just one month how much they had changed.

And now it was coming to an end.

Their encore song played as they bowed and waved, *Grow Up*, a familiar, melancholic and comforting song in his ears.

His heart was warm.

Full.

So happy to be a part of this. A part of Stray Kids- with his members and their fans.

He couldn't wipe the smile off his face.

Around him, the rest of his hyungs sang their parts, fooling around, interacting with their fans.

Jeongin watched them with a smile that grew bigger. Until he turned full circle and saw Minho.

There, under the blowing confetti, in the glowing ray of a spotlight overhead stood his oldest dancer hyung.

Still, and unmoving, head tilted, gazing up, far, far up away with distant eyes.

"Hyung...?"

But Jeongin's voice was too soft and the song and laughter and excited cheers of their fans around them were too loud.

Minho looked so very different, and all of a sudden, out of reach. Like his mind was a million miles away.

Like he was going to cry.

Then his eyes fluttered and he tore his gaze from the lights, bringing them down to their STAYS and the stage.

He smiled, wide, and genuine and began to dance idly to the music and wave.

If Minho had been paying any attention, maybe he would've seen the look far behind Jeongin, on the other end of the stage.

The look Chan had been giving him.

But he didn't.

And Jeongin didn't notice either.

And none of the three of them saw Changbin either- tearing his eyes away.
Two days later, practice wasn’t the same.

Minho kept missing his steps, fumbling, looking down, looking up, eyes drifting from his face in the mirror to the floor.

Woojin watched with a furrowed brow.

Everyone did.

They cycled through their set-list for their overseas concert.

*Hellevator, Awkward Silence, Get Cool* - all the way to their recent comeback album.

It was building.

Woojin saw it from his view in the mirror.

The other boy danced with frustration on his face that broke into a yell when his center break in MIROH came. He jumped too high, dragged his feet too slow and threw himself forward with far too much force on his punch.

He hit the floor and rolled.

Everything stopped.

The members spun to complete stops.

Their managers along the back wall sat up, alarmed, from where they’d been slouched on their phones.

Minho lied on the floor, curled on his side, face tucked in his arms-

And didn’t move.

Around them, from the speakers, MIROH blasted, too loud, too cheery, too bright.

They were frozen.

Then they weren’t moving like a button had just been pushed on Play.

Jaehyun went and shut off the speaker as Donggyu hurried over.

Woojin was already at Minho’s side, holding his arm out and telling Jisung to move back, give them space-

"*I'm telling you all to sit down.*"

The younger members backed away.

Chan and Donggyu crouched around and behind, effectively hiding Minho from their view. They could hear Jaehyun behind them suggesting to the rest of the members for them to take a break and grab some water.
"Minho." Woojin's voice was soft.

There was no response.

But he could see through the small sliver of Minho's raised arms, his shadowed face, and see the dancer's open, flickering eyes.

"Did you hurt yourself?" he asked, quietly.

The tiniest shake of Minho's head.

Woojin dropped a hand on the boy's head and ran his fingers through his hair.

"Do you need some air?"

A pause.

Then Minho shook his head again. He lowered his arms, revealing flushed cheeks and burning ears and a horribly lopsided smile on his embarrassed face.

"I fell," he said.

"Yeah." Woojin stared down at him before glancing up at Chan.

Chan who was looking at Minho with an incredibly hard expression, pressed lips and burning eyes. Minho seemed perfectly content to ignore him, moving carefully to sit up instead.

What was with that?

Woojin frowned, shifting to give Minho space. He dropped his hand from the other boy's hair as Donggyu helped Minho straighten himself out.

Their manager searched Minho's face briefly, but Minho said nothing, blinking owlishly, playing with his own messy hair as though he had only been lying on the floor relaxing and now it was time to get up.

"It doesn't hurt?" Donggyu questioned, just to double-check.

"No."

Donggyu checked on his ankles anyway for any signs of swelling or twists.

Woojin frowned even more. If Chan wasn't going to say anything, then he would.

"Minho, what was that?"

"I slipped."

"Before that."

"I missed my step."

"I know."

And Minho stopped fussing with his hair to give Woojin a ridiculously casual look. "Then that's what happened."
Woojin couldn't believe it.

He looked at Chan again. Looked over his shoulder to the six other members of their team trying and failing to pretend like they weren't looking and listening in.

But Minho was standing up, stretching his arms above his head and cracking his neck like nothing had happened.

"Should we keep practicing?"

Woojin opened his mouth to push the argument for answers at the same time their manager did, but Chan was even quicker, shutting them down with a look and small gesture before he got to his feet as well.

He didn't even look at Minho, waving at the others, pointing briefly to the speaker and Jaehyun.

"Fine. Turn it on."

He was pissed.

Anyone with ears could hear.

Anyone with eyes could see.

Minho tracked their leader with a gaze unreadable and troubled and upset before his brow furrowed and he turned away, back towards the mirror.

Woojin stared.

Chan didn't meet his questioning look as the other members uncomfortably fell into their positions and Jaehyun started MIROH over again.

Their leader stared at his own face in the mirror, instead, void of any emotion.

Minho stared at the floor.

The track began.

And absolutely nothing more was said.

It wasn't brought up three hours later after they finished.

Three hours later after they shut off the lights, grabbed their bags and left the JYP building.

Three hours later after they returned to their dorm, questioning quietly what they should eat for dinner.

And Minho, dropping back to the end of the group as they filed up their dorm stairs and down the hall, shuffling beside Chan, got little more than a blank stare and low voice saying-

"Minho, please not now."
Startled, Minho stopped walking.

Chan kept moving ahead.

Woojin, waiting at the door for everyone to come inside, glanced at his same-aged friend, then back outside and towards the still-struck dancer.

"Minho-ah," he called softly. "Come in."

The younger boy dragged his eyes over his way, slowly, expression spooked.

Woojin wanted to do something.

Say something.

But he didn't know what he could do.

Minho laid on his bed.

He laid on his bed and stared up at the bars of Chan's bunk as though it would give him some sort of answer or comfort.

It didn’t.

It didn’t stop the noise in his head.

The replay in his head.

The moment when he went down and the floor rose up and he dropped his arms to ten other faces and his own in the mirror instead.

Reckless.

He’d gotten too unfocused.

Too lost in his own head.

Too focused on his own body’s rhythm, off-beat, that not-quite-right feeling, slowing, quickening his muscles and reaction-times, throwing his balance off-kilter.

It usually wasn’t like this.

It hadn’t been like this.

Why now?

Why now?

Their promotions had always been full of high energy and long days.

He had managed fine before.
Aside from the one time during My Pace when he’d gotten injured before their special stage- he had never had any incidents in front of the others.

Bouts of clumsiness and absentmindedness were a given- all the members had seen and accepted it with laughs and exasperation, writing it off as a personality trait.

But rolling an ankle, dropping tools, getting lost, nearly breaking his own fingers, falling to the floor- They’d notice-

“Do they know?”

Eventually, they’d notice.

What then?

I don’t want to know.

Chan’s face, furious and despondent, annoyed by him, because of him-

His face contorted, then broke and fell, then smoothed out as Hyunjin entered the room.

“Hyung, there’s food, do you want some?”

His questioning voice was deceptively light.

Minho continued to stare at the bars of Chan’s upper bunk, tone dropping into something vaguely uninterested.

“Depends. Who cooked?”

“We ordered in.”

“I thought we weren’t going to with the food in the fridge.”

“I guess we changed our mind.”

Minho was quiet for a time. He could feel Hyunjin’s eyes on him.

Watching.

Waiting.

Searching.

He wouldn’t find anything.

Minho finally spoke again. “No, it’s fine. I’m not hungry- I’ll eat later.”

“There might not be anything left,” Hyunjin tried to goad.

“Then just eat it,” Minho replied, carelessly, like it didn’t matter at all.

He didn’t care about food.

He didn’t care.
He wanted to know why Chan had looked and sounded like-

*He hates me.*

The thought made something in his chest squeeze tightly. Near breathless.

No, it couldn't be.
Chan wouldn't hate him.
Chan didn't even know.
He couldn't know.

Oblivious to his thoughts, Hyunjin spoke up, a frustrated mutter as he turned to leave the room at Minho's attitude.

“Suit yourself.”

Minho's thoughts spun slowly to an end.

No.

It wasn't that.

Whatever was bothering Chan... must've been something else.

Minho and his mistake in practice must've just made it worse.

He blinked up at his bed’s ceiling slowly.

Hyunjin was probably annoyed.

Oh well. That was fine.

He wouldn't be tomorrow.

Hopefully.

But even as Minho thought that- even as he reassured himself that his leader was angry at something else- someone else- even as he listened to the rest of his members begin to eat and talk and break into laughter that he had taken away with his carelessness in practice mere hours before- his mind wouldn’t settle.

His fingers, cracking against his sides as he pressed them against his waist, wouldn’t stop their fretting.

He rolled out of bed.

Changed.

Grabbed a cap and mask and pulled them on, and snagged his backpack from practice with his water bottle still left inside.

He went unnoticed as he slipped from the hallway to the front door.

At least he thought he did.
He didn’t really glance up or over with the hope that he wouldn’t draw attention to himself.

He had just started to relax and put on his second shoe when the question came.

"Where are you going?"

Minho jumped and looked behind him.

Walking out and over from the kitchen was Changbin, a bowl of rice in one hand, dressed simple in black sweats and a tee.

His expression was serious but he wasn’t frowning.

Still...

Minho fought to keep the annoyance from his voice.

"The gym," he answered.

And as expected, Changbin stared. "What- after you wiped out on the floor?"

Minho made a petulant face. "I didn't wipe out."

"Well you didn’t not fall on your face," Changbin retorted.

"I tripped."

"You lost control."

Minho rolled his eyes.

He finished tying his second sneaker and grabbed his small bag from the floor beside him as he stood. "Goodbye."

"Wait."

Minho stopped, one hand on the door, wishing, wishing Changbin wasn’t there so he could go.

The longer they talked, the easier the chance someone else would come out and ask questions, repeating the cycle until he had no choice but to speak to them all.

"I'm coming too."

Minho whipped his head around so fast his neck cracked. "What?"

Changbin gazed at him, unfazed. "I should workout too. I didn't today. Let's walk together."

"You were just eating."

"And now I'm done."

Technically, Minho couldn't stop someone else from going to the gym if they wanted to work out. But he didn't want company. Much less from Changbin.

Why did he have to wait?

Couldn't they go separately and pretend for one night they didn't know each other?
His disgruntlement must've shown clear on his face because Changbin snorted and said, "I'll only take a minute. Hold on."

And before Minho could give any sort of answer, Changbin was gone, returning his bowl to the kitchen and saying something unintelligible to the others before vanishing down the hall and into his room.

Minho stayed by the door, wondering if he should just leave anyway.

If they were both going to the gym, they'd run into one another eventually anyway. There was no need to walk together.

Unless Changbin had other reasons for deciding to tag along. Reasons that involved talking—about himself, about the earlier incident.

He didn't want to.

Couldn't they give him space to breathe?

"Hey."

Changbin was back, dressed the exact same but with a bag. He shouldered it, then nodded at the door.

"We going?"

Minho tried not to glower. "Unfortunately," he uttered.

They pulled their face masks up and left.

But no matter how wary Minho was the entire walk out the apartment and onto the streets, Changbin actually didn't talk.

He kept silent, unfazed and with an expression that said he wasn't thinking about anything particularly hard. He didn't even say anything after Minho stared at him for two minutes without looking away.

And Changbin hated being stared at.

Minho couldn't take it.

"Do you have to come with me?" he blurted.

"No," and Changbin didn’t even look at him, staring ahead as they walked. The sky was darkening slowly above their heads, cloudy, navy and orange with the coming of dusk. “I could always go back. Invite Chan-hyung too.”

Minho's heart thudded in his chest at the thought. “No.”

“Then accept that I’m coming with you or I’ll call.”

"Ya- you can’t- you can’t threaten me Seo Changbin.”

"Sure I can. I just did.” He glanced at Minho from the side of his eye. “What are you going to do?”

Minho sputtered.
Honestly, there was nothing he’d do and Changbin knew it.

Minho was all bark and threatening glares and raised fists with absolutely no bite.

"I told them where we were going. Since you forgot. Again."

Minho stayed quiet. He hadn't forgotten this time. He just didn't want them to know.

He would've been back within an hour anyway.

"So what are you going to do? Arms? Legs?" Changbin asked conversationally.

"Can we not talk?" Minho answered, bad mood sinking in fast.

Changbin scoffed. "You're really something."

But he didn't say anything more, and they made the rest of the walk in a silence not sure whether to be uncomfortable or tense.

It wound up being both.

Once at the gym, swiping their ID cards to get inside, Minho took off for the lockers to throw his bag inside and didn't look back.

He grabbed a small neck towel, his water bottle and made a point to shove in his airpods and turn the music up loud on his phone.

What to do?

His body felt anxious, pent up, confused.

Weights were out of the question. Any sort of weighted workout was.

He was annoyed, but not annoyed enough to disregard basic health safety. Dropping to the floor in practice meant no putting extra strain on his muscles.

Running was best.

He maneuvered through the decent-sized gym and claimed a treadmill between an elderly man and young woman.

Chan, Hyunjin, Changbin, himself, his mistake, the faces of his team-

Everything else could go away.

------------------------------------------------------------------

It must've been more than an hour later when Minho came back to himself.

The elderly man and woman were gone.

He was by himself on the row of treadmills, and his reflection in the widespread windows in front of him along the wall was completely drenched in sweat.
Minho slowed his pace carefully, little by little, finally registering the burning in his calves and lungs. He didn't usually sprint so hard on longer runs.

How far had he vanished into his mind this time?

He grabbed his small towel from where he'd slung it over treadmill monitor, wiping his face and running it through his hair as he walked a cooldown.

He felt better.

*Good.*

Like his head had cleared of all cluttered noise and negativity forcing his mood to the sunken pits of isolation and self-derision.

Minho sighed.

His stomach growled.

He slowed to a complete stop and checked his record on the machine, noting it mentally for the next time he came.

He really had run harder than before.

His miles covered were nearly double with a time much shorter than usual.

It made him a bit proud.

Maybe he could try and achieve numbers like this again the next time he came.

Minho slung his towel around his neck and glanced around the gym in search of Changbin. The gym itself wasn't very full, and those who were inside were minding their own business. Only the sounds of clinking weights, whirring machines, sneakers squeaking as they worked and uneven breathing could be heard.

But Changbin was nowhere to be found.

Even as Minho made his way back to the lockers and went into the bathroom to throw water on his face, he couldn't find the other boy.

He frowned, wiping his face, and tried not to panic.

Changbin had probably just gone home.

It wasn't like he was *forced* to stay while Minho worked out.

Hadn't Minho been ignoring him anyway?

Why would anyone stick around with someone else who clearly didn't want them there?

Still. It kind of hurt.

Minho cleared his throat and blinked his eyes rapidly to unstick his clumped lashes.

Out by the lockers, pulling his bag on, he checked his phone. No messages from Changbin, but there were several private ones from his other members.
He scrolled through them, feeling a little confused.

Shouldn’t they be mad at him?

Wary… or… or something after what happened earlier?

Bokkie: Saved food for you, hyung~ It has your name! Come back soon, yeah?

Woojinna-hyung: Did you take my socks?

Donkey: hey i found a new drama hurry up i wanna show you ep one

Woojinna-hyung: No, seriously. Did you? I told you not to take them anymore.

Donkey: hyuuuuuuuuunnnnnngggggggg.

Donkey: LEE MINHO

Donkey: answer me im bored

Donkey: also if woojin-hyung starts asking about his socks dont say anything, im using them for something

Seungman: You aren’t back yet, hyung? We have a performance tomorrow.

Seungman: Also, Woojin-hyung came in a while back and started going through your drawers. What did you do?

Minho furrowed his brow at the situation that seemed to be unfolding at the dorm, pushing back his bewilderment at how normal they were all being- and messaged back swiftly.

To Bokkie: thanks~! I'll eat it well. Make sure you ate enough too!

To Woojinna-hyung: Hyung, I didn't take your socks. Get out of my room.

To Donkey: what's the drama?

To Donkey: ok. but why'd you take his socks?

To Seungman: Stop fussing~ I'll be back soon.

He pocketed his phone, not waiting for the responses, and left the gym.

He had no idea where Changbin was, but his stomach was growling too badly to ignore.

Even if Felix had nicely put aside food for him back at the dorm, Minho's brain overrode all logical thought and politely told him to get something now.

Outside, there was a brisk wind, the sky dark and nearly black with the gathering clouds.

He slid his mask back around his ears and pulled it up, tousling his hair in an attempt to air out the sweat.

Was it going to rain?

He ducked into the only convenience store between the gym and their dorm, glancing around at the few people inside before heading to the front to buy several steamed buns stuffed with pork.
It was only while checking out and debating over whether to eat at home or sit in, that he saw Changbin at one of the small plastic tables by the window, drinking some sort of healthy, green monstrosity with half a finished sandwich in front him.

"Ya!"

The exclamation came out before he could stop it.

Minho glanced around at the stares he received and apologetically half-bowed before hurrying over to where the other boy sat.

Changbin looked completely unsurprised, sipping at his bottled drink. "Oh. You finished?" he asked.

"What are you doing here?"

"Eating. Waiting for you."

"You didn't say anything."

"Well now you know how it feels, right? Also you were sprinting kind of like you were possessed. I wasn't going to interrupt."

Minho stared.

Changbin kicked the plastic chair across from him lightly with a foot. "Are you going to sit, hyung?"

Minho did, still staring, still glaring, still baffled at the audacity of the younger boy. Now he didn't even want to eat.

"I don't just disappear," he said.

"Are you joking? You vanished three times this last week alone. Forget about the time you went to the park and got attacked by that bird."

"We said we wouldn't talk about that."

"Then stop trying to feed wild animals with claws."

"They have talons, not claws."

"Same thing."

"It's not. Donggyu-hyung already lectured me about that. Why are you bringing it up now?" Minho scowled.

"Because you don't take care of yourself," Changbin said bluntly. "Not like you're supposed to anyway."

Minho did a double-take at the words.

The words so similar to the ones he had heard from his dancer hyung long ago.

His eyebrows lowered in bewilderment, the steamed buns bagged in his hands crinkling and getting smushed ever so slightly.

"What are you talking about?" he asked.
Changbin took another swig of his drink. Shrugged- then rolled his shoulders out. "Today- what was that? You freaked out."

"I didn't freak out."

"I guess you were yelling at nothing then," Changbin retorted sarcastically. He frowned. "What happened?"

"Nothing."

"Don't say it was nothing."

"Why are you telling me what to do?"

"I'm asking a question."

"There's nothing," Minho said again, coldly, shortly, features shut down completely. "You should drop it."

Changbin leaned forward, pointing his finger that wasn't wrapped around the bottle's lid. "Ya. Ahjussi. We're a team. If something's wrong with you, it's wrong with all of us."

Minho huffed. "Not really."

They stared at one another, unrelenting.

Then Changbin sat back and glared at him from across the table, setting his drink down. He looked frustrated and resigned. "Do you really not care?"

"If there was something to care about, I would say so."

"No you wouldn't."

"What do you want from me?"

"Some honesty."

Changbin's face was dead serious.

"Even if you're not sick, if there's something going on in your head that's making you like this, you have to tell us. Didn't we agree? Didn't we say as a team we wouldn't hide anything? We wouldn't fight battles alone?"

They had.

They had all promised.

With their rings and necklaces worn together everyday- a constant reminder that they were something more than just a group of nine brought together for an entertainment purpose.

They were in it, always, as a unit of nine.

A family of nine.

They would overcome all trials together and come out of them stronger for it.

Better.
Older and more mature.
But not every problem was one that could be solved with words.
And not every problem belonged to them all.
Some things were just personal.
Some things just weren't worth sharing.
Some things just couldn't be changed.
There was no point in making a fuss.
For now, all he could do was keep going with everything he had, grinning, laughing, smiling with every emotion pouring out.
Until there was nothing left.
"Even the peaceful ones should be enjoyed. We don't get a lot of them, but I think they'll be the moments you remember most."
And Namjoon had stood, clapping him on the shoulder awkwardly with a half-grin.
"We should go back."
Minho had nodded. Gotten to his feet. Looked at the older boy in front of him feeling like for the first time in a long time he had remembered what it was like to-
Breathe.
Minho took in another breath, leaning forward on the table, thumb rubbing circles over his throbbing right eyebrow.
"If it was something I needed to tell you, I would tell you, Changbin-ah..." his voice was far quieter than before, lacking any heat.
He was tired.
His body felt slow.
Sluggish and drowsy and warm, slipping slowly.
It had to have been the gym.
Exhaustion from the gym.
Just that.
Only that.
He forced himself to stop the soft descent.
It's not that.
"Should we go back?"
And it was Changbin asking, voice low and calm.

No longer mad.

Minho pulled his thumb away from his brow and straightened up.

He looked at Changbin and Changbin looked back, but there wasn't anything negative in between.

So Minho pushed back in his chair and stood, and Changbin, seeming to get the silent answer, got to his feet as well, tossing the remains of his sandwich and his drink away.

He left the store first and Minho followed, holding his bag of steamed buns close to his chest.

For a long while it was quiet between them, but not like the first quiet that had accompanied them when they had first left the dorm.

This one settled deeper.

Minho tried not to worry what that meant.

"Hyung."

He glanced over.

Changbin looked at the ground as he walked, bottom lip pulling through his teeth as it often did when he was either annoyed or thinking hard.

Minho hated that he was the one to put it there.

Hated that he had made things like this between them.

He shuffled a little closer to the other boy, trying not to make it obvious. "What is it?"

Changbin raised his head and shifted his gaze from the sidewalk to Minho's face. "If it's like this, then I won't bother you." He paused. "But whatever it is... we're here. You know that, don't you?"

Minho gazed back at Changbin, not even able to find it in him to get upset again.

He just wished he could understand.

Why- why - did every little mistake he had made suddenly matter to his team?

They all had their difficult times - the days they wanted to be left alone - the hours they needed to take for themselves with their worries for them alone to think through and solve. It had never been a problem before - so why now?

Because of their schedule? Their promotions?

Because they had so much to do?

Minho could handle it. It wasn't so hard.

It wasn't such a big deal.

It wasn't.

He would get better - like he always did - just stumble and fall and get back up, be okay.
"Minho, please."

"I'm sorry mom..."

*Her arms wrapped around his head, pulling him in close and he breathed it in, her warmth, her tears, her fear-*

He was fine.

But aloud to Changbin, he only said, "I know."

Above them, the sky began to break and cry.

Changbin gazed at him.

He stopped walking- silent.

Minho stopped walking too.

Then Changbin reached out and put one hand on the back of Minho's head, forcing him close and putting his face down, on the shoulder of his tee and into darkness.

For a moment, all Minho did was stand there, staring into the black of Changbin's shirt, stunned.

It smelled like fabric softener and cologne.

Did he even work out?

"What are you doing?" he finally asked, voice muffled.

"Nothing."

And there was something in Changbin's voice. Something Minho couldn't really place.

"Shut up and let me hug you."

"Get off me," Minho mumbled.

But he didn't try to move- and neither did Changbin.

It occurred to Minho it might look kind of weird, the two of them standing in the middle of the sidewalk, not moving, just partially hugging like they were in the middle of a life crisis only they could understand.

But Minho also kind of didn't care.

"Our Lee Lee Know did so well this comeback. Everyone says 'well done'," Changbin teased all of a sudden in a disgustingly cute voice.

Minho slightly lifted his head off the other boy's shoulder and tilted his chin to glare at a mole underneath Changbin's neck.

"Do you want to die?"

Changbin snickered and dropped his hand, putting space between them.

He looked Minho up and down, from his half-hearted, dark-eyed glare, to his calloused fingers
gripping his bag of buns tight- then to the older boy's feet, heels touching but toes pointing out.

It was a habit he noticed a long time ago, especially with all the hours they spent filming and standing around together.

Minho stood like a ballet dancer.

It wasn't anything close to an amazing revelation, or even anything important. It did, however, really make Changbin wonder.

He knew Minho danced since he was a kid, but he had never heard of his hyung doing anything besides hip-hop with his old crew.

Just like they had all known he had cats he adored- well some of them had known- but none of them realized how he had come to adopt them until he told Seungmin through a video almost two years after knowing him.

And there was the matter at hand. The simple fact that even now there was so much they didn't know. About Minho. About each other.

Even though a majority of them had been together during their high school years as trainees, pre-debut, there was still years of history, experiences and secrets they all had way before joining the company.

Secrets they kept to their own.

Changbin knew, logically, realistically, there were going to be personal memories they would never ever want to share with one another, no matter how close they were as teammates or friends.

But it was also somewhat frustrating.

Because somewhere along the way, the nine of them had wound themselves like a thrice tied knot. Unable to tighten without pulling the rest taunt.

Unable to loosen without unraveling the whole.

Their knot hadn't loosened, but it had begun to fray. The thread that bound Minho to them was pulling away.

It would break if left on its own.

Changbin wasn't the only one who saw it.

But if their fingers couldn't reach the fraying thread, couldn't grab and pull it in- how were they supposed to bind the wear?

They couldn't.

Not without Minho’s help.

Not unless he offered that loose string towards them first.

"I'm going to leave you behind," Minho's voice abruptly called- and Changbin raised his head from the sidewalk.
So lost in his own thoughts he hadn't noticed that his hyung had walked ahead, putting a good amount of distance between them.

Minho swung his bag of steamed buns a bit impatiently, brow furrowed, but a good-natured smirk tugging at his lips.

"What are you doing? Come on!"

"I'm coming!" Changbin answered in an irritated tone despite not being mad.

Minho grinned. "Slow-poke."

"Shut up."

"Ya- how can you tell your hyung to shut up?"

But Minho didn't do anything else but punch him in the shoulder as Changbin caught up and joined him at his side.

They fussed with one another, grabbing fingers, twisting them, jabbing each other in the side as they walked-

And Changbin finally snatched his fingers from Minho's vice-grip to sling an arm around the older boy's neck.

"Let's just walk," he complained lightly.

"Says you. You're the one who started it," Minho snorted through half a laugh.

But he settled down, regardless, expression calming into a tiny smile as they headed the remainder of the path towards home.

Changbin chuckled, and after another minute, let go, stepping back.

The soft rain above them suddenly turned harder.

They picked up the pace, walking turning to jogging, saying nothing more.

This time, the silence between them was fine.

Welcoming and easy and free of outer worries.

If only it was that simple.

If only Changbin could just accept it as it was.

But he couldn't.

Because he knew now- at least with one thing about Minho- Chan had been right.

Chapter End Notes
I mean I really have nothing to say at this point except lololololololololololololololololololol Fighting!

Thank you to my beta, who is really, really great. I adore you and your awesome work!

Have a great day guys <3

I hope you're all eating and sleeping and taking care of yourselves.

<^-^>
There were worse ways to spend a Friday afternoon.

Jaehyun leaned on the rail of the bridge overlooking the clear river below. Crystalline, gurgling, sparkling lightly in the wake of the shining sun.

Above, the sky was vast and blue and sparsely filled with wispy, drifting clouds.

It was perfect weather for Seoul.

Perfect weather for the ending of a spring slipping into summer.

Jaehyun hummed to himself a bit, eyes half-lidded in idle thoughts.

The job of a manager had its difficult and its easy days.

Two days ago had been difficult.

Today, had been easy.

Truthfully, it was far too random, the switching cycle of the good and bad moments in the job, so he had never actually tried to be prepared.

Not like Donggyu, who always seemed to mentally prep himself for any challenges that they’d encounter before arriving to the boys’ dorm.

What was the point?

People weren’t so easy to predict.

Least of all the nine boys he helped look after.
Least of all Lee Minho.

Jaehyun's eyes fell to the riverbank, a wide arc of sandy and gray-colored pebbles and uneven rocks where several parents and their children and even a couple of dogs played.

Minho was there too, pants rolled to his knees, sleeves to his elbows, feet bare and toes wiggling as he crouched along the bank's edge.

He was smiling, giggling at something as he pointed at the water, a young pair of children at his side curiously peering in to see.

Then the children leaned over further.

Minho stuck his hand in the river, and splashed them in the face.

They shrieked- he laughed- they scurried away- and Minho playfully gave chase with a yell and dinosaur-like run.

The children's parents, further off the bank in the grass with sunglasses and hats on as they sat on a blanket, only chuckled to themselves.

What a bizarrely domestic scene.

If Jaehyun was any other stranger, he would've thought Minho belonged to the family.

Just a big brother teasing his little siblings, having fun along the bank beneath good weather and the warm sun.

It was like the day before yesterday had never happened in that dance room during practice.

Like he had never collapsed- like he had never screamed- like he had never been an idol who performed on a stage, who traveled abroad, who went through a survival show, got eliminated, and still debuted.

And maybe this is what it would have looked like had he never joined Stray Kids.

Had he stayed in Gimpo with his mom and dad and his cats, visiting his grandparents every weekend to clean the house, helping with the yard, listening to his aunt coddle him as she pinched his cheeks, gossiping about the other ladies at her job and bragging to her sister about Minho's excellence as a filial son as if her sister wasn't Minho's own mom in the first place.

He'd probably work at a shelter in his spare time if he could.

Or sit by the river and stare into the water, minding his own business, peaceful and quiet and alone.

When Minho had shared that wish, once, behind the filming of 'A Song 4 You', the other members had laughed, bewildered, and poked fun at him.

They didn't understand the logic behind the other boy's desire to spend the rest of his life fishing- it he had the chance.

But Jaehyun understood.

Behind those words, was just a person, just a kid, who wanted to live simple.

Away from the rest of the world and its problems and its contradicting people and expectations of
who they should be and how they should, where they should work-

A life dictated by accomplishments and fame, weighed down by societal pressures in a never-ending climb to the top of a ladder where things often got worse, and not better, in the playing field of wealth and power.

These were things Minho didn’t want.

That place, high in the clouds, was where he didn’t want to be.

Not alone.

Not if it meant losing who and what he wanted to be.

Because Minho didn’t live by the expectations of anyone else, though he followed rules well. He stayed true to himself, even if that meant choosing to not be understood.

Jaehyun honestly didn’t know why Minho had gone down the idol-route.

With that kind of mindset, it seemed strange Minho would willingly throw himself onto the long road of ambition, wrought with obstacles and doubts and the relentless pressure to be more- do more.

It didn’t make sense.

What was he looking for?

What was he trying to accomplish?

It was a stark and jarring contrast from Chan.

Chan- who made his goals and desires very clear for anyone who took one look at him to see.

He was a leader and he had a message.

A message he wanted to share that would reach others like him- others like themselves- who needed their voices to be heard in a world that constantly told them they were wrong, that they needed to change, that who they were should be drowned out in favor of living in a world full of people simple, unproblematic, and easy to understand.

Chan had that passion.

Minho had… thoughts.

Jaehyun could talk to the kid for hours on end and still never get to the root of what Minho actually meant and how he truly felt.

One thing was clear though:

This team and this place was where he wanted to be, for as long as possible, doing everything he could with STAYS.

That, with Minho, had always been a constant hope.

Jaehyun sighed.

Well… trying to figure people out was a headache.
There was really no need to put so much effort into it.
It wasn’t like he’d get a trophy.

Minho knew what he was doing.

Minho knew Jaehyun knew.
And that he wouldn’t do anything about it.

After all, Jaehyun lived by his own philosophy too.

It was probably why he and Minho got along so well in the first place.

Still…

Compared to him, the younger boy was just a kid.
A kid with a situation spiraling out of control.

Jaehyun pulled away from the bridge's rail and took the time to amble along the walkway to the stone steps leading down beneath to the river and its bank. It was significantly cooler closer to the water, with more shadows shielding the heat of the sun.

He easily found Minho again, sitting by himself with his feet in the water, head tilted towards the sky, leaning back on his hands.

His eyes were closed.
Jaehyun stopped at his side, and a little ways behind him- and waited.

It took a while, but eventually the younger boy opened his eyes, blinking slowly into the sun before taking note of Jaehyun and dragging his gaze over.

"Do you want to sit, hyung?" he curiously asked.

"No need," Jaehyun casually turned down.

Minho dropped his head and looked at the river.
Jaehyun followed.

Between them came an easy quiet, simple and calm.

They said nothing. Did nothing.

Fifteen minutes passed.

And then Jaehyun spoke in a wholly uninterested voice.

"If it's left alone, then it won't get better."

There was a significant pause in the air.

Jaehyun tracked the motion of two birds skirting above the water, wings dipping into the surface, as they tilted at an angle.
Laughter trickled in from behind them.

A dog barked. Parents chuckled. High school friends chatted over mundane things.

Minho stayed as he was- idly gazing out into the river.

Jaehyun spoke again.

"Well... one thing at a time. You should probably know, running away is the worst option."

And Minho answered, lightly, voice lilting in question. "What are you talking about, hyung?"

"Nothing in particular," Jaehyun replied.

They were both good at pretending.

A peaceful quiet fell again.

Another ten minutes drifted by.

Then Minho swung his feet from the river and stood, shaking out his wet legs.

He grabbed his crocs which had been sat beside him- abnormally large, leopard-print monstrosities- Jaehyun had always wondered where he got them- and stuck his feet inside.

He looked at Jaehyun, cheerfully, and asked,

"Wanna go back?"

---

*Evening spilled across the river’s wide, pebbled bank, a bleeding bath of red and orange and gold.*

*The sky sat, an open painted sea, brushed in dark purple, streaked in warm pink, crested blues on the horizon rising as the fiery sun sank.*

*He wiggled his toes. Pressed them down into the gritty dirt and sand until the summer heat vanished and the cool swept in.*

*In front of him, his classmates laughed and played, pants rolled to their knees, jackets tossed, shoes forgotten on the rocky shore.*

*They were going to get scolded.*

*Volunteering had run later than he thought it would.*

*He was normally on the bus back home an hour earlier- but there had been a lot more cats in the area to round up than the week before.*

*Minho was completely confused about where they were all coming from, and their teacher didn’t seem to have any answers either, but if it meant giving more of the cats real homes then he wasn’t going to complain.*

*Too much.*
They really scratched hard.

Minho raised his eyes from a particularly long and red scratch on his forearm, watching arcs of water curve through the air as his classmates splashed and kicked through the river.

One of the taller boys in their volunteering group had veered off the sidewalk and down to the river during their walk to the bus stop. Then he’d ditched his bag and shouted for them to come down.

A couple didn’t and kept walking with stuck out tongues, but the rest had all glanced at one another and shrugged, clambering over the rail and sliding down the grassy hill to the riverbank below.

Minho had stood for a moment, caught between both options.

He knew he should go home. And he was hungry so he wanted to eat.

But he wanted to have fun with the others too.

He wanted to be better friends with them.

So he had followed them down.

And he had sat on the edge of the grassy hill, torn between ruining his uniform and upsetting his mom, or being a good son and weirdo classmate who watched everyone else have fun.

In the end, his filial sense of duty to his mom had won.

She always worked so hard to press his clothes neat.

But it did mean not getting to join the others.... which was a bit of a bummer.

He dragged his eyes away from his classmates having a good time and looked along the rest of the riverbank.

A few girls were sitting by themselves, talking, and there was another boy further down, lying on his back gazing up at the clouds above.

Then Minho's attention wandered from the boy to a bit more down the bank, and he blinked in surprise.

One of his classmates, back turned, was hunched over, head lowered.

For a long minute, all Minho did was stare with big, confused eyes.

But his classmate didn't move.

Minho glanced around to see if anyone else had noticed her, but it didn't look like they had, and before he knew it, he was getting up, grabbing his shoes and picking his way carefully over the rocks in her direction.

It was weird.

She didn't move or turn her head to look back even as he got closer.

Then Minho noticed her hands, working on something near the ground.

He took another step forward.
"Careful," she said suddenly.

Minho stopped.

He recognized her now. He should've known sooner. She was the only one in the group today who'd worn her hair low in a set of pigtails.

Hyeji.

He didn't know much about her, just that she always stayed behind to help clean the blackboards after class and liked to help the teachers sort out papers.

Minho liked staying behind to clean the blackboards too- but he always ended up inhaling chalk and choking on the dust.

Minseok, his class president, had taken one look at him and put him on sweeping duty after that.

So far, Minho hadn't managed to move up from sweeping the floors, but at least Minseok had stopped watching him all the time like he would trip and fly out the window if left alone for longer than a minute.

Minho shuffled behind Hyeji but didn't come any closer.

"What are you doing?" he wondered.

She turned her head ever so slightly to look at him. "It's caught," she said.

Minho stepped around a little to see what she was talking about.

There, in her hands, trapped horrendously in plastic soda rings, wire and string, was a flailing bird.

It was dark- so dark its wings looked blue- its tail feathers gray and long.

Hyeji was in the process of unwinding the string, trying to get the bird to settle. Her fingers were nicked and red.

His eyebrows creased. "Are you okay?"

"Me or the bird?"

"Both," he answered worriedly. And he meant it.

Hyeji huffed out something of a laugh. "I'm working on it."

"Do you need help?"

"I don't think so... too many hands might scare it more."

And her voice went softer.

"Look."

Minho moved the tiniest bit closer to get a better look at the bird.

It flapped and twitched, helpless, its lone visible eye flitting from the sky to the ground to their faces, over and over again, frightened.
Though it shook, it made no noise.

Minho's heart sank, and with it, his expression.

"Oh."

They had only just helped the stray cats earlier. And he had been happy afterwards, proud of their work.

But for every animal saved, another one was out there, somewhere, suffering.

It didn’t matter how many they went out to save if their homes were going to get flooded with plastic and trash. If they were going to be born just to be abandoned on the sides of streets and in trash cans by their owners who had given up anyway.

They would never be able to rescue them all.

No matter how hard they tried.

"I think it's hurt too bad," he said at long last.

Hyeji shook her head lightly. "No." She removed the plastic ring from around the bird's neck, then moved gently to the string wound tight around its struggling body. "It'll be okay."

Minho watched, unconvinced.

Hyeji worked slowly with a focus he couldn't remember ever seeing on her before.

Or maybe he had never paid enough attention.

They didn't get many chances to talk.

Their volunteering had only started three weeks ago- and Minho wasn't familiar enough to call any of them friends- though everyone else seemed to know each other already.

Maybe that would change.

He hoped so.

"I didn't really care before," Hyeji said all of a sudden.

Minho slid his gaze from the bird to his classmate's face. She was smiling, eyes shining bright.

"I don't have any pets," she shared idly. "And a lot of the animals near our street are dirty and probably have diseases. I hated to look at them. I thought it'd be better if they stayed away."

He tried not to look as baffled as he felt.

He probably failed.

But Hyeji kept talking, as though she were speaking to herself, reliving a small memory.

"A bird flew into our door once. When my mom and I were hanging laundry, it came out of nowhere and hit the glass and fell. I thought it was dead. It's embarrassing, but I started to cry."

She freed one of the bird's wings, running her fingers carefully over its feathers in a tiny check for permanent damage.
"Mom dropped her clothes and picked it up. She didn't care it was dirty. I was really young so I don't remember a lot. But when I looked again, the bird was awake and in her hands. And it flew away. It lost some of its feathers though."

Hyeji paused. Her eyes fell on the bird cradled in her palms.

"I don't know why. It made me feel bad."

Silence fell.

For a moment all they did was gaze at the small animal in her hand, that had stopped struggling and had gone still, seemingly resigned to its unknown fate in the hands of a stranger.

The river gurgled loud, the shouts and glee and teasing of their classmates, filtering into Minho's ears like a background soundtrack, close but far away.

Then Hyeji giggled.

Minho looked at her, startled.

Her fingers swiftly, carefully, releasing the last of the wired strings from around the bird's wings.

"Well... even if it's just one, I think it's okay," she said.

She got to her feet and turned towards the river.

There was a pause as the bird in her hand remained still.

But after a moment, it twitched, flapping one wing as though questioning its sudden freedom. A moment more after that, it twisted, rolling upright, moving its head quickly around.

Then its wings spread- feathers falling, lines cut into its skin-

And it flew.

Minho followed the bird as it shot towards the sky, plummeted, grazed the river, and spun itself back into the air.

He watched it glide towards the city line until it was far out of sight.

Until he was positive it wouldn't fall again.

"See?"

He dropped his gaze.

Hyeji was looking at him over her shoulder, smiling wide.

"It just needed a chance."

"Minho."
Woojin poked his head into the younger boy's shared room, glancing around.

Chan was absent.

Seungmin was in his upper bunk, looking down with a blank face.

Woojin followed the singer's gaze towards Hyunjin's bed. The taller boy was in it, sleeping, twisted in his sheets. He lowered his eyes further.

What he saw were a pair of legs sticking out from beneath the bed accompanied by the muffled and somewhat demented sounds of laughter.

He stared.

"What are you doing?"

There was a startled noise, then a loud thump, followed by a yelp and rattling of Hyunjin's bed as Minho struck his head on the underside of Hyunjin's barred mattress.

A few seconds later, Minho emerged, wriggling backwards and out. He rubbed his skull, somewhat annoyed, and raised his eyes towards Woojin.

"Oh. Hyung."

Woojin kept staring. "What were you doing under there?"

"Stretching."

"I don't believe you."

Minho climbed to his feet, unable to keep the smirk off his face as he waggled his brows. "That's fine. Did you need something?"

Woojin remembered why he had first come in.

Pushing aside all warning bells ringing in his head that he should maybe check beneath Hyunjin's bed, he shook his head and looked at the younger boy and asked, "You wanna get ice cream?"

Minho blinked at him. "Suddenly?"

"It's nice out and I'm bored."

Woojin tried to look imploring.

He wasn't quite sure if it worked or if Minho was just generally disgusted by his attempts at a begging face because for a moment all Minho did was look at him with an expression that said he would rather not.

But then the younger boy's gaze went to Seungmin still perched up on his bed watching, and he said-"Wanna come too?"

Seungmin glanced at Woojin, then at Hyunjin, then back to Minho- and refused. "No thanks."

Minho eyed him with suspicion. "Don't tell him," he warned.

"He'll know it was you anyway," Seungmin retorted.
"Not if you don't say anything."

"Hyung, he'll know."

Woojin looked in between them. “Is this something I need to stop?” he questioned, somewhat serious.

Mostly confused.

“No, it’s not,” Minho answered quickly.

He grabbed his wallet on his dresser, then Woojin’s arm, and hauled them both out of the bedroom and into the hall.

“Where did you want to go?”

“Minho-”

The other boy stopped them by the front door, looking at Woojin very intently.

“Hyung. It needed to be done.”

Woojin stared again.

They were out on the street less than five minutes later-

Minho on his phone mapping a route to a new ice cream parlor he had noticed several weeks ago-

Woojin messaging Seungmin a bit more insistently on whether he needed to prepare some sort of rescue on Hyunjin’s behalf or be more worried for everyone else in the dorm once whatever tomfoolery both dancers had gotten into this time inevitably erupted into another prank war.

Seungmin only messaged back this:

Yes.

Great.

Woojin lowered his phone and looked over at Minho in slight exasperation.

“What did he do this time?”

Minho glanced up from his map, playing dumb. “Who?”

But before Woojin could pry any further and get a straight answer, the younger boy was babbling off his ear with directions to the ice cream parlor and racing ahead to the crosswalk.

Woojin rolled his eyes to himself and decided to drop it for now.

After all, it wasn’t the reason why he had wanted to drag Minho out of the dorm in the first place.

So long as they didn’t return to it burned down, it would probably be okay.
Probably.

He caught up to the other boy and walked along his side.

“Where did you go with Jae-hyung earlier?” he questioned.

Minho eyed him a little warily, as though Woojin was trying to get something else out of him.

Which was- technically true- but not about what Minho thought it was.

“The river. We just hung out.”

“Oh. That’s nice.”

“You’re being weird.”

“How is asking a question being weird?”

“I don’t know.” Minho grinned a bit and laughed. “You’re just being weird.”

Leave it to Minho to know.

They were roommates for a long time.

They could easily sense when the other one was off.

And though they might not have understood the exact reasons why, they would try their best to get to the root of it.

Like Woojin wanted to- about recent events.

He had a lot of questions and not enough answers.

Even if Chan had tried to explain...

Well, it didn’t make sense.

Not to Woojin anyway.

Something like that, with Minho- it couldn’t really be possible.

They had been with him for almost two years for extensive amounts of time.

Woojin had slept in the same room.

They had shared their doubts with one another, talked about their hopes and fears.

Woojin would’ve known.

He would’ve known.

Minho wouldn’t have kept anything like that from him.

Because they had promised, like a pair of school kids, stupidly, childishly linking pinkies at Minho’s request-

“Let’s not keep secrets then. I’ll tell you mine, if you tell me yours.”
“What if I don’t want to tell you?”

“What if I don’t want to tell you?” he said in monotone.

Woojin laughed and grabbed his pillow with his free hand, smacking him in the head. “Ya! You grabbed mine first!”

Minho giggled. Pulled back. Then fixed Woojin with a calm but cheerful look.

“I mean it, hyung. I’ll listen if you need it.”

And Woojin actually couldn’t stand the cheesiness of it- tempted to curl his fingers and cringe- but Minho was being so ridiculously sincere he couldn’t find it in him to joke about it.

This time.

So he had sat back and let their pinkies fall apart, smiling at his dongsaeng instead.

“Alright. Then I’ll listen to you too.”

And then they had both gotten embarrassed and pretended the conversation had never happened.

But they had always, always kept an open ear.

Maybe Woojin should’ve known.

Maybe he should’ve been more concerned.

He had been interested at first, when Minho’s sleep-talking mumbles had begun- because they’d gone on for long- and had oftentimes been loud.

But he had never really given the nonsense words much thought.

“... don’t wanna go there.... don’t go... don’t go... don’t...the yogurt was better over- mango no...”

“...told you not to...said I’m sorry...”

“...do you think it’s what I want...?”

"... let me go if it’s better...dad... you have to let me...”

It bothered Woojin now.

What had Minho really been saying, all those times, back then?

He wished he knew.

He wished he could go back to easier times when Minho would climb into his bed and tell him about his day- and Woojin could listen without worrying- without needing to pick apart each truth from the lies.

As shy as Minho was in front of strangers, in front of family and friends he spoke a lot.

He showed everything he felt.

He voiced every random train of thought that came to mind when he wanted to share.
Pointed out anything that had caught his interest without hesitation or second thoughts if any of them even cared.

Which is why it was so mind-boggling and frustrating that none of them could suddenly get past the facade of nonchalance and cheerfulness Minho had begun to throw up.

Woojin hated being lied to.

Hated Minho lying to himself more.

Was he even aware he was doing it?

Did he really think they wouldn’t care?

That it didn’t matter?

That it wasn’t real?

“You’ve got a really scary look on your face,” Minho joked, waking Woojin abruptly from the roiling black pits of his thoughts. “What happened?”

Woojin brought his eyes from the road ahead to the younger boy at his side.

*That’s what I want to ask you*, he thought.

But he didn’t say that aloud.

He turned his attention to their surroundings- did a double-take- and stared.

They had stopped at a crosswalk.

The ice cream parlor was across the street, cute and blue with white decorations and a chalkboard sign out front.

It was boxed in on the corner by a short gray wall and line of vibrant green bushes. Round, wire tables with wood-back chairs were placed on either side of its polished glass doors.

There was even a seating area off to the left with umbrellas.

In other words- fancy.

And way above any sort of budget Woojin would ever spend on a cone of ice cream.

"What is this place?” he asked, temporarily ignoring Minho’s own question.

Minho followed his gaze. “It’s ice cream.”

"I know that.”

"Then why’d you ask?”

"How much does it cost?”

"You have enough.”

Woojin looked at him.
Minho looked back.

The crosswalk turned to green and Minho hurried across before Woojin could drag him back by his collar and take them somewhere else.

“You’ll like it,” Minho said not even ten minutes later as they stood in line waiting for their orders to get done.

Woojin- who had just forked over 11,000 won for some sort of charcoal black, cotton candy, sprinkled monstrosity stuck with a bunch of rainbow-colored gummy bears- had absolutely nothing to say.

Minho actually laughed at the look on his face as their names were called and they moved to get their cones.

His was chocolate on chocolate, drizzled in more chocolate fudge with bits of chocolate crumbled on top a bizarrely mint-flavored cone.

Woojin didn’t know what to feel.

Not even as they walked out the shop two minutes later with baby spoons and napkins in hand.

The tables outside were occupied, but Minho didn’t want to walk, worried everything on his cone would drop or melt.

So they searched for a place along the parlor’s surrounding wall instead.

“Ahh! It’s hot!” Minho complained, sitting down in the shade of several of the wall’s bushes, dark and green and bursting in vibrant flowers.

He twisted, grasping one of the bright red flowers with his free hand.

“Do you think it’s fake?”

“It’s not ours, leave it alone,” Woojin answered, batting the other boy’s hand away.

Minho mocked him but let go of it all the same, squinting up at the sun again.

"It's not that bad," Woojin said, following the other boy's gaze to the sky.

His eyes on the sun lasted approximately zero seconds before he had to blink and look away and try to clear the dark spots from his sight.

How Minho could stare at it for so long unfazed was beyond him.

Didn't it hurt?

Still- regardless of how blindingly bright the sun was- the weather wasn't anywhere near unbearable or hot.

It had the warmth of summer with the breeze of spring.

There had been much hotter days.

Personally, Woojin didn't think it was even 'ice cream weather'.
Minho was strange enough in the way he could eat ice cream and frozen treats in any sort of weather—rain or snow or blustering winds.

A habit that had passed on to Hyunjin—then Changbin—then inevitably infected Jisung.

And because of it, Woojin had come across multiple scenes of the four of them huddled together on the living room couch in the middle of winter, wrapped in electric blankets with tubs of ice cream from the convenience store as they binge-watch old dramas.

But weather and personal preference aside, Woojin had achieved his two primary goals of the day.

Getting Minho out of the dorm.

Enticing and distracting him with something he liked to more easily get some sort of confession.

Woojin was an honest guy.

Sort of.

But he wasn’t beneath dirty tactics.

And he really wasn’t the sort to let issues that bothered him go on.

It was why he was the first, next to Hyunjin, to stare down or scold their members when he thought they were acting too much out of line.

And if their leader wouldn’t confront Minho—despite all the worries he had shared about him—then Woojin would.

This couldn’t go on.

It wasn’t something Minho could hope to keep from them and think they’d never catch on.

But—a subtle question first.

“Did you have a fight with Chan?”

Minho choked on a piece of chocolate.

Woojin poked at his own ice cream with a spoon, trying not to let it collapse off the cone and to the ground.

He wasn’t wasting 11,000 won for nothing.

“Well?” he asked, when Minho still hadn’t answered half a minute later.

He glanced over.

Minho glowered at him, looking somewhat betrayed. “I knew you had another reason for bringing me out here.”

"Of course I did." Woojin said. "We both know that. Did you fight?" he asked again.

Minho looked at his ice cream, petulant. "No."

"Then why aren’t you talking to him?"
"Because he’s not talking to me."
Woojin feigned ignorance. “Do you know why?”
"I don’t know."
Was he serious with that answer?
Woojin couldn’t help it. He looked at Minho incredulously and said, “You really don’t know?”
And Minho returned the look with a mixed amount of suspicion and growing irritation.
"Of course I don’t know. He just stopped talking to me. You were there. You saw."
Woojin turned his attention back to his cone, taking the time to try and eat it while giving the other boy a moment to lose his bout of anger.
If there was anything he knew, Minho couldn’t be forced to talk. The conversation had to flow in his direction and get picked up by him first.
The longer Woojin ate, the more and more Minho’s expression smoothed out. Soon the younger boy had gone back to his ice cream.
The sun continued to burn overhead.
Around them people walked silently or chatted amicably with friends as they passed.
It was a nice atmosphere.
Really, recently, days like this had felt impossible to find.
He was glad they still existed.
Though... probably not for long.
Woojin waited until he ate half of his own ice cream- which was, actually, not as horrific tasting as it looked- and then shifted his gaze to his side.
Minho's neck was craned, chin jutted, left hand covered in melted chocolate and the ripped bits of his napkin as he tried and failed to eat like a decent human being with any sort of class.
Woojin wanted to sigh.
If anyone could see them now...
Sometimes Minho really didn't seem like an idol.
Woojin found him digging through the dumpster behind their building two months ago in search of his gym ID card he thought he had thrown away.
It turned out Felix had borrowed it and forgotten to put it back into Minho's wallet the night before- but the point was- anyone else would've just called the gym and explained the situation to get a new card in the system- or- maybe tried to search around their dorm first before diving headfirst into a metal bin full of garbage.
But Minho was Minho.
Which meant a lot, and not enough, at the same time.

Woojin took one of his own napkins and pressed it onto Minho's face, exasperated. "At least try."

Minho inhaled the top half of his cone completely, then leaned back, using Woojin's napkin to wipe off his ice cream doused chin. "Was yours good?" he asked with a full mouth.

Woojin looked back down at his own cone and decided to be honest.

Maybe he could lead by example.

"It's not bad. So, are you feeling better?"

Minho eyed him curiously, either ignoring the real meaning behind the question or truly not noticing. "I wasn't feeling bad?"

"Oh." Woojin feigned some ignorance, continuing to spoon his own ice cream from his cone. "I wasn't sure if you were still feeling sick."

A pause.

There was a noticeable change in Minho's voice when he spoke.

"I wasn't sick."

"I meant when you fell."

"I wasn't sick," Minho repeated.

Woojin looked up and over and found the other boy staring at what remained of his cone, looking genuinely confused.

It baffled Woojin.

Why was Minho the one wearing that kind of expression?

There was no way he didn't know.

Was he pretending?

"You don't remember what happened when you fell?" Woojin found himself asking before the question even registered in his mind.

It wasn't what he had originally wanted to know, but this...

"I was dancing," Minho said, brow lowered, eyes thinking as he frowned. "It wasn't working. I tried to fix it but messed up. And I fell."

"Did something happen before that?"

"No." Minho met Woojin's searching gaze, something earnest and serious and honest written on his face. "I was fine. I danced the night before with Hyunjin but that was it."

He hesitated.

Looked down at the ground where his ice cream dripped in small splatters.
"I think it was an off day."

Woojin kept staring at him.

The look on Minho's face.

The way Minho sat.

Doubtful of himself.

Anxious.

Fearful in the way he had only gotten when he had been forced to stand in front of a crowd and perform and face JYP PD-nim on his own.

It was like looking at Minho pre-debut.

And that was something none of the members, least of all Woojin, ever wanted to see again.

He lowered his cone, appetite gone, and this time seriously confronted the other boy.

"Would you lie to me, Minho?"

Minho lifted his head, startled. "What?"

Woojin gazed at him intently. Trying to convey how important this was to him.

"We swore. You promised. I said I would trust you. You said you would trust me. Does that not mean anything to you?"

Minho stared at him, bewildered and stunned.

And Woojin knew it was because he was torn.

Because with any other member, Minho could brush off their concerns and hide away.

Because with any other member, Minho was a hyung- their hyung- their rod, and their support, if they needed it.

He looked after them, encouraged them, cheered them on and made them complain both about his annoying teasing and clingy hugs- upholding the role of someone they could really turn to for comfort and help.

Because Minho would give it.

Even if at first he resisted, Minho would give it in full and not expect it in return.

Because the problems of a big brother weren't meant to be shared.

To his little brothers, it wasn't fair.

But even if Minho thought this, even if he believed and followed through with that philosophy for the rest of his life-

Woojin wouldn't let him forget.

Minho might've been a big brother, but he was a little brother too.
And Woojin was his to turn towards when there was no where else to go.

His rock.

His shelter.

"Come here."

And Minho broke into tears, smile and bravado gone. "I wanted to stay. I'm sorry I messed up. It wasn't good enough."

Woojin hugged him even tighter, staring, glaring, at the wall over the other boy's shoulder. "We're not letting you go. Okay?"

Minho kept his face in Woojin's shoulder, shaking as he cried.

Woojin squeezed with everything he had and turned his head, pressing his mouth against the side of Minho's head and keeping it there, trying so hard to keep his own emotions down. Seeing his dongsaeng like this- one who tried and never complained and worked so hard-

"I'm not letting you go, Minho."

"Tell me," Woojin said softly.

Their ice creams, the people on the street, the sounds of summer and the city were gone- forgotten.

"Woojin-hyung..."

Minho looked away from him and stared at his feet.

"Hyung," he said again, in a voice incredibly small.

His face was crumpled.

Defeated.

On the verge of breaking.

"What would you do... if I wasn't....?" he started to ask.

But he stopped.

Minho stopped- and didn't speak for several moments again.

Something flickered across his face- too fast to discern.

Then he huffed out a breathy laugh, and smirked.

Rueful and tiny.

Like there was a funny secret only he knew and was keeping all to himself.

"If I wasn't in Stray Kids, where do you think I'd be?" he asked all of a sudden in a bright voice.

It was such a three-sixty from his earlier mood, that Woojin couldn't help but be taken aback.

"What?"
Minho glanced at him, smirk growing only the slightest, before flickering away completely. His eyes were full of emotion.

Emotion Woojin couldn't place.

"If I wasn't in Stray Kids, hyung," Minho repeated, speaking every word with force, loud and clear. "Do you think I'd be dancing?"

Woojin wondered why his throat suddenly felt so dry. Why his chest suddenly felt so tight.

What was Minho trying to say?

What was he talking about?

"Wouldn't you be?" he somehow managed to get out.

Minho looked at him.

Looked at him and looked at him until it became so uncomfortable Woojin had to blink his eyes desperately just to keep them from drying out.

Then Minho slid his gaze away and back towards the sky- staring into the sun blankly- expression empty.

An unsettling quiet stretched between them for what seemed like an eternity.

Until Minho spoke again.

"Maybe," he answered at long last. "Wouldn't that be nice."

But it wasn't spoken as a question.

Wasn't spoken as a fact.

It was spoken like a wish that had been said a hundred times over in the air.

Like a wish that had fallen on deaf ears.

Woojin faltered.

"Minho?"

The younger boy broke into a laugh, a helpless smile on his lips as he lowered his head and looked at Woojin once more. He got to his feet and stretched his arms above his head.

"Ah seriously..."

There was cheer in his voice.

Cheer in his eyes.

Pain in the lines of his face.

"If it's like this, I really will die."
The bottle slipped from Jisung’s hands and broke.

"Ah- what are you doing?" Seungmin complained, looking over from the kitchen table.

Jisung scratched the back of his neck and chuckled. "Oh, my bad. Must've lost focus," he joked.

His eyes fell to the soy sauce spilling across the floor, dark and slow.

A moment later, Hyunjin stumbled into the kitchen, looking extremely put-off, disgusted and confused.

His glasses were skewed on his face, clothes hanging off his body as though they had been haphazardly thrown on.

Seungmin looked at him with an all-too-knowing face, then looked back at Jisung. He got up from his chair, eyebrows raising.

"You're not going to clean that up?"

"No, I am," Jisung answered, in a voice strangely distant and far.

He gazed at the shattered glass and sauce pooling around his socked feet.

"Where's Minho-hyung?" he asked.

Seungmin looked at him oddly. "With Woojin."

And he stared at Jisung carefully.

"Why? What is it?"

Jisung continued to gaze at the mess at his feet for a moment longer, brow creased and eyes baffled, full of unreadable thoughts.

Then he raised his head and smiled, brushing off Seungmin's concern.

"Ahh... it's nothing."

He went to get a washcloth from the sink and cleaning supplies.

Though his mind was preoccupied, he still heard Hyunjin groggily approach Seungmin and ask-

"Why does our room smell like fish?"

Jisung wished he could laugh.

His heart was heavy instead.

"What did you say?"
Minho stopped grinning at the tone of voice.

He lowered his arms from above his head and looked at Woojin, confused.

"Hyung?"

"What did you just say?" Woojin repeated, anger in every word.

He stood and faced Minho, ice cream dropped to the sidewalk in a hideous splatter.

Minho stared at him wide-eyed.

Stunned.

In his own hands, what was left of his ice cream melted beneath the sun- chocolate trickling down his fingers, dripping between them, seeping into the concrete, staining dark and deep.

"I said..."

Woojin watched the way the younger boy's throat stuck.

The way his huge eyes swelled with an ocean of terror, confusion and doubt.

The way his skin paled.

"I said I'll die," Minho answered, voice unsteady and so faint it could barely be heard.

Woojin could have punched him.

"Why would you say that?"

Minho gazed at him, still shocked, like he didn't understand.

"Because... it's so... hot," he mumbled. "It's hot so I... I thought..."

Woojin couldn't control his face.

He tried- but he couldn't- because-

"That's not funny."

Minho flinched.

Woojin stared.

"Minho-ah, that's not funny ."

"It was... just a joke, hyung."

Minho searched his face desperately, trying to find the cause of sudden anger Woojin felt.

But how was Minho supposed to find it if Woojin couldn't even place it himself?

The sudden rush of fear, the screeching halt of his thoughts and his mind colliding against the inside of his skull as his gut dropped and sank and plummeted through his feet into the pits of the earth at the words- the mere idea that Minho would ever vanish and be gone for good-
"Hyung?"

Woojin forced himself to look into Minho’s face again.

Forced himself to push the fury in his body down and away-

It was a joke.

"Woojin-hyung... I’m sorry," Minho apologized, because he wasn’t sure what else he could do.

He had been trying to lighten up the atmosphere, bring back that comfortable familiarity between himself and his hyung- but it had backfired, awfully- and now Woojin was-

Walking away.

Leaving him.

Going down the sidewalk on the road back to home.

Without him.

Without looking back.

"Hyung?"

But Haejun kept going- going farther down the street.

Farther down the hill.

His shoulders were hunched to his ears, fists shoved in his pockets, fury and frustration in every line of his body as he walked, shadow dark and long in the evening sun as it lowered across the cityscape and reached their small neighborhood road.

And Minho stood at the top of the hill, watching the older boy go.

He smiled- eyes wide and cheeks wet.

He smiled- eyes crinkling, chest aching hard.

He smiled- face breaking.

Left all alone.

In his studio, Chan sat back in his chair.

He spun away from his computer and desk, after closing out his tabs- and stared at the dark pads of the soundproof ceiling above his head.

He breathed in deep, then exhaled, cheeks blowing, creeping red with hints of anger.

For a long moment all he did was look up.

Then he dropped his head and pushed out of his chair, walking towards the door.
His hand slipped to his back pocket and seized a hold of his phone.

He was going to do it.

Chapter End Notes

My beta has been very interested in everyone's comments and has been wanting to respond to them for some time! She sent a message for me to share with you all, so I hope you can take the short time to read it if you have the chance<3

She works really well and hard to catch and fix any mistakes. I'm always grateful T-T

Here is her message:

"Hello!
This is go_'s beta, Kat!
I've been dying to voice my thanks to all of you. I always am diligently checking the comments and I read em all. And I'm so so so happy to see people finding and enjoying this amazing story!
Seeing people theorize and express their feelings on this is so interesting ><
I especially value you guys who praise go_'s writing style and the atmosphere it creates!
The way we're introduced to things and are slowly shown more and more of the bigger picture
I can't wait to be on this journey alongside you because even I have no idea where we're headed
Please keep supporting go_ and No Galaxy and thank you again!"

And here's another sincere thanks from me to everyone reading and following along 😊

I hope it’s a story you can continue to enjoy!

╰(*°˚°*)╯♡

Have a good day <3
Laughter in the air. Voices under the sun.
The sky deep and blue, stretched endlessly above.
"On your own again?"
He paused, fingers stilling in the grass.
And there, a different finger came, pressing into the furrowed crease of his brow.
A soft laugh followed.
"You're gonna get wrinkles."
The voice was teasing and kind.
Minho lifted his head.
Above him, the branches of the tree he crouched beneath, cast the light away.
Across from him, his classmate grinned, squatting in the light of the afternoon sun.
"What's the matter? You sad?"
Minho shook his head slowly, blinking at the appearance of the other boy.
The finger dropped from his forehead. His classmate rocked back onto his heels, resting an elbow onto his leg and cupping his chin in his palm.
A smile tugged crookedly at one corner of his lips.
"Why don't I believe you?"
Minho gazed at him, startled, for a long, long time.
Long enough that the buzzing of summer cicadas filled his ears with white noise.
Long enough that the heat began to make his skin prickle.
Long enough to memorize every scar on the other boy's face.
Every bump.
The crooked angle of his nose and his right eye- smaller than his left.
His growing, quirky, grin.
"Something on your mind?"

Minho felt the words catch in the back of his throat.

The words he wanted to say- needed to say- because it felt like now would be his only chance-

Could he let it slip away?

He could tell him.

I could tell him.

It was building fast. The feeling, in his chest, pressing hard- pushing hard- squeezing so hard he could barely-

"No," he managed to get out. "There's... nothing," he faltered.

He glanced away, embarrassed, staring at the ground.

At his hands clenching at the dirt, at the grass beneath his palms.

But his classmate only laughed.

He looked up again.

For a moment, the other boy said nothing, simply gazing across at Minho with a ridiculously fond face.

Then he smiled.

"You know-" he reached through the distance between them, words light and bright and warm.

"You're a really bad liar, Lino."

Minho stared.

The sun shone gold across his classmate's features as the other boy beamed wide.

As his brow lowered and mouth turned further up in soft exasperation.

"You don't have to lie to me."

_____________________

Tears on his arm.

Jisung woke in the soft light of morning, groggy and blinking hard.

He looked down, mind muggy, body slow, gazing for a long time at the hand gripping tight onto his shirt.

Around him, the air was still and warm. Hazy in the way it could only be at the first break of sun on a quiet Saturday morning.
He shifted, pausing, realizing his leg was trapped between another and slid his eyes away from the familiar hand on his clothes to the messy head of hair dropped on top his chest.

Finally, his brain caught up to the scene, and he stilled, staring, stunned.

Minho.
Dead asleep.
Crying in his dreams.
"Hyung."

It came out breathlessly quiet.

His hand was lifting, fingers brushing against the older boy's face, chest aching with an indescribable ghost of pain.

"What's wrong?" he whispered carefully.

Minho didn't answer.

Of course he didn't.

But Jisung didn't care.

He swiped a thumb beneath the other boy's eye, catching the tears still spilling out.

"Wake up," he said quietly.

Minho's eyes fluttered but didn't open.

Jisung waited, knuckles brushing across his hyung's cheek. He wiped the lingering wet away and watched as Minho slowly woke at the gesture.

The other boy grimaced, confusion and annoyance first overtaking his features as he struggled to escape the fog of sleep.

The confusion only grew when his gaze went to Jisung, silently searching for the reason he'd been woken.

Jisung met his eyes and spoke softly. "What are you crying for, hyung?"

Minho looked at Jisung for an incredibly long time, brow furrowed.

Then he shifted his attention to the tears caught on Jisung's fingers.

And stared.

For what seemed like an eternity, he stared, and said nothing, at a loss for words.

Across from them, in his bed, Jeongin mumbled and tossed over.

He slept uncomfortably, squashed halfway beneath the pile of long limbs and drooling mouths that belonged to Hyunjin and Seungmin.

There was no way they weren't waking without cramps.
But after the prank Minho had pulled, there hadn't been much of a choice.

The room had reeked of raw, spoiling fish, and not even seven hours of their window being thrown open and three bottles of Febreeze unleashed could fix it.

He guessed Minho hadn’t really thought about the consequences his prank would have had.

To be fair- Jisung wouldn’t have either.

Pranks weren’t fun if someone spent too long thinking on them.

Sure, maybe fish wasn’t the smartest thing to stick under a mattress, but Jisung would’ve done the same thing to someone eventually.

Probably Seungmin.

He had already started crafting his masterpiece with Woojin's socks- but after his older hyung had returned to the dorm without Minho, stoic and shut down, Jisung had decided to maybe not do his grand prank after all.

At least, not for a few weeks.

And when Minho hadn’t come back even after three hours, Jisung had called him.

Minho had said something about running a few errands and checking in with his mom, ‘so I’ll be back soon’.

But Minho hadn’t come back until the dark hours of the night.

Jisung had sworn to himself he wouldn’t ask what had happened between his two hyungs.

Not until Minho was ready to talk about it.

Not until he wanted to.

But now, looking at the older boy's stunned face-

He wanted to know.

All of it.

He wanted to help.

He needed to.

So long as something wasn't right with Minho, things wouldn't feel right with himself.

That was how it had begun to be since halfway through their debut show- when things were difficult.

When Jisung spent more time being frustrated with himself, fighting with Hyunjin, pretending on camera he felt okay.

Minho had never pretended.

He had always been honest.
True with his feelings.

Back then, he had been terrified of the stage.

Back then, he had been trying to find his place among eight others who had already formed a bond.

Back then, Minho had come to Jisung like a lifeline, looking for one of its own.

They had held each other's hands, looking for certainty and reassurance that they were in the right place- they were doing the right thing. They would be okay.

And they hadn't let go since.

But now Minho was pulling.

Pulling close, then far away, carried in and out by the current of an ocean none of them knew how to reach across.

Jisung could stand on the shore and shout and toss one of those stupid, useless red rings to his drowning hyung, but it wouldn't matter if the other boy didn't catch it.

If he didn't turn around and at least try and swim.

Minho was an awful swimmer- he'd let a wave hit him and sink on his own without a hand to hold.

But when would his hyung realize they would never let him get swept anywhere- least of all away from them?

*Let us in.*

*Let them know.*

*Let us help you, Minho-hyung.*

He wanted to say it.

He wanted to say it all.

Except he couldn't. Because Minho would sooner break than let anyone else see him fall.

And if not even Woojin could get a word out of him... then...

He didn't know.

Jisung really... didn't know.

What could he do?

Minho squirmed away, pulling himself up and scrubbing his face idly with the heel of his hand.

Jisung recognized the body language. Recognized the look.

Minho wouldn't talk about it.

Still.

"Hyung, are you okay?"
Minho finished wiping his face, a half-smile tugging at his lips.

"I'm fine."

"You were crying."

Minho shook his head lightly.

"It must've been a bad dream. Don't worry about it. Go back to sleep."

Jisung looked at him.

"I'm wide-awake."

Minho playfully made a face.

"Then go shower. You stink."

Jisung kicked him in the leg.

"Ya. You were the one holding me. You stink."

Minho kicked him back.

Jisung picked up his pillow and smacked him in his big head.

Minho yelled, tumbling back, and regained his balance just in time to roll forward, snatch the pillow and whip it back across Jisung's face.

They devolved into cursing and jabbing their fingers into each other's sides relentlessly until their voices rose to shouts and Seungmin and Jeongin grumpily roused and hollered at them loudly to shut up.

Which then sparked an incensed scolding from Jisung on respecting one's elder, even as he continued to punch his fist onto Minho's leg.

In the end, they all got up, irritated and mad, blaming one another for the cramps in their back and the poor prank Minho had pulled, putting them in the situation to begin with.

Of course, at that point, Minho had pointed accusingly to Hyunjin still dead to the world in Jeongin's bed, putting full blame on the taller dancer for picking the fight.

And then he threw Jisung's pillow at Hyunjin, effectively waking him up and stirring another argument.

Next door, Changbin banged on the wall and yelled.

"Ya! Knock it off you punks!"

Minho stood in the shower, looking at his feet, letting the water run hot over his head.

Seungmin was at the sink, brushing his teeth.
Staring at him through the mirror.
"What do you want?" Minho asked, not bothering to look up.
"Nothing."
"Why are you looking at me?"
"I'm not."

Minho inhaled lightly.

There wasn't any real reason to get mad. It was just... early in the morning.
After bickering and stalking off to the bathroom, the exhaustion from waking up had settled in again.
It made his shoulders and his mind heavy.
His thoughts full of weight.
Because he remembered, with clarity, that bright and sunny day.
Turned into a dream.
Of all times now.

Minho had never been the sort of person to believe something was out there after him. He was one person, just one, among the millions of others.
He wasn't special.
There shouldn't be anything out there that cared enough to make his life good or bad- karma or otherwise.
He hadn't done anything wrong, had he? He had always tried his best.
But he guessed it didn't matter.
Because now it was chasing him.
Now it was getting close.
His face crumpled.
What was he supposed to do?
How could he make it stop?
Something must've started it.
Must've made it come back.
Must've dragged the memories from where he'd safely locked them away.
But what...?
"Did something happen between you and hyung yesterday?"
Minho startled, head whipping up.

He got water in his eye, and cursed, turning his back and wiping at his face.

He'd forgotten Seungmin was there. He thought he'd left.

But no- when Minho turned his head to peer half-blind out the glass shower door, his younger member was still at the sink, turned around and leaning against it to look at Minho fully.

If he had noticed Minho losing himself in thought, Seungmin said nothing of it, studying him instead with an expression somehow only half-interested.

"Woojin-hyung looked mad."

Minho winced at the reminder.

He pushed away all thoughts of himself threatening to drag him down and shuffled backwards under the water again.

It struck his shoulders, hot.

"Oh... that..."

He frowned a bit.

"I made a joke he didn't like."

"Must've been a bad joke," Seungmin noted.

"Guess so," Minho mumbled.

He fumbled behind him and spun the water off.

For a moment he stood there, listening to the pipe drain and water taper off.

Then he sighed, sliding the shower door open and grabbing his towel Seungmin offered his way from where it'd been put on the edge of the sink.

"I have to say sorry, I think."

Seungmin raised his eyebrows high.

"It was that bad of a joke?" he asked, somewhat disbelievingly.

"Well he definitely wasn't laughing," Minho uttered.

He toweled off his hair then wrapped it around his waist.

"And Chan-hyung still isn't talking to me."

"Actually, he was looking for you yesterday."

Minho stilled.

He looked up at Seungmin baffled.

"What? When?"
"In the evening. But you hadn't come back from wherever you'd gone. Didn't you check your phone? He said he sent you a message."

"It must've...not gone through," Minho said absently, thinking back.

After Woojin had split, Minho had stayed behind to clean up the ice cream that had fallen.

And then he had gone on a very long walk.

And sat on a park bench.

His aunt had called shortly after, as the afternoon slipped to evening, and Minho had listened to her talk about the most inane things.

It had been interesting enough to distract him from the thoughts he had been having about how he would approach Woojin when he came across him again, and he had gotten invested enough in the conversation that it had lasted several hours.

Apparently, there had been a new member of his aunt's book club who had been plotting to take away his aunt's presidency.

Apparently.

His aunt had a notepad of evidence she had written down and had spent much of the time listing off all the aggressive behaviors of the newcomer and how much they enjoyed showing off their knowledge and basking in the praise.

Of course, this was all from his aunt's very biased viewpoint- and when Minho had suggested that maybe the newcomer just really liked to read and discuss theories- his aunt had hung up.

And then called again to apologize and ask about his day and their upcoming travel plans as a group.

So Minho had gotten lost in the talk, not minding when the sun ducked beneath the horizon and darkness swept in.

None of the members had had plans to do anything but enjoy the Friday off. None of them needed to be anywhere in particular.

But even as he had hung up the phone and began the trip back home, there had been no new notifications on his phone.

Nothing but a few messages from Jisung and a call- checking on his whereabouts.

Nothing from Chan.

"Did he say something to you?" Minho asked Seungmin, a bit hesitantly.

Seungmin eyed him for a moment, turned to spit in the sink and rinse his mouth out, then turned around again, not even beating around the bush.

"You mean was he still mad too?"

"He wasn't-" Minho began to protest, but faltered and closed his mouth.

Seungmin took pity on him and answered.
"No. He didn't look mad. I think he just wanted to talk to you, if it makes you feel any better."

"It doesn't," Minho replied miserably.

And Seungmin looked at him carefully.

"Hyung. What's going on? Did something happen with you two?"

"No... I think we're just fighting."

"Is it okay if you tell me why?"

"I don't know why."

"Well I doubt that."

Minho looked at Seungmin sharply.

The younger boy shrugged, far from apologetic even though he offered up a short, "Sorry."

Minho huffed and changed the subject, voice becoming accusing instead.

"Ya, you really went and told Hyunjin it was me."

"I did not."

Seungmin straightened up, offended.

"I told you he would know. Nobody else would do something like that!"

"You play pranks all the time!"

Their voices raised.

"Yeah but I don't stick raw fish under people's beds! That's my bed too!"

"Well you didn't stop me!"

Seungmin stopped, pinching the bridge of his nose briefly before rolling his eyes and dropping his hand.

"Alright. Whatever hyung. Maybe I should've had Woojin-hyung stop you after all. But it's too late now. The damage is done. We're all suffering now."

Minho waved off the other boy's annoyance.

"You like sharing beds. Don't pretend."

Seungmin stared at him.

"There were three of us in there. That's not even close to comfortable. And you talked in your sleep," he complained.

And Minho paused, current argument forgotten.

He gave Seungmin a very wary look.
"I did?"

"Yeah."

And then Seungmin was pausing too, the annoyance leaving his face and slowly being replaced with an expression Minho in no way liked.

An expression clearly knowing- seeking answers.

"It... wasn't anything weird, hyung, you don't have to worry about that."

"Then what is it?" Minho questioned, hearing his heart pick up slowly in his ears.

Seungmin looked at him for what felt like forever before opening his mouth and beginning to ask-

"Who's-?"

Hyunjin stumbled in through the door.

Minho took that as his cue to leave, punching Hyunjin in the gut along the way and pretending not to hear Seungmin call his name.

It was easier.

Much easier.

Just to pretend.

Woojin was still sleeping when Minho poked his head into the older boy's shared room- and Minho didn't dare to wake him.

So he quietly walked over and stuck a sticky note on his hyung's forehead instead.

A simple message with a drawing of a smiling hotdog between a bun.

'Sorry'.

When he turned around, he saw Changbin sitting up on his bottom bunk, staring at him.

He barely squashed down his yelp, jumping into the air and biting down a loud curse.

He glanced over his shoulder just to double-check and make sure Woojin hadn't stirred, then scowled and crossed the short distance over to Changbin.

"What are you doing?"

"What are you doing?" Changbin asked back, nodding his head in Woojin's direction.

"Nothing. Mind your own business."

"You came over to me."
"Whatever."

He paused.

Gnawed on the inside of his mouth.

"Do you know where Chan-hyung is?"

"Where he always is," Changbin answered. He raised his eyebrows. "Why? You going to see him?"

Minho stopped chewing at his cheek and matched the look the other boy was giving him.

"Why? You wanna come?"

"No."

And Changbin threw himself back onto his bed, tone bored, staring up at the bars of Felix's bunk above.

"Handle it yourself."

Minho found himself glaring. "There's nothing to 'handle'."

"Do you like lying to yourself?" Changbin asked with half a scoff and laugh.

He didn't sound upset though.

If anything, it was annoying how _not_ upset he sounded while asking the question.

As it was, Minho just glowered down at the rapper, until Changbin dragged his eyes from the bunk bed bars to quirk a challenging eyebrow in his direction.

"What? If you're not gonna say anything, then go away."

He lifted his leg and kicked at Minho's knee lightly.

"Don't just stare at me. It's annoying."

"You're annoying," Minho retorted.

He slapped Changbin's foot away then left the room, pulling out his phone to put in an order.

---

He arrived at the studio nearly two and a half hours later.

Walking to grab the food had taken longer than he thought.

There had been a postman along the way who had lost half his mail in the wind and was trying to chase it down the street.

Minho had quickly joined in to help, the postman had thanked him and then offered to pay for a meal.
Even after refusing, the elderly man had insisted.

And Minho hadn't really had it in him to refuse.

So he had a sweet bun and tea for free.

It wasn't exactly to his taste... but the postman had been nice and had told him many stories from his childhood as they sat outside and ate.

Many things were different. But it seemed like everything that it was to be a kid stayed the same.

People weren't so different. At least there was comfort in that.

No matter how much time changed.

He sighed at the thought as he wandered down the hall of production studios numbered in nice, bolted numbers. Chan's was all the way at the end, in the corner, a bit larger than the rest.

Minho stopped outside the studio door, plastic bag of takeout food hanging from his fingers as he suffered through second and third doubts.

He leaned his ear against the door, hoping no one else in their studios would come out and think he was being weird.

Because he felt weird.

Like a total weirdo.

He rapped his knuckle on the door.

No answer.

Obviously.

If Chan had headphones in it was useless.

Minho swallowed.

He lowered his hand to the knob, resting it there for a moment.

This was... stupid.

There wasn't anything to be nervous about.

Even if they had fallen into some sort of disagreement, it wasn't like the problem would remain forever.

They had an awards show coming up next week and then a concert in Germany the following weekend.

There wasn't room for long-lasting disputes- though they had happened before when they were earlier into debut.

But that just made everyone miserable and affecting their on-stage presence.

So they had all resolved to work out their issues before going into the public eye.
It had worked really well up until March with their latest comeback. When he and Hyunjin had had their *minor* fight.

But even that hadn't been the kind of problem happening now.

The kind where his *leader* was upset with him.

But he couldn't just stand here.

He couldn't keep running away.

He had to...

Minho swallowed again, straightened- and twisted the door knob in.

Cool air of the AC rushed and caressed his face immediately before blowing out.

He welcomed it and stepped inside, glancing around the studio confused for a moment when he saw the desk and computer chair was empty.

Then he saw the bundle of dark clothing huddled on the couch.

Ahhh.

Chan was sleeping.

Minho tried not to feel so relieved.

A part of him was glad there'd be no confrontation.

A part of him was sad.

He just wanted to fix whatever had pulled taunt between them.

He wanted the silence and the ignoring and the distance growing between them to stop- before it became much worse.

Before it couldn't be fixed.

Minho wasn't the sort who liked to fight.

Least of all with Chan.

He set the bag of food he had brought on Chan's studio desk, then walked the short distance towards the small couch against the wall where his leader slept, curled uncomfortably in half a ball.

He crouched in front the other boy quietly, gaze roaming over him.

He felt like he hadn't seen him in a long time.

Hadn't joked with him in a long time.

He missed it.

Minho liked joking with all the members and he teased them a lot.

Bothering them was fun, but it was Woojin who liked to mess around and tease *him*, and Chan who
liked to smother him in hugs he couldn't get from the younger members.

Well- he could harrass Hyunjin and throw himself on top the taller dancer whenever he wanted, Hyunjin usually played along, but they were in the middle of a small feud at the moment, so the only sort of thing they'd been exchanging were punches and verbal digs.

Minho reached out and placed his hand on top of Chan's hair very carefully.

Surprisingly, compared to its appearance, it was soft.

Minho smiled, patting his leader's head several times.

Everyone always joked about it- how his hair would probably never return to normal. And their fans had already made bald edits and sent them in to them on Twitter.

But truthfully, Chan had naturally curly hair the fans only sometimes saw on broadcasts or LIVES. Minho liked Chan's hair like that; like a comfortable cotton ball he could rest his head on whenever he wanted when they were back at the dorms and no one had bothered to fix their hair.

Those days were the best- because no one cared about anything, really.

Not even if Minho was being extra clingy.

He sighed, pulling his hand away from Chan.

"Sorry," he apologized softly.

He crouched there for a moment, mind absent of thoughts, remembering instead.

That familiar face and earnest words.

"Promise me, Minho. You won't let it go."

His brow lowered.

He had made a promise back then.

He'd sworn to keep it, no matter what.

So he would.

Minho hesitated, then leaned in carefully, studying ever zit and scar on Chan's face.

The bags beneath his eyes.

The bend to his nose.

The way he almost drooled.

Memorizing so he wouldn't forget. Because one day...

No .

He shook his head and huffed a bit.

He wouldn't forget anyone- least of all his members.
That, he knew.

He poked his finger lightly against Chan's cheek.

Really- it was amazing how one person could have so much good in them.

How one person could be so good.

There was no one else as selfless, as earnest as the older boy.

No one else who cared for Stray Kids and his friends and their fans as much as Bang Chan. His leader. His friend.

Chan just wanted to protect them- everyone if he could.

And Minho was okay with being there.

He wanted to be there. At his leader's side, wherever they'd go, for a long, long time.

With Stray Kids.

He gazed at Chan sincerely, knowing the older boy wouldn't be awake to see it- and smiled sadly.

"Do you hate me?" he asked quietly.

"Do you want me to go?"

Because there was no doubt that there was something Chan knew.

Even if Minho didn't know what it was, Chan had discovered something and it had made him mad.

Minho wasn't oblivious.

He had known what Woojin was asking the day before.

But if Minho had any straight answers about what had made Chan upset, he would've shared it with Woojin.

He would've confided in him, looking for reassurances he needed too.

But he hadn't known why Chan had reacted the way he did.

All Minho knew was why he had fallen.

But if Chan had somehow known too...

His lips pushed down.

He shuffled backwards, away from his leader and the couch.

"I brought you food," he told him, even though he knew Chan wasn't awake to hear.

"I thought you'd be hungry."

He paused.

"You probably shouldn't come back to the dorm. It's Hyunjinnie's fault, okay? Just remember it was
him."

No answer.

Minho gazed at his leader again, with an expression that said absolutely everything and nothing at once.

His voice dropped to a whisper.

"I don't want to fight. I'm sorry, hyung. I can't tell you. You know why, right?"

Chan was silent, breathing deeply, peacefully.

Minho rocked back onto his heels and stood, heading for the studio door.

A part of him really wanted to stay.

Just to be able to see Chan when he woke.

To hear his voice and talk- because they hadn't in over three days.

Maybe Chan would accept his peace offering of food.

Maybe he wouldn't.

Though he was really curious about why Chan had come looking for him the night before, he wouldn't disturb the first good sleep his leader had seemed to have gotten.

He could... always ask later.

Maybe.

Minho paused at the door, one hand on the knob, and glanced over his shoulder one last time.

Chan stayed asleep.

Minho felt his expression slip.

Then he left- door clicking in soft behind him.

For a long moment, the studio was silent.

For a long moment, Chan pretended to still be asleep.

For a long moment, he laid there, wishing he had said something- anything- so Minho would have stayed.

But he hadn't.

And now the other boy was gone.

Rain pattered on the walk.
Minho gazed at the drops as they splattered and sunk into the cement, growing dark to gray.

It was humid and warm.

The passing shower was a small and light one with no plans to stay, but for the moment it seemed content to hover overhead this particular part of the city.

He hadn't brought an umbrella.

He didn't think he would need it.

The weather had been good that morning.

He stared ahead absently, thinking of himself, thinking of Chan, thinking of the memory in his dreams.

Of Seungmin's unfinished question, 'Who's-? ’ and unfinished promises.

Of summer storms.

*Thunder boomed and he crouched by the bed, frowning, waiting for it to end.*

*But his friend stood at the balcony doors, struggling to get them open as the rain and wind struck against the glass.*

*Minho stared.*

"What are you doing?"

*His friend looked back at him, beaming wide.*

"Come here."

"No."

"Come here!" his friend insisted.

*Minho shook his head.*

*His friend snorted and let go of the door to come and grab a hold of Minho's arm.*

*There was a brief struggle as Minho fought to stay put and his friend fought to haul him over, but in the end, the other boy won.*

*Minho stood behind him, reluctant, as his friend successfully shoved open the balcony doors.*

*A huge gust of wind slapped them in the face and pushed them back.*

*Minho turned to run, decidedly before they got blasted through the wall next.*

*But a hand on his elbow caught him.*

*He whipped his head around, annoyed and scared.*

*His friend gazed at him, smiling reassuringly even as the storm howled at his back.*

"It's okay."
Minho hesitated.

His friend squeezed his arm, smiling softening.

"I promise. Don't you trust me?"

An umbrella above his head.

The rain stopped.

Minho gazed at the droplets fanning out and away from his shoulders and head, watching as they fell to the ground at his feet and broke.

They never made a sound, lingering whispers in his ears.

His own voice, an echo.

"Okay."

He glanced over his shoulder.

Hyunseop met his gaze.

"What are you doing?" he asked. "You're going to get sick."

Minho looked at him, falling back into himself with ease.

One corner of his mouth curling up into half a smile.

His voice was incredibly soft.

"It's not raining that hard."

The smell of grease and sound of sizzling, glasses clinking, filled the air.

Outside the noise of falling rain grew louder, pattering against the glass panes of the small shop's window.

They sat at a square table against the wall in one of its furthest corners.

Hyunseop stared, watching as Minho cut and laid and flipped a line of meat along their table's grill with uncanny speed and focus.

"Um... Have you done this before?"

Minho glanced up at him briefly, unbothered, then glanced back down.

He reached over and grabbed Hyunseop's plate, throwing three-fourths of the meat from the grill onto it before setting it back down.

"I'll take that as a 'yes',"
Hyunseop mumbled.
He looked at his plate then at Minho's significantly smaller portion.

"Why do you keep giving me more?"

"You should eat."

"You should eat too."

"I will."

Minho pointed the cutting scissors in his left hand at the small dish of raw meat still off to his side.

"Should I put this on?"

"No, Minho- eat."

And Hyunseop leaned across the table, pushing half his portion off his plate and onto the younger boy's.

"You look tired. Did you sleep?"

Minho reluctantly accepted the new addition of food on his plate.

"I slept."

He finally set down the scissors and leaned away from the grill he had been over for the first fifteen minutes of their meal.

Hyunseop broke a pair of chopsticks and handed them over, waiting until Minho grabbed a piece of meat and actually put it in his mouth before speaking again.

"Why are you so good at this?"

"I used to work at a place like this back home," Minho answered, muffled.

Hyunseop did a double-take. "You did?"

Minho looked at him weirdly, as if his reaction was bizarre and Minho's behavior wasn't.

"Yeah. My parents said I should learn to work hard," he said. "They were hiring extra hands in the kitchen but I did delivery too."

"Weren't you fourteen?"

"No. They wouldn't hire anyone that young. I tried at first, but they said just to come back when I was older."

Minho laughed, a bit quietly.

Hyunseop didn't know what it was- but something was off.

He listened to the younger boy talk carefully, trying to figure out what was wrong.

"I don't think they really thought I would come back, but I did when I was sixteen. I came with signed permission from my mom and dad, and the manager-noona remembered me. She made me
call my parents just to make sure I wasn't lying, but my aunt was visiting at the time and picked up the phone and started bragging instead."

Minho laughed again, this time more genuine, looking horribly embarrassed but amused.

Hyunseop let himself feel a small amount of relief. Maybe Minho hadn't gotten very good sleep. Hopefully eating something would help.

"Your aunt sounds like she's proud of you," Hyunseop said as Minho's laughter trailed off.

The idol shrugged.

"I don't know what they were talking about. I was just standing there while the other workers in the back listened in. It must've worked out though, because the manager-noona gave me a starting job."

He shoved several cuts of meat into his mouth and looked over the table at Hyunseop with raised eyebrows.

"What is it?"

Hyunseop looked back at him, thinking, going through the timeline in his head.

Minho had come to Seoul for the first time around thirteen or fourteen for an audition, then he'd gone back home, then returned, performed at competitions, joined an official dance crew, was hired by several companies to help bolster backup dancer numbers and was eventually noticed by a JYP scout in 2015.

At that point though...

Minho would've been either fifteen or sixteen.

Which is when he would've started working for this barbeque place, apparently.

And then... gone to school?

Hyunseop's face contorted in confusion.

"Did you graduate high school?" he asked Minho.

Minho blinked.

"Of course I did."

"How were you dancing and working and going to school?"

"Ahh, that-"

Minho smiled.

"I didn't live alone in Seoul until I was at least seventeen. I just traveled back and forth from Gimpo to here on weekends when our crew was needed or when we had competitions. Sometimes BTS-hyungs needed extras for award shows or music videos, so we would come down on those days to rehearse. There were regular classes too, practices after school on Tuesdays and Thursdays, so I took the bus and sometimes the train."

"But weren't you scouted by JYP?"
"I failed the first audition," Minho told him, not looking particularly upset.

"If I had gotten in, I still would've gone to school in Gimpo and worked until I graduated. And just kept traveling back and forth as a trainee until whenever."

"And if you didn't become an idol?"

Minho smiled down at his plate where only two pieces of meat remained, poking at them with his chopsticks.

"I'd be home. Things would probably be easier then."

His voice was soft and cheery.

But there it was again.

That... sense ...that something was wrong.

Hyunseop looked at the younger boy.

The light was dimmed in his eyes.

What was he thinking? Where had he gone?

Was it to the past- or somewhere more recent?

It wasn't something Hyunseop had ever given much thought to before getting to know Minho.

What would all these teens be doing if they weren't in the idol industry?

What kind of lives would they be living?

Who would they be?

Hyunseop had never had particularly big aspirations.

He had grown up with parents who told him a paycheck and stability would bring him the best happiness in this life, that what was most important was becoming a productive member of society so that no one could ever look down on him poorly or trace a bad reputation back to his family.

His biggest accomplishment?

Getting his own apartment.

Being able to live on his own.

It meant something.

But in comparison to kids like this, who worked to the bone just to get a chance to stand on stage, to get their talents seen and heard-

Someone like him must've been boring.

But maybe Minho would've been boring too, had he not been an idol.

No...
The thought was gone as soon as it came.

Hyunseop looked at the other boy as he went back to grilling the last of their meat.

Wherever Minho would've gone, whatever Minho would've done, he would've been someone.

Some people were meant to stand on a stage. It didn't have to be a real one.

It didn't have to be in a field like entertainment.

It didn't have to be in a time or place where he was well-known.

Even a small community off the grid would have felt it had Minho decided to give up dreams of being an idol.

Had he decided to go live remotely, help out on a farm, or on a boat.

Once it was found, it couldn't be ignored.

Minho's energy.

His underlying passion.

His heart.

Hyunseop hadn't even known him for a year, hadn't even spent extensive time with him outside of broadcasts- but he knew.

First and second and third impressions, Minho was just a quiet kid with a strange and mischievous streak.

Odd habits.

Sometimes awkward.

Unable to stay focused on any one subject for too long because he'd get bored.

But lately Hyunseop had begun to see it.

Feel it.

The subtle impact beneath the reserved nature, the burst of something, burning, kindling inside.

There was something Minho was trying to do.

Something he was aiming for.

Hyunseop didn't know what it was. But it was there.

If only he could...

"Hyung. What did you want to do when you were a kid?"

Hyunseop pulled from his thoughts at the inquiry, lifting his gaze from the grill and looking at Minho.

The idol looked at him curiously, waiting for a response.
Hyunseop reached over and moved Minho's arm away from over the grill.

"You're gonna burn yourself," he mumbled.

Then he answered the younger boy's question.

"I don't know," he said honestly. "I didn't focus on anything like the future when I was younger."

He scratched the back of his neck and laughed.

"I wasn't really a diligent kid. I didn't like studying and messed around with my friends. It wasn't until I had to apply for high school that I really started focusing. But by then it was too late to get into anything good."

Hyunseop recalled the memory, the feelings, regret and unease, the fear of what kind of place he would have in the world if he couldn't get a job.

His parents.

Their disappointment.

Their only wish for him to be able to support himself so he wouldn't be the son who stayed at home.

There were plenty of families around them where parents didn't mind their sons and daughters sticking around until they were ready to go, or found a partner to be married to.

But Hyunseop's weren't like that.

His family wasn't the place to return to, it was the place to leave from.

Sometimes, when he listened to Minho talk, he would feel envious.

Warmth and support, unconditional love and pride that came from hard-earned accomplishments and the drive to never give up.

But if there was anything a person like Minho deserved- it was that.

So Hyunseop's envy never stayed.

What was the point in feeling wistful over someone else's life?

It wouldn't do anything.

To this day, Hyunseop didn't know what it was he wanted to do.

Being a bodyguard wasn't a job he wanted for the rest of his life.

But he had no particular talents and no particular skills.

He liked woodwork, but what the heck was that going to do for him in life?

Carving birds wouldn't earn him a living.

Or any sort of his parents' respect.

At the very best, he could get a desk job.
Depressing, but stable.

A future he could see playing out.

Predictable.

He should have tried harder.

*Why didn't I then?*

Because it hadn't felt important.

Because he hadn't had any dreams.

"Hyung."

Hyunseop slid his eyes from where they had fallen in front his empty plate.

He found Minho gazing at him intently, one hand reaching out.

His other hand was preoccupied with the cutting scissors hanging haphazardly from his fingers.

Hyunseop wanted to grab them before an accident could be made- but he hadn't gotten the chance- because Minho was speaking, words soft and serious and low.

"If there's something you want to do, then I don't think it's ever too late. So long as you try..."

He gestured lightly with his outstretched hand and glanced down.

Hyunseop followed the gaze and automatically reacted, offering the younger boy his empty plate.

Minho took it, smiling, eyes full crescents.

"I think hyung could do anything."

Hyunseop stared, taken aback, any words he wanted to say caught in the back of his throat.

His eyes blinked quickly and he ground his jaw, dropping his gaze to the table then to the chopsticks in his hand, trying to work his voice.

What was he doing getting worked up and emotional?

What was with that stupid feeling in his chest?

The overwhelming, sudden urge to burst into tears like a five-year old who'd just been given the best birthday gift.

'*You can do anything'."

That thing... that one thing his own parents had never said.

Friends had never said.

Because from the start, it had been clear to them what kind of life Hyunseop would have.

And it wasn't anything grand.
But here was someone who had been a total stranger not even seven months ago- putting faith in him.

Minho was four years younger. He was really... just a kid compared to Hyunseop and yet-

"Thank you."

His words met the table.

He couldn't look up.

Minho made a noise.

The other boy's hand slid into his line of vision, holding on to his plate.

It was full.

Hyunseop gazed at it for what felt like a very long time.

Then he took it, smiling, and raised his head.

Minho grinned, waggling his brows, and Hyunseop almost started to make a joke back about how much of a worm it made the other boy look like- when he realized Minho was still leaning across the table, over the grill- oblivious to the bottom of his shirt catching on fire.

"Oh my god."

Minho followed his eyes and looked down.

Then he yelped and threw himself back.

The scissors still hanging in his left hand fell onto his lap.

He cursed and shook his left hand out, getting out of his chair to rub very aggressively at the hole in his pant-leg.

The bottom of his shirt was still on fire.

Hyunseop panicked, pushing halfway out his chair, and threw his water- and the glass.

It hit Minho in the chest, and then hit the ground and shattered.

Hyunseop ignored the broken glass in favor of running around the table to grab a hold of Minho who had keeled over with a shout at the impact.

The other customers stared.

"I think there's a hole in my leg," Minho said about fifteen minutes later as they walked down the street.

Hyunseop eyed him worriedly. "Are you sure you're okay?"
The rain had ceased, turning into little more than a drizzle.
The sun peeked from the clouds, beginning to cast a warm glow down on their heads.
Minho pulled off his cap for the briefest second and tousled his hair before tugging it back on.
"I'm fine," he said, waving off Hyunseop's concern.
Then he snorted.
"The glass you threw hit harder."
Hyunseop looked at him.
"I said I was sorry."
"Sorry doesn't help a broken rib."
"You didn't break a rib."
"Only my abs protected me."
"What abs? You don't have any."
"How would you know?"
"You told me."
"Maybe I grew them."
Hyunseop leveled him with a flat look.
"You grew a twelve-pack over the weekend?"
Minho rolled his eyes like Hyunseop was the one being ridiculous.
"Of course not. I have a one-pack."
"That's just a stomach."
"It's a stomach with an ab."
"No, Minho, that's-"
Hyunseop stopped and sighed.
Minho looked at him from the corner of his eye, way too amused.
"I'm kidding. It doesn't really hurt hyung."
Hyunseop only sighed again.
"I'd hope it didn't. I feel like your company would hunt me down or something if you got hurt."
"No, they wouldn't."
Minho looked thoughtful for a moment before he grinned.
"My manager-hyung might though."

"That's great, Minho."

They stopped at the corner of the street where they had first met.

Minho turned and faced him, eyes bright.

"Sorry you had to pay. Next time I can take the bill?"

"You don't have to. You're younger you know."

"How does your wallet feel about that, hyung?"

"Depressed- because you eat a lot."

Minho's expression dropped into fake outrage. "You eat way more than me!" he exclaimed.

"I wouldn't have to if you didn't keep filling my plate," Hyunseop told him very pointedly. "Seriously... Take care of yourself first next time."

"That's not proper manners," Minho retorted, facial features still mockingly pinched.

Hyunseop rolled his eyes and huffed through a grin.

He pressed a finger into the middle of Minho's furrowed brow where a small crease had formed.

"You're gonna get wrinkles," he admonished.

And Minho froze.

Hyunseop stopped.

Minho was looking at him stunned.

"What is it?" Hyunseop asked, startled by the idol's reaction.

Minho shook his head, mouth dropping open, closing, falling open again slightly.

Something in his eyes- shock and distress- gone as soon as it had come, replaced by a bewilderment and a desperation to make it go away.

"Minho?"

Hyunseop dropped his hand.

And Minho shook his head, putting on a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes.


"You don't have to apologize," Hyunseop told him, frowning ever so slightly. "I didn't mean to-"

And he paused- because he wasn't quite sure what he had done.

Or how to fix it.

*Was* there something to fix?
He didn't know.

But whatever he had done had obviously meant something to Minho in some way.

And had put that look on his face.

And it wasn't one Hyunseop really ever wanted to see again.

Maybe he had done something wrong- maybe he hadn't.

It didn't matter.

He should say something.

Anything.

Own up to the mistake so it wouldn't happen again.

But what was the mistake?

His brain had all but given up on trying to answer, useless and short-circuiting.

He looked down at Minho, mind completely blank.

"Uhhh..."

Minho blinked, seeming to fall back into himself as he took in the constipated look Hyunseop must've had on his face.

Because it felt like it was there.

Hyunseop felt the sweat gather on the back of his neck the longer he was stared at.

"Um. I won't poke you again," he managed to get out, half-choking on the words.

Minho stared at him for the longest time- then burst into laughter so loud it made the others passing by turn and give them looks.

"Ai... hyung..."

Amusement crawled onto his face, bright and warm.

"It's not like that. Really. You reminded me of something and I got surprised."

"I thought it was something bad," Hyunseop told him very honestly, mouth twisting down.

Because that expression on Minho's face had been alarming.

But Minho only shook his head again, offering a real smile his way.

Or at least Hyunseop hoped it was.

"It wasn't anything. I promise."

Hyunseop eyed the younger boy for a moment- then slumped his shoulders, sighing loud.

"I'll take your word for it."
And Minho seemed genuinely happy to hear it.

He beamed.

"Thanks."

"No problem."

Minho had put trust in him earlier.

Hunseop would do the same - at least until Minho was ready to share what it really was.

He reached out and fondly pat the top of the idol's head.

"The food was good. We should do it again- when you come back from America."

Minho peered up at him, curiously.

"You'd want to?"

"Of course!" Hunseop insisted. "You have to tell me about America. I've never been there, you know."

Realization fell across Minho's face- and something apologetic too.

Hunseop stopped him before he could do anything ridiculous like say sorry.

"No. Stop. That's not your fault," he said, exasperated. "It's my own for never traveling. One day I will."

Minho looked at him with a goofy grin.

"You should go somewhere with good food."

Hunseop laughed.

"That's really all you think about? We just ate!"

"You should eat well!" Minho protested, eyes growing wide.

Hunseop just smiled.

"Fine. If I go somewhere with good food, I'll tell you all about it. You'll probably have been there though."

"Doesn't matter, hyung. I'll listen."

Hunseop couldn't help it.

He punched Minho in the shoulder very lightly, grinning.

"That a promise? I'll hold you to it," he warned.

Minho hesitated, expression shifting.

Just for the slightest second.
Then he pressed his own fist into Hyunseop's stomach and returned the grin.

"Okay."

On the walk home, the sun broke through the clouds.

Minho ambled along the sidewalk in a far cheerier mood than before.

Woojin had sent a message waving off his apology and saying they were going to try and go to karaoke, so Minho should hurry up and return so they could go.

Minho had fired back a text asking if Hyunjin was going, which Woojin replied to swiftly with for them to stop fighting before he joined in on the pranks and made them both suffer.

Needless to say, Minho had quickly given in.

For now.

At least around Woojin he'd pretend.

Hyunjin was sorely mistaken if he thought Minho would ever give in.

His phone rang.

He slid it unlocked and answered without checking.

His mother's voice broke through.

"Minho."

He blinked in surprise and slowed his walk at the tone.

"Mom?"

"I tried to reach you earlier, but you didn't answer."

He pulled himself over beneath the awning of a small bookstore and stopped walking.

"Is everything okay?"

His mother hesitated.

Minho felt uneasiness and dread pool in his gut.

"Mom...?" he questioned again, quieter than before.

She hesitated for only a moment longer.

Then said very softly-

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She hesitated for only a moment longer.

Then said very softly-
"I'm so sorry, Minho."

He stared at the ground.
"I'm worried about Minho."

Those were the words Chan had quietly spoken to Woojin in the muted hours of the early morning, standing at the stove, cooking with a pan.

Woojin leaned on the counter beside him, arms folded across his chest, jaw squared and face pensive as he listened.

"Did he tell you something?" he questioned in an equally low voice.

"No."

And Chan pushed his spatula aggressively at the eggs in the pan, brow pinched in frustration.

"He hasn't told me anything. That's the problem."

He grabbed the handle of the pan and shook it, trying to dislodge the pair of sunny-side eggs from where they had gotten stuck.

"I was hoping he would've told you."

"Well he hasn't come to me for anything," Woojin answered. "When we talk, it's about normal stuff."

"What 'normal' stuff?"

"His day. What he did. What he wants to do. And then we play games or watch videos online."

Woojin watched Chan twist the stove off and stare down at his eggs, bothered. He felt himself frown.

"What is it?"

Chan hesitated.

Woojin pushed away from the counter and straightened, facing the other boy fully. "What?"

Chan glanced at him- then glanced away- seemingly unable to keep his gaze from falling. "I... thought something seemed off for a while. Didn't know what it was," he murmured. "Did you ever think it was weird sometimes? When he gets distracted or unfocused? Or can't seem to settle down?"

"He's random," Woojin answered simply.
In reality, Woojin knew it was more than that, but sometimes all Chan needed was a word or two to let his cluttered thoughts unfurl.

To let them build and break out.

It was enough, sometimes, just to show the other boy he was listening.

Sure enough, Chan shook his head and answered his own questions.

"It's more than that. I thought he just had trouble focusing- that's why he bought that ball to mess around with. That he was still nervous about standing and speaking up in front of others on his own. Or that he thinks he's not good enough."

Woojin regarded Chan closely. "He is."

Chan's eyes flickered over to him, slightly annoyed. "I know that. We all do. You've seen him on stage lately. He's confident. And powerful. You can't even tell he's self-conscious because he does well."

"Okay..." Woojin said carefully. "Then what's the problem?"

"I think he dissociates."

Well Woojin could have figured that one out.

It was obvious to anyone who watched Minho long enough.

Even if he was with the members, he was off by himself, thoughts a million miles away doing... *something*.

None of them knew what it was, but Woojin hadn't thought of it as much of a concern.

It never affected Minho on stage and had never been something the younger boy had shared with the rest of the group as something to keep an eye out for.

Besides, he wasn't the only member to fall into small dissociative episodes.

Jisung did too.

It just wasn't something any of them had addressed out loud- though they all knew it was there.

Chan must've read the un-surprise on his face as something else, because he frowned and stopped paying attention to the turned off stove and his sad pair of eggs completely to stare Woojin down.

"I know you already knew that. I mean I think that dissociation comes from something else."

"Like what?"

"I don't know," Chan stressed. "He's always getting sick. A cold every few weeks- or- or he's just so reckless - not paying attention and getting hurt. And I've never seen anyone get so drained from the sun before, like he's going to melt or something. You really haven't noticed anything?"

And now Chan sounded mad.

Woojin stared at him, trying to figure out where the anger was coming from- and who it was for.
It wasn't for Woojin himself, that much he knew. But for who then?

Minho? Himself?

The situation?

Was there even a situation?

As far as Woojin knew, Minho had passed out once in all their time spent together. And it was approximately six hours ago.

That was it.

It wasn't particularly a good thing, but it was *common* for trainees and idols to work to the brink of exhaustion- and when their bodies were tired- for them to collapse or lie down and try and tell themselves they were okay.

In the past weeks, there had been nothing alarming about Minho or his health or even his habits.

If anything, he had opened up *more* to them in the months leading up to their anniversary comeback- and as Chan had noted- gotten stronger.

Confident and lively.

He didn't hide anymore.

So Woojin answered honestly- because he wasn't the sort to lie. And because being anything else would've only frustrated Chan further.

"No. I haven't noticed anything," he admitted.

Chan sighed. "Maybe I'm overthinking."

Woojin didn't say anything, waiting. Chan spoke again a moment after, voice quieting.

"I talked to him a little while ago. He doesn't know what happened."

"He doesn't remember?"

"So he says."

“What-” Woojin blinked at his friend curiously. “You don’t believe him?"

“I don’t know."

Woojin regarded him carefully. “Why would he lie?"

“I don’t know ,” Chan said again, a bit more force to his words.

But he didn’t elaborate, and he didn’t try to explain.


"I guess," Chan uttered, sounding completely unconvinced.

Now it was Woojin's turn to sigh.
He reached out and clasped his leader on the shoulder, giving him a light shake.

"It'll be fine. We can keep an eye out just in case. You have him resting tomorrow anyway, right? One of the manager-hyungs can be here to watch if you want. If you asked management, I don't think Donggyu-hyung would mind."

Chan slumped, the anger dwindling from the lines on his face and tension in his muscles.

Woojin dropped his hand and watched as Chan went back to his pan to take it off the stove and find a plate.

He didn't know how to describe it.

Somehow, he wanted to help.

Chan had enough on his shoulders as their leader and producer. He had also been the one who brought them all together, as a team- as one.

But looking after seven younger members wasn’t easy.

Keeping up with their well-being and health even harder.

Not every wound they carried was physical. And they were all so young.

Woojin too.

The members might have liked to joke about it, but he was just as caught up in that strange period of adolescence to adulthood they were going through.

Insecurities and doubts, growing desires and passions and dreams- carelessness, carefulness- it all fumbled together in a tightly wound ball of string they had to sit down and take the time to unravel.

But they were always on the move, always working, coming back- practicing, performing, traveling.

There wasn't enough rest to do it. And there wouldn't be for a while.

Not until they had left the rookie-status behind and had cemented a place in the industry.

A place that wouldn't go away if they let themselves take a needed break.

Woojin and Chan had always split the responsibility naturally when it came to looking after the team, stepping in when the other wasn't present or had temporarily stepped out.

It wouldn't hurt to lean a bit more of his attention Minho's way.

So long as the younger boy didn't notice their hovering, he wasn't likely to close himself up.

Hopefully he'd remain oblivious.

Hopefully Minho had just forgotten to drink and eat enough before deciding to practice on his own.

Hopefully nothing else was wrong.
"Are you crazy?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Minho, we just had this conversation last night."

Hyunjin stood by his dresser, a small neck towel in hand, watching Minho and Chan argue. Not because he wanted to- but because he had no where else to go.

And he wasn't stupid or nearly brave enough to try and walk between them to get to the door.

Instead, he looked down, drying out his hair and silently hoping his two older members would either forget he was there or notice he was there and then decide not to fight. Because it sounded like they were about to break into a-

"I didn't do it on purpose."

"Then what were you doing? Huh?" Chan nodded his chin at Minho briefly in challenge, jaw squared.

Everything in his stance spoke ready for a fight.

Or at the very least, a hand ready to reach out and shake some sense back into Minho's body.

Hyunjin knew the feeling. He had tried it himself not that long ago when he first came across Minho sitting on that bench entirely zoned out.

But witnessing it was different.

Felt more dangerous.

More tense.

Maybe that's why Minho had gotten so fussy with him when Hyunjin had grabbed him and tried to get him to stand.

Even now, his hyung looked spooked.

Wide-eyed, with a face carved from stone, eyes big and dark and ready to fight back.

Why?

He hadn't been like this before.

Did something else happen with Minho and Chan before?

Hyunjin slowed his efforts to towel his hair, peering up.

The two stood opposite each other, glaring still, caught in some sort of silent exchange.

An argument.

Then Chan spoke aloud.

And he sounded defeated. And he sounded upset. And he sounded like all he wanted was some sort of reassurance things were okay.
"What's been with you lately?"

Minho maintained his cold stance, staring down their leader without any fear of reprimand. "What? I can't help somebody else if they need it?"

Chan's eyes narrowed at the tone.

He drew himself up- that brief moment of weakness- gone, replaced with growing heat.

His eyes were dark embers, smoldering.

"Not if you don't know how to take care of yourself first," he ground out. "Not if you can't act like a responsible adult."

Minho bristled and pulled himself back, smiling through a pissed-off laugh. "Ya, you're saying some real crazy stuff. You want me to ignore people now? Why? Because of a fall?"

"You didn't fall, you passed out!" Chan snapped.

"But I said I was okay!" Minho said back, voice raising loud.

Hyunjin looked at him, startled.

Minho raised his voice all the time when he was fighting. Even over minor disagreements or small rounds of bickering, he tended to get loud.

But this was different.

He didn't just sound mad. He sounded disturbed.

And his eyes were impossibly huge.

Chan was silent. Staring.

Minho faltered ever so slightly under the look.

Hyunjin really... really wished he was anywhere but here.

For a moment, no one spoke or moved. Until Chan opened his mouth and told Minho-

"I don't care what you said. I'm telling you what I see. I see someone being reckless. And careless. And who obviously doesn't know the simple meaning of the word 'rest'."

The words must've struck something in Minho, because the small fear on his face changed to anger.

"Speak for yourself," Minho scoffed. "You do the same thing."

Chan's expression clammed up immediately and he took a step forward, eyes blazing.

"This isn't about me."

"So it's different if it's anyone else asking you to look after yourself. If we want the same thing from you." Minho laughed lightly. Sarcastically. "Okay. Understood. Because hyung says so, right?"

He was smiling again, sweet words in no way matching the clear fury written in every line of his body.
"Be quiet, Minho," Chan said.

"Or what? What are you gonna do?"

"Minho. Shut up."

Minho stared at Chan.

Unafraid.

Or if he was, he was way better at hiding it than any of the other members would've been in the face of their ticked-off leader.

Hyunjin wondered if now was the best time to maybe clear his throat or make some sort of noise, because everything seemed like it was one second away from-

"Do something."

Chan looked at Minho, offended, as if he hadn't heard him right. "I'm sorry?"

Minho didn't move. "Do something," he ordered again.

His voice hiked suddenly in volume as he goaded the older boy.

"Do something! *Do something!* Go ahead! Yell! Do it! You want to, right? You want to be mad? Hit me."

He beckoned Chan forward once with a hand.

"Go on. Come here. Hit me. Hit me! Come get it out, but don't tell me to shut up when you're the one picking a fight!" he exclaimed, finger pointing.

A hand had risen to his waist as it always had when he was truly upset, like he was holding on to himself, like he didn't know how else to express it beyond body gestures and loud words.

He glanced over, quickly, at Hyunjin, as though acknowledging he knew the other boy was there.

Hyunjin watched him, flabbergasted.

Minho was the first to vocalize his thoughts in any given situation- whether he agreed or disagreed- whether he was upset or complaining or wanted something changed.

If he was offended, the members knew right away.

If he was hurt, there was no hiding it on his face.

He confronted them immediately, and if he couldn't, then he made sure they knew he'd say something later.

But he never ever provoked a fight.

He hated it.

He could barely even stand the idea of any of them not getting along. Had been worried for days over Chan and Changbin fighting pre-debut until they revealed it was a track, *Third Eye*, they'd been working on while yelling at one another.
When Hyunjin and Jisung had fought, Minho had spent the time back and forth between them, just being there, in silence or talking or distracting them with inane conversations or discussions so silly they'd turn into much lighter arguments that helped steal their minds from the fight they'd just come out of.

Minho was searching.

He was pushing.

Hyunjin stared at the other dancer when the realization hit.

Sure enough, Chan burst, skin flushed red, veins in his neck showing as he visibly restrained himself from lunging at Minho and pulling him in.

"Are you insane? I'm not going to hit you- Minho- what the hell is wrong with you? I wouldn't- I would never-"

It was clear how he struggled to collect his flying thoughts and put them in order. How he struggled to make sense of his own jumbled emotions.

Next to Hyunjin and Minho, there was no one else in their group as driven by their emotions as Chan. As driven to speak and act on them even if he never knew the end result.

Chan was their leader.

He was also twenty-one.

He wasn't perfect. He didn't have everything figured out.

They knew this. All the members did.

But it was easy, depending on Chan as much as they did, to forget sometimes he was barely clinging on too.

To himself.

To them.

Hyunjin hadn't thought it was unusual for Chan to scold Minho.

But Minho must've seen something else.

"Well?" Minho urged.

Chan answered, eyes growing wide and flitting across Minho's face in bewilderment.

"How could you think I'd hurt you? I'm coming to you, worried as your friend, and your leader who wants to make sure you're okay. There's a million other things going on. I can't be the one wondering how we're going to make formations and adjust songs as a group of eight if you fall out now because you've gotten sick. All I want is for you to take care of yourself. To come to us for help if there's something wrong so we can do something. I've told you. You're no good to us hurt."

And Minho kept his stance, kept his finger pointing, and hand on his waist, but the heat was gone from his face and gone from his voice.
"I said I was okay."

"I know."

"You're overreacting. I'm fine."

"Are you?"

"I said I am."

Minho dropped his stance. He gazed at Chan with something of a frown. "Is something not working?"

Chan did a double-take. "What?"

"Is it not working? Something you're making?"

Chan's mouth shut.

There was an unreadable expression on his face for the briefest of seconds before it was wiped away in the tiniest hints of frustration again.

"No. That's not-"

And his eyes, for the first time, wandered over to where Hyunjin stood.

Still awkwardly by the dresser.

Towel in hand- watching.

Chan's eyebrows lowered.

He opened his mouth- closed it- then sighed and shook his head.

When he returned his gaze to Minho, he was visibly upset again, but it wasn't from any sort of anger.

"I'm going to the studio," he said, shoulders slumping all of a sudden.

Minho's frown grew. "Do you want company?"

Chan pinched the bridge of his nose, looking like he was two seconds away from silently bursting a blood vessel.

"No, Minho. I want you to stay here. Do... something else, because I know you won't rest."

"Well if I'm not tired I'm not going to rest," Minho answered like it should have been obvious.

Hyunjin inwardly brought a palm to his head.

Chan, on his part, just looked at Minho for a long, long moment- as though he were an idiot.

Then he shook his head again and turned to go.

"Just mind yourself, yeah? I'm not going to try if you don't care."

"I care."
Chan didn't answer.

Minho's brow furrowed. He called after Chan's back.

"I care. What are you talking about?"

But Chan left without another word, pulling in the bedroom door closed with a soft click- leaving Minho and Hyunjin for an uncomfortable amount of time in quiet.

Hyunjin didn't know what to say.

He felt as though there were something he was missing out on.

Something larger at hand that Chan knew, and maybe Minho too, because it was too sudden- their argument and their anger- for it to have come from nothing.

Minho's eyes slid in his direction.

His gaze roamed across Hyunjin's face, lips pushing down.

He looked lost.

In the next second, he had walked over, taking the towel from Hyunjin's unresponsive hands and ruffling through his own hair.

He paused after a moment, apparently reading something in Hyunjin's expression, because he started toweling Hyunjin's hair too, standing on his toes.

"Sorry," Minho mumbled.

It was unclear what he was apologizing for.

Hyunjin looked at the older boy. "It's fine, hyung."

It was unclear what Hyunjin was talking about too.

Minho kept toweling his hair, and now Hyunjin could see and feel the trembling of the other boy's fingers.

He caught one of Minho's wrists, staring.

"Are you okay?" he asked seriously.

Minho gazed at the hand gripping his arm.

"I'm fine," he said, distantly.

"Even after yesterday?"

Minho's eyes rose and locked with Hyunjin's. His expression was confused, like he couldn't understand the concern Hyunjin was asking with.

"You fainted," Hyunjin reminded him, when it was clear Minho wouldn't answer.

"Oh. That." And Minho blinked, as though returning to himself from a place far away.

He glanced down at the towel, then again at Hyunjin's hand on his wrist, then let his gaze wander
onto Hyunjin's face once more.

He put on a smile.

"Well, I'm okay. I didn't mean for it to happen."

Hyunjin studied him.

Minho smiled some more.

He tugged his wrist lightly and pulled away, putting some distance between them before whipping at Hyunjin's stomach with the towel.

"Go eat."

"Hyung-"

"Go eat," Minho said, more insistent, louder than before.

He kept grinning, though Hyunjin could see it again in the other boy's eyes.

He wanted to be alone.

Hyunjin hesitated only once more before nodding. He turned to his dresser and grabbed a fresh set of clothes, wasting no time in pulling them on.

Behind him, he could hear Minho sigh to himself and start to get undressed.

By the time Hyunjin had shut his drawer and turned around again, Minho was on his bed, naked, face-down in the sheets.

Hyunjin made a face.

He reopened his drawer and yanked out a random pair of sweats. He dropped them on the older boy as he passed and said-

"Please don't make me look at your butt."

Minho snorted, but rolled over to grab the pants anyway.

Hyunjin slapped a hand over his eyes and blindly headed for the door.

"You big baby," Minho said after him, small laughter in his voice. "Like you haven't seen it before."

"Not because I wanted to," Hyunjin said back.

He stepped outside and shut the door.

Running into Jisung waiting on the other side.

He blinked and looked down. The shorter boy looked up.

"Minho-hyung?" Jisung asked quietly.

"Inside," Hyunjin answered, though it was obvious.

"I meant about Chan-hyung."
"Oh." Hyunjin paused. He thought on it for a brief second, frowning just a bit. "Well. He's fine. I guess. So he says."

Jisung snorted. "And you believe him?"

Hyunjin glanced at Jisung again. "No. Who would? But he doesn't want to talk."

Jisung gave him an infuriatingly smug look, raising his eyebrows. "Maybe to you."

Hyunjin pushed him lightly. Jisung pushed him back.

They exchanged fake glowers and jostled each other as they exchanged spots.

But before Jisung grabbed a hold of the door and pushed it in, he sent Hyunjin a short look, expression serious.

"Don't come back in for a while. Okay?"

Hyunjin quirked an eyebrow, about to make a joke- but Jisung's expression was unmoving, without a trace of humor.

Hyunjin eyed him peculiarly.

What was that about?

A part of him wanted to ask.

Another part of him knew Jisung would never tell him unless he wanted to.

So Hyunjin nodded.

Jisung nodded in return.

He slipped into the room.

The last thing Hyunjin heard before the door shut completely was Jisung's lightly spoken-

"Hyung? It's me- ya- why aren't you wearing any pants?"

Hyunjin stood in the darkened hallway for only a brief moment- and then headed for the kitchen where he could hear the others.

There was a lot he wanted to know.

But now wasn't the time to ask.

...Right?

"So. That must've been a riveting conversation."

Chan kept clicking in his software, adjusting the timeline on two instrumental layers he'd brought in. His voice was flat- absent and distracted.
"What?"

"With Minho."

Chan's finger on his mouse stilled. He felt the eyes of his manager on the back of his head.

“What about it?”

"Were you able to get it all out? You sounded like you had a lot to say.”

"You sound like you have something to say,” Chan answered a bit clipped.

“I don’t.”

Chan waited.

And waited some more.

When Jaehyun still hadn’t said anything after two minutes, Chan gave in and spun around.

He looked at his manager pointedly.

“Alright. What did I do wrong?”

Jaehyun raised his eyebrows, lifting his eyes from his phone.

He sat on the studio’s couch, one leg crossed over the other, comfortably slouched down.

“I never said you did anything wrong.”

"You didn’t have to.” Chan wiggled his fingers a bit impatiently. “I felt it in the air.”

Jaehyun made an extremely noncommittal noise and returned his eyes to his phone, scrolling with a thumb.

“You didn’t think you were going a bit too far?”

"With what? A scolding?” Chan frowned. “I think it was needed. Wouldn’t you have done the same thing?”

"Probably not, since I didn’t,” Jaehyun replied idly. “The kid went out for a walk and got turned around. No harm done. I’ve never seen you react like that before.”

“Well that’s not true,” Chan said frowning further.

Because he had always scolded all his members- even other trainees way back before in pre-debut whenever they had done something dangerous or pulled any tricks that would've gotten them injured.

Jisung had even brought it up again during their last episode filming of Finding Stray Kids.

It was so easy to lose everything because of an injury or from recklessness.

Chan had been an athlete- a swimmer.

Teammates who didn’t take care of themselves or tore muscles- it sat them out of their careers for years. Forget playing for any university in the future, they couldn’t even finish the race ahead.
Chan didn’t want that to happen—couldn’t have it happen to any of his members. It would destroy them.

What would Changbin do if something had happened to take away his ability to create? Jisung?

If Felix or Minho couldn’t dance anymore?

If Seungmin or Woojin couldn’t sing?

If Chan had never debuted with these eight other members under the name of Stray Kids?

No.

He couldn’t imagine it.

He wouldn’t.

It was just...

"Sometimes, I don’t know," Chan sighed, leaning over in his chair.

He set his elbows on his thighs and stared at the ground, contemplation deep in the lines of his face.

“I don’t know if I’ve done enough. Or too much. They’re not kids, but they’re not adults. They can take care of themselves— but they can’t. Or maybe I’m the only one who feels that way.”

He felt Jaehyun’s gaze settle on him calmly.

“It’s not easy being a leader.”

"No. It’s not,” Chan admitted.

He hesitated.

“I’m trying. I can’t help being worried. Wanting to fix things. Anything so we can all stay together.”

He let out a soft laugh, almost detrimental.

“I might be the only one who feels that way though. At least as strongly.”

Because he knew the other members to a degree felt the same way as him— that they had found something in each other, in the team, that made them want to stay.

But Chan wanted it forever.

He needed them.

It was all he had.

And it scared him.

Losing any of it...

It was bound to happen.
They’d been together for over a year now in the industry.
Eventually his members wouldn’t depend on him.
Eventually they’d think his hovering, his leadership was too much.
When they wanted to do their own things and take their own risks.
When they didn’t want to be just Stray Kids anymore.
Realistically Chan knew those days were far off- at least a few more years away down the road.
But it would happen.
That was life.
People and time moved on.
They didn’t stop.
Not for anyone.
No matter how much he wished it would.
Every day spent working was just another reminder that one day it would be gone.
Something different, something new, would be in its place instead.
“You’re young,” Jaehyun said, tapping into his thoughts lightly. “It’s hard to know if anything you ever do is right. If the outcome will be good or set you up for failure.”
Chan lifted his head at those words and looked at his manager, listening intently.
Jaehyun returned the look with an expression that gave nothing away. “It’s alright to have fears. But you should be careful. Those fears might bleed into something else. Other affairs.”
Chan stared, hearing the implication loud and clear.
"You think I’m projecting onto Minho.”
“I think you’ve been under stress. I think Minho is the easiest person for you to point your worries towards.”
It was fascinating how incredibly uninvested yet invested Jaehyun managed to sound.
There was no one else who could pull it off.
Seriously, it had to have been a talent.
Chan turned back towards his computer, hand falling on his mouse again, thinking on his manager’s words.
Maybe there was some truth in it.
Maybe he had been projecting.
Chan felt his mouth twist down as he saved the current project and started another, fresh and new.
Maybe.

But Minho’s dissociative episodes had grown more frequent in a way they hadn’t before.

Nearly twenty minutes he’d been staring up at the bottom of Chan’s bunk away from the world while Chan sat there, silent and thinking until Chan had finally spoken up- and tried to pull him out.

Even in the weeks before, Minho’s mind had vanished, eyes growing vacant randomly during their time backstage in the waiting rooms or in van rides back home.

It was startling how lost in thought he would get if left on his own.

It used to be during their VLIVES, in their early months after debut, where Chan would have to ask a question or drop a hand or make some sort of contact- anything- to get Minho back to where they were.

Nowadays, Chan just sat near to him, beside him in broadcasts and interviews if he could.

But it didn’t seem like it mattered how much time they spent together.

Trying to understand Minho was impossible.

“You want to be mad?”

“Is something not working?”

”Do you want company?"

So why did it seem like Minho could understand him just fine?

Chan shook his head to himself and made a noise.

Frustrating.

How frustrating.

He didn’t think he was that easy to read.

As their leader, as one of the oldest, his own problems shouldn't be that easy to see.

His thoughts drifted. Away from himself again.

There had to be some way to help Minho.

To let him know he wasn’t alone.

And maybe if Chan discovered something useful, he could share it with Jisung too.

Being able to help them both would be perfect.

He could only keep his fingers crossed Minho wouldn't be upset with him tomorrow.

Chan had never seen Minho like that before- at least not towards him.

It'd been alarming.

It’d been a wake-up call to Chan that he needed to calm down.
Use his head.

*Think.*

He owed Minho thanks.

He just hoped he could return it.

"We have a team, 3RACHA- the members in it write and produce our songs."

Changbin put the foot that had been about to round the corner down and out of sight.

He had been on the way back from the bathroom, when he had heard Minho's voice.

Speaking unusually formally, but oddly comfortably, even as he fumbled over his words.

A quick peek had revealed BTS's J-Hope.

But that was all Changbin had glimpsed before pulling himself away and against the wall.

He didn't want to interrupt.

It wasn't often Minho even got the chance to talk to his old hyungs.

Or employers.

Or... whoever Bangtan were to him.

Were they coworkers?

How did that even work?

Changbin had never directly asked.

He thought it might be awkward for Minho.

Although judging by the sound of things... Minho was doing a perfectly fine job making things awkward himself.


He felt himself smile a bit. The other dancer sounded almost proud.

Changbin hoped Minho realized it.

"Ah. Yes. Hyunjinnie does too- and-"

Changbin sighed. His hyung would never take a direct compliment off-screen from cameras, would he?

J-Hope, on the other hand, huffed in amusement.
"He's the one who's been MCing this past week. We met him. I think Yoongi-hyung told him to tie his shoe."

Changbin blinked at the casual use of Suga's real name. So Minho was familiar enough with BTS to go past stage names?

Changbin shifted- and paid a bit more attention to the conversation at hand.

But oddly enough, it had grown quiet.

An unusual sort of quiet.

Something tense.

He frowned.

J-Hope spoke.

"I've been meaning to ask, now that I can see you like this alone. About back then."

A slight pause.

"Do they know?"

Changbin's frown grew. His brow furrowed in confusion at the question.

Who was 'they'?

But Minho didn't speak.

Didn't offer up any sort of answers.

Instead he heard the silence stretch on, and then J-Hope's somewhat alarmed call of Minho's name.

And Changbin, worried, peeked his head around the corner of the wall and saw the older dancer reaching for Minho.

Minho who was pale and wide-eyed and stunned in a way Changbin couldn't recall seeing him look like before.

It made him want to step out and intervene.

He opened his mouth to speak.

But then Jisung was there, all of a sudden, from the opposite end of the hall.

Changbin stared, bewildered, because the other boy definitely hadn't been there before.

But neither Jisung nor Minho seemed to realize he was watching them from behind, because they bowed politely at J-Hope before turning away, heading towards their waiting room without ever looking back.

Both Changbin and J-Hope watched Minho shuffle close to Jisung.

Watched Jisung pull him in.

Watched the duo walk in quiet with a carefulness that only came with secret knowledge.
Then J-Hope turned away- caught sight of Changbin- and paused.

Changbin blinked, and hastily threw himself into a respectful bow.

J-Hope bowed back a bit, regarding him with wondering, thoughtful eyes.

Changbin didn't know what to make of it.

Didn't know what to make of the words, 'Do they know?'

But what he did know, going back to their waiting room, noticing Jisung and Minho sitting, getting styled, silent and withdrawn-

Was that something wasn't right.

Something had happened.

But what?

His gaze wandered, and he noticed Chan sitting off in the corner by the window, eyes on Minho, chewing pensively, deep in thought.

Changbin stared.

No.

Seriously.

What was with that?

"Thanks dad. Yeah, no, that's... helpful." Chan shifted his phone from his right ear to his left, holding it up with a raised shoulder as he shut the books in front of him closed.

"Remember to approach it carefully. I don't want you getting into a fight."

Chan huffed out a light laugh at his father's concern.

"We're not gonna fight, dad. It'll be fine. He's a good guy."

"Right. He's your 'man'."

"Can you not say it like that?"

His father's laughter broke loudly through the phone.

Chan made a face, reaching over his books to close the lid of his laptop down.

"Dad. C'mon."

"I'm joking. Don't get upset. Your mother and I aren't particularly concerned with you finding someone. You will in your own time. When you're older. And ready. With the right person."
"Didn't I get this talk before?"

"That was before you flew off to Korea. And it was about Stranger-Danger, not a girlfriend."

"I'm not looking for a girlfriend, dad. You know I'm not interested."

"Oh, I know."

Chan made a face again.

"I meant not now. There's too much work to get done. I really wish you would stop implying things with your voice."

"I'm not implying anything, kiddo. It's your ears that are hearing it."

Chan barely stopped himself from rolling his eyes.

He knew his father wouldn't be able to see it way down in Australia, but parents were weird.

They had inhuman senses.

One time he had gotten irritated with his mother's nagging and started silently mimicking her lecture-only to have her stop mid-rant on the other end of the line and start to accuse him of mocking her.

That had been terrifying.

He shuddered, trying to erase the memory.

At the bedroom door, a light knock came, and Chan turned, contemplative- before calling out, "Come in."

Felix poked his head inside.

Chan's expression brightened. He gestured for the younger boy to come in and shut the door behind him, then turned his attention back to the phone.

"I'm gonna go now, Felix is here. And I've got to get some work done."

"Make sure you rest. Tell him I said, 'hi'."

"Will do. Love you."

He pulled the phone away and ended the call.

Felix came over, confusion clear on his face.

"What are you doing in here?" he wondered.

"Privacy," Chan answered simply.

Felix stared.

"Oh." He paused. Jabbed a thumb over his shoulder awkwardly at the door. "Oh, I can go-

Chan looked at him, eyebrow quirking, grin tugging at his lips, incredulous. "Get your mind out of the gutter," he said, slipping into English with ease. "I messaged you to come over, remember?"
He motioned for Felix to get closer.

He could see why the younger boy would think it was weird he was inside the spare room meant for when one of their managers or both had to spend the night, but it was one of the places none of the member usually suspected he was in when he needed to be alone without making the trip to the studio.

He knew he should feel somewhat bad about keeping his whereabouts unknown, but it was nice having a quiet place still close to the others without them knowing sometimes.

Although if any of the members heard him say that, they would jump on him immediately for hypocrisy.

"You texted me," Felix said, comfortable in English.

"Yeah." Chan shifted around in his chair and watched as the other boy took a seat on the spare bed against the wall.

The room was in no way big. The distance between them was small.

"I just got off with my dad. I asked him about some of the stuff in your books," Chan said. "He said it reminded him of something my mom's brother had. But it wasn't dissociation. It was a type of anxiety that actually pointed towards a bipolar disorder instead. He couldn't focus, and his thoughts were all over the place at times. His conversations and behavior could get random but he didn't seem to think it was anything out of the ordinary."

Felix pulled one of his legs up into his lap. "Okay. And you think this relates to Minho?"

"No, it's not that," Chan answered calmly.

He glanced back at one of the books Felix had lent him on anxiety and panic disorders. The other two books were on health.

While Felix struggled himself with episodes of anxiety and panic - checking his pulse - afraid of those moments when his heart was beating just a little bit too loud - just a little bit too fast - it wasn't the same as what Minho suffered from.

Although the dancer did have a clear phobia of water and heights and public speaking, he could overcome them in the presence of others, with support at his back and friends that grabbed his hands.

It wasn't what was causing the peculiarities in Minho's behavior lately.

"How often has Minho been going to the practice room?" Chan questioned Felix.

The other boy thought for a moment.

"I don't know. Often. Every other night. Whenever he doesn't go to the gym."

"Does he ever say why?"

"I think it's just to try out some new choreography," Felix replied. "He likes to experiment."

"You didn't notice when he started doing that?"

"With the new comeback. A few months ago. I think around the middle or end of January."
And now it was Felix's turn to look at Chan questioningly.

"Why?"

Chan tapped his thumb idly on the desk- but he didn't answer.

Felix wondered at the sudden silence, eyes drifting to his books he had shared with his leader.

Admittedly, he'd been confused, and worried, when the older boy had come to him asking about whether or not he could take a look at them.

Because it wasn't like anyone chose to read books on mental health and disorders for fun.

Usually there was a purpose.

Felix had told Chan a hundred times before that support didn't go one way.

That if Chan needed someone to talk to and confide in, he could turn to Felix- without worrying about dongsaeng or hyung.

Just as two people.

Two friends.

Two brothers.

So he had been concerned that maybe Chan was trying to tackle a problem with himself on his own.

But it turned out Chan's attention was on Minho - which had been an eye-opener on Felix's behalf, because he hadn't thought anything was wrong with the other dancer- aside from small social anxiety.

It made Minho fumble sometimes, made him awkwardly speak and act, but it had never been something Felix thought his hyung was crippled by.

In fact, Felix had been proud seeing all the progress and growth the older boy had made.

Because it wasn't easy.

It wasn't easy at all.

And then Jisung and Changbin had found Minho on the floor, music blasting from the practice room speakers as he laid there, unresponsive for several minutes to their calls.

And when Minho had finally woken up, he had only been coherent for seconds before blacking out again.

Jisung had recounted the scene, the confusion, the unintelligible conversation Minho had had with him before collapsing.


It didn't make sense to any of them.

Minho took care of himself.

He drank the most water.
He ate well.
He slept early and woke early.
He did morning stretches with a foam roller in the living room.
He always stopped the other members from working themselves to the brink and made them shut down their computers, turn off the music and leave.
And when he couldn't get them to leave, he stayed sitting against the wall or standing by the door, waiting.
Until they gave in.
There was nothing that could've made him sick or weak out of the blue- although Minho really did catch colds often- but they chalked that up to him never wearing any clothes around the dorm, and taking showers without drying himself off right.
But now that he thought about it...
Chan did have a point.
Minho had been practicing with more intensity ever since January.
They had all been more focused with their comeback and with their plans for their first showcase around the world, but the amount of times Felix had watched Minho leave and return to the dorm really was a lot.
"What's on your mind?" Chan asked, lightly knocking into Felix's thoughts.
Felix sat up a bit- and scratched the back of his neck.
"Nothing. You had a point, that's all."
"About Minho?"
"Yeah. He's been doing a lot lately. Was he like this before?"
Something thoughtful fell across Chan's face.
"No. There was a time back in December, after the survival show, before we debuted... but we were all preparing at the time. I didn't think it was strange for any of us to be working really hard. And he had only been with us for five months then. Been a trainee, actually. So I assumed it was him working to catch up to everyone."
Felix frowned.
Then it was hard to make any conclusions.
Both times in the winter months leading to their spring releases, everyone would have been busting their asses to prepare.
He said as much aloud.
Chan nodded.
"Yeah. That's why I'm unsure. The books were helpful though," he patted them again. Sincerely. "Thanks for letting me borrow them." He slid his gaze to Felix and offered half a smile. "You can have them back. I'm going to try something else."

"Alright."

Felix stood and came over to pick them up.

Chan stopped him before he could leave the bedroom though.

"Jeongin saw a little of what I was reading earlier. If you can, try and keep it on the low. I don't want any assumptions to be made when none of us know what's going on. And I don't want anyone to worry."

Well it was probably too late for that, but it was nice of his friend to try.

But just to be sure...

"Is there something going on?" Felix questioned. "Like-something you think'll be a problem?"

He wanted to know.

Should he be keeping an eye out for Minho too?

They had spent nearly the whole day together not too long ago.

Thinking back on it, there had been periods of time when Minho had gotten unusually quiet.

When he had spoken about why he had become an idol.

When he had looked into the mirror and something strange and unreadable had crossed his face.

When he refused to answer Felix if he was okay.

By the room's desk, Chan shrugged, hapless, sighing soft but loud. "I wish I knew man. I wish I knew. I guess we'll find out."

Felix nodded once more, and grabbed a hold of the door knob.

He was sure they would find out.

But he worried if it would be in a good way or not.

He stepped outside and shut the door- and nearly had a heart attack.

"Yongbok."

"Aiiish! Hyung!" Felix near swore, jumping about a foot in the air.

He looked behind him to the closed door Chan was on the other side of, then swung his glare onto Changbin who leaned against the wall with folded arms.

Felix lowered his brow, pulse pounding in his ears.

"Don't do that," he uttered seriously, bringing two fingers of his free hand not holding on to his books up to his neck.
He took in a deep breath, assured himself everything was okay- it was Changbin - and scowled at the older boy.

"What are you doing?"

Changbin looked at him.

"Shouldn't I be asking you that?"

He nudged his head a bit at the spare bedroom door.

"What's going on in there?"

"Nothing," Felix answered too quickly.

Changbin fixed him with a flat and unimpressed stare.

Felix rolled his eyes.

"Chan-hyung's doing work. He doesn't want to be bothered."

"I guess you were just in there for moral support huh," Changbin answered.

But it wasn't particularly malicious, just really blunt.

And knowing.

And unnerving.

"Uhhh...."

Changbin lifted his eyebrows, waiting. His eyes dropped to the books Felix had tucked under his other arm.

Felix noticed- too late. "Okay, wait-"

Changbin was reaching for them before he had the chance to hide them away. "What's this?"

Felix all but lunged out of reach and off to the side, several feet down the hall with wide eyes.

"Mind your own business, hyung," he said a little too loudly.

He started backing further up down the hall, towards their own shared bedroom. He pointed somewhat aggressively as he added-

"And don't bother Chan-hyung. He's busy. I mean it."

Changbin gazed at him, expression about as dry as a desert, watching until Felix had vanished.

Then he turned towards the spare bedroom- and went in without bothering to knock.

"Hyung."

Chan tore his gaze from his laptop, took one look at Changbin's face, and sighed ridiculously loud.

"Great."
It was now the elephant in the room.

Metaphorical of course- though it really did feel like there was one physically in the room whenever they had all gathered- without Minho present.

Like now.

The seven of them sat in the living room, in various positions on the couch and on the floor, eyes glued to the flashing TV screen, hands occupied holding cans or digging through chip bags.

They were technically supposed to be on a diet.

But honestly- none of them cared at the moment to follow it.

Their minds were far too occupied.

"So are we not going to say anything or...?"

"Seungmin-" and Woojin looked at the younger boy in warning.

Seungmin's eyes could've gotten stuck in the back of his head with how hard they'd rolled.

Minho was with Jeongin, having stayed behind to run through the choreography one more time at the younger boy's request, effectively leaving behind seven members with too little and too much information to pretend nothing didn’t exist.

Seungmin was all for respecting boundaries and an individual's privacy.

But to be fair- and to be honest in Seungmin's very humble opinion- everyone had unconsciously given up that right as soon as they became a part of Stray Kids and called themselves family.

There were no secrets.

At least, there shouldn't have been.

It didn't take a genius to see how off everyone had been.

They had a showcase in two days.

If they couldn't get themselves together, their fans would know.

And the last thing they needed was speculation to spread across the Internet or on any sort of social media.

Rumors could destroy them.

Any sort of infighting among the members would too.

Especially in the middle of a comeback.

Seungmin kept his eyes on the screen, digging into the bowl of popcorn at his side, grabbing a hold of Hyunjin's fingers and twisting them when the other boy's hand got in his way.
"All I'm saying is that we should probably talk."
He paused very pointedly.

"While Minho-hyung's not here."
He felt Chan's eyes hone in on the side of his head, and resolutely ignored it.

"There's nothing to discuss," Chan said, going for casual and ending up with something terse instead.

"So what you're saying..."

And Seungmin took the time with his words, really letting them hang in the air as they watched the Marvel movie play out on screen.

"...is that we should pretend nothing's wrong."

"Sure. What's wrong with that?" Jisung piped up, also failing spectacularly for indifference.

Changbin rolled his neck to the left from where he sat on the floor against the couch, looking at the other rapper like he thought he was a real fool. "Because that's helpful," he said. "Ignore the problem until it gets worse."

Jisung made a face and looked back at Changbin with a small glare. "There's isn't a problem."

"There isn't? That's good to know."

"That sounds sarcastic."

"It is."

"Don't fight," Woojin intervened, on the couch above them, in the middle. He glanced over at Chan who was sitting awfully quiet, and conflicted, on the arm of the couch closest to the living room window.

There was no hiding the indecision on their leader's face.

Woojin felt the resignation grow within him.

"Chan..." he began.

"If there was something wrong that I thought would affect the team, that was important enough for everyone to know, then I would tell you," was Chan's reply.

Not just to Woojin- but to everyone.

Chan's eyes flickered from the screen to the other six members staring at him, waiting.

His gaze lingered on Felix and Jisung for the slightest bit- then pulled away.

"It's only a rough patch. Minho will get through it. So I need you all to not bother him, okay?"

"But what is it?" Hyunjin wondered, straightening up.

"I'm not sure," Chan answered.

He pretended not to notice Changbin staring at him like he was the biggest liar on the face of the
"Hyung, you know something."

"Changbin, please..."

"Maybe we shouldn't press..." Felix suggested, hesitant, glancing at them both.

Changbin's eyes flickered to him, annoyed.

"Like you're not in on it."

Felix's brow furrowed at the accusation at the same time Chan's did.

"I'm not 'in' on anything, hyung," Felix said.

Changbin huffed- but said nothing else, turning his attention back to the TV with clear
disgruntlement written in every feature of his face.

And the seven of them sat in silence.

Captain America showed up on screen.

"Oh. That's neat," Jisung commented.

Everyone stared at him in varying degrees of annoyance.

He read the atmosphere and looked back at everyone, irritated.

"What? I can't feel joy now?"

Hyunjin threw a single kernel at his head.

Their showcase had been a success.

Chan couldn't be more proud.

As he wiped his face off with the bottom of his shirt and followed the rest of the members back to
their waiting room off stage, he couldn't help but be relieved nothing had gone wrong.

Their choreography had been executed well- with only a couple minor fumbles- but those had been
near unnoticeable, hopefully, and all his team had seemed like they had fun.

Their reception among Korean STAYS had been lively as well. It felt like they were getting closer to
their fans every week.

Becoming more whole as one.

The feeling was good.

Everything was good.
Except...

His eyes lifted and he dropped his shirt, gaze straying ahead to where Minho walked, gesturing to their manager that he was going to the bathroom.

Chan couldn't help it.

He frowned.

What had that been...? Back then during their last performance number?

*Grow Up* and Minho had lost himself in time.

Lost himself for long enough that Jeongin had noticed.

That both the younger boys had stopped dancing and stopped smiling and had forgotten about their fans.

They had spent time together rehearsing, and though they had returned tired but smiling, Chan couldn't help but wonder at the time if something had happened.

If Jeongin had had some sort of conversation with Minho, or if they had simply run through choreography like they said they would.

Jeongin *had* seen what Chan was reading.

Even if the younger boy wasn't fluent in English, he wasn't an idiot.

In fact, he was uncannily observant, and read the emotions of the other members well.

If he had pried in some way... tried to reach out to Minho or bring something up...

Well. Minho didn't show it.

Though Chan doubted he would.

Minho had a soft spot for Jeongin. There was no way he would ever burden the younger boy with a problem of his own.

"You coming?" Donggyu questioned, snapping Chan out of his musings.

Chan blinked, noticing he had stopped in front the waiting room door.

His other members were inside, stripping off their clothes, pressing cold towels to their necks and faces.

Chan looked at them for a moment- then smiled at Donggyu.

"I'm gonna run to the bathroom too. Be back in a sec."

"Don't take too long!" Donggyu called after him as Chan went off. "We'll stop somewhere to eat!"

"Alright!"

Getting to the bathroom didn't take very long. It was only a few turns and a long hallway down.

And it was quiet- and empty.
Chan smiled.

The perks of renting out a venue late at night.

Unlike at a music show, they didn't have to share, or worry about bowing ninety degrees every time they came across another person.

It might've been proper manners, but after rehearsing on a blistering hot stage with flashing lights following the instructions of the director and stage managers alike, it was more tempting to face-plant into the floor than offer a respectful bow to any senior or junior.

He entered the bathroom-

And stopped.

"Minho?"

The younger boy stood at the sink, bent over, arms folded, head down.

His jacket was off, several crumpled paper towels at his feet.

There was a short moment's pause where Minho didn't move at Chan's voice.

Then he turned his head slowly, face scrunched and eyes hazy.

"Oh. Chan-hyung."

His voice was very distant.

Chan stepped away from the door and towards his friend.

"Minho. Are you okay?"

"M'fine. It's just hot," Minho said.

It wasn't.

It was cold enough in the bathroom that it gave Chan's skin goosebumps.

He stepped even closer, staring, reaching out and putting a hand on Minho's shoulder.

It shook beneath his hand.

Chan's fingers gripped tighter.

He glanced into the sink, past Minho's head- and saw blood in the sink.

The bewilderment that struck him was quickly washed away with sudden fear.

He pulled Minho up, ignoring his unintelligible, muddled noises of complaint, and forced the other boy to meet his gaze.

Chan's breath was knocked away.

He stared at the dried blood trickling from Minho's left nostril, then lifted his gaze and looked into Minho's eyes. They were confused and swimming and dim, dilated far too much for any one who noticed to try and say he was okay.
"Minho," he whispered, helplessly.

He raised his arm to try and wipe the blood from the other boy's face.

But then Minho was frowning, brow furrowing, features contorting as he worked his mouth open and shut. He lurched forward the tiniest bit, fingers coming up to fumble at Chan's shoulders and chest.

"I need to lie down," he said abruptly, breath hitching, panic in his voice. "Let me lie down, hyung. I need to-"

Chan brought them to the ground carefully, one hand propped behind Minho's head.

He watched as Minho closed his eyes, struggling to breathe in.

He'd never felt more useless.

"What do you need me to do?" he asked.

"Shh..."

Chan shut his mouth.

Minho lifted his legs off the ground and brought his knees to his chest.

He wrapped his arms around them for a long moment, as though caught in a stretch.

It was only after a long five minutes had passed that Minho reopened his eyes and re-extended his legs, dropping them slowly onto the ground.

Then he lied there, looking absolutely exhausted, gazing up at the tiles of the ceiling above them.

"Where are the kids?" he questioned in a voice far too weak.

Chan stared at him, heart pounding, his chest threatening to suffocate him where he knelt. "Getting changed," he barely managed to get out. "What just happened?"

Minho's eyes fluttered.

He was drifting.

Chan set a hand on the dancer's stomach and squeezed, voice growing tight.

"Minho."

"I'm just tired hyung," came the faint reply.

Chan could've screamed.

He didn't.

He squeezed Minho's stomach harder instead.

Minho rapidly blinked his eyes open. He glanced at the hand on his stomach, then up at Chan, half his mouth tugging up.

"I'm fine."
Chan had never wanted to rip the smile off somebody's face more than he did in this moment.

"Are you serious?"

Minho gazed at him, smile faltering.

Chan returned the gaze, incredulous and more than a little mad.

He shouldn't be upset- it wasn't what Minho needed- not after something like that- whatever that was.

But he couldn't help it.

What the hell?

What the hell?

What the absolute hell was Minho trying to pull?

Like he hadn't been on the floor two seconds from dying, blood coming out his nose.

Minho fumbled for words.

"No, hyung, it's not- it's not anything serious- it's okay, I-"

"Shut up."

Minho's mouth closed slowly. He looked at Chan with wariness in his big eyes.

Chan inhaled, struggling to keep his breath even, struggling to keep the heat pooling in his gut, surging through his veins, down, down, down, far away from the surface.

He removed his hand from Minho's stomach, rocked back on his heels and then onto his feet.

He bent over only once to pick up the scattered paper towels on the floor around them- paper towels he could now see spotted in blood- and tossed them in the trash.

"Can you stand?" he asked tightly, washing his hands in the sink.

Out the corner of his eye he saw Minho carefully sit up.

"I can stand," he answered, small.

"Then get up," Chan told him.

He turned towards the bathroom door, forcing himself not to acknowledge the flash of hurt across the younger boy's face.

"Everyone's waiting. Don't take so much time."

He didn't stay behind to see Minho's reaction any further.

Because if he did, he wasn't sure he could control himself, this time.

Projection his ass.

This was something more.
“Should we keep practicing?”

“Fine. Turn it on.”

Minho laid on his bed.

*I'm fine.*

He blinked his eyes slowly.

Open and closed.

*There's nothing wrong with me.*

The tension was palpable.

The members gathered in the kitchen, around the food Donggyu had ordered in for them, staring at the scattered array of plastic containers and canned drinks, but not touching.

"So we're still not gonna say something, huh?" Hyunjin muttered.

Seungmin glanced at him, but didn't particularly disagree.

Across from them, Changbin folded his arms and said, "Maybe we should pretend like it never happened again. That'll fix things."

Woojin looked at all three of them disapprovingly, but he didn't try to stop their speculation.

In fact, in somewhat of a relief, he seemed just as bothered.

Changbin slid his eyes over to Jisung, waiting.

The younger rapper poked his finger at the lid of a Pepsi.

"What?" he uttered. "Don't look at me."

Jeongin stared down at the table, worry evident on his face. "What happened?" he asked in a near whisper. "Why did Minho-hyung fall?"

"He tripped. That's it."

Hyunjin looked at Jisung in blatant disbelief. "Ya, you're still saying that?" He squinted at the shorter boy accusingly. "What exactly are you trying to hide?"

Jisung bristled- and threw a plastic fork at Hyunjin's chest. "I'm not hiding anything. It's called being a logical thinker."
"Logical my ass," Hyunjin retorted scathingly. "You're defending him for no reason and it's not even working."

"Well you're never gonna know the truth now are you?"

"So there is something else going on!"

"There's not!"

"This argument is pointless," Seungmin chimed in. "Because there is something happening and everyone sucks at lying."

"I think we should wait to hear from hyung himself," Felix suggested. "And Chan-hyung too."

Seungmin slid his gaze to him, frowning. "Chan-hyung's pissed. He's not going to say anything. And Minho-hyung's definitely not going to. It's been almost a week. Waiting around won't give anyone answers."

Felix bit his lower lip.

This was quickly spiraling out of control.

"I know," he emphasized. "I just don't think we should do anything that might make things worse."

Hyunjin regarded Felix flatly. "How could things get worse?"

"Listen. I'm hungry. Can we eat or what?" Jisung questioned, looking as annoyed as he sounded. He stabbed at one of the plastic containers with a pair of chopsticks.

Woojin glanced around at everyone, feeling a headache come on. "We can eat," he decided. "And let Chan come to us." He looked very pointedly at Hyunjin and Seungmin as he spoke. "One of you ask if Minho wants to eat. We won't isolate him. But don't push him."

"Fine." Hyunjin stepped back from the table, heading towards the hall. "I'll ask."

Felix watched after him worriedly. "Maybe I should..."

Woojin shook his head. "It's fine. Everyone just... sit down and eat."

Jisung plopped down in the nearest chair, dragging the nearest container over and stuffing his cheeks without hesitation. He balked at everyone's staring and Seungmin's disgusted look.

"What? What? What?"

"You can't close your mouth?" Seungmin said flatly.

"Maybe I don't want to," Jisung retorted, and he opened his mouth at Seungmin's face.

Seungmin threw a balled up napkin at his head with a loud exclamation of annoyance.

Jisung batted it aside.

It struck Woojin in the eye.

Both younger boys stopped bickering immediately- and looked at him with bated breaths.

Woojin, for his part, merely inhaled deeply, grabbing his own pair of chopsticks before pointing
them very slowly at everyone around the table.

"All of you. Eat."

The members took a seat.

What followed was a quiet so painfully awkward, they all couldn't stop glancing at one another.

Then Hyunjin returned, without Minho, significantly more irritated than before.

"I'm going to do something," he said without hesitation.

Jeongin looked up at him, wide-eyed. "What do you mean, hyung?"

Hyunjin gazed across the table at him seriously. "I'm going to prank him. Replace his shampoo. Turn his toothpaste to mustard. Something." He swung his eyes to Seungmin with an intent stare. "You're going to help me."

"Uh, no I'm not," Seungmin refused.

Hyunjin frowned.

"Why not?"

Seungmin stared.

"You really think I'd get involved in any sort of prank war with you two?"

"You love pranks."

"Not the kind that involves going bald."

Jisung snorted.

Hyunjin glared.

"I lost my eyebrows, not my hair," he said, heated.

"Was there a difference?" Seungmin uttered, putting his full attention onto his food.

And there was an even shorter period of silence this time as they all recalled the events of a month ago.

Jisung snorted again.

Jeongin cracked a smile.

And Felix broke into low snickers.

Woojin returned to looking like he wanted to fade out of existence.

But Changbin's attention had wandered somewhere out the kitchen door.

He got up, small dish of rice in hand, and went into the hall.

When he came back, he told them all he was heading to the gym and to put food aside for himself and Minho. They'd be back in an hour or so.
Everyone else exchanged a glance.

Woojin glanced at Changbin with something of a significant look.

Changbin met his gaze, expression unreadable, and left before Woojin could get a word in edgewise.

"Alright. So what happened?"

Chan jerked upright, drool on half his cheek, red from being smushed against his arm on his studio desk.

"'oo jin?" he muttered.

Woojin stared. He shut the studio door behind him and walked over, pulling the spare chair from against the wall and taking a seat across from his leader and same-aged friend.

"Did you sleep here last night?"

"Couldn't rest," Chan answered, a yawn cracking at his jaw.

He seemed to notice the drool on his face then because he grimaced and struggled to wipe it off.

"What are you doing here?" he questioned.

"What happened with you and Minho?"

Chan glanced at him, halfway amused and somewhat annoyed.

"You're straight to the point, aren't you?"

"I think I have to be. It's affecting the team now," Woojin said without preamble. "What happened?" he asked for the third time. “What are you fighting about?”

"We’re not fighting."

Woojin looked at him pointedly. “So you’re ignoring each other for fun?”

Chan eyed him for a long moment, clearly thinking.

He rubbed at his face with both hands, dragging them down and along his jaw where they lingered before falling to his lap with a heavy thud.

"I think he's sick."

Woojin waited.

Chan wasn't anymore forthcoming.

"O-kay...." Woojin said afterwards. "Are we talking about a cold or a fever? A stomach bug?"

Chan looked at him without a single trace of humor.
"I'm talking about falling to the floor and bleeding from the nose."

Woojin stared, confused. He must've heard wrong.

"What?"

Chan pinched the bridge of his nose and massaged it for a short period of time, looking like he was one second from a nosebleed of his own.

"After the showcase. I found him. In the bathroom. Something wasn't right, Woojin. He could barely stand up."

Woojin thought back to that night, his lips twisting down. "He was fine when he returned to the waiting room though?"

"That's only after he spent five minutes on the ground."

Woojin's brow dipped so low it almost hurt. "What was that about?"

"I don't know."

And Chan laughed, but it was far from amused. It was more frustration and incredulity than anything else.

"Would you believe he told me he was 'fine'? After all that?"

"Go back to what you said before. You think he's sick?" Woojin's voice raised slightly at the end, uncomprehending.

That didn't seem... very plausible.

They hadn't done anything lately that would even cause any of them to catch an illness like that—hadn't done anything strenuous that would make any of them sick to the point of fainting and bleeding.

Unless Minho had been working way past his limit when none of them were looking.

But even that seemed ridiculous.

Minho knew how to rest.

How to care for himself.

Chan seemed to follow his train of thought with ease because he shook his head and said a bit defeated-

"I'm not talking about a recent illness. I'm talking about something he had before. Before us. Stray Kids."

"He wouldn't have passed the health evaluation if that was true," Woojin replied, trying to make sense of Chan's words.

All potential trainees went through numerous checks on their health.

It was a financial liability to accept someone into the company who would cost them any sort of money loss if they needed to leave the group later due to health.
Not only did it affect the group, but the dynamic in the team and sometimes among the fans.

So Minho couldn't possibly have had any sort of condition that would prevent him from the relentless training of an idol.

And aside from that, he was a dancer - an athlete- who competed and traveled even from a young age.

He went on a tour with his crew, hired by Bighit. He couldn't do that if he was any sort of ill.

"Minho was scouted by the agency once when he was fifteen," Chan said. "He said he failed the audition. But they called him back two years later when we had an open spot that needed to be filled. You remember that?"

"I remember."

"When Minho was fifteen..." Chan frowned. He sighed and shook his head.

Woojin mirrored the expression. "What is it?"

"No. It just...doesn't make any sense."

Chan slid his gaze to his computer, contemplative.

"To call him back two years later and give him only three months of training before deciding he'd debut with us... If they didn't think he had skills that could contribute to a group, why would they do that? He couldn't rap and his singing wasn't particularly good- though it was clear he had potential. He was a great dancer. I can't imagine he was any different at fifteen. Still a great dancer- that's why they scouted him. Rapping and singing could've been worked on for two whole years instead of just three months. So why did they turn him down? It's not like our company doesn't have room. We're huge."

Woojin thought about it for a moment, but it didn't have any answers.

Just more questions.

Because yeah, thinking on it now, wouldn't having Minho as a two-year trainee as opposed to a three-month one have been much better for everyone involved?

What had been so different when he was fifteen?

"You feel me, yeah?" Chan questioned, attention falling back onto Woojin. "Something's wrong. I can't figure it out. But I'm going to try. I have to."

And Woojin hesitated.

"But... now? Is it really a good time?"

They were still in the middle of MIROH promotions, with an awards show, concert and series of overseas showcases on the way.

Chan regarded him with impatience and a hint of frustration.

"If not now, then when? When he starts bleeding again? When he trips and this time doesn't get back up?"
"And you won't go to management?"

"So they can ground him? Put his career on a shelf and send him away?" Chan shook his head. "No way. We should hear it from him first."

"Well what if he is sick? Sick enough he has to go?" Woojin looked at his leader intently. "What would you do if you found out? You couldn't keep that hidden away."

"Woojin, I don't know." Chan stared at the ground between them, his features pinched. "But I need answers. It's driving me mad."

They sat together in weighted silence.

Chan didn't look up.

Woojin stood carefully, returning his chair, gazing down at the top of his leader's head.

He paused.

And then said-

"I'll talk to him, if it'll help. I haven't really tried. He might open up to me."

Chan was quiet.

Woojin frowned.

"I can't promise he'll tell me anything. But Chan- don't do anything without thinking it through. We'll figure this out together. You can depend on me."

Chan hesitated- before nodding once.

"I know."

His voice was incredibly low.

Woojin hesitated too- a bit reluctant to leave.

Wondering if it was really a good idea to go.

But his head was full of circling thoughts, crashing and bumping, breaking apart and melding into nonsensical reasonings and assumptions with doubts and whispers of uneasy fear.

Minho- sick?

That didn't seem true.

It had to have been something else.

He would find it out.

Help put all their minds at ease.

Yeah.

No problem.
He could do that.

He was the eldest hyung.

Easy.

But it wasn't easy.

And he came back, boiling, jaw clenched tight in unreasonable rage.

"It was just a joke."

Outside in the kitchen, an argument broke out, loud and ridiculous.

"Why was there fish under my bed?"

"I said I wouldn't get involved. You shouldn't have swapped his toothpaste out for mayonnaise."

"I said I would!"

"Well then it's your own fault our room reeks!"

"Me? You should be blaming Minho-hyung!"

"Just open the window- Jisung, what are you doing?"

"You didn't see Woojin-hyung?"

"No, I did-"

"Where's Minho-hyung?"

"You didn't see him?"

"I didn't-"

"Find him. I'm going to make him pay."

"Hyunjin, chill out. Find some Febreeze."

Jisung's voice was the last thing Woojin heard before he rolled over in his bed and pulled his pillow over his head.

"Why didn't hyung come back?"

Chan hung up the phone.

His arm fell to his side.
He leaned against the wall in the alleyway between the studio building and the main headquarters, gazing up at the sliver of sky above them both.

It was so incredibly bright and blue.

"What are you crying for, hyung?"

Seungmin pretended to sleep, squashed between Jeongin's arm with Hyunjin's knee rammed in his gut.

He listened as Minho denied it.

As he broke into bickering with Jisung.

As their arguing grew so loud it woke Jeongin and he couldn't pretend any longer.

"Shut up!" he complained, rolling over.

Minho's face was swollen, eyes red.

What was he still pretending for?

What were any of them still pretending for?

He dragged himself to his feet, straightening out his night clothes as Hyunjin woke and Jeongin groggily and grouchily rolled himself back into the sheets of his bed.

Minho escaped the room.

Seungmin watched him go, wondering deeply at the words his hyung had spoken in the middle of his dreams.

But he never got any answers.

"Oh, hyung, you’re back."

This was the greeting that welcomed Chan when he returned from another sleepless night spent at the studio.

He blinked in surprise at the sight of his members in the living room, those that weren't there, wandering out from the kitchen, afternoon snacks in hand.

It was rare to have them all together- usually everyone was occupied with personal hobbies while Chan, Jisung and Changbin worked together on new tracks in the studio.

But he guessed... everyone must've missed one another.
More than usual.

Chan's expression crumbled slightly at the thought.

This wasn't what he had wanted.

Tomorrow their rehearsals would start again for *The Fact Music Awards*.

They needed to work together. Be back together, as one unit, one family again.

*Minho...*

His eyes roamed the room for the other boy. But he couldn't find him. He glanced towards the kitchen with a frown.

Jisung must've noticed his wandering eyes, because he spoke up and said-

"He's not here."

"Where'd he go?" Chan questioned, bringing his gaze back around.

Truthfully, given Minho's words back in the studio and his warning not to return to the dorm, he had thought things would be more... loud.

But Hyunjin looked calm, sprawled on the floor, halfway over top Changbin's idle form, both tapping away on their phones.

They must've been playing some sort of game together on an app.

Maybe nothing had happened after all?

Or if it had, Woojin must've handled it somehow.

"He met with a friend or something," Jisung answered. "I think he'll be back soon."

"Did you guys eat?"

"We ate," Jeongin answered. He offered Chan a small smile. "Do you want to sit, hyung? We haven't picked anything to watch yet?"

Chan hesitated.

Felix rolled his eyes and removed the cushion from beside him, patting down the empty spot with conviction. "Just come over and sit. You're not doing anything right?" he said. "When Minho-hyung comes back, he can join us. That's fine, right?"

Chan's feet carried him over, even though his heart and mind weighed heavy at the name of the other boy.

"I said we'd do karaoke later," Woojin added as Chan sat, oblivious to his dragging thoughts. "I guess we'll see when Minho comes back."

"Do we have time for that?" Seungmin wondered. "Rehearsal's tomorrow."

"There's always time for karaoke," Jisung said.

"Maybe there shouldn't be," Hyunjin commented. Then added under his breath- "For those who
can't sing."

"Ya!" Jisung shoved his foot into the other boy's face. "Did you forget who went on Masked Singer? I have the voice of an angel. A really cool, muscled angel."

Hyunjin pushed Jisung's foot away, expression disgusted, but not because of the sock that had nearly been up his nose seconds before. "What muscles? I have more muscles than you."

Seungmin rolled his eyes at them both, reaching for the TV remote even as his words directed themselves Hyunjin's way. "Aren't you just mad because everyone scored higher than you?"

"I can sing," Hyunjin retorted, defensively.

Jeongin looked at him with the brightest, questioning, fake smile in existence. "Can you really?"

Because they all remembered their last experience at karaoke and Hyunjin's astounding rendition of 'My Heart Will Go On'.

And by astounding they all meant god-awful.

And long.

The longest six minutes of their life.

Hyunjin frowned Jeongin's way, betrayed. "Yaa-"

The banter they fell into was easy.

Chan sat between Woojin and Felix and listened- thinking- torn. They were all in such good moods. Compared to the last week, anyway.

Should he tell them?

Should he wait?

Was it even his place to say?

Maybe it was better to go to Minho first and hear what the younger boy had to say for himself first.

He had tried finding Minho yesterday, after hanging up the call, but Minho hadn't returned to the dorm after going out with Woojin, and Chan had wound up returning to the studio, hoping to take his mind off all his thoughts by drowning himself in work.

It hadn't done anything- obviously- given by the fact that he didn't return home and wasn't able to sleep.

But at least hearing Minho come by earlier, not upset, only wanting to make things up between them, had made him feel slightly better.

Things weren't broken between them.

Chan hadn't ruined things with his temper.

With his easily riled emotions.

His impatience and worry.
He was doing the right thing. He had *done* the right thing.

It would be okay.

All they had to do was talk.

Chan settled into the couch, these thoughts in mind, letting himself seep into the cushions.

Letting himself be reminded of where he was, with who he was- his members and his brothers and his friends.

His eyes drifted shut.

The voices of his team cascaded and fell around him like a comforting ocean wave.

And he slept.

---

Minho returned three hours later as the rainy afternoon bled into the warm, early evening.

Chan had woken thirty minutes before, to the TV playing reruns of *Knowing Bros* and the other members circled on the floor, caught up in a card game.

Jisung was bragging, Changbin was losing and Hyunjin and Seungmin were busy blatantly exchanging cards while Felix protested and Woojin ignored them all as he reshuffled his bad hand of cards into the deck in the middle of them all and drew again.

Jeongin sat a little ways behind Woojin, already out of the game.

He sighed and glanced at Chan when he noticed his hyung was awake.

"I tried," he said.

Chan looked at him with a little smile stretching across his face. "Yeah, that's a bit of a lost cause," he replied.

He reached out and ruffled Jeongin's hair.

"They're animals. All of them."

"Ya. I heard that," Woojin said, unbothered as he defeated the rest of the members with a winning hand.

Chan rolled his eyes.

Two more rounds were played.

Chan helped Jeongin here and there, and using a sleight-of-hand trick from his middle-school days, swapped out several of Jisung and Hyunjin's cards to give to their youngest member.

It was almost amusing watching how they turned on each other without realizing what was going on.

Eventually, he was laughing.
And so was everyone else.

And then the front door beeped and opened as the code was put in.

And then Minho stepped inside.

Chan pushed off the couch, greeting Minho with a small but bright smile, ready to make amends and address the problem later.

When he could carefully think of what to say.

"Hey, you're back," he greeted fondly. "I got your food. You were out with a friend?"

But Minho didn't look up.

He didn't take off his shoes.

He stood with one hand on the door as he pulled it in behind him- quietly- with a click that echoed louder than the playing TV.

Chan slowed until he stopped, halfway over. "Minho?"

The other members paused in their game- and stared.

Minho's cap obscured his face.

"Ya. Chan-ah."

He spoke, voice low.

He felt the eyes of his members on him.

The eyes of his leader too.

He didn't care.

Blood pulsed loud and slow in his ears.

His words rang out, shaky, in the muted silence.

"You bastard."

Chapter End Notes

Howdy ho, you all! It's good to see you all again <3

Thank you, kat, my beta. I love hearing your thoughts and getting to work with you like this! I'm learning new things :) And I'm always grateful for your support <3 <3 <3

Wow. My readers and kudos-droppers-

Thank you for always taking the time to read these long chapters! I know a lot and a little can happen in them, but I'm always grateful to hear your guy's thoughts. And I'm
happy to know you like the story so far!

Maybe? Haha <3

And sorry about the cliffhanger....lolololololol?

I'll try and update soon!

(or should i wait a few weeks?)

Happy Chapter 10 ^v^>
Snow spun from the sky.
Down onto their heads.
Frosted breath puffed in small clouds into the air.
“Minho, look there.”
Their feet were still, the space between them near.
They stood, shoulders pressed, gazing up at the vast sea of stars high above.
Freezing. It was freezing.
The cold squeezed merciless with each inhale, tight around his lungs.
His fingers were red and numb, burning like his ears. Like his nose. Like his skin.
He knew he should feel guilty. He knew he should feel bad.
His mom would be worried. His dad would be upset.
He shouldn’t be here.
They shouldn’t be here.
But-
Eleven.
Young.
And they-
“Found it.”
They tracked an arc of light shooting wide and bright across the galaxy.
Minho grinned.
He watched until it vanished- until it spun far away and out of sight.
Then he dropped his gaze and glanced towards the boy beside him.
But the other boy was already looking at him, smiling soft.

Minho blinked at him, startled.

“What is it? Something wrong?”

The answer was a slow shake of the head.

“No… don’t worry about it.”

And the other boy turned his gaze away and let it drift back towards the sky.

His eyes crinkled as he grinned.

“It’s okay.”

“Hey, Minho.”

A hand on his shoulder, shook him lightly from the fogs of sleep.

He struggled to open his eyes, struggled to clear the blurriness from his swarming vision and focus on the face hovering above.

The floor was hot beneath him, sticky with sweat.

For a moment, he laid there, trying to remember what had happened.

“You with me?”

Fingers settled on his head, running carefully through his hair.

Patient.

Waiting.

Calm.

Oh.

It must’ve been...

“Hyung. What are you doing here?” he mumbled in quiet, slurred words.

And Haejun looked at him, squatting at his side. “Looking for you. You never came home.”

“Oh.”

Minho slid his gaze from the older boy to the padded, soundproof ceiling above.

It was dark and blue and looked very soft.

Softer than the floor.
Warmth wrapped around his limbs, bound and tied them down, pillowed beneath his head and pulled itself across his chest and shoulders like a big, thick blanket.

Ah… he wanted it.

Sinking.

Sinking down.

Sleep.

Haejun’s hand stayed, a comforting weight.

His eyes fluttered shut and he sunk-

Down into a cloud.

“Make a wish.”

The sun was low on the horizon the next time he opened his eyes.

Legs hooked, arms draped, the sidewalk moving languid as his gaze fell and tracked the motion.

Beside them the sun sat low on the horizon, a bloody spread of oranges and reds above a dark blue gurgling river.

Minho turned his head resting on a shoulder, looking out past the rail of the bridge and at the city buildings as Haejun walked the road to home.

The clouds of grogginess were slow to disappear.

The haze lingered though the minutes dragged on, and he knew he should feel scared.

He knew he should be worried.

Why had it gotten worse?

Why wasn’t it going away?

But innately, deep inside, he knew the answer.

“It’s never gonna get better,” he mumbled into Haejun’s shirt.

The older boy’s hands gripped the underside of his legs a bit tighter.

“It will. So don’t say it won’t.”

Minho didn’t answer.

Haejun hiked him up higher onto his back, gripping even harder.

And Minho couldn’t see the older boy’s face, but he heard the conviction in his voice— the determination and the fear.

“Stupid. I’m not letting you go.”
The beeping of the monitor was slow and steady.

Minho sat in the small plastic chair beside the bed, one hand too small, so he used both, holding the soft hand of his aunt in between his own as she peacefully slept.

It would be the same, wouldn’t it?

Eventually.

One day.

Everyone would-

The doorbell rang for the hundredth time.

On the couch, Haejun stared at the same textbook he had been looking at for the past hour.

It was like another freaking language.

No amount of drilling or practice with equations and their annoying a’s and b’s and squared digits to a raised power times two would ever make any sense in his head.

As soon as his eyes caught sight of anything even close to a numerical value, his brain shut down.

Just yesterday he had spent twenty minutes in the grocery aisle trying to weigh the value of twelve slices of bread for 3000 won, or an unsliced loaf they could cut into as many pieces as it allowed for 3500.

He wouldn’t have had to worry about any of that had his school not been so insistent on shoving mathematics down their throats- but now all he could think about was ‘the better bargain’, ‘weighing pros and cons’; was the grocery store actually robbing him of its true value and how to ‘find the angle, width and height of a bunch of shapes for no reason’.

He had wound up returning to his mom in the fresh produce section with empty hands, a glare and a vague sense of annoyance that had carried itself into the rest of the evening and into the late night as he stood beneath the water of the shower glowering at his feet and questioning why the price of a can of corn was more expensive than a can of peas.

He hadn’t caught an ounce of sleep that night.

And here was the doorbell ringing again-

Haejun groaned in frustration and ripped his earbud out, twisting his neck off the arm of the couch to
glare in the direction of the hall behind him.

“Ugh, shut up!”

Silence.

A long and unusual silence.

Haejun glared at the door, waiting, suspicious-

Then came banging on the door.

Haejun threw aside his textbook and rolled off the couch with a yell. “Ya!”

He stomped every step of the way to the door, scowling as he ripped it open.

“You.”

The boy on the other side glared.

“Course it’s me. Why didn’t you answer?”

“Maybe I didn’t want to,” Haejun said.

The boy continued to glare, eyebrows furrowing, lips pushing down and out.

Haejun glared back.

And for a moment all they did was glower each other’s way.

Then Minho swung his backpack off his shoulders and into Haejun’s gut.

Haejun went down with an undignified, “Hgrk!”

~x~

The arrangement had begun approximately three weeks ago.

Haejun had answered the door at five AM, barely alive, his hoodie pulled sloppily over half his upper torso and his head, gazing out at their front step for all of three seconds before closing the door shut and re-locking it.

Then he had gone and went down the hall, into the kitchen flooded in dull, fluorescent light.

“Mom.”

“Hm?”

He approached her from where she stood at the sink, watching over her shoulder for a moment as she washed and cut the dirty ends off a giant radish with a knife.

Another moment passed before he asked-
“Why is there a kid at the door?”

“What?”

“There’s some kid at the door. Do you know him?”

His mom paused, turning her head to look at him in disbelief.

“Did you leave him outside?” she asked incredulous.

Haejun paused for way too long.

“...No.”

His mom dropped her knife in the sink with a noise of exasperation, pushing the newly cleaned radish she’d been working with into Haejun’s hand.

“Hold that,” she told him with slight annoyance, grabbing the dish towel off the counter and moving swiftly out the kitchen as she dried her hands.

Haejun stared down at the radish in his hands with equal annoyance.

Then he went and followed his mom into the hall.

She had reopened the door, ushering in the small boy who had been sitting on their front step, dressed in the school uniform of a third-grader, red and blue backpack strapped on both shoulders tightly.

He looked lost.

And confused.

And wouldn’t stop looking at the enormous radish Haejun held.

“Minho,” Haejun’s mom said softly, dragging the younger boy’s attention away.

She knelt, wiping her hands on the towel she’d brought along, expression considerably brighter and kinder than it had been before.

“What are you doing here?”

So she knew him?

Was Haejun supposed to know him too?

He eyed the other boy suspiciously, taking in the round face and big eyes and stubby hands.

He didn’t look like anyone else Haejun knew but still-

“Is this another one of dad’s?” he asked.

“Haejun!” his mom whacked him with the towel.

He frowned defensively and moved away. “What?”

She gave him a look. “He’s not ‘one of your father’s’, he’s the son of a good friend of mine.”
And she moved her gaze towards the other boy again, something worried settling on her features.

“And how did you get here? Who dropped you off?”

“Mom said she called you,” the younger boy answered. “She had to go, but said I should stay here. And go to school.”

“Yes, we did talk about that,” Haejun’s mom replied with a bit of a frown. “But not until next week…” she trailed off, her eyebrows lowering in thought.

Something must’ve occurred to her- something neither Haejun or the other boy knew anything about- because she straightened up and set a reassuring hand on the kid’s shoulder.

“I’m glad you’re here,” she told him with a smile. “You can go with Haejun to school. The bus won’t come for another two hours, but you can watch cartoons on the TV if you’d like. Did you eat?”

The boy nodded.

Haejun’s mom pat him on the head and then stared at Haejun and his radish.

“Why are you still holding that?”

He stared right back. “You gave it to me.”

She frowned. “Well put it in the sink and go get ready.”

Haejun blinked, confused. “For what?”

“For school.”

“It’s not until seven.”

“Yes, but we have a guest. I want you to sit with him.”

Haejun looked at her.

Looked at the kid.

Looked back at his mom baffled and said, “Why?”

His mom whipped him lightly with her towel again.

“Because I said so. Now hurry up.”

~X~

“I’m Minho,” the other boy introduced himself about an hour later.

“I don’t care,” Haejun muttered from the opposite end of the couch, bent over and trying to cram his science and English textbooks into his already overstuffed bag.

The living room TV played in the background, quiet but too much noise in Haejun’s already noisy
It was annoying.

This was annoying.

Having to take a shower and get dressed and play host for some kid he didn’t even know instead of flopping back into his sheets for some extra sleep before school was the most annoying.

And why couldn’t he get this stupid English textbook to fit?

He sat back with a frustrated huff, giving up and leaving the textbook shoved halfway inside his backpack.

Whatever.

He didn’t care about English anyway.

He glowered at the TV.

Why did he have to learn another language?

It wasn’t like he or his mom were ever leaving South Korea.

They didn’t have the money.

If anything, he’d grow up and get stuck punching data into a computer all day like his older cousins. Or running some family-owned corner store only school kids visited like his grandparents did.

There wasn’t much point in trying for anything else in life.

“Are you mad?”

Haejun slid his gaze over to the kid.

“No.”

“You seem mad.”

“Well I’m not.”

Haejun’s mom came out of the kitchen, dressed for work, a plastic box in hand.

“Are you boys ready?” she asked cheerfully, handing Haejun his lunch for the day with a press of her lips to the side of his head.

He grimaced but didn’t try and move away.

“No,” came his petulant answer.

She rolled her eyes at his response.

“I’m heading out, so make sure to lock up the house. Look after Minho. I want you both on the bus.”

“I’m not gonna lose him,” Haejun uttered.
“It’s just a precaution, sweetie.”

She looked towards Minho, even as she put a very pointed and firm hand on Haejun’s shoulder and squeezed.

“You’re in good hands. My kid will look after you, so don’t worry. I spoke with your mom. Just for today, you’ll catch the bus back to here after school. She’ll come and pick you up in the evening.”

Minho nodded. Haejun complained.

“Mom, it’s Tuesday. I have dance after school. No one will be here to let him in.”

“Then he’ll go to the studio with you. I’m sure your teachers won’t mind.”

Haejun stared.

His mom smiled.

And that was that.

At least it was until they boarded the bus to school forty minutes later and Haejun slid into a seat at the back of the bus beside his friends, eyeing the way Minho slipped into one of the front seats and tuning out the babbling of his own friends.

He pulled out his phone and messaged his mom.

To mom: why?

A response didn’t come until hours later, halfway into his mathematics class.

This is adult stuff, Jun. I just need you to be understanding for a short while, ok?

To mom: i’m an adult

You’re thirteen.

To mom: i’m still old

You’re not old, I’m old.

To mom: why is he coming to the house?

It’s temporary for the next few weeks. This was planned in advance, and I meant to tell you beforehand, but circumstances have changed. Be KIND to him Haejun or I’ll take away your games.

To mom: what if he’s mean to me?

That boy doesn’t have a mean bone in his body. Besides, I’ll know if you’ve been rude to him. His mother will tell me if he goes home upset.

To mom: so he’s a snitch

HAEJUN.

To mom: what?
...Are you messaging me in the middle of your class?

To mom: no

He slid his phone back under his desk and went back to listening to whatever his teacher was saying.

Equations.

Gross.

He tuned out.

~x~

Over the course of the next few weeks, Haejun had discovered several things.

He really sucked at math.

He couldn’t dance to jazz.

He should’ve never complained that one time when he was five about being an only child.

He was exhausted.

Between his nagging teachers, piles of homework, bi-weekly exams on new material, dance practices and after school cram sessions, he just wanted to crawl into his bed, shove the biggest pair of headphones over his head and make everyone and the world go away.

But no.

He had to get up at five-thirty every morning to let Minho in.

He had to ride the bus every weekday to and from school with Minho at his side.

He had to walk fifteen minutes to the elementary building on Tuesdays and Thursdays after classes to pick Minho up just so they could catch a different bus to his dance studio further into the city for his evening practices.

He had to get used to the questioning stares and comments of his dance hyungs and noonas and teachers and classmates and friends wondering why he suddenly had another four foot tall human being attached to his side like some sort of bacterial amoeba that he couldn’t get to go away.

He was sick of it.

He was sick of Minho following at his heels on their walks home and even more sick of watching documentaries at six in the morning on coral reefs and the mysteries of the deep sea.

Honestly Haejun would rather gouge his own eyeballs out then sit and watch the same repeated shots of the ocean floor and bunch of fish.

But most of all, he was sick of his mom treating Minho like the second son she never had.

One she adored way more than Haejun.
The other boy didn’t even do anything great.

He just came in and ate cereal and did his homework all diligently on the couch in the mornings, and always asked Haejun’s mom about her day and about different food recipes and helped with dishes in the afternoon and tidied up around the house-

And okay- yeah- maybe Minho did do a little bit more than Haejun had ever done around the house, but Haejun was always busy with other stuff.

Grown-up student stuff.

Minho was basically a kindergartner in comparison.

Their homework probably wasn’t even hard.

He bet Minho couldn’t do half the dumb math equations Haejun spent hours trying to figure out.

But no one seemed to care about Haejun’s pre-teen woes, least of all his own mom, and so his frustrations and annoyance simply built itself a home in every corner of his mind it could find instead.

Though he couldn’t keep it in for long.

And he had long since stopped trying to keep his irritation out of sight.

“Why are you eating like that?”

Minho glanced at him over the table.

Friday night and they were having another dinner Minho had been so nicely invited to by Haejun’s mom, because Minho’s own parents apparently liked to forget they had a kid of their own to feed.

Haejun’s mom had said something about Minho and his family having recently relocated further out of the city, closer to where Minho’s grandparents and aunt lived.

But the school bus for their district didn’t travel that far out, and his parents couldn’t afford to drive Minho to school with their own commute for work being in the opposite direction.

Haejun and his mom lived five minutes from the freeway in a quiet neighborhood on top a hill that happened to be the splitting point between where he and Minho went to school and where Minho’s parents needed to diverge for their own jobs.

Hence the new arrangement.

But Haejun wasn’t dumb.

He had seen the way his mom always looked at Minho whenever he came to their house looking troubled and lost.

He had heard the way his mom’s voice quieted, rising and dropping in concern and kindness as she spoke to Minho’s mom on the phone.

He had noticed all the signs that pointed to a mom and dad trying to keep their kid out of a familial dispute.

Because his own mom had tried to do the same before dropping the news of ‘divorce’ on him two months before his eighth birthday.
Haejun’s mom might have done it to ‘protect him’ - or so she had said - but all it had done was make him feel like he’d been living in a weird state of limbo surrounded by lies and uncertainty and fear that something else far greater was wrong.

Their secretness on it had done nothing but make him feel like he was living in a swamp of negativity and stress and tension threatening to drag them all down before the split.

It sucked.

And maybe he should be understanding if something like that was happening to Minho.

But why?

He wouldn’t have anything nice to say about it, much less any sort of advice.

And it wasn’t like he bothered talking to Minho enough to feel comfortable bringing it up.

They weren’t friends.

They weren’t anything.

Minho was just a bother.

Haejun stabbed the vegetables on his plate viciously and shoved a forkful into his mouth.

“Well?” he said, when Minho hadn’t answered his question.

Next to him, Haejun’s mom told him to, “Leave him alone.”

Haejun chewed in annoyance.

His eyes focused pointedly on the chopsticks in Minho’s left hand, held like a spoon.

Minho gazed at him for a moment before following Haejun’s line of sight to the utensils gripped in his stubby fingers.

“Why are you holding them like that?” Haejun finally asked.

“Like what?” Minho said.

“Like a weirdo.”

“Haejun.”

He glanced at his mom before sliding his gaze back towards Minho - who was now giving him the stinkiest eye he had ever seen.


His mom smacked him lightly on the back of his hand with her spoon. “Stop it.”

She looked at Minho warmly.

Haejun pretended he wasn’t bothered by the obvious difference in treatment.

"Is something wrong with the food? You haven’t eaten a lot today, Minho,” his mom wondered.
Minho stopped glaring at Haejun, his expression breaking and falling into something hesitant.

He lowered his gaze to the bowl of rice he had been picking at, gaze skirting from one side of the table before returning to her patiently waiting face.

“No… the food is really good,” he mumbled. “Thank you.”

“You don’t have to thank me, sweetie. It’s always a pleasure to have you.”

Haejun would disagree.

But no one asked for his opinion anyway.

“Thank you,” Minho mumbled again.

Haejun’s mom looked at him, concerned. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“...I’m okay.”

Anyone with eyes could see that he wasn’t.

Minho’s shoulders were drawn, his face downtrodden, voice quiet and small.

*Annoying.*

Haejun hated it.

His mom never asked *him* if he wanted to talk about his problems.

She just told him what to do and expected him to be okay with doing it.

What was *Minho* doing that *he* wasn’t?

What did she want from Haejun?

For him to be a better, kinder son who liked talking in the mornings and watched the romantic comedies she put on?

For him to *be* Minho?

He stabbed his fork into his plate once more, with enough force it made an audible *clink*.

His mom ignored his petulance, attention focused solely on Minho.

“Well… that’s alright. We don’t have to talk about it,” she smiled. “You know, I have pig’s feet in the fridge. It’s not cooked and I had been planning on saving it for later this weekend- but I think it might spoil.”

She chuckled as Minho’s expression slightly brightened.

“What do you think?” She looked at Haejun pointedly. “Should we have it now?”

He returned her stare just as pointedly. “No.”

Because that was supposed to be *their* jokbal for a Sunday dinner- like it had always been- ever since the first week after his parents’ divorce when Haejun had been moody and withdrawn and his mom had surprised him with his favorite food and made it a tradition for them to have.
For him.

He pretended not to notice the disappointment on his mom’s face as he dropped his attention back to his own plate.

As his mom sighed in light exasperation and pushed out of her chair, telling them both she would return in just a short bit so-

“Behave .”

Then he and Minho were left in silence.

A really awkward, terse silence that was really bizarre for a thirteen and nine-year old to have between them.

Haejun waited about four seconds before raising his fork and pointing it at Minho with narrowed eyes.

“I’m onto you.”

Minho stared. “Onto what?”

“Whatever game you’re playing. Whatever you’re planning. You think I don’t notice but I do,” Haejun scoffed.

Minho made a face, whatever sadness he had been feeling quickly slipping from his face in a mixture of confusion and annoyance.

“I’m not doing anything.”

“Really?” Haejun continued to point his fork, his own annoyance rising. “ Really? ”

Minho looked at him like he thought he was dumb.

Haejun scowled- because yeah- he did kind of feel like an idiot. He dropped his fork but not the subject.

“Why are you being so nice to my mom?”

Minho’s expression did something weird.

Several emotions pinched and flickered across his face, too fast to pick apart, too sudden to ignore.

“You’re supposed to be nice to your mom,” he said.

“Yeah, but she’s not your mom,” Haejun pointed out.

Minho frowned. “She’s still a mom.”

“Well stop it.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re being annoying.”

“I’m not.”
“You are.”
“I’m not.”
“You are.”
“You’re annoying.”

Haejun’s mom returned just in time to watch Haejun throw his bowl of rice at Minho’s head.

Needless to say- she wasn’t happy.

And she had spent a good twenty minutes scolding him while Minho sat at the table eating jokbal with the most irritatingly smug face no nine-year old should have been capable of wearing.

~x~

He and Minho stopped talking entirely.

And when they did ‘talk’, it was through short bickering, loud voices and glares.

Haejun sat in the back of the bus with his friends, while Minho sat in the front, looking out the window with a blank face or reading a book.

When the time for dance practices came, Minho sat outside the studio with headphones in either sleeping or doing his homework on the hallway floor.

They walked home fifteen feet apart in silence.

And yeah- sometimes Haejun ‘forgot’ to open the doors in the morning.

His mom had approached him on one rare Wednesday night when Minho had been picked up directly from school by his dad instead.

“What is going on with you two?” his mom had demanded to know. “Did you fight?”

“He’s not my responsibility mom,” Haejun had answered from his bedroom desk, annoyed, stuck on a math equation with a stupid amount of multiplication and division added in.

He felt his mom’s eyes on him, bewildered at his attitude.

“What happened?”

“Nothing.”

“Haejun, I asked you to look after him.”

“Why?”
And Haejun put his pencil down and leaned back in his chair, looking at his mom with a pinched brow and frustration.

“He’s not my friend. He’s not a sibling. He’s no one and it’s not my job. I don’t get why you think I want to do this. I’m busy .”

His mom looked at him.

“You’re not busy.”

Haejun felt the anger sear through his veins and bubble out his mouth before he could squash it down.

“How would you know? You’re never around unless it’s for him.”

Confusion on his mom’s face.

“Haejun,” she said. “What are you talking about?”

Like she didn’t know.

It made him even more mad.

He couldn’t stop it.

It spilled out.

“I’m busy. I’m always busy. I go to cram school, I study for tests, I do homework everyday but my grades still suck and I’m failing half my classes and can’t even hang out with my friends because I’m stuck ‘looking after’ Minho, and I don’t care about Minho, and I don’t care what you want me to do! I had a showcase the other day for dance and you didn’t come- you didn’t know - and everyone else’s parents were there except for you , and stupid Minho was there instead and I didn’t want him to be and I’m tired, it’s not fair, I never sleep and you don’t even notice! I’m your kid, not him!”

Silence.

His mom looked at him with an unreadable gaze.

With hurt on her face.

Like everything was his fault.

Always his fault.

The reason his parents had gotten divorced.

Too much of a hassle.

“I never wanted a kid Hara, we only kept him because of you!”

“He’s our son. How can you say that?”

“He’s not my responsibility.”

But the man had gone and gotten married anyway.

Gone and had another kid.
Then two.

Then three.

The problem was Haejun.

Must’ve been.

He looked at his mom, drowning—drowning as he’d always been—knowing she’d never notice, knowing even now she couldn’t tell—got to his feet.

Grabbed his hoodie off his dresser as he ran out the bedroom door, down the hall and out the house.

It was cold outside.

He jogged down the darkened street, breathing hard, lungs tight, skin flushed and warm and vision hot.

Blurring.

How annoying.

He angrily scrubbed at his face.

It was really, really annoying.

~x~

Like a dumbass he had forgotten his phone on his desk.

Now there was no way of letting his mom know he was still alive.

Technically, he could just walk back home and tell her.

But he didn’t want to.

He felt stupid.

And embarrassed.

And really, like he wanted to vanish into the sand beneath his feet and never come back.

As it was, Haejun only continued to straddle the park swing like the petulant, depressed kid he was.

No wonder his mom didn’t want to deal with him and his dad left.

He kicked at the sand with a humorless huff.

At least he was self-aware.

Somebody, somewhere, was clapping for him.

He dragged his gaze towards the sky—
And wished the world would squash him down.

The front light of their home was on when he finally returned.

It had to have been hours later- nearly three AM.

His mom was in the living room, her phone and Haejun’s phone held in her hands, gripped tightly, even as she slept under the lone, orange glow of the room’s only lamp.

Haejun gazed at her for a long, long moment.

Thinking of a lot of things.

Thinking of nothing.

Then he went and grabbed one of the blanket’s from his mom’s room, returning and spreading it over her before turning out the light.

When he went to his room, he went straight to his bed.

Laid down.

And slept.

The next morning Haejun woke, groggy and sluggish and smelling like dirt.

His mom was gone from the living room and her bedroom door was closed.

He could hear the sounds of her moving about- no doubt getting ready for work.

He found his phone on the living room table, grabbed it, and went to the front door.

He waited.

Leaning on the door, face pressed into the painted wood trying to will away the exhaustion with sheer force- he waited.

The minutes ticked along by.

He checked his phone several times.

It was nearing the usual time Minho arrived.

Not much longer then.

He closed his eyes and let himself drift.
But when the time came and went and Minho still hadn’t rung the doorbell or knocked, Haejun opened his eyes and frowned.

He double-checked his phone.

6:15 AM.

Haejun pulled away from the door and looked at it for a moment as though it would give him an answer.

It didn’t.

He went and opened it up instead, looking around at the empty street confused.

Then he glanced down.

Minho curled against the wall, dead asleep, clutching his school bag to his chest like a pillow.

Haejun startled.

Minho’s brow furrowed and unfurrowed, lips moving in soundless mumbles.

Haejun found himself kneeling, found himself shaking the younger boy awake.

It was freezing out and the front step was cold as ice.

He wanted to go back inside.

It took a few more attempts, but eventually Minho woke, cheek swollen, mouth puffy and eyes crusted in sleep.

Haejun couldn’t help but stare.

It didn’t look like he had gotten any sort of sleep.

Well... at least that was something they had in common.

Haejun grabbed the smaller boy by the elbow and pulled him up, bringing them both inside.

Minho struggled to take off his shoes for a good minute before managing to kick them off.

By then, Haejun had already gone to the living room, sitting himself in the corner of the couch with the TV set on low volume with dull brightness, a rerun of Running Man on.

But Haejun didn’t watch it, propping his elbow onto the arm of the couch and then dropping his cheek onto a fist, letting his eyes slip closed.

He had never felt so drained.

He just wanted to stay home.

Skip school.

Sleep forever.

There was dance practice in the evening though… and a new routine they had started learning on Tuesday.
He sighed.
The seat cushion beside him sank.
A small body fell into his side.
Haejun cracked an eye open.
Minho said nothing, already dozing, collapsed into his arm with a horribly smushed face and drool out half his mouth.
It was gross.
But Haejun couldn’t muster up the energy to care, much less react.
So he simply shut his eye again-
And let himself rest.

~x~

Something had changed.
Haejun didn’t know what it was exactly.
But something had.
He and Minho sat together in the middle of the bus.
Haejun started watching as Minho got off at the elementary building and wandered alone inside its doors.
He pulled out his notebook halfway through his mathematics and started paying attention.
Or tried to anyway.
The numbers still made no sense but he was working on it.
That afternoon, on the walk to pick Minho up before catching their second bus into the city, he found the younger boy waiting for him, swinging his legs on the short wall along the sidewalk with a pensive look. And Haejun stopped before him and asked-
“Something wrong?”
Because Minho was a kid.
The same as him.
And they were both worn.
Minho looked up, surprised and yanked from whatever thoughts had been running through his mind.
At the time, the younger boy hadn’t answered, aside from a tiny, “No”, and shake of his head.
But when he had dropped from the wall and stumbled into Haejun’s side, Haejun steadied him with an arm- and kept it there.

All the way to the dance studio.

And then he had held the door to their practice room open where several of his hyungs andnoonas stretched and lounged around- waiting, looking at Minho.

“You don’t have to sit outside,” Haejun mumbled after a long while when the younger boy just stared at him in confusion.

He glanced inside, looking at his reflection in the mirror wall.

It looked about as subdued as he felt.

He sighed.

Glanced back at Minho.

“Well. You can if you want. Whatever you want to do.”

Minho continued to stare at him, the confusion on his face morphing into wariness.

“You’re not mad at me,” he wondered aloud.

Haejun frowned. “No.”

“But you were before.”

And- well- Haejun couldn’t really deny that.

But he wasn’t mad at Minho.

He was just mad.

At everything.

Minho’s appearance and sudden integration into his life had only brought the emotions he’d forced down over the months to a breaking point.

“I was mad,” he said. “But not at you.”

“What were you mad at?”

“Everything,” Haejun answered bluntly.

“Why?”

“Because it sucks.”

“Oh.” Minho quieted for a moment, growing a bit lost in thought.

His gaze lowered to their feet, then towards the open door and the few people inside, then rose to Haejun’s face once more.

He nodded once, agreeing.
“Yeah.”

Haejun looked at Minho for a long, long time.

He then looked inside his classroom, made eye contact with a noona, told Minho to hold on- and went to talk to her, letting the practice room door swing shut behind him.

He emerged five minutes later, jerked his head at Minho waiting against the wall, and said-

“C’mon.”

But Haejun didn’t head back inside the room.

He headed down the hall, back towards the studio exit and onto the street.

Haejun glanced behind him once to make sure the younger boy was following- and then led them on an extended walk down the city street.

Alongside the river and its bridge, brown and yellow leaves crunching underfoot, frigidness curling the air and blistering the tips of their fingers and ears red, they walked and walked and walked the flat streets of downtown before starting a winding uphill ascent, away from the inner city.

When they reached the crest of the hill, forty minutes later, the sun was lowering- vivid and orange against a pale and pastel streaked sky.

Behind them was a small series of tiny, family-owned stores, and a local convenience store.

Haejun looked over at Minho.

The younger boy was halfway keeled over, cheeks flushed, nose red, eyes squinted as he struggled to breathe, but he was looking right back at Haejun.

Haejun turned with half a smile, going into the convenience store.

When he exited ten minutes later, hot packs in hand with cheese-stuffed buns, Minho was sitting in the grass across the street, gazing down at the wide view into the city.

The younger boy didn’t say anything as Haejun plopped down beside him, face still patchy from the cold, but there was something bright in his eyes.

Far brighter than before.

Haejun gave him two hot packs, kept the third for himself, and split the three buns between them.

He was quiet for a moment, mouth half-stuffed with food, hands idly tossing the hot pack he had back and forth from one palm to the other.

When he spoke, it was absently- as absent as his thoughts.

“A few years ago my dad drove past here cuz it was longer to get from the studio to home. And he didn’t want to be home. I wanted to stop and look outside. But he said it wasn’t worth it.”

He felt Minho glance at him. Heard the other boy speak.

“You came back.”
“Course I did. I made mom take me instead and we sat up here for hours.”

Minho paused.

Then very hesitantly said-

“I like your mom.”

Haejun stopped fiddling with his hot pack and looked at it, feeling a lot all of a sudden, very weighted and down. “Yeah. She’s a good mom.”

He looked at his hot pack for a while longer, the silence between them stretching before he huffed and squeezed it tight in both hands.

Warmth spread between his palms, a searing heat.

“She’s got a real shitty son though.”

If Minho was put off by the bad word he didn’t show or say it.

In fact, he didn’t even seem to care, eating the food Haejun had given him with bulging cheeks and a thoughtful face.

“I don’t think you’re bad,” he said after a few minutes.

“I’m bad,” Haejun retorted without missing a beat. “You remember when I threw that bowl at your head, right? And when I slapped you with that kimchi.”

Minho let out the tiniest snort. “That was really mean.” He paused. “And dumb.”

Haejun rolled his eyes and dug a light elbow into the smaller boy’s side.

“You’re dumb. You shoved the pepper up my nose and I’m the one who got in trouble.”

They both had, actually, but Haejun had gotten scolded the worst- and had spent the entirety of a Monday night standing on a chair and trying to scrub red pepper sauce off the ceiling and floors while Minho scrubbed dishes at the sink and flicked soap suds his way.

Haejun didn’t even know why his mom had sat them both on the kitchen floor beforehand and asked them to prepare it while she went to the store.

They’d been nothing but hostile to one another in the days leading up.

Maybe she had meant it as some sort of ‘bonding’ experience- but all it had done was keep Haejun up at night running plots of revenge through his head.

Haejun scoffed at the memory- and glanced over at Minho.

He was grinning.

Haejun knocked shoulders with him, irritated but not really. “Yah.”

Minho just kept grinning, color returning to his cheeks.

Something in his eyes turned solemn.

And it was such a weird look on the smaller boy’s face, someone five years younger, that Haejun
couldn’t help but look at him and frown.

Because even at the time if he hadn’t been paying astute attention, he remembered the smaller boy’s exhaustion and moodiness over the course of the past few weeks.

He remembered his own mom’s kind behavior and the bits and pieces of conversation he had picked up on the late nights walking back and forth from the living room to his own room as his mom spoke in hushed tones on the phone to Minho’s mom.

“What is it?” he heard himself ask.

Minho seemed to debate over his words for a moment, rolling them over his tongue and back before glancing sideways at him and mumbling out, “You’re...neat.”

Haejun was pretty sure he was mistaken.

“Come again?”

“You’re neat,” Minho muttered. “Dancing is cool.”

And though it looked like Minho had pulled almost every muscle in his body to get out the words, they sounded genuine.

The look of embarrassment on Minho’s face was real.

Haejun looked at him, a grin tugging at his lips.

“You think I’m cool.”

“No.”

“You said I’m neat.”

“No I didn’t.”

Haejun, in all the thirteen years of his life, had never heard someone else say the words. It wasn’t like he and his friends ever gave each other compliments.

They were too busy dissing each other and complaining about one another’s habits.

Honestly, Haejun was probably getting too excited about it because now Minho was looking at him in something very suspiciously close to disgust.

The brat.

“I take it back,” Minho said.

“You can’t take it back,” Haejun answered.

“Well I do.”

“You can’t.”

Minho got up, grass stains and mud on his pants, with a blank expression.

Haejun continued to grin.
When they went home, it was to Haejun on Minho’s heels, teasing the flustered, red-faced, speed-walking younger boy.

The next two weeks passed in a flurry of ups and downs.

Haejun’s mom had decided to give Minho a copy of their key- which meant Haejun no longer had to get out of bed so early in the morning.

It also meant waking up to the smaller boy roaming around in their house or trying to cook in their kitchen.

His own mom had taught Minho how to make tuna and rice balls, and though Haejun’s mom already knew how to make them herself, she had listened and watched Minho patiently at six-thirty in the morning before she had to leave for work.

Then that night she had come home and forced Haejun to prepare kimchi in the living room.

When Minho had come over the next day, Haejun’s mom showed him a basic recipe for kimchi fried rice.

Which Minho burned the first time around.

He had sulked for several days until Haejun had taken the time one evening Minho visited to actually walk through the steps beside him.

It wasn’t the greatest.

But that night at dinner, Minho had looked so nervous neither Haejun nor his mom had done anything but force themselves to eat seconds and thirds.

Not too long afterwards- Haejun’s dad had started coming by.

He didn’t know why or for what.

He holed himself in his room, music in his ears, hating how it made him feel like he was eight years old again, listening to his parents argue down the hall.

About him.

Is that why he’s back?

Had Haejun done something, somehow, to make that man return?

His dad had other kids now.

It didn’t make sense for Haejun to be something of a concern.

His pencil hovered over the lines of his notebook.

His mom had started asking Haejun to stay out in the afternoons, with his friends, and Minho had stopped visiting in the evenings altogether.
But for some reason, Minho still came to the dance studio, and still sat outside in the hall.

For some reason, Minho still rode the bus beside him on the late night trips from inside the city back to home.

For some reason, on the days Haejun and his friends didn’t meet, Minho would join him at the library as they both made attempts to get their schoolwork done.

“Why do you keep following me?”

“M’not, dummy.”

He was.

Haejun realized it one day as they sat in the back of the bus on their way to school and Minho had suddenly said-

“You don’t like it.”

Haejun had glanced at him.

“What?”

Minho had looked around at the others around them before mumbling, “Nothing.”

It had taken Haejun until the middle of the night, standing in the shower trying to ignore another argument as his mom and dad- who was staying until the morning again - to figure out what Minho had meant.

No.

He didn’t like it.

He didn’t like being there.

He hated how it wore down his mom. Wore him down.

He wanted his dad to go.

“Why are you here?”

Haejun stood in the hall, blocking the way to the kitchen- and further back- to the bedroom of his mom.

The man across from him regarded Haejun with utter indifference. “You’re not involved.”

“I live here,” Haejun said. “I’m involved.”

A scoff.

“You’re a kid.”

His dad walked forward, making an attempt to get by.

Probably to make himself another cup of coffee, judging by the empty mug in his hand.

Haejun put out a hand beside him, on the wall, staring so hard at the man in front of him it hurt.
“I’m the only one who’s been here while you’ve been gone. Off with other women. You don’t belong here.”

His dad’s eyes narrowed.

And maybe it would’ve escalated—maybe things would’ve gotten much worse—had Haejun’s mom not left her bedroom and ushered him away.

Had she not told his dad that maybe it was time for him to go—just for now—they could discuss things later at a better time when Haejun wasn’t around.

“Mom, what are you doing?” Haejun had asked as they left.

His mom had shushed him gently.

“I promise, it will work itself out. Trust me, okay?”

That Tuesday afternoon, he skipped dance and went on a run instead.

Running to clear his head.

The hill burned—everything.

His lungs, his calves, his anger and frustration—burned.

He thought he was old enough.

That his mom could trust him to be more reliable for her.

He might’ve only been thirteen, but he had always tried to do what he could, even though he wasn’t anything even close to a perfect sort of kid.

Couldn’t she see that?

Why was she listening to some ass jerk who left her five years ago for someone else?

Haejun was never dating. He didn’t care.

He stopped at the top of the hill, overlooking the city, hunched over, breathing hard, scowling harder, for a moment doing nothing but shouting profanities in his head.

Then he straightened up and turned towards the convenience store.

He needed water.

Minho met his eyes.

Haejun did a double-take.

The younger boy pushed off the wall he’d been waiting along, not at all unfazed by Haejun’s arrival or disgruntled face.

Like he’d been expecting him all along.

“What—” Haejun started, annoyed.

Minho swung the plastic bag that had been in his hand without warning Haejun’s way.
It smacked him in the face. *Hard.*

And dropped to the ground with an unimpressive thud.

Haejun hollered.

Minho rolled his eyes.

“You were supposed to catch it, hyung,” he said with a complaining frown.

Haejun balked in disbelief, one hand clutched to the side of his possibly fractured head.

“What was that for?!”

Minho made a face, coming over to pick the bag up, making a face as he checked the contents inside.

Then he looked up at Haejun and pressed the bag against his chest- and then into his hands.

“If anything’s ruined it’s your fault.”

“As if.” Haejun held the bag forcibly given, irritated beyond belief. “You just *threw* it at me.”

“I said your name a lot” Minho frowned, equal irritation falling across his face. “You weren’t looking.”

Haejun scowled.

He looked into the bag the younger boy had given him, finding a bag of snacks and water.

Confusion came just as quickly as his annoyance.

“What is this?”

Minho shrugged.

“You looked mad. I got it while you were screaming at the ground.”

Haejun stared.

“I wasn’t screaming.”

Minho stared back.

“Yes you were. It was loud.”

Haejun tore his gaze from the boy to look around them.

There were several people sitting at the tables in front the convenience store and walking along the sidewalk who quickly averted their gazes when he looked.

Mortification and humiliation settled in swift.

Minho poked him lightly.

“What wanna sit?”
Haejun had never gotten around to asking how or why Minho had been up there, waiting for him. But after that day, Haejun’s dad stopped coming around.

Haejun wasn’t sure what had happened.

He had questioned the disappearance a week later.

“How?”

“He left. Traveling overseas for business, then personal concerns.”

“...Is he coming back?”

“He will. In the future.”

Haejun didn’t understand.

But his mom had looked grim as she worked in the kitchen that early morning, Minho at her side packing rice into fried tofu rolls.

“But when he comes back, it’ll be the end. I’ll settle things for good.”

Haejun wondered what that meant.

But no answers came.

The weeks went on.

Spring term came to an end and seven days of holiday came in the summer.

The situation at Minho’s appeared to get worse.

He never said anything of it- but Haejun could tell.

He saw it in the bags beneath the smaller boy’s eyes, in the way Minho’s pencil lingered on his homework for far too long, in the way Minho joined him on the runs Haejun started taking in the mornings, even though his legs were short and he constantly fell behind.

Too many thoughts.

Haejun didn’t know what was going through his head. He never did.

But he had an inkling of an idea what the other boy needed.

He approached Minho on an early Saturday afternoon.

Something had happened at his house and Minho had been dropped off in the middle of the night by his apologetic dad before the other man had driven off.

Now Minho lay on the floor, working on a crossword puzzle with a frown and absent eyes.

Haejun came over, and without a word, set down a flyer on top the puzzle.
Minho looked up, annoyed.
“Hyung, what are you doing?”
Haejun folded his arms across his chest.
“Look at it.”
Minho did as told.
“Competition?” He questioned, noticing the name of Haejun’s dance studio printed across.
Haejun rolled his eyes. “That’s not even written on it, dummy. Look.”
And he waited, watching as Minho properly read the flyer and the words Open Class.
Minho raised his gaze back to Haejun, confused.
It was clear he didn’t understand a single thing.
Haejun sighed.
Seriously… sometimes…
“It’s an open class. Fall is coming, so they’re looking for people interested.”
“You already dance there, hyung.”
“Are you doing this on purpose? Do you want to die?”
Minho stabbed his pencil into Haejun’s foot.
Haejun yelped, hopping around with a scowl and half a curse out his mouth- stopping it only when his mom poked her head from the kitchen and fixed him with a look.
Haejun scowled and rubbed his foot, giving Minho a clear glare that said he would suffer later.
“It’s an open class, Minho. It means you can come in. And dance.”
Minho blinked up at him, baffled. “I don’t dance.”
“But you can now. If you want.”
Minho continued to blink.
Haejun started getting both flustered and annoyed at his own act of thoughtfulness which clearly wasn’t being received well.
He reached down and snatched the flyer back.
“Well, forget it if you don’t want to. I just thought it would give you something to do.”
Minho sat up- staring at him with the most unreadable look on his face Haejun had seen yet.
Haejun contemplated leaving- so he could wallow in his own embarrassment elsewhere.
But Minho reached out- grabbing the bottom of the flyer.
He gazed for a moment at the vibrant words printed across.

Then lifted his eyes to Haejun and smiled bright.

Minho was a fast learner.

But more importantly- had found something to channel his worries and energy into, like Haejun had, years ago.

And before he had knew it- a year had gone by.

Commotion from down the hall.

His mom’s worried voice, footsteps thudding, drawing near.

Haejun lifted an eyebrow and pulled out one of his earphones, just in time to watch his door slam open and see Minho barrel in, eyes wide and frantic and expression struck.

“What’s with you?” Haejun asked, spinning around in his chair.

“Mind your own business,” Minho said, throwing his bag against the wall and crawling onto Haejun’s bed.

He pulled the sheets over his head and turned to face the wall.

Haejun threw his pencil at the unmoving bundle.

"Hey. Don’t be rude.”

“Go away.”

“This is my room.”

“Then leave.”

Haejun sighed, shut his laptop, closed his notebook and went over to the bed.

For a moment all he did was stand there and look at the lump buried in his sheets.

“What happened?”

“Nothing.”

“You wouldn’t have come here like that if nothing happened.”
“I said it was nothing shut up!”

And the younger boy’s voice had risen to a yell.

Haejun stared.

Then he glanced over his shoulder at his mom in the doorway.

She seemed distraught.

Haejun frowned, giving Minho one last look before heading to the door and stepping out into the hall with his mom.

They closed the door behind them with a gentle click.

“What’s going on?” Haejun asked right away.

His mom shook her head, lips curving down, eyes flooding with grief. “They don’t think she’ll make it. I didn’t mean for him to hear but he was by the kitchen-”

“Mom.” Haejun cut her off with ease.

He waited for her flitting eyes to meet his own.

“What do you need me to do?”

His mom hesitated for the slightest second.

“His mother is going to spend the remaining time she has left at his aunt’s. She doesn’t want Minho there. It won’t be good for him.”

Well this wasn’t either.

But Haejun didn’t say that aloud.

He waited for the rest of his mom’s words.

“With his father working, commuting between his job and Minho’s aunt and his grandparents, there won’t be anyone at home for him.”

Haejun’s mom paused- and gazed at him intently.

“I know this is a lot to ask of you. I know it’s not fair. I’d have him stay here if I could but with the situation with your father-”

“How long?”

“I- what?” His mom cut herself off, bewildered.

Haejun slid his gaze to his closed bedroom door, thinking of the younger boy inside.

“How long do you want me to stay there?” he questioned, bringing his eyes back to his mom.

There was nothing but thankfulness on her face.

“It could be a week. It could be two.”
She reached out and pulled him into a firm hug.

“You know I love you, right? I’m always proud.”

“Just don’t let dad bully you,” Haejun uttered back, flushing at the praise. “I’ll come back and beat him up.”

His mom grinned against the side of his head.

“What did I say about fighting?”

“Fists first.”

“Haejun.”

“What? You’re the one who taught me.”

“I did no such thing.”

They separated and looked at one another.

His mom swatted him across the chest lightly, cocking her head in the direction of his bedroom door.

“Cheer him up? I’ll run down to the store and grab jokbal. We’ll have wraps and kimchi-fried rice. It should take forty minutes.”

“Ice-cream for dessert?”

“Forty-five.”

She pressed a quick kiss to his brow before departing down the hall.

“Mind the house!”

“Always do!” Haejun called back, unbothered.

He re-entered his room and spent the next five minutes trying to rip the sheets off Minho’s head.

"Stop it!” Minho shouted.

"They're my sheets, you brat!"

Though they were both nearing two years older, nothing between them changed.

Minho was still a kid.

Haejun was still navigating the line between teenager and adult.

In the end, Haejun won their little scuffle.

Though there was very little sense of victory.

The new scratches on his arms and face burned as he tried to straighten out his bed from where it had been pulled away from the wall in the struggle.

Minho was on the floor, red-faced, jaw squared, eyes big and dark and lips turned down so hard it seemed painful.
“I’m not gonna cry,” he said.

“So don’t,” Haejun answered.

“I’m really not going to.”

“I heard you the first time.”

Minho went quiet.

Haejun stopped his poor attempts at refolding his blanket and looked at him.

Minho was staring at the ground, eyes wide and burning, fists clenched into his pants.

Haejun went and dropped a hand on the top of his head, simple and light.

Then he went to his desk and grabbed his computer and notebook, saying, “I’ll be in the living room. Mom went to get stuff for dinner but she’ll be back soon.”

He didn’t bother waiting for any sort of answer, because he knew none would come.

He left, pulling his door in shut, lingering outside for only a moment as the start of Minho’s sniffles began and broke into ugly sobs.

Haejun looked at his feet, forehead creased ever so slightly before moving away.

He was halfway through the devil’s spawn that was mathematics and the Pythagorean Theorem when Minho emerged, miserable and shuffling his way over to the couch.

He plopped down on the cushion next to Haejun and collapsed into his side.

Haejun offered him his homework in response.

Minho stared at the notebook, then looked up at him confused.

“What do you want me to do with this?”

Haejun looked right back at him.

“If you’re going to get snot all over my clothes after bawling your eyes out, the least you can do is solve this problem.”

Minho pulled back defensively.

“I didn’t cry!”

Haejun rolled his eyes so hard he almost saw his own brain.

“Yeah, okay.”

“I didn’t!”

“Whatever. Help me find the length of this building’s roof.”

“Can’t you do it yourself?” And Minho peered at his notebook again, frowning as he let out a little mumble of, “I don’t know what any of this stuff is.”
“Cuz you’re dumb,” Haejun said with no heat, taking his notebook back and looking at the equation again.

As expected, Minho grew offended.

As expected, they started to bicker and fight.

As expected, Haejun’s mom returned home to the sight of them arguing over the right way to calculate an angle and-

"-what would you know, stupid? You’re barely ten!"

“But I passed math and you didn’t, dummy, so who’s more stupid?"

“It’s you!”

“It’s you!”

His mom passed by them and went for the kitchen, shaking her head with a sigh.

But there was a smile on her lips, grateful and small.

~x~

Minho’s house was eerily silent.

And somewhat unnerving.

Haejun had caught the last bus after his dance practice from inside the city, then rode forty minutes out to its final stop nearly two miles away before walking thirty minutes to where Minho and his family lived.

No wonder Minho’s parents had been dropping him off at Haejun’s in the mornings for school.

There were so many places Minho could end up on that two mile walk to the bus stop, he wouldn’t ever trust leaving the younger boy on his own.

But wow.

Minho hadn’t been kidding when he said he and his family owned a lot of empty yard.

All he could see was yard.

And for some reason- a lack of electricity.

“Do you live in the dark?” Haejun asked, gazing up at the small two-story house from the front step. “Why is it so quiet here?”

He glanced over his shoulder and the long stretch of road leading back to the street past an empty yard with a fence.

Somewhere in the distance, a cow mooed.
He brought his head back around and stared at Minho standing in the half-cracked door.

“Am I going to get murdered?”

The younger boy snorted.

“If I leave you out here, maybe.”

Haejun snorted right back with half a shrug.

“Fine. Do it if you want. But when a ghost comes flying out of your closet and sucks away your soul, don’t come screaming for me.”

Minho looked at him. “There aren’t any ghosts here.”

Haejun returned the look. “Sure there aren’t.”

Minho stared.

Then quickly stepped back and opened the front door all the way. “Hurry up and get in.”

Haejun huffed out a laugh.

The inside of the house was cold, though the living spaces were cluttered in a plethora of homely decorations, plants, blankets and books.

And for some reason, a lot of glass and plastic animals.

Haejun stopped in front of the fake fireplace in the wall, looking at the line of clear glass turtles making a small path to a jar of stones.

“Aunt Soohee likes them,” Minho spoke up from behind him.

Haejun slid his eyes from the turtles to look at the smaller boy who stood fiddling with his fingers, looking at the ground.

“Does she?” Haejun said more to himself than Minho in thought.

Maybe it was where Minho’s interest in sea life and fish stemmed from.

There was an awful lot about Minho’s aunt Haejun didn’t know.

He only knew about what he had heard from his own mom and through the stories Minho would sometimes randomly tell.

She was friendly and bright, optimistic and, if nothing else, a bit too easily distracted.

The older sister of Minho’s mom, the first to travel abroad, someone who once saw a massive garden of sunflowers while studying abroad in Europe and returned to South Korea insistent on building a forest of plants and vibrant flowers of her own.

She adored bees and ladybugs, she liked studying the stars.

“I like her a lot. She’s my best friend,” Minho had once said as he smiled down at the brochure to the aquarium Haejun’s mom had taken them to.

Haejun, by force.
Minho, by choice.

But it was hard to stay annoyed at the forced excursion when both Minho and Haejun’s own mom spent the whole five hour long journey giggling and pressing their faces up against the glass to get a better look at the brightly-colored schools of fish swarming around.

As it was, Haejun had just glanced down at the smaller boy at the sudden, off-hand comment he had made.

And Minho had returned the glance, grinning. “We can come back with her next time?”

Haejun would have rather thrown himself off a cliff than be subjected to another day wandering in the dark tunnels of a multi-level aquarium pretending to be interested in sea creatures forced to swim around in glass cages all day, but he didn’t say it aloud.

The last thing he had needed to do at the time was open Minho’s eyes to any sort of truth on the cruel reality of captivity.

Better to let him believe they were happy.

Haejun returned his gaze to the glass turtles and frowned.

What had he been trying to protect back then?

“...Do you wanna put your stuff down?” Minho asked after a little while longer.

“Sure.”

Haejun left the fireplace and followed the younger boy down a narrow, picture-framed hall and up a set of carpeted stairs.

They passed a bathroom and a shut door, and went one more door down.

Haejun raised his brows, poking his head inside and looking at the messy desk and unmade bed and scattered dirty clothes on the ground.

“You want me to stay in your room?”

“We don’t have a guest room,” Minho said, coming up behind him with a frown.

He peeked past Haejun’s waist and studied the state of his room.

“You can use the couch downstairs but it’s kind of lumpy.”

Haejun looked down at him, questioning. “Where would I even stay in here?”

“The bed.”

“And where would you stay?”

“The floor.”

“Why would you sleep on the floor?”

“Cuz the guests are supposed to have the bed,” Minho told him like he thought Haejun was a fool.

Haejun rolled his eyes and backed away, heading back down the hall. “Take your own bed,” he told
the other boy. “I don’t care about the couch.”

“You’re gonna wake with cramps!” Minho called after him.

“No I won’t!” Haejun called back, though he probably knew he would.

He paused at the bottom of the steps and looked over his shoulder at Minho, who was gazing at him pensively from the top of the stairs.

“When does your dad get back?” Haejun wondered.

Minho raised and dropped his shoulders, something very unsure settling on his face.

“I dunno. Late. I hear him sometimes come in but he’s gone when I get up.”

“What- he doesn’t say ‘hi’?”

“He’s busy,” Minho mumbled. “Seeing grandma and grandpa and Aunt Soohee.”

Haejun’s forehead creased. “You’re here too.”

Minho shrugged again, looking much smaller than before.

And it was far too easy to remember the nights Haejun had spent on his own, back to his door, sitting, listening as his parents argued from the living room.

As his own dad brushed him off and he was left to take care of his mom on his own.

And he knew Minho’s dad wasn’t like that.

Knew neither of Minho’s parents would ever willingly hurt the smaller boy if they could.

But even the smallest feeling of being forgotten could turn into something else.

Haejun knew.

He knew it too well.

Someone like Minho shouldn’t ever have to experience the same.

So Haejun set his duffle down near the base of the bottom step, and made his way back up the stairs, groaning and grumbling like each step was a bother, pretending not to see the way Minho’s expression brightened.

“I’ll help you clean your room only this once, then you’re on your own, got it?” he said.

And Minho’s cheery expression quickly morphed into hideous disagreement.

“Why are we cleaning my room?”

“Because it’s dirty.”

“It’s nine at night! We’re supposed to be asleep.”

“You weren’t gonna sleep anyway,” Haejun snorted as they made their way back to Minho’s room. “You were probably gonna sit up wide awake terrified of the ghost under your bed.”
Minho grabbed the back of his shirt tightly, glaring very hard.

“There aren’t any ghosts here,” he said adamantly for the second time.

Haejun grinned. “Yeah, okay.”

He pretended to be surprised an hour and a half later when they had finished tidying Minho’s room and had both taken showers- as Minho came down the stairs to the living room with the blankets off his bed and his pillow demanding that Haejun move over on the couch.

So they laid there, on opposite ends, kicking at each other’s feet, Haejun watching as Minho slowly lost more and more energy, eyelids drooping, jaw cracking in large yawns.

“Did you eat?” he asked.

“Why’re you askin’ now?” Minho mumbled, brows pinched in annoyance.

“I want to know if she left without giving you food.”

“She’s a good mom,” Minho frowned.

Haejun sighed. “Not what I meant.”

But it sort of was.

“She cooked,” Minho answered, words slurring, fading out. “Lotsa food for us…”

Haejun stopped jabbing his thumb into the smaller boy’s heel as Minho’s eyes closed and stayed shut.

For a moment all Haejun did was look at the younger boy- thinking of a lot of things- himself, his mom, Minho’s aunt.

The kind of life they were living compared to everyone else.

No.

Not compared.

He was sure his classmates had problems like this too, even though they never said it.

Maybe they were all too good at pretending nothing was wrong.

His eyes drifted to the dull and dark fireplace one last time- to the glass animals placed carefully on top- and lingered.

Weird.

He hadn’t ever imagined himself like this.

He hadn’t ever imagined growing up without a father figure, without siblings, in a house with a philosophy influenced entirely by his mom.

He didn’t hate it.

He only wondered sometimes what it would’ve been like.
Better or worse.

Had his dad stayed.

Had there been another brother or sister in the house.

If he had an older brother or sister, Haejun wouldn’t have had to worry about a lot of things.

He probably would’ve been the sort of little brother that didn’t notice anything.

Who would’ve ran around with his friends, gone to dance practice and back, ate dinner talking about his day.

Maybe he would’ve been brighter.

But that was useless to think about.

Time was something he could never get back or change.

It turned, relentless, sometimes fast, sometimes slow.

Only ever moving forward.

And Haejun had discovered on his own, navigating through repeating days of school and uncertain ones at home, that there was nothing he could do except keep walking ahead.

Even if he never knew where he was going.

What situation he’d come across.

Who’d he find.

A cheerful aunt.

A close mom who often worried.

A kid who was annoying and idiotic and *moody* - who Haejun- beyond any sort of logical reason he could think of- wanted to simultaneously punt off a roof and take care of.

They weren’t friends.

They weren’t strangers.

They weren’t neighbors with any sort of relationship someone would call friendly or polite.

They existed, Haejun and Minho, through circumstance.

But they were together, now like this, through choice.

Weird.

He dropped his gaze to the other boy, now soundlessly asleep, breathing deeply.

The feeling was weird.

It was probably the same sort of feeling he’d have-
If Minho was a little brother.

Haejun snorted at the thought, very quietly, very lightly, half-amused.

Then he slouched comfortably down into the lumpy cushions of the couch, thinking of tomorrow and the future days ahead.

They wouldn’t be easy.

Whatever they were.

~x~

Their schedules largely stayed the same.

To school to home, to school to dance, on the weekends, on their own with their own families and friends.

Haejun continued on with extracurriculars Minho wasn’t involved in, Minho continued to stay behind and bounce around between clubs, indecisive, always wanting to try everything and never settle.

Haejun had half thought the other boy would join the fishing club, but Minho had for some reason picked up volunteering with his classmates to try and herd cats into the waiting arms and vans of a shelter stationed further into the city.

Over time, some changes came.

Haejun started picking up chores when he swung by Minho’s more and more often, taking note of the days Minho’s dad would return from work, exhausted but putting on a weary smile, with a message from Minho’s mom.

Short relays of how much she loved Minho.

Thanks to Haejun.

Asking Haejun to thank his mom as well.

She was sorry.

She was grateful.

“Minho, Aunt Soohee says ‘hi’. ”

Though those were words Minho never wanted to hear.

Words that always made him sullen; made him dive into his homework with more diligence than before.

He didn’t want to hear hi .

He wanted to see his aunt himself.
To know she was okay.

That’s what Minho told him.

Haejun’s dad reappeared, gruff and angry one night on their front step.

Then left hours later after a yelled discussion- for good.

His mom had never explained what had happened in full depth.

He only caught bits and pieces about finances and something about debt.

Haejun had leaned outside the wall in front the bedroom door, itching for that chance to barge in and- and do something - but he wasn’t needed.

And-

"he’s not coming back. Ever again."

And there had been fire in her eyes, anger in her voice, but relief in every line creasing her hard face.

He had hugged her.

They had rearranged their living room and added two more lamps, colorful and bright.

Minho had come home with Haejun the next evening after dance practice with a jar in hand, full of colored glass pebbles, smooth and round.

“They were Aunt Soohee’s,” he had told them, not meeting their eyes as he took his shoes off at their front door. “She gave ‘em to me.”

At the time, Minho hadn’t said anything more.

Haejun and his mom had exchanged looks over Minho’s head, though, speaking volumes.

And Haejun’s mom had taken the jar and set it on the table in their newly changed living room, thanking Minho brightly.

But she had also removed several pebbles and returned them, pressing them lightly into Minho’s hand.

“They were a gift, weren’t they?” Haejun’s mom had kindly said.

She had smiled, folding Minho’s unmoving fingers over the small glass stones.

“I’m sure, no matter what, she’d be happy to see you have it.”

Minho had stared down at his closed fist for a long, long time.

That night, on Haejun’s bed as Haejun finished the last paragraphs of an essay at his desk, Minho spoke up quietly and said, “I think she looks different now. Mom won’t send pictures anymore.”

Haejun turned and asked him if he wanted to make a quick run to the convenience store for ice cream.

Two weeks and a half into the new routine, as Minho’s aunt was admitted into a hospital where she remained as summer swept to fall and fall froze to winter, Haejun left the depths of his poorly lit
room and wandered down the hall.

His brain and back ached.

All he’d been doing was sitting, pushing a hole in his chair with his butt, cramming for the end of the term exams.

He was bored.

He needed to do something else—bother someone else.

In the living room, beneath the blinding light of all three burning lamps, Minho sat on the couch, cross-legged, frowning deep and hard.

It had become a normal pattern, switching mornings, evenings and nights between one another’s homes— to the point it almost felt as though he and Minho were two kids living in a separated household.

Only the separated parents got along extremely well.

Haejun paused at the end of the hall and looked at the younger boy.

“What are you doing?”

Minho kept squinting at the science textbook held two centimeters from his face.

“Shut up.”

Haejun turned and went and knocked on his mom’s bedroom door.

The next day, the three of them went into the city to the eye doctor.

Minho spent too much time reading books in the dark.

“Well you’re paying for it now,” Haejun had said as they waited for Haejun’s mom to finish speaking with the receptionist calculating their appointment’s bill.

Minho had punched him in the leg.

Haejun had punched him back.

His mom had come over several minutes later to find them trying to twist one another’s fingers off.

“I found frames for a good price,” she told them.

They weren’t Minho’s style.

They weren’t Haejun’s either.

They were thick and black with frames that couldn’t decide whether to be round or square.

But neither Minho nor Haejun would ever look at his mom and tell her ‘no’.

Minho hated to wear them.

He got made fun of at school.
When Haejun had gone early to wait for Minho before their regular dance practices and found three of Minho’s classmates making fun of him at the entrance wall, he found himself stepping in, eyes wide and fingers turned into fists.

He couldn’t remember ever being mad before- on anyone else’s behalf.

But he guessed there was a first time for everything.

At home, Haejun’s mom had apologized, embarrassed, looking oddly very small.

From that day on, Minho wore his glasses.

Haejun made a point to stand in full view of the entrance when Minho’s school let out- and made slightly threatening gestures with his hand whenever anyone at their dance studio so much as opened their mouth Minho’s way with the word ‘glasses’ on their lips.

Minho had caught on eventually- and had burst into obnoxious laughter for a good ten minutes.

But after he had settled, after Haejun had stopped glaring holes into the younger boy’s head- because this was the thanks he got-

Minho smiled at him brightly and said-

“Guess I owe you, hyung.”

~x~

Time crawled slow.

Haejun somehow passed his exams.

Minho made a new friend who he talked about often.

Something something about Japan, getting stuck in a storm-drain, being weird but kind of nice and funny.

Haejun wasn’t too sure about the details.

He had tuned out in the middle of Minho’s ramble as the younger boy annoyingly leaned over his shoulder and watched him fail in mathematic calculations for the hundredth time.

If Minho had noticed, he didn’t care, staying there, talking, train of thought wandering until Haejun’s mom came and grabbed them both for dinner.

Haejun didn’t think too much about it. Minho and that new kid.

Not at the time.

Because whoever that classmate was, they had made Minho smile.

Brought energy back into the other boy’s eyes that had been missing for the longest time.

A cheer.
Haejun wouldn’t ever complain about anyone who could manage to do that.

The only time Haejun had made Minho grin and laugh in the past few months was when he tripped over the curb and hit the sidewalk in front of a girl he had been trying to impress.

They sat down for dinner, and Haejun rolled his eyes, as Minho sat and shared for the second time all about his day and the adventures he’d had with his friend.

His mom was a saint, who pretended to be interested with far more sincerity than Haejun ever could.

Then a month and a half later—came the news.

Haejun’s mom received a call.

Ten minutes later, Haejun did too.

From a classmate, asking to copy his notes.

“Can’t you send them through the chat?”

“Can’t you do your own work?”

Haejun glanced out the side of his eye as his mother stood halfway between the kitchen and hall, her brow pinched as she listened intently to whoever was speaking on the other end of the line.

“You know no one ever listens in that class. Kim is boring. You slept through her last lecture.”

“That was a long time ago.”

“It was yesterday, dumbass.”

“Shut up.”

Haejun met his mom’s gaze from where he sat in the armchair.

She gestured his way.

In his ear, his friend continued to complain.

“If I fail I’m not gonna graduate. You know my mom will beat my ass. You have to let me copy, bro.”

“No seriously,” Haejun said, getting up off the couch. “Shut up for a sec.”

He ignored his friend’s colorful response on the other end of the phone and lowered it as he went to talk to his mom.

“What is it?”
“Minho’s mom,” was the answer as she also moved her phone away from her ear.

She looked surprised.

“There’s a treatment.”

The transplant had predicted complications.

A success rate of below seventy percent.

There had been a donor from another family. And now Minho’s had a chance.

They were adamant— they would take every one they had.

“Minho?” Haejun asked.

His mom paused.

“I’m not sure.”

She went back to her phone.

For a moment Haejun stood there, listening to one side of the conversation as his mom held a discussion.

“Ah, I see… that’s good isn’t it? Mm… no, I’m sure Haejun wouldn’t… he’s right here, would you like to-? No worries… it’s okay…”

Haejun’s mom looked at him and smiled.

“We’ll be there.”

Haejun hung up his phone, not bothering to check if his friend was still there or not.

“When?”

“Three days. Sunday. They’re pushing for as soon as possible.”

~x~

The hospital was quiet, save for the sound of muted chatter from the nurses behind their desks, footsteps and light rolling as gurneys journeyed from one hall to another, elevators out the double-wood doors pinging, cutting loud through the air weighing down on their heads.

Minho slouched in the plastic chair along the wall, head down, picking at his palms, digging his nails into the skin.

Haejun watched him from the corner of his eye.

His mom was on Minho’s side, Minho’s dad beside her, and next to Minho’s dad, Minho’s mom.

They probably looked bizarre.
Minho was dressed in all black sweats, beanie on, sneakers tightly tied, like some part of him was either trying to hide or prepare to run away.

There were bags beneath his eyes that matched the ones imprinted on his dad’s face.

As though Minho’s dad had gone the entire week without rest, preparing for the worst.

And maybe he had.

Haejun himself was dressed just fine, in regular shirt and sweatpants had gotten up incredibly earning that morning, messaging Minho who apparently had spent the whole night awake, staring up at his ceiling.

Then Haejun had cooked breakfast and leaned against the kitchen counter, waiting and looking at his phone as 10:00 AM drew near as he gradually came to realize his mom would probably oversleep.

Sure enough, when Haejun had gone and knocked on her door and then pushed it in, he found his mom rolling out of bed still dressed from work from the night before.

She had pulled an overnight shift to take tomorrow’s Monday off.

“In case they need me. We don’t know what will happen. I should be here,” she had told Haejun.

And Minho’s mom?

Haejun’s gaze slid over, past everyone else.

She sat, small, hands folded in the lap of her floral skirt, blouse white, sandals strapped to her ankles.

Her hair was pulled back, neat and simple.

She was the only one of them, aside from Haejun who looked remotely put together.

She had mentioned, quite softly, that she had gone to church that morning.

Haejun hadn’t pried.

Hours passed.

The doctor came to them.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

Everyone grew attentive.

Minho stopped picking at his hands- stilling, from where he leant against Haejun’s arm.

Haejun’s eyes rose to him sharply, then honed in on the doctor.

The doctor met his stare- and seemed a bit bewildered.

He continued from where he left off.

“The operation was a success, with minor complications, but she’s stable now. We’d like to keep her in our intensive care for a while longer. No visitors. I’m sorry you’ve come down to see her, but we hope you can understand.”
Haejun wondered how much trouble he’d get in for hitting a doctor.

Whose first statement for a successful transplant was a freaking ‘I’m sorry’?

He glanced at Minho.

The younger boy’s face was incredibly blank.

He glanced at Minho’s mom.

She had sunken back, features shaken, skin pale.

His own mom looked furious.

Good.

Haejun swung his glare to the doctor.

The doctor looked between them- and excused himself swiftly with a bow.

Success didn’t mean everlasting.

~x~

It bothered Haejun as he sat in the back of his literature class the next day, staring at the sparse notes he had taken as his teacher spoke.

A pointless lecture he would probably never ever apply to any other thing in his life except this school term’s grade.

*This* wasn’t forever.

Death was.

Haejun had done his research.

How much time Minho’s aunt truly had-

~x~

He stood in the doorway of hospital room 309, watching as Minho and his mom and his dad gathered before the bed.

The first day of visitors allowed, Minho’s aunt lay in her assigned bed, sleeping, unmoving, tubes running through her nose, IVs dripping in her arm.

And Minho stood at the bedside with his mom and with his dad, gripping their hands tight, and they gripped his equally as tight in return.
Like they were each other’s lifeline and support- breathing, shuddering, grateful- together.

Haejun looked over his shoulder to where his own mom stood.

Her gaze left the family inside the white-walled hospital room.

She met Haejun’s eyes.

She smiled, brow creasing, masking away her pain- and Haejun wondered if what she was thinking about was the same.

He went to her and hugged her, something short and simple.

There were only two of them- but it didn’t matter.

Because she was still his mom and he was still her son.

Around a week later, Minho’s aunt was stable enough to receive visitors while she was awake.

Haejun hadn’t gone the first or second or third day.

He didn’t want to intrude.

He had met Minho’s aunt once in all of three years.

Wouldn’t it be weird?

Seeing some other kid standing at the side of the bed?

It’d be a bit weird, wouldn’t it?

She’s just gotten through a massive surgery.

She didn’t need confusion.

Those were the thoughts that had been running through Haejun’s head.

Then Minho sent a message.

Hyung. Come tomorrow?

And it was the next day as Haejun entered the new hospital room meant for recovery, window open, sky bright and blue and air brisk, as Minho’s mom and Haejun’s mom chatted, laughing lightly with Minho’s aunt propped up in her bed, as stood in Haejun’s shadow stuck outside the room- that Haejun realized.

Minho hadn’t been to see her either.

“I still feel like she’s gonna go away.” Minho had whispered that through the phone the first night they all returned from the hospital after news of the success.

“She’s here, Minho,” Haejun had told him, stepped halfway out the running shower as he went to
answer the ringing phone left on the bathroom sink.

“It’s okay.”

“...okay.”

“Okay?”

“...I got it hyung,” Minho had mumbled, sounding somewhat embarrassed.

They wound up talking about a new dance routine one of the members of their studio, Donghae, was insistent they all learn.

They were in the middle of discussing technicalities and improvements when Haejun’s mom banged on the door- wondering why he’d been showering for so long.

“There’ll be no hot water!”

“I’m on the phone with Minho!”

“Tell him I said ‘hi’ and get out already!”

“Alright, alright! Geez...”

But now, here they were.

And Minho was still scared.

Haejun glanced over his shoulder, at the younger boy and his petrified, pensive face.

“Hey,” he said, low beneath his breath.

He nudged Minho lightly.

“Get in there. Say ‘hey’.”

Minho looked up at him with eyes far too big.

Haejun frowned.

“Minho…”

But he wasn’t the one to call the younger boy’s name.

Haejun paused as Minho froze, bringing his attention back inside the room where all three women in it stood gazing their way.

Minho’s aunt smiled.

Though her face was pale from medication, it was pretty.

The curve of her lips was the same as Minho’s- the crinkle of her gaze too.

For a moment, it sort of tripped him out.

He didn’t realize he had gone still until Minho started pushing at his back, trying to enter the room.
He stepped aside- and watched the reunion.

As Minho and Haejun’s moms fell away.

As Minho took their place.

As Minho’s aunt reached for his hand- and grabbed it- swinging it light against the sheets.

“You’re mad,” he heard Minho say, the smaller boy’s gaze on their hands.

His aunt’s brow creased, her smile growing, understanding and fond.

“Why? Because you were upset?”

“Wasn’t upset.”

“No?”

“No.”

Haejun wondered if he should be in the room.

It felt like an invasion of privacy.

He didn’t belong.

And in the brief silence that had fallen, Minho’s aunt looked up and towards the door.

Haejun glanced behind him- wondering if someone else had come.

But no.

The hall remained empty.

He frowned and brought his gaze back around.

Minho’s aunt was still looking.

His way.

No- wait- at him.

She... wanted something?

Haejun stared.

She stared back, her eyebrows raising high on her brow in amusement.

And before he knew what had happened, he was there at the bed.

There at Minho’s side.

Looking down into the face of the older woman who had meant so much to Minho it had changed him.

Even closer he could see the dark bags beneath her eyes.
The sallowness to her skin.
The wispiness to her hair, brittle and thin.

Her fingers were bony, her nails unkempt, her smile small and not as bright as he had thought- for some reason- it had been.

She had been dying.

Was dying.

Even now- still.

They had gotten more time, but eventually, that too would drift away.

Nothing would have changed.

In the same place- years down the road- nothing would have changed.

They had to have known it.

Everyone but Minho.

No… maybe Minho knew too.

And that was why he had refused to set foot inside the room.

It wouldn’t last.

Haejun blinked slowly, the thought resonating oddly in his head.

He felt strange.

As though he had just learned something very, very important, though he didn’t know what.

What was it?

He felt Minho’s eyes on him.

Felt the eyes of his own mom and Minho’s mom on the back of his head.

Why?

And Minho’s aunt spoke, soft and calm.

“Why are you crying?” Haejun looked at her, startled.

She gazed at him with an expression, unreadable but kind.

“Haejun...was it? I don’t think we’ve ever met. Thank you for looking after Minho.”

Haejun bowed politely, too surprised by his own tears to even be embarrassed.

He wiped them as he bent over, wondering where they had come from.

For how long.
But when he straightened, her face had shifted into something oddly knowing.

Haejun couldn’t tear his gaze away.

Couldn’t speak.

Minho’s aunt shifted her eyes from him to Minho, waiting, listening in to the both of them from Haejun’s side.

Her entire expression melted.

“You don’t have to be sad. Everything will be just fine,” she said warmly.

Haejun wondered who she was talking to.

Haejun?

Minho?

Or was it Minho’s mom- her younger sister- standing, watching them with a crumpled face?

~x~

Outside the room, nearly an hour later, Haejun trailed back behind with Minho as their moms talked quietly up ahead.

They headed down the hall, into the elevator, outside the glass entrance doors and down the sidewalk towards the parking lot.

Minho was oddly quiet.

Haejun glanced at him, hands in his pant pockets.

“What?”

Minho shook his head.

“Nothing.”

“Don’t believe you.”

“Who cares?”

And Haejun turned his gaze back to the front, snorting, as they went for their mom’s cars parked side by side.

“Thought you weren’t gonna cry.”

Beside him, Minho stared at the ground intently, eyes watering.

“Shut up, stupid.”

Haejun huffed through his nose, a small smile tugging at his lips.
“How rude.”

A hand pulled on his elbow.

Haejun stopped in front his mom’s car.

She still talked with Minho’s.

Haejun slid his eyes from them to the younger boy stopped behind him.

Minho who stood, shoulders hunched, eyes bright as he smiled.

“I’m really happy she’s okay.”

Haejun gazed at him. If it was true- then why did Minho look like he was in so much pain?

*What is it you’re not saying, Minho?*

---

Spring came, a quiet spread of blooming buds and turning trees, sprigs to leaves and grays to blue.

Haejun waited along the wall, headphones on, gaze loose and idle on the sky.

Clouds drifted by unbothered, slow like a snail.

3:30 PM and Minho had yet to leave the school.

He tried not to be worried.

Minho was always outspoken nowadays and had started staying behind to talk more with his teachers.

He had taken an active interest in volunteering, picking up trash and animals.

He’d even started talking about working at the aquarium, though he was way too young for hire.

That sudden burst of passion had caught them all off guard.

But it had annoyingly stirred some sort of motivation in the depths of Haejun’s undecided, procrastinating mind.

Motivation that came equipped with an equally annoying voice that had begun pushing him to start thinking about himself and what he wanted to do.

He didn’t want to become a businessman.

He didn’t want to become a professor.

He didn’t want to be a cop or a fireman or work in general services.
He was seventeen, already nearing eighteen.
Graduation and conscription loomed ahead.
He’d have to join the military.
The sooner, the better.
But he didn’t want to be there forever.
After his two years he just wanted to…
Lounge around and work as a hired dancer?
Deliver mail on the side?
Maybe get a girlfriend?
Haejun had never had any particularly big aspirations.
He spent most of his time making sure that his mom was okay- that Minho was okay- that his dad was far away.
That he could get decent enough grades in his class to pass and please his mom and fly beneath the radar of his teachers.
Now that he thought about it…
What had he done for himself?
He thought on the idea for a long moment, curious.
So curious he almost missed the sight of Minho walking past the wall, chatting brightly with a classmate at his side.
It looked like the exchange student, Minho’s friend.
Haejun raised his eyebrows, pulled out his earbuds and called after the younger boy.
“Minho-yah.”
Minho and his classmate stopped, looking over their shoulders at him in clear surprise.
“Oh, hyung,” Minho said.
He turned to face Haejun and grinned apologetically.
“I didn’t see you.”
“That’s obvious,” Haejun snorted, but it was light with humor.
He spared Minho’s classmate a glance.
“Going somewhere?”
Minho’s grin grew.
“Yeah. We’re gonna go hang out.”

“So you made me wait all this time for nothing?”

Minho made a face. “I never said you had to.”

And alright, the brat had a point.

But could anyone blame Haejun for assuming?

It had become an unspoken habit over the years for Haejun to swing by after school and for them to make part of their trip home together.

Even if some of those days were now slotted for buddy-time with Minho’s new and now apparent best friend.

And if they weren’t going home and if Minho wasn’t off with his friend- then it was always Haejun and Minho taking trips to the dance studio.

Minho had picked up Tuesday and Thursday classes with gusto.

The younger boy even took trips to the studios on the weekends early in the afternoon in any practice rooms with unbooked space, drilling through fundamentals.

He was far from perfect.

And his gestures were sometimes too big.

But there was natural-born skill there.

Precision.

Something subtle.

Sometimes so smooth it barely looked like he was trying.

Haejun had heard their choreographer teachers talking once.

There was a small competition in Gimpo.

They wanted to put together a team.

“What do you think about Minho?”

“He’s young. But you only get better with experience.”

“Then-”

Overheard a particularly zealous dongsaeng with ambitions to start his own crew.

“It’ll be good. Anyone can join. We can compete. Travel around.”

A pause.

“Someone ask Minho. He seems like a good fit.”

“You think?”
“That’s what I said.”

“Well alright- ”

“Hyung, you good?”

Haejun blinked and broke away from his thoughts.

Both Minho and his classmate were looking at him, curious and waiting. Haejun’s gaze lingered on Minho’s friend, the cheerful boy with floppy hair and bright eyes.

He felt his mouth twist down.

Strange.

There was something about the way the other boy returned Haejun’s gaze, past the smile and outward cheer- a complexity to it- a depth- uncannily knowing and mature.

It was the sort of look a thirteen-year old shouldn’t have.

The sort of look that said he had to grow up too fast.

Had to live in the world of adulthood.

A look that Haejun had only seen on himself in the mirror, four years ago, long before Minho, Minho’s mom and his Aunt Soohee.

“I’m fine,” he answered Minho at long last, a bit distractedly, unnerved.

He tore his gaze away and looked at Minho.

“Have fun,” he said, even as the younger boy began glancing between Haejun and his classmate with a frown. “I’m going home.”

Minho hesitated, looking at his own same-age friend one more time before nodding.

“Okay. ”

And that was the end of that.

Haejun and Minho turned away.

Their paths diverged.

Haejun made the lone journey to the bus stop fifteen minutes down the street heading for the inner city- unable to erase the crease from his brow.

What was with that?

~X~

He didn’t see that classmate ever again.
Or Minho for a whole week after.

And when he finally did—something had changed.

Minho left the school alone, thumbs loose in the straps of his backpack, expression blank.

He passed by Haejun without any sort of acknowledgment or sound.

Haejun pushed off the wall and stepped after him, alarmed.

“Minho.”

He didn’t stop walking.

Haejun stared, baffled—then chased after him—one step—two—and grabbed the younger boy’s arm.

“Hey.”

Minho halted.

Haejun ran into his back.

Stepped around the other boy and looked at Minho’s face—and froze.

Bruising on his cheek.

A cut along his brow.

A split lip.

Minho stared at the ground and refused to look up.

He shrugged off Haejun’s hand.

He pushed Haejun away.

He told Haejun to leave him alone—and went alone—down the sidewalk, the opposite way.

At the time, Haejun had been too stunned to move.

Because Minho didn’t fight—he had never fought—he would never throw himself into a confrontation if he had the choice.

~x~

“Who was it?”

Minho scowled at him through the crack in his door, palms flat against the wood on the other side as he tried in vain to push it shut.

Haejun pushed right back up against it with a hand and equal force.

“Go away,” Minho said. “What are you even doing here? Who let you in?”
“They’re called your mom and dad and they’re worried because you won’t come out of your room,” Haejun snapped.

“So what- they called you instead?”

Minho turned his flat palms into fists and struck them hard against his side of the door.

“You can’t mind your own business? I said *go away* .”

“Whatever, brat. You’re just a kid.”

“I’m not a kid!”

“You’re a stupid kid!”

“You’re a stupid hyung!” Minho yelled.

Haejun stopped with the politeness and threw his shoulder into the door.

Minho lost his balance and fell back, tripping over his feet and onto the floor.

Haejun came in and shut the door behind him with a pointed click.

He looked at Minho, doing nothing, saying nothing, waiting.

And Minho gazed up at him with an expression far too filled with anger and fear.

Eyes dark and swimming and *huge*, as though a part of him was screaming to let it all out.

Neither of them spoke.

Haejun’s eyes lifted up and away and glanced about the younger boy’s room.

It was ridiculously clean.

Spotless.

His backpack and a pair of sneakers were by his desk.

The backpack was open.

Haejun stared at the stuffed clothes, toothbrush and toothpaste inside.

“What are you doing?”

The question left his mouth, loud.

Minho got to his feet.

Went to the bag.

Turned his back as he went and zipped it tightly up.

“Nothing.”

Haejun kept staring.
“Running away.”
“I’m not.”
“What’s with the bag?”
“It’s a bag.”

Haejun walked over.

Stopped Minho with a hand on the smaller boy’s wrist.

Minho refused to meet his eyes, and Haejun stood there, at a true loss for words.

What had happened to make him this way?

To skip out on dance, turn down the offer for a competition participation, ditch volunteering, avoid his parents and Haejun and Haejun’s mom like they were bothers?

It wasn’t Minho.

Minho wouldn’t do anything of the sort.

He loved his family.

He cared about his classmates.

He had just told Haejun three and a half weeks ago he wanted to go to Seoul, climb a mountain with some friends and camp out beneath the stars.

Of course, Minho’s mom had told him no out of concern, but it was that fact that Minho had wanted to explore.

Had said so with excited eyes and so much enthusiasm over dinner at Haejun’s house that day that Haejun had thrown rice at his head and earned a scolding from his mom.

So what had changed?

“Why did you pack this bag, Minho?”

And if Haejun sounded insistent, if he sounded mad, he didn’t care.

This wasn’t the kid he had known for five years.

Minho tried to pull his arm away.

Haejun refused to let go.

Minho got frustrated, turned and tried to peel Haejun’s fingers off of his wrist.

“I said it’s just a bag, I can’t pack a bag?”

No.

Because Haejun had seen this before.

He had tried it himself, years ago, when he was eight and his parents had refused to stop shouting-
because of him-

What a hassle-

“Not my responsibility-”

“-not my kid-”

and “he’s your son!”

“-we’re through, we’re done!”

It’s because of me.

And Haejun remembered with clarity that night and the overwhelming hurt and pain that had made it hard to breathe, back to his bedroom door, ears unable to close, hands unable to stop shaking.

And Minho’s hands were shaking now, trembling, eyes blinking fast.

“Hyung.”

He turned and knocked into Haejun’s chest, standing still, unmoving, even as his shoulders heaved up and down, as he crumbled, face cracking, brows creasing, tears spilling.

“Aii hyung, make it stop. Why is it happening? Why can’t I make it stop?”

Haejun stared stunned at the wall past the younger boy’s shoulder as Minho’s voice hitched and broke and fell into uncontrollably loud sobs.

“I can’t make it stop.”

Haejun lifted his hand.

Brought it to the back of Minho’s head.

And pulled him closer in, still staring at the wall.

Empty noise ringing in his ears.

~x~

Minho spoke to his family again.

He spoke to Haejun and his mom.

He attended weekly dance practices, visited Haejun and his mom, greeting them with a muted smile before sitting down in the living room to do homework or sleep on the couch.

Haejun sat beside him, doing his own work or studying for his tests, sometimes with Minho’s head in his lap.

Sometimes with Minho’s feet there instead as the younger boy dozed.
He watched as Minho’s mom or aunt would come to pick him up.

How his mom and Minho’s would speak in low and worried tones, glances shifting their way and back again and again.

But there was nothing they could do.

Spring turned to summer, turned to fall, turned to winter.

Minho’s interests picked back up.

Haejun graduated at the end of the term with honors and a date set for enlistment in the early months of next spring.

~x~

Thirteen-years old and Minho pushed away from where he waited beneath the awning of the old convenience store, picking his backpack up from where it rested by his worn-down sneakers.

There was a can of coffee in his hands.

He threw it at Haejun’s head.

Haejun caught it, one-handed.

Minho huffed through half a smirk.

“Guess you’re good enough to join.”

“Like I want to hear that from you, brat.”

Haejun ruffled his hair.

They sat on the hill across the street, plopping down, gazing out at the familiar view down below.

The air was brisk, the afternoon quiet, the sun high and bright.

“You’re gonna have to cut your hair,” Minho said.

“Don’t remind me,” Haejun said back.

“You’re gonna look dumb.”

“Whatever. I won’t ever look as dumb as you.”

“I’m not dumb.”

“You’re dumb”

“You’re dumb.”

They jostled one another back and forth with their shoulders, getting more and more aggressive until Minho punched him in the thigh with a knucked fist.
Haejun sputtered, Minho preened, and Haejun very seriously contemplated tossing Minho off the hill and somewhere down into the city.

He picked the grass from Minho’s hair a short moment later.

“Eighth grade and then it’s high school. You’re getting old.”

Minho shrugged. “I get to do more stuff.”

Haejun paused. “Like what?”

“Adult stuff.”

“What ‘adult stuff’?”

Minho looked at him like it should’ve been obvious.

“Movies. PC rooms.”

Haejun pretended he hadn’t been thinking of things much worse, lifting a brow at the younger boy instead.

“You hate PC rooms,” he said. “You suck at games.”

Minho made a face at him, looking like he was two seconds from slapping Haejun with his knuckles again.

“It’s the thought that counts.”

“For what?” Haejun snorted.

Minho made another face.

They fell into silence, comfortable and light.

There were enough memories to fill it.

Nostalgia.

Grief.

Maturity.

Growing up.

Five years now and things between them hadn’t changed.

Five years now and things were not the same.

Adolescence.

Given and taken away.

“Aunt Soohee said she’s gonna send you mail.”

Haejun raised his brow in question.
“What’s she going to send?”
“I dunno.”
Minho offered half a shrug.
“Maybe it’ll be something embarrassing.”
“Why do you want my life in the military to be miserable?”
Minho didn’t answer.
Haejun looked at him.
The younger boy picked at the grass.
Haejun watched him very carefully. “You know I’ll be back in two years.”
“You’ll be an old man.”
“I’ll be twenty.”
“Old,” Minho muttered.
He began tugging a little harder at the grass by his leg.
“How’re you gonna dance?” Minho asked.
“I’ll dance when I come out.”
“But you won’t be here in Gimpo.”
“Maybe. Maybe not.”
And Haejun looked at Minho with no small amount of exasperation and amused fondness.
“Just say you’ll miss me, dummy.”
Minho gave him a look of absolute disgust.
“No way.”
Haejun rolled his eyes.
“Okay, then I’ll never come back. Have fun with Donghae.”
Minho gripped his sleeve in wide-eyed mortification.
“No. You can’t leave me with him.”
Haejun snickered, making small, uncaring attempts to shake the smaller boy off.
“Sure I can. Bet when I’ll come back you’ll have traveled halfway around the world.”
Because Donghae had really grown enthused about his dance crew over the past year.
And though Minho had joined, Donghae’s enthusiasm was an unparalleled force of power full of
dreams to compete on a national stage and join a big company and become known as that dance group, created by him.

Led by him.

Minho was just getting dragged along in it- way too nice to drop out- way too invested in dance to quit.

It cracked Haejun up.

He didn’t doubt the kind of shenanigans Minho would get into while he was gone.

Especially with Donghae.

*Particularly* with Donghae.

The pair had the most idiotic relationship of love and hate he had ever witnessed.

Haejun was grateful.

Minho might not have known it.

Might not have seen it.

But he had always been surrounded by others who cared.

Others who watched and willingly stepped in to offer out their hand.

Maybe Minho wouldn’t notice for a long time.

He was only thirteen.

The same age Haejun was when they had first met.

And there were plenty of things that had gone over Haejun’s puberty-drugged, frustrated, clown-head.

The efforts of his mom, her love and care- she had always trusted and thought him responsible from the start- even with his dad’s disinterest, his ‘friends’ who couldn’t care less about his troubles and only cared when he was interesting enough to be around, the girls he thought were always giggling at him and hated, only to realize halfway through the tenth grade as one of them confessed it was because they thought he was cool and always got embarrassed when he would turn in his seat to lend them a pencil.

Minho would see things later.

And maybe… maybe he would come to understand.

Why his classmate had gone the way he did.

Haejun hadn’t understood, hadn’t known at first.

But once he did...

He had realized it himself weeks ago- the feeling that the other kid must’ve had.

Even if wasn’t quite the same, the reasons were.
The emotion unchanging.

“Hey.”

Haejun let his lips tug upwards in a grin.

He dropped an arm across Minho’s shoulder and lightly tugged at his ear.

“Get out of your head. I’ll be here. You know, we get a day to visit once a year.”

“Wow. That’s really cool,” Minho said with no soul whatsoever.

He leaned into Haejun’s touch all the same.

He stayed expressionless but his fingers messed around with Haejun’s own.

“...I’ll write,” he said after another long moment.

His voice quieted.

“Maybe.”

“Do what you want,” Haejun answered with a tone of disinterest.

Thoughts came and went within his head- but one constant remained.

His most important request.

“Minho-yah.”

“What?”

“...Look after yourself.”

Minho gazed out across the cityscape for an incredibly long amount of time.

Something unreadable in his eyes.

Then he glanced over at Haejun, lips curving slightly up, humorless yet humored at the same time.

“I will,” he answered softly.

Then softer still-

“Haejun-hyung, I-”

Snow spun from the sky.

Down onto their heads.

"Minho. Don’t."

Frosted breath in the air.
Their feet were still, the space between them far.
The stars were gone high up above.
He gazed at the boy across from him.
The boy who gazed back kindly.
Who smiled far too softly.
Who told himself the lie.
Minho rejected it.
Refused.
Broken, breaking, shattering still, the cold air burning with each inhale, around his lungs, squeezing, scorching- oh. It hurt.
It hurt.
Fifteen.
Older.
And it-
“-’s not your fault. You know that...right?” his old classmate said. “There’s nothing.”
Minho looked at him, tears spilling, and he couldn't get them to stop.
Even though he blinked.
Even though his hands fumbled and raised and tried to cup them back onto his face, back into his eyes.
“Don’t worry,” said the other boy. “I’m happy. I’m glad.”
His voice was unwavering even as his own tears fell.
Even as his own face crumpled, eyes creased and smile grew.
“So promise me you won’t cry anymore.”

“You’ll be okay.”

Chapter End Notes
.... ya'll were really looking for that minchan weren't you? lololololol

I hope you like being confused.

JK.

IT'S BEEN A THOUSAND YEARS SINCE AN UPDATE- I APOLOGIZE T-T

A couple of things:

1) If you've read this, please go back and watch the MIROH Making M/V Stray Kids put out on YT and their VLIVE and watch the conversation between Minho and his dance hyung at the end.

"What do I think about Minho?" (lolololololololol)

2) Lee Know doesn't cry *winkity wink*

3) I'm feeling kind of generous today for some reason. Must be the sun. If you're looking for some answers, here you go: feel free to make interpretations. BUT WARNING. It could be triggering.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SL_-RqReveA
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R19uQyfwqhg
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oqkGQF4NSVc
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m_qlgFQs7E4

You can find them in the comments. (the words that is)

4) Thank you to my beta. This is a big chapter to get through but I'm grateful. Take care of yourself bub, get rest and eat some good food <3 I'll keep trying my best on my end too!

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!