Lucked Out
by inertial

Summary

Let's play the avoidance game! Jung Daehyun versus Yoo Youngjae. The winner gets to keep his pride intact—sanity or figuring out what's wrong with Jung Daehyun not included. Are you childish enough to play along, Youngjae?

Notes

Warning: This fic contains possibly triggering themes. Please exercise reader discretion.
let's play pretend (prologue)

There's something wrong with Jung Daehyun. Something very, very wrong between his strained voice and aversion towards his bosom buddy. As his closest friend, don't you think you have the responsibility of finding out what, Yoo Youngjae? But it seems you're more preoccupied with letting Daehyun drown in his misery. Youngjae, why do you willingly play the rebound and allow Daehyun to suffer alone? Why does your pride stand in the way from chasing after Daehyun as he runs from you?

We all know that deep inside, you let his presence (or lack thereof) manifest inside of you. Spread like a disease, turn into an obsession, consume every part of your mental and physical being. It's ridiculous to evade someone who has always been your other half. Gambling will do you no good, Youngjae. You can't just depend on luck to hope somehow the situation will fix itself. Strike the jackpot when Daehyun comes back to his senses and you can finally rejoice over the return of your long lost friend, cash in your chips and lock arms with the boy deemed indispensable—no such thing, Youngjae.

Is it because you don't care at all despite your trembling fingers, suppressed hurt and bleeding heart (diagnosed as withdrawal symptoms from staying too far from your soulmate)? Or is it because you're afraid to find out what exactly is bothering Daehyun, and perhaps, be abandoned once and for all?
It had never crossed his mind before. Prior to now, not once, not even a grazing hint of a simmering
inkling. Yet this notion, strange as it is, has wrapped around his entire head, before he can even wrap
his head around it.

He'd been warned before their debut that fame changes people. Having your life recorded makes you
wary of who you are, and with the cameras so frequently rolling, the fear of missing out the ready,
set, action makes you decide to never revert back from your role.

Youngjae had never been one to fear such things. He thought he'd do fine being himself on camera;
he didn't need to play a character. It turned out the world's more cruel than he'd imagined, and he's
less that perfect. Much, much less.

The eyes of others our prisons; their thoughts our cages. Sometimes, you can't hear the snap of the
clapperboard and people want more from you than just you. After their debut he'd been boxed up in
several names, like the other members have. Some got the labels they wanted, some didn't, while
some got those they'd never expected to get.

Youngjae had fallen into all three categories. He had been crowned brain of the group, and he
worked hard to remove the stinging stamp of being fat. The only epithet of him he hadn't expected
involved not just him but another group member as well. He thought it was weird; he wanted to
chuck it away the moment he heard of it, deeming it to be trivially unwanted like a misfitting piece of
clothing.

But it wasn't as easy to be stripped off as his other displeasing label. It wasn't just about physical
appearance or intelligence, it was about a relation. One with his closest friend, Daehyun.

How do you shake off a misinterpretation of a friendship?

They had a good laugh about it the first time they heard it. The second time the matter was brought
up, only Youngjae laughed. The third time it was talked about, he couldn't laugh anymore. Not with
Daehyun. They'd grown too far apart for Youngjae to make a joke out of it.

Apparently, Daehyun disapproved the distortion of their relationship as well. The difference was that
he was much, much more desperate to drive it into the ground. But he couldn't go out on air and yell
that he wasn't gay, much less dating his group member. Thus, he had taken to distancing himself
from Youngjae. Like sand their friendship trickled through their fingers. Youngjae tried to grasp on
to it. But Daehyun didn't.

Eventually, Youngjae gave up trying.

It didn't matter, though. The company wanted to milk this set up as much as possible. So it became
an on-off skit. On stage, they stood beside one another; off stage, they sat at opposite ends of the
couch. On air, they talked and laughed with one another; off air, there was only silence between
them. On camera, they were closer than before; off camera, they were further apart than ever.

Youngjae had thought it would be alright. He knew when to smile and he had always been able to
last till the yell of cut! and the whirring of films. As long as he kept it up, knowing when to wear his
front, he would survive for the time being. Other things were irrelevant at the moment as he had a
job; he was living for the fans now.
But sometimes, you can't hear the snap of the clapperboard, and people want more from you than just you.
Arms tangled, perfectly timed laughs, shared, unrelenting gazes. Screams at every instance (I think Youngjae's cute) and the non-existent space between them suddenly feels overly suffocating.

Youngjae nuzzles his face into Daehyun's neck and notices how his jugular vein tenses. It almost seems like a dream that this had all been natural once. They'd done it because they were close, not for the squeals of those who only saw a limited side of them. Watch all of it disintegrate into the air once the camera stops rolling (and Daehyun leaps away in relief).

"Alright, that's a wrap up!" Youngjae instantly unwinds himself from Daehyun and after a quick bow, heads straight into the changing room. A trail of footsteps pad after him and Himchan joins him in the room, settling beside him on the bench.

"Are you okay?" Himchan asks, gulping down a bottle of mineral water. Youngjae looks up at him tiredly, still in the midst of catching his breath. He dips his head the moment his panting settles down and Himchan passes him his bottle.

"Are you sure?" Himchan presses, watching as Youngjae swallows the rest of the bottle down. Water drips down Youngjae's chin and Himchan reaches over to wipe it away.

"Yeah," Youngjae answers. Himchan is still looking at him, so he throws back a puzzled glance. "Why?"

Himchan shrugs in return, eyes still trained on Youngjae. "Nothing," he replies airily, looking away once Youngjae's eyebrows crease. The door snaps open and the rest of the members shuffle in one by one. Yongguk joins them by the bench, drenched in perspiration, and Youngjae hands him a towel. He leans back against the wall, letting his eyelids flutter to a close.

He can see only black, but there's still a hint of light trailing through his skin. He thinks of quick flashes and the artificiality commanding to be put back on. He briefly hears Jongup's voice mingling with Daehyun's laughs, and Junhong's squeak echoing through his breaths causes him to snap open his eyes.

Daehyun is staring at him. He watches dark pupils avert their gaze as nimbly as he had caught them, but Youngjae's stare doesn't let up. Daehyun pulls Jongup into a headlock and Jongup shouts for Junhong to help, the three ending up wrestling on the floor. He isn't sure if he had actually seen Daehyun's eyes on him, but he lets the thought perish when Yongguk squeezes his shoulder.

"You've done well, today. Your voice was amazing," Yongguk says with an encouraging smile. Youngjae flushes in return and nods lightly, mirroring Yongguk's smile. Himchan shoves Youngjae into Yongguk, accusing jokingly about Yongguk not praising his performance.

Youngjae remains against Yongguk's chest, head resting in the curve down Yongguk's neck. He's wheezing through his mouth again and he catches Daehyun's eyes. This time, Daehyun doesn't veer his gaze away, but Youngjae does after a long moment.

The car ride back to the dorms is largely made up of silence, aside from their manager's comments on their show and Himchan's random remarks. Jongup and Junhong have fallen asleep and it's just Daehyun and him in the back. He's exhausted, but he can't find it himself to sleep. The arm rest is cutting into his ribs, yet he inches further towards the window. He replays the way Daehyun had
vehemently insisted on sitting with Jongup and Junhong, and how Himchan had shoved Daehyun into the back seat while throwing him a furtive glimpse.

It hurts to be pressed against sharp corners, but the agony's not as bad as the one in his chest. His hand inches to give Daehyun a punch in the jaw, but he restrains himself and digs his fingernails into the cushion. Himchan whirls his head around, pupils glossing over the duo before addressing Youngjae.

"Yah," Himchan utters softly. "Isn't it uncomfortable to sleep like that?"

"I'm fine, hyung," Youngjae brushes Himchan's concern off, *it's not as much as sitting with that fucker*. Daehyun snaps his head towards them and Youngjae turns away, watching the scenery soar past. He can see Daehyun's reflection in the window and his gaze fixated on him.

Himchan sighs after a pregnant pause and gestures for Daehyun to move. "You wanted to sit with them, right?" Himchan presses and climbs over to the backseat. He pushes Daehyun forward, a little rougher than needed. "Go over. It's too cramped here." Daehyun frowns at Himchan and sends one last glance towards Youngjae before clambering over.

"Here, rest on my shoulder," Himchan says and Youngjae casts him a grateful look. He presses himself into Himchan, shivering slightly. The tension in his shoulders finally collapses into dust as he breathes in Himchan's familiar untainted scent; he'd been wearing cologne ever since he debuted. He remembers Himchan and him in the practice room, all weary glances and sharp exhales. Himchan's hair had been brown at that time, messily styled because he wanted one last chance at screwing up his appearance and having no one give a shit. *You'll win so much*, Himchan had told him while they shoved pork belly strips down their sore throats, *but in exchange, you'll lose the things you have now*. The freedom, those minutes without someone breathing down your neck about your chapped lips, the much smaller need to care about the opinions of others. Being self-conscious lasts through a lifetime, but the scale at which celebrities have it is suffocating. Every move photographed, documented and reported.

Youngjae closes his eyes, sinking his cheek into the contours of Himchan's shoulder. There are no lights this time but he can still hear the fading echo of an ovation and Daehyun's piercing protests. They'd once cried in one another's arms while divulging their demons. He'd been there for Daehyun when his voice cracked on their debut stage, the one thing they'd been training for for years. Daehyun had been there for him when JJ Project first performed and he'd been reminded of why he quit JYP.

Soulmates. That had once been what Youngjae thought of him and Daehyun. They had their differences and they fought more so than the other members, but they completed one another. He'd clearly thought wrong. What halves of a whole avoid one another like the plague?

Youngjae doesn't ask how it happened. Neither does he ask if they can fix it.
"Tomorrow's stage will have a special since it's our anniversary," Yongguk announces, grinning when Junhong pumps his fist in the air. Youngjae rolls over from his spot on the stage, their rehearsal being put on hold as the managing team reshuffles their setlist. Entangled with him is Junhong, his lanky limbs all jumbled up with his shorter ones. Youngjae can feel Junhong’s short breaths against his neck, the sound of *Warrior, I'm leaving you under the sun* still brimming in his eardrums and their sweat mixing inexorably with skin against skin. The lights above them are blinding, piercing his eyes the moment he tries to open them.

"We'll be performing *Secret Love* as an extra, along with elevated stages." Jongup yells at this, leaping off the floor. Junhong shifts towards him, cheering half-heartedly. "Each pair will get a stage."

"The usual, I'm guessing?" Himchan says, dancing jokingly over to Yongguk. Yongguk shoves him away with a chortle as Himchan feigns offense. Youngjae laughs into Junhong's shirt, too exhausted to move when Junhong shivers at the tickling sensation.

"I want to switch."

The voice that stabs through the air instantly has Youngjae narrowing his eyes, fist clenching. He's caught off-guard when Junhong holds him tighter, as though silently telling him not to act rashly.

"Junhong-ah," Daehyun beckons but he makes no attempt to near the pair on the ground. Junhong stiffens and a grimace immediately claws onto his face as he looks to Youngjae. He hears Junhong whisper but he can't make it out in the consistent drone backstage. *Is that an apology? But why-*

"I want Junhong to be my partner." The entire stage turns silent, contrasting the previous comfortable quietness.

"Daehyun," Yongguk states tiredly, but it comes out almost like a warning. Youngjae stills at Yongguk's tone of voice. He had known they wouldn't be able to elude the members' knowledges of their ongoing cold war, but it seems like everyone knows a bit too much for Youngjae's liking. He had thought they wouldn't think much of it. He's not supposed to worry them. They're not meant to get involved; it should just be between him and Daehyun.

Youngjae had thought they looked fine on the outside, enough to fool everyone. For a moment, he feels terribly naked and kept in the dark. The embarrassment from obviously being unwanted by Daehyun smacks him hard on his head, along with the soft gazes from his teammates. Youngjae can't tell if it's pity or not.

"I want Junhong," Youngjae spitefully blurts before he can stop himself. Daehyun whirs his head towards him, eyes turning into slits. Youngjae's grip unconsciously tightens on Junhong's arm. The atmosphere thickens tenfold for that second, and before Daehyun can open his mouth to argue, Yongguk cuts in.

"Youngjae, you'll go with Junhong. Daehyun, you're with me. Himchan, Jongup. No objections," he adds at the end for good measure, eying Daehyun threateningly. Daehyun grumbles under his breath and shrugs indifferently, throwing the towel over his shoulder and striding off to get a drink.

Youngjae's breath is still caught in his throat when Junhong unwinds from him and pats him on the...
Shoulder. He turns to look at the youngest of the group, and catches that same look etched within Junhong’s pupils. *Sympathy?* The harrowing misgivings scratch at his neck as he watches the others file out. Abandoned, that’s what he is, by the boy who’d called him his best friend, who now refuses to look him in the eye like the plague.

He picks himself up and stares at the chair Daehyun had occupied. They had adamantly insisted on sharing chairs some months ago even though they obviously couldn't fit on one. How has it come to this?

The hours of practice are gruelling, but even more so when Youngjae refuses to even graze Daehyun in the midst of their dances. When he saunters out of the theatre, a few fans are gathered backstage. Youngjae puts on his brightest smile as they sprint towards him with notebooks in their hands. They fawn over his looks, *your eyes are so pretty, oppa. You put a girl like me to shame.*

They pepper him with questions and he patiently answers them, gesturing for them to slow down when he can't keep up. One of the girls leap up, glancing behind him. "Oppa, where's Daehyun oppa?"

Youngjae's smile falters for that moment, but his lips remain curled despite them digging into his cheeks. "He's still changing, I think," Youngjae says, chuckling when the girl makes a disappointed groan. "It's weird to see you two separated. Aren't you two attached by the hip, oppa?"

The girl is obviously making a joke, but Youngjae's smile completely falls. *That's what we are to everyone.* The fans worriedly look at him, snapping Youngjae back into reality. He visualises the roll of the cameras and the lens zooming in. *Take two, don't screw it up.* Youngjae pouts, puckering his lips as tightly as he can. "So you're not happy to see me?" He cutely argues, relieved when the fans start to protest and he has successfully avoided letting out any of their personal affairs.

After the fans leave, Youngjae feels a hand on his shoulder. He turns around, blinking with his lips jutted out. "Hyung?" He mewls, a pitch too high, much too delicate. Yongguk looks at him, startled.

"Youngjae?" Yongguk's voice hits Youngjae like a cluster of bricks and he shakes his head, scratching behind his neck. "Sorry," he mumbles, clearing his throat. "Are we going now?"

Yongguk nods, still blinking at Youngjae as he leads the younger boy away.

When they reach home, Youngjae volunteers to bathe last since Junhong looks ready to keel over. He takes the longest time in the shower, blows his hair dry and briefly hears Yongguk and Himchan talking in the kitchen. He recalls what had happened a few hours ago and taps his forehead lightly. *Why did I do that?*

Daehyun is already asleep by the time Youngjae climbs into bed. He doesn't spare him a glance as he turns over, facing the window, and buries himself into the sheets.

*Thank you for watching our performance! We’d like some feedback from the audience. Ah, how about you two? Yes, the two in the front row. Hand them the mike, please.*
"You saw what happened, didn't you?" Yongguk sighs, falling back into the chair. Himchan downs his coffee, earning a disapproving glare from Yongguk. He puts the cup down, pulling a face.

"They were fighting for Junhong." Himchan quickly peeks out from the kitchen, eyeing the sleeping members.

"They were fighting against each other," Yongguk corrects. "Not so much for Junhong."

"They both just want to win," Himchan laughs, though he's barely amused. This has gone on for too long. Each of them has seen their fair share of fights in the dorm, even before their debut. Daehyun and Youngjae fought occasionally, their squabbles sometimes brutal and petty, but no matter how stubborn either of them are, they still managed to mould themselves back into the pair of unbreakable friends they were.

The moment Yongguk and him locks eyes, he reads the sense of anxiousness. He doesn't know what to do.

No, I'm sorry; you can't review the script. Our cast don't have scripts, you see. It's all part of what makes the act more natural. And that's all for today, folks!
Cute boy. That's his label. Forgotten as the lead vocalist *(main* vocalist, till Daehyun joined) and erased from the chorus of their songs as Daehyun's popularity shoots sky high and flings him through the roof, too far from Youngjae to see. Yet Daehyun's high notes (the one Youngjae had failed to reach, *still* fails to reach) are ringing in his ears after every concert. He takes up the most of their songs, after all.

There was a time Youngjae was confident he wouldn't be jealous of Daehyun. It'd been true—while everyone had been worrying about him when the news of Daehyun's arrival hit, he was more excited than anything. A friend, he had thought, of his age to finally accompany him when he felt out of place between Jongup and Junhong, and Yongguk and Himchan. A friend who shared his dreams of singing his heart out for the world.

He thought he was blessed to have gotten more than he'd asked for when Daehyun and him became closest friends. But everything seems so unfounded now. Like everything he'd went through were just allegations in his head, all unsubstantiated and finally overturned by the court in his head. Overturned by Daehyun, to be more exact.

It feels less like envy to see his lines lessening, but more of hatred. He'd never thought he had the right over those ad libs; the better singer gets more, after all. He'd gladly give up his parts for Daehyun. Not so much now.

Youngjae stops singing. He's still breathing out words but the lyrics come from the walls of his swollen throat instead of his ribcage. He gives up halfway during practice the moment he feels a strain in his neck (and his heart because that *fucker* is ignoring him so blatantly) and bows his head low but emotionlessly when their manager scolds him. Daehyun doesn't comfort him anymore. It's Himchan, Yongguk, Jongup and Junhong who do.

Youngjae roams over to the left during his part of Stop It on the stage, squishes his cheeks between his small hands and hears the coos of fans. Jongup embraces him tightly, chin poking into his broad shoulders. Youngjae's beanie nearly falls but Jongup catches it, putting it back on. The crowd shrieks at their "moment" and Youngjae leans nearer to Jongup. He nearly feels guilty for doing it on purpose instead of his own inclination.

They don't matter. They're just a few lines, anyway. They don't make a difference. He doesn't make a difference (not to Daehyun).

Daehyun belts out his series of high notes as they fall into formation behind him, all quick steps and whirs of joints. When his voice fades to a perfect close, Youngjae glances at Daehyun. Daehyun is drenched in the spotlight, luminance blinding his sharp features and accentuated dark eyes. He looks untouchable, unreachable, unrecognisable.

Youngjae wonders for that second if Daehyun had wanted out because they're not on par anymore. Maybe it had never been that Daehyun was sick of having his "preferences" seemingly mistaken thanks to his friendship with Youngjae. He's stuck on the bottom tier, barely able to get his head above the water as the menacing sea of disregard drenches his eyes and blocks his vision. There'd been a time where Daehyun struggled, as the shy country bumpkin with a thick Busan accent who'd join when everyone knew each other. Youngjae had been there for him. He'd showed him the ropes and warmed him up to the rest of the teammates.
But maybe Daehyun's too high up to grab Youngjae's grappling hands as he sinks underwater with the words of others brimming at his ears. Youngjae can't hear his own voice; it almost feels like the water has gushed down his throat and quenched the passion burning in his heart.

Maybe Daehyun doesn't even want to save him. A part of him wants to argue that no, Daehyun isn't like that but he can't finish it off with I know him.

Junhong grabs him by the waist, tugging him to the side. A fan screams about their height difference and Junhong pats him on the head, smiling cheekily. Youngjae wants to snap at him jokingly, like how he always does when they're stuck in the dorm and Junhong is bored so he goes to bother Youngjae, but he instead bites his lip and crosses his arms petulantly.

A fan raises her fanboard high, neon lights scarring into Youngjae's pupils. LoJae. It's different from the sea of boards with popular pairings on them. Of a certain one he now loathes.

Youngjae sends a wink to the fan (missing a line in the process) and she cheers, waving her fanboard harder. He doesn't know what he's doing exactly, but he knows at least he's going in the right direction.

The moment he goes backstage, their manager grabs him and throws him a look. "What are you doing?" He hisses. "You've made no contact with Daehyun at all. They're going to think there's something going on between you to."

"There's nothing going on between us." Youngjae means it both ways—one's a lie, while the other is a truth which Daehyun is too stupid to get. The anger strikes him again. He dealt with it, why can't Daehyun do the same? It's just a dumb, pointless rumour. Everyone knows it isn't real. Insecure wimp, Youngjae scathingly spits under his breath.

"Then go and talk to him. Interact with him. I've told him to do so too so you better not argue." He's shoved out without a second word and he bumps into Daehyun instantaneously. Daehyun jumps and he melts into an unreadable look. Youngjae doesn't care. He pulls Daehyun closer and cheers to the crowd, tilting his head and fluttering his eyelids.

[Enter] YOUNGJAE [and] DAEHYUN

YOUNGJAE

How are you guys today?

[Puts an arm around Daehyun]

[Crowd goes wild]

DAEHYUN

...
A break in the script. A pause as the theatre's atmosphere shatters and so does Youngjae's patience (sanity). As a main actor, you never forget your lines because the eyes are always on you. It's a fatal mistake. "At least have the fucking decency to act," Youngjae hisses menacingly into Daehyun's ear. Daehyun turns to him, evidently startled, before his arm winds itself around Youngjae's hips and his fingers slide just the slightest bit under his shirt. The curve of his stomach fits perfectly with Youngjae's.

"How are you, Seoul?" Daehyun's deep voice reverberates past his ear, booming through the speakers. It's obnoxious and way too loud, just like how it usually is when Daehyun yells while they're playing video games.

Youngjae misses it.

When they're at the dorm, he lets his guard down for that split second. Shows the cards in his hands from their idiotic, evasion game of who breaks first. He puts a hand on Daehyun's shoulder just before the older boy steps into the bathroom to shower.

"Do you hate me that much?" His voice drips of revulsion, and a hint of disappointment (a clear sign of weakness; he's given the upper hand to Daehyun). The clasp tightens, his nails digging into Daehyun's shirt. Daehyun used to insist they should bathe together, but Youngjae had found it too invading of his personal space.

Youngjae doesn't wait for an answer. He goes to bed, pulls the blanket over his head and keeps his eyes shut. He pretends to be sleeping when Daehyun gets out of the shower and the darkness helps to keep up the disguise Youngjae's still form aims to imitate. A warmth materialises beside him and he freezes when he feels breathing against his lips, barely noticeable through the thick fabric. Whoo-

Drip.

The part of his blanket, just above his face, turns wet.
Bright lights. Burn into corneas as the camera relentlessly goes click and captures every second, the frequency increasing along with the chance of slipping up. Of course they'd do the interview together. What else did Youngjae expect?

Youngjae pretends to be tired and leans his head into the couch, drowning out the murmuring. Daehyun is sitting on the other end of the sofa. Youngjae isn't sure what he's doing but he supposes the staff won't talk too much about them since they've just rushed over from overseas. They're allowed to be exhausted enough to not converse without accusations of being superficial.

Youngjae stares straight at the mirror when the stylist does his make-up, no words, simply brushes of powder and pencils. He watches as his face gets drawn on, the reflection starkly showing Daehyun's scrutinising face. When they're called, Youngjae gets up and walks to his seat. Daehyun takes the space beside him, patting down his jeans. The interviewer stands beside the camera, out of sight. It's just them on the space of white.

The questions come moderately, nothing too out of the blue, nothing they haven't handled before. Sometimes they interrupt one another but that's been a harmless, natural occurrence way before their rift started.

"I heard you guys are quite popular with the fans. They call you two DaeJae, is that correct?" Daehyun visibly freezes and Youngjae holds back the urge to roll his eyes. Making a mountain out of a molehill. No one actually thinks it's real. Only you do.

"Yeah, it is," Youngjae smoothly answers. He can feel Daehyun boring his eyes through his head. "As Daehyun and I are close friends, the fans enjoy watching our friendly moments."

Lying comes too easily nowadays. But superficiality is all celebrities are about. It starts with the make-up (Youngjae can't tell if it's seeped into his skin by now), then the flashy clothes too heavy for the eyes of any normal person, and lastly, the persona people want from you. It's too hard to make people like you for who you are. It's easier to act like you are what they want you to be because you're dealing with just one person, yourself, instead of millions.

"That's sweet. Would you two like to give one another a heartfelt message? You can go first, Daehyun." Daehyun is numb, contrary to his previous talkativeness, and the interviewer squints at him. Youngjae can see from the lens that the camera is zooming in on them.

"Youngjae," Daehyun starts after a long, tense moment, the nervousness clear for all to see. "I-" He pauses almost instantaneously and Youngjae sees him twitch. "You're my best friend. We've been there for each other since our trainee days and you ... you have taken care of me well when I first joined." Youngjae frowns when he notices the way Daehyun's eyes enlarge and his adam apple bobs up and down. It isn't like Daehyun to err so noticeably on camera. He's unusually anxious and it's not just his persistent brand of incense due to Youngjae's presence.

"Ah, sorry, I can't find my words now," Daehyun laughs but he swallows thickly once again. His gaze remains veered away. "Just know that I- I love you a lot, Youngjae." Three words yet Daehyun manages to stammer and stumble them out like a kindergartener reading from his textbook, choke them out like he's sacrificing his heart.
Youngjae buries his head into Daehyun's neck, breathing in his familiar scent. "It's my turn now!" He exclaims, clapping his hands together adorably. "Daehyun," he begins easily like his lines have been imprinted into the back of his mind, "Because of our same age, we understand each other well. I'm very grateful to have you in B.A.P. Although the rest of the members provide a great source of comfort and happiness, it's nice to have someone who knows you well. Thank you for always being their for me and being my wall to lean on during our recent tour. I'm ever grateful for the things you've done lately to show you care. Without you by my side, I don't know what I'd do. I love you!"

The interviewer cheers, her gentle voice resounding beside Youngjae's laugh. Daehyun barely shifts, expression inanimate and eyes unfocused, before Youngjae puts a hand on his knee. He sends him a look, reminding him to play along. Their conflict may be unsettled, but civility is due when it comes to their jobs.

When they're dismissed for a short break, Youngjae pulls Daehyun to a deserted aisle away from the buzz. "What's wrong with you?" He asks, just a sprinkle of concern laced in his rebuking tone. Daehyun blinks hard and glares at him.

" ... Don't say things you don't mean," Daehyun blurts. "I haven't done anything lately—" Daehyun stumbles on his words and he's not making sense, "—and you don't... you don't lo-" He abruptly cuts himself off, eyes wide and looking more frantic than ever. His eyes dart around for hastily for an escape. Youngjae can't read the emotions drenching Daehyun's eyes but he's too astonished to bother deciphering them.

"How about you take your own advice?" Youngjae counters softly. He knows it's a mistake to let down his guard but he still does because suddenly, Daehyun doesn't look like the fucker who gave him up thanks to the judgements of everyone else. Suddenly, Daehyun looks like the confused, vulnerable kid he once was and not the untouchable existence too far from his grasp to feel anymore. He reaches out slightly to feel Daehyun's shoulder and the cheap t-shirt fabric that once covered his bony shoulders during their pre-debut days, but the spikes on Daehyun's expensive jacket wards Youngjae away. Maybe the fear of grabbing nothing has him not even wanting to try so he won't be disappointed. How can you ever admit that you've lost one of the best things in your life? To what, exactly?

Youngjae takes a step back the moment Jongup's laugh floats towards them. He flashes Daehyun a look of hurt and turns, padding towards the source of voices. "It'll make it less hard for you."
ripped off the skin

It's custom to review their performances after every concert. Pick out the mistakes like if one of them falls out of sequence even the tiniest bit or if one isn't speaking up enough and have them polish it up like the dirt on a mannequin. Sometimes, when the company is a little more slack, it'll just be them as a group on the practice room floor with their manager watching their concert video.

Jongup and Youngjae return from getting snacks (the healthy ones, Manager Kang had reminded), padding into the quiet room. Jongup drops himself onto the ground between Daehyun and Yongguk on the right side of the room and Youngjae hesitates for a moment before sitting beside their manager at a corner. His stomach touches the cold floor and he briefly remembers the days at the gym with Daehyun, sweat slipping down his neck and Daehyun's encouraging pat on the back.

It stung when people called him fat. Sometime before his debut, he hadn't given another damn about his weight because he came here to sing, not impress the crowd with his dashing looks. But there's always a reason why people are allowed to be on television for millions to see when they're commoners like everyone else. The privilege of standing on a stage higher than others comes with a standard you have to hit and that's being better than others. We don't just listen to the television, we watch. Voices aren't the only thing that matter. If you want to stay up on a pedestal, you better live up to the height you're standing at.

Youngjae had felt envious of Daehyun, not in a malicious way, for being able to eat and not gain weight so rapidly like he did. He'd starved for months to get his jawline, felt his muscles burn and his joints snap as he exercised to the brink of fainting. There had always been one person by his side who would push him on and not to give in to that one bar of chocolate.

"I slipped up there," Yongguk points out again about ten minutes into the video, pulling his lips to the side. Manager Kang leans towards Youngjae, gesturing towards the screen.

"You've been pretty out of it lately, Youngjae," he drops his voice to a hushed whisper. "You haven't been singing up to standard. I mean well."

Youngjae nods, waiting for the spur of motivation to hit like it usually does. He has always taken criticism about his passion well; it's always been a source of drive to get him to improve. It doesn't come, for some reason. He frowns and ponders over Manager Kang's words instinctively when something else hits him.

"I mean well?" He repeats the words, them sounding foreign in his head. Why would Manager Kang feel the need to add it like some safety net? He's never been one to need such things. It's Daehyun that does; he's more sensitive to remarks and more often than not, takes them personally.

"What do you mean by that?" Youngjae chuckles lightly, slight nervousness dripping off his laugh. "I know you mean well, hyung. I always do."
The way Manager Kang looks at Youngjae is rather alien, so he fidgets under his scrutinising gaze. Has Manager Kang forgotten?

"I know. I was just being careful, I guess."

"Why?" Youngjae presses on, confused. "You know me. I'm not the type to get insulted easily."

"Yes, yes. I know you," Manager Kang repeats absent-mindedly. Youngjae shrugs it off, angling his chin towards the screen. He's singing a segment of Crash (pitch raised, lips pursed, head tilted) and the entire crowd is cooing at his adorableness.

"The fans really love that," Youngjae comments to wash away the unsettled feeling from their preceding conversation.

"They do, don't they? Tons of K-Pop sites are adding you on their list of the cutest boys currently active. You should check out the forums when you have the time," Manager Kang laughs, ruffling his hair. "You learnt it all from me, didn't you?" He presses his cheeks together and Youngjae feigns throwing up, earning him a jab in the ribs.

"Keep it up. The public really likes this side of you. I think we can all agree you're more cut out for the cute boy role than Himchan. My role, Youngjae thinks offhandedly as he snickers at Manager Kang's joke. A few minutes before the end of their concert video, Manager Kang turns to face him seriously.

"I promised Yongguk that I'd leave your personal issues up to you guys to handle, since he said it's important to let you guys grow by yourself." He cocks his head towards the right, clearing his throat to lower his voice further. "The fact that you guys are so young yet are already going through all this makes it all the more harder. Youngjae, I'm here for you. You can tell me anything, okay?"

Youngjae nods, unsure of how to respond. Manager Kang blinks at him, as though expecting more, but rises once Youngjae turns away. "Alright, so that'll be it. I'll come back with the comments from the production team, alright? Yongguk, follow me, will you? Junhong, go return the tape to the studio."

If Youngjae hadn't been so sharp, he would have missed the look their manager had thrown at Himchan. The second oldest instantly stands, yawning. "I'm going to go get some coffee from the vending machine. You guys want anything?" The three left sitting shake their heads. Himchan pats his pockets.

"Jongup, come with me. You have change, right? I'm not sure if I've got enough." Jongup obediently follows, but Youngjae cuts in. "Hyung, I have change. I'll go with you." His jaw is locked and his voice comes out as a scoff. They've obviously concocted a plan to leave him and Daehyun alone.

"No need to. We'll be back soon." Himchan waves dismissively, shutting the door behind them. The tension in the room coils around Youngjae's body, so he stretches himself (breaks the ropes around him and for a while, he remembers Daehyun's arms around him as he hooks the safety wires to him for their special stage, we're gonna fly sky high!) and keeps his eyes averted. He'd left his phone with their manager as instructed, so he can't pretend to occupy himself with it.

Youngjae wants to act like nothing's wrong. That they're not having this stupid feud, that he's not being a bitter, childish bitch and throwing back the shit Daehyun has thrusted at him ten times harder. That he's the mature, intelligent boy everyone praises him for. So he decides to break the ice.

"The concert was fun, wasn't it?"
A part of him, one that he vehemently denies, hopes that maybe if he tries again like he had at the start, their cold war will dissolve into nothingness and they'll go back to the friends they used to be.

Daehyun hums. Youngjae offers him a smile and his heart palpitates faster like the drum beats of a suspenseful soundtrack. *Say something*, Youngjae begs, *make fun of me like you always do. Tell me I stepped on your foot during whatever song, that my face contorted when I was singing whatever chorus.*

*Don't make me give up on you.*

Daehyun coughs and stands. Youngjae's shoulder deflates and he shuts his eyes. Daehyun doesn't head for the door, as Youngjae had anticipated, but instead steps towards him. Youngjae snaps his eyes open the moment he feels warmth near his jeans and is greeted by Daehyun kneeling before him.

Their proximity is too close for his liking, even though they're an arm apart. It'd once been normal but they haven't been this close for so long that it feels strange.

Youngjae furrows his eyebrows when Daehyun leans forward, movements cautious. He remembers whispering into Daehyun's ear about some nearby restaurant at one of the fanmeets during their Warrior era and laughing in amusement when the crowd shrieked.

*I thought maybe,* Youngjae breathes but nothing comes out as Daehyun halts halfway, teeth visibly chattering the slightest bit, *maybe we'd both continue being who we are, doing what we do, and let the world think whatever they want of it.*

It'd only been him, however.

"Your lips," Daehyun's voice is strained like overly twisted strings on a violin. Daehyun hesitantly reaches upwards and tucks his hand under the side of Youngjae's face and fingers on his cheek. Youngjae's face is small so Daehyun's rough hand takes up a good part of it, warmth seeping from skin to skin. Daehyun's adam's apple bobs up and down. "Chapped. They're chapped."

"Uh. Okay. T-Thanks for telling me," Youngjae replies uncomfortably, feeling the blood tap against his ears. Daehyun stares for a moment longer and gets off him, looking disoriented. He walks towards the door just as Youngjae gets up, heart oozing with faith that'd been buried since a few months ago.

He reaches out to grab Daehyun and pull him into a brotherly half hug. Maybe Daehyun had been trying to reconcile with him, telling him he still cares, no matter how weirdly and awkwardly he'd done it. *Are we back to being ourselves?*

"Also, for our continent tour." Daehyun's hand pauses on the doorknob and so does Youngjae's outstretched one. "I want to switch and room with Jongup. I hope you don't mind."

The shock grapples at Youngjae's mind and soon, the fiery bewilderment and anger from everything, no, *Daehyun* making no sense washes over him.

By then, the door clicks open and Daehyun walks out.

Youngjae doesn't have enough time to scream.
Youngjae had once, not too long ago, been able to declare he was one of the less childish ones in the group despite being third youngest. He could easily outrank Himchan in maturity (or so he thought) and he had taken pride in the fact that Yongguk went to him often when discussing group dynamics and issues he had noticed the members were going through.

They say you never really grow up. The part of you buried in Neverland fantasies still holds on to Tinkerbell's torn wings and you don't stop nibbling on the loose skin of your thumbs. A part of that childhood innocence consists of messy fights and petulant yells of *he did it!*

Youngjae has grown out of running to his mother to tattletale on whoever had taken his toys and made him mad. But he thinks the notion behind the incessant kicking under the table between siblings, each hit harder than the previous, hasn't left him fully.

"Jonguppie," Youngjae whines, falling into Jongup's lap. *Don't look,* he forces himself to keep his eyes fixated on the boy above him, tapping on his gameboy. There is no desire to look at the two guys at the other end of the lounge, feeding one another snacks while waiting for their concert to start.

Hit the ball back into the court twice as hard. *You want a fight; I'll give you a fight.*

"Hyungie," Jongup teases, running a hand through Youngjae's hair. Jongup's thighs are warm and his eyes are kind. Guilt stirs in his gut; Youngjae has no right to be manipulating a boy this pure. Junhong shrieks all of a sudden, begging Daehyun to stop as the other tickles him persistently.

People argue all the time for the stupidest reasons. Sometimes, you keep up the yelling even though you have no idea what you're saying. Just scream louder so you can drown out your opponent, fueled by a rage with no basis and rationale. You forgot after a while what the whole point of this argument was for. It's a petty aspect of human nature and for some, they never out grow it. This fixation on victory, winning, wanting the last laugh, *aren't I better than that?*

"Youngjae, get off of Jongup," their manager chides, waving the stylist towards Jongup. "You've got your make-up done; don't hold up the others." Youngjae makes a face, narrowing his eyes at their manager before finally relenting. He saunters to the couch, making sure not to look at the duo still having their fair share of laughter in the corner and draping himself over the arm of the sofa.

"Yah, you lazy bum." Someone pokes him in the back of his head and he shoots upright, flushing a little upon seeing Jieun. He'd been particularly nervous about this trip because his Secret seniors had tagged along for their music video filming. He'd never been good with girls; his last girlfriend was older and had made the first move.

*Pretty.* Jieun's lips are striking red and her eyes are large, light brown contacts highlighting their size. She crosses her legs, milky thighs brushing against one another. It's been a long time since Youngjae has been in a relationship.

"I see life hasn't been treating you so well." Jieun empathetically pats Youngjae's dark circles, causing the boy to get flustered. "Take care of yourself. You'll hit big soon; just gotta keep digging." Youngjae nods, smiling lightly.

Hyosung settles down on the couch beside them, stretching herself with her gaze glued to her phone.
She laughs, tapping on the screen and shaking her head. "Look at what Kikwang sent me," she rambles, extending her arm.

**Noona, this fan gave me a fanart of Yoseob-hyung naked!!!! T_T My eyes!!! I don't know how to face Yoseob-hyung anymore huhu. Can I hide at your dorm? >=< kekeke**

Youngjae blurts out a short laugh and Hyosung nudges him with a teasing smile. "Ah, these shippers are making poor Kikwangie uncomfortable." Jieun knits her eyebrows together, ponytail bouncing when she turns her head. "Why would he feel uncomfortable?"

Hyosung prods at her chin, pondering. "Well, seeing these kind of things will make you feel weird, right? You wouldn't want to be thought of as gay. And it makes the two friends awkward; they'll start to wonder if what they do with one another can be considered romantic." Hyosung elaborates, pursing her lips. Jieun's frown turns deeper. Junhong scoots over to Youngjae's side of the room at this moment upon being called, Daehyun hesitantly in tow.

"Oh, come on. Why does it matter?" Jieun folds her arms. She's always been the most logical and blunt of all the group members. "These kind of things shouldn't sway you if you're confident and sure of yourself." Hyosung whines, pouting at her boyfriend being shot down. "Besides, if you fall for a friend because someone said they were good girlfriend or boyfriend material, wouldn't that just be opening your eyes wider? Like, making you realise an attraction that's always been there? You wouldn't suddenly like someone because I showed you a naked drawing of them." Jieun rotates her head towards Youngjae, ruffling his hair.

"You agree with noona, right, Youngjae?" The boy stills under Jieun's gaze, briefly glancing at Daehyun. He's staring, eyes unreadable, but why would Youngjae ever be able to decipher Daehyun? They aren't friends anymore, after all.

"Yeah. It's stupid. If they're going to be stuck in someone else's perspective, they might as well not have eyes of their own. Just listen to whatever other people say, right? Be like a flock of mindless sheep, following a shepherd's orders." A bullet train out of his mouth—double the speed, no, triple it—out to crush Daehyun with all his might and hatred and-  

I miss you.

"If someone gets so worked up over what other people think and start to doubt themselves, that just shows they're weak and pathetic. Can't think for themselves." Youngjae's lips. Venom staining them blood red. Teeth biting so hard it'll draw crimson from raw flesh. Daehyun's lips.

I want to hold you. Laugh with you. Fight with you over stupid things and make up without the need to say sorry.

"Uh, that was uncalled for, Youngjae." Jieun's voice is barely audible anymore. Hyosung looks ready to lash out, but something makes her retreat in confusion. Jieun places a hand on Youngjae's shoulder, glancing at the two with their eyes locked.

"Daehyun, Youngjae," Jieun calls out softly, just that whisper enough to send a crack through the tension between the duo. Youngjae can't remember Daehyun looking this tired ever since the day they met, his Busan accent lingering despite his delirious attempt to mask it. His eye circles can still be seen through his make-up, but he does not look simply physically exhausted. He looks troubled, like he's been for these past few months. Only Youngjae never bothered to admit it, because Daehyun wouldn't let him in.

Youngjae doesn't want to break their stare-off because this has been the only tangible bridge between
them for a long while.

Daehyun's eyes are narrowed and his stature towers over the three sitting figures, the distance between them relatively large but not secure enough to prevent a physical rift. At this moment, Youngjae hopes glares can kill so he'll know whether he's looking at Daehyun because he loathes him or because he wants to remember the face of the boy he'd come to love. His best friend. What a farce.

Youngjae stands. Hyosung sucks in a sharp breath and Jieun shifts to the edge, stance ready to jump between the two. Some of the stylists have noticed the suspenseful commotion, brushes in the air and necks craned to get a better look.

He storms out, the chatter leaving his ears and a blast of fresh air hitting his face. He messily wipes at his tears, the taste of metal on his tongue as he wills himself not to cry else the make-up will run and his face will be left naked like an open book.

Chapped. They're chapped.

Daehyun's lips are chapped.
"I know you two are having some... misunderstandings at the moment. But it sells, Youngjae. Every group does fanservice; I'm sure you know that. Some rely completely on fanservice to climb their way to the top. That's why there's always those sort of rankings for most liked pairings amongst idols. Don't let it go to waste, okay? I'm not asking you to hang out with him twenty-four-seven. Just in front of the fans. It really helps to boost popularity, Youngjae."

"...Okay."

[PREVIEW] 130502 Youngjae leaving Wanbyeok Concert Hall

Comments (1)

Handsome

DOWN

[FANCAM] 130507 Youngjae at TS building

Comments (0)

THE

[PREVIEW] 130510 Youngjae at Incheon Airport

Comments (3)

Aww!!! Peace, Youngjae-ah~

Cute... Why are you pouting ^^ Do you miss us
RABBIT

[FANCAM] 130511 Daehyun and Youngjae moment at Wonderland Theatre

Comments (29)

Oh my god!!!!!

So cute ahhhhhhhhhhhh.

They look so perfect together T.T

Did they kiss?! *o* Youngjae blushed

Daehyun oppa, take care of Youngjae oppa well okay >.<

See more

HOLE

[PREVIEW] 130513 Youngjae at Mad Tea-Party Café + Autograph

Comments (10)

Like a lost puppy~

His pinky sticks out when he drinks kekeke how adorable >w<

Who is this guy? He is prettier than I'll ever be huhu v.v

Look at his lips jutting out waa like a little boy

His jawline is magnificent @_@

See More

LOSE

[UPDATE] 130514 Youngjae's tweet + selca

Comments (16)

Youngjae used so much aegyo keke keep doing it!! u.u it suits you!!
I can't stand this, he's my bias now
Angel... ^^ Take one with Daehyun
Oppa, have you eaten? Where are the rest
Jaejae aigoo so cute it hurts >_<
See More

[PREVIEW] 130515 Daehyun and Youngjae post-concert
Comments (37)
Do you feel warm now Youngjae? kekeke like a couple
Daehyun oppa is so attractive...
The way Youngjae snuggled up to Daehyun ahhhh kitty~
Daehyun oppa, your arms are getting so muscular x_x
Our Youngjae is becoming cuter lately
See More

[PREVIEW] 130515 Youngjae at convenience store
Comments (21)
How did the cashier not faint at his cuteness
Omo, he looked into the camera directly!? Those puppy eyes!!!!
His smile aish */////*
Bring one of the members, oppa. It's not safe to go alone
Why did I not notice this side of him until now ~.~!!!!
See More

CONTROL
...Youngjae was so goddamn cute! He slipped up a lot today, lol, tripping during his dances. He kept coming down to the moshpit and picking out some fanboards. Then he sat at one corner of the stage, skimming through them and then he picked out this DaeJae fanboard. It was really funny because their faces were on the board and it was of Youngjae running away from Daehyun with a lot of censored vulgarities pasted beside his head. He blinked at it, did this super lovable head tilt and laughed with one hand over his mouth. Then, he showed it to Daehyun who laughed a little, but kind of awkwardly. Don't think he found it that funny, lol.

Who in the world am I? Ah, that's the great puzzle.

Anyway, Youngjae was so engrossed in looking through the fanboards that he missed his line in Crash. Us fans near him told him about it and he pouted, making a sulky face. Then he came nearer to us, blowing kisses and doing this finger to finger poke. He was so busy that he forgot to sing his next line lol.

I knew who I was this morning, but I've changed a few times since then.

I think Himchan noticed Youngjae kept missing his parts so he walked all the way from the extended stage to the left. He squatted down beside Youngjae, tapping him on the shoulder then whispering into his ear. He looked worried which was really sweet.

You're not the same as you were before. You were much more... "muchier". You've lost your muchness. Why?

They stared at one another and Himchan started frowning HAHAHA. Youngjae shrugged after a while and waved the boards around like he was a five year old with candy, god. He handed the boards back to us and skipped over to the other side.

I'm afraid I can't explain myself, sir. Because I am not myself, you see?

DaeJae moment! They bumped into one another and Daehyun's eyes went so wide. Youngjae just laughed and pulled him into a hug awww. They held hands! Well, more of Youngjae dragging him away lol. It was seriously the cutest moment of the entire two hours. They're so close; it makes me jealous ahh. I think we all want a DaeJae kind of friendship in our lives. On to Jongup...
It's all just a dream. He was part of my dream, of course—but am I part of his?

END

What are you doing, Youngjae?

It's past curtain call.

Take off your costume.

Bathroom's down the hall.

Nowadays, I keep rewatching our old videos and looking through our message history. I like to pretend we're still who we used to be so I don't have to believe you're not there anymore.

Nowadays, when I see you, I can't recognise you anymore. They call it the circle of life, right? We're back to where we started—strangers, again. Had everything been a dream? Nothing makes sense. Aren't I worth more than a misconception? Perhaps not.

... I just want to know what's going on, Daehyun. Please. I miss you. I miss you so fucking much.

"You are a terribly real thing in a terribly false world, and that, I believe, is why you are in so much pain."

Even though we never said it, I always thought we would be the kind of friends who would last till the end of time.

"How long is forever?" Alice—with his bright red lips, his sad doe eyes—asked.

The White Rabbit—with his back turned, his Busan accent—replied, "Sometimes, just one second."
Several references to Alice in Wonderland; there's a lot of quotes taken from there. These are the original ones I tweaked:

"You're not the same as you were before. You were much more... "muchier". You've lost your muchness."

"He was part of my dream, of course—but then I was part of his dream, too!"

Also, one quote from The Asylum for Wayward Victorian Girls:

"You are a terribly real thing in a terribly false world, and that, I believe, is why you are in so much pain."
and the bridge comes falling down

Morning seeps through the window in beams, grabbing at the linens of Youngjae's blanket. He rolls over, growling, but the sunlight is persistent to pull him out of bed. He pulls his quilt over his head, trying to block out the blinding light, before a voice penetrates his thoughts.

"Come on, Youngjae." Someone prods him when he doesn't respond and he whines, swatting away at who he thinks is Yongguk. "Daehyun, can you wake Youngjae up?" Yongguk asks while Youngjae grabs onto a hand. He shoots up at Daehyun's name and realises it's Daehyun's hand he has in his grasp whereas Yongguk is standing by his side. He instantly lets go and throws the covers off him, hobbling out of bed.

"I'm up," he grumbles while Yongguk emits a chuckle. Youngjae doesn't spare Daehyun even a glance as he groggily exits the room, bumping into Jongup on the way. He hears Yongguk mutter is he okay? and no answer following behind.

They gather in Himchan's room, flicking on a random variety show. Daehyun arrives and settles down on the floor while Jongup takes the space beside Youngjae and beckons for Junhong to sit with them. Himchan stomps over and sits on the arm rest beside Youngjae, closely inspecting his face.

"You look tired." Himchan has been nagging an awful lot lately. Youngjae would appreciate it on a better day, but he's still disoriented from his dream, so he ignores Himchan, shuts his eyes and tries to recall it. The world is chattering but he hears nothing. The lights blind him and there are people all around him, bending to the non-existent music. His hair clumps to his face as sweat streaks down his body, him shutting his eyes and absorbing the atmosphere. The club is overwhelming with energy, and he lets loose for a while more as he brings the glass to his lips. His throat burns and suddenly, he feels an oddly familiar pair of arms wrap around his waist. A breeze bristles the hairs on his neck.

Daehyun's holding him. His warmth is intoxicating, more so than the alcohol. Youngjae's skin burns and his breath catches in his throat. He pushes himself further into Daehyun as Daehyun tightens his grip, lips so close to his ear he can feel every of Daehyun's pants. They sway to the music and the universe tumbles and turns, but Daehyun's the only thing holding him down. Youngjae is spun around and Daehyun faces him, their noses touching. Daehyun's eyeliner is on so thick Youngjae wonders if it'll disfigure him. He wants to wipe it away, wipe away all the wrinkles and darkness haunting his gaunt cheeks and tired smiles.

The tears come to his eyes and Daehyun murmurs something but he can't hear anything. He resorts to reading his lips. Youngjae, I-

A finger to his eyelashes snaps him out of his trance. The contact has him shrinking back into the sofa. What had happened afterwards? "Look at those eye bags. You should get more sleep," Himchan scoffs and leans into him. He is being unusually persistent, for what reason, Youngjae isn't sure.

"Says the one who sleeps more than a Koala does," Youngjae murmurs, smiling for the sake of it. Himchan laughs a bit too hard and sneaks a hand around his neck. Yongguk hands him a sandwich but he rejects it, patting his cheeks and wincing at the extra fat he'd put on a few weeks ago due to his binge.
"Eat." Himchan's grip tightens and Youngjae lets out an inaudible, irritated sigh. "I'm not hungry, hyung," he replies more coldly than intended. Daehyun suddenly laughs, loud voice piercing through their conversation as he slaps Yongguk roughly on the back, pulling him into a tight hug. He points at the television screen, grinning at the bewildered pranked host.

Youngjae stretches his neck, letting his head loll towards Himchan with a roll of the eyes. He can't identify the catalyst for how grouchy he is but he has an inkling his undecipherable dream has something to do with it. It's not as though he feels his annoyance isn't justified with Daehyun and his ridiculous avoidance game, but Youngjae has always kept his ire at bay to be undetected. *(That's what you think.)* Pretend that if Daehyun walks out of his life, he wouldn't notice a single difference. *(You broke the other day. Collapsed, along with the bridge he'd set fire to. You stood there like an idiot as he took out the lighter.)* He admits it's a spiteful way but Daehyun had asked to play; he's only being a cooperative sport by hitting the rebound. *(I'm tired. Just hate me; I'm too tired to be hurt.)* *(I'm too hurt to be hurt.)*

Himchan exhales dejectedly and wears a small smile. "You're right. We should kick off our rest day with something good." He hands Youngjae his beanie and a mask as another cackle explodes from Daehyun and Youngjae rips his stare away from Daehyun's arm tightly draped over Yongguk's neck. "Let's go get breakfast."

Youngjae has never been a morning person. More than anything else, he enjoys staying in during mornings and letting the ache of his limbs slither away as he buries himself within sheets. Create a dome of white that fits only him so he can tune out the rest of the world and think for that few hours about himself. But the moment Daehyun pulls Yongguk further towards him, hand resting on Yongguk's cheek, he rises tiredly with a nod. He doesn't turn back to look at any of his teammates as he walks out the door.

He briefly hears Himchan collecting orders and Junhong's excited yell. Daehyun replies equally as enthusiastic, but Youngjae can hear a queer strain in his voice. *Like hell I'm buying any shit for him,* Youngjae thinks as Himchan shuts the door and their steps fall in sync. Silence wafts around them, Youngjae sinking into the stillness in an effort to preserve the time.

"I like it." Youngjae whirs his head towards Himchan, barely able to cock an eyebrow due to his fatigue. "Like what, hyung?" He enquires as they step into the elevator, Himchan stepping away to give him more space.

"When you get angry," Himchan replies easily, jabbing at buttons. Youngjae stares hard at the other, tilting his head in confusion. Himchan glances back, evidently searching his eyes as his glimpse jumps from one pupil to another.

"It tells me you're still there. That you're still you," Himchan explains, his light-hearted tone contrasting the weight in his words. Youngjae furrows his eyebrows. "What do you mean, hyung?"

They exit the building, the cold breeze of dying winter beating against their faces as they amble down the streets. His chapped lips tear against the fabric of his face mask and he tastes just a bit of iron.

Himchan turns to face him as retail stores flicker past them. All jibberish in a language he can't understand. "Don't you think it's tiring to keep on smiling?" Himchan beams at this moment, but the grin barely infiltrates his dark brown eyes. Youngjae shrugs.
"We're paid to do so; it's our job, hyung. A duty. I don't want to make the fans worry," he retorts, holding open the restaurant door for Himchan. Himchan doesn't spare him a glance as he treads in. "But that doesn't make us any less human," he says and meanders up to the counter. "Less us. We get mad. We get upset. It's all part of being human."

Youngjae stops halfway in the midst of grabbing some utensils. He stares at Himchan, furrowing his eyebrows as he tries to decipher him. Himchan doesn't meet his gaze however, casually ordering and leaving Youngjae bewildered.

If he won't tell me what he's trying to say, then it's none of my business, Youngjae thinks as he grabs a few bags from Himchan. They chat the rest of their way, the eeriness of Himchan's words still pecking at the back of his head. Does Himchan know something he doesn't know?

He's certain Himchan knows about what's going on between him and Daehyun. Heck, everyone knows. He's just not too sure whether they know why Daehyun is avoiding him; he's not sure himself, honestly. So much for a friendship, the bitterness sinks in again and chews at his ribs.

The thought of Himchan sitting him down for a talk about Daehyun and him sends an unidentifiable feeling up to his throat. Is it irritation that Himchan's butting into their business? Is it dread that they're going to have to resolve this someday, and he doesn't know how to? Is it embarrassment, because they're like children at the playground fighting over the swings?

It's not my problem. Daehyun started it.

Himchan nudges him into the dorm as Junhong leaps over, excitedly removing the bags from Youngjae's red wrists. Jongup pats his arms a little and does the same to Himchan, igniting a laugh in all of them. Yongguk comes over to unpack the food, while Daehyun continues sitting on the floor.

Youngjae glances at Daehyun while he's handing Yongguk his fried noodles. He swears he sees him twitch the moment he does, but he shrugs it off and smiles when Himchan cracks a joke towards him.

(I'm tired. I'm really tired, hyung.)

Junhong, Himchan and him settle at the table while Yongguk and Jongup join Daehyun by the bed.

"Hyung." Youngjae raises an eyebrow, blinking at Junhong. He angles his chin towards Youngjae's propped up arms.

"You've been sticking out your pinky a lot lately," Junhong snickers, making Youngjae flush and retract his finger. He nearly pouts but shakes away the inclination, glaring at the youngest of the group.

"It's getting to him," Yongguk teases. "Flower boy Yoo Youngjae."

Daehyun walks towards them at this moment and Youngjae feels the exhaustion pile up in his nerves. He wishes to hand Daehyun his food, laugh when Daehyun chokes, but he's learnt since a long time ago that wishes are things you can't attain with your own capabilities. That's why you have to resort to pathetically believing in a fantasy to get it.

Youngjae walks out. "I'm going down for a stroll," he supplies, even though his legs hurt and he's exhausted from dance practice. He leaves the door open behind him because he knows Himchan will chase after him and he'll be relentless in his pursuit. Why bother?

Himchan does. Youngjae pushes open the door to the stairs and makes it down half a flight before
Himchan grabs him by the shoulder and spins him around. It oddly feels like Youngjae's dream and Youngjae nearly reaches out for Himchan to wind his arms around his waist like Daehyun had.

Pathetic. I'm resorting to pretend, now. I thought I grew out of that, but I guess not.

Himchan stares him down, concern etched into his eyes. They stay like that for a while, Youngjae glaring back to challenge Himchan to spit out the words. Let the worry melt his walls that never were and leave him bare and vulnerable.

"Youngjae," Himchan begins, hesitant and gentle. Youngjae hates the way he's speaking to him, as though Youngjae needs to be treated with extra care. Like he's a fragile doll, incapable of settling his own business. Like he's a wounded animal, because his closest friend (soulmate) abandoned him out of fear.

Pathetic. Absolutely pathetic.

"Why are you avoiding him?" Himchan asks, voice nearly inaudible. He doesn't give a name but it's clear who he's referring to. Youngjae clenches his fists and grits his teeth so hard he thinks it'll break his jaw along with the rest of his head.

"Simple. Because he's avoiding me." It comes out more childish than intended, instead of the simple, perfectly logical equation Youngjae had worked out in his mind. His nails pierce into his skin and his veins pulse visibly down his arms.

Himchan's eyelids fall, his lips pressing together. He extends his arms and his smooth palms run past Youngjae's cheeks, taking away the tears on them. No, Youngjae begs as his vision turns blurry, desperately trying to calm down the rush crunching up into his throat and stop the tears from falling. I can't lose. I can't fall.

Himchan's grip is delicate, tender and loving. Youngjae finds his nose buried into the nook of Himchan's neck, his arms grabbing on to Himchan like he's his last lifeline. His scent is comforting and familiar, and the image of Himchan's eye circles are imprinted into his memory.

"I miss him," Youngjae breathes, choking weakly as he crumbles into nothing. Daehyun had been there to pick up the pieces in the past; now, he's grateful Himchan is there to catch him as he falls. "I miss him, hyung."

"I know." Himchan tangles his fingers through Youngjae's hair, touch affectionate and careful. Youngjae wants to apologise, say how sorry he is because Himchan's so fucking tired and he has his own bullshit to deal with, yet he's here having to take care of Youngjae. Glue back the fragments and fix him up even though he's a repairman without proper blueprints, unassigned and unpaid.

But all Youngjae does is cry harder.

Our bridge is falling down,
Falling down, falling down,
Our bridge is falling down,
My fair boy.

Build it up with wood and clay,
Wood and clay, wood and clay,
Build it up with wood and clay,
My fair boy.

Wood and clay will wash away,
Wash away, wash away,
Wood and clay will wash away,
My fair boy.

Build it up with bricks and mortar,
Bricks and mortar, bricks and mortar,
Build it up with bricks and mortar,
My fair boy.

Bricks and mortar will not stay,
Will not stay, will not stay,
Bricks and mortar will not stay,
My fair boy.

Build it up with iron and steel,
Iron and steel, iron and steel,
Build it up with iron and steel,
My fair boy.

Iron and steel will bend and bow,
Bend and bow, bend and bow,
Iron and steel will bend and bow,
My fair boy.

Build it up with silver and gold,
Silver and gold, silver and gold,
Build it up with silver and gold,
My fair boy.

Silver and gold will be stolen away,
Stolen away, stolen away,
Silver and gold will be stolen away,
My fair boy.

Build it up with love and care,
Love and care, love and care,
Build it up with love and care,
My fair boy.

Love and care will burn away,
Burn away, burn away,
With the limelight and his hate,
My fair boy.
walking on eggshells

Little Daehyun sat on a wall.

Help, I can't get down.

Little Daehyun had a great fall.

No, there must be another way.

All the king's horses and all the king's men,

Someone, help me. Please.

Couldn't put Daehyun together again.

Help me.

If you didn't want to fall,
You should have never climbed up that wall.
    But he was up there, Daehyun cried,
That beautiful boy, black-haired and brown-eyed.

With both of you up that wall,
The weight's too heavy and it starts to loll.
    It's bound to crumble,
And then both of you are going to stumble.

But you've learnt your lesson, haven't you?
Now that your heart is all black and blue.
    Little Daehyun, do not bawl,
Just push little Youngjae off the wall.

But I can't push Youngjae away, Daehyun said,
He'll bruise and hurt, and his skin will shred.
In the first place, you should have never gotten close to him,
    Now one of you has to give up a limb.

It's all my fault, Daehyun sobbed, I should have turned around.
Fret not, little Daehyun. Look closely at the ground.
    Under you is cement while below Youngjae is mud.
If Youngjae falls, he'll shed less blood.

It's either you save yourself or you fall.
Little Daehyun, it's your call.

I'm sorry, Youngjae.

No one will catch you when you fall, Daehyun. You'll crack your skull and bleed out, and no one will be able to fix you.

But Youngjae always picks me back up.

Will he, this time?

Little did Daehyun know he'd already fallen since a long time ago and broken all of the bones in his body. Paralysed with his spine fractured and leaving no support, kept in a standstill with the rough asphalt against his cheek and the all too bright light beating down against him, breath caught in his throat.

Are you sorry for what you've done, Youngjae?

You tipped him over. Sweet, innocent Youngjae with his boyish grins and rough nudges had tipped him over, all without a single ounce of knowledge.
i'll hide and you'll seek

LET'S PLAY THE AVOIDANCE GAME!
(for ages nine and below)

PLAYER 1: Jung Daehyun
PLAYER 2: Yoo Youngjae

How To Play
#1 Avoid the other player for as long as possible.
#2 It is encouraged that you show you are completely unaware of the other player's presence.
#3 Do not show that you are affected by the other player.
#4 The person who cracks first loses!
TIP: Use allies to spite the other player.

READY?
YES/NO

ROUND 1
Server: Player 1

This is gospel for the fallen ones
Locked away in permanent slumber
Assembling their philosophies
"Youngjae." Himchan comes into view, effectively shielding Youngjae from the taunting display before him. Youngjae continues using his phone for a moment before looking up, raising an eyebrow as though completely unaware. "I'm tired," Himchan whines, plopping onto the chair beside him and flaring his nostrils. Youngjae scoffs, wanting to poke him but afraid to ruin his make-up.

"No one will believe you're an idol, hyung." Youngjae imitates Himchan's snort and Himchan threateningly raises his hand. Youngjae ducks and they end up wrestling one another, trying not to fall off the chair. Youngjae puffs, his back bent as Himchan pushes him tauntingly down off the chair.

"Hey," Himchan whispers, him squishing Youngjae under his weight. "That girl to your left. She's hot." Youngjae glances towards the concert staff by the corner, the same direction as where Daehyun and Jongup are sitting. His gaze goes haywire—Daehyun's chin is still on Jongup's shoulder, prodding at his phone as Jongup swats him away.

"She is, isn't she?" Youngjae snaps back his attention, something undecipherable stirring in his gut. "Man, I haven't met a girl in this country that didn't meet my standards." Youngjae grimaces as Himchan continues laying on him, sighing contentedly. "You're gross. Get off me, hyung," Youngjae grumbles, attempting to pry Himchan off him.

"No, no, no," Himchan sings, gripping onto the chair and snuggling against Youngjae. A sudden yell disrupts the duo, Youngjae turning to see Daehyun pointing at Junhong. "Yah, Junhongie!" He whines. "It's my turn!" Junhong nonchalantly throws him a peace sign, twirling in his chair as the stylist gets her clips. "Sorry, hyung."

That means he'll have to do his make-up with Daehyun. Youngjae folds his lips, displeased.

There's a new smartwatch out on the market. Usually, Youngjae tells Daehyun about these kind of things because even though he's not into tech gadgets, he still listens attentively and comments unnecessarily on it. Now, Youngjae talks about it to Yongguk, because though Yongguk doesn't care either, he has the decency to act interested.

"Daehyun, Youngjae." Youngjae shoves Himchan off him, prodding him in the thigh and inciting a yelp in Himchan. He settles down, glancing in the mirror at Daehyun and Jongup. "Aw, but I wanted to see the ending," Daehyun insists, jabbing at Jongup's stomach.

"Daehyun," their manager warns and Daehyun huffs, tugging Jongup by the wrist. "Hey. Sit beside me. I want to watch the video."

Jongup obediently follows Daehyun, sitting in the chair beside Daehyun. The stylist occupies Youngjae's thoughts as he grips the arm rest. "The coordinator said you were the most gorgeous out of the group," the stylist remarks, making small talk. Youngjae tries to laugh as he pries the extra reflection in his mirror of Daehyun persistently leaning towards Jongup and cooing at the screen, in spite of the chastising he's receiving.

"Himchan-hyung's going to be jealous. He said she was pretty, noona," Youngjae replies lightly, the stylist puffing in amusement. "I saw you two fighting just now. I don't think she'll like any of you after seeing that." Daehyun emits an impressed hum at the video as the brush comes into contact with
Youngjae's face.

Daehyun nearly tilts himself over the chair, as though desperate to get away from Youngjae. His laugh is annoying. Youngjae wishes for their manager to chastise him once and for all and instruct Jongup to sit far, far away from Daehyun. The stylist bends down, mumbling for Youngjae to stay still as she gets to work.

Youngjae remembers them competing over whose stylist would finish their make-up first. Youngjae always won because Daehyun had acne he needed to cover up and Youngjae would rub it in his face. Daehyun would get upset, but afterwards, they would be okay. They would always be okay.

There's none of that today. No poking one another like silly five-year-olds, giggling at something barely humorous. Tangled up in jump rope, inseparable, getting ecstatic over stupid things and playing hide and seek. While Youngjae's cooped up beside the dumpster waiting to be found, Daehyun has long forgotten about him and gained tons of other playmates.

Lower the opacity. Attain that full transparency and let not just his eyes pass through you but the limelight too as you stand in between him and the crowd. Youngjae's barely aware he's here with Daehyun so blatantly ignoring his presence, despite his reflection overturning his doubts. Is the mirror lying to him?

Youngjae is trusting Daehyun's eyes more than his. He can't but think how pitiful that is because his existence has long been erased from Daehyun's vision, yet he pines after his acknowledgement more so than his own. He stares hard at himself in the mirror, mapping out the outline of his hair and broad shoulders. Daehyun used to tell him how envious he was of that particular feature.

"Relax," the stylist reminds, her thumb against Youngjae's eyebrow. "If you keep on frowning, you'll ruin your foundation."

You've got your mask on. Don't fuck it up.

Youngjae nods. Backstage, he hears the VCR play. "Remember what I told you," their manager whispers into his ear before they storm out onto the stage.

It's a circus, Youngjae realises a little too late. A circus with a particular theme every Sunday about the partnership (possibly interpreted as love) between two oddities, one ensconced in the other's shadow and chained down to his name. That's Youngjae's role as a trapeze artist. Balance it out and don't let that smile fall from his face or else the fans will worry and he doesn't want them to because they didn't pay a goddamn hundred bucks to see him mope around about his personal issues. They came here for the performance of a lifetime from a group they'd given so much to. He and Daehyun are the trapeze artists and Youngjae's job is to swing far enough to link limbs with Daehyun.

All for show. The performers are in position and Daehyun is paying no attention to him, like he's ignorant of their spectacle to spice things up. Youngjae needs to do it. He walks over to Daehyun but the other stealthily steers away. The anger pumps in his blood vessels and Youngjae's hands slip from the trapeze, him swinging back and forth with the momentum diminishing. Junhong roams over, flashing him an encouraging smile. The other three members are staring at him, quick glances and intentions clear. A stilt walker directly below him, promising to catch him if he falls. Three acrobats on the sidelines, ready to rush in in case of an accident. Daehyun is at the far end, paying no heed to him. He's not even bothering to reach out so Youngjae can hold on to him.

Maybe Youngjae's a clown walking the tight rope, oversized red shoes flapping against a stinging wire.
Youngjae needs to reach the other end where Daehyun is waiting, seemingly distancing himself further and further. If he gives up and lets go, he'll crush the rest and the show will come to a momentary halt. How unprofessional.

Daehyun winds around once Youngjae nears him and Youngjae catches a fan squinting in confusion, whispering something into the ear of her friend. Youngjae grabs Daehyun by the sleeve and almost plunges fifty feet down. A little sloppy on the landing, but he's throw himself across into Daehyun's grasp.

He locks arms with Daehyun and waves to the crowd, snuggling up against him. Daehyun slowly tightens his hold, smile more dashing than ever before. They're both cut out to be actors, Youngjae thinks, because Daehyun jerks whenever their palms touch and Youngjae lets go the moment they're covered by the curtains.

"You okay?" Yongguk asks gruffly, still catching his breath from their last performance. The urge to pout and skip like a four year old girl is taunting and he wipes the lipstick off his face. It smudges against his cheek and his wrist, and his reflection in the mirror resembles a clown.

"I don't like lying to them," Youngjae admits as he sits beside him, shutting his eyes. The cheers for an encore still resonate from behind him. "But I don't want them to worry. They don't deserve the burden." *We're supposed to be able to handle things on our own.*

"It's not their fault, hyung." *It's Daehyun's.* "They shouldn't be worried for us."

*The show must go on.* Yongguk looks at him solemnly. "It's one or the other."

It's becoming harder for Youngjae to sleep nowadays. He tosses and turns and his body screams for sleep but his eyes are painfully awake under the cover of his eyelids. His thoughts are consuming, demanding all the space in his head. *Daehyun.* The wind chimes Jongup has hung up by the window sings a soft tune from the living room. Youngjae thinks of bells by a small house he'd seen the other day while the van zoomed past, a front porch of wild weeds and a child scurrying about.

Youngjae dreams of a meadow, the sound of Jongup's wind chimes ringing in his ears. The wind breezes past his face and he leans further into the grass patch, green extending to the horizon.

Daehyun is by his side on the picnic mat. He's a lot younger, his buck teeth still visible and hair ruffled, like the day Youngjae first met him.

"Hi," Youngjae starts, unsure of his own words. Daehyun turns to him with a quizzical look on his face, amused smile dangling from his lips. "Hi," Daehyun replies, voice soft and reminiscent of how he'd introduced himself, trying to cover up his accent. Youngjae stares at Daehyun for a moment longer, before turning away.

"How have you been?" Youngjae asks, the words sad and frail like the leaves on the tree beside them. Daehyun shifts, his shirt riding up his thin stomach. His gaunt arm reaches out to grab an apple from the basket and he bites, the crunch resounding past Youngjae. "Fine. How about you?"

Youngjae veers his head towards Daehyun, taking in his skinny form. He looks so bare; it's calming. No artificiality that the PDs or their concert reviewers demand for, everything natural. The leaves rustle in the distance, the sunshine meek and welcoming.
"I'm fine too," Youngjae settles on saying. Silence simmers in, Daehyun chewing on his apple. Something cold meets his lips and he finds the apple in front of him, Daehyun waiting expectantly. Youngjae shakes his head but Daehyun insistently presses it to his mouth.

"You're not going to get fat, Youngjae," Daehyun chuckles reassuringly. Youngjae remembers Daehyun pinching his tummy fat and promising to accompany Youngjae to the gym after the latter's binge. "Forbidden fruit," Youngjae lamely jokes, but takes a bite anyway. It's sweet.

They stay like that for a while, the meek melody of metal chimes as company. The grass tickles Youngjae's skin and he stares up at the blue sky, reaching out for it. He grabs on to nothing, but before he retracts his arm, Daehyun places the half-eaten apple in his hand. "Eat," he states. Youngjae stares at him and does as told.

Daehyun rises once only the core of the apple is left in Youngjae's grip. A panic assails Youngjae as he shifts to sit upright, doe eyes on Daehyun like a puppy afraid of abandonment. "Hey. Let's take a walk." Youngjae acquiesces, climbing to his feet.

They walk side by side, elbows brushing and Daehyun humming a tune of his favourite ballad. Halfway, Youngjae accidentally trips and falls on his bum, thankfully right before a mud puddle. His feet manage to catch the slimy dirt, however, igniting a loud guffaw in Daehyun. Youngjae scrunches up his nose, lamenting his red shoes getting dirty. Daehyun bends down, inspecting the damage.

"Stop looking," Youngjae grumbles, squirming out of Daehyun's view. "It's embarrassing." He tries to clean off the mud, struggling to get his sneakers off, only to have Daehyun squat in front of him and tug them off. Daehyun chuck's off his own slippers and ambles to pond before Youngjae can protest, dipping it in the water and shaking it hard.

He places the shoes on a stone, retreating from the bank and settling amidst green and white. Youngjae reluctantly wears Daehyun's slippers and joins him. They sit in a field of white dandelions, Daehyun's large hands squashing a few underneath his palms.

"I bought those shoes for you," Youngjae croaks. Daehyun sniggers. "No wonder they were loose on your feet." Youngjae shoves Daehyun and they stifle back a bout of laughter.

"I miss you." Youngjae's maroon shoes sit motionlessly by the serene pond, water lilies floating by. Daehyun grins, smile genuine and soothing. "You see me every day."

Youngjae stays quiet, watching the white petals of the lotus flutter. "But I still miss you," Youngjae speaks as the flower reaches the shore. Daehyun chuckles, fist to his lips.

"You know," Daehyun hums, his Busan accent strong in the air. "They say the number of breaths you take to blow all the seeds off a dandelion is equal to the number of years you'll take to meet your true love." Youngjae snorts, rotating his head away. "That's stupid."

Daehyun laughs, leaning back. "You've never believed in these kind of things." He plucks out a stalk, handing it to Youngjae. "Come on. Just try it."

"Fine," Youngjae concedes, taking the small puffball. He puckers his lips to blow at it, but the wind coaxes the seeds away before he can. Daehyun chortles, Youngjae adamantly pulling out another strand and taking a deep breath. The wind takes them away again, small white beads bumping against Daehyun's face. It's now Youngjae's turn to laugh as Daehyun swats them away.

Youngjae forgets his shoes.
Through the ajar bedroom door, Youngjae can see Daehyun lying on the couch. He's wearing a white wife beater along with light grey track pants. There's a chalky wet towel on his face, his hands resting on his stomach. Youngjae's gaze veers to Daehyun's arms, bulky and well-crafted. Daehyun may have a narrow built, but he'd truly made up for the lack of shoulders with his buff arms. Youngjae stares a little longer and pinches his own stomach out of habit.

From this far, Youngjae can't confirm if Daehyun's chest is moving. An eerie feeling grapples at him as he shifts off the bed, taking a better look at Daehyun. Dressed in all white with his face covered, it's instinctive to think of the dead. The black sofa is the coffin and Daehyun's corpse is above it.

Youngjae shudders at the thought, but it bugs him persistently. If he were to live longer than Daehyun, what would he say at his funeral? A tearful eulogy made of broken hearts and unsaid words befitting of a best friend who never was. In their next lives, maybe they'd meet again. Start over and extend a hand. Hi, I'm Yoo Youngjae. Would Daehyun want to make friends again?

Youngjae's phone buzzes in his palms. He snaps out of his reverie, the chills still sneaking up his spine. Daehyun removes the cloth from his face and the preposterous, illogical misgiving lingering in Youngjae's head crumples into dust. "Himchan-hyung," Daehyun bellows, patting his face. "It's still swollen."

"You're hopeless," Himchan calls from the kitchen. He emerges with a basin of iced water, the cubes clacking against the plastic rim. He places it on the table, folding his arms. "Dip your face in this."

"Hyung, are you crazy?" Daehyun gawps, aghast. Himchan presses Daehyun's head down lightly above the bucket, letting it bob back up again and pushing it down. "It helps to clear your pores, idiot. I want you to drown yourself in it, understand?"

Daehyun whacks Himchan's arm away. He blinks at it with a contorted face before conceding. He gradually lowers his head, twitching when his skin makes contact with the cold liquid. "Hold your breath and stay down," Himchan orders.

Junhong peeks into Youngjae's room at this instant, chin bumping against the door frame. "Hyung, what are you doing?" He drums out a rhythm on the wall.
"You're bored, aren't you?" Youngjae deadpans. Junhong eagerly leaps into Youngjae's bed, nodding fervently. "Hyung," he sings, wiggling up to Youngjae's side. "Who are you texting? Your girlfriend?"

Youngjae scoffs, grinning. "I'm going to tell Donggeun you called him my girlfriend." Junhong curiously hums. "Hey, can I see your wallpaper?"

Youngjae relents, letting go of his phone as it continuously vibrates. Junhong inspects it for a moment, before bolting off the bed into the living room. Youngjae widens his eyes, scampering out after him. "Choi Junhong, you dumbass!"

Himchan shakes his head in amusement while Daehyun lifts himself up, softly gasping for breath. Junhong stands on the other side of the coffee table, cheekily waving Youngjae's phone. "What was your ex-girlfriend's name again, let's see..." Junhong scrolls through the contacts as Youngjae darts towards him, tiptoeing and barking at Junhong as he holds it out of reach.

"You better hand it over, idiot!" Annoyed, Youngjae shoves Junhong into the sofa and kneels over him, smothering Junhong in his shirt as he grabs for his phone. Junhong stubbornly waves it around, shrilling. Youngjae irritatedly sits down on Junhong's lap, choosing to seize Junhong's head and puckering his own lips threateningly. Junhong begins to screech.

"Don't know if you guys are aware but that position's quite compromising," Himchan helpfully pinpoints. Daehyun grabs his towel, wiping his face and tossing it over his shoulder. "I think I need some fresh air, hyung," Daehyun intones and breaks the current arrangement, heading for the door. "I'll be going down to the gym. Call me when you guys are getting dinner."

The door clicks shut barely a few seconds later. Junhong puts down his hand, tamely giving back Youngjae's phone. He leaves, but not before apologising quietly.

Youngjae isn't sure what he's sorry for.

Youngjae dreams of the ocean, wet sand reaching up to his toes. The sea splashes against the shore, water shooting upwards against the sea breeze. Daehyun is sitting by his side and their hands sink in the grains, inching nearer to one another.

"You're gone," Youngjae breathes, watching the ship by the docks set sail. A lady stands by the harbour, waving a white handkerchief. Youngjae can't see her face.

"I'm gone?" Daehyun repeats, to which Youngjae nods. Their fingers touch, Daehyun's rough skin against his soft hands. "I'm here, aren't I?"

"Out there," Youngjae explains, swallowing down something hard in his throat. It menacingly scrapes down his neck. "Out there, you're gone."

Daehyun turns back wordlessly, them watching the ship cruise away. The seagulls yap above their heads, as though shrieking out their grievances. "Then, will you wait for me to come back?"

Youngjae deliberately shifts his arm, Daehyun's hand and his intertwining amidst golden grains. "That depends. Where are you going?" Daehyun hums, pondering for a short while. He decides, "To war. I don't know if I'll be able to come back."
"That doesn't matter," Youngjae asserts firmly, the prickly sand not at all daunting to his fingers in Daehyun's grasp. "What matters is whether you'll come back if you could. I'll wait if you will." He turns to look at the woman in a fluttering white gown, still waving her handkerchief. "A lot of wives get abandoned here. The husband goes to another country and starts a new family while the wife spends her whole life waiting for him."

"So I've heard," Daehyun replies easily. "Waiting's not easy when you don't know what's in store for you." The waves wash up to their knees, shells scattered underneath their feet. Youngjae is still wearing Daehyun's slippers.

"Do you ever think..." Youngjae utters, pulling his hand out of the sand and shaking off the specks. He draws out the shape of a hand beside Daehyun's one and places his fingers over it. "...They wait, and wait, and wait, and they start to go crazy?"

"That's certainly a possibility. That they drown in the longing." Youngjae clasps harder, the grains filling the space between his fingers. The quietness between them is sat upon by the woman's sobbing and the rush of currents.

"I want you back," Youngjae confesses. He lets go of the sand and rests his hand over Daehyun's. "I'm so desperate that I want you back in any form. Even unreal."

"Any form?" Daehyun sits closer, his warmth consoling. "Sounds like I died, and you're talking about reincarnation."

"Could be," Youngjae concludes, too tired to think of a proper response. Daehyun continues to move nearer. "What, so you're okay with me being your pet dog?"

Youngjae's laughter is permeated with mirth. "That'd be a dream come true." Daehyun elbows him, using it as an excuse to scoot even closer. "Idiot. What about me being your brother?"

"Yeah. I'd like that a lot," Youngjae concludes, envisioning the prospect. Their limbs graze one another. "How about son?" Youngjae frowns at the question. "That would be weird," he answers, "but okay."

"Then, how about lover?" Daehyun buries his head into the nape of Youngjae's neck and Youngjae stills. Daehyun guffaws obnoxiously at his reaction and Youngjae kicks him in the shin.

"Yes," Youngjae breathes, their fingers tangling and Daehyun's laughter against his skin. "That's fine too."

SCORE: 30-LOVE
Visiting Daehyun in his dreams has become a habit. It's like dropping by an old friend's place by the countryside while Youngjae has moved all the way to the bustling, noisy city. He'd brought along a stranger by accident in the shoes of his friend. There's nothing he can do about it.

Youngjae's computer repeatedly spits out his Starcraft CD, refusing to load the contents. Youngjae tries for the seventh time and irritatedly slams his hands on the keyboard, chucking it onto the bed. He considers borrowing the other members' laptops, but on their outlandishly meagre breaks, the only thing the other members do is glue their face to their computers.

"Hyung," Youngjae calls, glancing at the two by the small table. Himchan is bent over Jongup, guiding him through his assessment books. Himchan grunts, accidently knocking into the hotel room's television. "My laptop's broken."

"You can borrow mine, hyung," Jongup mumbles, tapping his pencil against the paper. "Or my tablet," Himchan offers.

"Your laptop doesn't read discs, Jongup. I want to play Starcraft." Himchan shrugs, nodding contentedly when Jongup gets a tough question correct. "Deal with it, Youngjae."

"This has been our only day off in months, hyung, and it's because the concert venue failed its inspection. I'm gonna enjoy it no matter what," Youngjae protests, knocking indignantly against his laptop. He looks out of the window, the late evening calm with a hint of oncoming rain in the air.

"I'm going down to fix it." Himchan turns to look at him. "Woah, what?" Youngjae gets off the bed, heading to his luggage for his coat. "If they can't fix it on the spot, I'll just head back to the hotel."

"Youngjae," Himchan intones, "we're in Jeju. None of us know our way around here. You'll get lost."

"I'll be fine," Youngjae reassures, dumping his jacket onto the bed. "It's not like we're in a foreign country."

"Can't you do something else? We aren't familiar with the area," Himchan argues and pats Jongup lightly on the neck when he finishes the page. Youngjae flashes him a look of determination, clearly unwilling to change his mind. Himchan sighs.

"At least bring someone with you." Youngjae relents, nodding while exuding a long breath. Himchan crosses his brows in thought. "I can't go down with you since I've got to help Jongup with his upcoming exam. Yongguk's out with our manager."

"I'll bring Junhong along," Youngjae instantly returns, making a move towards Junhong's room. "Are you serious? Both of you are just going to get lost together." Himchan releases the red pen in his hand, tossing his spectacles onto the nightstand. "I'll go get Daehyun."

"Wait, hyung," Youngjae blurs but Himchan is already out the door, going to the neighbouring hotel unit. He knocks as Youngjae follows behind, loud protests abruptly ceasing once the door swings open.
"Daehyun, are you free now?" Youngjae can't see Daehyun because Himchan is blocking the small gap Daehyun has allowed. "Yeah, hyung. What's up?"

"Can you accompany Youngjae down to find a repair shop? He broke his computer." It'd almost seem like Daehyun hadn't heard the question, silence permeating the empty aisle. Youngjae unconsciously holds in a breath. He sees Daehyun's bare legs move slightly, before a reply arrives. "I'm busy."

The words are curt and sharp, slicing through Youngjae's throat like fresh shrapnel. It feels strangely pitiful, to have thrown away his pride and asked for help yet be rejected. Fucking asshole. "You just said you were free," Himchan snaps, evidently aware of Daehyun's true intendment.

"I don't feel up for it." Youngjae stumps back into his room, gathering his laptop and wallet and throwing on a coat. He stalks out of the door before Himchan can stop him.

"Youngjae! Don't-"

"I'll be fine, hyung," Youngjae snarls, jaw locked. Himchan chases after him as Youngjae jabs the lift button incessantly. "Come on, Youngjae. Stop being like this. We'll fix your computer once we get back to your dorms."

The lift doors open. Youngjae ignores the boy in his peripheral vision, standing far away in the aisle, and glares at Himchan. "I don't need anyone to accompany me. I can do it by myself, hyung." The syllables are so scathing it burns his tongue. Youngjae doesn't look back as he shuts the door, Himchan's expression of consternation obscured.

It's cold. Youngjae winds up getting lost and spends five hours finding his way back, showing up drenched in the foreshadowed downpour. Their manager throws open the door, smacking him hard on the head. Youngjae stumbles back, vision steadying to find Yongguk sitting on his bed behind their manager.

"Are you a fucking idiot!? Do you know how late it is right now!?” Youngjae braces himself for the impending castigations, head lowered in apology. He doesn't regret purposely not bringing his phone, however. Yongguk successfully calms down their manager and coaxes him to go back to his room, assuring him he'll deal with the mess.

Yongguk stares at him sternly, eyes narrowed. "Himchan told me what happened. What were you trying to prove? That you'll be able to return, even if you lose your way?" Youngjae keeps mum. Yongguk goes into the bathroom and gets a towel, towelling Youngjae's hair dry.

"We were all really worried, Youngjae. Don't do it again, alright?" Yongguk rebukes, gently massaging Youngjae's shoulder and nudging him into the room. Youngjae stays motionless by the open door as Yongguk's footsteps ebb away. Except for one of you.

Rapping of knuckles against mahogany wood sounds down the corridor, along with a metal click. "I told you to turn in," Yongguk breathes. Youngjae tugs the towel off his head and drapes it around his neck. His laptop is still broken.

Whoever Yongguk's talking to doesn't answer. "He's back. You can go to sleep." Youngjae turns around and shuts the door.

He misses Daehyun's hushed grunt.
Youngjae dreams of the arcade Daehyun and him visited back during their trainee days. Daehyun's terribly cut bangs flopping against his forehead. It's a bit odd for them to be here when the place is filled with middle school students. Youngjae grips the steering wheel, kicking against the pedal when he ranks second in the racing game again. He frenziedly taps Daehyun's shoulder for an extra token and slots it in, starting up another round.

"Hey." Daehyun hums in response, uninterested in the arcade machine in front of him and facing Youngjae. The question tumbles out of Youngjae's mouth easily when he's distracted. "Do you think I'm stubborn?"

Daehyun snorts uncouthly, arm propped up against the controls with his cheek against his fist. "You've always been stubborn, Youngjae. Just like how I've always been sensitive. You get competitive when challenged; I get defensive when attacked."

Youngjae nods in agreement, prodding the buttons on the cabinet. "Should we do something about it?" He starts the game, putting Daehyun's words and his lingering feelings at second priority.

"I don't know. Do you want to do something about it?" Daehyun returns, still ignoring the flashing screen in front of him. Youngjae furrows his brows, slamming his foot onto the pedal and cursing as he makes a wrong turn.

"I guess. I'm tired of fighting," Youngjae manages to churn out as he navigates through the race track. He snickers when he overtakes and crashes the car in front of him. "But you started it, anyway. You should have let me in."

"Started? You don't see my hands on the controller. Wasn't playing a game, Youngjae." Youngjae's concentration breaks and he swerves the wrong way, wanting to look at Daehyun but unwilling to tear his gaze from the screen lest he loses.

"Why'd you leave, then?" Youngjae interrogates, pitch raised as he struggles to regain control of the game. Daehyun exasperatedly winds his fingers through his hair. "I don't know, Youngjae. I don't know." His voice is awfully serious and almost concerned. "Youngjae, I'm not-"

"I know you don't know." Youngjae doesn't want to say I know you're not real so he settles on saying just that. Daehyun huffs, crossing his legs. His ankle rests against his knee as he puts up his hands behind his head.

"Then why'd you ask?" Daehyun's question is hushed beneath Youngjae's dead-set focus. "I... I don't know," Youngjae mumbles, steering aggressively. "No guts to ask you out there, so I asked you here, I guess."

His peripheral vision notices his red shoes on Daehyun's feet. He opens his mouth to argue, but Daehyun beats him to it. "Rightfully mine," Daehyun supplies and pats his shoe after following Youngjae's brief glance. It's a bit dirty, but Daehyun doesn't seem to mind.

Youngjae scrunches up his nose, emitting a cute, high-pitched wail like that of a baby. He stops himself before he starts babbling like a little girl who lost her candy, leaning back as the game glitches and pauses for a while. "You're acting weird," Daehyun remarks, the words quiet but serious. "You've been... doing these kind of things lately."

"I have, haven't I?" The game reboots, giving Youngjae a second chance but erasing all his previous progress. "I've been acting cute." He picks the same car. "People like me like this," Youngjae points
"You do it around the house too." The game loads slowly and Youngjae shrugs. "I can't differentiate between on-stage and off-stage anymore."

"Can I confess something?" The beat of Youngjae's frantic heart dies away in his ears and he feels terrible mangled. Crushed under a shattered windscreen without time to even let out a scream before he'd been ripped from his own hands. "I like it when you hold me on stage. Even if it's pretend."

Daehyun says nothing. Youngjae wants an apology, but even if Daehyun does say he's sorry, Youngjae knows it's only his memories begging for Daehyun to feel remorse over the boy who'd offered up his heart and trust by sitting with him in the passenger seat, and yet gotten cruelly abandoned with the pedal stuck on accelerate.

"What they say about us..." Youngjae starts, words coming out in a blurt as the game starts. It's pointless to say it here, but Youngjae still does. "...As a couple. You know it's not true, right? It's just something fans do. Just look at our seniors Eunhyuk-sunbaenim and Donghae-sunbaenim. They top official couple polls all the damn time and they're completely okay with it. They find laughter and happiness out of it. The fans shipping them together just shows how strong their friendship is."

Youngjae's grip tightens on the wheel and the screen buzzes. "Eunhyuk-sunbaenim has a girlfriend. They don't let themselves be affected by it because there's nothing to be upset about. It's all for fun; it's harmless. No one takes it seriously."

He meanders down the road, jaw locked. "Even Yongguk-hyung and Himchan-hyung are paired up. You don't see them complaining. Himchan-hyung finds it cute while Yongguk-hyung doesn't really pay attention. Honestly, don't you think you're overreacting?" Youngjae's reaching the finish line. He steps harder on the accelerator, eyes fixated on the black and white line. "It's not real, Daehyun."

"What if it is?" Daehyun's question is piercing. Youngjae freezes. *Where did that come from?*

"What?" Youngjae swerves to avoid the random obstacle and crashes into a wall, humiliatingly in front of all the spectators with just inches left to the finish line. He turns to Daehyun, but by then, he's not there anymore.

**SCORE: 40-LOVE**
The drizzle outside creates an uneven rhythm against the window, leaving streaks down the glass. Youngjae lays in bed, the chilly sheets up to his collarbones. He flickers his eyelids, watching the transparent fluid draw trails as he waits.

*If I slept forever, would you be forever as well?*

He doesn't like waking up nowadays. The piercing sunlight cruelly demolishes his parcosm moulded after foggy memories and the debris left is that of eye crust and the taunting memory of Daehyun's touch. Then, he has to face Daehyun, a distorted version of him, and wait for night to come so he will revert back to his former self. All he has to do is disregard Daehyun's presence during the day, but it's much longer than the night.

Sleep is blissful, they say. You can sleep through any disaster and simply die without knowledge. Even while through the end of the world and the universe collapses into nothing but broken reality. Youngjae can't help but agree at this point. But an eternal slumber is equivalent to death, isn't it?

Footsteps shatter his train of thoughts into smithereens but Youngjae does not face the newcomer. "You've been turning in really early recently, hyung." Jongup settles down by his side, the mattress dipping. "You're usually such a night owl."

Youngjae hums. They wordlessly bask in each other's company, the other members out in the living room. Sometimes, Youngjae wishes they didn't care so much, because he hates knowing they're all shouldering a piece of his misery.

"Daehyun-hyung's been acting strange lately," Jongup says, tone mellow. Youngjae remains stationary. "I know."

"I wonder why?" Jongup mumbles, evidently trying to cajole a more elaborate response out of Youngjae. He receives nothing, so he sighs. "It's towards all of us, hyung. Not just you." The pads of Jongup's thumbs are tender, unlike Daehyun's. "Don't be so hard on yourself."

Youngjae nods, even though his heart screams out contradictory. Jongup squeezes Youngjae's arm and makes a quiet exit. Youngjae shuts his eyes, imprinting Daehyun's smile into the darkness.

"He's not supposed to, Jongup." *It's selfish to say this, but especially not to me.*

Youngjae dreams of a street, the downpour against an umbrella held in Daehyun's hand. The roads are peaceful, cars driving slowly past and the overcast afternoon sky a shade of light grey as though the sun refused to get wholly blocked out. The heat Daehyun emanates is intoxicating.

"I forgot the way back home," Youngjae confesses, staring down at Daehyun's feet and following his footsteps. He knows it is not true since they've walked to their dorms a million times and the route is sewed into their sinews, but somehow, he is lost and doesn't know where to go. Daehyun does not reply, instead digging through his pocket and slipping out a mouldy ticket. It's a KTX train ticket to Busan, long overdue. He hauls out several of them, all past their allocated dates and seemingly endless in numbers.

Youngjae looks at Daehyun. He smiles, the ends of his lips piercing up into his wrinkled cheeks and worn-out eyes. Daehyun chucks them into a nearby bin, them never stopping in their stroll.

"I'm sorry," Youngjae whispers, the tears welling up in his eyes. They sting hotly despite the cold
atmosphere wrapped around their figures. *I'm sorry I'm not there for you."

"Say that to me in reality," Daehyun nearly pleads, words hoarse and fragile. "...Don't you remember when I said you're my only home left?"

Youngjae knows he can't say it—his pride won't let him—though the agony claws at his chest and the burning need to hold Daehyun chokes him, so he keeps silent. He doesn't even know if Daehyun will let him in. His composure remains unbreakable as Daehyun and him walk through the storm, water pelting the umbrella and dripping off the ribs.

"Can I kiss you?" Youngjae's request is soft and nearly inaudible in the rain. "On the cheek." Daehyun chuckles and Youngjae feels the hair on Daehyun's arm brush against his skin. "Yes?" His words, clearly amused, has Youngjae putting his hand over Daehyun's wrist and stopping him in his stride. The sound of rain drowns out the thumping of his heart as his lips gently press against Daehyun's creased face. It's nothing more than a fast peck, but his lips still tingle.

They gaze at one another, not questioning the road ahead left to be covered and the faceless passers-by. They're just another two people on the road, drenched in the murky weather. Youngjae's- no, Daehyun's slippers on Youngjae's feet are clutching water, the wetness uncomfortable but tolerable.

"Can I kiss you too?" Daehyun's voice is deep, dropped down a pitch which he does when he's unsure but needs to answer, so he hopes no one can hear him lest he gets it wrong. Youngjae nods lightly and they make way for a passing bicycle, the rider throwing them a strange look. Youngjae's back nearly touches the wall, the doors to the convenience store just a few metres away.

Daehyun leans forward, steps uneasy, neck craned and movements choppy. Youngjae meets his gaze and averts it when they're too near to stare at one another without crossing eyes. Daehyun's breath tickles his skin and it feels intricately real for a dream.

Warm wetness meets his cheek, a side of Daehyun's mouth brushing Youngjae's lips. His breath catches in his throat and the world stops for a moment, just them existing in the small space of mystical intimacy. His touch lingers, peeling skin grazing against Youngjae's cheek.

Daehyun pulls away and breaks out into a smile, oddly conflicted in spite of the sincerity etched in his bared teeth. "I'm your new target now, aren't I? After Junhong." Youngjae bumps into Daehyun, making a face. He can still feel the moisture on his cheek.

"Hey, that's different. I kiss Junhong because he's cute," Youngjae elaborates. Daehyun hums, "And you're halfway to becoming a pedophile." Youngjae squawks, nudging Daehyun harder.

"What about me?" The space between them vanishes into nothingness, Daehyun's hoodie against Youngjae's cardigan. Youngjae mulls over it, his feet soaking in dirty puddles. He likes the feeling of Daehyun by his side and his snug presence.

"I don't know. Because I love you, I guess." Youngjae veers his head towards Daehyun but the boy disintegrates before he can say anything else. The rain beats down mercilessly on him and he's standing on the edge of some roof, a familiar warmth behind him. The world spins below him, nausea rocking him back and forth over the brink.

Someone kicks his back roughly and Youngjae tips over, falling fast. The building he'd been on is tall and the wind slices across his body as he tumbles face first. His heart rises to his throat and the cement floor below him comes closer, closer and-

The sickening crack of bones and shatter of cartilage resounds as he hits concrete, the excruciating
pain embedding itself sharply into Youngjae's veins. Blood leaks out from underneath him, mingling inexorably with the rain drops negligent to his fragmented state. In that split second, Youngjae's eyes fall to a close—but not before he sees the two figures facing each another by the wall, one with red shoes and the other with slippers.

Youngjae awakes with a scream, his heartbeat pounding in his ears and his chest rising and falling sharply. He desperately catches his breaths, pants erratic and off beat. He barely has time to process the hurried footsteps and arms around him, Himchan's soothing voice placating it's okay, I'm here again and again. The lights flicker on and Yongguk enters, hurrying over to Youngjae's bedside. "What happened?

Junhong and Jongup come in tow, worry permeating their expressions. The fabric of reality sinks in rapidly and Youngjae sits upright, compressing the hysteria and terror loitering threateningly in the recesses of his sanity. "S-sorry. Nightmare," Youngjae says, tone dismissive and reassuring. Yongguk nods quietly, instructing Jongup to bring some water and Junhong to get some medicated oil.

The two youngest of the group obediently leave, Himchan stroking Youngjae's back. The feverishness in Youngjae alleviates but the fear still remains, trampling over his nerves. "I'm okay," Youngjae firmly states, more to assuage the concern blatantly shown by the other members. Flashes of his red shoes and Daehyun's slippers, the ones he often wear out to the convenience store because he doesn't really care about his dressing, resting in his blood scorch into his corneas and Youngjae shuts his eyes heavily.

"Hyung," Junhong pipes in, perturbed. "I can't find Daehyun-hyung." He meanders over to Youngjae, placing the ointment on the nightstand. Youngjae pries open his eyelids, his back slouched in fatigue. "He's not in his room?" Yongguk questions, brows knitting. He rises, briskwalking to Daehyun and Junhong's shared room.

The feeling of moisture finally seeps into Youngjae's brain, the boy wiping at his cheek. The remnants of saliva and dead skin sit on the back of his hand as Youngjae scrutinises the combination. It's cold; he hasn't drooled since elementary school. Himchan grimaces, flicking Youngjae on the arm. "Gross. You'll be slobbering puddles like Junhong, at this rate."

"...I'm sorry," Youngjae murmurs. As expected, Himchan merely chuckles. "You better be, disrupting my beauty sleep." He stands, pacing after Yongguk as they bring their discussion elsewhere. Youngjae looks over to the shoebox in the corner, containing the red shoes he'd never gotten around to giving Daehyun because their rift demolished the bridge between them. Where are you?

Jongup arrives with a glass of warm water, handing it to Youngjae carefully. "Hyung, you're like a warning siren," Jongup jokes innocuously. "If it weren't for you, we wouldn't have known Daehyun-hyung disappeared." Youngjae laughs hollowly, reluctant anxiety pervading his senses. He hides his shivering fingers from Jongup's line of sight.

Himchan coaxes him to return to bed, adding that they've already contacted Daehyun even though Youngjae never specifically requested for that information. Himchan leaves Youngjae's door open in case the nightmare returns, switching the other lights off except for the living room one.
Daehyun returns about ten minutes later, Youngjae still trembling under his blanket. The front door clicks and Youngjae cracks an eye open, staring at darkness.

"Daehyun," Yongguk sternly chides, disappointment biting at his syllables.

"I'm sorry, hyung. I couldn't sleep, so I went out to clear my mind."

Yongguk sighs. "You should have told us."

"I'm sorry. I was only out for a few minutes."

A long pause.

"It's alright," Yongguk concedes. "Don't do it again, okay? Go get some rest."

"Hyung, you're so unlucky," Junhong sniggers. "You go out for a walk secretly and the entire house wakes up and finds out about it."

"What woke you guys up?" Youngjae swallows thickly, the echo of Daehyun's question reaching him. "Who," Himchan corrects, "Youngjae had a nightmare and screamed."

Silence. A suspenseful break in the chat. A reply comes, soft and weak. "...Is he okay?"

"Why not you go check for yourself?" Himchan's tone is casual, yet somewhat staunch. Quietness. The closure of a conversation and a signal for Youngjae to play dead. His eyelashes interlock and he forcefully contains his shuddering. The remainders of his dream haunts the back of his eyelids.

His door creaks shut and the apprehension doubles in Youngjae. Daehyun's footsteps are hushed, but still hearable. Heat materialises by his side, one too recognisable in the depths of his fantasies. Youngjae tries to keel over into a slumber that will take him away but he's always been sleeping with his eyes open.

Strong arms wind around his figure along with an almost muted breath. Youngjae tenses, the tremors wrecking his bloodstream multiplying tenfold. He's a dead giveaway.

Youngjae is hauled upwards into Daehyun's embrace. His ear squashes against Daehyun's chest, the palpitations of his heart ringing in his ears. He can't tell if it's him or Daehyun that's shaking.

"Should auld acquaintance be forgot... and never brought to mind?"

Youngjae has heard Daehyun sing nearly every day of his life, from on the stage to outside the bathroom, but the tears still trickle down his face. He's heard Daehyun sing this song before; it's a traditional folk song used commonly for farewells. There was a time where he wouldn't stop singing it, exhilarated for the new year.

"For auld lang syne, my dear. For auld lang syne."

Daehyun's humming is calming and velvety. Youngjae doesn't know what he's saying but he doesn't fight the water streaming down boldly, wetting Daehyun's shirt. It's lukewarm, like the thick lips his imagination had bestowed upon his cheek. Youngjae wonders if Daehyun's bidding goodbye to him for good.

"For auld lang syne, my dear. For auld lang syne."

Youngjae wishes he could say all he did in his dream. But he can't, so he resorts to basking in Daehyun's long lost company and lets his tears flow. He wants to look up at Daehyun but he's afraid
that if he does, Daehyun will vanish like in his moments of waking.

"We'll take a cup of kindness yet, for auld lang syne."

Youngjae never opens his eyes.

*If you love me let me go*

‘Cause these words are knives and often leave scars

The fear of falling apart

And truth be told, I never was yours

**Player 1 wins!**
you'll hide and i'll seek

END GAME?
YES/NO

Sorry, Player 1 has not left the game.

END GAME?
YES/NO

Sorry, Player 1 has not left the game.

END GAME?
YES/NO

Sorry, Player 1 will never leave the game.

READY?
YES/NO

ROUND 2

Server: Player 2
I've let you go, Daehyun. What more do you want?
I've already given up.

Busan has been demolished in the recesses of Youngjae's dreams. A part of him believes it's the same for Daehyun, and that perhaps he's fallen to smithereens precisely because he's trying to piece back the debris of his hometown -- while Youngjae stands watching as the whole place collapses. He'd tried to rescue him (lies), shove him out of the falling rubble's ways (lies) but Daehyun's touch had burned his palms and he'd realised too late that Daehyun was already up in flames. He'd caught a bit of the fire, the damage scorching his skin and leaving his hands red and sore.

Even children know not to touch a boiling kettle after being burnt once. But what do you do when it's the dead of winter and the wind grates at your skin mercilessly? He'd been clad by the coat woven from his teammates' encouraging words, but the sole source of warmth in the blizzard is too hot to touch. He'd rather freeze to death than be burnt alive.

It's becoming easier to pretend Daehyun doesn't exist. Daehyun's doing his part well and there's no more desperation to feel Daehyun's smile against his skin. Himchan seems to be helping; something had clearly happened after that day Youngjae disappeared. Himchan stands in the way when Daehyun's laughing at Yongguk's pretty, dainty fingers and Yongguk's blushing hard, when Daehyun's patting Jongup on the head for getting him snacks, when Daehyun's cheering at Junhong having helped him beat a level on their gaming console.

Himchan is the man accompanying him voluntarily in the snow storm, arms insufficiently wrapped around Youngjae's shivering form. He veers Youngjae away from the sight of charcoal and fire, reminding him it's just a sick mirage of nothingness.

Sometimes, in Youngjae's dream, he sees a shadow. But he turns away before the figure comes close enough.

Jaebum calls him one day. Youngjae admits he wishes he'd never quit JYP. Jaebum says it's okay and they're still friends beyond the whole structure of the band. That no, it's not the fact that they're in this rigid set-up that their friendship is validated. That yes, their friendship exceeds being in the same company and it's the same on the flip side of the coin -- some people do it as a job and there is no brotherly bond. Youngjae can ascertain that.

Himchan hears his confession. They sleep in the same bed that night, and in between the moments of dreaming and waking (Himchan's endless rambles his new lullaby), he hears Daehyun ask Himchan why.

Yongguk makes it clear their band will last much longer than two years and their current group dynamics will not help them fulfill that. Youngjae sends Himchan a pleading look but he says nothing. Thus, Daehyun and Youngjae are forced to room together for their new tour.

It's akin to living alone. Just believe Daehyun's part of the walls and he's another figment of Youngjae's imagination where in his peripheral view, he sees something moving but it's really nothing.
Youngjae sometimes wonders if they're stuck in the same memory. Of intertwined limbs incapable of being untangled, sunny days where they'd fall asleep by accident in one another's arms against the couch, Youngjae's laugh still frozen against Daehyun's shoulder. He wonders if Daehyun will stand and stare, and then pry them apart so even their intimate moments don't last in history.

It's Youngjae's birthday. All of them, except for Daehyun, are gathered in Yongguk and Himchan's hotel room. Yongguk proclaims he'll buy as much soju as possible and Himchan promises an ice cream cake. Jongup gets him a pair of headphones and Junhong a pair of shoes. No one really talks about how Daehyun's not feeling well, today of all days, and is cooped up in his room.

"Yes!" Junhong shrills loudly, rolling around on the bed. "Soju. I want soju."

"You're not legal, stupid," Himchan scolds, stepping on Junhong's stomach. "Honestly, it's not even that good. It's only attractive to you because it's technically forbidden." Junhong secretly flips Himchan the finger and Jongup bounces around the room.

"They're even more excited than you are," Yongguk remarks with a laugh. Youngjae looks up from his iPad and snickers at the two youngest. "I'm not even sure if it's my birthday celebration or theirs."

"Hey," their manager pops his head into the room. "Come on, the staff are waiting downstairs. We can't eat unless the birthday boy has arrived."

Youngjae salutes, the team cheering as they file out. Youngjae pats his pockets to find them empty. "Hyung," he mutters, Yongguk turning back, "I left my phone in the bedroom. I'll meet you guys downstairs."

"Alright, be quick!" Yongguk chimes and they disappear down the hallway. Youngjae jogs back to his room, half praying Daehyun's showering so he won't have to meet him.

He's not in the room. Youngjae walks to his desk, scavenging for his phone when he sees a torn piece of paper on the table, along with a green tea popsicle from the vending machine. *Happy birthday.*

Youngjae's heart misses a beat. He claws the flimsy notebook paper off the table, scrutinising the words. Below it is some kind of comic; Daehyun went through a drawing phase before their debut.

The first row is of a man walking into a spectacles shop with a male friend and picking out a pair of glasses. They're red, as compared to the rest of the black and white comic. The man tries them on and the box showcasing his view is red and his friend in front of him is now a pretty girl. He takes off the glasses to find the optometrist frowning at him.

The man returns the spectacles and leaves. The last row is blurred out due to the condensation from the popsicle, like it'd been intentionally soaked. Youngjae can still make out the lines to be that of various sceneries, the man's friend standing in every window. Some supposedly with long hair, others short.

There's nothing else. The contrast of green and red is unnerving. Youngjae glares at the card and decides trying to decipher it isn't worth his time. He grabs the popsicle and his phone and sprints out of the room, his mind still unwilling to let go of what he'd seen. *Was it meant to be funny? Maybe I'd missed something.*

His heart is still beating at a furious pace. Youngjae reminds himself of having let go of smouldering firewood and swallows down the lump in his throat. The evening goes well, vibrant yells and hearty congratulations brimming at his ears. He drinks more than he should despite Yongguk warning him
not to, and he thinks Himchan says something like forgetting isn't an excuse to get alcohol poisoning.

"Oh god, I need a break," Youngjae wheezes to Jongup as he stumbles towards the bathroom. Junhong laughs at him and steals his cup of beer. He disappears into the bathroom by the corridor and emerges more dazed than ever, the alcohol shooting up through his nerves and rendering his mind a mess of red. The green tea ice cream stick is still in his pocket, washed because Youngjae doesn't have the heart to throw out the last remnant of Daehyun's crappy gift.

**Daehyun**, Youngjae thinks and stumbles into the lift. He manages to prod the right button and taps out the rhythm to their debut song. Youngjae lunges out the moment the elevator pings, floundering towards their room. He can't think straight, so he lurches for the only thing (in)comprehensible during his moments of (in)sanity.

He knocks on the door once. Then twice. Then incessantly, without stop. The door swings open and Youngjae nearly falls forward, managing to catch himself on the door frame. Daehyun is wearing a faded t-shirt and a pair of track pants. His eyes are wide, like the times where his and Youngjae's favourite soccer team manages to score a goal.

"You're looking terribly sick," Youngjae sarcastically bites and Daehyun's face melts back into a scowl. "What are you doing? It's only ten."

"I should be asking you that, shouldn't I?" Youngjae spits, shutting his eyes to steady his groggy mind and the ground below him collapsing into nothing. Daehyun is stirring up something heinous in his gut. Youngjae can identify one part of the concoction to be rage but the other is a burning thirst, for what, he isn't sure. "Where are you? What are you doing, Jung Daehyun?" He mockingly sings, one of the tracks their company had queued for them to release mid-year. Youngjae doesn't know if he can last that long.

Youngjae shoves Daehyun aside and barges in, his hand charring the moment their skins meet. "Can't even show your damn face, huh? What are you busy with?" Youngjae sneers, looking around in feigned curiosity just to spite Daehyun.

"You're drunk." Youngjae spins around at these words, eyes narrowed and teeth clenched. Daehyun stares back nonchalantly. "Go to bed."

Youngjae staggers over like leaping over rocks in a high tide river, attempting to get to the other side. Daehyun's eyes enlarge and he steps back, the agony cutting through Youngjae's throat and halting his feverish breath.

"Stop," he whispers before he can stop himself. His tone drips of revulsion and desolation like the remaining alcohol on his tongue. "Stop looking at me like that." Daehyun visibly gulps and Youngjae envisions himself missing a stepping stone, slipping down into the river and drowning as the water consumes him. Youngjae decides if he's going to go down, he'll have to rightfully bring Daehyun along with him.

Youngjae grabs on to Daehyun's collar, hauling him towards him feebly. He raises his voice even though his mind screams at him not to let a word slip, else he'll end up like the pitiful boy a few weeks ago who'd gotten abandoned and lost in a foreign town. "Stop looking so tensed like I'd *break* you if I came any closer," he seethes, grasp on Daehyun's shirt shaky. Their eyes are latched onto one another and Youngjae admires how familiar Daehyun looks without his stupid chunks of eyeliner. Perhaps without them clogging up his eyes, would Daehyun be able to recognise him again?

"I'm not a monster," Youngjae breathes falteringly, "I'm not diseased." He loosens his grip, sinking
back into his slouch as the tears prick him as punishment. He'd lost the game, but he truly never
wanted to play in the first place. "I'm your friend."

Daehyun stares at him wordlessly, torn lips parted. Ever since he'd started his diet, his face has been
cleared of his unrelenting acne. Youngjae misses it. His pride cracks like weightless paper
mache built in the shape of a fortress that never was.

Himchan isn't here to wipe away his tears, so he helplessly lets them roll down his cheeks. "Say
something," Youngjae begs, the tears scarring his face as visible proof for the damage Daehyun has
inflicted. The make-up had been used to cover up his wounds because the goal was always to show
he wasn't hurt to ward off the futile attacks, but Youngjae's okay with baring his victimised, battered
state if Daehyun mercifully retracts his knife.

"Please." Youngjae lowers his head, his pitch cracking and the suppressed cries wrecking his lungs. *I
miss you. I need you. I love you.*

Daehyun's eyes are welled up with tears. His lips are pressed together but he never breaks off their
stare, reaching out his hands and placing them on Youngjae's stained cheeks. His rough thumbs wipe
away the persistent wet warmth and he exhales just barely. It's too familiar. Youngjae needs more of
it.

"You're my friend," Daehyun weakly whispers, his own tears streaking down his face, "and that's
precisely why you're breaking me."

No time to think. Fast beats like their powerful come back songs, their feet stomping against the
stage. Crash like two cars baring down the roads with suicide in aim. Daehyun's lips are on his and
Youngjae chokes back a sob, their mouths moulding like a combustion between two scathing acids.
Youngjae's back hits the wall and Daehyun presses his thigh into Youngjae's crotch.
Youngjae's chokehold around his lips slip and Daehyun's tongue dives in, their breaths intermingling
ravenously.

Daehyun's yearning is so stark Youngjae is caught by surprise. Daehyun's hands are shivering like
he's on a high gotten from a forbidden fruit and Youngjae melts into Daehyun's grasp, eyes falling to
a close as he savours their close proximity. He misses this. They're not supposed to be doing this, but
he misses this. He misses being able to touch Daehyun and somehow the alcohol has clouded all
logic and unlocked the floodgates of a desire to be one with Daehyun again, and thus the willingness
to settle for anything, at this point.

Like a starved addict going into a relapse after being kept away for centuries, Youngjae winds his
arms around Daehyun and pulls them impossibly closer, chests colliding as their lip lock breaks. He
doesn't know what the fuck is going on. Daehyun's mouth finds its way to Youngjae's neck, sucking
hard. Youngjae breathes in deep to relish in Daehyun's missed scent, the triggers in his body all
setting off simultaneously.

Daehyun pushes him onto the bed and it's not even a split second before he clammers over him,
resuming their contact. Youngjae arches against Daehyun's mind-numbing hold, their hips gyrating
against one another. Youngjae's skin is ablaze and he wants to fit their contours for the rest of
eternity so they'll never again be the pair of tragic, separated soulmates they were for the past months.
A morbid rendition of Romeo and Juliet because the demons from within kept them apart. He doesn't
know what Daehyun's were, but his were purely born out of spite.

Daehyun removes their garments, Youngjae's delirious hands roaming up Daehyun's toned chest.
Their members press against one another and Youngjae emits a lewd whimper, Daehyun swallowing
it up with another kiss. Daehyun is attractive, very attractive. Maybe it's the alcohol or maybe they've
been apart for so long the absence has toppled his heart over the cliff of fondness to an abyss of
crazed, insatiable desire and longing.

Daehyun licks a long path down Youngjae's torso, suckling on the sensitive skin surrounding
Youngjae's hips. His tongue grazes Youngjae's tip and Youngjae twitches, his senses dissolving into
incomprehensible rationale as Daehyun takes in Youngjae fully. The boy writhes beneath him, bucking
greedily into Daehyun's hot cavern as the pleasure bashes through his fucked up arguments of we're
goddamn guys.

Youngjae tugs Daehyun up and kisses him hard, teeth clacking and tongues battling for dominance.
The feeling of Daehyun's chapped lips are a one-way ticket to delirium and he makes sure to explore
Daehyun's skin, earning him a feverish groan. It's a make-up for what we've missed, Youngjae
placates the wrought misgivings pleading for him to stop. He can't get enough of Daehyun.

He misses Daehyun so fucking much.

Daehyun grapples for their lip balm, smearing a chunk onto his shaft and inserting a finger into
Youngjae's hole. The boy nearly shoots upright but the alcohol sits down on him, along with the
spinning conclusions. It'd been a performance at first. Him as Daehyun's affectionately dubious
partner to make the fans go wild (how cute!) and open up a new path to gaining more fans. It'd been
an arrangement. It's not meant to be real. No one takes it seriously. Only Daehyun thought it was
real.

Only Daehyun thought it was real.

Daehyun's digits hit somewhere in Youngjae's hole that sends him into a crack of pure bliss,
Youngjae choking on his moan and scratching at the sheets. Daehyun climbs over him, lifting up his
legs and pressing him into the headboard. With a sharp kiss, Daehyun slowly slides into Youngjae,
the other boy embedding his nails into Daehyun's back. The pain throbs in his behind but the
moment he looks up at Daehyun, the world dissolves into red.

When Youngjae's grip slackens, Daehyun begins to move, thrusts slow and gentle. Youngjae throws
his head back as Daehyun's length hits his prostate, the ecstasy swelling tenfold. Their lips interlock,
hands voraciously finding one another and grabbing at all the skin they can. Daehyun pounds in,
their whimpers weaving a cacophony to others but a sickeningly sweet symphony to them.
Youngjae's shaft rubs against Daehyun's stomach and he grips Daehyun's hair aggressively.

Daehyun brings the stars down into Youngjae's eyes as the bliss builds up in him. He holds on to
him for dear life, clawing at one another as Youngjae is thrown repeatedly into the headboard. He's
scared if he lets go, Daehyun will leave like in his moments of waking. He pulls Daehyun down for
a kiss as he releases, white spilling and a warm liquid filling up his hole.

Daehyun collapses onto the bed with heavy pants and his cheek automatically finds
Youngjae's collarbone. Youngjae wonders if he can pretend this is all just a dream and he'll wake up
tomorrow with Daehyun gone like sand trailing from his fingers. There's no space to think of what's
right and what's wrong, not when they're this close.
It was never us against each other, was it, Daehyun? This cat-and-mouse game, trying to pinpoint a loser... It was always us against them.

I'm sorry, Youngjae. I'm so sorry. I had no idea.

Oh, but you were the one who pushed him, weren't you? Now little Youngjae has broken his crown.

I thought he would fall into the mud!

Silly child. The mud was just the surface. Not only did you humiliate little Youngjae, his pretty white clothes all soiled, but you crippled him as well. While you're at it, why not pick up his fallen teeth?

Give them to the tooth fairy and make a wish to turn back the time.

Because there's no way else you two will ever heal.

It's raining (bleeding); it's pouring (bleeding).
The two men are snoring.
They went to bed and knocked their heads,And couldn't get up in the morning.
bloodshed, internal strifes (to the asylum, veteran!)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There's blood everywhere. Bombs blasting, missiles launching, merciless commands reaching Youngjae's ears as he runs. He runs, sinews aching painfully and cowering whenever a deafening explosion sets off near him. The debris flies at his face, shrapnel slicing through his skin, and Youngjae runs while the fear brims in his throat.

The world is in black and white. He nearly slips in black goo, a battered, dismembered arm by some cargo boxes. Youngjae holds in the urge to puke and shudders, sprinting as hard as he can. A soldier yells out in an incomprehensible language and Youngjae hurls himself forward into a small warehouse. He pushes aside the many shipments, scouring deliriously.

"Daehyun," Youngjae breathes, knocking away a container. He hears a surprised grunt and his eyes widen in relief, lunging towards the source. Daehyun stands in his grey uniform, his tanned face with blood splattered against it. His jaw slackens upon seeing Youngjae and the latter dashes up to him, the only coloured thing in his vision. Daehyun's helmet is tight on his head, masking a bit of his eyebrows and the streak of crimson between them. He's much older, almost thirty with his wrinkles along his jawline and defined eye bags. His eyes are swollen and his lips are bleeding, filth smeared across his cheeks. Youngjae cringes in agony, reaching out to hold Daehyun's face. He wonders if it's the make-up that has sliced through his skin and drawn on his wounds.

Daehyun shifts the rifle against his back, face melting into pure rage and panic. "Oh my god, Youngjae, what the fuck are you doing here?" He hisses, grabbing Youngjae and yanking him to crouch when an eruption of bullets pierce through the windows. "I told you to leave!" Daehyun booms, hysterical gaze darting from one eye to another. Youngjae looks up at him, forlorn.

"I- I didn't want to leave you alone-"

"Are you fucking insane!?!" Daehyun nearly shrieks, Youngjae flinching at his sharp tone. "We're in a war zone, Youngjae! It's not the goddamn sunny town we played tic-tac-toe in! I don't want you to die!" He tugs Youngjae into his hold, protecting him from the showering glass smithereens. All that's left of his right hand is three fingers, the rest bloody stumps. There's a patch of maroon seeping through his uniform.

"Don't you see what's out there?" Daehyun frantically yells, grip digging into Youngjae's shoulders. Persecuted souls, flesh torn from their limbs for a difference too ghastly for others to acknowledge. Demand for a wipe-out across the district, no one to be spared. Martyrs hung from the ceilings as warnings. "Any minute they're gonna fucking storm in and kill us!"

"I won't let you die like this," Daehyun seethes, the echo of shrieks banging at the metal shutters. A gunshot reverberates through the space, Daehyun hugging Youngjae tighter. "No one has seen you yet, so we'll just pretend you're not one of us, okay?" Daehyun's hands are shaking as he caresses Youngjae's face, dirt trailing along. He stashes a shabby map into Youngjae's hand, hauling him up and leading him to the exit. He presses himself against the wall, glancing out cautiously to check for enemies.

"Say you're a foreigner. A tourist. They'll let you off with a warning," Daehyun instructs, unlatching
his helmet and fitting it onto Youngjae's small head. It droops and Daehyun hastily buckles it, getting blood onto Youngjae's chin. "But what about you-

"I can make it out alone, just go!" Daehyun booms, shoving Youngjae towards the door. He adamantly holds on to Daehyun's hand, clawing him down as someone excruciatingly near shouts out orders. Their trembling breaths intertwine as Youngjae keeps his grip firm, locking eyes with Daehyun. "Please, Daehyun," he whispers, heart scrunching up as Daehyun grimaces in absolute torment. "I've already come all the way. Let me stay," Youngjae pleads, meshing their fingers. "I don't want to leave you."

"We can't build a home out of a battlefield, Youngjae," Daehyun wheezes, adam's apple bobbing up and down as he takes in Youngjae's features. The patter of feet resounds past them as Daehyun's eyes begin to water. "I don't want you to get hurt. Please. Just go."

"Daehyun," Youngjae says gently, weaving a hand through Daehyun's musty, sweaty hair and pulling him into his embrace. "It's fine." He strokes Daehyun's head as Daehyun grits his teeth, tears streaking down his face. The warfare outside rattles the ground menacingly. "I'm fine," Youngjae whispers. Daehyun crumbles against his grasp, frustrated breaths churning through his locked jaw.

"I'm scared," Daehyun rasps, bitter tears dripping from his scratched jaw. Youngjae clutches onto him, releasing a frail breath. "We'll be okay, Daehyun."

"We'll be okay."
Youngjae cracks open his eyes, sunlight streaming into the room as his memories sink in. His breath hitches and he sits up, a sharp pain piercing through his behind. He's fully clothed, the sheets fresh without a trace of last night's concocted happenings. Daehyun's not in his bed.

Youngjae holds his head, headache dawning, and stumbles off. Inspecting his bed with a confounded gaze, he wills his pounding heart to calm down, a disturbing sense of relief sitting on his shoulders. *It never happened.* Youngjae's bed is clean and Daehyun's strong scent isn't weaved into the mattress. The shadow of a strange sensation bristles the hair on his arms, imaginary touch too familiar against his throbbing nerves. *It never happened,* Youngjae chants like a mantra as he walks to the bathroom, boring his eyes through his reflection. His lips are swollen and his lower half is sore and uncomfortable. Youngjae's grasp on the sink slips and his breathing turns uneven.

"It never happened," Youngjae quivers to himself, gulping thickly and stepping into the bathtub. Something cold trails from his behind and he hurriedly turns on the shower, washing away the white slipping from his hole. The tremors run free and Youngjae collapses onto the porcelain white, water pelting him and decisively removing all residue of an agonising dream to reveal a terrifying reality. Like the dismantling of curtains to show it was never a set. Youngjae hugs himself tight, rocking back and forth with chattering teeth. His fingers feel oddly like Daehyun's rough thumbs.

*It never happened.*

Insanity...

is relative.

IT DEPENDS ON WHO WHO WHO WHO

WHO WHO WHO WHO WHO WHO WHO

has who

who who

who who

locked in

what cage.
The floor crumbles with every step. Youngjae has laid in bed for the past three hours with his eyes open, afraid to close them and subsequently facing the young Daehyun in his dreams. The one he calls out because he misses their loving friendship and camaraderie between two boys to be each other's best man and drinking buddy. The one not distorted, the one with his cheeky grins and dirty jokes (magazines of provocatively dressed women tucked underneath his cupboard). His arms are shivering and the numbness eases his mind into facing away from the piercing regret and inability to undo.

The other members will be worried if he doesn't get his lunch. They'll notice something's amiss, which is why Youngjae is wobbling down the hallway. He feels bare, the closed doors along the aisle mockingly laughing as he fears knocking on any one of them. Nowhere to turn so he'll have to stitch his lips up and bear the consequences.

"I want to change rooms." Youngjae freezes at the voice, senses breaking out of their chilled state and smashing into overdrive. His breathing quickens and his hazy eyes dart around, relentless recollections puncturing his lungs. The feel of Daehyun's lips against his is torturous.

"Daehyun, you're being ridiculous-"

"I want to change rooms," Daehyun seethes, tone sharp and demanding. "You guys fought last night, didn't you?" Yongguk sighs lengthily. "We should have gone in to check on them yesterday, Himchan."

"I thought he would at least be nicer to Youngjae on his birthday," Himchan snaps, irritation clear. "You know, being best friends and all." His sarcasm loiters heavily in the air, a strong jab carved from exasperation and the need to protect Youngjae.

"I'll swap with Junhong," Daehyun persists, Youngjae standing dumbly at the doorway out of sight. He feels weightless but the pain inside his behind reminds him of being filled up, Daehyun's saliva slipping down his chin. His blood turns cold.

"Daehyun, stop being childish. This has gone on long enough. If you could at least tell us what you're going through-"

"There's nothing wrong with me!" Daehyun raises his voice to a scream, the whole room going silent. "Just- just let me room with someone else. Please, hyung. You don't understand." His voice is hauntingly reminiscent of Youngjae's nightmare, their finger grappling on to one another. Blood making their grasp slip, wounds stinging and shards of broken bones poking out their flesh.

"Daehyun, we're here for you." Yongguk speaks like a caring mother to her first son. "You can't keep doing this."

"I need to room with someone else," Daehyun begs, syllables crumbling at the end of his speech like a roof in shambles. "I need to. Please."

"I can't let you, Daehyun," Yongguk whispers gently. "I've already let you so many times. What about Youngjae?"

Youngjae snaps his head up, limping into the room. Daehyun widens his eyes like a comical cartoon character, those they laugh at while they're wrapped up in blankets in the living room. It's funny, so funny that Youngjae wants to vomit.
"No, I want to change rooms too," Youngjae implores in distraught. Himchan whirring his stare in concern. Flashes of Daehyun's hair against him, their crotches grazing and the undeniable pleasure hangs Youngjae like a noose stealing his breaths. "Hyung," Youngjae whimpers, agonised eyes igniting bewilderment and misery in the two older members. "Please."

Daehyun backs away subtly, lips parted and swallowing stiffly. Even from here, Youngjae can tell he's paralysed, desperate for an escape. Himchan's expression softens and Youngjae seizes the chance to pull him out of the room. Himchan obediently follows as Youngjae tugs him into the stairway, the door swinging shut behind them as he pleadingly grabs on to Himchan's wrists. "Please, hyung. I can't be with him." Even touching Himchan, their distance barely intimate, swirls the choking remnants of yesterday down his throat. He flinches when Himchan strokes his face and hates himself for mangling his intentions.

"It's manager's orders," Himchan croaks, unwilling to play the bad guy and put his junior through so much pain. "You know you can't avoid him forever." Youngjae's clutch on Himchan tightens and he doesn't try to silence himself, churning out a broken wail as Himchan hurriedly embraces him. Fast, before Youngjae shatters amid the steps like pitiful litter to be stepped on.

Youngjae wishes Himchan had been faster, because he's already battered and dead against the parapet wall.

Daehyun disappears for the rest of the day, leaving Youngjae alone in the room. Youngjae opens one of Yongguk's books, The Catcher in the Rye, and flips to a random page. He stares at it for several hours, thoughts eating him from the inside out. He stops halfway only to pick up Daehyun’s drawing and clip it in between, his glasses sliding down his nose bridge.
He can't think. The isolation is suffocating but even Himchan's embrace isn't enough to dissolve the (welcoming) acid sitting on his skin. His position on the bed digs out heinously Daehyun's face above his, perspiration trailing down his jaw and dazed eyes locked with his. He wants to scream but he doesn't know what to say. Phrase it into a coherent plea for help without Himchan gawking in irksome disbelief and wordlessness. Trapped in a cage like a magic trick gone wrong with his tongue ripped out, shame pervading his senses as passers-by sympathetically rattle the lock and asks if he knows where the key is.

Youngjae's listlessness nearly engulfs him when the door clicks open, the weak glow of his bedside lamp lighting part of the corridor. Youngjae remains unfeeling though he forgets how to inhale and there's an earthquake rumbling beneath him, threatening to swallow him into the depths of insanity. It's midnight. He'd stayed up in worry of Daehyun not returning permanently. Chased away by their mistake they'll never be able to rub out no matter how many erasers they scavenge for (the country rubbers where they would, like elementary school kids, dig through and cheer when they find South Korea).

Daehyun walks in, freezing upon seeing Youngjae awake. It had evidently been unexpected from the deadly silence and only Youngjae's night light on. Their gazes fall upon one another, undecipherable and mangling, before Daehyun lowers his head and walks to the bathroom. Youngjae closes his book and switches off his lamp, turning the other way and ensconcing himself within the sheets. Daehyun emerges after a long while, scent of spice permeating the atmosphere. He clambers into bed quietly, presence almost a figment of Youngjae's imagination.

The cover of darkness gives rise to Youngjae's demons and confounding sins. Within, he searches for Daehyun's innocent, bright smile but finds nothing but chapped lips spitting out unfelt lyrics. He thinks of the warfare tapping on his shoulder, requesting for his return to the game, and Daehyun's spilt blood scorching his eyes. Someone holds a rifle to his head.

Youngjae snaps his eyes open, laying motionless. He shudders and thinks of Daehyun's hold and the farewells of old acquaintances. He removes the cover over his face and sits up. He's still scared of the dark.

Youngjae clambers out of bed and silently climbs into Daehyun's, the boy instantly waking from his slumber and staring down with disconcerted eyes, along with onsetting alarm and distress. Youngjae misses Daehyun's warmth dearly, so dearly he'd rip himself apart and attach them to Daehyun so they'd fuse into the same being.

"W-What are you-"

Youngjae shuts his eyes, resting against Daehyun's chest and releasing a splintered breath. He allows the dam he'd constructed from nothing but his begrudging muteness to shatter, tears leaking despite his face remaining stoic. So cold. So afraid. He doesn't know where or who to turn to, so he grips on to his accomplice and seeps away into ebony.

Daehyun exhalles, hands uncertainly hovering above Youngjae. He's treating Youngjae like fine china, a forbidden, prized possession that may crack anytime he'd lay his hands on him. Youngjae wants to tell him he's already wrecked so he doesn't have to worry; he can't be demolished any further.

Daehyun finally heaves Youngjae towards him, shaky grip a runny mixture of castigations-induced fear and a raging longing excruciatingly suppressed. He takes in a deep breath, lips against Youngjae's hair. "I'm sorry," he whispers, smothered against remorse and damned unrestraint as though he'd been dangled above temptations in the pit of fire for eternity. "I'm so sorry."
The wet warmth slashing down Youngjae's face flows more vigorously, his stiff lips breaking their still form only to respire. "What do we do?" He asks, fatigue ridden in his words.

"I don't know," Daehyun returns after a pregnant pause. Youngjae fists Daehyun's shirt, eyes twitching at their soreness. He diffuses in Daehyun's heat, steadfast clasp a fraud for Youngjae to shelve his misgivings and bask in the presence of a boy who'd been so far out of reach. Of a boy he'd loved as a close friend, of a friendship now twisted, misconstrued and deformed.

"I missed you," Youngjae cracks, shutting his eyes tight. Daehyun falteringly tangles their legs together, his thigh slipping between Youngjae's limbs. It reminds Youngjae of their debut days. Except then, he hadn't wanted to kiss Daehyun and feel Daehyun so deep inside him Daehyun penetrates into his bloodstream.

"I missed you too," Daehyun wheezes. His hands are shuddering like he's having a seizure from grasping a hallucination and Youngjae realises how beautiful he looks. Taboo desire showing its face in the form of condemned bliss, charges of unnatural blasphemy and a hint of love. The first signs of madness and a write-off to a mental asylum.

"So much." Perhaps Daehyun had always been spiralling down into the abyss of delirium. His clutch is warm and secure despite his stark unstability, and Youngjae thinks maybe if they died right now, their bones buried together (ribcages intertwined), it would be okay.

Daehyun kisses him on the forehead, released pant like he'd just been flung out of water into the air. Youngjae wonders if Daehyun had been drowning under a frozen lake while Youngjae fought the fire (stinging hurt).

"So, so much."

There

is

always

some

MADNESS

in

love
First quote by Ray Bradbury -- "Insanity is relative. It depends on who has who locked in what cage.", second quote by Friedrich Nietzsche -- "There is always some madness in love". Bradbury's quote is reference to the title of the first chapter, "the eyes of others our prisons; their thoughts our cages" (quote by Virginia Woolf). Does the poem appear in the shape of an hourglass? I'm not sure if it works on the other browsers lol. Doesn't work on mobile I think. dun dun dun
we'll hide and they'll seek

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*M rated chapter

The end of dusk

( Dear morning, spare us)

The urge to avoid is now mutual, unlike Youngjae's innate fervor to beat Daehyun at a game Daehyun could not explain was a war. Like a little boy Youngjae had been, peering curiously as Daehyun hastily deluded him into thinking it was child's play despite the minefield that was his mind. It was all the better when Daehyun ran and Youngjae mistook it for a contest where he had to run too, in the opposite direction because Daehyun kept running despite Youngjae's screams for him to come back.

Ten paces and turn. The hilarious comedies where the cowboys, with their backs turned, keep going till they're miles and miles apart. If Youngjae had decided to cheat and take a peek at Daehyun in their duel to the death, he would have realised Daehyun had the pistol pressed to his very own forehead. But that wouldn't be Youngjae, as Youngjae's too proud to dispel the dire need to prove he's capable of winning fair and square with just his own abilities, despite being pushed to the brink of death.

Sometimes, Youngjae wonders how pathetic had he been to resort to conjuring up illusions just to see the boy who was right in front of him. He'd tried to sleep through the apocalypse of his soundness, bury himself alive, but he'd tried time and time to open the casket because he wanted to see Daehyun one last time -- even though Daehyun was the one who cremated him.

What Youngjae never realised was that ironically, they'd both dug each other's graves, and he doesn't know if it's fortunate they found one another's hands within the soil and muddy roots. After all, the weight of the world is suffocating on their embrace and the paparazzi waits around the cemetery for
the undead -- to rip them out of the earth and hang them rightfully in a shameful scandal. How long can they play dead till the bears leave?

Hopefully, Mother Nature is forgiving and will allow the natural turned otherwise to decompose in peace.

There is no more hate and irascibility. Daehyun and Youngjae sit at the opposite ends of the couch at home and they stand at different wings during concerts. Youngjae dodges Daehyun during their dances so they won't even graze one another and he showers last so he doesn't have to face Daehyun. Their manager singles them out and yells at them. Youngjae forgets how to speak as his head lolls about like a tattered, scrap doll and he nods.

The fear tingles his skin. Do they know? Can they smell out the unnatural on Daehyun and Youngjae? Are their gazes too affectionate and drowning?

Youngjae doesn't bother to steal glances at Daehyun like he used to, the ones he so vehemently denied as Daehyun joked with another who should rightfully be Youngjae. Nowadays, Youngjae finally understands the look in Daehyun's fatigued eyes, because his irises mirror them. He wants to say sorry for pushing Daehyun over the edge. If Youngjae had kept his damn mouth shut and continued their seemingly petty fight, they could still be hurting in a less reprehensible manner.

It's just a phase. Youngjae just needs to keep telling himself that and extricate his thoughts of Daehyun's breath on his hipbone.

Youngjae says sorry a lot these days. He considers quitting B.A.P and begging his ex-girlfriend to take him back before he drags the rest down to hell. Truthfully, he doesn't mind tying the vines around his neck so the budding tree above, five boys filled with brimming talent and enthusiastic dreams, can flourish from his corpse. Especially for one boy who people thought fought with Youngjae for a place in the garden (his replacement, because he couldn't sprout tall enough, hit those high notes) but had actually intertwined their arms to grow together.

He'd give up the last of his oxygen in his lungs so Daehyun can crawl out of the graveyard and mourn over the death of a boy nothing more than his best friend, as carved into Youngjae's tombstone. Nothing else, because Youngjae took their fatal mistake down into the depths of perpetual slumber, which the Daehyun in his dreams has no idea of. Maybe then, they can they live in peace.

"You look like a zombie," Yongguk jokes, a bid attempt to hint he knows something has happened. "Like you've lost your soul. The walking dead, argh." Yongguk roars a little and puts out his arms, toddling around before flashing a gummy grin. Handsome, Youngjae thinks, and he sinks his nails into his thighs as punishment.

They've been doing this lately. Jongup takes Youngjae out for strolls and apologises for casually (intentionally) bringing Daehyun into the conversation once Youngjae twitches. Junhong pretends he wants to clear his phone's memory space and sends Youngjae pictures to preserve them online, those where Daehyun and Youngjae are laughing together and they're too close for comfort. Junhong's reply to Youngjae's message, alright, tell me when you're done backing it up and I'll delete them, is still fresh in his mind.

Don't these photos mean anything to you, hyung?

The biggest tragedy of photographs is the fact that they perpetuate a moment, but never the people in it. They are not savepoints in a video game that allow you to rewind. They are parts of a museum, to be nostalgic and feel bittersweet over. Never solely happy nor sad with a partition's determination,
but perhaps leaning towards one.

Youngjae laughs at Yongguk and the hollowness rings so clear Yongguk's smile dims. Youngjae wants to rush over and piece it back together, guilt gnawing at his ribs.

"You can tell me anything, Youngjae." He wrings an arm around Youngjae's neck and their contact is delectable. Perhaps only because it reminds him of how Daehyun holds him. Himchan and Jongup emerge from the kitchen, Himchan's chin on Jongup's thick shoulder as the younger boy pokes his tablet. Himchan refuses to let go of Jongup, hands wound tightly around his waist and hampering his walk. In one hand is a chocolate bar, Himchan feeding Jongup periodically as they waddle to the couch.

Yongguk tosses a cushion at Himchan's face, guffawing. "You two might as well get married at this point," Yongguk puffs in amusement. Himchan wiggles his brows, making kissy faces at a distracted Jongup. "Will you marry me, Jonguppie?"

"If you get off me, hyung, then yes," Jongup mumbles, taking another bite. Himchan bursts out laughing, hugging Jongup tighter and attempting to kiss him. Jongup leans away as far as possible, them struggling against one another comically.

"So you'll give up Lee Hi for me?" Himchan questions teasingly. Jongup widens his eyes and nudges Himchan off him. "That was so long ago, hyung. You said you wanted to get close to Younha-noona too."

"She was really my type, though," Himchan mutters. "Too bad she had a boyfriend." He unwinds his arm and trudges towards Youngjae, resting his head against his shoulder.

"Stay loyal to Jongup," Yongguk warns lightheartedly, knuckling Himchan's head. Youngjae chuckles, feeling foreign amid the joke too real in his sins.

"You look really tired," Himchan says. The artificiality extends over from Youngjae's wretched face to Himchan's smile as Youngjae shakes his head, chortling when Jongup trips and conks against the polished concrete. Himchan chides him for laughing and thankfully, Jongup doesn't bleed.

Sand that composes eye crust and tranquil sleep is traded for the insomnia and a lethargic reality Youngjae wonders could be a dream. Under the guise of darkness, they are safe. In the place where their demons haunt them best and they fall prey to cloaked perpetrators, they've managed to build a sanctuary too obvious in sunlight to house and protect two ostracised boys. It's miserable to reside where light doesn't exist, chased away like shadows hiding behind an admirable stature despite having been its offspring, because Daehyun shines so mesmerisingly to be veiled.

Yongguk had suggested they room together again to try and fix things. Daehyun and Youngjae hadn't objected to the idea in spite of how futile the solution was.

Under nightfall, Youngjae can focus on Daehyun's breathing on the opposite bed and his crumpled form. It is with their identities thrown far into the sea that they dare to meet, but still under the covers. Youngjae clambers into Daehyun's bed and Daehyun says nothing but grips him like he's his last lifeline. Youngjae takes the first step because Daehyun seems to treat him like an entity high above his head, something too precious and fragile for his filthy hands to hold unless bestowed permission. With their eyes obscured, they rely on warmth and hushed whispers (toned down, because it may
break the lampposts on the other street and alert the police) to communicate. It's like going into relapse in the day to Youngjae, because he craves Daehyun's touch and sometimes he wonders if he was a girl, things would be so much easier. But then, he would never have met Daehyun, would he?

"Why?" Youngjae breathes, lashes beating tiredly against his eye circles. They've been laying in bed for the past two hours, arms tangled and Daehyun adoring the soft beating of Youngjae's heart. Both of them know the other's not sleeping though their eyes are shut and Daehyun remains still like camouflaging in the wilderness. "Was it out of lust?"

Daehyun keeps silent. Youngjae forgives him, because he cannot begin to imagine the muteness Daehyun has been enduring. Youngjae has only experienced a fraction of it, and he has to exercise all self-restraint not to fling himself into Himchan's arms because Himchan seems so genuine when he says he'll always be there for him, no matter what.

"I don't know what to tell you," Daehyun croaks, bleeding into a mere puddle in Youngjae's embrace. He breathes in hard and his lips graze Youngjae's chest. His arms are locked around Youngjae's waist, having been frozen there since midnight. Youngjae considers pouring cement over them now so they can break time and last forever.

Youngjae shifts downwards, his legs going off the bed as he levels himself with Daehyun. The remorse wrangling Daehyun's beautiful face makes it seem as though he murdered someone. A felony of breaking another boy in ways both physical and mental.

"When can you tell me, then?" Youngjae whispers. Daehyun's eyes are teary, so Youngjae delicately wipes them.

"I don't know," Daehyun returns again, like a shattered tape recorder repeating the same song over and over. His eyes dart around, desperately trying to take in Youngjae's features and imprint them permanently into his brain.

"I'm sorry," Daehyun cracks, churning out a cry so grievous it begets tears from Youngjae. It reminds Youngjae of how children cry, loudly and begging the entire world to hear their sorrow. He splutters over his chants, choking on his sobs forlornly. Youngjae grasps his face gently, thumbs unable to catch all the wet warmth pouring down.

"I'm so sorry."

Youngjae shushes him, breaths meshing underneath the moonlight. "It's okay, Daehyun." He knows it's not, but he says it anyway in hopes of fixing Daehyun with his very own shards. "I can wait." Hopefully, before his grave demands his occupancy.

"You don't understand," Daehyun bleats, hysterically grabbing onto Youngjae's wrists. His eyes spare a glance at the nail marks sliced through Youngjae's skin, dried blood decorating his paleness sadistically. "I-I did this to you. If I'd just stopped myself, if I wasn't so selfish, you-"

Daehyun breaks, falling apart into infinitesimal dust from a star crashing down and burning into ashes. "You'd be okay." The misery wrecks Daehyun's face beyond recognition as he gasps for breath, the reality bashing them into the ground and demanding everything they'd worked so hard for like a bully after lunch money. Flung off the swings and rupturing their skulls because they landed just after the sand pit on the scorching concrete.

"I am okay," Youngjae lies for the sake of saving the boy in his grasp. The fiends trampling in his gut and the memory of proclaiming he'll marry a beautiful bride is melancholic on his tongue. He'd stuck a shabby drawing of his future wife and him on the notice board back in his first year of middle
school. No one drew two boys together, obviously, since that goes against the arrangement of nature and the way the world works.

Youngjae doesn't want to think of the future and how they'll move on, but it's become an insatiable desire to have Daehyun by his side. He wants to pass this off as a one-time mistake, an accident, even. Two drivers crashing into one another (Youngjae hadn't checked before turning, Daehyun had seen it coming but couldn't press the brake in time) and staining the asphalt with crimson red. Maybe they could pick their dismembered bodies off the road, staggering to their feet and waving one another off. Both of their faults, so they'll settle on letting it slide and continuing on with their day.

But it's okay, right? It's just a passing phase that they'll smoothen out and laugh at years later. He's okay because he knows they did it because the company doesn't allow them to contact anyone so they broke and let their drive gnaw them up.

It's unfortunate, though, because if they were to try and pick up their limbs scattered over the road, they'd grasp on to nothing. Stop and let it sink in that they're souls had been divorced from their bodies. Hope the rain washes away the traces of their carelessness that commands grief from their loved ones.

"You're not," Daehyun breathes, wobbly arms tugging Youngjae's hands off his cheeks and encasing them like reciting prayers. "Don't lie to me."

"I am okay." Who does Youngjae hope to deceive? Daehyun knows him better than anyone else. But he still deludes Daehyun in vain, as he doesn't have the heart to tell Daehyun he cries in the bathroom and leaks cold sweat when Jongup touches him too intimately.

The recollection of Daehyun with his toothy grin, boyish laughter and embarrassing burps is hardly seeable in his weeping. Youngjae swallows back the urge to cry harder and gently guides their lips together. Daehyun instantly dives his tongue into Youngjae's mouth and kisses roughly, famished and desperate for more. Youngjae hopes it isn't because of what he thinks, as he himself feels it from the depths of his chaos. A one-way ticket to paving a path much too rocky for their feet not to fracture. He wonders, amid the romance novels his mother used to tell him about, how love can be so menacing and frightening.

Daehyun's eyes are swollen and bloodshot, and Youngjae forces his lips to twist. "I went to that jajangmyun shop without you," Youngjae softly strains out a chuckle, Daehyun heaving slowly to calm down his pants.

"Who did you go with?" Daehyun answers back, not truly over their conversation. Youngjae continues smiling and even though it slices his cheek, he finds happiness from their close proximity.

"Myself. Junhong wanted to accompany me, but..." Their hands are still interlocked. Youngjae squeezes Daehyun's fingers. "It'd feel like I was replacing you."

Daehyun smiles. It's forced and his desolation shrieks for a cure, but at least he's trying. "I still have our movie tickets."

"It's expired now, idiot," Youngjae whispers back teasingly, and he really wants to go closer to Daehyun but this is as close as they can go. "You wasted them."

"I didn't want to watch it without you," Daehyun answers quietly, mouth still curved. Youngjae scrunches up his nose and cheekily replies, "So you're the bigger saint?"

"Yeah, I am," Daehyun says jokingly, their voices faint and hushed in fear of the night watchman
hauling their huddled bodies out. They speak of stars and suns across the solar system, vacuum
standing vigilantly on the edge of the universe. Youngjae shares about the new smartwatch.
Daehyun calls it stupid. Youngjae tells him of the red shoes he bought for Daehyun and how he
threw them away even though he never wore them. Daehyun jokes that he'll dig it out of the trash
and says he had a lot of things in mind for Youngjae's birthday present. They'd clogged his head
incessantly, three months before Youngjae's birthday. Daehyun doesn't elaborate on why he didn't
buy any of them.

Youngjae misses being able to talk like this, misses it so much he'd give up anything for it. So when
Daehyun drifts off to sleep with the remains of ointment-dabbed wounds and their shaky
collection, Youngjae silently cries his heart out and curses every damn thing in this world for
giving Daehyun back to him in such a cruel manner.

Fear no colours

(But Ma said her)

It has become a recurring pattern to meet at night. Youngjae awakes to Daehyun gone, himself back
in his own bed with Daehyun's warmth completely drained away. Abandoned like the madly in love,
by playboys who return periodically to string them along and keep them chained. Youngjae says
nothing and waits for Daehyun to figure out himself, waits patiently for the chaos within Daehyun to
subside and for him to come up with an explanation and, pray to God, a solution.

In the day, Daehyun and Youngjae forget one another exists, despite the clarity doubling infinitely
with the sunlight smouldering their skin. It is precisely this that makes their unnaturalness so much
more obvious that perhaps Yongguk may squint a moment more to decipher their loving gazes.
When Daehyun's in their shared room, Youngjae sits out in the living room. If he needs his laptop,
Youngjae walks in, grabs it and leaves without another thought. Daehyun reciprocates with equal
apathy, often curled up on the couch and falling asleep with his mouth wide open. Youngjae would
laugh a year ago, but he himself collapses onto the bed in mid-afternoon and spends their
excruciatingly scarce breaks sleeping away.

Numb. Youngjae had ultimately concluded incinerating in flames with his body charred beyond
recognition was better than the biting winter. So he'd leapt into the fire and scalded all of his five senses and his soundness. It's difficult to feel anything anymore, except for the last thing he'd grasped before he combusted in the searing, licking heat. The last of his memory before he'd snapped.

He doesn't want to sit down and think because he can't fix this even though he's Yoo Youngjae, the brain of the group, the boy the manager goes to for input after Yongguk. The easy solution is what Daehyun had thought up as well, to avoid and pretend that nothing has happened. His heart doesn't jump into his throat when Daehyun grins so dashingly and he doesn't moan Daehyun's name when he's breathlessly thrusting his finger in and out of himself (the after-shame too intense to combat). What he's learnt from Daehyun's mistakes that made both of them tumble off the building is that you can only stay away for this long.

It's simple. It's simple, for fuck's sake, goddamn it, Yoo Youngjae! Pull your self together. You can forget all about it and everything will be fine and dandy. Too bad, how unfortunate, childish little Youngjae wants more of Daehyun as the days go by and he yearns the intimacy. He doesn't want to consider that maybe, just maybe, he'd fallen for Jung Daehyun, fellow teammate in B.A.P, best friend for three years, soulmate for eternities to come. (A fucking boy, what a joke. He'd never even given men a second glance before.) Because if he ever comes to that conclusion, he'll finally be sure that there's no hope. No way to permanently mask the crime scene stained with their fluids and disgusted spits from the public.

If Youngjae hadn't thrown himself into the fire, he would have frozen to death anyway.

"They look good together, don't they?" Yongguk comments, nudging Jongup in the chest. The chatter of the company staff brims at Youngjae's ears, his slouched back flopped against the pillar. Lately, the weariness has been latching him to a support constantly. Jongup peers over and Youngjae zones in on their conversation, doing the same.

Daehyun stands at the side of the practice room with a small-built trainee, smiling kindly and talking enthusiastically. The girl has wide, doll-like eyes, a precisely sharp nose and pouty, cherry lips. Her hazelnut brown hair falls to her shoulders, curled subtly at the ends.

"Mm. She looks like hyung's type," Jongup remarks, the two in question oblivious to the attention. Daehyun breaks out into a laugh as the trainee grins shyly, twiddling her fingers. "Sweet and gentle."

Youngjae's jaw locks unconsciously. Bitterness permeates his entire being, along with a chilling sense that forces him to curve back into the wall. His eyes examine the girl Daehyun towers over. He can't deny what Yongguk has said; they look straight out from a couple photoshoot with their defined features and impeccable faces. A girl and a boy. Daehyun had once shared that he dreams of the perfect Sunday morning, playing with his children in the garden while his doting wife makes breakfast for them. Youngjae's throat goes dry.

"Small, too. You know Daehyun, he's the kind that wants to protect his girlfriend," Yongguk points out with a mischievous grin. Youngjae's hand climbs to his neck and he squeezes himself to take up less space on the bench. The girl has an impressive body despite her petite size. Long legs, tiny waist, large bust...

The coldness scratches into Youngjae's blood vessels and suddenly, his broad shoulders aren't something worth flaunting anymore. His lower lip quivers and his brows knit together. He swallows to regain control of his throat but he can't churn out a sound to call Daehyun back into his arms.

"He's into her," Jongup whispers, wriggling his eyebrows. "Look at what he's doing." Daehyun massages his shoulders, stretching out his arms. It can be interpreted as Daehyun trying to mask his narrow built, but that doesn't mean he is doing so. What the hell does Jongup know?
There must be some kind of promise within their embraces at night, right? Yes. Of course. Definitely. But all they talk about is stupid things. Nothing with substance. Like Youngjae's just a fling because Daehyun can't control his drive and needs somewhere to vent it out. Does the husband ever talk about his wife's new child with the blind affair?

A shaky breath escapes Youngjae's lips. They're standing too close to each other and the girl is now touching Daehyun's arm coyly. Youngjae wants to storm up and rip Daehyun from her aggravating clutch. However, as they continue to chat, all smiles and no pain, Youngjae wonders if he even has the right to claim Daehyun as his.

Youngjae tries to tear his stare away but his eyes are riveted sadistically on the pair. The girl's thighs are showing provocatively up to the edge of her behind and her crop top reveals her flat stomach. "He should seriously come to terms with it," Yongguk sighs in amusement. "Not anyone has the perfect built like Youngjae." He leans over, poking Youngjae lightly through his shirt where his stretch marks are. Youngjae doesn't reply, staring so hard his eyes start to strain. Pass the eye drops to vanquish the sore sight and gift his vision clarity once again. Daehyun's drawing is in his pocket.

"I'm getting old," Yongguk laments, massaging his face. "Seeing that just makes me worry if I'm ever going to get a girlfriend." Jongup chimes in with a chuckle, "I'm worried too. And we're celebrities, what a life."

"What makes you so sure he's interested?"

Youngjae's hand is trembling and his nails pierce into the fabric of his thigh. His face remains stoic and unfeeling, as though he couldn't care less. That's how he always deals with problems, anyway -- pretend it doesn't ignite anything heinous under his skin like his life depends on it and bash back all his emotions to leave rationality and just a tinge of spite.

Youngjae wryly shrugs and he hurries out of the room, afraid if Daehyun stares any longer he'll start to compare and pick out Youngjae's numerous faults.

Youngjae nods off during their meeting and gets chewed out by the director. He is instructed to go wash his face and he obediently exits the room, Daehyun's brooding gaze quickening the pace of Youngjae's feet. Through the closed door, Youngjae hears Himchan offering to follow behind. He is told to stay. Daehyun remains silent.

It's tiring. So tiring Youngjae waits for the night to come where he can recuperate. Not his drooping eyes or his sore body, but the fabric of his faith and soul.
Daehyun gets into bed with Youngjae instead of the other way round this time. He wraps his arms around the body facing away, Youngjae freezing in Daehyun's grasp. The silhouette of long hair and S-lines has dug so deep into Youngjae's mind it breeds an infestation of chilling insecurity and the grappling knowledge of never being able to.

Youngjae tries to distance himself but Daehyun spins him around, a sigh leaving his lips similar to heavy smokers finally reunited with murderous nicotine. Youngjae says nothing as Daehyun breathes in hard, hand groping americano contours instead of lilac curves. Their groins press lewdly against one another as Daehyun's hand slips up Youngjae's shirt, and panic assails Youngjae. His fear crystalises into a sickening notion of him as an imposter, stubbornly stabbing his oversized feet into the tiny shoes of Daehyun's rightful girlfriend. Like Cinderella's repulsive step sister.

*Pretty. Small. Dainty.* Youngjae pushes Daehyun away and he widens his eyes, meeting Daehyun's confused gaze. Daehyun melts into a bewildered, worried frown and he leans down, experimentally attempting to brush his lips against Youngjae's. Youngjae shies away, eyes darting around with a gulp. Even without looking, Youngjae can picture the hurt and dejection scrawled into Daehyun's face.

Daehyun's hand removes itself from Youngjae's waist and he rolls onto his back, boring his eyes through the ceiling with peevishness. Youngjae apologetically squirms away, pulling up the band of his shorts in case Daehyun tugs them off to see the perverse and unnatural.

"You did well today," Daehyun's voice reeks of petulance, secret envy and ache, but he manages out those few words. "Your duet with Himchan-hyung." It's bitter. They were supposed to do it together but Himchan readily volunteered to replace Daehyun, citing the excuse to step out of his comfort zone. The management did not object.

Youngjae hums quietly. They wallow in silence, suffocating into an abyss of wordlessness and cut tongues. He doesn't want to push Daehyun for clarification as to their all too intimate night and subsequent, recurring embraces. Youngjae clutches the bedsheets.

"Do you ever want to get married?"

Youngjae's question remains harsh against the walls of their room, unravelling their secrets by peeling their skin with the most merciless knives. Daehyun blinks once and frustratedly sighs. "Let's... not talk about this."

Youngjae persists. "You said you wanted kids. Your own flesh and blood."

"So?" Daehyun's veins begin to protrude from his arms, clearly agitated because it's a clear cut truth. He acts like it's an interrogation and Youngjae is demanding a confession out of him, to spit it out that they have no idea what the fuck they're doing or what the world has in store for them. "I say a lot of things. I once said I wanted to be the president; look where I am now."

"You really like children," Youngjae says matter-of-factly in the most detached tone he can muster, throwing out information and letting Daehyun put whatever slant he wants on it.

"Nothing," Youngjae rebounds ruthlessly. The apathy ringing through his tone contrasts with the scorch up his neck, anger from a faceless girl who looked so flawless by Daehyun's side. "I'm just saying. Why are you so sensitive?"

"I'm not sensitive," Daehyun seethes though his hands ball into fists. "You are the one pelting me..."
with questions." Youngjae rolls his eyes.

They leave it at that. Daehyun shifts to the side of the bed, chest rising and falling sharply. He's fuming, because he interpretes all things he can't understand as a direct, personal attack. When confronted, Daehyun turns hot and mad while Youngjae turns cold and calculative, like fire and ice. It's odd how they match so well even though one is driven by emotions while the other relies primarily on logic when they've got nowhere else to turn to.

Any moment, Daehyun will rise and go back to his bed, ensconcing himself in the sheets while dwelling obsessively on Youngjae's words and combating them with hateful, unsaid speeches. On most occasions, Youngjae writes Daehyun off as petty and leaves him alone in spite of knowing clearly how to fix things. But just for today, even though Youngjae's as stubborn as Daehyun (Youngjae's headstrong in meaningless victory, Daehyun's obstinate in paranoia-ridden self-defense), Youngjae lets his immaturity clang down onto the ground along with his abandoned weapons. He doesn't know how long he can hold on to Daehyun, anyway.

"I'm sorry," Youngjae whispers, sincerity shining through. Unlike Youngjae, Daehyun cools down easily. Daehyun's innate fervor to protect himself and fend off whoever tries to crush him to the ground has his fortress flourishing tenfold with every prick, but ironically, with a splash of gentleness, it demolishes into rubble of forgiveness and guilt. Daehyun rolls over and seals their lips, eyes spelling penance. He winds Youngjae closer and snuggles against him, lifting one of Youngjae's arms and laying it over himself like a bouquet on a corpse. Youngjae prays for reason to separate them.

"I'm sorry," Daehyun answers with heartfelt remorse. His fingers rest on Youngjae's thighs and snakes up the rim of Youngjae's shorts. He kisses Youngjae again, insinuations of never being able to get enough in his grip.

Youngjae is sorry it feels like love.

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Of mice and men

( And more than friends)

The sharp line differentiating a boy from a girl has become more prominent, Youngjae thinks more
frequently. He'd always known he was a boy; it was as obvious as anything else. However, it'd never been a dawning, attention-seeking realisation, one that demands not just the subconscious to safeguard but the stream of consciousness too.

Youngjae gets excruciatingly nervous around girls recently, including the stylists and vocal coaches. It's not for the same reason as before, and he panics when the faces of him and a female staff are reflected in the same plane. He zones out when Junhong gets flustered over a voluptuous older fan and Himchan snickers so hard he spits, and when Yongguk talks about waiting for the right one to marry ("she'll pick up litter even if it isn't hers") and Jongup snarkily says Yongguk might as well plainly state he wants to marry a garbage collector. When Daehyun stands beside a woman, Youngjae can't help but think they look so good together. So good Youngjae wants to beg the scalpel on the operating table to cut him open and bring him a new form.

The dorm is empty, except for Youngjae's sole presence. The stylists leave some of the make-up kits in their dormitory in the event the boys need to be dragged out of their beds for a sudden schedule (willingness and sickness not a matter for discussion).

Isolation is quite deathly. Sitting by yourself with no source of intervention lets your soul rot and darken more quickly than ever, because the only person you can talk to is yourself. And sometimes, the one thing you should have the most control over is the one you have least over.

Yesterday, backstage of a music show, Daehyun had been talking to Eunji. They'd met before for that advertisement. Daehyun hadn't bat an eye that day at her or any of her other group members, more interested in Youngjae's new hair and his slimmer thighs.

Hah, I don't need to diet because God blessed me with this awesome body. Daehyun had leaned into Youngjae, gesturing for Youngjae to feed him.

Youngjae had acquiesced with an amused scoff, shoving the chopsticks into Daehyun's mouth and snickering as he spluttered. Keep quiet, no shoulders.

The make-up kit clatters inside the drawer as Youngjae rummages through it, hands unsteady and mind warped. His train of thoughts bends into an endless circular motion around the shapes of a dashing boy and a gorgeous girl, blaring about Busan and its famed beaches. All jokes in satoori and talks of how they miss hearing the genuine accent. Fingers brushing. Their height difference is something to coo about as Daehyun has to slouch slightly since Eunji's barefooted and her feet are so preciously minuscule. This is what a woman does to a man. She makes his heart thump at a ferocity so awe-inducing, permed hair and tender warmth. A body capable of giving life and the next-in-line, a future for all to behold.

Youngjae digs out the make-up, grasping it shakily like it's an invaluable wish stone. Maybe he can be as pretty as Eunji. He was ranked as one of the most androgynous idols that one time, and the fans are always gushing over his cute, porcelain features. The stylists said several times he was born with the most beautiful, unique face possible. You're lucky you don't have to go under the knife. Which boy has eyelashes as long as you? A sonorous laugh as the brush meets Youngjae's cheek.

Maybe Eunji isn't that far off, right? The possibility exists. Yeah, maybe.

Jongup's wind chimes are still hanging by the window sill, weaving a delicate tune to Youngjae's ministrations. He's seen the stylists do it a hundred of times and when they were too busy to touch up a blemish, the group had to do it themselves. Youngjae sits in front of the mirror, dabbing some blue eyeshadow and curling his lashes. He gets them clumped up and irritatedly fixes his mascara, combing through his hair and powdering his cheeks. His hands are shaking but one wrong stroke is enough to be scorned as a failure.
Time passes without indication. The world leaves the desperate artist alone as he paints on his face, deliriously hoping to showcase a masterpiece worth to get him off the streets and be recognised. Youngjae dabs the last of his lip gloss and halts for good, boring his eyes through his reflection.

He doesn’t look too bad. If he had some hair extensions, it would be more believable. Youngjae frames his face with his hands, imagining long locks reaching down to his shoulders.

You know her? Oh my god, I can’t believe it! We used to be inseparable when we were young! Hey, maybe we met before, just that we don’t know. My name used to be Hyerim.

Oh please. As if Daehyun would forget a pretty girl like you. He told us he was a playboy back in Busan.

Hyung, shut up! Don’t ruin it.

Yes, maybe Youngjae can pass off as a girl.

It takes approximately half an hour of ogling for the reality to set in, like the dragged out suspense of a horror movie. The compact case crashes onto the ground as Youngjae shivers, staring wide-eyed at the mirror. His breathing stumbles erratically and he falls onto his behind, frantically crawling away from the numerous pencils.

(Yoo Youngjae, what will your mother say? At her son’s wake, oh, the heartbreak.)

Youngjae grabs his head and tugs at his hair, panting transforming into audible squeaks. What the fuck had he been doing for the past two hours? The mirror mockingly thrusts his reflection back despite Youngjae ducking away into another angle, and he cowers when his back touches the wall like facing a mangled banshee. He’d been imitating the actions of a child emulating her favourite princess, messily thrashing make-up onto an unadulterated face.

What... what in the world had he been thinking?

I've gone mad.

Youngjae screams. He wails so loud, incoherent apologies to his mother spilling like fresh blood, that Himchan hears him from the doorstep and bursts in immediately. "Youngjae," he breathes in shock, scrambling up to Youngjae and cradling his gangly form.

"Youngjae, what's wrong?" Himchan's voice is quivering. Youngjae hides his face adamantly in stifling shame, crying so woefully he draws tears from Himchan. "Youngjae," Himchan pleads, eyes welled up with shimmer, "tell me what's wrong. Talk to me."

Himchan pries Youngjae's hands off after a long while of fighting and Youngjae's shrikes, and sucks in a sharp gasp. The eyeshadow, blue and depressing, leaves a mark on Himchan's wrist as he hauls the boy closer to him, holding him tight with no clue on what to do.

"Talk to me, Youngjae," Himchan churns out a cry in spite of his strong effort to remain calm and channel composure over. "Please, I'm begging you. Tell me what's wrong."

Youngjae doesn't have the heart to. He fists Himchan's shirt as the blackened wetness taint his cheeks and the fabric, eyeliner draining away to reveal a sore-eyed boy. Himchan continues to embrace him, sniffing in hard and willing back his tears. "Is it Daehyun? Tell me, Youngjae. I won't tell anyone..."

It is. Youngjae seals his lips with the clandestine kisses Daehyun showers and sob harder, pleading
Himchan to stay a little longer with apologetic, woeful eyes.

Himchan has never been this furious before. His entire face is mashed up into a scowl the moment Youngjae calms down and the rest of the members return from their shopping spree. The vein down his jawline shows and he keeps quiet at the dinner table despite his usual joking, unbreakable demeanour. Everyone else notices something amiss, but they leave it to Yongguk to settle it. The guilt jolts through Youngjae's every vessel as Yongguk blinks slowly and collects the dishes, fatigue wrecking his body.

Himchan's raised voice, menacing and intimidating, cannot be deciphered from outside the house with the downpour so heavy. When they return, Yongguk passes by Youngjae's room and smiles kindly at him.

"Hey, Himchan wants you to sleep with him tonight." Yongguk gestures to the rain clawing at the window to be let in. "Thunderstorm."

No one would believe that excuse. But the fact Yongguk tries to make Youngjae not seem needy like a charity case makes Youngjae sorry beyond point, so he doesn't argue. Daehyun parts his lips in bewilderment upon seeing Youngjae drag his blanket over to Himchan's room, but before he can interject, Himchan steps in with a scornful look.

"He's sleeping with me tonight. Jongup will sleep in your room."

Daehyun frowns harder, eyes enlarged and attempting to comprehend the situation. Youngjae does not meet his gaze.

"Why?" It sounds too demanding, contradicting with Daehyun's usual indifference. Himchan doesn't buy it.

"Because I want him to," Himchan succinctly replies and nudges Youngjae into the room, shutting the door on Daehyun. He pulls up a gleeful smile and switches off the lights, pretense of the past few hours ready on his face.

"Let's share a bed. Sleepover!" Himchan announces boisterously, jumping onto Youngjae and pushing him onto the bed. Youngjae laughs and Himchan melts into a charming smile, pinching Youngjae's nose lightly. It reminds him of old times. Initially, Youngjae had always thought Himchan was a bit dense for an adult four years older. He'd only realised it was his naive mind that couldn't see through the thick fronts both Yongguk and Himchan had, an accompaniment of growing up, seeing too much and needing to maintain innocence of those around them.

Himchan's warmth is comfortable, secure and consoling, unlike the passion-igniting, heart bursting one from last night. Youngjae settles in and reminds himself they are just two boys in platonic, brotherly love. The heavy rain has transitioned into a mild drizzle, rapping against the window as curious spectators to Himchan and Youngjae's friendship.

"Guessing I'll finally get a good night's sleep today," Youngjae remarks to let Himchan knows he's okay. His fingers had been relentlessly clamping around his eyelashes during dinner, however.

Himchan chuckles. "What do you do at night?" He prods Youngjae's eye circles and ignores the trail of powder Youngjae hadn't cleanly rubbed off. He doesn't ask what the hell Youngjae had been doing when he found him.
I fall in love. Hopelessly, with the boy next to me and his thick lips. His black hair. His secure hugs. Repeat the cycle under the guise of darkness.

"I think."

Himchan snorts in response, shaking his head. "That's a waste of time." He ruffles Youngjae's hair and nestles against him. "You shouldn't think too much, especially of your troubles. It just gives you a headache and makes you unhappy."

Youngjae lets out a quiet breath. Himchan smells starkly different from Daehyun. "Well, I'll have to face it someday, right? Who knows, it may snowball into something too big for me to handle if I just leave it like that."

"That's true, but don't forget to enjoy the other great things you have now. Else, it'll take a toll on you." Himchan purses his lips. "Some things just aren't worth it. Causes you too much trouble and pain. Better to let it go."

Youngjae can understand what Himchan's insinuating. "But what if it brought me a lot of happiness?"

Himchan ponders for a moment. "Hey, do you know what are sunk costs? It's an economics term. It means you only consider the marginal benefit of your choices, not what you've already incurred." He smugly grins. "People who don't follow it are considered irrational, or... stupid."

"Asshole." Himchan laughs at the insult. They slip into a comfortable quietness, teeming at the ends of Youngjae's recovering composure. Youngjae uses cryptic statements to reveal a peek of the turbulence thrashing within him.

"Hyung." Youngjae turns away so that his back faces Himchan, just in case Himchan delves too deep into Youngjae's pupils and sees a queer, hopeless longing. "Have you ever been in love, and wished you weren't?"

Himchan bores his eyes through Youngjae's curled up form. "Several times. Sometimes, it brings more pain than happiness, but you just can't let go."

Daehyun's laughter is burned into Youngjae's lips. His tongue swipes out to collect the remnants of Daehyun's saliva from last night. It'd been heated, and Daehyun's lips had trailed down to Youngjae's collarbones. Kissed Youngjae like how he should kiss his companion, touched Youngjae like how he should touch his paramour, held Youngjae like how he should hold his soulmate—the result of consummate love. It's supposed to be perfect; Youngjae had read it in a psychology article once. The equation of intimacy, passion, and commitment should birth the ultimate, most impeccable form of love. Then why did it feel so defective that Youngjae pushed Daehyun away?

"Love can be sickening, huh?" Youngjae breathes. "Consumes you completely. Makes you do the things you'd never do."

"......Are you two fighting over a girl?" Himchan asks quietly. Youngjae wants to laugh at how simple that alternative sounds to his feud with Daehyun. The wordlessness from Youngjae hints a whole new slant on the situation but Himchan keeps his words to himself.

"You have to decide what's most important to you," Himchan softly coaxes. Youngjae nods and he realises the rain has stopped. Nightfall is cold and so, Youngjae cuddles up to Himchan.

"Alright, no more talking. It's time for bed," Himchan announces, back to his cheery, fabricated tone.
"Good night, hyung." Youngjae misses Daehyun's loving hugs and shivering legs, hinting of a crippling inability to separate himself from Youngjae like indispensable conjoined twins.

"Good night, Youngjae."

In Youngjae's dreams, the longest time since he'd had one as he only catches about an hour of sleep with Daehyun's nuzzles and bated breaths wearing him down, he is wearing a dress. One that reaches all the way down to his ankles, yellow linen beginning from his waist strained in a corset. They are embroidered exquisitely, patterns trailing preciously around his strangely light legs.

He is in a wooden cottage, straw sitting above for the roof and an unlit fireplace by the corner. He rises from his white, silky mattress on the floor, pinching his temple to quell the swelling headache. His fingers are dainty and feminine like Yongguk's (that Daehyun used to mock a flushed Yongguk for, "You ate too many Lady's Fingers, huh, hyung?" and his shoulders are much more narrow than Daehyun's (where Himchan would say, "You know girls still think you're manly, Daehyun. In fact, the way you eat is kind of gross.").

Youngjae walks over to the mirror and furrows his brows in consternation to see the full reflection of a woman staring back at him. The reaction, however, is not as aghast as he would have been a few years ago. Youngjae's skin is as white as snow, lips as red as blood, and hair as black as ebony. He twirls a full round, running a hand down the outline of his body. It's nice, but not in the way it should be, in a way that envisions Daehyun's pleased smile and solid embrace. He wastes an extended while admiring his new form, patting his cheeks to ensure it's not just make-up hiding his disfigured face, and paces around the house.

There are seven short beds lined up by the pillar. Each has a word scrawled into its footboard. Wrath, Greed, Sloth, Lust, Pride, Envy, Gluttony. All the beds are bare of any bedding except for the fourth one. There's a crimson, stumpy, supposedly paranormal figure hidden within the bedsheets, hint of a tail slithering about. Somehow, Youngjae's instincts lead him to awaken the unidentified form asleep.

He taps on the curled up beast's shoulder once. Then twice. Then incessantly, without stop. The beast growls, stretching his vermillion arms and sniffing. His eyes are fully charcoal, fangs gleaming as he yawns. He faces Youngjae with a demeaning look, before a sinister smile creeps onto his face. "I have been awakened from my slumber by a pathetic mortal," he sneers with an extremely deep voice, clawing at his cheek. Somehow, despite his intimidating aura, there is some sort of familiarity that leads Youngjae's terror to drop. He cocks his head one side. "What are you?"

"Well, that's rude," he returns, shifting to the edge of the bed and revealing his curled horns. "I am a demon. You can call me Lust."

"Where is Love?" The question falls from Youngjae's lips naturally. The demons releases a menacing cackle, throwing his head back harshly. "Love? What's that? A mispronunciation of my name? That does not exist."

"No," Youngjae clarifies. "Love. What makes you do things you would never have done. What makes you leap off a bridge, even when you wouldn't when paid all the money in the world. What makes you sacrifice your everything for someone else who cannot possibly hope to repay."

"Nonsense," the demon dismisses, long tongue dangling out to swipe his nose. "There is no such
"Yes, there is," Youngjae persists, thinking of replaced organs and Daehyun's infatuated eyes. The demon scowls, licking his claws one by one. "That is only an illusion, my dear. It is not real."

Youngjae shrinks back in bewilderment. "W-What?" He stammers, gripping the edge of his dress draped over his knees. They remind Youngjae of when Daehyun tucks him into bed and his lips linger on Youngjae's forehead.

"Wherefore am I summoned, then?" The demon snickers, reaching out to cup Youngjae's cheeks. Memories of Daehyun buried deep inside him, their delirious pants and clacking teeth, instantly materialise within his head. "Are you sure it is not merely an excuse to continue sinning? A vague, unproven concept to mask over a mistake, hm?"

"I..." Youngjae wheezes, slumping against the demon's touch. The demon's tongue runs down Youngjae's jawline and Youngjae feels terribly dirty. "Let me ask you, then. Do you love Jung Daehyun?"

Youngjae's eyes enlarge and he sinks in comfort of Daehyun's stunning grins and stupid jokes. He cannot make out the words on his tongue. Youngjae pats on his throat to find something warm leaking through and a piercing pain through his vocal chords. Opening his mouth to practise the words is futile as his tongue has tied the knot. Heartbreaking fear pelts Youngjae's face in the form of tears and the demon shushes him.

"Do you want him to hear?" Youngjae follows the demon's stubby finger to where Youngjae had been laying. He parts his lips in stupefaction to find a glass coffin on the floorboards, the white satin Youngjae had been resting on layering its interior. Someone lies by the casket's side, hugging it tight while asleep. Youngjae stands unsteadily, dainty footsteps rushing over to a pudgy, dwarf-like version of Himchan.

Himchan's grip is vice-like from his reddened fingers insistent against the glass. Youngjae gingerly places a hand over Himchan's shoulder, wanting to wake him up but not wanting to showcase his current appearance. All of a sudden, a knocking interrupts them.

The stranger knocks once, unsure and soft. Then twice, growing fervid in nature as though having confirmed the owner of the house and its other occupants. Then incessantly, without stop, threatening to break down the locked door. A banging manifests and the doorknob rattles furiously, commanding to be let in.

Youngjae sucks in a breath, panic wrecking his beautiful, flawless little face. The demon strides over with a tormenting, cheshire-like grin, waving his tail around in amusement. "Who is it?" The demon drops his voice to a dragged out whisper, imitating a school teacher guiding a toddler to speak. The rapping of knuckles against the door is excruciatingly fierce, commanding for permission to enter and driven by a force so intense and hysteric. He feels a hand intertwined with his and looks to find Himchan, still asleep, has interlocked their fingers in assurance.

"Aren't you going to open the door?" The demon asks, propping his cheek up on his arm. "That person wishes to be let in badly. Oh, but are you going to go out like that?" He scrunches up his nose in disgust, circling his face.

Youngjae opens his mouth but muteness clamps it shut, flusteredly touching his face for blemishes and defects that tell of his true gender. He flashes a pleading look as the demon taps his head lightly with one finger. "Well, to make things easier, you'll only have two visitors. One, the evil Queen. Two, Prince Charming. But who is at your door is the question..."
Youngjae delicately untangles his smooth, slender fingers from Himchan and approaches the door cautiously. Whoever behind the door has an evidently fervid motivation, the hinges of the door shaking violently and about to fall apart.

"Open the door and you may find true love," the demon coaxes and sits on the coffin, extending a finger and drawing a line down the surface. Youngjae briefly imagines Daehyun stepping forth to rescue him from the everlasting paranoia. "Or you may meet your utter downfall." Youngjae's hand remains outstretched, fingers curled as he scrutinises the agitated knob.

"Do you want to open it? If you meet the Queen, you will ultimately die from the bite of the apple, and she may even heinously burn down the cottage. What about the four other hardworking, innocent dwarves who live here? Collateral damage, hm." The demon clicks his tongue and Youngjae inhales deeply, glancing back to Himchan on the floor. "But if you meet Prince Charming, you will have your happy ever after."

"Or will you? The Queen will follow you relentlessly, my dear. You and, now, the Prince as well, will be forced to run for your lives." Youngjae retracts his arm, boring his eyes through the door in hopes for making sense of the presence on the other side. He retreats, glimpsing at the curious animals watching through the window into the hut.

"You can always escape through the back door and save everyone, including yourself." The door trembles aggressively and the planks begin to cave in. "Like those who flee from a one night stand with regret. The merciful huntsman has offered the alternative for you to run as far as you can. It is not too late. But will you be willing to leave your one true love behind?"

Youngjae steps back hastily, careful not to trip over Himchan. He shivers as the wood snaps to reveal a jagged hole and Youngjae falls to the ground.

Falling away

( For you, I stray)

When morning dawns and Youngjae misses the opportunity for intimacy, he wakes up to the sound of Daehyun and Himchan talking. It's half squabbling, half decent conversation because they have no real, unravelled reasons to argue. A hint of animosity wafts through the air, looming over the trio.
Youngjae continues to hide under the sheets despite the tension threatening to scrawl a fissure into the ground. He cannot see anything through white but he can make out the black forms of Himchan and Daehyun by the door frame. One of them is breathing harshly.

**DAEHYUN**


Good morning, hyung.

*Exit.*

*Stands adamantly by door. Shows scathing acrimony, strained voice.*

You locked the door last night, hyung.

**HIMCHAN**

*Yawns. Does not sense anything amiss.*

Morning, Daehyun.

*Exit.*

*Frowns. Vigilant. Youngjae keeps eyes closed.*

Uh, why were you trying to come in?

**DAEHYUN**

*Offstage.*

*Looks past Himchan. Suspicious. Gnashes teeth.*

Hyung, you guys were sleeping in the same bed.

**HIMCHAN**

*Offstage.*

*Baffled, increasingly watchful. Youngjae prays for breach in script to recover.*

Yeah, so? Move, Daehyun. I want to brush my teeth.
DAEHYUN

*Offstage:*

*Severely displeased. Himchan clears throat.*

*Why?*

HIMCHAN

*Offstage:*

*Shoots back easily, more antagonistic than needed.*

*What do you mean 'why'? Can't I share a bed with my dongsaeng?*

*Footsteps. Distancing voice.*

*Why do you care, anyway?*

*Exit.*

---

*Silence. Long pause stretched over the seven seas bound to swallow them up if they stop swimming.*

*Paranoid gaze burning through sheets. Shuffling feet. Exit.*

*[That male lead should be fired. Terrifying impromptu.]*

---

Youngjae finally awakes from his pretense when Himchan brings in breakfast. They sit in the bedroom, watching random dramas and infomercials on his laptop. Himchan has voluntarily picked up a burden too heavy for him to carry, yet there is no ounce of regret in his eyes. An eyeliner pencil lays on the shelf and Youngjae secretly pockets it, scouring the place for where Himchan hid the make-up kit.

Youngjae looked pretty yesterday. Youngjae wants to see it again. Maybe draw a different portrait today to make up for his hideous flaws he is unfortunately plagued with.

"Hey, hyung."

"Yeah?" Himchan's cursor hovers across the screen as he scrolls through more videos. Youngjae spent a lot of just now, under the covers, conjuring up what ifs. Scenarios, if you will, of how Daehyun and him could have met in a thousand alternate universes. A male and female trainee
hanging out after dance practices. Best friends turned lovers, inseparable since childhood. A boy junior infatuated with his female senior. A businesswoman bumping into a single father at a coffee shop.

"Do you ever wish you could turn back time?" Youngjae sinks back into the pillow. "To go back to the good old days." Where nothing hurt, and Daehyun got angry when Youngjae said he would get a girlfriend three times faster than Daehyun.

"Well, sometimes, I do," Himchan says thoughtfully. "But it's not good to live in the past, Youngjae. You musn't fear change. It's always gonna be there, alright? We all have to face it."

Youngjae nods, pointing to one of the suggested videos. At this very moment, Himchan is the one thing that keeps him from falling apart.

"Hyung."

Himchan optimistically hums, cackling at the comedy playing. Youngjae has his head on Himchan's shoulder, lashes tiredly batting. He reaches up to press his lips against Himchan's cheek. Himchan blinks in surprise, rotating his head towards Youngjae.

"Thank you."

Himchan closes his ajar mouth, but before he can make out a reply, a deafening, quaking bang reverberates through the dorm. Himchan jumps out of bed to check and finds a nonplussed Jongup staring at the front door. Yongguk emerges with consternation. "What happened?"

"Daehyun-hyung slammed the door," Jongup meekly answers, still frightened by the resounding smash. Yongguk quizzically paces up, inspecting the door for damage. "Hyung pushed Jongup-hyung out of his way and just stormed out for no reason," Junhong squawks from the couch.

"What's his problem?" Himchan grumbles, combing his dishevelled hair in frustration. Yongguk crouches and pokes at a crooked hinge. He sighs lengthily as Youngjae bends down to pick up the compact case underneath the sofa. Youngjae hastily hides it when Junhong takes a peek, thumb tracing the sharp outlines.

Yongguk peers into the kitchen, catching the untouched loaf of bread. He exhales, grabbing his wallet and a mask. "If Daehyun comes home, leave him alone," Yongguk advises, putting it on. Youngjae nods obediently and the door creaks shut, Yongguk’s pattering footsteps increasing in ferocity. The traces of hatred and irascibility have dented the edge of the door.

"Himchan-hyung." Youngjae yawns and acts casual in spite of his quivering lip. "I'm gonna stay in my room for the whole day. That's okay, right?" Himchan flashes him a look of concern.

"I mean, now that he's out of the house... I just need some time to myself. To think over everything. Do you think you guys could leave me alone just for today?"


Face painting is what children do at birthday parties. What clowns do behind the curtains. What they do backstage before a concert. What Youngjae does before meeting Daehyun.
As promised, Himchan does not disturb other than to carefully open the door and slide dinner in, much alike to a prison guard who feed the incarcerated. He informs Youngjae that Yongguk has found Daehyun, but returned alone. In the darkness, Youngjae's mask is concealed, so Himchan cannot tell the make-up threatening to scorch into Youngjae's skin. Youngjae waits, after hours of reshaping, touching up and pinching the edges to prim perfection, for Daehyun to come back. Youngjae dons a loose, white dress shirt, baggy enough to give the impression of things that are not there, and no shorts to reveal pale thighs. The pencil marks on his face have been erased so many times and rewritten that Youngjae is almost afraid he might tear a hole in his skin.

The noisy atmosphere abruptly cuts off as Youngjae pretends to read one of the books Yongguk loaned him ("take your mind off things, okay?") called The Yellow Wallpaper. The whole neighbourhood seems to go quiet when the door clicks shut. Daehyun's strange drawing is clasped in the middle. Youngjae blinks slowly, afraid to ruin the make-up, as he pieces the hints together in suffocating ebony while the air remains deadly silent. Yongguk says something. There is no response. Himchan says something, this time louder. There is no response.

Somebody raps on the room door and opens it carefully. Junhong blinks meekly and softly announces, "Daehyun-hyung is back." Youngjae merely hums, the clip-on book light revealing only Daehyun's card and not his face. His heart begins to thump at a maniacal ferocity, smashing against his chest as he thinks of what Daehyun would say upon seeing him. A twisted excitement of a wife at bay, dolled up to receive the love of her life and his wandering eyes.

It is all peace and quiet like a cemetery. Out of the blue, the door flings open and Himchan's remnant of a warning withers in the air. Youngjae does not look up at him, eyes scouring over red. Daehyun seems to stand by the door for a while before kicking it shut, towelling his hair dry and locking the door behind him.

"So." Daehyun's voice strains so hard violin bows constantly stretched would scream in sympathy. "I was just an experiment, huh?" His tone is mocking and unruffled but hints of a demand to be heard. Youngjae pays no heed since he has to play the perfect doll. The agony pierces so far back it goes through his spine and Youngjae thanks the bed for support.

"Just something for you to test out. Confirm." Despite his seemingly light tone, his syllables are crisp and similar to those of choked sobs. Daehyun has always been terribly bad at hiding his feelings. His emotions scribble all over his face like an unstoppable pen, scratching in frowns and twitches at the needed places to give away everything. Youngjae remains silent.

Once Daehyun gets angry, he will begin spitting out more spiteful words in desperation of receiving a reply. He jabs hard, harder, because it's the only way to make the opponent feel Daehyun's doubling injuries. Everything goes blurry and his delirium makes his self-control and usual kindness go haywire.

"Isn't it selfish?" As predicted. Round of applause, but what less can we expect from Jung Daehyun's closest friend?

"That, you know," Daehyun's chuckle is mocking and scathing, "you just throw me aside? Isn't that kind of what sluts do?" He winds around to his bed.

"So Himchan-hyung is better, I'm guessing?" Daehyun tosses the towel so hard the flimsy material slams against his headboard. Youngjae swallows but maintains his composure. The accusations claw through his heart but he reminds himself behind this facade, he is invincible. Keep your cool.

"Answer me," Daehyun sounds out through gritted teeth. Youngjae keeps his stare trained on his book. Daehyun snatchs it and hurls it down onto the ground. Youngjae narrows his eyes, looking up to meet livid eyes and shallow breathing. *Keep your cool.*

"I said *answer me,*" Daehyun seethes, balling his fists and uncontrollably shaking his arms. Youngjae blinks and turns away, but just before he can slump down onto the bed, Daehyun roughly pulls him up by the collar.

"Fucking answer me, Yoo Youngjae," Daehyun holds back an enraged shriek for the sake of not alerting the other members, but Youngjae knows he's on the brink. They glare hard at one another, fire scratching through ice, and it's so stabbing that Youngjae's eyes begin to hurt. *Keep your cool.*

Daehyun slams Youngjae against the wall and his lips are thrashing against Youngjae's, tongue digging into Youngjae's mouth and hands gripping Youngjae hard to prevent him from escaping into anyone else's arms. Youngjae kisses back with equal fervor, blindly grabbing at Daehyun's hair and pushing their mouths closer and closer. They're both hurting, Daehyun's harsh grasp and Youngjae's merciless pull on hair, but the concoction lets loose all the pandemonium mauling their insides.

"I'm just your fucking toy, huh," Daehyun breathes sorely, pushing Youngjae onto the bed and thrusting his tongue back into Youngjae's bruised lips. Their teeth are biting and drawing blood, discreetly yearning for understanding of their wounds, and Youngjae bucks his hips up against Daehyun. Youngjae winds his arms around Daehyun's neck to choke him to death and they deepen their kiss, Daehyun clawing at Youngjae's shoulder.

"I was fucking nothing, wasn't I?" Daehyun spits once they part in a plea for their abandoned breathing to return, staring down at Youngjae with such hurt eyes Youngjae wants to say sorry for everything. Daehyun catches his breath and his eyes widen in utter shock.

"Youngjae?" The transition between hatred to consternation is laughable. Tear off all the skin to show that love is truly formidable and anything, from the most horrible of evils to the purest of goodness, can be born from it. Daehyun wipes at Youngjae's lips, glancing at the dark ink he'd gathered, and he gazes down in confusion at Youngjae's face. "Why..." His eyes run over Youngjae's face in perplexity and he hurriedly switches on the bedside lamp, jaw slackening at his find.

"Why are you wearing make-up?" Daehyun asks in a slight stutter, hesitantly reaching down to wipe the blush from Youngjae's face. Youngjae stares back wordlessly and lets his tears do the talking. It's the first time Youngjae has genuinely let himself crumble, not bothering to hold back his grievous weeping mimicking the howls at funerals. Daehyun grasps Youngjae's face and hastily dashes the tears, attempting too late to stop a broken faucet of fully brewed insanity.

"D-Don't..." Youngjae stammers, eyes growing with hysteria, "don't I look pretty?" Daehyun's breathing begins to speed up as his mouth parts further in anxiety. "Pretty?" He repeats in an overwrought pitch, tenderly but firmly wiping away the powder and staining his wrists.

"Youngjae," Daehyun wheezes, pulling Youngjae into his chest and hugging him tight. His grasp is delirious like picking up crumbling pieces of a building bound to be demolished. Try and put the debris back in place and be overwhelmed by the speed it's toppling at. "W-Why are you doing this? You're so beautiful the way you are, why are you-" Youngjae relaxes in the embrace he'd always loved since the day they shared their worries about their debut, so safe, so haven-like, so deluding, and sobs madly into Daehyun's shirt. Daehyun chokes out a blubbering speech of a mangled boy completely at a loss. "Please believe me, Youngjae. You're beautiful the way you are. Youngjae, you're beautiful, I-"
"God, I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry, Youngjae. Please... Please don't do this again." Youngjae clutches onto the fabric as Daehyun pulls him closer, begging in a tearful, absolutely grievous voice for Youngjae not to cry. Daehyun gives up his tears in hopes it's some kind of trade the world demands so Youngjae doesn't have to wail, but he doesn't realise they're giving their tears to one another. They can't be anymore sorry to each other than now.

It takes half an hour for Daehyun to wipe off all traces of artificiality from Youngjae's face and leave it blank and naked. He proceeds to kiss Youngjae as gently as possible, basking in tender warmth and unsaid love. Daehyun pulls away as Youngjae runs his hands down his contours, Daehyun's eyes uncertain and ingrained with nerve-wrecking worry to break the boy he'd already shattered further. Youngjae assures him through puffy, bloodshot eyes that this is the last Daehyun will break him for tonight and matches their lips once again. They keep mum as they explore one another, heartfelt intimacy brimming in their shivering lips.

Daehyun cautiously unbuttons Youngjae's shirt, suckling on his collarbone, while Youngjae slips a hand down Daehyun's boxers. Daehyun lets out a moan, gyrating against Youngjae's tender fingers, and traces down Youngjae's body to his behind. They spend a long, almost eternity-like time admiring each other's forms, mouths attached and hands begetting pleasure. Youngjae tugs down the rest of their garments and as they come to a stop, Daehyun unsure to go any further and eyes offering Youngjae anything he can possibly give, Youngjae reassuringly spreads his legs and allows Daehyun to take him once again.

Softly. Gently. Quietly. A clandestine affair of so much more that those not in their shoes would misunderstand. Daehyun's thrusts are slow and consuming, Youngjae's eyes coming to a close as he arches back against the sheets. He wraps his legs around Daehyun's waist and matches Daehyun's tempo, bliss caressing his veins. Daehyun massages Youngjae's member and presses their lips together like shy middle schoolers. Youngjae likes being held by Daehyun, no matter how many times he screams it in his head and thinks of it obsessively.

Their lips match like halves of a couplet, the world dissolving into nothing but indescribable melodies as Youngjae clutches onto Daehyun. They gaze at one another, so lost, so alienated by the world, yet Youngjae believes it'll be okay if they just have one another by their sides. Daehyun's eyelids fall and his pupils reflect so much affection it seems like a dream. Youngjae softly cries out as Daehyun moans shudderingly, breath against Youngjae's ear. All of Daehyun's touches are so tender and warm and Youngjae wants to understand how they can be so miserable together when Daehyun only brings him happiness.

Amid Daehyun's whispers of 'you're beautiful' and his grief-stricken confessions of having destroyed a king with his filthy, beggarly hands, Youngjae kisses Daehyun. Everytime Daehyun begs to be convicted and be subjected to capital punishment, Youngjae forgives him with interlocked fingers and gentle smiles. His hands wrap around Daehyun's jaw, finger tips brushing his neck, and they release between their exchange of breaths.

It feels like love. Even if it isn't, and no one in the world has a name for it, Youngjae still wishes for it to never end.

Youngjae falls asleep to Daehyun's soothing strokes and passionate words, whispering of love stories he read and hinting of something they'd both been fearing since the spark of their newfound connection. Daehyun calls him beautiful so many times Youngjae temporarily forgets how much he lacks in the space that should be rightfully occupied by a female. Youngjae softly says back that
Daehyun is so much more beautiful, and Daehyun grazes his smile over Youngjae's lips. 

Daehyun says he hasn't been looking at girls for a long, long time and implies a smouldering infatuation with a boy for more than a year—something Youngjae had failed to notice amidst his unceasing whines for a girlfriend. Youngjae realises Daehyun had been the sole thing occupying his thoughts for months, in spite of the fact Youngjae was deadset on showing Daehyun he could easily live without him. Daehyun throws away the make-up kit and makes sure to tie the garbage bag up. They spend the hours past midnight kissing, vigor sustaining infinitely as their souls unify.

That night, Youngjae dreams. He sees Himchan instead of Daehyun. They're in court and both of them are donning grey, dreary, lifeless suits. Everyone else around them are faceless but the drone in the air is consistent and repetitive.

Youngjae stares at Himchan from across the stand. Himchan is nibbling on his nails, a habit he'd stopped before debut and tried to get Youngjae to quit. Himchan holds his gaze with reassurance as Youngjae's attorney, though his slippery grip on his briefcase tell otherwise. The bible sits in Youngjae's hand. The registrar moves his mouth and Youngjae repeats after him. "I swear by Almighty God that the evidence I shall give shall be the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth," Youngjae monotonously churns out.

The world whirs and the audience, despite having no eyes, glare at him so menacingly Youngjae believes he is already convicted without testifying. An intimidating man rises, clearing his throat. "The prosecution may proceed."

"Thank you, your honour."

Youngjae shrinks back into his skin. Someone cries out from the gallery about abomination and Yongguk jumps to his feet, pulling the man in question by the collar. The judge calls for order in the court, gavel striking against the block like knuckles knocking for permission to enter.

"Mr. Yoo." Suddenly, a grey table materialises under Youngjae's hands and metal slices through his wrists. The handcuffs rattle loudly, the sound strangely similar to that of a doorknob being twisted. The prosecutor splits into an interrogator, police badge gleaming and looming over him malovently.

"Did you commit lewd acts with Mr. Jung Daehyun?"

Youngjae's blood goes cold and a circus-like theme song plays mockingly in the background as people start to point and whisper. One unabashedly guffaws, making insulting gestures. Youngjae parts his lips but all that comes out is an embarrassing honk. Himchan shoots up, throwing out an accusing finger.

"Your honour, I believe the pro-"

"Mr. Yoo," the man cuts in, voice raised. He sounds oddly like one of the reporters who'd tried to pry out who Youngjae's ex-girlfriend was. It changes midway into a female's voice of a recent interviewer. "Did you have sexual intercourse with Mr. Jung?"

"Your honour, the prosecution is badgering my client!" Himchan bangs his fists on the table but the judge remains quiet, discrimination clear in his eyes. Youngjae wipes at his forehead to find white remaining on the back of his palm, and crimson. Under his gaze as he crosses his eyes, he sees that his nose is covered by a vermillion ball.

"Answer the question," the man aggressively demands, cold and unforgiving. Youngjae shudders uncontrollably, searching around the courtroom frantically for Daehyun amid the jingle of chains.
Fear seeps through his nerves and perspirations drenches his neck. Youngjae can't find Daehyun.

"Your honour!" Himchan nearly shrieks, rage blasting through every syllable.

"The persecution of prostitution may proceed!"

Youngjae crumbles. "Yes," he confesses weakly, slumping as the handcuff grows tighter around his arms. A collective, diseased gasp spreads through the room. The prosecutor clicks his tongue in disgust, pacing back and forth with his piercing glare never leaving Youngjae's pathetic form. A boy asks innocently if there are anymore freakshows left to look at. The stand turns into a ring on fire and Youngjae's shoes squeak loudly when pressed, a clown on display.

A balance scale appears in the prosecutor's hand and a locked, old chest sits in the left pan. Every memory of Youngjae's, prior to his lovemaking with Daehyun, exists within the right pan. They swirl with an ambitious glow beside the box.

"Mr. Yoo, which did you choose?" The prosecutor dangles the scale demeaningly before Youngjae. The stand sprouts a roof and shrinks, crushing Youngjae down in a rusty cage with a outdated lock. It's natural to reach out and prod the chest like it's a key, the peal of presumed ingots resounding.

"Love," Youngjae recites the word with the tone of a three-year-old curiously practising her phonics. Instantaneously, the box unlatches and an explosion of ebony mist savagely beseiges Youngjae. The howls of ghouls swarm Youngjae grimly, choking every fibre of his being.

"Condemned! Love, an impossibility!" The prosecutor bellows, smashing the scale onto the ground as its contents shatter. "Adjourn the court! My client is not feeling well!" Himchan roars till the lamps above break and go out, leaving darkness to lend charitable shade to Youngjae.

The witnesses flash past the witness stand, fragments of their testimony beating down on Youngjae's back. "He was always looking at him with those irksome eyes!"

"Terrifying, how they would touch each other and not think twice about it."

"We all saw the way they treated one another. So loving, so appalling."

"How did your parents raise you?"

Everything blurs and the world moves so fast Youngjae can't differentiate anyone out of the muckiness. "The jury finds the defendant guilty!" The gavel pounds mercilessly. "You are hereby sentenced to death by suicide!"

The fog ruthlessly drags Youngjae away as Himchan frenziedly begs for mercy on Youngjae's behalf. "He's just sick!" Himchan shouts deliriously and lunges for Youngjae, desperate to save him. "He'll be better tomorrow, I swear! Back to normal! Postpone the hearing! Postpone the hearing!"

"May God have mercy on your soul."

"Psalm 27:12! Do not turn me over to the desire of my foes, for false witnesses rise up against me, spouting malicious accusations! They are lies! Please, your honour! I beg of you!"

Officials hold Himchan back as he struggles in distraught. "Youngjae!" He shrieks, "Youngjae! I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry, Youngjae!"

The dismal phantoms tighten like a noose around Youngjae's neck and Youngjae splutters to reply through his wails. "I'm sorry, Himchan-hyung," he wheezes, nearly tripping over his feet. "I'm sorry..."
you kept waiting for me to get better and I never did."

"Youngjae!" Himchan shrills, repetitive screams evanesce into a distant memory. Within the relentless spirits, a timid soul surfaces and caresses Youngjae's tear-stricken cheeks. The spirit's following whisper ignites a tearful, bitter joy in Youngjae's heart and it ghosts over Youngjae's lips, transforming into a familiar hand and echoes of laughter and an accent. It calms every hysterical vein in Youngjae's being and he shuts his eyes to meet the executioner.

("Youngjae, I love you.")

Apart no more, love

(hear mourning doves)

**HALE**: Woman, plead with him! *He starts to rush out the door, and then goes back to her. Woman!* It is pride, it is vanity. *She avoids his eyes, and moves to the window. He drops to his knees. Be his helper! What profit him to bleed? Shall the dust praise him? Shall the worms declare his truth? Go to him, take his shame away!*

**ELIZABETH**: *Supporting herself against collapse, grips the bars of the window, and with a cry.* He have his goodness now. God forbid I take it from him!

**THE CURTAIN FALLS**
Jack and Bill went up the hill
To fetch a pail of water
They held hands and up they ran
And came across an altar
"Where is Jill? Then, no refill!"
"These martyrs, with no answers!"
Jack then asks for breathing masks,
Forgiveness, in his prayer
Seeked to live, never to grieve
So they fled from the pastor
Jack fell down and broke his crown
And Bill came tumbling after

Chapter End Notes

End notes here: http://www.asianfanfics.com/story/view/630596/14/
stream of subconsciousness

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

ATTENTION, PASSENGERS

The train of thought is arriving. Please stand back from the edge of the platform until the train comes to a complete halt. Thank you.

Round her neck she wears a yellow ribbon,
She wears it in winter and the summer so they say,
If you ask her "Why the decoration?"
She'll say "It's for my lover who is far, far away."
"Hey."

Daehyun grunts in response, hand roughly rubbing his right eye. The boy beside him sighs, tugging his arm away. "Stop it. You're gonna go blind at this rate." Daehyun nods wordlessly, resuming his destructive ministrations as his irritated eyes begin to turn red.

"Daehyun," Youngjae chides, firmly latching his palm onto Daehyun's wrist and leading him through the throng. Daehyun lifts his other arm to scratch at his tear duct but Youngjae nimbly catches his limb, holding them together as the faceless crowd bustles past them. Daehyun blinks hard and fast, trying to quell the itch brewing between his eyelids.

"Come on. We're almost there," Youngjae placates, glancing back with a grimace. "Look at you. We really need to get you off contacts asap." Daehyun experimentally opens his eyes, groaning at the brimming sunlight and shutting them tight again. He stumbles a little over the other passers-by's feet in the darkness, allowing Youngjae to pull him to their destination. "Ugh, it burns, Youngjae. It burns," Daehyun whines loudly.

"Stop whining," Youngjae laughs, letting out a relieved sigh as his footsteps stop. "You have to wear your new glasses off stage, alright? I don't care if you look ugly or not." Daehyun accidentally bumps into Youngjae, lips meeting Youngjae's neck. Youngjae emits an irked exclamation, wiping at his back. He nudges open the door and guides Daehyun in, smacking him on the forehead to see Daehyun still with his eyes closed.

"Dumbass," Youngjae scoffs amusedly as Daehyun pries open one eye and whimpers exaggeratedly. The world is blurry and distorted without the help of his contact, but they have given him sore eyes from overuse. Daehyun and Youngjae settle down on the stools and the optician roams over, face smudged beyond recognition. Daehyun pays no heed, patting his squinted shut right eye and using his good eye to gaze at Youngjae.

"Hi, um, he needs spectacles," Youngjae provides, lips quirking politely at the ends. His lips are especially red today after their impromptu Kimchi eat off, spiciness dabbing a pretty shade onto his mouth. The optician nods, ushering Daehyun into a room to do the eye exam.

"You'll wait for me, right?" Daehyun calls cheekily as he follows after the woman in a pristine white coat, grinning brightly. Youngjae shakes his head in exasperation, though his small smile betrays his expression. "Where else would I go, idiot?"

The optician shuts the door as Daehyun seats himself on the raised chair, eyes twitching uncomfortably. "Sir, please rest your chin there," the optician instructs and Daehyun does as told, looking into the autorefractor. "You'll see a picture of a meadow and a boy standing in the middle. It'll turn blurry and clear several times. Please remain relaxed and continue looking at the boy."

Daehyun unwinds his shoulders, gazing at the picture presented. As mentioned, a boy stands in a field peppered with white. Hills rise and fall behind the figure gazing out at the horizon. Despite his back being turned, he looks oddly familiar. Daehyun hums a soft tune, enjoying the serene view with the boy.

"Okay," the optician chimes and Daehyun leans back, watching with intrigue as she brings the phoropter forward. Adjusting it to the prescription, she positions it by Daehyun's eyes. "Now, can you read out the letters to me on the eye chart over there, sir?"

"Hm..." Daehyun looks through the lenses with his left eye, musing, "W, H, A, T, D, O, Y, O, U..." He starts to squint and the optician switches lenses, the itch persisting. "Can you see clearer now?"
"Yeah," Daehyun decides, listing on. "S, E, E, W, I, T, H..." The optician flicks another lens and Daehyun continues, "Y, O, U, R, um, E, Y, S, C, L, O, S, E, uh... D?" The optician hums in satisfaction, switching to the next eye and then ultimately to both. Daehyun emerges from the room after a prolonged while, singing merrily upon seeing Youngjae still in his seat. Youngjae casts him a demeaning glance, massaging his nose bridge.

Daehyun pats his prickly eyes as the optician offers an arrays of frames for Daehyun to choose from. Youngjae scours over them, pointing to a circle-rimmed one. "Hey, that one's nice. Looks like the one I wore for our Stop It MV." Daehyun keeps his eyes shut, basking in Youngjae's voice. Even without looking, he can tell Youngjae's eyes are wide from his enthusiastic tone, dipped with a tinge of nostalgia.

"Those don't suit me," Daehyun points out, snapping open his eyes painfully and moaning in annoyance. "Can we get some eye drops?" Youngjae requests, gently hauling Daehyun's arms away. "Do you want your eyes to fall out? Stop rubbing them. Your hands are dirty," Daehyun makes a face, letting his eyes fall to a close. "Help me pick one that fits me." Daehyun gestures to the glass cabinet and gratefully accepts the eye drops. The artificial tears slip from his lashes and Daehyun snivels, gruffly wiping at his stained cheeks. Youngjae bends over, perusing the available frames. "I think... they'll all look ugly on you." Daehyun casts him an incredulous glare as Youngjae feigns innocence. "See, it's not the glasses." He leans closer, eyes enlarging in pretended seriousness. "It's your face." Daehyun slaps his hand onto Youngjae's face and the boy yelps, reaching out to grasp Daehyun by the collar. They wrestle a little before Youngjae shoves Daehyun away, apologising to the observing optician. He adjusts his shirt, cheeks slightly red from their play fighting, and Daehyun reaches out to pat Youngjae's ruffled hair down.

"When's the earliest we can collect it?" Even though they're here primarily because of Daehyun, Youngjae's slightly bossy nature has him taking charge, asking all the questions and dictating what to do. It sometimes irritates Daehyun whenever Youngjae just waves away his opinion in favour of his own, but at times like this, it's quite endearing. Half of his behaviour may be due to his own innate need to lead, but Daehyun's sure it also derives from his desire to take care of others.

"In an hour, if you don't want any add-ons." Daehyun whistles in marvel, glancing down at the frames and picking up one of them. He tries on one, then another, then another, to which Youngjae all casts him a look of distaste. Ultimately, Daehyun slaps Youngjae's knee and decides on a black-framed spectacles similar to the one he had in high school. They decide to wait around and Daehyun instinctively winds an arm around Youngjae's hips, hauling him out of the shop after paying.

"What are we going to do now?" Daehyun grumbles, hand drumming a tune on Youngjae's tummy. His recent binge has brought back a bit of flesh over his stomach but Daehyun likes the feel of it, more so than the ribs accentuated by Youngjae's diet during their Power era. He cackles inwardly at the memory of Youngjae's terrifying hairstyle; Youngjae had threatened to headbutt him everytime he fiddled with the spiky ends.

"Get coffee?" Youngjae asks. Daehyun snivels his nose. "You're talking like Himchan-hyung. Let's watch a movie. There's the new Alice in Wonderland horror remake." Youngjae cocks his head one side, pondering on the offer. His lips are really, really red. They look like sugared apple slices. It's nice. "I read the summary," Youngjae informs, "It's kind of boring. Alice-"

Daehyun hastily places his hand over Youngjae's mouth, shaking his head adamantly. "No spoilers. You're gonna ruin it for me," Daehyun grunts, palm lingering over wetness for a prolonged moment. Youngjae rolls his eyes, pushing him away and yelping when Daehyun wipes his hand on
Youngjae's cheek. His jawline is really, really defined. There's a delicate quality to it that makes it seem doll-like. It's nice.

"More like I'm saving you from a bad movie," Youngjae puffs, strolling along with Daehyun to the mall entrance. "You cheated," Daehyun drawls, clicking his tongue, "where's the fun in knowing how it ends?"

"It's called not wasting your money, dummy," Youngjae returns, following Daehyun anyway to the movie theatre. "Besides, today's Sunday. It'll be more expensive," he adds to drive his point home. Daehyun turns a deaf ear, striding up to the poster and gesturing at it enthusiastically. He slips out his phone and searches for the movie, casting Youngjae a scrutinising glance. "What the hell. It's rated above average. This critic even says the fear factor is through the roof. Here, the suspense is remarkably drawn out, gradually dawning and ultimately erupting in full-blown paranoia and insanity."

Youngjae stares blankly and heaves a huge breath. "Alice and the White Rabbit dies!"

"Oh come on!" Daehyun yells, grabbing Youngjae and shaking him. "You're an asshole. Biggest goddamn asshole of the century." Youngjae muffs back a rich laugh, eyes crinkling prettily at the sides. "Let's watch something else," Youngjae suggests, roaming up to the screen times above the counter. Daehyun frowns before realisation hits him and he shuffles to Youngjae's side.

"You're scared," Daehyun whispers smugly into Youngjae's ear, smirk painting his cheeks. His scent is familiar, like sheets to be woken up in, and Daehyun relishes in it. Youngjae blinks hard and glares, spinning around and imitating a look of indifference. "I'm not. I'm just smart enough to value the precious little bit of money I have, while you obviously aren't."

"Prove it," Daehyun taunts, stretching his arms behind his head and arching a provoking brow. "Well, since you're scared, we can watch something else." Youngjae narrows his eyes and nonchalantly returns, "I'll watch it." He confidently walks up to the counter as Daehyun cheekily scampers behind, helping to pick their seats. They purchase some popcorn and drinks, Daehyun juggling two packets in his arms.

"Don't worry; I'll protect you," Daehyun snickers. Youngjae attempts to stomp on Daehyun's foot as the other cackles unremorsefully. Daehyun drapes an arm over Youngjae's shoulders and pulls him into the cinema. The number of moviegoers is small, a few scattered about at the back. "Youngjae," Daehyun whines, groping around in the darkness. Youngjae's profile is dimly lit but still traceable, outline sharp against the screen blaring trailers. Light scratches into Daehyun's vision and onto his face as he pulls a searching Youngjae to face him. "I'm scared," Daehyun sings teasingly, grasping onto cotton and skin.

"Shut up," Youngjae snaps back and Daehyun stifles a guffaw, crawling to his seat with Youngjae. "God, it's cold in here," Youngjae mutters as they settle down. Daehyun shrugs off one arm of his windbreaker, tossing it over Youngjae. The boy naturally slips his arm into it and they squirm up to one another when Daehyun chides him not to stretch it.

"Hey. No spoilers during the movie, okay?" Daehyun reminds, basking in Youngjae's warmth. It feels oddly like home, or perhaps Youngjae has been by his side so long his essence has become an ingrained part of Daehyun.

"The Mad Hatter, the Cheshire Cat, Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum supposedly died too," Youngjae deadpans. Daehyun throws his head back and groans loudly, knocking himself into Youngjae on purpose.
"I kinda liked the Cheshire Cat. He helped Alice a lot," Youngjae remarks, shifting so that Daehyun's head falls onto his shoulder. "It's sad he died because of Alice and the White Rabbit."

"Stop talking like you watched the movie, stupid," Daehyun laughs, pinching Youngjae's thigh and decidedly resting his hand there. It feels nice. Very nice, to be out of the spotlight and instead watching someone else on the big screen with Youngjae by his side. Friendship feels especially nice when it comes to Youngjae, his closest friend. "Hey, didn't Jongup and Junhong say they wanted to watch this?"

"Yeah. We should have brought them along," Youngjae returns, leaning against Daehyun. "Those two should be Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum. One of the same kind. You know, they're really cute in the movie." Daehyun swats at Youngjae and puts a finger to his lips. "I came here to watch the movie, not listen to you narrate the whole thing," Daehyun scoffs. "The people behind us are gonna complain. What if we get on the news because of you?" Daehyun waves a little. "B.A.P members Daehyun and Youngjae disrupt movie screening. That'll be the end of our career."

"You tell me to keep quiet and here you are talking non-stop," Youngjae puffs, simmering down once the screen darkens. The gore is chilling and brutal, dismembered corpses and crimson flowing endlessly across the four corners. The merciless Queen of Hearts demands for the beheading of the foreigner Alice and the instigator for Alice's arrival, leading to a wild chase across Wonderland while their allies desperately try to help them escape. Youngjae visibly cringes everytime an irksome sound effect resounds, clenching his fists and squinting shut his eyes. It is absolutely horrific and Daehyun's clasp on Youngjae's leg tightens every once in a while out of sympathy and disgust.

"You are mad! Therefore, you must go," the Queen of Heart declares as troops surround the blonde girl, a bloodbath beneath her scarred legs and disfigured face. Between sobs, Alice cries, "I am not mad! You are mad, but you can't see that, so you think I am mad."

When the movie fades out and the lights flicker back on, Youngjae lets out a soft breath. They remain curled up against one another, watching the rolling credits and quelling the terror sitting in their nerves. "Even after you warned me, I was still hoping for a happy ending," Daehyun grumbles. "It's so sad they thought they could escape but the rabbit hole had been sealed up all the time."

"I'm sad for their friends," Youngjae sighs, still affected by the gruesome scenes. Daehyun apologetically puts a hand over Youngjae's arm, squeezing lightly. The shadow of vermillion haunts his vision and he shakes his head hard. "They died because of them two. If they'd just left them, they wouldn't have died in the explosion," Youngjae concludes.

"Yeah," Daehyun huffs, rising and tugging Youngjae off his seat. "Hey, my specs should be done by now, right?" Youngjae nods and they leave the theatre, shoving the appalling shots out of their mind. Daehyun's thankful that there's the separation between what happens on screen and in reality.

They arrive back at the shop, the optician with the glasses ready on the counter. Daehyun excitedly sits, inspecting them in awe. "Try them on," Youngjae advises. Daehyun slips the spectacles onto his face, letting it sit snugly on his nose bridge. He halts in his ministrations and blinks hard, furrowing his eyebrows. Everything in sight becomes clear but is now drenched in carmine, his arms and blue jeans an eccentric tint of red.

"Huh..." Daehyun breathes in disbelief, lifting his head and gazing at the figure in front of him. His eyes fly wide open and he nearly staggers back in pure shock. The bizzare person in front of Daehyun is clearly Youngjae, but it can't be Youngjae. Youngjae does not have long, flowing hair, a bust and petite shoulders. This is not the boy who leaned against him throughout the movie just now, inaudible breaths and rise and fall of shoulders more discernible to Daehyun than it should be. This is a woman, an imposter before him wearing Youngjae's face.
"What the hell?" Daehyun shrugs off the glasses to see Youngjae's expectant look melt into concern. Instantly, with the lens removed, Youngjae reverts back to his normal, boyish form. "What's wrong?" The glasses in Daehyun's pams now visibly have red lenses and Daehyun holds it up. "Look at it."

Youngjae peers at it in attentiveness. "What's wrong with it?" Youngjae questions, searching for a fault or a crack. Baffled, Daehyun glances to the optician and puts the spectacles back on. The red tint follows incessantly, dyeing every object in view, but the optician remains unchanged. Daehyun veers his head back to Youngjae and sucks in a sharp breath to see the same female form from just now. Except the person before him is imitating Youngjae's facial expression, and when she parts her lips to speak, out flows Youngjae's smooth voice.

"Does it give you a headache?" She inclines forward and Daehyun instantaneously retreats out of hold, confusedly trying to decipher the strange distortion. "Daehyun, tell me," the woman presses in perplexity, pursing the same lips Daehyun had been staring at an hour ago. Her hair falls all the way to her shoulders and a hint of her cleavage is showing. Daehyun swallows thickly, gingerly extending a hand. He gently grazes the woman's cheek and hesitantly asks, "Y-Youngjae?"

"Um, yes?" The woman sends him a look of askance and Daehyun hastily removes the spectacles, shedding Youngjae of his queer camouflage. "Why is everything red?" He questions the optician, who stares at him as though he has grown another head. "Sorry, sir, what do you mean?" Daehyun waves the glasses in front of her, completely befuddled. "The lenses are red. And Youngjae looks like-"

"Daehyun, what are you talking about?" Youngjae interjects, jaw slackened in puzzlement. "They're totally transparent. Are you okay?" Daehyun parts his lips to speak but only manages out a choked breath, scrutinising his spectacles. He can ascertain they are blood red, fire red, apple red, yet the two in front of him questioningly glimpse at him. Daehyun passes the glasses to the optician, confounded. "Can you try this on?"

"Sir, it would be better if you told me straight what the problem is," the optician instructs, gaze turning wary. "I do not have the same degree as you. Would you prefer to do another test?"

Flabbergasted and bewildered, Daehyun examines the spectacles once again, the rose-painted lenses clear for him to see. He holds it up to Youngjae and probes, "Can you really not see the red?"

"No," Youngjae firmly replies, putting a hand to Daehyun's forehead. "Are you alright, Daehyun? You're starting to worry me." His silky palm remains on Daehyun's skin and Daehyun stares back, dazed. "I- Nevermind." Daehyun removes Youngjae's hand, the contact igniting a tingle down his veins, and stands. He places the glasses back in the case and holds his head, bowing and nimbly exiting the store. It's tough to see the figures of the red man and green man on the traffic light across the street.

"Daehyun!" The bell hung by the optician's door chimes and Youngjae waves a hand, consternation written all over his face. "What's wrong?" The memory of Youngjae's female counterpart is fresh in Daehyun's mind, weaving translucent extensions down Youngjae's short hair. Daehyun frantically shakes his head and shrugs wryly, pocketing his glasses. Maroon lingers at the seams of his sight and as they walk down the pavement, through Daehyun's peripheral vision, Youngjae is much smaller and effeminate.

"Okay..." Youngjae dismisses, evidently weirded out by Daehyun's random episode. "I think you're just not used to it. You'll be fine after a while." Has Youngjae always had such a tender, affectionate voice, along with breathtaking lips? Their shoulders brush and their proximity is enthralling, lingering like desperate thoughts on regretful late nights. Daehyun decides that Youngjae looked
good as a girl, but retracts the conclusion as a sense of unguardedness composes itself.

"Let's go home." Youngjae interlocks their fingers messily and leads Daehyun through the herd of featureless humans. Youngjae's anatomy is reminiscent of Daehyun's best friend but his warmth is something savoury that cannot be identified. It's unnerving. "Daehyun?"

"Yeah?" Daehyun backs out of Youngjae's grasp and the other blinks sharply, parting his lips quietly. "Are you okay? Be honest. Did the glasses make you feel giddy?" The world deliquesces behind Youngjae and suddenly, everyone begins to turn to them. Red colours Youngjae's cheeks unnaturally and his eyelashes begin to curl upwards. Daehyun holds his head as he avoids the hazy faces veered towards them, staring and gossiping.

"Um, yeah, actually," Daehyun murmurs because he doesn't know why everyone is watching them and melting at the same time. Youngjae's presence demands to be seen and felt and Daehyun retreats, setting himself by a curb. "Daehyun?" Youngjae calls again, and the name drums in Daehyun's head incessantly. Daehyun shuts his eyes and shakes away the looming thoughts when the noise vanishes like the severing of one's ear drums, except the despondent silence is intruded by a new voice.

"Mr. Jung."

Daehyun bursts open his eyes to find himself in a new room, painted an eerie shade of pure white with no merciful allowance for mistakes. Daehyun gasps, placing his hands and meeting soft fabric. He is sitting on the edge of a chesterfield chaise lounge, exquisitely imbued with blood red. "Please take a seat," the deep voice resounds from his side and he spins his head to find a man sitting in a white arm chair. His spectacles slip down his nosebridge, face obscured by his bangs and the shadow of the sun. A white coat is draped over his shoulders, reminding him of the optician from before.

"Where am I?" Daehyun asks, falling back into the chair. The psychologist, begins to scribble on his clipboard. "Therapy, Mr. Jung. As ordered by the court." Daehyun snaps his neck to face the psychologist, sparing him a questioning glance. He catches sight of orange-red sleeves and gulps, bending his head to see he's donning a set of prison uniform. His name is printed in block capitals, upside down from his view.


"Now, Mr. Jung." The psychologist releases a long exhale, lifting up a set of papers. The sheets are all blotted with black ink. "What do you see in this card? Please tell me the first thing you think of." Daehyun squints, making out in the jet black mess. It looks like a set of wings and gifts Daehyun with a sense of exhilaration, freedom and an idealistic belief he can accomplish anything.

"Youngjae." Daehyun widens his eyes, taken aback by his very own answer. He hastily puts his hand to his lips and the psychologist scribbles furiously, not questioning Youngjae's identity. "Sorry, I meant wings." The psychologist flutters his eyelids slowly, nonchalance written into his skin.

"Mr. Jung, there is no correct answer. This is about you, so please feel free to say whatever comes to your mind. Okay," he states, "how about this one?" The psychologist raises a different piece. Daehyun scrutinises it carefully, internally reminding himself to answer properly. Daehyun interprets this new ink blob as two people holding hands, demonstrating a beautiful unity tied together with love.

"Youngjae," Daehyun says instantly. He chokes upon realisation as the sound of lead scratching
paper resumes, Daehyun shrinking back into the couch. The psychologist fingers out another sheet. "This is the last one. What do you see, Mr. Jung?" Daehyun arches his brows, staring at the paper completely stained with black. The raven colour is overwhelming, consuming and staggering, threatening to suck Daehyun into its seemingly endless abyss.

"Youngjae." Daehyun frowns at his own answer, patting his lips gruffly in punishment. The psychologist nods contentedly, placing away the flimsy papers and finishing up his writing. Daehyun leans over, catching just a bit of the writing before the psychologist covers it up. *Repeatedly speaks of victim.*

"I'm going to ask you some questions now, Mr. Jung. Take it easy and relax; take as much time as you want to answer them." Daehyun nods stiffly as he shifts, resting his head further down and glimpsing up at the ceiling. The lamp glares down at him, stabbing at his vision.

"Are you a celebrity, Mr. Jung?" Daehyun hums in response, the lamp's glow inciting the recollections of the alluring sea of light sticks, passionate fans and Youngjae's hand intertwined with his. "How do you feel about it?"

"It's great," Daehyun decides, lips curling as he remembers Youngjae breaking out into tears backstage after their first stage. He had been tight-lipped and stoic while Daehyun had laughed crudely at him, wet warmth rolling down his own cheeks in happiness. He loves standing in front of a crowd and singing his heart out for the fans who have shaped him into who he is today. They are an indispensable part of him, and so is B.A.P who consistently stand by his side as they take their last bow for the day. Bang Yongguk, Kim Himchan, Jung Daehyun, Yoo Youngjae, Moon Jongup, Choi Junhong. "I love the fans. They're my everything. So are my bandmates."

"I see," the psychologist returns. "Youngjae," the psychologist meets Daehyun's eyes, "he is in this band of yours?" Daehyun nods enthusiastically, letting out a long ramble. "We're really close. He's the lead singer and I'm the main singer. We don't really know what's the difference but anyway, we're both in charge of singing."

"Ah," the psychologist replies, "then, have you come across hardships in your life as an idol?" Daehyun purses his lips, a flood of sour, tear-filled memories flushing through his mind. There had been a time before debut he constantly cried himself to sleep. On his debut stage, his voice had cracked in anxiety during his high note when that was precisely his forte. He had gotten into fights with the other members several times and gotten so angry he broke furniture. "Yeah, I have," Daehyun mumbles, pressing his lips together in bitter nostalgia. "A lot."

"I suppose one of them would be the pressures of being a high profile figure, no?" The psychologist urges, leaning out of his seat with strangely determined eyes. Daehyun instinctively squirms away, movements subtle. "Yeah. But it's alright. Our fans are nice and we haven't really met into any sasaengs. They're very caring."

"That's one source of pressure eliminated, but how about the media?" The psychologist presses, setting aside his clipboard. Daehyun ponders on the question, grimacing and shielding his eyes from the fluorescent lamp directly above him.

"Personally," the psychologist continues, rotating his head to his shoulder, "I think celebrities are flies." Daehyun recoils in bewilderment, insulted by the remark. "They always create buzz," the psychologist blathers, "and they always garner attention. There are tons who want to bring them down: anti-fans, jealous idols, competing companies, money-driven paparazzi. They're the humans trying to swat flies with newspapers."

"You've learnt to evade these threats, right?" The psychologist smiles, biting on his nails like how
Youngjae always does. Delicately, with his pinky stuck out, just the offending fingernail in his mouth. Daehyun doesn't like it when Himchan tries to stop Youngjae by grabbing Youngjae's wrist, staring intently at Youngjae's lips. It just ticks him off, probably because it's weird and Youngjae is definitely able to handle his own bad habits.

"But there's always that light you want to touch," the psychologist rattles on as Daehyun listens questioningly. "Your temptations that bring you warmth, or passion, or enthrallment, or something else. If you aren't careful," the psychologist snaps his fingers, "you'll run into a trap and be electrocuted." He draws a squiggly line down in the air, tracing the path of a fallen bug. "Meet your downfall with all these fly catchers seducing you. Or perhaps you will crave the brightness of the sun and sizzle, burn out into nothing but ashes once you touch it."

"Tell me, Mr. Jung. What do you think of when I say the word light?" Daehyun mulls over the question attentively, glancing up at the blazing bulb. He shuts his eyes, traces of red seeping through his eyelids and permeating through the fabricated darkness. His entire built sinks in lethargy and his cruddy fingernails scratch linen and not leather. Daehyun groggily wrests open his eyes and the view of a familiar ceiling greets him. He sluggishly props himself up, the blanket slipping to his waist as he holds his head.

"It's the first time I'm up earlier than you."

Daehyun swivels his head to face his roommate, landing his eyes on a mesmerising pair of lips. Daehyun looks up to see Youngjae grinning cheekily down, donning a button-down shirt and black jeans. He blinks away the remains of a disjointed dream and grabs his alarm clock, squinting excruciatingly.

"What the hell..." Daehyun curses, reaching over to smack Youngjae weakly on the forehead before sliding back under his covers. Youngjae gripes in irritation and Daehyun feels the bed weigh down, choking out a breath when Youngjae sits on his stomach. The sheets are heaved off Daehyun's face and the boy emits an anguished cry, placing his arm over his forehead. "Youngjae, goddamn it," Daehyun moans, slightly uncomfortable at Youngjae's behind squirming against his abdomen. "It's one in the morning. Go back to sleep."

"No." Is Youngjae mad? This is one of the rare few times they actually get to sleep at midnight and not some ungodly hour. Daehyun splutters out a banshee-like wail as Youngjae pulls away Daehyun's arm, allowing the light to trail bothersomely onto his face. "What do you want, Youngjae?" Daehyun groused, relenting and taking a good look at Youngjae. Daehyun's wrist is in Youngjae's small palm and luminescence brims from behind Youngjae.


Youngjae reaches into his back pocket, squirming as he continues to straddle Daehyun. He whips out a small ticket, leading Daehyun to squint at the familiar sight. It is the special kind of ticket for KTX trains, namely from Seoul to Busan.

"When did you buy that?" Daehyun wheezes, head giddy from lack of sleep or perhaps Youngjae's position over him. "Remember that really long toilet break I took? When we were leaving practice yesterday? I ran to the station and bought it."

"You got scolded for that," Daehyun recounts quietly, to which Youngjae shrugs. He looks very breathtaking suddenly, the way his jawline merges from both ends and his eyes seem to hold all the sunlight the world can ever hope to have. Daehyun's heart scrunches up as he slowly takes the two-
way ticket, inspecting something so simple with a sense of wonderment.

"Anyway, since tomorrow, we don't have a schedule, only practice," Youngjae begins rambling, frowning. Daehyun recognises the gesture; it's a habit Youngjae does when he is thinking hard or planning something. Daehyun's hands rest on Youngjae's thighs, his body over Daehyun's a form of shelter from any sort of attack. Daehyun bites his lower lip, tears pricking at his eyes as he obediently listens to Youngjae's words. He hasn't seen his parents in a long, long while. He kept quiet about it but there were a few nights where Youngjae got up to sit with him, in spite of how silent Daehyun's crying had been.

"I'll say we snuck out for some snacks at Dongdaemun market at around six. We reached there at seven and wandered around till eight, planning to reach back by nine when our manager comes. We got separated just as we were about to go home and spent three hours looking for one another. You forgot to bring your phone and your wallet, so you can't get a train ticket home and I have to look for you. My phone ran out of battery, so you were worried and we kept searching for each other," Youngjae continues on. "It'll take you three hours to get to your home. By then, it'll be five. We have to make this look like an accident and we were totally going to come back on time, so you'll need to be back by one."

The way Youngjae talks is mystifying. He speeks like the seasons can be put into words and makes Daehyun want to sing his heart out like the nightingale who gave up her life for a red rose. "Five hours with your family isn't so bad, right?" Youngjae mumbles, biting on his fingernails. Daehyun gently guides his hand away as Youngjae grunts in annoyance, but ultimately lets Daehyun safeguard his abused hand.

"My parents will be asleep," Daehyun says, because if he tells Youngjae how thankful he is to have him, he'll cry and wake the peaceful night. Youngjae rolls his eyes, arching an eyebrow. "I'm sure your parents will wake up a couple of hours earlier to see their long lost son," he deadpans. Their voices are hushed, afraid of awaking the other members. If they do, they'll be burdened by having to lie along with them.

"It's not like you to be so... spontaeneous," Daehyun remarks. Youngjae has his impulsive moments, but he is never as careless as Daehyun is. He plans everything out by logic, deciding on which is the most optimal decision and shaving off ends he regrets afterwards when his emotions come into play.

Youngjae pulls his lips to the side, nonchalant in his reply, "I don't like seeing you sad." It sets off a scorching burn through Daehyun's body, sending his mind into pure overdrive. "Oh," Daehyun breathes, his eyes fixated on the boy above him. "But... shouldn't I go alone? Why drag you along?"

"I don't want you to get punished alone." Youngjae shrugs. "And I'm bored. I need to unleash my inner rebel." Daehyun laughs, never letting his eyes veer from Youngjae. The boy above knits his brows and makes a face. "Stop staring at me like that."

Daehyun manages out a watery smile and continues to gaze up at a disgruntled Youngjae. "What the hell does that even mean?" Daehyun scoffs, pulling Youngjae down so he can see in his eyes how exactly he's staring at him. Their noses nearly bump and Youngjae hisses, smacking Daehyun on the head. They struggle against each other, the determined glint in Youngjae's eyes contrasting Daehyun's light glow. Daehyun ends up on top of Youngjae, laughing as quietly as they can, completely defeated. Daehyun likes how their legs are tangled and Youngjae is warm like a fireplace in winter.

"Thank you," Daehyun whispers into Youngjae's ear, letting a tear crack from his swollen eyes. Youngjae sighs, churning out an irked groan. "Don't be a crybaby," Youngjae mutters, though he winds his arms around Daehyun as they remain chest to chest for a prolonged while. The night keeps
quiet to complement the two boys laid intimately on the same bed, allowing the cicadas to serve as distractions on the off chance someone extends their neck all the way to the soulmates' window.

Daehyun buries his nose within the space between Youngjae's jawline and his shoulder. He inhales and Youngjae visibly stills. "We should get going," Youngjae remarks, nudging Daehyun off him with a slightly questioning and weirded out look in his eyes. Daehyun apologetically moves away, scratching the back of his head.

"Text your parents that you'll be reaching around five. You have your house keys, right?" Youngjae instructs clearly. Daehyun nods and does as told. He prominently leaves his phone on his desk, Youngjae nodding in contentment. Daehyun throws on a shirt and a pair of jeans, wasting a moment to style his hair before they tiptoe to the door.

Every creak and thump sends their heart racing, wary glances thrown at one another as they cross the suddenly lengthy distance from their room to the front door. Youngjae nearly smacks a mug off the table by accident, his arm grazing past it, but Daehyun hurriedly manages to catch it. Youngjae fumbles with the keys as the adrenaline beats down their nerves, the soft sleep talking from Himchan and Jongup's room a false bark making no bite.

The lock clicks noisily. Youngjae squints his eyes shut, grimacing at the breakage in silence, and Daehyun gingerly pulls open the door. They wait in tense quietness, waiting to ensure they haven't woken anyone up, and slip out. Once they step into the eerie corridor, the dim lighting cast onto their slouched forms, Daehyun lets out a long breath. Youngjae glares at him, carefully locking the door, and tugs Daehyun to the stairwell.

"God, for a second there-"

Youngjae agitatedly shushes Daehyun, eyes widened as Daehyun's voice echoes down the hallway. Youngjae's hand slips from Daehyun's wrist to Daehyun's palm, grabbing tightly as they nimbly cover every flight. One step, two step, three step. Daehyun is careful not to trip and send them both stumbling, igniting a ruckus to scare the sun into awakening. One step forward towards Daehyun's freedom and the faces of his family, two steps back into hell once they return. Youngjae has nothing to gain out of this.

They stop at the door to the basement lobby. Daehyun stops Youngjae's outstretched arm. "You should go back. I can go alone," Daehyun breathes, pulling Youngjae into an embrace. He hugs tight, so tightly Youngjae choking a little and squeaks to be let go. His scent is enthralling and even though they're starkly different, it still reminds him of the beaches back in Busan and his dusty room at home.

Youngjae makes a face, moving back at their close proximity. "I want to go," Youngjae retorts, reaching for the door handle. Daehyun stops him again. "I don't want you to get into trouble. What are you going to do outside? You'll have to wait hours outside since we're supposed to be out at Dongdaemun together." He guides Youngjae's hand away, urging him back up the staircase. "Go back. I'll say I went out to eat and got lost."

"That story's so unbelievable. You got lost without your phone and wallet?" Youngjae snorts. "You need me, in the story. I have to be there so it's believable that you not just stupidly have no means of communication, but also," Youngjae dangles out his wallet, "survival. Which idiot would go out like that unless he had someone to depend on?"

"But-"

"It won't work without me, Daehyun," Youngjae emphasises. "We looked for each other; that's we
took up so much time outside. If you were out on your own without your phone or wallet, you couldn't have gotten far in the first place. Even if you said you had money but ran out of cash at Dongdaemun, no one would believe you couldn't borrow some money to call our manager to come get you. It was because I was missing and my phone was dead so you couldn't leave, out of worry that I was searching for you and didn't go home straight."

The manner in which Youngjae talks is truly quite beautiful, Daehyun thinks. He says his plan as systematically as possible, explaining bits and parts with concentration. It's an undeniable aspect of Youngjae to speak so fluently, pondering hard and letting the creases beneath his eyes emerge from his deep thinking.

"I'll be at Dongdaemun to call our manager using a public phone and tell him what happened. He'll probably ask me to go back and wait for you to come back, so the latest I'll be out will be till ten. All you have to do when you come back is say that you were looking for me. If our manager asks why you didn't borrow money to phone home, just tell him that you knew if you did, hyung would tell you to go home and wouldn't let you search for me."

"That is what you'll do, anyway, if we were in that situation," Youngjae mumbles. "You wouldn't go home, like an idiot."

Daehyun clicks his tongue, lightly shoving Youngjae back. "Why would he believe we were in Dongdaemun, anyway?" Daehyun questions, adoring Youngjae's button nose and suppressing the eccentric urge to kiss it.

"See, you really are stupid," Youngjae deadpans. "I'll go buy something with Dongdaemun on the packaging. Besides, there'll be the phone code when I call our manager." Youngjae has always been intelligent, quick-witted and innovative. It sends a thrill up Daehyun's nerves and he wants to tell Youngjae how attractive he is; how can Youngjae worry he won't find a wife in the future?

"Seriously, Daehyun. I said I want to go," Youngjae repeats determinedly, swatting away Daehyun's hand. His expression softens and deliquesces every tangible thing in the universe into mere colours and bristling sensations. "You know what will happen if they find out you went to see your family. Remember what happened to Yongguk-hyung?" Youngjae's voice drops to a forlorn whisper. "I don't want you to be banned from visiting your parents."

"Come on. Don't waste any more time," Youngjae says. The stars shatter to sting Daehyun's eyes, prickling hard so he'll lose his sight—as a preventive measure from his growing inclination towards Youngjae. Youngjae moves to open the door. Daehyun swallows, his throat dry and painful, and parts his lips. "I-"

Youngjae stops in response, peering up at Daehyun. Daehyun fumbles over his words, his heart crushing up his throat and bleeding incoherency. Why is it so hard to say something like this? He tells Junhong he loves him all the time and pinches his cheeks, much to the youngest's irk. Why are the words so heavy like they're bound to drag him down through the ocean? Because they have so much more weight this time round? "I... I lov-"

"Ew," Youngjae cuts him off, making the most aghast face possible. "Please don't. That is very gross." Youngjae chuckles, pulling a teary-eyed Daehyun out the building as sneakily as possible.

Youngjae flags for a cab to Seoul station, and as they get in, Daehyun envisions a different scenario. The lights of midnight Seoul splash lavishly against the windscreen and paints a complementary background to Youngjae. The city limits draw an outline around Youngjae's profile and Daehyun thinks of himself as a traveller exploring the outskirts of a country so beautiful. The
radio murmurs a talk show, toned down, and Daehyun wonders if the boy beside him who he spent years with could be a stranger. Perhaps it was late and Daehyun offered to take a cab together with this man after a long day of work, and Daehyun wonders what exactly could sprout from a meeting like this.

Isn't this how romance novels begin?

"Stop staring at me," Youngjae groans, slapping a hand to Daehyun's face. His eyes shimmer with the millions of colours trickling past and Daehyun catches his own spellbound reflection in the window.

"I know you're grateful and all, but cut it out. It's creeping me out." Youngjae looks like he ate something sour, lips crumpled and eyes blinking sharply. Daehyun uses it as an excuse to placate his own misgivings. "I am grateful," he says, shifting closer.

"Who wouldn't be? I'm amazing," Youngjae cheers, patting himself on the chest. Daehyun wants to replace their hands for that split second. "Where are you going to go?" Daehyun asks quietly.

"Sightseeing." Youngjae leans out and glances through the window, sighing dreamily. "I've always wanted to see Seoul at its darkest hours. It's pretty, isn't it?" Youngjae prods his short finger at the stoplights they whoosh past, asphalt blurring along with neon. Daehyun looks hard at Youngjae. "Yeah. It is."

"You shouldn't be wandering out at night like that," Daehyun chides, guilt clawing through his body. Youngjae could be sleeping right now. He could be resting after their exhausting concert yesterday, having rushed from one side of the world to the other, but he's here with his dark eye circles and sore eyes trying to craft happiness for Daehyun.


"There's no way I'm going to intrude on your parent-child bonding time. I already wasted so much money on that one ticket, anyway," Youngjae mutters, crossing his arms. Daehyun remorsefully squeezes Youngjae's leg, pulling Youngjae's head to lay on his shoulder. The boy complains a little but Daehyun adamantly presses Youngjae down. His hair smells awfully nice. "I'll pay you back once I get home. I'll treat you to dinner. A whole month's worth of dinners."

"You better, Jung Daehyun," Youngjae laughs, allowing himself to relax in Daehyun's grasp. The taxi driver glances back in the rearview mirror, gaze going as fast as Daehyun catches it. Daehyun and Youngjae remain against each other, Daehyun stroking Youngjae's leg. He unconsciously runs his hand too high up till his wrist grazes Youngjae's hip bone. Thankfully, Youngjae has fallen asleep, head lolling off Daehyun's shoulder every once in a while and Daehyun prodding him tenderly back into place.

Even though they're in a taxi going miles away from the dorms, and a hundred times that towards Busan, it feels like home. Against the ebony cushions, Daehyun feels escape for the first time in its proper form and Youngjae is here to cement it into liberation.

They arrive in fifteen minutes and Daehyun wonders if it'll be better to just sit here in the car with Youngjae asleep on his shoulder. However, Youngjae blearily opens his eyes and hauls himself off, blindly grabbing the door handle and getting out. The car whooshes away the moment Daehyun steps onto ebony, taillights scampering away.
The station is devoid of any living souls, aside from the blurry train staff. "Last train from Seoul to Busan arriving!" A warden yells from the platform as Daehyun and Youngjae pad up the stairs. Their hands are interlocked; Daehyun initiated it while Youngjae is squirming. Daehyun ignores it as Youngjae isn't really fond of skinship, while skin contact to Daehyun has always been common since he was young, an integral sign of a tight-knitted friendship. It means nothing else.

"I guess this is goodbye." They walk towards the platform edge. Youngjae quizzically peers at Daehyun, chuckling. "You're saying it like we're never going to see each other again."

Daehyun shrugs. He twines his arms around Youngjae, burying his nose within the nook of his neck. Youngjae stills in Daehyun's grasp, though he gingerly hugs back. The quiet rattling of tracks from afar chains them together as Daehyun inhales, exhaled, inhales the essence of sweet life support amid bleach and calculating doctors, exhales the remnants of bloody cotton and torn-off bandages.

"Uh, that's enough PDA for tonight..." Youngjae mumbles, grip loosening after a few seconds. Daehyun retains his hold, folding his lips and nuzzling his head further into Youngjae's skin. He mouths the words that have been brimming on his lips for a while now, a crater teetering on the edge of a cliff ready to collapse and kill the man sitting beneath in the shade.

"I love you," Daehyun says it naturally, easily, smoothly like the words are meant to tattoo themselves around Youngjae's neck tighter and tighter.

"Hey, you two! Please stand behind the yellow line!"

The warden's shout breaks them apart. Youngjae's hands abruptly clasp around Daehyun's shirt and he pushes Daehyun away, letting out a quiet breath as he moves aside. They stare at the platform's edge, reading the warning in block capitals repeated on the tiles. DO NOT CROSS THIS LINE.

For a moment, the floor dissolves into flickering shutters, blinding flashes and the hoarding of microphones. The mirage vanishes and all of a sudden, Youngjae pulls his lips to the side, darting his eyes away impassively. The brightness in his face is ripped from him and it leaves a cold-cutting apathy in place.

"Don't say things you don't mean." The words are a haunting echo, and it strangles every bit of Daehyun's breath out. This was not what happened. This was not what Youngjae said. This memory... it isn't accurate. Yet, they are oddly familiar because they came from Daehyun's lips.

The train barrels into the station, rushing past and ruffling their hair into a complete mess. The doors slide open smoothly and Daehyun continues to face Youngjae. The transition from his frigid, almost bitter expression back to his original worn-out but contented mood is distracting. Youngjae seems to barely acknowledge the heavy, enigmatic words he had just spoken, smiling encouragingly at Daehyun.

"Go in, you idiot." Youngjae shoves Daehyun into the carriage, but Daehyun catches him before he can stumble fully in. Youngjae remains at the platform's edge, their shoes meeting at the treacherous gap. Daehyun wants to erase the eye circles above Youngjae's cheeks, grab his hand and run. Escape from that hellhole of no contact with their family and friends, where the six of them only have each other. It's sad that they are living their dreams in a cage.

Youngjae looks peculiarly beautiful under the jarring lighting of the train station, blended with the more yellowish lamps in the train. The world bleeds into just the two of them, Youngjae's lips imprisoning Daehyun's worries despite them choking up Youngjae's airway. Melodies of every single kind from long-time ballads to classical music floods Daehyun's mind as he grasps Youngjae and pulls him close.
Too close. Daehyun angles his head to meet Youngjae's lips, clutching at the other boy's shirt. Youngjae tastes of seawater and fire, a sprinkle of cellar-like love and drunken death. A strident beeping noise pulls them apart as Daehyun breathes shallowly, Youngjae's eyes wide and expression flabbergasted. The door slices through them, Youngjae still staring in stupefaction. A trace of trauma stabs into his enlarged irises as he remains rooted to the ground. The warden comes over and tugs Youngjae back from the platform gap, but Youngjae persists in his gaping.

The train begins to rattle out of the station. Youngjae's eyes are continuously fixated on Daehyun's form by the window, parted lips devoid of any words. Daehyun reflects Youngjae's action, standing motionlessly as an eerie silence clouds his mind.

**What did I just do?**

He had done it because... because... he wanted to? He... just suddenly felt like it. It was the spur of the moment. But why did he have the urge to kiss Youngjae, his boy best friend?

Daehyun clasps his ticket as he wobbles to his seat, gaze unfocused. What the fuck did he just do? What in god's name did he kiss Youngjae for?

But Youngjae kisses Junhong all the time. No one says anything about it, except joke that Youngjae has pedophilic tendencies.

But Youngjae does it on the cheek. And sometimes, Daehyun doesn't like it very much. He laughs and pushes the two apart, feigning a hurl and ignoring the ruffling nip under his skin.

So? Daehyun and Youngjae are closer to one another than to anyone else in the group. A kiss on the lips is just an expression of passionate friendship. Daehyun had been overwhelmed by gratitude and he didn't think a hug would suffice, so he kissed Youngjae out of indebtedness and brotherly kinship. That's all. It's nothing to get worked up over.

Then why are his hands shaking?

Daehyun flings himself down onto his seat, sinking into the woolly cushion and shutting his eyes. The radiant light above demands to be let into his pupils, clawing through his eyelids and oozing a reddish, evening-like hue. He can't say sorry to Youngjae, or try to explain himself and clear up the misunderstanding (how, though?) since his phone is back in the dorms. Daehyun calms his beating heart, blanking out every thought within his head to leave only the sound of his breathing.

The light grows hotter on his skin, beginning to burn like faces buried in charcoal. Suddenly, Daehyun falls back into his chair as the back vanishes into non-matter and darkness. Daehyun's back hits something soft, posture completely horizontal to the ground. He splits open his eyes and shoots up, instantly shielding his face as light rips him into consciousness. The chirping of sparrows stream into the room along with sunlight, warming linens and the slender figure beside Daehyun.

The remnants of his dream crumble into nothing but undecipherable debris, the downfall tragic and invoking eulogies. Daehyun grasps hard on the thin material between his fingers, placating his erratic breathing as he turns over to his wife.

It's just a nightmare. Daehyun deliquesces into a soft smile as he lets go of the piece of his spouse's gown within his clasp, reaching over to weave a hand through the woman's hair. She awakens from her slumber, yawning moonlight from her small mouth.

"Daehyun?" She catches the hand messing up her long locks, laughing sweetly. Daehyun bends down to lock their lips, taste of morning and sourness tangling between marriage and unification.
"Youngjae," Daehyun coos, nuzzling their noses as the female nudges him away with a chuckle.

"I'm sorry I fell asleep while waiting up for you," Youngjae whispers, gently squeezing Daehyun's arm. Daehyun draws circles into her cheek, smiling lightly. "I had to carry you all the way to our room. My arms are sore now."

"Are you saying I'm heavy?" Youngjae huffs jokingly, prodding Daehyun with her foot. "More like you're not as buff as you used to be." Youngjae sits up, sliding to the edge of the bed. She sways her hair over her shoulder as Daehyun whines, grabbing her back into his hold. "I still can do as many bench presses as back in college."

"Your flab disagrees," Youngjae teases, pinching her husband's stomach. She attempts to slip out of Daehyun's embrace but the man locks his arms around her, resting his chin on her shoulder. He runs his hand down her curves to her thigh, stroking it delicately. Youngjae guides Daehyun's face towards her, linking their lips as Daehyun tightens his hold.

"Your breath stinks," Youngjae remarks, untangling Daehyun's interlocked fingers and escaping from his hold. "Go wash up. I'll make breakfast." Daehyun obediently nods as Youngjae strolls out of the room, small hips swaying from one side to the other. Daehyun trudges into the bathroom, blinding grabbing at his toothbrush and performing his daily ablutions. He gruffly wipes his face on his shirt, heading to the dining room.

The scent of scrambled eggs and toast swarm the room as Daehyun picks up today's newspaper from the doorstep. He settles in a chair and watches Youngjae for a moment, the pretty woman roaming about the kitchen, before flipping the papers open. Headlines in bold and large text uniformly stamp across the papers. **Jung Daehyun pleads guilty to murdering bandmate Yoo Youngjae.**

Youngjae leans over as she places down a plate of sausages and eggs on the table. "It's sad," Youngjae sighs, "I really liked their music." She ambles back to the kitchen, bringing over some coffee and bread. "I wonder why he did it."

Daehyun squints at the text, skimming through it quickly. "Woah. Apparently, he killed him out of love." Daehyun grimaces wryly, stunned.

"Fought over a girl, huh?" Youngjae muses. Daehyun shakes his head. "Says here he loved him, but couldn't have him, so he kidnapped and murdered him." Youngjae blinks in surprise, following Daehyun's finger to the line in question. "How shocking..."

"It's so dark. The band definitely can't go on after this," Youngjae wheezes, sitting beside Daehyun and slipping the papers out of his hands. She folds them and plops them onto the counter. "Anyway, do you have to go to work today? You came home so late last night."

Daehyun digs into his food, chomping noisly as Youngjae carresses his eye circles. Daehyun leans into Youngjae's touch, nestling his cheek against Youngjae's short finger. "Yeah, I do. I'm sorry. But hey," Daehyun chimes, "we have our weekend trip to Jeju."

Youngjae begins cheering, Daehyun fondly gazing at her adorable behaviour. "Himchan-oppa is going to be so jealous once he hears about it. He said he wanted to go to the Jeongbang waterfall," Youngjae chuckles. Daehyun pouts, nudging Youngjae under the table gently. "You shouldn't talk to Himchan-hyung so much, especially when I'm not around."

"He's married, Daehyun. I'm married," Youngjae giggles. Daehyun continues sulking, propping his face up against the table. "All the more you two shouldn't hang out so much. It feels like you guys are dating. When was the last time we went on a date?"
"We live together, Daehyun. Aren't we dating right now?" Youngjae teases, crossing her arms across the table. Daehyun whines, "It's not counted."

"Baby," Youngjae laughs, nudging Daehyun in the shin. "Hey, shouldn't I call you out for always eating with that secretary? Yongguk-sshi?" As Daehyun chokes, Youngjae guffaws even harder. "You told me you used to go for the artsy types in high school." Daehyun continues to gape as Youngjae slyly points to the painting hung on the wall. "She got us a replica of that art piece Danaë."

"She's just a friend!" Daehyun adamantly protests. "I stay around her because the guys keep hounding her. It's because of you! I imagine you in her shoes, all pretty and getting harrassed at work, and so I protect her because I don't want to see that happen to you."

"Daehyun, I work at a kindergarten. I don't think the kids would harrass me in that way," Youngjae chuckles. She raises a brow jokingly. "So you admit she's pretty?" Daehyun splutters hard, eyes wide as he rushes to clarify himself. Youngjae slaps him across the head gently. "Eat your breakfast, idiot."

Daehyun obediently acquiesces, wolfing down his meal. "Oh right. Junhong's having a baby shower next Sunday," Daehyun announces, missing the way Youngjae's fingers clench slightly.

"Oh." Daehyun continues swallowing down his food. He blathers through bites, "That idiot won't shut up about his daughter at work. Says she has her mother's eye smile or whatever. I better block him from my KakaoStory feed; he sounds like the kind of parent who spams updates about his kid."

"So, are we going?" Daehyun asks, lifting his head to meet Youngjae's averted gaze. He instantly stills, remorse clawing through his sinews. God, how could he have been so careless?

"Youngjae," Daehyun drops his volume and reaches out for his wife's hand. She retracts her arms on the table, churning out a smile. "Yeah. I'm free. You're free too, right?" She hums, leaning back into the chair and further away from Daehyun's grasp. "We should get some baby clothes from Jeju."

"We don't have to go," Daehyun blurts, cringing upon realising how stupid the remark is. Youngjae veers her gaze towards Daehyun, creases forming between her brows.

"Why not?" Though casual, within her tone lays a trace of interrogation. "You're busy?"

"...Yeah," Daehyun lies. Youngjae spares him a cutting, knowing glance before sighing, getting up and walking to the counter. She retrieves several bottles and packets of medicine, pouring herself a glass of water. Daehyun watches in agony as Youngjae forces the handful of pills down her throat, swallowing them all down in one gulp and coughing.

"I want to see how his newborn looks like," Youngjae beams, lips stretching unnaturally into her soft cheeks. Youngjae remains by the counter, busying herself with sorting out the blister packs. She drops several of them and unsteadily fingers them back into her palm, seemingly prolonging her efforts. "She must be very pretty if she has Jongup's eye smile. That woman lights up the room just by her smile alone."

Daehyun rises, striding over to Youngjae's side. He twines his arms around her waist, nuzzling his nose into her hair. She lowers her head, body shaking slightly as she struggles to keep her tears at bay.

"You'd be the kind of father to ramble all about his child, too," Youngjae laughs, patting her wet eyes. Daehyun gently sways her from side to side, stroking her tummy soothingly. "Thinking of you
"Have you thought about what I said?" Daehyun quietly asks, grip firm around Youngjae's hips. "If we apply to adopt now, the most we'll have to wait is a year."

Youngjae wryly smiles, rubbing her eyes harder. Daehyun presses her into his chest, inhaling the scent of her hair. "You know your mother won't be pleased," Youngjae softly comments, placing a hand over Daehyun's palms on her abdomen.

"What matters is if you are happy," Daehyun convinces. They remain in this position for a long while, Youngjae letting out weak breaths as she calms her brewing cries.

"I'm sorry," Youngjae whispers, her trembling tone igniting agony in Daehyun. "I'm such a failure, aren't I? I'm not a woman." She clutches the fertility pills trapped in plastic. Daehyun has seen her choke down tablets of fabricated hypocrisy and suffer injections of you-aren't-what-you're-supposed-to-be just to transform herself into the life-giving woman she always has been.

"Youngjae-

Daehyun wants to reassure Youngjae that she is the best thing that's ever happened to him, the other half of his soul he always believed he would find, someone he would love endlessly whether or not she came in the form of a woman a decade older or someone handicapped. Youngjae is Youngjae, regardless of what shape, size and type she is.

But Youngjae cuts him off before he can placate her self-doubts and invalidation. "The doctor said my body is responding well to treatment," Youngjae states. Daehyun recalls sitting in the corner anxiously while Youngjae laid on the bed, like shrapnel carved into his mind. He had never seen Youngjae so hopeful and yet fearful at the same time, the combination crushing into tiptoes on tightropes and the jump towards happiness as treacherous as the fall to despondency.

"We'll have a baby soon," Daehyun whispers, nuzzling his nose into his wife's neck. "Even if we don't, you know it doesn't make you any less of the amazing person you are."

"I love you," Youngjae whispers, guiding Daehyun's cheek to her lips. "You should go shower. You'll be late for work."

"Bathe with me." Daehyun nestles his lips behind Youngjae's ear, nipping lightly. His wife smacks him, shaking her head. Daehyun whimpers loudly, acting like a toddler demanding for candy.

"You're already thirty yet you act like a child." Youngjae clicks her tongue, Daehyun persisting as he juts out his lips and puts on his best pair of puppy eyes. Youngjae carresses down his jawline, relenting with a grin.

"Fine. You go in first. I need to go water our neighbour's plants." Daehyun lets out a celebratory bellow in response, inciting a sweet laugh from Youngjae. They kiss and Daehyun pulls away, skipping to the toilet. He sheds his clothes, turning on the shower. As the water turns hot, Daehyun steps into the shower, sighing in relief as the liquid hits his body. He shuts his eyes, relaxing his tense muscles and relishing in the comforting warmth.

He smiles as he imagines Youngjae's curves arched against his chest, Daehyun pinning the woman against the glass wall as they make fervorish contact. It's a dream to have Youngjae by his side. He honestly wonders how he'd been lucky enough to be chosen out of the countless suitors who chased after Youngjae, Himchan included.
Suddenly, the water spurting out of the shower head becomes unnervingly cold. Daehyun clasps blindly outwards for the faucet, and his hands grip through several holes. Fatigue grapples at his limbs and Daehyun snaps open his eyes.

The dusk submerges Daehyun into visionless navigation, just barely making out the barbed wire fence at the tip of his nose. His entire self is drenched in cold rain and filthy sweat, dirt trails tattooed into his arms and neck. Remnants of dried blood decorated his limbs, pain permeating all his senses. Ache screams so loud he almost can't hear his own name but something else shrieks so ear-piercingly it commands all attention from Daehyun.

The night is freezing. Daehyun shudders as the wind pierces through his tattered army uniform, roughly wiping the snot running down his stubble. In his right hand is a wire cutter and the sliced wire scratches Daehyun's left palm. He instinctively cuts off the last few wires and manages to make a hole just barely big enough to fit him.

Daehyun is running out of time. He needs to get to the other side. Youngjae is there. Youngjae, his comrade, the boy he shares his bunk with along with thirty other men, the one who sneaks out with him to the field so they can peek past the walls of the barracks and dream of a future.

They had met because of unfortunate fate. Both of them had to enlist in the military as their country fell into war, and they left behind family, friends and loved ones to put their lives on the line for a ridiculous dictator swearing mutiny with soldiers as chess pieces. That disgusting man would never know what it's like to live knowing you may not make it through the day—without any last words to the people waiting at home for you, praying day and night for your return.

Through snapping sinews and silent sobbing, hoarse hollers and hopeless havens, Youngjae had been there for him. They were the youngest out of the lot at that time because of the army's poor organisational skills; certain platoons had an exceedingly high number of older men while others housed those just barely legal to fight in war.

They had automatically found one another's faces in the congregation of their platoon, waiting for the introductions and first orders. Daehyun's face had been mashed up in pure bitterness, rancorous rage teeming on the fact that he hadn't gotten the chance to say goodbye to his grandmother before he was taken away. Youngjae had walked up to him, since he was the only other teenager there.

They didn't exchange a single word for their first day, sent barrelling through mud trenches and bark scraping fresh blood in their smooth, innocent legs. Daehyun fumed for those twenty four hours, holding back vengeful, irascible tears, while Youngjae respectfully kept quiet.

It was natural that they became inseparable; they had no choice, really. The older men picked on them, though not as much when it came to Daehyun since the boy always looked on the verge of cracking and starting a massacre. Youngjae was more quiet and subdued, so he often bore the brunt of crude sexual taunts, especially with his porcelain-like features.

Daehyun often snapped and vented his anger on Youngjae, cursing every goddamn thing in a fifty mile radius for his cruel fate. He had only asked his girlfriend out two weeks before he received his draft notice. Youngjae simply accepted Daehyun's menacing rants and demeaning insults, letting Daehyun wallow in the rage from injustice everyone in the army was subjected to.

Daehyun realised how much of an asshole he was when Youngjae broke three months in. While Daehyun left his mother behind in the hands of his capable older sister, Youngjae's ailing mother had no one else but Youngjae. Daehyun had been too busy focusing on his misery to realise Youngjae was in a far worse position than him.
That was why Youngjae wrote letters constantly, every night without fail, no matter how grueling their training had been and everyone threw themselves onto the bed, exhausted. That was why he visited the military's post office constantly during his breaks, despite the fact that the clerk repeatedly told him the next batch of letters from home would only come a month later.

Youngjae had been suffering silently, and even as he cried that day, tears flowing endlessly for a good hour, he made not a single noise. That day, one of the elders ran his hand up Youngjae's thigh and told him he would make him feel all better. Daehyun ended up with a black eye, a broken arm and a dislocated jaw, but he inflicted much worse onto that man despite a fight of three on one.

The mocking tripled in abundance after that, but their bunkmates steered clear of them two. Daehyun had fought like a mad man drunk on full-blown insanity; he had deliriously clawed, bitten and dug at whatever he could when he was held down. No one wanted to be temporarily blinded and have their cheek ripped through with just Daehyun's persistent, maniacal fingers, so they left both Youngjae and him alone.

Punishment had been backbreaking, but even so, Daehyun returned to his bunk feeling glad for the first time since he stepped into this hellhole. Youngjae had leaned over and squeezed his hand, thanking him inaudibly as the sergeants made their rounds.

The downpour beats down heavier on Daehyun. The memory of Youngjae's comforting touch remains on his dishevelled hair as Daehyun scouts the area, hurriedly clambering through the hole. He presses his back into the perimeter of the walls, staying silent and listening hard for any noises. The night is dead quiet, dawn bleeding in like the whispers of Youngjae's hopes and dreams. *I always wanted to be a soccer player.*

*Lame.* Youngjae had laughed in response, outline of his battered face captivating against the moonlight. Daehyun still thinks of his girlfriend, sometimes, but recently, he's been dreaming more of meeting Youngjae in a different world. Maybe they'd be classmates in college and hit off instantly. Or they could be long-time neighbours, best buddies since days of scraped knees and high-pitched wails. Even being colleagues would be nice. Why did he have to meet Youngjae in a time so wretched and dreary?

Daehyun's heart pounds in his ears. It vaguely rings of the sirens blaring through their camp, sounding so loud it convulses his bloodstream. Stillness has never been so deadly, even when Daehyun inwardly cringes at defeaning gunshots.

The searchlights grazes the circumference in a never-ending semicircular motion. Daehyun stays close to the wall as rain pricks his eyes, attempting to stop him. His destination is half a mile away, the distance required to cross daunting. He can barely make out Youngjae's figure against the rickety train tracks.

Daehyun squints harder as trepidation and hysteria ruptures his sanity. He can't tell if Youngjae is breathing from here. Did they beat him too hard? Is he still alive? Youngjae can't die. He can't. He can't leave Daehyun alone. What would Daehyun do without him?

No, no, no. Daehyun quickens his steps, nimbly avoiding the lights trailing the corners. He can see a few guards by the ends of the war zone. Daehyun crouches, crawling determinedly as his eyes sting. His wounds reopen as his body drags across cement, but Daehyun continues forth with his stare set on the lump over the rusty tracks.

One step, two step, three step. Daehyun gingerly remains obscured, camouflage blending into the despairing walls. It feels like an eternity as he makes his way across, the grim reaper his shadow threatening to ebb away an ounce of life for every minute Daehyun wastes. Panic grips Daehyun as
he lugs himself further, further, and further, till the nails of the train tracks finally come into sight. Youngjae lays there inert, bound tightly by rope to his execution site. Daehyun forgets the invisibility he is supposed to uphold as he catches a brief glimpse of Youngjae's soulless, open eyes, and staggers over.

Youngjae barely raises his head, the look of resignation eliciting tears from Daehyun. His previously pale body is showered in lacerations, hair doused with the merciless rain. Red leaks all over his face, disfiguring the beautiful man Daehyun never once admitted he stares at in the showers. Part of Youngjae's ankle is jutting out so cruelly in the opposite direction Daehyun wonders why the skin bothers to cover it. How fucking, fucking cruel for them to have Youngjae endure so much torment, before getting run over by a train of ten thousand tonnes.

Daehyun lunges for Youngjae's feet, the contact not even jolting Youngjae in the least bit. "Youngjae," Daehyun blurs airily, collapsing onto the ground from weariness and picking himself up again. Youngjae widens his eyes, spending a moment staring at the sky as though trying to tell if the call had just been from his sweet dreams, and looks down when Daehyun clumsily tugs out the wire cutter.

Adrenaline races through Daehyun as he snips at the wire, hands trembling and eyes darting around ferociously. "D-Daehyun?" Youngjae wheezes, voice so weak it barely conveys the utter disbelief etched into his bleeding face. "Daehyun, g-go back," Youngjae hacks, phlegm wrecking his vocal chords, "are you fucking crazy? Oh my fucking god." Youngjae begins to pant heavily, eyes widened hysterically. "Go back, Daehyun; t-they're going to catch you and kill-" Youngjae sucks in a breath, even that mere sentence straining his lungs. He cranes his neck desperately, looking out for the soldiers on patrol.

"We're going to make it," Daehyun reassures, more to himself because he shakes when Youngjae shuts his eyes and stops breathing for a split moment. "We're going to fucking make it, Youngjae," Daehyun whispers wildly. The snap of tight ropes alleviates his terror as he moves to Youngjae's body, slipping through the suffocating, make-shift clothes woven out of nylon.

"Daehyun, you're going to die if you don't go back now," Youngjae breathes, the frenzy so maiming Youngjae tears up. "Go back, Daehyun, please. I'm begging you. I... I got caught, so be it. Please just go..." Despite the almost unhearable volume of their voices, emotion writhes through Youngjae's every syllable.

"I'm not leaving you behind," Daehyun hisses, chopping through the ropes up Youngjae's torso. Just a few more rounds to freedom. They can make it. They can make it. Daehyun just needs to carry Youngjae back. It's fine. They'll make it.

"Daehyun, go, please. Just... take care of my mother for me. Please."

"I'm not leaving you behind, Youngjae," Daehyun seethes. "I swore I'd protect you. I'm not fucking going back on my words. You'll protect your mother yourself. Stop being such a wimp."

"Daehyun, are... are you a fucking idiot?" Youngjae gasps through choked breaths, cocking his head back in agony as the metal cutter grazes his stomach wound. "If they catch you-"

"Just shut up and save your breaths," Daehyun orders, slicing through more circles of rope. Youngjae's face is scrunched up in pure agony, guilt and remorse, the concoction so grievous Daehyun's eyes start to water. The cutters are slippery due to the storm and Daehyun nearly lets go of it by accident.

"D-Daehyun," Youngjae chokes, sobs weak and trembling. "Why... why did you come back for
me? God, you're... you're so fucking stupid..."

"Shut up, Youngjae," Daehyun hisses, because Youngjae's quivering voice and shining vulnerability is so stark in the moonlight and it makes Daehyun wish he could take him away to a place where he'll never cry again—something Daehyun knows is impossible.

"I don't want," Youngjae grapples for breath, heaving erratically, "I don't want you to die, Daehyun..."

"I'm not going to, okay?" Daehyun exhales, relief breeding in his nauseous throat as he cuts the last of the rope. "I'm not going to. Stop fucking crying, Youngjae," Daehyun croaks. Youngjae has never cried out loud before. While Daehyun wailed furiously, shrieked irately and violently bashed things, Youngjae thinned his lips and let his tears roll silently without a single slip of a word.

"Daehyun, you can't-"

"I'm not going to die, Youngjae," Daehyun soothes, dropping his tone as he heaves Youngjae up from the metallic tracks. He briefly glances down the long row extending all the way to the city, devoid of any vehicles and souls, and stares comfortingly into Youngjae's eyes. Daehyun wastes a second wiping the mix of blood, mucus, rain and tears down Youngjae's cheeks and earnestly holds him. "I won't die."

"Let's get you out of here," Daehyun whispers, hauling Youngjae more steadily to his feet. He is about to turn Youngjae around and drape his injured arm over himself when a booming bellow reverberates through the quiet grounds. Before Daehyun can even open his mouth to tell Youngjae they'll be okay, something sharp and relentless pierces through his throat.

Time stops. Youngjae gawks in absolute hysteria as Daehyun's grip loosens, eyes rolling back. The arrowhead embedded into his throat juts out disgustingly through his adam's apple, glistening in the moonlight. More shots begin to rain down on Daehyun's back as he shields Youngjae from the storm of ammunition, razor-sharp stings tearing through his muscles and organs.

"D-Daehyun," Youngjae chokes out, lips parted and entire body shaking recklessly. He grabs onto Daehyun with all his strength, fingers desperately at the man spurting out blood. He deliriously tries to heave the man away as the gunfire ceases, commands yelled from light up offices. "Daehyun," Youngjae repeats, distraught wrecking his tearful eyes. Daehyun falls forward into Youngjae's feeble hold, drenching the other boy in blood. His lifeless, rolled back irises stare up forlornly at the endless, free sky before falling shut and Youngjae screams.

"Daehyun!"

The world is pitch black. Daehyun's forehead hits concrete and he feels wetness between his eyebrows. He barely manages to open his eyes, coming face to face with his bully as his vision clears. The blood from his injury drips onto his high school uniform, first button popped out from the perpetrator's brutality. They are in the corner of the school campus, far, far away from the staff room.

"You faggot." Daehyun is heaved into the air as the boy grips his collar, Daehyun spluttering for breath. Youngwon continues to strangle Daehyun, his malevolent friends snickering by the side and keeping watch for any teachers.

"Stare at my brother again, will you?" Youngwon flings Daehyun against the locker, blunt pain wrangling Daehyun's head. "I didn't," Daehyun stammers out a lie, earning himself a kick in the guts. The hallways are silent, some students passing past quickly in order to avoid getting involved. It is a common occurrence anyway.
"I saw you fucking staring during lunch, you bastard," Youngwon spits, saliva splattering onto Daehyun's face. Daehyun averts his gaze. He had indeed been staring at Youngjae during break. Daehyun knows not to, but Youngjae had been laughing like happiness was something he had created with his own bare hands. Happiness, something only that breathtaking boy can ever give to Daehyun... no matter how many beatings and taunts Daehyun has to endure.

Yoo Youngjae. He studies in the same year as Daehyun, three classes above Daehyun, and is the rough Yoo Youngwon's brother. He is the chairman of the school's famed choir and has a senior girlfriend named Han Sunhwa. He has lovely large eyes, a small face and heart-shaped lips. Broad shoulders, slender thighs and minuscule hips. The most boyish chuckles, the kindest touch, the liveliest voice. Somewhere, Daehyun had fallen hard for a boy far too out of his league.

Daehyun hadn't known what Youngjae had been laughing about during recess, but the sight had been so mesmerising he made the mistake of staring too long instead of the usual furtive glimpses.

"Goddamn fag. Go suck someone else's dick." Youngwon steps down onto Daehyun's stomach, applying more pressure in glee. "Stupid bitch. Do you want to be a girl?"

I just want to love him, Daehyun churns out in his head as Youngwon digs deeper into his ribs. Ache burns through his bones as he arches back against the floor, bruise blooming where Youngwon had punched him.

"Youngjae doesn't want you even if you go for a sex change, disgusting piece of shit." Youngwon grabs Daehyun by the hair and tugs roughly, Daehyun groaning in pain. He almost deals another blow when Youngwon's friend whistles. The sound of high heels clacking against the ground floats towards them as Youngwon immediately retracts his limbs.

"Leave my brother alone, you hear me, gay slut?" Youngwon warns, balling his hands into fists. Daehyun frenziedly nods, cowering when Youngwon raises his fist intimidatingly. He stalks off, friends following quickly behind. Daehyun relaxes against the red lockers, calming his shallow pants and shutting his eyes.

The click-clacks increase in volume and stops suddenly, Daehyun too tired to open his eyes.

"Thanks, Hyosung."

Daehyun snaps open his eyelids at the voice. He weakly turns his head to find Youngjae standing at the end of the corridor. His friend, Hyosung, stands in high heels Daehyun recognises as the ones the female student councillors wear for official school ceremonies. Hyosung veers her gaze towards Daehyun, sympathetic, before saying, "Don't take too long."

Hyosung removes her heels, socks pattering silently to the supplies room. Daehyun watches through laboured breaths as Youngjae turns to him, expression soft. Daehyun keeps his eyes fixed on Youngjae as the boy walks over, placing the first aid kit borrowed from the infirmary. He opens the box, pulling out some tissue and wiping the blood streaking down Daehyun's nose.

Daehyun gazes longingly at the boy who delicately cleans up his wounds, wincing when Youngjae applies ointment to his bruises. Youngjae lets out a sigh, tenderly repeating his ministrations. He spares a glance at Daehyun's face and melts into a hint of displeasure. Daehyun looks away, wondering how lovelorn he must have looked to even irk Youngjae.

"You shouldn't like me, you know," Youngjae begins with a sigh. Daehyun lowers his head, staring down at the purple down his wrists. Youngjae gently lifts his arms, rubbing circles into the ugly injuries. "He only comes after you when he catches you staring. You, of all people, should know
how Youngwon works." After all, a long time ago in middle school, they had been the closest of friends. Youngjae questioningly glimpses at Daehyun. "Why do you still do it?"

Daehyun gulps, meeting Youngjae's intricately carved double eyelids and the trace of brown in his irises. "I... I don't know. I'm sorry," Daehyun meekly confesses. Youngjae heaves a worn-out breath. "You're causing trouble for yourself. Isn't it tiring? Isn't it painful?"

Daehyun keeps mum, discreetly basking in Youngjae's warm and caring tone. He senses slight exasperation in Youngjae's words and apologetically slouches. "It's not... right to like me," Youngjae mutters, Daehyun freezing at his sentence. "I'm a boy, Daehyun. I have a girlfriend. You know that, don't you?"

"Daehyun," Youngjae seriously says upon receiving no answer, frowning. Daehyun looks up at him and nods quietly. It's wrong. Daehyun knows it's wrong. He used to laugh at Junhong for having a crush on his male babysitter Yongguk when they were young, calling him a weirdo. He used to dream of marrying a beautiful woman who looks like a combination of all his favourite celebrities. He used to want a girlfriend, till he met Youngjae in freshman year.

"Then why do you still like me?" Youngjae asks, frustrated. Daehyun shrinks back, staring down at his bleeding fingers.

"I just do," Daehyun mumbles softly. Youngjae exhales lengthily, packing up the first-aid box and staring at Daehyun for a moment. He strokes the blue-black along Daehyun's jawline and whispers, "Please, Daehyun. Stop this. You're only going to hurt yourself."

Daehyun sinks into Youngjae's grasp, wet warmth slipping from his lashes. Youngjae lets out a breath, decidedly pressing a chaste kiss to Daehyun's forehead. Daehyun shuts his eyes, enjoying Youngjae's merciful affection for that short, blissful moment.

"Okay, run along, sweetie."

The lips between Daehyun's eyebrows simmer away into non-existence as he flutters his small eyes. He stares up at his mother who bids him goodbye, nudging him towards the kindergarten's playground. "Don't forget to eat your apple!" Daehyun's mother reminds as she walks towards the school gates.

"Yes, omma!" Daehyun squeaks, waving enthusiastically. He nearly trips over his two feet as he spins around, dashing for the sandbox. "Youngjae!" Daehyun screams when he notices the boy by the pavement, forgetting to slow down and crashing right into the other four year old. That's his best friend. Yoo Youngjae. He's very smart and he likes Math. Daehyun doesn't like Math but it's okay; they don't have to like the same things to be friends.

"Daehyun!" Youngjae yelps, both of the toddlers falling into the sandbox. Youngjae moans, rubbing his head as he crossly glares at Daehyun. "Why did you run into me!?"

"I was happy to see you!" Daehyun declares, patting his chest excitedly. Youngjae ignores his outburst and nurses his sore forehead, grumbling to himself. "Stupid." He moves aside as Daehyun stares curiously at the hax sign on the ground, yellow chalk lines intersecting at ninety degree angles.

"Tic tac toe?" Daehyun asks. Youngjae nods, forgetting about Daehyun's blunder and offering him the yellow piece of chalk. Daehyun excitedly claps his hands, snatching the chalk and scrawling a fat X in the middle. "X!" He announces proudly.

"O," Youngjae hums, drawing a circle in another box. They continue to holler X, O, X, O, X, O, till
Youngjae folds his arms and sulks. "No one wins!" He mutters as Daehyun fills up the last square still. Daehyun tosses the yellow crayon away once one of their classmates beckons them over.

"Yah! Daehyun! Youngjae! Come here!"

Daehyun shouts back a "okay!" in acknowledgement, grabbing Youngjae's hand and hauling him over to Hana and Himchan. "Let's play pretend!" Hana cheers, the girl with ponytails bobbing her head eagerly. Himchan sits cross-legged on the floor, scratching at his neck. "Let's play mummy and daddy. I'm the mummy! Who wants to be my hubbie?"

"That's lame," Himchan groans, falling back onto the rubber floor. Hana clicks her tongue and glares at him. "You'll be my hubbie, then. I'm going to scold you so bad! Watch out!"

"There's no other girl," Youngjae points out, sniffing as he looks around the playground. They are the only children here, the rest yet to arrive or waiting in the classroom. "What are we going to be?" Youngjae asks, pointing to Daehyun and him.

"You can be our children. I have two sons!" Hana exclaims jubilantly. "Aw, but I wanted to have a tea party... The men can go read newspapers while the mothers drink tea," Hana laments, pouting cutely.

Youngjae nods while Daehyun cocks his head one side. "What about I be the daddy and Youngjae be the mummy?"

Hana and Youngjae snort synonymously at this, Himchan still laying on the ground unhappily. "Are you stupid?" Hana snaps. "Youngjae is a boy. He can't be a mummy."

"Oh," Daehyun deflates, puzzled by the sudden revelation. She's right; he hasn't since two married men before. Silly him. "Okay!" Hana declares. "Mummy and Daddy are going out shopping. You two are at home, um..." She grasps the red ball of thread from Himchan's pocket, kicking him for good measure when he yelps in irritation. "Skipping rope!"

Hana throws the yarn to Daehyun and gestures to the ground. "We're going to come back home soon and I'll cook dinner. Draw a door! Draw a door!" She hauls Himchan off the ground as the boy moans in annoyance. Youngjae picks up the discarded chalk and squats on the ground, Daehyun crouching curiously.

"Let's just draw a line. I don't know how to draw a door," Youngjae admits, prowling around the clear space. Daehyun quickly patters behind, head craned inquisitively. "Where do we draw the line? Here? Here? How about here?" Daehyun points randomly as Youngjae mulls over the question.

"Here," Youngjae decides, facing Daehyun and drawing a yellow line between them. Daehyun steps on it for no particular reason, inciting a displeased warning grunt from Youngjae. Daehyun untangles the rope and throws the other end to Youngjae. "Hana wants us to jump rope, right?"

Youngjae nods, cutely snivelling his nose as snot leaks out. Daehyun reaches out his hand to wipe it instinctively, something his mother always does for him. He subsequently wipes his hand on his shirt and steps over the rope. They begin to jump, poor coordination igniting yelps and yells between the two.

"Yah! Jump properly over the line! With me, with me!" Daehyun demands, pulling the string backwards too quickly and tripping Youngjae. Youngjae collapses onto the ground, pulling the rope with him and accidentally tugging Daehyun along. Daehyun falls onto Youngjae, red string tangling them together as he lands with a blunt thud, eyes squinted shut in pain.
The rope around them is suffocating, bounding the two toddlers together. Youngjae starts to cry just as the bell rings, cacophony of sniffs and shrills brimming at Daehyun's ears. The warmth beside Daehyun ebbs away as he lays motionlessly on the floor. He struggles to rise when he knocks into something hollow. The bell fades into a slow, depressing rhythm, and the wailing persists.

Daehyun's eyelids flit open to meet darkness. Through some gaps in whatever he is encased in, he manages to deduce the wood trails streaking down the pillar in front of him. He can only see a world of grey, barely varying in saturation. Must be the sky. Daehyun weakly stretches out his elbows and bumps into more planks, much to his confusion. The low bell persists in its chimes along with the grievous weeping, strange chanting surrounding him.

Is he suspended in thin air? No, he's inside something. A box, presumably. There's something thin between his fingers. Daehyun shifts so he can get a better view of the object, placing it underneath the small thin of light. The small movement is extremely taxing, for some reason. It is a green, wilted stalk, standing alone within his palms. A tiny, naked bud sprouts from the top.

Daehyun unstably hoists his hand, weirded out by a ticklish sensation on his palms. Every of his movements reek of pallor and lethargy, as though clawing him back into his inert resting position. Daehyun furrows his brows at what seems to be dandelion seeds all squashed underneath his hand. He gathers all his might and pushes at the cover, hearing a rattling noise but the roof otherwise not budging. Where is he? What exactly is he locked inside?

He brushes his face and rubs his eyes, garnering heavy make-up all over. "We are gathered here today to pay our last tributes to our departed brother, Jung Daehyun. The passing of such a noble soldier is a loss us comrades will feel greatly in the depths of our hearts." Daehyun widens his eyes, horror seeping into his veins as he tries to process the gravity of the situation. He's... dead?

Daehyun attempts to scream but nothing leaves his throat, only agony piercing through his adam's apple. He touches his neck to find a gash, picking up dried blood on his trembling fingers. There is foundation plastering the hole, attempting to conceal it. "He was a strong man who fought bravely for our country. We believe he would have become a great husband and father if he had not cut short his own life with his bare hands."

What?

Daehyun tries to claw at the hinges lining the side of the supposed coffin, trepidation filling his senses. If he gets buried, he'll die of asphyxiation without a doubt. They need to know he's still alive. He's Jung Daehyun; he won't go down without a fight.

The crying voice, the sole weeping noise in the funeral procession, doubles in intensity. Daehyun strains his ears to identify the voice and sinks in a sharp breath. Youngjae. That's right; he had escaped to save Youngjae and gotten ambushed. Relief washes over Daehyun to know that Youngjae managed to survive the ordeal.

Daehyun shakily lifts his pale, lifeless arms, powerlessly knocking against the cover. His feeble pats barely make a difference on the tightly shut casket. Youngjae, he mentally calls, even his voice strained in his mind.

"Jung Daehyun made the unforgivable mistake of leaving our King's side to rescue Yoo Youngjae." At this point, the wails escalate, drowning the prayers around Daehyun into oblivion. Daehyun scrunches up at the despair writhing through Youngjae's voice, mourning breaking the tragic air.

"Brothers, we have all pledge unconditional allegiance and devotion to our great King. Whether brethens are left behind, we must venture forward for the good of our nation." There seems to be
some tussling and Youngjae's sobbing abruptly cuts off. He whimper and the sound of something collapses onto the floor with a blunt thud.

"Jung Daehyun has failed in his duties. To save him from his shame, we shall sink his corpse into the sea." Youngjae croaks out a cracked, sorrowful bleat, bells somberly accompanying his pants. Daehyun enlarges his eyes in shock, attempting once again to escape from his prison. *I'm alive!* Daehyun screams in his mind. *Youngjae, I'm alive!*

"We can only hope his act of cowardice was not for a twisted intent that deviates from the word of God." The deep, guttural voice sighs loudly, the phrase bewildering Daehyun. What did the preacher mean? Regardless, he has much more pressing matters to tend to. Daehyun lifts his arms, the weight pulling them down resembling that of a thousand bricks and chained ship cargo.

"Take Yoo Youngjae away." Daehyun stills in his motions, listening intently. "He must be a witch. Burn him." Daehyun sucks in a breath in disbelief just as Youngjae begins to chant deliriously.

"No," Youngjae splutters in distress, Daehyun envisioning the boy struggling against his captors. "No! Please, no!" Youngjae shrieks, syllables a deranged, incoherent mess of pleas and tears. "No, no, no!"

*Youngjae!* Daehyun hecticallly gathers all his strength, the dire need to save Youngjae overwhelming the agony gorging through his muscles. Daehyun bangs on the door, pushing again and again as Youngjae's screams grow more distraught. His sinews sting and his skin feels like they're made of wax, melting into mere puddles of grey. Water floods his coffin through the narrow slits. *Youngjae! Youngjae!*

"Daehyun!" The screech pierces through Daehyun's lucidity and bleeds all his force into his knuckles. He thrusts as hard as he can but the grim reaper begins to reclaim him in the form of fatigue and the-dead-should-never-move. He feels his eyelids begin to droop shut, artifically curled lashes slashing into his deceased bones.

*Youngjae.* Daehyun's vision begins to blur but he persistently shoves, jostles, budges. The lock seems to be coming loose, stream of light chugging in brighter by the second. However, Daehyun's eyelids simultaneously grow heavier, to the point it is a chore to keep them open. Daehyun pushes one last time as blackness fully swarms in, the door creaking open with the tip of Youngjae's name on his lifeless lips.

*Youngjae...*

Daehyun thrusts open the door, stumbling forward. Heavy rain pelts his nose and quickly douses his head and clothes, so forceful it poses a form of beating. This is the roof of their dorm. Daehyun searches through the obscurity, red sneakers wading into rain water.

"Youngjae!" Daehyun yells, wiping at his eyes to clear his vision. He identifies a form standing by the corner and hastily sprints up to the boy. "Youngjae, god! What the hell are you doing?"

"Don't come near me!" Youngjae shrills, stance defensive like a wild animal sensing a predator. His hair is dripping wet, eyes blinking out the rain thrashing onto his face. The blemishes and eye circles scarring his face are stark underneath the Daehyun stops, eyes widening to find Youngjae's feet are balance precariously on the edge of the roof. His heart rises into his throat and his body shakes in full-out trepidation.

"Y-Youngjae-"
"Don't come near me, Daehyun," Youngjae hollers threateningly, shifting back. "Take another step and I'll jump. I will."

Daehyun gingerly nods, faded echoes of Youngjae's yells drowned out by the downpour. "Calm down, Youngjae. Don't do anything rash. Tell me what's wrong." The urge to vomit scathingly seeps through his vocal chords, the terrible hallucinations of Youngjae's battered corpse haunting him.

"What's wrong?" Youngjae scoffs in wry, sick amusement, glaring back at Daehyun as though he had said the funniest thing in the world. "What's wrong?" Daehyun stares uncomfortably as Youngjae cackles maniacally, throwing his head back.

"You, Daehyun," Youngjae spits, clenching his fists. Daehyun can't tell the tears trailing down Youngjae's cheeks but he can sense them purely from Youngjae's narrowed eyes and quivering lips. "You are what's wrong."

"What did you do to me?" Youngjae breathes, voice trembling like earthquakes in the night. Flashes of fragmented memories pervade Daehyun's mind, the traces of Youngjae's silhouette beneath his body and aching desire.

"What did you do to me!?” Youngjae screams, fists balling so hard veins strike down his arms. Startled, Daehyun steps forward, the movement igniting wariness in Youngjae. "Don't come any closer."


"Sorry?" Youngjae repeats, irony booming through his irate speech. "Of course. Jung Daehyun is sorry. That fixes everything, right? Oh, I'm sorry, Youngjae. I'm sorry for fucking ignoring you for god knows how long. I'm sorry I was such a shitty friend and ditched you for no apparent reason. I'm sorry I had sex with you because I couldn't fucking control myself."

Daehyun parts his lips, wanting to protest vehemently but the look Youngjae shoots slices off his airway. It is ironic, really. In his insanity, Daehyun had ran as far as he could from the darkness Youngjae bled, to escape being drowned alive. While he ran, however, further and further away, he left a trail of gasoline that lit Youngjae up in ferocious, ebony flames.

"How can I go back to being who I was?" Youngjae whispers, nearly begging Daehyun for an answer. A solution, maybe. It's so out of place because Youngjae never asks for help to prove he's capable of everything. The three words stain Daehyun's lips, morphed from his incessant thoughts of a bandmate with a sharp jawline and stupid, stupid laughter, and his insatiable desire to claim Youngjae. All because Youngjae knows him too well and his smiles seem to draw out the fearful sun even in a sorrowful eclipse.

"You've ruined me," Youngjae quivers. His body limply shudders and Daehyun widens his eyes. Youngjae steps off the edge. Daehyun lunges out for him, wrenching him into his embrace as they spiral downwards. The wind claws past their skins as Youngjae stares up at Daehyun in utter disbelief. Daehyun manages out a smile and cradles Youngjae tighter, hoping that maybe, as his blood splatters against the sidewalk and his bones shatter through his organs, he'll be able to keep Youngjae safe. Youngjae speaks but the whooshing air encrypts all of Youngjae's desperate and sorry cries. Daehyun buries his face into Youngjae's cheek, shuts his eyes and braces himself for impact.

"Stop blinking!"
Daehyun flutters open his eyes, beaming at a frustrated Youngjae. The boy taps on his camera, deleting the photograph and looking through the lens again. "Do it properly, you idiot."

The blinding afternoon sunlight coaxes sweat from Daehyun's aching legs, sore feet induced by their long hike to the crossing. Youngjae had suggested going sightseeing during their limited one day break, given because the company could sense the rebellion boiling from their cracked joints and sleepless eyes. They had split ways with the group when Himchan admitted he didn't want to spend the day walking in the hot sun and the others quietly agreed.

Daehyun briefly glances around, admiring the old train tracks running down the sea of pebbles. Youngjae accidentally trips on one, inciting deep laughter from Daehyun. He continues grinning when Youngjae sends him a glare, both of them ultimately breaking out into chuckles.

"Another one?" Daehyun asks, balancing himself on the railroad's plates. Youngjae nods, adjusting his camera settings before snapping another picture. This time, Daehyun keeps Youngjae and the serene, aged background in his sight. Youngjae hums contentedly, though he puffs amusedly at Daehyun's pose.

"Mine looks so much better than yours," Youngjae muses, flipping to his picture taken and admiring his form in the small screen. Daehyun feigns puking, knuckling Youngjae on the head. "That's because I took the photo, dumbass."

Youngjae waves him off, joining him by the side. The distant rattling of tracks reverberate through the still air but the two of them pay no heed. "Let's take one together. I'm going to tweet it out," Youngjae declares, whipping out his phone. Daehyun naturally wraps an arm around Youngjae and the latter does the same, their heads bumping into one another. Youngjae's skin is soft.

The rumbling surges in volume, the train operator honking at them to get out of the way. Youngjae raises his phone and pulling up a bright grin. "Alright, one, two, three," Youngjae counts, Daehyun tightening his grip around Youngjae's waist. Daehyun glances at Youngjae for a split second and mirrors the grin, staring into the camera.

"Smile!"

You're waiting for a train. A train that will take you far away. You know where you hope this train will take you, but you don't know for sure.

But it doesn't matter, because we'll be together.
"Daehyun!"

Footsteps pad briskly behind Daehyun, contrasting the tremors his feet bangs into concrete. The veins convulse up his arms all the way to his neck, threatening to suffocate the livid man alive. The moment a hand lands on Daeyun's shoulder, Daehyun swivels around and glares daggers through the intruder.

"What?" Daehyun snarls, eyes large and showing too much white like a mad man. His teeth are gritted so hard it grinds dust, soles scorching through the forlorn cement supporting his feet. The streets are largely empty since it's just seven, the scent of dawn reminding Daehyun of Youngjae's tussled bed hair. "What the fuck do you want, hyung?"

Stunned, Yongguk blinks at Daehyun silently while processing his infuriated, dishevelled state. The irascibility throbbing through Daehyun's deeply incised wrinkles and his shaking arms sends Yongguk a step back. Daehyun's head pounds with Youngjae's tormenting shadow within the gap of the ajar door, Youngjae's lips pressed against Himchan's cheek.

The leader clears his throat, speaking quietly but sternly as though afraid to set of a time bomb. "What happened?" Yongguk asks. Daehyun glares so hard his eyes nearly cross in ache and he believes they'll roll out of his sockets. He wants to punch a wall, break plaster over his knuckles and come back bleeding so Youngjae will feel remorseful for how hurt Daehyun is.
"I don't know," Daehyun rebounds sarcastically, as though challenging Yongguk to find out because he himself doesn't know what the fuck happened. Youngjae kissed Himchan. They had slept together in the same room last night, agony, worry and self-doubt concocting insomnia in Daehyun. Between concerned taps of feet and Daehyun perpetually sitting up and at the edge of the bed, Daehyun had gingerly made his way to Himchan's room. He had fumbled with the doorknob to find it locked, onsetting paranoia keeping his eyelids stapled open.

The insecurity creeps under Daehyun's skin as he locks his jaw harder, relentlessly dwelling on self-conscious thoughts and ruptured ribs. Youngjae had kissed Himchan. Why? Does he like Himchan? Does he love Himchan? They have been spending a lot of time together lately. Himchan can't seem to leave Youngjae alone. He keeps asking if Youngjae has eaten and if he wants to go shopping. Youngjae seems to talk to Himchan most.

Why. Is Daehyun not good enough for him?

"What made you angry?" Yongguk rephrases the question, eyes furrowing into a strict frown. Daehyun glares back, cocking his head one side and fingers digging into his palm. "Nothing," he growls, quaking from the sheer intensity of his rage. Within him, the curve of Youngjae's stomach slices up his sinews and imbues pain all over. Has he only been an experiment to Youngjae?

Flutters of lashes. Pristine eyes. Grazes of cheeks. Youngjae's smile. Daehyun's scowl sours noticeably, Yongguk watching in perturbation. He wryly coughs, stating, "You were standing outside Himchan's room. I saw you just before I went into mine." Daehyun snaps his head, as though daring Yongguk to make his own conclusion. "A few minutes later, you nearly broke our door."

"Yeah, so?" Daehyun seethes, toes coiling in agitation. The memory of Youngjae against Himchan's shoulder and the soft look they had exchanged breaks Daehyun's bones into sadistic fragments, clawing irate tears from his eyes. He sucks them in with a rough inhale, boring his eyes through Yongguk's head. Why had Youngjae kissed Himchan? Has Daehyun been forgotten? Thrown away? Abandoned?

Taken aback by Daehyun's unwavering vexation, Yongguk lets out a quiet breath and gently grasps Daehyun's shoulder. This is how Yongguk has been treating him lately. He plays the role of a placating, mature wife to an ill-tempered, childish husband drowning in utter turmoil. Breaking possessions, setting their home ablaze, cacophonous shrieks, that's all Daehyun knows how to do when blinded by his temperament.

"Daehyun," Yongguk starts softly. He seems to mull over how to piece his words together, Daehyun's fuming stature not dissipating one bit.

"I saw you in Youngjae's room that day."

Daehyun's glower melts into puzzlement and he interrogates Yongguk with his eyes. Yongguk averts his gaze before meeting Daehyun's livid eyes, breathing, "That night, you went out for a walk and Youngjae had a nightmare."

The recollection causes Daehyun to still. He thins his lips and subtly gulps, Youngjae's profile against the pillow still vivid in his mind. How long had Yongguk been watching him? He had been there for a while or so, maybe fifteen minutes, or perhaps thirty, possibly an hour.

"I went to the toilet and passed by Youngjae's room. You were crouching by his bedside while he was asleep." Yongguk scrutinises Daehyun, attempting to decipher him. "You kissed him."

Daehyun's blood turns cold. Fear thrashes with his acrimony, his stance slumping and fists uncurling.
Yongguk looks at Daehyun for a elongated moment before squeezing his shoulder. He doesn't seem to suspect anything more than lingering friendship. Daehyun misses the slight frown Yongguk melts into for that split second, irises unreadable.

"I don't know why you're avoiding him," Yongguk sighs, his eye circles and tired voice inciting remorse in Daehyun, "but he obviously still means something to you." Yongguk waits for the weight of his words to sink in as Daehyun glances at the wall, tension in his back crumbling. Daehyun had given in to his demons that day—crept out of his room, incapacitated by withdrawal symptoms of staying too far from his beloved, and admired his face against the gentle moonlight.

"You know you have to face it eventually," Yongguk soothes. "Face him, too." Daehyun's eyes flash with trepidation for that second, Yongguk reassuringly patting his back. It reminds him of his mother back when he was young.

What exactly does he need to face? The fact that he's been staring at Youngjae with enamoured eyes for a long, long time, and he's tragically fallen too deeply in love with him? What will he do when he acknowledges that?

"We're here for you, Daehyun." Yongguk lets his hand slip, offering a small smile. "Don't make us wait too long. Sometimes, if you take too long, the things you love may have already gone by then." He inhales lightly. "You know who I'm talking about."

Daehyun keeps his gaze veered, contour of Youngjae's jawline fresh against his shoulder. Yongguk retreats, turning around and striding down the sidewalk. "Don't stay out too late," he advises gently, nuturing attitude pacifying Daehyun's bulging nerves. Daehyun continues to stare at his feet as Yongguk disappears.

Daehyun's vision focuses as Youngjae solidifies his lucidity, a familiar pair red shoes that doesn't belong to him coming into sight. In his blind madness, he had shoved his feet into the first pair of shoes by the door. Daehyun's eyes scour over the prim shoelaces, colour still radiant and fresh. These are the pair of shoes Youngjae had bought for Daehyun but ultimately decided to throw them away. Daehyun had seen this by the recycling bin before a while back, Junhong too lazy to empty the trash.

Youngjae had taken them back.

a/n:

AFF ate my annotations twice and I WILL NOT BE HUMILIATED LIKE THIS. THEY TOOK ME HOURS COMBINED, AFF *shakes fist*

imma go sleep instead

The first scene is what Daehyun illustrated in his drawing to Youngjae ^^

End notes here: http://www.asianfanfics.com/story/view/630596/15/
Jack and Bill went up the hill
To fetch a pill; get better
"Bill's pretty," Jack said softly
And they burst into laughter

"Lead astray... It's just a phase."
"Gone by the morning after."
Months went by yet still Jack cried,
"I love him, even greater."

Shocked they were, and filled with fear
"Jack's turned into a monster!"
"How wretched... please get better..."
Diagnosed mad as a hatter

Said goodbye, Bill knew not why
In despair, he chased after
It turned worse; too deep in love,
Jack tried to run from danger

Then Jack thought, how sad it was,
To run from his dear lover
Jack fell down and broke his crown
And helpless was the doctor
How did he kill himself?

LITTLE CHILD

Knock knock.

THE MONSTER IN THE CLOSET

Who's there?

LITTLE CHILD

Youngjae.

THE MONSTER IN THE CLOSET

Youngjae who?

MY SIN

Youngjae, your closest friend.

THE MONSTER IN THE CLOSET

Wrong.

MY DOWNFALL

Youngjae, your bandmate.
THE MONSTER IN THE CLOSET

Wrong.

MY LOVE

Youngjae, your soulmate.

Hello?

Daehyun?

"Youngjae?"

Yongguk kneels over the sobbing child, worriedly looking down at him. Youngjae snivels, wiping furiously at the tears running down his chubby cheeks.

"What's wrong?" The bigger boy asks just as his other friends gather, curiously peering down at the crying boy. Youngjae continues to wail loudly and Himchan toddles over, prying Youngjae's hands off his face.

"Youngjae, tell me what's wrong," Himchan firmly says.

Youngjae scrunches up his lips and blows his nose into his sleeve. He points to the closet he is sitting in front of, blurtling through choked cries, "Daehyun won't let me in..."

Junhong kneels down with Youngjae and innocently rubs Youngjae's runny nose. Jongup stares at the cupboard, experimentally trying the doorknob. The doors rattle but they do not budge. Yongguk frowns, knocking on the door.

"Daehyun, what are you doing? Are you guys playing hide and seek?" Yongguk hollers. "Youngjae found you so you have to come out now!"

There is no answer. Himchan pats Youngjae's head and proceeds to bang on the door.

"Daehyun! Why did you lock yourself in there?" He smacks his palm against the wood, causing the whole cabinet to shake. "Come out!"

Yongguk furrows his brows, glancing from the latched cabinet to the howling boy. Daehyun and Youngjae had been playing fine just now; they had been sitting with their toy elephant in the room.
Yongguk had seen Daehyun kiss Youngjae's forehead and Youngjae had hugged him, the two boys talking animatedly and disregarding their toy. Youngjae ran away to hide while Daehyun stood counting, hands plastered over his eyes.

"No," a muffled voice sounds out. Youngjae wails harder and Jongup crawls to his side, hugging him lightly.

Yongguk crosses his arms, sternly commanding, "Daehyun, let Youngjae in."

"No!" The sole syllable is petulant in tone. Youngjae whimpers into his sleeve, nuzzling his wet face into Jongup's shoulder.

"Why not?" Yongguk raises his strict voice, waiting for a reply. Silence passes and Junhong knocks on the door, briefly wondering if Daehyun had fallen asleep.

"Just because!" Daehyun finally yells back.

Himchan huffs and slaps the door in aggravation. "Give us a reason, Daehyun!"

Junhong prowls forward, trying to pull open the locked doors. Youngjae persists in his sobbing, snot running all the way down his chin. Yongguk bends down and wipes the fluid with his shirt.

"Hyung, why are you even in there in the first place?" Junhong questions. "It's dark and scary in there."

Jongup nods fervently while Himchan puffs, "Who cares about you, Daehyun!? No one wants to go in, anyway! There are monsters in the closet!"

"Yeah, hyung," Jongup mumbles, "I once saw a skeleton in the closet. It's so scary."

Quietness surrounds the six boys, one concealed and one bawling away. Daehyun bellows, "Yeah! That's why Youngjae shouldn't come in!"

"But I want to be with you," Youngjae blubbers.

Daehyun shouts back, "No! Go away!"

Youngjae's cries double in intensity at this moment, Jongup wincing in pain. The boy inside the wardrobe remains adamant, insistently screaming at Youngjae to get lost. Acknowledging that Daehyun will continue being obstinate, Yongguk shifts towards Youngjae.

"Come on, Youngjae," Yongguk soothes, stroking the boy's head. "Let's try again later, okay? I'm sure Daehyun will let you in by then." Youngjae lifts his head, sniffling as Yongguk helps Youngjae to his feet. The other three boys follow behind to comfort the crying boy.

"Really, hyung?" Youngjae whispers. Yongguk nods confidently, the five boys leaving Daehyun trapped in the cupboard.
You hear your heartbeat.

You raise your rifle.

Can't find the buck in the scope--

Because your hands are shaking.

(Can't look at him.)

Hold your breath.

(Avoid Youngjae like he's diseased.)

Crosshairs under the buck's shoulder.

The moment of truth has come.

(Just friends, obviously.)

But this buck's too beautiful to kill.

(Youngjae.)

So you make your face a mask.

A mask that hides your face.

A face that hides the pain.

A pain that eats your heart.

A heart nobody knows.

(I love you.)

Bam!

First shot misses!

("Daehyun?")

Bam!

Second shot misses!

("Daehyun, look at me.")

Bam!

Third shot misses!
("Why are you avoiding me?")

Bam!

Fourth shot misses!

Down on one knee.

("I thought we were friends.")

Find the buck in the crosshairs.

It is so beautiful.

Magnificent.

Proud.

Strong.

All you want to be.

But the buck has to die so you can be a man--

(I don't love--)

Has to bleed.

("I thought we were friends.")

Has to fall.

("I thought we were friends.")

Has to die.

(".....I thought we were friends.")

So you can be a man.

What have you done, Jung Daehyun?
crime scene, take 1

A/N: Chapters 17 to 20 are about each member's point of views of certain scenes in the story. They're namely from chapters 6, 7, 9, 11, 12, 13 and 14. It requires a lot of previous knowledge so it might be confusing. I'm sorry. T - T

For each scene, the first word of the paragraph is linked to the chapter where the scene came from. Hover your cursor over the linked word and a small info box will appear after a few seconds, giving you a summary of what happened in that scene.

Like this!

"How Can Mirrors Be Real If Our Eyes Aren't
Said
But
Symbolic That He Is Leaving Him, The End.

Happens in Chap 95. Zayn Malik proposes to Youngjae and he is conflicted because he loves Hairy Harry.

Thanks for reading! ^ - ^

How did he kill himself?

LITTLE CHILD

Knock knock.
THE MONSTER IN THE CLOSET

Who's there?

LITTLE CHILD

Junhong.

Youngjae-hyung has been sitting outside the closet the whole day.

Hyung, aren't you going to let him in?

Daehyun-hyung.

Once upon a time, there was a servant boy who bled to death on the ballroom floor. His hands were mangled with glass shards and he laid in his own blood. In his desperation to piece the broken glass slipper back together, he had repeatedly cut himself and bled to death. No one knows why he had done so, since the prince Jung Daehyun has vowed to marry the girl whom the glass slipper fits.

LET'S PLAY I SPY!

(The blood in your eyes is the best magnifying glass!)

Look closely, my dear child. You will see things you have never seen before. Things you wish you never saw.
"What are you doing, hyung?"

Junhong plops onto the chair beside Daehyun, the latter having been staring into space just moments ago. His misty look fades into indecipherable debris of a dream too far out as Junhong tries to follow Daehyun's initial stare. He finds Youngjiae sitting in front of the mirror, the stylist drawing on make-up for the boy. Vermillion smudges over Youngjiae's lips and Daehyun's hand suddenly blocks his field of vision, forching Junhong to look back at Daehyun.

"Nothing. Just zoned out there for a while," Daehyun answers easily, leaning back into his chair. Junhong nods and mirrors his action, stretching his lanky arms. Daehyun seizes the chance to poke him under his arms and Junhong squeals, slapping Daehyun away.

"Haven't done your make-up yet?" Daehyun questions. Junhong puffs out a sigh and nods tiredly, making a face. Since he's the youngest, he often has to wait his turn for just about everything, which includes make-up. He doesn't like wearing make-up anyway, so it's probably better that he wears it last.

Daehyun melts into a contemplating look at this point, irises fading out into a hazy shade once again. He looks tired, not that it's unexpected. It feels like he underwent a metamorphosis that sewed ebony to the fibre below his lashes, what with how undetachable it is from him. Either that, or the demons within Daehyun have emerged to the point they brim on the edge of his skin.
Undoubtedly, Youngjae is the cause of it. Not him in particular, just the rumours about Daehyun and him spread for a little fun amid the fans. There's a flood of childishness and a tinge of 'things won't always turn out the way you want them to' in it all. They all know what to expect when they become an idol—the cookie-cutter celebrities churned out everywhere have shown just about every aspect of a star's career. Sure, he understands that Daehyun doesn't like it. But to treat Youngjae like this to dispel some meaningless fun is being melodramatic.

They've been told to wait it out since Daehyun has been talked to repeatedly and he is adamant on staying away from Youngjae. They talk no more and treat one another like glass, see-through—not an ounce of humanity to their anatomy, divorced from their identities as the closest of friends. Junhong personally thinks it's a bad move to let them be since the more Youngjae is shoved aside, the more it's starting to make a dent. One that's unfixable, perhaps.

Junhong briefly wonders how it came to this. He traces Daehyun's enraptured stare to find it directed towards the dressers, Youngjae's eyes closed and the stylist painting white onto his skin. Daehyun's voice hastily snaps his neck back.

"We shouldn't wear so much make-up," Daehyun muses casually, scratching his knuckles. "Makes us look like girls."

Junhong erupts in cackles and remarks cheekily, "Yongguk-hyung?"

Daehyun scoffs and shoves him lightly. "Yeah, can't even tell the difference." They dwindle into silence, Junhong swinging his long legs back and forth. Daehyun's amused grin melts away into thinned lips and evident deliberation, Junhong observing him curiously. Daehyun's posture is stiff and he goes from scratching his knuckles to clawing at his palms, particularly the lines engraved on them.

"Yeah... Just the make-up," Daehyun mumbles almost inaudibly, a little timidly, but Junhong manages to catch what he says. He leans forward and raises his brows.

"What's just the make-up?"

The question hangs starkly in the air, tension coiled suddenly like a rope from the ceiling. Upon noticing Daehyun's sullen expression, Junhong almost feels regretful for asking it.

Daehyun rubs the back of his neck and churns out a small smile. "Nothing. Just...

He hesitates for a long time, so long that the conversation falls apart and his opening seems more like a cliff hanger. Junhong nudges Daehyun to continue and offers a grin for assurance.

"Attraction, I guess?" Daehyun meekly whispers. Junhong reclines with enlarged, humorous eyes, sceptically regarding the boy before him. He puts up his hands and leans further away, jokingly darting his eyes around for an escape.

Witnessing the perturbed reaction, Daehyun rushes to clarify. "Just a tiny bit," he emphasises. "Some of you look a little bit pretty with make-up."

"Wow, you're desperate, hyung," Junhong laughs, slapping Daehyun on the shoulder. "I know we've got a no dating policy, but really?" He scoots away. "I better stay away from you."

Junhong darts off and hides behind the chair, comically poking his head out to peek at Daehyun. "Our Secret seniors are here! Don't lose hope, hyung!"

Daehyun laughs none and furrows his eyebrows instead, spouting in a raised voice, "Hey, I don't
actually think you guys are pretty. I was just wondering. The stylists cake so much make-up on you
guys that I couldn't even recognise you guys anymore. Blame yourself for looking like a girl."

Junhong snorts and wiggles his brows persistently. Daehyun deliquesces into a deeper frown,
seeming more urgent by the second. "I seriously don't think that, Junhong. It's the make-up. Look at
how much lipstick they put on you," he rambles, volume heightening. "And your eyeliner's so thick-
"

Junhong grabs the snacks on the nearby desk and shoves a bunch of apple slices into Daehyun's
mouth, guffawing when Daehyun chokes. Daehyun threateningly raises his hand and Junhong
squeaks, cowering. Daehyun snatches the packet away and starts wolfing down the fruits, Junhong
whining for some to no avail.

"I want some. Please, hyung," Junhong whimpers in a high pitch and bats his lashes exaggeratedly.
Daehyun sends him a look of askance.

"What," Junhong snorts and crosses his arms, "Do I not look pretty enough?" He cackles
remorselessly when Daehyun lunges for him.

"You better not tell anyone what I told you," Daehyun warns and pinches Junhong's cheek roughly,
Junhong yelping and slapping him away. "I told you, I didn't mean it. I was just saying," Daehyun
stresses.

The room bustles with movement, stylists darting around as the other members do their make-up.
Youngjae is done with his cover-up and he glances over to the other corner of the room, where
Jongup is sitting on his own. Youngjae settles in the chair beside him and abruptly plops his head
into Jongup's lap. He mouths something to Jongup and pouts, hair sprawled out against Jongup's
thighs.

"Hyung, do you think we'll be allowed to go out for a walk?" Junhong offhandedly asks, patting his
arms absentmindedly. "I hope they do. There's this shoe store I really want to check out."

Daehyun doesn't answer. Jongup tangles his fingers through Youngjae's hair and Junhong veers his
gaze away from them, glancing at Daehyun.

"Hyung?"

"Huh?" Daehyun speaks but his stare adamantly fixates on the pair across the room. His head turns
but his eyes have to be reluctantly ripped away. His expression is eccentrically unfocused, dry lips
parted and mind clearly elsewhere.

"I asked-

Daehyun abruptly reaches over and prods the boy repeatedly, inciting a shriek in Junhong. He bursts
into fits of laughter as tears pool at his eyes. "Stop it, hyung!" He slaps Daehyun's wandering fingers
away and attempts to escape Daehyun's tickling. Daehyun gradually and retracts his arms, casting a
distracted smile towards Junhong.

"Come here." Daehyun lugs Junhong towards his chest and the youngest of the lot uncomfortably
rests against Daehyun, squirming in his hold. Junhong's eyes go from Himchan to Youngjae, who
has moved to the couch and is sitting with Jieun. He glimpses at Daehyun and teasingly elbows him.

"Youngjae-hyung is trying his luck," Junhong snickers. Daehyun jolts upon mention of Youngjae's
name and Junhong reclines slightly, bewilderment drizzled onto the tip of his tongue. He knows
they're not on good terms but to see Daehyun react with such uncharacteristic, instinctive aversion
towards just Youngjae's name is way overboard.

Jieun brushes her fingers over Youngjae's eye circles in concern and Daehyun's hold on Junhong's arm tightens. Junhong winces and watches Daehyun in perplexity. Hyosung joins Youngjae and Jieun on the sofa, giggling at her phone.

Daehyun stands suddenly. Junhong tumbles out of his embrace and onto the chair, observing Daehyun warily as he realises Daehyun has his eyes dead set on Youngjae. The mounts of wrinkles scrawled across his face and the drainage of all saccharine from before is astounding. Junhong rises and continues to observe Daehyun cautiously. It's sad they have to be so watchful.

He doesn't understand why Daehyun is staring but he knows from Daehyun's twisted lips that it isn't something good. "Hyung, do you still want the apple? I can get you more," Junhong chimes and intercepts Daehyun's field of vision. He fortunately shatters Daehyun out of his trance, but tragically, only for a split second.

"It's okay." Daehyun puts up a hand conclusively before Junhong can slip in another word. He strides over to the other side of the room as Junhong bites his lips, a dabble of uncertaining reigning in his veins. Daehyun won't do anything rash—especially not with other people around. But what had happened? Why did Youngjae suddenly catch his attention?

Junhong wills himself to relax, reminding himself they're still 'friends' at the end of the day. He should have more faith in Daehyun. They're not a hopeless case of enemies, just that one is lost and the other stranded.

Jieun ruffles Youngjae's hair. Daehyun is explicitly staring at the three from aside, not bothering to conceal or inject even a drip of subtlety for formality's or pride's sake.

Youngjae speaks. His voice is raised but Junhong can't hear a single thing with the drone and white noise inherent in the atmosphere. Youngjae's eyes gradually veer towards Daehyun, movement so painstakingly slow yet heavy, and his mouth keeps moving. Daehyun is just standing there, motionless.

Junhong takes a step forward and Jieun puts her hand on Youngjae's shoulder. Daehyun and Youngjae are simply staring at each other, so much tension weaved into the imaginary bridge between them that Junhong holds his breath. The atmosphere freezes into unforgiving solitude and a chilling sense of something utterly unrepairable.

There are no words said but the air amplifies its intensity tenfold. Youngjae is glaring so hard his eyes look like they'll snap out of their sockets any moment, like his head will warp inwards and he'll erupt into splatters of blood and sheer hatred. Daehyun is staring back with a sullen expression, animosity slicing through both their heads. Junhong hurriedly crosses over to break apart an upcoming fight.

Before he reaches them, Youngjae rises sharply. Junhong cringes intuitively and his breath hitches. Youngjae swerves on his feet and storms straight out of the room. A loud slam follows and the room goes silent for a moment. Junhong glances back to Daehyun to find his gaze now latched onto the shut door, brows still furrowed and lips mangled into a shadow of a scowl.

"What's going on between you two?" Jieun asks softly, rising to her feet. Daehyun simply continues drilling his gaze through the door, almost like a stubborn child not wanting to lose a stare-off. The door is closed but perhaps because Daehyun's always been so scared of the cameras rolling and catching what goes on behind the scenes, that he thinks he's trapped inside a CCTV. Perhaps so,
because his skin and his flesh are the lens and the cold exterior and his veins are the running wires, and deep inside, the unspeakable lays in trepidation as Daehyun crushes it down till he breaks.

Junhong strides over and lugs Daehyun by the arm, forcing the older boy to look him in the eyes. "Stop it, hyung!" Junhong growls in exasperation. There is barely a trace of anything decipherable within Daehyun's clouded orbs, nothing but the silhouette of a broken friendship deflecting off the surface.

Daehyun thins his lips into a surly, petulant glower and he looks and feels so much like a child in that instant. Junhong swears he sees a glimmer of wetness sitting upon Daehyun's lower lashes. Frustrated, he roughly lets go of Daehyun and follows after Youngjae's footsteps.

I SPY WITH MY LITTLE EYE
SOMETHING I MISTOOK FOR A LIE

Don't these photos mean anything to you, hyung?

Junhong watches as the 'read' notification flashes, now permanent against his message sent to Youngjae. The previous reply from Youngjae, Alright, tell me when you're done backing it up and I'll delete them, stoically stands above along with the numerous photos Junhong had sent Youngjae. He'd made the excuse that his phone was running out of space and so sent specific photos to Youngjae, hoping to incite at least something in Youngjae.

Junhong waits for a few minutes, staring intently at his phone, but puts it down upon realising Youngjae isn't going to answer. He irritatedly runs a hand through his hair, glancing through the corridor into Daehyun and Youngjae's room. They've been having this rift for god knows how long. When are they going to solve it?
It's clear that Daehyun instigated the fight, avoiding Youngjae at all costs. Junhong admits that even if Youngjae tries, he won't end up anywhere since Daehyun hasn't budged for a long time. He keeps his mouth shut when Junhong questions him casually about how Youngjae is doing and whether they'd went to watch that movie together, and he snaps when Junhong pushes too far, slamming his chopsticks down and coldly stating he's full.

Yongguk, Himchan and the manager have sat Daehyun countless of times to talk. They have been utterly cautious with their words, bringing up the usual contributions fans made to the fandom, before touching gingerly on the whole shipping concept. Junhong hadn't actually believed Daehyun would get so worked up over something so overused in the music industry. They're all at the brunt of it, so why does he have to overreact and evade Youngjae like he's diseased? Why does he have to act as if a single, measly comment will break him apart?

Junhong sighs in frustration. He can't remember when they had looked happy within one another's company. The memory is so distant it almost seems imaginary, as though he had simply conjured it up, yet the photos he'd flooded Youngjae with tells otherwise. Junhong scrolls through them, Daehyun and Youngjae standing together in nearly every one of them, inseparable by the hip. The way they're holding one another in these still images are eerily foreign, like a fabrication.

The people around you make up a part of who you are. Their shadows morph into one with your silhouette as they stand with you and the concoction follows you incessantly, an undivorceable part of your anatomy. To see Daehyun and Youngjae severed is quite tragic, like the cruel parting of two lifelong companions. Sure, they bickered often, and sometimes, their fights got physical, but seeing them apart even for a mere few days is odd.

Daehyun clearly still cares for Youngjae. Junhong has been scrutinising his actions lately to find it is in his subtlety that he gives himself away. His quick glances. How he piles up dishes for breakfast on his plate and puts them back when Youngjae finally awakes, last as usual, most of the food cleared. That time when they had just finished their concert, and they were short of one mineral water bottle. Youngjae had been the unlucky guy searching for one, panting breathlessly after their performance. Through his matted, sticky hair, Junhong had watched as Daehyun nearly tore open the bottle but stopped at the last minute. He had left the bottle by the mirror and exited the room, Youngjae finding it and sighing in sweet relief. Junhong had half a mind to tell Youngjae whose it was, but he had figured it would only piss off Youngjae.

Daehyun doesn't hate Youngjae. He still loves him, except it seems like he wants everyone to think otherwise. The thing Junhong doesn't get is why Daehyun avoids Youngjae in private. He can understand if he stays away on stage since he doesn't want to fuel the rumours, but when they're out of the public's eye, it makes no sense. Is he that affected to even elude Youngjae at home on the off chance someone even remotely twists their friendship into a romantic perspective?

(He's scared, you see. Scared they'll see through his skin and find out the truth. Scared they'll dig out through his dull irises that he's only ever been looking at Youngjae. Scared they'll flinch back in utmost horror and write him off as mental. Underneath, Daehyun's a monster, so he tries too hard to seem like he's not. Pathetic.)

The tension is strangling everyone in the team, not just the two in question. Daehyun is continually sullen like a time bomb, zoning out often during practices and song recordings and snapping when any of the members come to close, while Youngjae looks tired enough to die. It's miserable. So, so miserable, and it wraps around the air like the sermons at a funeral.

Junhong swipes through the photos, squinting at several of them with a quiet exhale. They're backstage at a concert in LA and Daehyun has his head buried into Youngjae's neck. He's glancing...
at the camera with such a blinding smile it pricks Junhong to see how far Daehyun had plunged into his anguish. The make-up is scrawled into every crevice in their skin, manifesting a sick, doll-like presence in their pores.

The shots are from a fast burst camera, several split second interval photos lined up, the flash so bright it incises every single detail on their faces. Daehyun's laugh grows with Youngjae's grin, their group huddling together to celebrate the end of their tour. Daehyun has his chin nuzzled into Youngjae's shoulder while looking up at the boy, melting into a soft smile and half-lidded eyes.

Junhong tosses his phone aside and grabs a mask, deciding to take a walk. He strides out to the living room. Daehyun is curled up against the arm rest, blearily blinking at the television. Junhong quietly stands over him and Daehyun barely registers his presence. He looks so tired Junhong wonders if Daehyun will drop dead the next moment.

"Hyung."

Daehyun grunts lowly and lolls his head to the other side, glimpsing at Junhong thoughtlessly. His head seems utterly heavy that he can't even lift it up himself, that if he stands, he'll collapse instantly. Junhong scrutinises him for an extended while, the creases across his cheeks crisp and somberness grim in his eyes.

"It's sad," Junhong breathes, and what he really wants to say is that it's pathetic. Pathetic because Youngjae has always made Daehyun grin brighter than the million-watt sun burning auburn through eclipses. But because Daehyun can't get over his own demons, can't close his ears to the voices around them, he ends up having to forsake their friendship, ends up demolishing seven hundred miles of smiles in 4/4 time and capriccio, ends up giving up his own happiness in surrender. Avoiding Youngjae won't solve the problem if it's embedded in Daehyun himself.

Daehyun raises his brows. "What's sad?" He croaks, voice splintering into fragments.

Junhong presses his lips together and spins on his feet. He heads towards the front door.

"That you're the one making yourself unhappy."

I SPY WITH MY LITTLE EYE

SOMETHING I NEVER KNEW WAS SO FAR FROM GOODBYE
Budding dawn shatters through the windows and simulates the still air with clarity, emphasising the dust particles thrashing within the light. Junhong sits in bed with his eyes wide open, tossing and turning under the covers. He restlessly gets up, scratching his head gruffly before finally rising.

He heads for the toilet, glancing blearily at the clock in the living room. He should honestly be using all these precious few minutes ticking by for sleep, considering they barely are given breaks before they are shipped off to the next country. But the insomnia hauls Junhong from his bed, his sluggish form toiling out of the room away from Yongguk's snoring.

The morning gleams in bruised black and maroon, Junhong brushing his teeth and washing his face. He schlepps back to the room, choosing to go for a walk and ransacking the drawers for his earphones. His search ends up futile and he considers going through Yongguk's belongings but ultimately decides against it, lest the leader castigates him for it. He recalls the new headphones Jongup had bought for Youngjae, a branded set he hasn't yet tried before. A few hours wouldn't hurt... Youngjae has been sleeping in lately so Junhong can most probably sneak it back in before then.

Stretching himself, Junhong makes his way to Daehyun and Youngjae's room, gingerly creaking open the door. He makes his first two steps on tiptoes, darkness drenching the room and hindering his movements through the mess of paraphernalia on the ground. Junhong half wishes he had a flashlight, glancing over to the huddled lump on Youngjae's bed.

Daehyun's bed is empty. Junhong frowns in bewilderment, having not seen anyone out in the living room just now. He creeps forward and does a double take, stopping short upon recognising that there are two figures buried under the sheets on Youngjae's bed. Junhong's eyes fly wide open, disbelief striking the boy as he stares dumbly at the jumbled heap.

Daehyun and Youngjae are in the same bed. They're sleeping together.

Dubiosity punctures Junhong and he stealthily steps towards the bed, blinking down at Youngjae within Daehyun's embrace. Youngjae is tucked under Daehyun's chin, laid against Daehyun's chest like a coddled child.

The rising sun lends helpful lucidity as light exposes the pair on the bed, intimate friendship woven into their position. Junhong stares for a moment too long, tensed shoulders relaxing with a massive relief that had almost seemed unattainable yesterday. Daehyun and Youngjae had not been talking yesterday, as per routine, but something must have happened last night. They've finally cleared up their misunderstandings.

Finally...

Junhong melts into a small smile, grabbing the headphones from the desk and tiptoeing out. A surge of joy and reprieve overwhelms him as he strolls down the streets, anticipating the other members' reactions upon finding out Daehyun and Youngjae have finally, after so goddamn long, resolved their conflicts. Will they finally talk across the dining table, throwing good-natured insults at one
another? Will they resume watching movies together, kicking each other off the couch? Will they fight for the shower and end up laughing so hard they don't notice Himchan sneaking in?

It's been a long time since they've been just a few centimetres apart. He imagines the relief easing the wrinkles down Yongguk's nose, Himchan and Jongup finally able to grin broadly without feeling out of place in the tense atmosphere. Things are back to normal, and the sensation is so exhilarating. Daehyun and Youngjae never looked too right apart from one another, anyway.

Junhong returns home after a few hours, having trekked through the city while the cool morning settled within the brimming daylight. He opens the door, fiddling with the headphones hung around his neck. Daehyun sits at the end of the couch with Himchan, both blankly staring at the television screen. Junhong grins toothily, waving enthusiastically to the both of them. Himchan raises an eyebrow as Daehyun churns out a wry, amused smile. His lips look so strained Junhong doesn't doubt it'll snap like an abused rubber band.

"What's he so happy for?" Himchan scoffs between munches of his sandwich, to which Daehyun shrugs. Daehyun rises, heading for the kitchen to assumedly grab breakfast. Youngjae emerges from the bathroom at this instant and woozily walks to the kitchen. Daehyun halts instantly in his footsteps and abruptly turns back, sitting on the sofa again.

Junhong furrows his brows and nimbly ducks past Youngjae, returning the headphones. He goes to join Youngjae in the kitchen.

"Hyung," Junhong excitedly greets, earning a muffled grunt from Youngjae. Youngjae pulls out two pieces of bread and looks over. "Have you eaten?" Upon seeing Junhong shake his head, Youngjae tosses out another two pieces.

"Jam, please! Thanks, hyung," Junhong chimes, patiently waiting and then stuffing his mouth with bread.

"Hey, hyung. You know that new horror movie I told you about? Keeper of Darkness?" Junhong queries, to which Youngjae hums groggily.

"Well, it's out now. I was thinking maybe you, me and Daehyun could go watch it together."

Youngjae visibly stiffens. He shoots Junhong a cutting look and almost spits, "You and him can go together. I don't want to."

"Why not? I thought you wanted to watch the movie," Junhong echoes. Youngjae narrows his eyes dangerously.

"You know why, Junhong. Stop acting dumb," Youngjae growls.

"What?" Junhong questions, blinking in befuddlement. Youngjae walks off without another word and disappears into his room.

Daehyun stands at this moment, ambling into the kitchen. He grabs the bread and chugs down some juice from a misplaced carton while Junhong gapes in perplexity. Aren't they okay with one another now?

"Daehyun-hyung." Junhong stops Daehyun just as he leaves, the other with a sandwich shoved between his lips. Daehyun raises his eyebrows, eye circles darkly lining his cheeks. Yongguk toddles in and curls himself up on the chair, head lolling off to the side as he sobers up form his slumber.

"Did you talk to Youngjae-hyung today?" Junhong doesn't know how to phrase the question. What
does he want to ask? The fact that Daehyun and Youngjae are able to share a bed evidently underscores that they get along to at least talk. Why are they still avoiding each other?

Daehyun stills. He regards Junhong with knitted brows, interrogating scowl mashed into his face. Yongguk perks up, gently grabbing Junhong and flashing him a warning look. Junhong watches with bewilderment as Daehyun files out, flinging himself onto the couch beside Jongup.

"Why did you ask him that?" Yongguk softly questions. "You know how they are with one another right now."

Junhong flutters his lashes, lips parted as he slumps onto the chair. Had his fatigue conjured up some illusion as he entered their room? He'd seen them together. He did. Why are they still acting like this when in broad daylight?

"Hyung," Junhong starts, still trying to make sense of the situation. "They should be fine with each other now."

"What makes you think that all of a sudden?" Yongguk frowns.

Junhong massages his temple and murmurs, "I saw them together. They were sleeping in the same bed, hyung. I went into their room this morning."

"What? Are you serious?" Yongguk snaps his head up. Scepticism scrawls all over his face.

Junhong nods fervently. "It's true, hyung. I swear. I snuck into their room to get Youngjae-hyung's headphones and I saw them sleeping together."

"They were sharing a bed?" Yongguk questions hesitantly.

Junhong nods slowly and watches as Yongguk sinks into deep thought. Nothing makes sense and he can't be bothered to hurl himself into the strange tug of war Daehyun and Youngjae have embroiled themselves within. Push, pull, push, pull, till they both fall into the mud like the absolute fools they are. Junhong emits a lengthy exhale, blocking out the blinding sunlight chugging in with a raised hand.

I SEE WITH MY BLOODSHOT EYE

NO POSSIBLE REASON WHY-
"What's his problem?" Himchan's growl resounds through the air, a chilling silence left in place after Daehyun had violently slammed the door shut and stormed out of the house. Junhong instinctively glances over to Youngjae, the eerie foreboding escalating within his ribcage.

Something had distinctly happened yesterday. He had never seen Himchan so furious before, his usual lighthearted demeanour maintaining an ever-present calmness whenever tensions between the memebers arise. Jongup had been instructed to switch rooms with Youngjae last night and Junhong had tried to sound as offhanded as he could when he asked Yongguk what happened. All he had gotten was a wry smile and reassuring words. *It's nothing.*

Nothing seems to make sense between Daehyun and Youngjae nowadays. Junhong thought he had it all figured it out—it was just some stupid, trivial problem that Daehyun was overreacting to. Right now, he can't deduce just what in the world is brewing between those two. Unsolvable hatred? Insoluble animosity? Or is it withdrawal from their ridiculous evasion game?

Yongguk sighs, exhaustion creating tremors in the atmosphere. The hinge of the door has gone crooked, jutting out abnormally like a snapped, twisted bone. Youngjae squats at this moment and picks up something from below the couch. Junhong cranes his neck and Youngjae hurriedly ensconces it within his palm. His movements are a split second too slow, Junhong catching sight of the square casing shaped similarly to compact cases.

*Why is it there? We never touch the spare make-up kit.*

Yongguk snatches his wallet and a mask, flinging the door open. "If Daehyun comes home, leave him alone." They nod without question and Yongguk disappears out the door. Junhong scrutinises Youngjae as he nonchalantly yawns, evidently not too startled by the incident.

"Himchan-hyung. I'm going to stay in my room for the whole day. That's okay, right?"

Himchan whirrs his head towards Youngjae, brows furrowed in consternation. Junhong watches as Youngjae clamps his hands repeatedly on the compact case, churning out a light sigh.

"I mean, now that he's out of the house... I just need some time to myself. To think over everything. Do you think you guys could leave me alone just for today?"

Himchan's expression spells clear reluctance. The eye circles beneath Youngjae's eyes are so prominent it looks as though they have entrenched themselves into his skin. He looks so miserable Junhong wants so desperately to offer up himself to carry some of the weight off his shoulder.

Himchan nods. "Take care of yourself."

Junhong swallows back the lump in his throat as Youngjae hums, pacing towards his room. His footsteps hasten as he approaches the door, hand grappling rather panicking for the doorknob. Once he vanishes, Himchan turns to the two remaining members.
"Don't disturb Youngjae," Himchan advises, shoulders slumping as the stress collapses onto his back. Junhong half wishes they could rewrite time and destroy every one of their accomplishments, the dances they've ingrained into their bones and the lyrics imprinted onto their lips, just so he can see the youth and innocence glowing from their faces. They're hurting. Junhong doesn't understand why.

The two nod quietly, filing to their rooms. Yongguk returns about half an hour later with his irises shaded in contemplation. Himchan emerges from the room and Junhong hears hushed whispers exchanged.

"We have to talk to them," Junhong manages to discern. He strides out and thins his lips the moment Yongguk and Himchan abruptly stops speaking.

"I'm not a kid, hyung," Junhong pointedly states, eyes narrowed. Yongguk flutters his lashes and averts his gaze. He nods in resignation, finally meeting Junhong's strict gaze.

"We don't know what's going on either," Yongguk confesses, frustratedly running a hand through his hair.

"Did you find Daehyun-hyung?" A small voice mumbles from behind, Jongup exiting his room. Yongguk nods stiffly. "I left him alone for him to cool down. He'll come back once he lets off some steam."

"Do you know why he got so angry suddenly, hyung?" Jongup asks, verbalising the question in Junhong's head. Himchan and Yongguk exchange glances.

Yongguk mumbles, "I... don't really know. But I saw him standing outside Himchan's room before that."

"Hyung, you and Youngjae-hyung were in the room together, right?" Junhong remarks pensively. Himchan licks his lips and cautiously answers, "Yeah, Yongguk just told me Daehyun was watching us. I don't know what pissed him off."

He withers slightly at Jongup's questioning stare. "We weren't bad-mouthing him or anything. We were just watching videos."

Junhong contemplates revealing what he had seen but decides against it, seeing Yongguk and Himchan's tight-lipped faces. If they aren't going to tell him anything, then he'll have to figure it out himself. Whether they've come to a conclusion, Junhong doesn't know, but there is obviously more to the situation than it seems.

If Daehyun had been standing outside Himchan's room where Youngjae was right before he flew into a rage, it's evident Youngjae has something to do with it. What did he do to provoke Daehyun?

And why did he take the compact case?

Junhong returns to his room and settles down on the bed, mulling so hard he feels like his neck will snap any moment. Himchan periodically goes to Youngjae's door, hoisting his hand up to knock but recoiling at the last second. As declared, Youngjae remains ensconced in his room for the remainder of the day.

Evening dawns. The dorm is grimly silent, Daehyun and Youngjae's absences grating the air. Himchan cooks dinner early and uses it as an excuse to check on Youngjae. Junhong follows behind
and Himchan spares him a quizzical glance before knocking on the door. Youngjae hums and
Himchan creaks the door open to find the boy lying down, back facing him.

"Youngjae, I brought you dinner."

Before Himchan can step inside, Youngjae returns, "Thanks, hyung. Leave it on the desk."

Silence passes. Himchan opens his mouth to protest but Youngjae cuts him off.

"I'll eat later. I'm really sleepy now."

Himchan retracts his outstretched foot and heeds Youngjae's request, placing the plate on the table.
He lingers for a short while and reluctantly leaves, shutting the door. Himchan frowns at Junhong
and Junhong backs away, strolling to the dining table.

They eat in meek conversation, no one daring to disturb the overhead melancholy hanging from the
ceiling. Yongguk places down his chopsticks and grabs their plates, moving them to the living room
and flicking on the television. They ease into a more relaxed mood and eventually, the ambience
reverts to normal, Himchan loudly cackling at the screen while Jongup nudges him to lower his
boisterous booms.

The lively aura doesn't last. It drops disastrously into a sudden diminuendo when the front door's
lock rattles, and burns out completely when the door flings open. The television blares but the voices
are mute, Daehyun disregarding the four on the couch.

It's late. Yongguk presses his lips together and starts gently, "Daehyun, have you eaten your dinner?"

Daehyun nods once, not bothering to spare Yongguk a glance. Himchan releases a weary exhale and
utters, "I hope you're feeling better."

His words remain stale in the air as Daehyun wholly ignores Himchan, the only indication of him
having heard Himchan being his doubly taut glower. He heads straight for the shower as Himchan
curses under his breath, regretting showing even an ounce of concern for Daehyun.

Yongguk taps Junhong on the shoulder. "Go tell Youngjae Daehyun's back," he bids.

Junhong rises immediately and ambles over, knocking and deliberately opening the door without
waiting for an answer. Youngjae is sitting up on his bed, drenched in darkness with only a small
reading lamp to provide a pathetic amount of illumination. Youngjae jolts slightly but he does not
turn to greet him.

"Daehyun-hyung is back," Junhong quietly informs. Youngjae hums hoarsely, not lifting his gaze
from the book. He looks strange under the cloak of all black, the lower half of his face dimly lit by
the diffracting light. His lips are oddly red, his face eccentrically white, and his eyes are particularly
dark.

Junhong glances to the spick and span plate on the table, not a morsel left on the edges. He takes the
plate and looks back to Youngjae. Youngjae shifts, light trailing up for a split second and revealing-

Is that... eyeshadow?

Junhong widens his eyes and scrutinises Youngjae's face more thoroughly, jutting his neck out for a
better view. He can't make out anything as the lighting is too dim, obscuring most of Youngjae's
face. Youngjae rotates his head towards Junhong and Junhong swiftly slips out, shutting the door.
He remains rooted to the ground as he processes the furtive glimpse of clumped lashes.
Jongup inquisitively goes up to him, arching a brow.

"Hyung." Junhong blinks rapidly, gradually working his legs towards the kitchen. Jongup follows behind and Junhong dumps the plate into the sink, staring at Jongup with a dumbfounded look.

"Youngjae-hyung was wearing make-up," Junhong blathers, the declaration even strange on his own tongue.

"What?" Jongup brashly answers, now cocking both his eyebrows.

"I'm serious," Junhong blurs, still flabbergasted. "He was wearing make-up. Eyeshadow."

"Are you sure?" Jongup dubiously response and sceptically looks back. Junhong nods fervently and insists, "I'm serious! Believe me, hyung. I saw it. There was glitter above his eyes."

"I think you saw wrong," Jongup doubtfully replies. "Why would Youngjae-hyung be wearing make-up at home? Wasn't he sleeping? Or... maybe he's going out."

"Hyung, we're not going out for a performance. It's almost midnight," Junhong presses sharply. "Youngjae-hyung was wearing make-up, I swear."

Unconvinced, Jongup parts his lips to speak when Daehyun emerges from the bathroom stall. Jongup instantaneously quietens down and Daehyun strides off to his room. Jongup and Junhong scamper out behind him and Yongguk stops Daehyun halfway.

"Maybe you and Himchan should exchange rooms for tonight," Yongguk whispers, tone kind. Daehyun slowly raises his head, menacing glare drilling Yongguk into debris. Junhong shivers and retreats at the irate aura emanated.

"Why?" Daehyun seethes, words smothered by his clenched jaw. The veins up his bulging biceps thicken visibly against his skin and Yongguk steps back warily.

"It'll be better for you two to be apart for now," Yongguk placates.

"There's nothing wrong with us." Daehyun slaps the towel over his shoulder and marches to his room.

Himchan sighs and calls just as Daehyun reaches for the door knob. "Don't pick a fight with him, Daehyun. I'm warning you."

His blunt words stab the silence. Daehyun’s grip tightens unnaturally against the turned knob and he pushes open the door. Daehyun pauses in his steps and the air goes cold, anxiety permeating each and every member. Yongguk reaches out but Daehyun kicks the door shut, effectively isolating him and Youngjae from the rest.

Himchan rises from the sofa and stretches with an exaggerated yawn.

"Alright, bed time, kids. Nothing to see here." He jokingly ushers Jongup and Junhong towards their respective rooms.

Junhong halts and argues, "It's only twelve, hyung." Usually, they would be over the moon for even an inch more of sleep, but the conundrum sitting behind the closed door claws at him.

"What do you mean it's only twelve?" Himchan scoffs, pushing Junhong harder towards his room.
"It's so dark out. Close your eyes and go to sleep," he jokingly lulls, though the sharp warning tone is drenched within. "There's nothing for you to see here."

Himchan tiptoes slightly and pats Junhong's head. Junhong deliberates on telling Himchan what he had seen. But once again, sensing the covertness in Himchan's easy smile, he decides to settle with a question.

"Are you going to stay up, hyung?"

Something had happened yesterday. That was why Himchan had gotten so mad; that was why the compact case was underneath the sofa; that was why Youngjae had dolled himself up.

What's going on?

The moonlight stretches over Himchan's face. Himchan smiles harder and his lashes bat weakly against his cheeks, him letting out a drained sigh.

"Can't be helped."

GAME OVER

What was it that made them cry,

What was it that never was a lie,

What gave it away that it was far from goodbye,

And what was it that made you ask why?

Silly child, it was love.
You find another glass slipper in the attic where the boy sleeps, similarly broken, along with a torn dress. From the uncountable, minuscule smithereens, it seems like it was intentionally smashed.

The prince is heartbroken as every girl in the kingdom has tried on the slipper yet no one fits it. You consider putting the fragments back together—just out of curiosity (eerie suspicion)—to see if it matches the boy’s foot.

**WARNING**

Ignorance is bliss.

Do you still want to play?
hi! i'll be updating every two days because this fiction is already complete and i don't want to spam you guys with a huge word chunk

How did he kill himself?

Innocent Child

Knock knock.

The Monster in the Closet

Who's there?

Innocent Child
Jongup.

Hyung, please let Youngjae-hyung in.

He hasn't moved since three days ago.

I thought you two were friends.

Once upon a time, there was a boy named Yoo Youngjae, who slept for an eternity in a castle.

\begin{align*}
\text{HE} & \_\_\_\_S\ \text{ME} \\
\text{He wore a bloody gash across his wrist, made with the prick of a spindle.} \\
\text{\textit{HE}} & \_\_\_\_S\ \text{ME}\ \text{NOT} \\
\text{By his head sat the wicked fairy in a pretty little bottle of pills.} \\
\text{\textit{HE}} & \_\_\_\_S\ \text{ME} \\
\text{And only true love's kiss could awaken the sleeping prince.} \\
\text{\textbf{I WISH HE'D NOT}}
\end{align*}

\textbf{LET'S PLAY HANGMAN!}
"Are you sure we should leave them alone?"

Jongup paces after Himchan quickly, the door swinging shut behind them. The company building is awfully quiet today with the trainees on a different floor, the group here to review their recent performances. They've just left Daehyun and Youngjae alone in the same room, having finished their self-assessment.

Himchan falters in his footsteps and clears his throat, cocking his head back with a grimace. "Here's hoping so," Himchan sighs. "They need to talk it out, so they better use this chance to."

"But-" Jongup recalls just moments ago the glare of betrayal pervading Youngjae's pupils, so unforgiving it ran chills down Jongup's spine. He really wonders how Daehyun and Youngjae's friendship had deteriorated to such a point, that even leaving them alone with one another is considered treachery.

Jongup isn't too sure if the plan concocted by their manager and the older members will work, especially with how deliberately it had been orchestrated. He tensely glances back to the closed door while Himchan calmly claws out change from the bottom of his pocket, slipping them into the vending machine. They sit outside the room on the bench with Himchan's slurps resounding through the quietness, waiting, waiting, waiting.

It's strange what they're doing, as if they're lingering in the aisle in the hospital outside the operating room. The wheeled in patient, ripped apart from head to toe, remains bleeding inside with only self-administered remedies and nothing to guide him but intuition (and love) in stitching himself back together. They're hoping that Daehyun and Youngjae will emerge together instead of the futile scenario where Daehyun staggers out first and Youngjae remains behind, bedridden, both in their bloody pools of hatred.

It's stupid, Jongup thinks. He suspects there's more to the feud than just Daehyun's hypersensitivity to the public's comments, since Daehyun persists in his aversion like an olympic sport even when the cameras are turned off and they are finally removed of the pressure to be perfect. That maybe Daehyun had gotten offended by something Youngjae had said and Youngjae is refusing to apologise.

That happens often, and all it takes is some casual acting on Youngjae's part, Daehyun's eventual
confrontation and the blow-up to reach the finale. It's either unrelenting screams and harsh insults or brutal fists and bloody lips, and then everything cools down. Repeat the routine some time later.

They can fix things. They always do. Why would something so small affect them? Sure, the public thinks differently of their friendship, but they know what goes on between them. When the curtains fall and they take a bow, their hands are interlinked and they keep them so backstage. Loving touches, affectionate gazes, two friends who found each other in the gruelling, throat-slicing competition of the industry. If they made it work then, they can make it work now—it's all whether they want it to or not.

(The curtains are stuck and Daehyun's pulling, pulling so hard his tendon rips and he's begging for the show to stop. But on the playbill, it's scrawled on that the audience will be watching for the rest of eternity—you were warned, Daehyun—so he has no choice to keep his mask on. The veil demands he play Romeo to his wry, amused Juliet, composed of a boy with summer-like grins and apple lips from warm March. Just a light-hearted comedy. Don't worry, Daehyun, you'll get a few interludes every now and then. Nothing to get worked up about.

But perhaps the show has gone on for too long, and the little breaks in between aren't enough for Daehyun. His role maliciously engulfs him and demands more than the skin on his back, and his mask burns right into his face. It's welded on and Daehyun tries deliriously to claw it off before it suffocates him, but even as his fingernails tear off his cuticles, it stays relentlessly on.

Daehyun can't find the line between reality and illusion anymore. In his desperation, he draws one between him and Youngjae backstage to keep them apart. Act so wretchedly behind the curtains that yes, it's nothing but a show, go overboard and isolate himself because he can't trust how he'll react to Youngjae's saccharine smiles. If Daehyun wants to live, if he wants to breathe, he had better stay away from Yoo Youngjae, else the mask will suffuse his skin and he'll lose his original self forever.

What Daehyun doesn't realise is that it's always been him on stage. The mask was his face all along and he had tried to claw at something so innate, so inseparable from his sinews. And what happened was that in his hysteria, he hammered a vizard onto his face to hide that hideous, unnatural freakshow underneath. It's pretend, for god's sake. Jung Daehyun, you aren't actually looking at Youngjae that way, are you?)

"How do we know if they're going to talk?" Jongup asks, the question oddly sounding like he's about to perform an interrogation.

Himchan shrugs and mutters, "If they want to fix things—if their friendship still means something to them—they have to. We're giving them a chance."

"But..."

Both Daehyun and Youngjae are stubborn in their own right, butting headstrong into one another as exemplified by their occasional rifts. It's more likely Youngjae won't show even a hint that he gives a damn and will walk right out. Or maybe it'll be Daehyun, since it's clear he's been taking the initiative to.

Jongup has seen their manager speak several times to Daehyun, pulling him aside after their practices and instructing everyone to go grab a drink. Being in the public eye can be devastatingly stressful, and sometimes, Jongup thinks the practice lights above their heads bash down too hard on Daehyun's slouched back. Their breaks aren't enough.

"Let's just try it, alright?" Himchan counters in a rather peevish tone, but he instantly softens in apology. He offers his drink to Jongup and Jongup acquiesces, gulping some of it down. The
consistent ticking of the wall clock pricks Jongup's skin lightly, as if tapping on his shoulder to turn back.

The door swings open. Jongup rises like a relative in wait of a loved one's surgery outcome and Himchan pats him on the thigh, reminding him to be casual. Daehyun walks out and Himchan rises with a yawn, stretching himself.

"You want to get a drink too?" Himchan hums. Daehyun nods and halts in his steps beside Jongup and Himchan. He looks to Jongup with drooping eyes, the exhaustion writhing through his grunt.

"Room with me for the continent tour."

Daehyun nonchalantly steps forward to the vending machine and plugs in several coins, a mineral water bottle rattling out noisily. Jongup blinks in bewilderment and before he can breathe a word, Himchan has already grabbed Daehyun. The sheer irritation scalds Himchan's face as he tugs Daehyun around.

Daehyun indifferently cracks open the bottle and slurps it up.

Himchan scowls and grips him tightly, spitting, "Daehyun, what the goddamn hell is wrong with you?"

Daehyun stares back impassively though the wrinkles beneath his eyes visibly twitches out of agitation.

"There's nothing wrong with me," he returns in an overdone insouciance.

Himchan growls and raises his voice, "Then, stop acting like a prick. Seriously, you think you can just give Youngjae this sort of bullshit? He's put up with enough of it."

Himchan locks his jaw and he decidedly shoves Daehyun aside, stomping into the room.

The aisle is silent. Jongup awkwardly spins on his foot and follows after Himchan, but a hand on his shoulder promptly stops him. Daehyun shakes the outstretched drink slightly, dark eyes reflecting nothing of the overhead, flickering lamp.

"Give this to him."

Jongup blankly takes the drink when Daehyun thrusts it towards him. Daehyun begins to dig into his back pocket and Jongup flutters his lashes.

"To who, hyung?"

Daehyun finally claws out a tube and drops it into Jongup's palm. The lights above illuminate Daehyun's eye circles, the swollen flesh drooping down like sandbags. He looks tired. Very, very tired. It's pitiful, and Jongup wishes he could do something about it.

"Youngjae."

Jongup shrinks back on Daehyun's behalf, the taboo name tumbling out of Daehyun's lips. Daehyun turns and heads for the bathroom, uttering not another word. Jongup inspects the tube in his hand to find it's a chapstick, the ones the stylists vehemently stuff their pockets with because lipstick can't stretch smoothly over tattered lips.

Jongup pads back into the room swiftly, stopping upon seeing Youngjae with his head buried into
his arms. He is visibly fuming, arms rising and falling with growing fury. Himchan is crouched beside Youngjae and attempting very painstakingly to cool Youngjae down, the curled up boy shaking from pure aggravation. Himchan's hand runs down Youngjae's back placatingly and when Himchan notices Jongup's arrival, he gestures for Jongup to take over and excuses himself promptly.

Jongup can make a good guess that Youngjae is crying (out of chagrin, despondency not possible) from the strict look etched into Himchan's face. Jongup squats beside Youngjae and delicately pats the boy's shoulder, able to hear his seething, smothered sobs. Youngjae lifts his head up after a moment, waving Jongup's hand aside and tightening his lips coldly, trying desperately to control the immense rage coursing through his blood. Youngjae hates crying in front of anyone, so Daehyun must have seriously pushed the limit.

Jongup offers the water bottle and Youngjae takes it wordlessly, gulping it all down and choking after a moment. They sit in quietness as Jongup glances to the doorway, vague, raised voice of Himchan echoing in the aisle. The conundrum thrashes through his head. Why couldn't Daehyun have given it himself? Is he that stubborn to insist on such a chilly facade?

"I'm sick of this," Youngjae finally breathes, voice airy and fragile. "I hate him. I fucking hate him."

As his lips move, the bright lights of the room emphasises the tear of skin crossing the edge of Youngjae's mouth. Jongup exhales softly and plays with the chapstick, holding it out when Youngjae calms down from his bout of crying. Youngjae regards him with squinted eyes and Jongup retreats, looking down at the floor. Youngjae takes it out of his hand and removes the cap, wiping his lips and applying it on.

"Daehyun's just sick," Himchan sighs gently as he reenters the room, bending down to comfort Youngjae. "Youngjae, he's only feeling under the weather, okay? Don't worry too much. He'll be back to normal before you know it."

"Under the weather? For months?" Youngjae snarls. "If you mean he's sick in the head, or that he's sickening, he's disgusting, then yeah." He grips the chapstick hard and crushes the finished drink. Himchan notices the water and turns to Jongup with questioning eyes.

"...Isn't that Daehyun's?" He hushedly asks.

Youngjae snaps his head towards them. "What is?"

Jongup fidgets and points to both of the objects in Youngjae's hand. An ear-piercing racket reverberates through the air, and Youngjae storms past the two hurled items and out of the room.
"Do you think anyone will recognise us, hyung?" Junhong cheekily asks and jabs Jongup in the ribs. He peers around enthusiastically and shrinks back into his coat, pulling down his cap. Jongup tiptoes and taps Junhong's snapback fondly.

"Don't get your hopes up," Jongup hums. The signs nailed into the walls glimmer in the late afternoon, cool weather unreadable with the streak of sunlight cutting through the greyish clouds. The crowd is somewhat sparse, gathering at flamboyant signs and posters of models. The five of them stroll down the sidewalk, no one mentioning anything about Youngjae not coming along in Daehyun's presence.

"I want to check out that new sporting goods shop," Junhong chimes and adjusts his mask. Jongup glances over to see Yongguk distancing himself, practically itching to go into the old records shop by the corner. However, he notices how far he has strayed and hurriedly scurries back.

"Just go already, dumbass," Himchan huffs lightheartedly and pushes Yongguk towards the store. Yongguk adamantly shakes his head and obediently waddles back to them.

"What, you haven't gone out for so long you forgot how to shop?" Himchan snorts. He winds an arm around Yongguk heartily and Yongguk nudges him away with a laugh.

"You too, Junhong. Let's just all go our separate ways. I want to get some coffee first," Himchan cajoles.

"Alright, alright. So we meet back here in two hours' time?" Yongguk suggests and stops in his footsteps, gesturing to the nearby fountain.

"Okay," Junhong pipes up, Daehyun and Jongup nodding along. Himchan jogs off to the café and Yongguk restrains himself from skipping away.

Junhong enthusiastically scurries to the sporting goods shop, eager to check out the skateboards there. Jongup glimpses at Daehyun as they follow behind.

"Do you have any place you want to go, hyung?" Jongup asks.

Daehyun takes a moment to acknowledge the question and turns to Jongup with a blink. "Sorry, what?"

"Do you have anywhere you want to go, hyung?" Jongup repeats.

Daehyun shakes his head and returns back to his silence, the subtle misery warping the bones jutting
out of his cheeks. Jongup keeps his words to himself and they pace after Junhong, the boy merrily swinging through the aisles.

Jongup stashes a few things into Daehyun's arms every once in a while, chiming heartily and pleading him through his eyes to talk. Daehyun responds succintly, though he tries his best to joke around and laugh.

It's sad. Daehyun is almost unrecognisable in this state, his eternally boisterous voice churning out disjointed arpeggios. The way he squirms around, even without Youngjae's presence (the supposed fuel for his aggravation), is perturbing, as though he's uncomfortable in his own skin. He looks perpetually out of place even when standing alone, like he's displaced from his own self, out of his senses, and Jongup knows every one of them in the group has been trying the hardest to put him back in his own shoes.

(If they were to look closely, they would realise Daehyun's been trapped in his red shoes for ages. The ones pretty Yoo Youngjae bought for him, the ones the dear apple of Jung Daehyun's eyes never bothered to give him. He wants to get out of them, not have them glued to the soles of his feet. The rest don't understand that and are shoving him back insistently into it, to Youngjae.)

What's worse is that Daehyun is Youngjae's point of reference. Youngjae can't find where he stands if Daehyun himself is lost—Youngjae has been looking more and more distracted lately.

They wander into an electronics store and wind through the aisles, Junhong prodding at boxes and catching them hastily when he knocks them over by accident. They stop at a random shelf, looking through the headphones and other devices on sale.

Junhong prances off to the next aisle to look at recording equipment. Daehyun clears his throat at this moment.

"This is nice," he starts hoarsely, thumbing out a sample pair of gold headphones on display.

Jongup hums in agreement and takes it when Daehyun hands it to him, examining it for a while before turning away. Daehyun's voice catches him again.

"Whose birthday is coming next?"

Jongup stops short upon processing the question and furrows his brows. Their birthdays have all passed this year, which means Youngjae's birthday would be next. Jongup keeps quiet and deliberates for a split second on whether to spout Youngjae's name, like it's a forbidden word bound to curse Daehyun to the depths of oblivion.

"Youngjae-hyung."

Jongup utters it softly, gently, quietly, in an attempt to slowly let it sink into Daehyun's mind. Daehyun bats his lashes and nods wordlessly, leaving Jongup to wonder if he should have mentioned it.

Jongup veers his attention away to several tablets and paces to another shelf. He glances back to see Daehyun still in the same spot, staring at that pair of headphones.

Daehyun bids Jongup over with a careless wave. Jongup raises his brows and walks over, offering a light smile.

"You should buy them if you like them so much, hyung," Jongup suggests.
Daehyun scrutinises the box and hands it over to Jongup.

"Youngjae," Daehyun halts immediately like the name had scalded his tongue, "wants this, if I remember correctly. You should get it for him."

Jongup lifts his head up in surprise as Daehyun insistently pushes the box into Jongup's hold. He brushes past him to the shelf on the far end. Jongup nearly questions if he misheard as he patters up to Daehyun unsurely.

"Really?" Jongup hesitantly asks.

Daehyun nods silently. They submerge in a thoughtful silence and Jongup inspects the case, rattling the headphones inside lightly.

He decides to press further. "What are you planning to buy for Youngjae-hyung, then?"

Daehyun does not answer, merely proferring an indifferent shrug. The apathy dims his face and Jongup promptly tries again.

"Ah, hyung. I already bought headphones for Youngjae-hyung last year; he'll think I'm lazy if I get him the same thing," Jongup chuckles. "Why don't you get it for him instead?"

Daehyun twists his head towards Jongup with a frown. He ponders momentarily and then claws out a crumpled, tattered piece of notebook paper from his wallet. He chucks it to Jongup.

"I think he'd like these."

Daehyun conclusively paces to the counter to distance the both of them, trying to keep Jongup from pursuing the topic. They have barely seen half of the store but Daehyun goes to wait by the entrance.

"Wait, hyung."

Jongup speedily chases after Daehyun while Daehyun retreats a few steps, crossing his arms. Jongup unfolds the torn paper to find a list of items scrawled messily. Several lines are written in different pen inks, added on to the original blue black. There are even small annotations saying that Daehyun's not sure if Youngjae still wants this or that.

"Did you get any of these for Youngjae-hyung?" Jongup asks deliberately. "I don't want to get the same gift as you. What did you get him?"

Daehyun's stiff posture relaxes and he returns assuringly, "I didn't get anything for him."

Jongup blinks once and questions, "Why not? You made a list and everything."

The tension returns into Daehyun's shoulders and Daehyun shrugs again, checking his watch.

"I'm going to get a drink." He takes a step back and swivels on his feet, walking off with a casual wave. "I'll be back in a few."

Before Jongup can ask to follow, Daehyun has already crossed the street to the vending machine. Jongup folds his lips and skims through the list warily. Junhong strolls over at this moment, peering over Jongup's shoulder.

"What are you looking at, hyung?" Junhong curiously questions.

"Daehyun-hyung gave me a list of things to buy for Youngjae-hyung's birthday," Jongup trails off
and as expected, he meets Junhong’s surprised eyes.

"Huh? Really?" Junhong snatches the paper out from Jongup's hand, perusing it. "Woah...

"Yeah." Jongup scrunches up his nose. "He said he didn't get anything for him, though."

Junhong arches his brows and hums, "Oh. Well, it's a start? We should tell Youngjae-hyung that Daehyun-hyung told us what to get for his birthday." He scratches the back of his head and continues, "That counts for something, right?"

"I hope it does." Jongup wryly smiles. He strolls to the counter and purchases the headphones, slinging the bag over his shoulders. They walk over to join Daehyun and Jongup decidedly drops the subject.

They return when Himchan texts them that he's waiting in the van, telling them to hurry up in case the manager finds out they borrowed the vehicle without asking. Yongguk jubilantly cradles his many sets of records and toddles to the car park, Junhong muffling back a laugh.

Himchan is in the driver's seat and Daehyun helps Yongguk with his items, snickering when Yongguk cutely fumbles and nearly looses his footing trying to catch his falling discs. Daehyun gets into the back seat with Jongup and Junhong while Yongguk takes the front seat.

Jongup fiddles with the paper in his pocket and glances over to Daehyun. Daehyun wouldn't have bothered giving the note to him if he didn't give a damn about Youngjae. This is pettiness in all its stark ugliness—Daehyun obviously still cares for Youngjae, but he pretends he doesn't out of... spite? Maybe inertia?

Himchan turns down the blasting air-conditioning and Yongguk tugs at his collar, questioning, "Why'd you turn it down? It's hot."

"Daehyun gets cold easily," Himchan mentions and clicks his tongue for Jongup to put on his seatbelt.

Daehyun raises his brows. "Huh? What are you talking about?"

"Don't you? Isn't that why you always sit at the front?" Himchan supplies, swerving out of the car park. "I always see you fiddling with the air-conditioning."

"Ah, yeah," Daehyun says without a second thought.

Himchan glimpses at him for a moment before remarking good-naturedly, "Just like Youngjae. Can't take the cold."

Daehyun doesn't reply. The atmosphere simmers into one of discomfort and awkwardness, Yongguk clearing his throat to break the quietness.

"Did you call him?" Yongguk asks while fingerjing out his handphone, lowering his voice.

Himchan mutters back, "Yeah. He yelled at me for waking him up. All he ever does is sleep nowadays. Lazy ass."

Daehyun is gazing out of the window with his lips pulled into a thin line. Jongup hugs the box sitting in his lap, pressing his jeans pocket and mapping out the crumpled paper hidden beneath. Youngjae has honestly been sleeping an awful lot lately. Jongup had brought it up with him once and joked he slept so much they wouldn't be surprised he didn't wake up one day.
Sleep is a sprinkle of death in its temporary form, the irony of recuperation bleeding through silenced voices and comatose minds. The heart beats even in slumber, the lungs grapples for breath, and the eyes never stop seeing. Youngjae seems to be getting more and more committed to sleep, and a part of Jongup wonders if he's so tired he just never wants to wake up again. He wants to know too what's Daehyun thinking right now—if he's worried like the rest of them are.

"He's sleeping even in the daytime," Yongguk points out additionally.

Daehyun's expression does not falter even an inch. Jongup decides to pipe up at this moment.

"He told me he's not been feeling well recently," he fills in.

Daehyun lowers his head and rests against the window.

Yongguk turns back and clicks his tongue, frowning in consternation. "Maybe he caught something..."

"We better stay away from him then. Don't want to catch whatever he's gotten that's making him sleep so damn much," Himchan laughs, rubbing his eyes.

"I hope the extra sleep he's getting helps him out. If he keeps this up, he's going to grow fat," Himchan jokes with a snivel of the nose.

He asks Yongguk about the production of their next album's songs and Yongguk's face visibly dims, their conversation drifting off. Daehyun remains zoned out, scenery dashing past like splatters of paint.

When they reach the dorms, Jongup peers into Youngjae's room to see the boy sleeping soundly, as expected. Himchan considers waking Youngjae up but decides against it.

Daehyun heads to bed as well and naps the afternoon away. Jongup retreats to his room with a strained sigh, laying on his bed and inspecting Daehyun's messy handwriting on the long list.
"Do you think Youngjae-hyung will like it, hyung?"

Junhong's gangly form is sprawled across the hotel bed, head hanging off the edge. Jongup fiddles with the gift box in his hands while Junhong tosses the shoes up and down, choking when he misses one and it hits him on the forehead. Jongup smacks him across the temple and laughs, flinging himself onto the bed.

"Daehyun-hyung told us to get these for his birthday," Jongup points out, the underlying message obvious.

Junhong scratches his head and mutters, "That's precisely why I'm asking, hyung."

Jongup raises his brows and Junhong provides, "What if Daehyun-hyung told us to get these because Youngjae hates them? I don't know, hyung."

He shrugs, rolling onto his side.

"That's a really petty way to spite someone," Jongup mentions.

Junhong sighs and ruffles his hair, "Yeah, you're right, hyung. I just... don't get it. He still cares, so why can't he just do it himself?"

Junhong chucks the shoes aside, one of the many gifts Daehyun had scribbled down onto that list he had given Jongup.

"It's pissing me off, honestly. They- no, Daehyun-hyung should just get over it. Everyone in this industry goes through this sort of stuff. We just gotta learn to deal with it."

"It's not real, anyway," Junhong puffs, tumbling over to smother his face into the sheets.

Jongup nudges him with his toe and Junhong swats at him. He can understand vaguely why Daehyun is so upset about it, though. He's heard of seniors, though rare and few, in the industry who are still irked by the fanmade 'couples', especially those of the same sex. It only adds fuel to the fire if these sort of things are popular within the fandom, which, for Daehyun and Youngjae, is certainly the case.

They can't go a concert without a fanboard for Daehyun and Youngjae waved erratically in the air, only serving to incense Daehyun further. It's the thing about making false assumptions—the reality of it can get distorted because of it. Jongup supposes Daehyun is questioning why exactly his friendship with Youngjae is misinterpreted, and he's trying too hard to give them a clear picture. If they need to cover the bases and tear themselves apart even when they're away from the public's eye, Daehyun will do it regardless—no matter how much they're suffering.

"Hyung, don't you think it's weird how Daehyun-hyung is sick? Seriously, of all times," Junhong mutters in a disgruntled tone.

Jongup coughs and nods reluctantly, veering his head towards Junhong. "He wasn't feeling well
yesterday, though...

"He knows we're celebrating Youngjae-hyung's birthday today, hyung," Junhong mumbles, exasperation in his relentlessly threading fingers.

Jongup gazes at Junhong wordlessly, reaching out to tap the other boy's nose. Junhong has been coming to him to discuss these kind of things lately, and he's evidently upset that Yongguk and Himchan are keeping them in the dark so as to keep the younger ones uninvolved. They're all desperately trying to find a cure to the plague threatening to consume Daehyun and Youngjae.

"Anyway, I should go check on Daehyun-hyung," Jongup muses and sits up. He can't help but agree with Junhong's inkling that it's all a sham. Daehyun's not actually ill, no matter how much his eye circles carve into his skin. Junhong nods and nudges Jongup off the bed, the two wrestling it out for a while before separating with boisterous laughter. Jongup slips out of the hotel room to the neighbouring unit.

The door is left ajar. Jongup peeks in and catches Daehyun sitting at the desk, scribbling furiously. Several balled up sheets lay on the table, another one joining the clutter as Daehyun tosses it aside and lets out a peevish sigh.

"Daehyun-hyung."

Daehyun jolts, his arms instinctively covering the paper he's writing on. He snaps his head back with a glare, clearly unnerved, before relaxing slightly.

"God, don't do that," Daehyun grumbles, crushing up the sheet he's working below his palms and tearing it into a few pieces. Jongup hops over and Daehyun's ministrations speed up, crumpling all the remaining shreds of notebook paper on the table. Youngjae should be in Yongguk and Himchan's room, since he usually goes there the moment he wakes up. The only time he ever faces Daehyun is when he absolutely has to, which is when he needs to sleep, and that doesn't exactly count for much.

Youngjae has stopped sleeping so excessively and ironically, he's been sleeping as scarcely as he can with the forced rooming arrangements. Jongup had witnessed Youngjae grousing to himself about the manager snapping at him for even hinting at a request to room with someone else, and he spends the withering hours of the day till midnight pestering Himchan.

"What are you doing, hyung?" Jongup inquires, craning his neck to get a better look. There are several ripped pieces of paper scattered like debris over the desk.

Daehyun sweeps all the paper balls into the bin and kicks it aside, standing in front of it.

"Nothing," Daehyun murmurs. "Aren't you supposed to be downstairs?"

"I came to check on you, hyung. Are you okay?" Jongup asks genuinely.

Daehyun thins his lips and he says hoarsely, "I vomited. I'm having a sore throat and a fever. Headache, too."

He steps back as he says this, foot bumping into the waste paper basket. He lists out his symptoms like they're substantial proof he's not fit for duty, not fit to be anywhere near Youngjae at this point as if it's much too taxing.

"Oh," Jongup hums. "Get well soon, hyung. Drink more water. My mother used to make iced lemon tea whenever my throat hurt."
Daehyun nods silently and Jongup remains standing there, observing him. Daehyun narrows his eyes into slits and mutters, "Aren't you going to leave?"

Jongup fidgets. "You should come down. Just for a while."

"I'm sick," Daehyun retorts, tone that of a child caught for cutting class. Progressively, he's becoming easier to anger. Daehyun used to be sensitive but at this point in time, it has escalated to new heights. Practically every single thing is possible of rubbing him the wrong way. He seems unreasonably paranoid.

"I know," Jongup mumbles.

"Doesn't seem like it," Daehyun snaps back.

Jongup flinches at Daehyun's raised voice and Daehyun shuts his eyes, clutching his head. The tension scarring his gaunt cheeks dissipate and he exhales feebly.

"Sorry. I'm just not in the mood for it," Daehyun provides quietly. He heads to his cupboard and grabs a random pair of shirt and trousers, schlepping to the bathroom.

"You should go. They'll be looking for you."

With that, he vanishes into hiding, the toilet door clicking shut. Jongup stares after Daehyun and angles his eyes to the dustbin. An inch of guilt permeates his hesitant fingers but he crouches down anyway. He inquisitively takes the first balled up piece, unwrapping it and raising a brow at the drawing. He chuckles lightly to see weird stick figures, one of them with red glasses.

He takes the next few sheets. They're all the same, just failed sketches and halfway scrawled comics. He plans to leave after opening the next one, till he catches words scribbled onto it.

_Youngjae_, the words following it are obscurbed by violent pen scratches, ink saturating the entire page. Every line is cancelled roughly, small tears in the paper. Jongup reaches for another and unfolds it, and then another, and then another.

They're all similar letters addressed to Youngjae. He scrutinises the page and makes out just barely several cancelled words, like _happy birthday_ and _sorry_. Jongup shifts to sit below the light, staring so hard his eyes nearly cross.

A noise from the bathroom startles him and Jongup hastily browses through the rest to find a few more shredded pieces, bits too small to give anything readable. He scoops them all up and tosses them back into the bin, bolting out of the room.

So Daehyun was writing a letter to Youngjae. At least he's doing something for his birthday. He's clearly trying very hard from the gargantuan number of binned sheets. Is he trying to explain why he's avoiding Youngjae? Is he trying to apologise?

The more Jongup thinks about it, the more he feels a headache coming on. If Daehyun still cares, if Daehyun still loves Youngjae, he hopes they can hurry and make up. It's been dragging out for months now. Daehyun can stay away from Youngjae all he wants in public to disperse that illusion sans misinterpretation of their friendship, but not let that mix into his reality. They're friends. Can't they resolve this once and for all?

Jongup paces to Yongguk and Himchan's room, his brows straining into a frown. They head down to the restaurant and the atmosphere brims with joviality and raucous laughter, camaraderie drenching their shoulders. Youngjae frequently lunges for the alcohol, downing can after can and
progressively growing more reckless and inebriated.

He lurches around with a stark blush on his cheeks, erratically blubering to anyone in sight and whining for more shots. Yongguk attempts to coax him away from the table but Youngjae squirms away from him, reaching for more. Himchan grasps him just before he trips over a chair and sighs in exasperation.

"How much did you drink?" Himchan questions, trying to calm the swaying, jittery man in his hold. Youngjae titters and shrugs, pouting cutely.

Himchan rolls his eyes and slaps him upside the head. "Why'd you drink so much, stupid?"

"Makes me feel good," Youngjae squeals, hugging Himchan tightly while the man yelps. Himchan grunts and pries Youngjae off, trying to get the man to stand upright. He regards Youngjae with a somber look and exhales drearily, "I know you want to forget about it, but it's not an excuse to get alcohol poisoning, idiot."

"Whatever," Youngjae blurs with a laugh, roaming off to talk with the other staff. He cheekily pinches Jongup's nose and wheezes, "Oh god, I need a break."

He clumsily puts away his beer on a nearby table and wobbles away to the bathroom, Junhong cackling at his tipsy state. After a prolonged while, Youngjae emerges from the toilet and Jongup catches a glimpse of him stumbling away.

"Hyung!" Jongup calls, weasling through the crowd after him. Youngjae disappears into the lift and Jongup turns to Himchan, gesturing to the lobby.

"Hyung, Youngjae-hyung just went up."

"What?" Himchan ruffles his hair in frustration and briskly walks to the lobby, Jongup tailing behind and watching the numbers steadily change.

"We better follow him up; I don't even know if he's sober enough to go to his own room."

They watch thankfully as the elevator Youngjae entered stops at their designated floor and they take the next one, the relief subsiding into worry. Jongup wonders if Daehyun would dare pick a fight with Youngjae on his birthday and ruin the day for him, and he recalls the many letters Daehyun had written to Youngjae.

He hasn't told Youngjae about them, since he supposes Daehyun would eventually write a proper one for him and he doesn't want to hinder anything. Hopefully, Daehyun and Youngjae will make up today. Perhaps so.

They reach their floor and exit, the door at the far end clicking shut at that very moment. Himchan strides swiftly towards the room while Jongup hastens his pace to keep up.

"Wait, hyung." Jongup catches Himchan's shoulder. Himchan turns around, frowning quizzically.

"Um, today..." Jongup pauses and rubs his elbow, uncertain. "Today, I saw Daehyun-hyung writing a letter to Youngjae-hyung."

"Really?" Himchan rebounds instantaneously, surprised.

"Yeah. I was in his room and he went to bathe so I looked through his stuff a little. He drew some stuff and, well, I think he was trying to apologise to him," Jongup meekly ends off.
Himchan knits his brows together and dissolves into deep thought. They stand in the silent hallway, Jongup fidgeting and second guessing what he had seen. It feels a bit unreal, what with how hostile Daehyun has been towards Youngjae.

Himchan finally lifts his head after a long while of pondering.

"If that's so... I think we should leave them alone," he breathes, releasing a lengthy sigh at the conclusion of his words.

Jongup nods silently. Himchan spares one last glance at the door at the very end, before leading Jongup back to the lift lobby.

"Do you think they'll be okay, hyung?" Jongup asks softly.

Himchan's lips curl and it's the type of smile that's a cross between happiness and sadness, a stand-off common within the margin of hope. It's bleak and it's treacherous, but Himchan glimmers with a bit of optimism.

"I hope so."

"There you are."

Himchan pops up from behind Jongup and pats the boy's back, slinging an arm around him. Yongguk lingers behind them by a shelf in the bookstore while Jongup gestures Junhong over, the
boy hopping over gleefully with his new pair of socks. Himchan snatches them and swats Junhong's face with them, cackling unapologetically when Junhong yells.

It has been a back-breaking day, them having toiled with practices for the whole of the morning since yesterday's full schedule and a mere three hours of sleep. Their manager had secretly squeezed in this break for them without permission, and the five of them have went out to breathe some fresh air. Only Youngjae is back at the dorm, all by himself.

"You guys done?" Himchan scours the place and peers out the exit, asking, "Where's Daehyun?"


Himchan's eyes go wide and he nearly chokes in disbelief. "What? He's looking for books?"

Upon receiving a nod, Himchan massages his temple in wonderment. "Wow. I thought he was allergic to them."

"Yeah, I was surprised too, hyung," Junhong sniggers, sniffing and glancing to Himchan's plastic bag. He reaches for it but Himchan nudges him away.

"What's that, hyung?" Jongup queries.

"I got some bulgogi for Youngjae," Himchan hums, swinging the bag around. He continues with a sigh, "I'm pretty sure he didn't eat his lunch again." He strides away to call Daehyun over.

Jongup presses his lips together, playing with his thumbs. They had all agreed to stop by the shopping complex on the way for a late lunch but Youngjae had insisted on staying, saying he wanted to catch some sleep. He seems to have regressed back to his tendency to sleep whenever he can.

For a period or so, Youngjae had actually gotten out of his habit of sleeping so early. They're all dead tired from being shipped from one country to another, but Youngjae has always been a late sleeper since they had moved into the dorms. He had began to sleep excessively for a span of time, after which he stopped—in fact, he was adamant on staying up, refusing to go to sleep despite their manager scolding him for it.

Now, he's back to sleeping much more avidly. The ironic thing is that he always looks like he is on the brink of collapsing from fatigue, easily falling asleep during their minimal breaks between schedules.

The thing is, it's common for Daehyun or Youngjae to sit out of their outings to avoid being together. What's worrying is the fact that Youngjae seems too tired to do anything at this point, too drained, too weak to even eat or move. He has been skipping his meals lately, initially citing that he needed to lose some weight to not being in the mood after Himchan began nagging him to eat. He has an inclination to snap at everything nowadays, eerily similar to Daehyun.

Daehyun, too, has become starkly more exhausted than usual. The darkness burns into his eye bags and he growls when Yongguk flings open the curtains and the sunlight claws out his drooping skin and rough bumps all over. However, he has lately been more calm and collected, rage-filled vigor and harsh hisses melted down into quiet and tranquil hums. He almost looks happier, though to call it that is really a mistake, more than anything. It's relative, but at least there's that little bit of progress.

"Youngjae-hyung said he had no appetite, right?" Jongup mumbles, glancing instinctively over as Daehyun files up to them. He can't tell whether Daehyun had heard what he said, the older boy silently cradling the numerous novels stashed in his bulky arms.
"He's obviously lying," Himchan snorts. "Anyway, I think I'll go back first on my own. Don't want him to starve".

Jongup notes how Daehyun tenses in his peripheral vision, Yongguk pacing up to them with a similar handful of books.

"I thought he'd say he'd eat later," Yongguk worriedly mumbles, having overheard the conversation.

Himchan sighs, "Do you think he'd really eat? Everytime he says that, I check the bins and there's no wrappers or anything in them. The dishes are always untouched."

"Anyway, you guys still want to shop, right?" Himchan glances to the chunk of non-fiction books and punches Yongguk in the arm, snorting, "You're such a nerd." He looks over to Daehyun, considering throwing out a remark but deciding against it.

"Then, I'm gonna go back first." Himchan promptly waves and heads out the store, footsteps quickening into the distance.

Yongguk offers Daehyun a curious smile and mentions softly, "Oh, those books are nice. When did you get into reading?"

Daehyun shrugs, thumbing through the books before the ends of his lips curl just the slightest. "Mind helping me pick one, hyung?"

Yongguk hums eagerly and browses through the novels, perusing them diligently. Junhong makes a face and walks off to the comics section, Jongup laughing and following behind.

An hour or so bleeds away quickly with no sign of Himchan or Youngjae, Yongguk phoning them about dinner but receiving no reply. After they get some take-out, they return home, Yongguk excitedly quibbling over his books. Daehyun is particularly responsive today and the mood brightens tenfold with his dearly missed, guttural laughter, the ends cracking like how they always do (and Youngjae cackling at how embarrassing it is).

They shuffle up to the door with bags in hand, Yongguk fumbling with the key. The dorm is entirely silent from the door step and suddenly, distinct footsteps are heard. The door is flung open and barely caught before it slams into the adjacent wall, Yongguk stepping back in shock.

The irate expression on Himchan's face mars his facial features and he radiates of outrage, jaw visibly locked.

"Himchan..." Yongguk manages out, gazing at the other man in consternation.

Himchan shuts his eyes for a brief moment, trying to calm himself down, before he lets out a ragged breath. "Youngjae's sleeping," he utters tautly. "Don't wake him up."

His pupils jerk over to Jongup's side, sweeping past Jongup to the boy behind him. Jongup does not miss the death glare drilled through Daehyun's head, and Himchan stalks back into the house.

They trudge in silently, Jongup nearly stepping on some spilled food remnants staining the floor. Himchan returns with a mop and forbids anyone from using the bathroom for the time being, but Junhong and Jongup still insistently take a peek and catches a dribble of black ink down the sink.

Daehyun is standing outside his own room, watching Youngjae sleep. Jongup glances over his shoulder to see Youngjae with a white towel draped over his face, wrapped up in equally ashen sheets. He looks grimly like the deceased at a funeral, resting in satin and divorced from all sin his
body has been tainted with.

It is a pity that nothing has changed since Daehyun and Youngjae's conversation at the hotel. Jongup had went to bed that night with high hopes that they would finally make up, or at least, stop avoiding one another so adamantly, yet it seems to have grown only worse.

Youngjae is uncharacteristically weary, even more so than before, and he barely speaks nowadays. He looks like his soul had been gorged out and every inch of life taken away, his irises reflecting an eerie dimness as if he's utterly lost and doesn't know how to return.

Daehyun makes a move to enter but is promptly held back by Yongguk, having winded past Jongup quickly. Daehyun turns back with a questioning look and Yongguk explains, "I think we should leave him alone. Especially you, Daehyun."

"What?" Daehyun brashly retorts, the familiar annoyance creeping up his face. "Why?"

Yongguk glances behind him, checking to see if Himchan is nearby. He lowers his voice, "I just don't think you should bother him now. He's... tired."

"Bother?" Daehyun reiterates the offensive word menacingly, as though he can't understand what in the world Yongguk means. Jongup wonders if Daehyun's just playing dumb or if he's in complete denial.

"It's my room, hyung. I can go in if I want to."

"Daehyun, please," Yongguk frustratedly wheezes and pinches his nose bridge. Daehyun visibly locks his jaw and his gaze scorches through Yongguk's eyes, before he begrudgingly turns around and heads to the living room. He huddles in a corner as a slew of indignation beats through his expression, eyes unfocused on the television screen.

For the rest of the afternoon, it is all stillness and no one dares to break it, just in case it comes crashing down like blood rain and whatever darkness ensconced comes thrashing out.

Dinner is silent. Himchan's face is contorted into a perpetual scowl, his vexation not subsiding in the least bit. Daehyun's appetite is particularly bland today, the boy often zoning out while eating and finally resuming his ministrations after a while. Himchan rises from the table halfway and heads for Youngjae's room, and Daehyun does not try to hide his pursuing stare.

Youngjae emerges from his room and all eyes turn to him instinctively. His head is lowered and his cheeks are hauntingly pale, gauntness digging into his bones. Everyone keeps mum and Jongup glimpses over to see Daehyun's unmoving, cemented gaze concentrated on Youngjae.

The only empty chair is the one opposite Daehyun. Himchan notices and he makes a move to switch their places, but Youngjae says nothing and settles in that chair anyway. Daehyun's hands make no movement, his head lifted and eyes still unnervingly trained on Youngjae.

Youngjae barely eats, just taking a few scoops of whatever dishes that are near to him. When he finally raises his head to take some soup, he reveals his noticeably sore eyes. They are bloodshot and swollen, crimson scarring white. No one dares mention it and Daehyun peculiarly keeps his eyes on Youngjae for the whole meal.
Dinner concludes with the overhead apprehension drawn into the air. Yongguk gathers the plate and the fatigue hangs down on his somber face. Himchan leads Youngjae back to his room and when he exits, he beckons Yongguk out of the house.

Yongguk grabs Jongup's shoulder just before he leaves.

"Don't let Daehyun disturb Youngjae. I'll be back soon," Yongguk urges in a strained whisper and disappears out the door.

Jongup turns to find Daehyun standing by the kitchen doorway, clearly deliberating on approaching Youngjae's room from the angle he is veered. Jongup obscures Daehyun's view just in time when he takes a step forward.

"Hyung." He proffers a small smile and Daehyun regards him quizzically. "Let's watch a movie. I'll go put something on."

He squeezes Daehyun's shoulder and Daehyun nods slowly.

"Alright."

Daehyun attempts to sidestep Jongup but Jongup obstinately tails him. Daehyun knits his brows and provides, "I'll be with you in a second. I need to get something from my room."

Even then, Jongup still remains in Daehyun's way. They lock eyes and the realisation simmers in, Daehyun's stance stiffening.

"Move, Jongup," Daehyun demands, reaching out to shove Jongup aside. Jongup grasps him and maintains eye contact, amiability fading into solemness.

"Hyung, I really think you should leave Youngjae-hyung alone for now," Jongup quietly suggests. He can feel a strain of indignation pelt his bloodstream and it's turning unbearable, this childish rift between them. Youngjae has never looked so broken before and Jongup kind of hates Daehyun for it for that split moment.

The resement returns through a scorn and Daehyun parts his lips to argue, but Jongup beats him to it.

"You saw it too. Youngjae-hyung cried," Jongup states.

Daehyun's bitter demeanour alleviates and a flash of guilt crosses his dull irises, considering the possibility that he'd been the perpetrator even from afar. He gnaws on his lower lip and Jongup wonders if it's heart-wrenching worry that's making Daehyun's irises so empty.

"So, you're saying I'll just make it worse?" His tone is composed of both provocation and dread, daring Jongup to agree and fearing it's the truth.

"I'm sorry, hyung," Jongup murmurs. That is all he can give for now because both of them know the exact truth. At least, Jongup can only hope so, because he remains oblivious to the fact that Youngjae cries blood in hopes he'll bleed out and reincarnate into something else.

Something Jongup should hope to never know, hope to never find out is why Youngjae wants to do so. Else, he'll realise the comical, lovey dovey caricatures were never a show and Daehyun and Youngjae won't revert back to their forms with a quick presto! as the comedy turns into absolute horror.

Daehyun whirls his head away silently, a calm lull standing in the gap between them. Himchan's
raised voice slips through the walls and Jongup moves his grip to Daehyun's wrist, pulling him towards the couch.

Himchan persists in his yells and Jongup hurriedly switches on the television. The blaring of the comedy and the unanticipated downpour manages to drown out Himchan's aggravated shouts from outside, and it takes a good forty minutes for Yongguk and Himchan to return.

Yongguk discreetly flashes Jongup a grateful look and gestures for him to come to the kitchen.

"Can you sleep with Daehyun tonight?" Yongguk asks, weariness dripping from his tone.

"Yeah, sure, hyung." Jongup returns, offering a small smile when Yongguk pats his head fondly. He winds over to his room and grabs his things, crossing over to Daehyun and Youngjae's room.

Youngjae is sitting on his bed silently, head hung low and oddly still. He looks like a rag doll, a bit tattered, a bit dismembered. Himchan has smatched Youngjae's pillow and he flashes Jongup a thankful smile.

"Youngjae, come on," Himchan urges gently, grabbing Youngjae's wrist and leading him to his room.

Jongup lays down on Youngjae's bed and makes himself comfortable, peeking out to see Daehyun by the door frame. Jongup naturally straightens up and the air thickens tenfold, Youngjae quietly dragging his blanket over to Himchan's room.

A muffled voice arises.

"He's sleeping with me tonight. Jongup will sleep in your room."

The few seconds chasing after is excruciatingly suspenseful, Jongup unconsciously holding in a breath. It's laughable how seeing Daehyun and Youngjae in close proximity is now a cause for alarm and wariness, when they used to be conjoined at the hip.

"Why?"

Jongup peers out, startled at the interrogating question. The vehemence and demand instilled in his tone permeates the consistent patter of rain.

"Because I want him to."

Himchan promptly enters his room and Jongup hears the door click shut. Daehyun stands motionlessly in front of the closed door. He swivels around after a pregnant pause, visibly heaving, and he storms off elsewhere.

The house is acutely silent. With the aches from today's vigorous training picking at his joints, Jongup falls asleep quickly to the unrelenting sound of rain. Sleep is nothing but a blank dream for him, white noise and the clamour of crowds brimming at his ears.

Jongup groggily awakes around midnight to the a loud noise. He squirms under the sheets for a moment and blearily pries open his eyes, sandy crust snapping into smithereens.

He makes out an obscure figure sitting upright over on Daehyun's side of the room. His lashes flit sluggishly and he squints to discern Daehyun doused with darkness, the moonlight lending familiarity to his slouch. His constrained breaths lurch through the ghostly nightfall, his back rising and falling sharply.
Jongup hears an incoherent mumble, as though twisted against clenched teeth. Jongup curls himself up sleepily and ensconces himself under the blanket, having half a mind to tell Daehyun to go to sleep. He continues staring for a while out of his disoriented stupor, snuggling against his pillow.

Daehyun seems to be holding something. He toys with the item for a long while, throwing it from one hand to another and then squashing it. Finally, Daehyun roughly hurls it back onto the bed, force propelling it over the bed and onto the ground. Jongup jolts and reclines, sucking in a breath.

When the stillness reclaims its place, Jongup peers down and recognises it to be the book Daehyun had bought today: Here is Where We Meet. There is a note pasted to the cover. Jongup cranes his neck and struggles to read it.

_I noticed you read a lot nowadays. Hope you like it._

A sudden growl alerts Jongup and he shrinks back into the bed, observing Daehyun silently. Daehyun visibly tenses up, his heaving intensifying. He crouches and cradles his head in his palms, muttering to himself. It eerily resembles him having a head to hefty to hold up.

He suddenly emits another frustrated snarl and straightens up. He goes quiet once again and deliberates for a moment before slumping, propping his elbows up on his thighs. Jongup doesn't know how long it lasts, woozily gazing at the other boy chug through the same cycle again and again.

"No," Daehyun mutters, the strain in his voice diminishing as he chants to himself. It abruptly does a one-eighty and inflates into pure agitation, Daehyun hanging his head lower and spitting out his words. His fist brutally meets the mattress and Daehyun shoots up, Jongup meekly recoiling.

Daehyun's looming physique blocks the moonlight cascading into the room, weak luminance crashing against his back. Daehyun seems to be frozen for a long while, simply standing by his bed with tight fists, before he eventually moves. He saunters to Himchan's room and Jongup warily eyes his outstretched hand.

Daehyun clasps the doorknob and Jongup hears a faint metallic rattling.

Silence. Daehyun tries again. The same restricted rattling emanates and Jongup catches a frail huff.

Daehyun tries once again. Still the same noise flung back at Jongup, this time louder and more violent. Daehyun raises his hand and after a pregnant pause, he knocks.

Once. Then twice. Then incessantly, without stop. Jongup widens his eyes and hurriedly gets up, the commotion pulverising the still air. He hauls Daehyun back to find him with a vaguely wild look and Daehyun gasps sharply, stepping back in panic. His unhinged expression subsists despite meeting Jongup's perturbed eyes, lips parted and scarcely trembling.

"Hyung, what the hell are you doing?" Jongup hisses. "Are you trying to wake the whole house?"

Daehyun lets out a shaky breath and visibly gulps.

"...What... what do you think they're doing in there?"

The frenzy scratching through Daehyun's face is unnerving, bordering on breakneck delirum. Confounded, Jongup spouts in disbelief, "Uh... sleeping?"

Daehyun returns no answer and bores his eyes through the door. Despite being drenched in the darkness shrouding the corridor, Daehyun's eyes are still ablaze with a disconcerting distress.
Perplexed, Jongup reaches out and strokes Daehyun's back, speaking in a more gentle tone.

"Hyung, let's go back to sleep," he coaxes tenderly, discreetly inching Daehyun away bit by bit. Daehyun seems to be on the verge of saying something, but he simply licks his lips several times.

"What if... what if they're doing something inside?"

Daehyun breathes, the lump in his throat rising again. Baffled, Jongup firmly hauls Daehyun to the bed and sits him down, peering down in consternation.

"What do you mean by something, hyung?" Jongup asks.

"Something," Daehyun presses in a wheeze, grip clenching on his shorts.

"What else would they be doing but sleeping, hyung?" Jongup counters in stupefaction.

Daehyun is making absolutely no sense. Why is he so worked up anyway? Even if Himchan and Youngjae are staying up doing god knows what, it's none of his business. What right does he have to be so upset about it?

Daehyun thins his lips and exhales raggedly, unfocused eyes deviated towards the ground. Jongup sits by his side in concern and tries to pry an answer from him.

"Hyung, what do you mean?"

"Himchan-hyung," Daehyun utters, trailing off as he progressively delves into disorientation. "He's been sticking to Youngjae a lot nowadays."

Jongup raises his brows but keeps mum, silently probing with his eyes. The whole group has noticed Himchan and Youngjae's sudden closeness, mainly because Himchan refuses to leave Youngjae alone and has begun to treat him like an indispensable part of himself, needing care and under 24/7 watch. Jongup can't pinpoint exactly when it started but it should have been somewhere after their concert in Japan—after Youngjae got lost outside.

"They're very close now, aren't they?" Daehyun murmurs, diverting his attention towards Jongup and waiting anxiously for an answer.

Jongup, unsure of what would be the best answer, spurts the truth. "Yeah..."

Something seems to crack within Daehyun and he wheezes almost in resignation and misery, "I knew it." He turns back to glaring at the door and breathing again, "I knew it." His tone spells an apparent, intensifying agitation, huffs bleeding through the midnight air.

"I'm..." Daehyun croaks, clutching onto the material of his shorts. "I'm nothing to him now. Nothing."

The words startle Jongup and he melts into a deep frown. "Hyung, you were the one who ditched him," Jongup states, the brash remark making Daehyun snap his neck to face him.

Jongup deliberates on apologising but the remorselessness, fatigue and undoubted truth eggs him on. "You treat him like nothing and then you get angry when he does the same, hyung?"

"But..." Daehyun gapes, unable to spout a proper response because Jongup has just hurled out the absolute truth. It's undeniable. Jung Daehyun has no right to be angry when he's torn Youngjae away from him so ruthlessly. Jongup can only see him as a foolish child that mistreats his toy yet demands
for it back when someone else plays with it.

"You... you don't understand," Daehyun rebounds, visibly upset but clearly at a loss for words. "Youngjae can't do this to me. It's not the same-

"What's not the same?" The clock glares Jongup down and shoves the migraine through his head, Jongup throwing respect for seniority to the wind. If Daehyun is going to act like a child, he will treat him like one, regardless of age.

"You ignored him for months, hyung. And now, you won't even allow him to spend some time with Himchan-hyung? Do you just want him to be alone for good, without any friends?" Jongup frustratedly sighs, riled up for Youngjae's sake. He's seen the members fight tons of times, but to drown themselves in such a childish game of eluding one another despite how miserable it makes them is just senseless.

"You don't want him, yet no one else can have him?" Jongup grouses. "Make up your mind, hyung."

Daehyun freezes. His mouth falls open and from the way his lips quiver, he's trying so damn hard to formulate a response.

None comes. The moonlight shreds through Daehyun's hair and Jongup briefly remembers how Daehyun would plop his head into Youngjae's lap and tap randomly on Youngjae's tablet to annoy him. That's all Jongup remembers, instead of how much Daehyun wanted to kiss Youngjae during those moments. How much he wants to mesh together with Youngjae and his heart beats atrociously faster at the thought of him.

Daehyun slowly shuts his mouth and lowers his head. A pang of guilt breezes past Jongup and he watches Daehyun dwell on his heavy words silently.

"Okay."

Jongup blinks in surprise at the murmur. Daehyun avoids his stare.

"I'll make up my mind."

He remains slouching over the edge of the bed, staring at the patch of luminance dying the floor. Uncertainly, Jongup nods and pats Daehyun on the back placatingly.

"Go to sleep, hyung. We can talk in the morning."

Daehyun mutely nods and Jongup shuffles away after a while more, getting back into bed. A doeful hope settles within his ribcage, the feeling both unsettling and relieving at the same time. Perhaps Daehyun misses Youngjae and he is refusing to acknowledge it.

"Do you think Youngjae's okay?" Daehyun's question is feeble in the dead night.

"Yeah," Jongup says, though he really has no clue. He's glad he said it, however, because Daehyun's shoulders slope in what Jongup can only hope fervently to be relief.

He watches Daehyun discreetly from his bed and Daehyun finally turns in after what seems like eternity, releasing the wheeze caught in Jongup's throat. He glances at the book on the ground and gingerly picks it up, perusing it for a moment.

I wonder who Daehyun-hyung got this for.
It's probably for one of the members, considering how hard it is for them to visit their friends and family these days.

*Maybe Yongguk-hyung? No, but he recommended it to Daehyun-hyung.*

Jongup furrows his brows, racking his brains to recall Himchan and Junhong even remotely reading during these few months. A magazine for Himchan and a comic book for Junhong would make more sense, while he himself is rather out of the question.

Out of mild curiosity, Jongup quietly flips it open. He squints at the handwritten words on the first page, right at the very top. He flutters his lashes and hastily rolls to his other side, extending his arm to drench the book in moonlight. The words are starkly scribbled into thin paper, unmistakable.

*To Youngjae.*

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**WRONG**

**DRAW TWO LINES FOR THE LEGS (SKEWED)**

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**GAME OVER**

It's too late! The man is dead. You lose.

Shame, you were so close too.

Silly child, the word is love.
Several hours have passed. Any attempt to wake the sleeping boy is in vain. As you try relentlessly to shake the boy trapped in eternal slumber back into his senses, a prince passes by on his horse. He is evidently searching for something, gazing out into the distance.

Upon asking, you learn that Prince Jung Daehyun is searching for a princess rumoured to be locked away in this castle, cursed to sleep for eternity until her true love's kiss. Having found no such woman, the prince dejectedly leaves.

As you watch the prince leave, you deliberate on asking him to kiss the sleeping boy—just out of curiosity (eerie suspicion)—to see if the boy will wake up.

WARNING

Curiosity killed the cat.

Do you still want to play?
How did he kill himself?

INNOCENT CHILD

Knock knock.

THE MONSTER IN THE CLOSET

Who's there?

INNOCENT CHILD

Himchan.

It's been a week, Dachyun.

Youngjae won't budge.

Why won't you let him in?
On the shore lies a dead mermaid with her tail sliced into half. Crimson dyes the sand beneath her, and near her hand lies a bloody scalpel. The top half of her body is poorly covered by sand, only her head fully buried.

From afar, her bisected tail almost looks like a pair of legs. Upon closer inspection, you realise she is actually a boy.

**LET'S PLAY CHARADES!**

(Ladies and gentleman, boys and girls, children of all ages! Welcome to the greatest freak show on earth!)

Can you guess what these two mimes are trying to say?

**ACT ONE**
"Come on, Youngjae."

Himchan hurries after the boy fuming in the lift lobby, footsteps tapping muffled intonation into the carpet floor.

"Stop being like this. We'll fix your computer once we get back to your dorms."

The elevator arrives and Youngjae storms straight into the lift, disregarding Himchan's pleas. Youngjae grits, "I don't need anyone to accompany me. I can do it by myself."

There is so much venom pervading his tone that Himchan recoils, wincing in dread. Before he can slip in another word, the lift doors slide shut, the numbers on the screen flickering down to one. Himchan closes his eyes in fatigue and emits a ragged sigh.

The sound of shuffling footsteps diverts Himchan's gaze down the hallway and he meets Jongup's concerned eyes, the boy still clutching onto his textbook. The door at the very end of the aisle clicks shut and Himchan clenches his jaw. There is not an inch of remorse from Daehyun, no guilt whatsoever.

It's tiring. Everyone's tired, yet they have to put up with this bullshit Daehyun keeps trying to stir up. They've sat both Daehyun and Youngjae several times down, mostly Daehyun, and they've tried so damn hard to no avail to pry out why exactly Daehyun is so insistently avoiding Youngjae. He treats him as though a single breath exchanged between them will infect him with an insatiable rotting.

Himchan gets it. He understands Daehyun's young and he's not used to the life of being an idol. It takes time to adapt and the whole concept of what fans do hasn't dawned on him yet. It's not that Daehyun isn't a good kid. He is. He loves the fans with an earnestness difficult to feign, and he's not the first to get worked up over who he's been paired up with. They're all straight, so he gets that Daehyun doesn't like his sexuality to be mistaken.

But to take it this far? Avoiding his closest friend in the group even off-camera? At this point, Daehyun's being too paranoid. The memory of Himchan's recent confrontation with Youngjae, the way he had looked like he couldn't care less in front of Daehyun but crumbled so promptly into debris within Himchan's arms, is still seared into Himchan's mind.

I miss him, hyung.

Youngjae has always been adamant on putting up a strong front, crushing back tears down his throat because he hates looking weak. It's a game of push and pull, a mindless tug-of-war where their pride hangs on the line and Youngjae has now decided he absolutely needs to win, else there'll be no remains of his dignity.

They're both hurting. Why do they have to act like this?

"Will Youngjae-hyung be okay?"

Jongup's question snatches Himchan out of his thoughts. Himchan veers his gaze to Jongup and hurts out an assuring smile, stretching his arms casually.

"I'm sure he'll be fine on his own." Himchan is lying blatantly, having demonstrated profusely before just how worried he is. Youngjae doesn't know his way around; none of them are familiar with Japan despite having been here numerous times. Himchan admits he had seized the chance when Youngjae said he wanted to repair his laptop—he had immediately suggested having someone accompany
Youngjae and darted straight for Daehyun's room. Daehyun clearly said he was free but backed out when he realised the person he had to go with was Youngjae.

Silence hangs in the hallway, unsaid words and intents buried five feet down into Daehyun's guts and his back against the closed door. But Himchan does not know this, and so he curses under his breath and leads Jongup back to the room. Hopefully, Youngjae will give up after a while of searching for a repair shop. If anything happens, at least Youngjae can call them and they'll come pick him up. Sure, he may get chewed out by management, but Youngjae will be okay by himself.

Evening simmers in with the break of darkening pink over the horizon and a brewing worry underneath Himchan's skin. Youngjae still isn't back yet and he has not replied any of the messages Himchan has sent. Himchan sits at the edge of the bed and gnaws at his knuckles, typing another text to Youngjae and sighing when he sees none of them have been read.

He prays Youngjae won't be stubborn this time round. They're in a different country, for god's sake. Himchan continues to bite his knuckles as scenarios chug through his mind, some utterly unpleasant and appalling. He pacifies himself with the fact that Youngjae is logical, but his consciousness mauls at him. The problem doesn't lie with whether Youngjae's smart enough to find a way back. It's whether his pride will demolish any sound judgement of his.

Knowing Youngjae, he'll go to the ends of the earth to prove he's right—that he's perfectly capable to find his way around without anyone's help, certainly not Jung Daehyun's. Youngjae may be intelligent but the one thing no one can beat him in is stubbornness. Like fifty pounds of unyielding marble mashed into a frozen statue, sculpted from all his grievances and the grudges he holds, Youngjae will never budge. If need be, he will be broken apart piece by piece, smashed into smithereens first before he gives in. And by then, he'll be too broken to breathe.

Himchan runs a hand through his hair and perks up when he hears the door click open. Yongguk saunters in and Himchan's face falls, fingers wrenching at his own hair.

"What's wrong?" Yongguk immediately questions, pacing over.

"Youngjae," Himchan starts, wheezing out a lengthy breath. "He went out to repair his laptop and he's not back yet. It's already been four hours."

"Where did he go?" Yongguk returns, concern drizzling onto his features. Himchan massages his temple.

"I don't know. I told him to get someone to go with him and since I was busy, I told Daehyun to. Daehyun refused and Youngjae got upset."

Yongguk melts into apprehension, creases forming on his temple. He crosses his arms and breathes hesitantly, "Youngjae got upset?"

"Yeah. He hasn't picked up any of my calls." Himchan disentangles his hand from his hair and falls back onto the bed, heaving frustratedly. Yongguk reaches over and delicately squeezes Himchan's shoulder, rubbing circles into his bone.

"Don't worry too much. I'm sure Youngjae won't be rash."

Nightfall shatters into the maroon gradient of the sky with the passing of an hour, anxiousness brimming sky high in Himchan's veins. Their managers still do not know Youngjae is missing. Yongguk paces around the room as Himchan calls Youngjae for the umpteenth time, fingers rapidly drumming against his thigh.
If Youngjae decides to act out, they can be assured he will see it all the way through. Till every fibre of his unforgiving skin screams for redemption and penance, till the fog composed of the December solstice blows over and Youngjae realises he had been fighting a war in no man's land. Yoo Youngjae is composed of four-fifths of rationale and three hundred, thousand miles of a refusal to lose. There's no knowing how far he'll go when he's determined.

"Let's go wait for him in his room," Yongguk suggests, consternation unsettled in his grimace. They call up Junhong from the gym and he unlocks the door to his and Youngjae's room. The room is expectedly empty.

"Where's Youngjae-hyung?" Junhong questions, still panting from his work-out. From the twist in his lips, it is evident he senses something amiss.

"He went out to fix his computer," Himchan replies easily. He nudges Junhong into the bathroom as Yongguk plops down onto the chair.

"Hey, go shower. We're going to get dinner in half an hour."

"Will he be back for dinner?" Junhong asks, failing to press the topic as Himchan shoves him successfully into the toilet.

"Yeah," Himchan assures without batting an eyelash and shuts the door. Yongguk clears his throat from the other end of the room.

"Call him again," Yongguk instructs. Himchan's fingers dial the number expeditiously, hopefulness doefully sitting on his restless thumbs. He inhales deeply and stares at his screen, listening to the first few rings before distinctly making out a sound in the backdrop.

Dismay bristles every hair on Himchan's skin and he meets Yongguk's wide eyes. Himchan promptly shoots up and haphazardly rummages through the desk, frenzy doubling in his movements.

"Shit."

Panic treads through Himchan's heart palpitations, Youngjae's vibrating phone emerging from under the messy pile of clothes on the table. Gut-churning thoughts manifest in the recesses of his consciousness within his numb nerves. Yongguk parts his lips in disbelief and massages his nose bridge in exasperation, glancing out of the window.

"Are you kidding me?" Yongguk exhales drearily. "Himchan, we have to tell the manager. He's been out since two and it's close to eight."

Himchan reluctantly nods. They swiftly head straight down the hall for the room at the corner. Daehyun emerges from his unit at this moment, jacket slung over his shoulder, and he stops them halfway.

"Are we going down for din-" Daehyun begins nonchalantly, but Yongguk cuts him off swiftly.

"Have you seen Youngjae?" Yongguk's eyes search Daehyun's desperately, apathy drenched into the other's irises. Daehyun's face sours and he darts his gaze towards Himchan.

"He went out. Ask Himchan-hyung." His voice reeks of petulance and it stomps sheer annoyance into Himchan's windpipe.

"He's not back yet," Himchan brusquely rebounds, not bothering to mask the irritation in his taut syllables. "He didn't bring his phone, either. It's been six hours since we last saw him."
Daehyun's sullen expression seems to bleed out in a tidal flush, subtle unease cementing his locked jaw. It's laughable, so laughable Himchan wants to snort and expose his pathetic, childish front he wields so painstakingly like a shield.

Daehyun parrots in a guttural, muffled voice, "...He didn't?"

"Yeah," Himchan snips, cocking his head to one side. “And we have no idea where the hell he went.”

Himchan knows playing the blame game won't solve anything but he can't help but feel incensed. Had Daehyun been a good sport and agreed, they could have been back hours ago. Yet Daehyun had to stamp the hostility straight through Youngjae’s bones and ignited a heinous, inextinguishable fire within his stomach.

Daehyun spins his head away and hums in a strained timbre, "Just wait a while more, then. He'll turn up eventually."

"Oh, you would know," Himchan bites, embittered words slashing from his lips. "It's not as if we're in a foreign country or anything."

Daehyun's eyes narrow into slits and he challenges, "He knows basic Japanese, hyung."

Daehyun indifferently brushes past them and paces to the lift lobby. Himchan clenches his fists and he begins to see red, blood red, and only the blood Youngjae sheds. Not the crimson the world demands from Daehyun as he bleeds his heart out for a boy, nor the blood spilt over Daehyun’s eyes and the consequent, overwhelming red he sees.

If Himchan were to see that the rim of Daehyun’s glasses enclose a vermillion that blinds him and makes him see Youngjae in the most intimate moonlight the world can only hope to encompass, he would have no words to say. Perhaps a few steps back, maybe a stumble here and there, but Kim Himchan would be left wordless as the horror seizes him.

Yongguk placates Himchan by stroking his back gently. Himchan heaves heavily, grinding his teeth into merciless sawdust.

"He doesn't even feel guilty," Himchan quips, growling in vexation. “He doesn’t give a damn!”

Yongguk pulls him towards their manager's room, citing quietly, "You shouldn't have asked Daehyun to go with Youngjae, Himchan. You knew that."

"There wasn't anyone else!" Himchan argues irately. "The fighting has gone on long enough, Yongguk. He’s acting like a kid!"

"Let's save that for later," Yongguk wheezes, rapping on the room door.

White noise, hushed whispers. Erupt into enraged castigations, fifty pound footsteps to the hotel lobby in alarm, frantic conversation. Four count breaths woven into a requiem. Youngjae is nowhere to be seen and as nocturne sets in more menacingly, Himchan conjures up the worst-case scenarios.

Nine o' clock. The two youngest are gathered in Yongguk and Himchan's room, eating silently, while Daehyun is in his own room, doing god knows what. Yongguk is resting on the arm chair, lips wrested into agonising worry.

Himchan's appetite is wholly crushed, a sickening dose of guilt lingering in his guts at Yongguk's words. He had deliberately orchestrated for Daehyun to go with Youngjae despite knowing the
outcome. If he hadn't done so and had just let Youngjae go on his own, he wouldn't have stormed out like that and forgotten his phone. Moreover, he would have long conceded and called them with a public phone if he was lost.

What if Youngjae is hurt? Himchan stops in his tracks and holds his head, attempting to calm down. Junhong glances up at him and Himchan decidedly leaves the room, not wanting to distress the youngest two further.

The door clicks shut behind him and he inhales sharply, coordinating his uneven pants. The staff have went out to search for Youngjae while the members are forced to stay in the hotel.

Himchan glimpses over and finds Daehyun leaning against Youngjae's room door, much to his surprise. Daehyun is agitatedly playing with his fingers, tempo chaotic with bouts of panic-stricken acciaccatura. Daehyun looks up and they lock eyes for a moment, the overwrought worry splintering Himchan’s breath for a second.

Daehyun lurches over to Himchan. "Any news, hyung?"

Himchan shakes his head grimly. Daehyun's face falls and he abruptly balls his hands into fists, jaw clenching spitefully.

"God, seriously..." Daehyun bores his eyes through Himchan's head and he raises his voice menacingly. "Why didn't you follow him out, hyung!?"

Taken aback, Himchan gapes at him. He misses Daehyun’s trembling fingers and counters, "Oh, so it's my fault now, huh?"

"If you'd just gone out with him," Daehyun snarls, crescendo slicing off into an agitated growl. “If you'd just told him to stay, he wouldn’t be lost now!”

With livid eyes, Himchan spits vehemently, "If you had just agreed to accompany him instead of acting like a fucking kid, this wouldn’t have happened!"

Daehyun’s knuckles crack and a feverish delirium shadows his eyes for a split second, too fast for Himchan to catch. No one can see far enough to learn Daehyun is about to crash and burn, with just a little bit more of a smile from Youngjae's lovely lips and how Daehyun thinks obsessively of him as beautiful.

Daehyun edges forward and his veins pulsate all over his arms, drawing ugly purple into his tanned skin.

“Why did you have to ask me?!” Daehyun snarls, accusatory tone igniting more indignation in Himchan. “You could have gotten someone else! It didn’t have to be me!”

“Because Youngjae has to put up with all your shit but you can’t even do him a small favour, right?” Himchan sneers. Irascibility slashes through Daehyun and he roughly grabs Himchan’s wrist. Himchan cuts him off before Daehyun can churn out an excuse.

“Stop pretending to care, Daehyun. You treat Youngjae like he’s non-existent and now you’re all worked up because he’s missing?” Himchan shoves Daehyun and hisses, “Make up your damn mind!”

“You don’t understand!” Daehyun roars, eyes absolutely mad with chaos. “Don’t talk so much when you don’t understand a fucking thing!”
Himchan attempts to snatch his hand back to no avail and grabs Daehyun’s collar to even the playing field. Himchan barks, “Yeah, I don’t understand. No one can, Daehyun.”

“I—”

“Guys, stop it,” Yongguk’s hasty voice drifts towards them and he intercepts them, hands latched onto both their outstretched arms. “We’re all stressed; don’t pick a fight with one another.”

Daehyun and Himchan remain fuming, eyes locked and daring the other to spill another provoking word. Yongguk’s grip tightens on both their limbs.

“It’s not helping the situation. Junhong and Jongup can hear you guys,” Yongguk sternly rebukes. Himchan narrows his eyes and his grip loosens on Daehyun’s shirt. Daehyun belatedly releases Himchan and wrenches himself away, folding his arms.

“Any updates?” Himchan breathes, turning to Yongguk. Adrenaline pumps through his entire body and his heart beats at a disconcerting ferocity, skin beginning to register the coldness swarming him. His wrist pulses with an ugly soreness around the circumference. Fights between the members get physical sometimes, but he had not expected it to escalate to such a point.

“No,” Yongguk sighs, Himchan instantly slumping.

“They’re combing the district right now so let’s just hope for the best,” Yongguk comforts, proffering an assuring smile. “It’s Youngjae. We trust him.”

“Yeah,” Himchan answers listlessly, shutting his eyes in fatigue. Daehyun abruptly spins on his feet and strides down the aisle towards the stairwell.

“Daehyun, where are you going?” Yongguk speedily chases after him and Himchan tails behind. “Daehyun!”

“Searching for him. Doing something,” Daehyun spitefully snaps, throwing open the door and jogging down the stairs.

“Didn’t you hear what our manager said?” Himchan bellows in exasperation, but Daehyun insistently vanishes from sight. Himchan massages his temple and bangs his fist on the railings. He makes a move to follow after but Yongguk holds him back.

“Take care of Junhong and Jongup,” Yongguk instructs, gently nudging Himchan towards the door. “I’ll go after him.”

“Daehyun! Come back!” Yongguk briskly patters down the stairs and Himchan lets out a jagged breath, leaning against the wall and clutching his forehead.

*I shouldn’t have flared up at Daehyun.*

Regret trudges through his conscience and he prays to God the situation doesn’t deteriorate henceforth. Himchan returns to the room and settles down quietly, putting on a random movie and distractedly brooding on his scarring words and Youngjae’s whereabouts. Jongup winds an arm around him and Himchan forces his lips to curl, emitting a sigh weighty enough to lug him into the ground.

More than an hour later, their manager enters the room and Himchan hauls him out to tell him that Daehyun had gone out to look for Youngjae, and Yongguk had accompanied him. Their manager blurts out a string of vulgarities and orders Himchan to stay in the hotel room, saying they will inform
them when Youngjae returns.

The quartette of strings from Himchan’s aching joints and worn out tendons breezes a sombre tune in his head, mounting worry tossing with the disheartening remnants of his and Daehyun’s quarrel. He knows Daehyun is going through a hard time, albeit for a stupid reason, and should have known better than to make things worse.

A soft knock has Himchan leaping to his feet and barrelling straight to the door, grappling at the knob. The door swings open and Yongguk greets him with a small, lethargic smile. Himchan glances behind him and then to the two younger members behind him, wide-eyed and hopeful.

“Where’s Daehyun?” Himchan questions softly.

“He’s back. Don’t worry,” Yongguk placates. He gestures for Himchan to join him outside and hums to the remaining two, “Go to sleep early, alright? We’ll find Youngjae.”

Yongguk shuts the door. Himchan presses his palm against his forehead and Yongguk soothingly wraps an arm around Himchan, calming him down with two-time strokes.

“Is Daehyun alright?” Himchan breathes quietly, guilt lacing the ends of his syllables.

“Yeah.” Yongguk bites his lip, hesitant, before divulging, “Himchan, he’s… really worried about Youngjae.”

“I know,” Himchan croaks regretfully. “I shouldn’t have been so hard on him. I just lost it. I’m sorry.”

“You were just stressed out,” Yongguk lulls, patting Himchan’s back delicately. “Go rest. They’re out searching for Youngjae, so let’s wait patiently.”

Himchan nods mutely to Yongguk’s composed voice, his familiar timbre allaying the nauseating concoction within Himchan’s pounding ribcage. Yongguk goes to wait in Youngjae’s room and Himchan wears a smile as he re-enters the room.

It begins to pour. Nightfall beats blue black into Himchan’s eyes, torn felt of the arm chair picked apart by his relentless fingers. The mangling fears and thousand and one “things I should have said” provides a futility to last the night, perhaps even longer. Between his prayers, the incessant rain and Jongup and Junhong’s silence, clearly not sleeping but playing the part so as to not cause more trouble, Himchan asks himself where things went wrong.

Did he step in too late? If he had done more, would Daehyun and Youngjae still be on good terms? What if all Daehyun needed was some reassurance and Himchan had never given him enough?

The rain drums two hundred beats per minute along with the pounding headache. It’s midnight. A knock resounds and Yongguk’s muffled voice echoes from outside. Himchan crosses over and unlocks the door, glancing at Yongguk hopefully. It’s the kind of hope that’s more fear than anything, afraid to flung down into disappointment if he expects too much.

“Youngjae’s back.”

These two simple words has everything crumbling onto Himchan’s shoulders, tension tauntingly built upon his rocky shoulders collapsing into debris of relief and utter gratefulness. Every single menacing make-believe rehearsed in the mocking theatre of his mind washes away with the flood of rain, and Himchan lets out an exhausted breath.
“Thank god,” Himchan wheezes, slipping past Yongguk into the hallway. He feels like crying.
“Where is he? Is he okay?”

“In his room,” Yongguk murmurs. Himchan brushes past him, ready to storm him and give Youngjae a well-deserved berating, when Yongguk holds him back.

“You should leave him alone for now,” Yongguk urges. “Let him sleep. I’ll talk to him later when everything’s cooled down.”

Yongguk drifts off into a small chuckle. “You’ll get a chance to conk him on the head tomorrow.”

“Is he alright?” Himchan questions in consternation.

“He seemed pretty out of it,” Yongguk confesses, massaging the back of his neck. “Kind of listless. He didn’t say a word to defend himself when he got scolded. I don’t think he’s said anything since he came back, now that I think about it.”

“Oh…” Himchan gnaws on his lower lip and exhales, “Have you told Daehyun?”

Yongguk nods gingerly and glances uncertainly down the hallway. “I better go talk to Youngjae.”

“How about I do it? You look dead beat,” Himchan offers, assuringly squeezing Yongguk’s shoulders as the leader melts into a doubtful look. “I won’t yell at him; don’t worry.”

“It’s not that. Aren’t you tired?” Yongguk asks.

Himchan glazes over his concern with a dismissive wave of the hand and nudges him down the hall.

“I should be asking you that.”

Yongguk wryly smiles in response and thumbs out Youngjae’s extra key card, handing it over. Himchan briskly stalks past Yongguk towards Youngjae’s room and he halts for a second. He nibbles on his lower lip and takes in a steady breath before unlocking the door, slowly creaking it open.

Youngjae is sitting on the edge of the bed, slouching with a towel over his neck. His hair is dripping wet and so are the rest of his clothes, drenched from what Himchan supposes is the relentless rain. Youngjae swivels his eyes towards Himchan but other than that, his blank expression makes no deviation whatsoever.

“Youngjae.”

Himchan flashes a small smile and shoves the key card back into a peeking Yongguk’s hands. He shuts the door behind him, cementing the still atmosphere into that of only one conscious, while the other is buried a hundred feet deep in his thoughts. Stranded out at sea where the waves are woven from reality, and it's terribly cold. The shore is too far out of reach for Youngjae, where the sand that brings sleep lays, where the Daehyun in his dreams exist. Daehyun is gone in reality, and it's so, terribly cold.

Himchan strolls over and clicks his tongue, pulling the towel off Youngjae’s back and crouching over to towel his hair dry. “Seriously, you’re like a kid. Can’t even dry yourself off properly.”

Youngjae flutters his lashes mutely in reply and sinks into Himchan’s affectionate ministrations, obediently letting Himchan change him out of his clothes. Despite Himchan’s consistent nagging, Youngjae perseveres in his compliance. It’s unsettling. Himchan had expected Youngjae to have
retorted just a few minutes in, but he had acquiesced without even a word of protest.

Himchan wheezes an inaudible sigh through his pursed lips and he tosses the towel onto the clothes rack, taking a seat by Youngjae’s side.

“Do you want to tell me what happened?” Himchan lowers his voice to a more gentle tone.

Youngjae continues staring into space.

“I’m tired.”

His jaded voice escapes meekly from his lips, almost unhearable in the constant sound of rain beating down on the window.

“Okay. We’ll talk about it tomorrow, alright?” Himchan rises, stroking Youngjae’s shoulder. “Get some sleep.”

“I’m tired, hyung,” Youngjae repeats, voice strained like his lips have been caught in a loom. Youngjae flickers his gaze up to Himchan and his eyes reflect not an inch of light, lethargy drenching his gaze along with a hint of sorrow.

"I'm really tired,” Youngjae whispers one last time, tone frail.

Himchan softens. He sighs and bends down, wrapping his arms tightly around Youngjae and allowing him to rest his head on his shoulder. The thoughts crushing Youngjae’s mind are a hundred tonnes heavy and Youngjae’s soft breaths trails over Himchan’s skin.

“Then why did you do it?” Himchan questions quietly, afraid of breaking Youngjae as the boy ensconces himself within Himchan’s embrace.

“I got lost,” Youngjae mumbles, voice cracking just the slightest at the end.

“You could have phoned us using a payphone. I know you stayed out there on purpose, Youngjae,” Himchan chides tenderly.

Youngjae shifts against Himchan’s warmth.

“I didn’t want you to be right,” Youngjae admits weakly. “I didn’t want him to get the last laugh.”

“Last laugh?” Himchan exhales, threading his fingers lightly through Youngjae’s hair. It feels like he’s holding a child in his arms, one adamant on winning till the very brink of his sanity. Teeter on the edge till he’s the last man standing and rejoice with his last breath as he falls back and shatters his head on concrete.

“Why does it sound like you’re trying to beat Daehyun?” Himchan questions.

“Maybe I am,” Youngjae breathes, petulance entrenched deep within his words. “I can find my way back, even if I’m all alone. Without him.”

“Youngjae… No one’s laughing,” Himchan reminds, still cradling the boy in his chest. “Not me, not Daehyun, not any of us. We were worried sick.”

He wonders if this was where it all went wrong: that Youngjae mistook Daehyun’s avoidance for a game Daehyun haughtily thrived in, and he didn’t want to be the loser. That is the truth, but Himchan doesn't know that Daehyun's flung deep into a war. While Daehyun waits for it to blow over, prays to every God out there he makes it out alive with shivering hands, Youngjae grabs the
toy gun off the shelves and patters after Daehyun in anticipation.

Youngjae remains silent. Himchan whispers, “Daehyun isn’t doing this for fun. Whatever he’s going through now, you know he still loves you. He was worried about you, Youngjae.”

Almost instantaneously, Youngjae squirms in Himchan’s grasp, and he slowly pulls away. Like a child covering his ears and drowning out all with screams, Youngjae turns over and murmurs monotonously, “I’m sorry for worrying you guys.”

Youngjae’s fingers are trembling against the mattress. They are almost unnoticeable but Himchan catches them out of the corner of his eyes.

“You can go back to your room, hyung.”

Youngjae grabs the blanket and promptly switches off the light, engulfing himself in sheets and sheets of white. Himchan stares and prods Youngjae’s head under the blanket, humming a light tune to ease the atmosphere.

“Scoot over.” Himchan nudges Youngjae and squeezes in beside him, igniting a grunt in the wrapped up boy.

“Hyung, go sleep in your own bed,” Youngjae bristles from under the blanket.

“I don’t want to,” Himchan sings unabashedly, tugging the covers over himself and snuggling against Youngjae. Youngjae cocks his head towards Himchan with a scowl and Himchan chuckles unapologetically.

They submerge in a pressing silence, city lights peeking past the curtains and reflecting off the glass. The rain has yet to stop. Youngjae still smells distinctly of rainwater and being swept out to sea.

“It must have been scary,” Himchan hums, kneading Youngjae’s arm with a soothing tempo. “Being out there all alone, in a place you don’t know.”

“It wasn’t,” Youngjae rebounds. Himchan doesn’t believe him, but he says nothing, because thinking of Youngjae afraid and miserably drenched in rain is pitiful—and if Youngjae ever learns of it, he will distort it into utter humiliation and run away till he loses himself again.

Night toils past the bridge of warmth between them, Youngjae’s panting evening out as the seconds trail into lengthy minutes. Himchan shuts his eyes.

“I know what he did hurt your pride,” Himchan begins, feeling Youngjae blearily stir as sleep hauls him down. “But it’s not a game, Youngjae. Don’t treat it like one.”

“You’re not going to win anything out of it.”
BEHIND THE SCENES — WHAT I NEVER KNEW

In the dead of the night, I heard him come to me in my dream. I heard him push open the door and he stood there, right there, by my feet. I saw the way he stepped back; I saw his trembling lips. He stared, and stared, and stared, until daylight broke me out of my sleep. It was then that he asked me this:

Why were you two sleeping together?

ACT TWO

“Has he calmed down yet?”

The sickening echoes of Youngjae’s distraught cries shudder within Himchan’s eardrums. He stands by Youngjae’s hotel room door, nodding stiffly. He meets Yongguk’s eyes and it seems as though the still air frames up Youngjae’s fragile, shaking self in Himchan’s memories.

“I gave him one of your books to read for the time being. Where’s Daehyun?” Himchan questions, not bothering to mask the fatigue. He’s sure his exhaustion is reflected just as starkly in Yongguk’s eyes, but at least Yongguk tries to look less worn out.

“He said he’s going for a walk.”

Yongguk glances down the empty hallway, distance brimming in his irises. The remnant of Youngjae’s shivering clutch remains on Himchan’s arms, the delirious look in his eyes disconcerting.

It’s common for Daehyun and Youngjae to request changing rooms, both hell-bent on avoiding one another. Bend them till they break, till their bones snap and they never wake, it’s always been petulance and deep-seated resentment and hurt that drove them to demand a mandatory distance between them.

But it’s different this time. Never had Youngjae been so insistent and desperate, so ready to weep if they didn’t comply with their pleas.

Why had Youngjae looked so grievous, as though he would break any moment more by Daehyun’s side?
“Is it okay to let him go out alone?” Himchan breathes out. “You know what happened with Youngjae the last time.”

Himchan briefly recalls the frenzy Youngjae had stirred up with his disappearance, refusing to come back despite being caught in a blustering downpour.

“I doubt it’s the same situation, Himchan,” Youngguk mutters back. Himchan folds his lips.

It wasn’t surprising when Daehyun came and demanded to switch rooms with Junhong this morning. There was noticeably a glint of derangement in Daehyun’s aggravated self but Himchan brushed it off, thinking it was just one of Daehyun’s usual tantrums.

Daehyun and Youngjae were supposed to talk it out last night, after Youngjae’s birthday celebration. Jongup had caught Daehyun writing an apology letter to Youngjae and that was precisely the reason Himchan let Youngjae stagger back on his own to his room shared with Daehyun, drunk. Himchan and Jongup had tailed Youngjae up and ultimately left them alone, leaving the two to settle their feud themselves.

Himchan had prayed fervently things would take a turn for the better. Perhaps Daehyun would take care of Youngjae in his inebriated state and they would make up, piece themselves back together into one whole of sunny smiles and little nudges here and there—not into a mess of quivering hands and Youngjae’s hysterical wails.

Thinking back to the way Youngjae had hauled him into the stairwell and promptly crumbled in Himchan’s grasp... It makes no sense. Something good was supposed to happen. They weren’t supposed to shatter to the point they’re unrecognisable.

Himchan knows for a fact that Youngjae would rather let his eyes turn inside out, let them be gorge out than cry in public. He cries in a way unique to a stubborn, embarrassed kid—he tries to imitate the stillness as though nothing can bring him down, calm, deep oceans over splashes of tidal waves, but he fails to stop his trembling lips.

If he’s so bent on hiding his tears, what more would he allow himself to sob over someone he hates?

“You’re right,” Himchan sighs, leaning against the door. “I should have listened.”

If he had taken Yongguk’s advice to check on them instead of leaving them alone after Youngjae’s birthday party, maybe things wouldn’t have deteriorated to this state.

“It’s not your fault,” Yongguk breathes.

Youngjae’s eyes had spilled only trauma as he begged, pleaded, mourned, as he adamantly held on to Himchan in the stairwell, and Himchan had been utterly confounded.

What exactly happened for them to collapse into such distraught?

“Yongguk,” Himchan breathes, hanging his head low before raising it to meet Yongguk’s eyes. “We need to find a solution. We can’t just leave them like this. It’s just getting worse and worse.”

Yongguk nods solemnly. “Did Youngjae tell you anything?” He tries hopefully, to which Himchan gravely shakes his head.

They simmer into another head-throbbing silence, Himchan shutting his eyes in lethargy.

“I just… don’t understand what’s going on. Why,” Himchan grits, prying himself off the wall,
“why? I don’t get it. At all.”

His voice grows to an agitated edge and he relaxes when Yongguk clasps his shoulder. They meet eyes and Himchan sinks dejectedly.

"Why?"

Daehyun and Youngjae used to be the best of friends. Even before they debuted, even when everyone worried a bitter rivalry may arise between the two main vocalists, they learnt to smile against one another so naturally.

“Maybe it’s the stress,” Yongguk offers quietly.

“That doesn’t give Daehyun any right to throw tantrums like a little kid,” Himchan snaps instantaneously. “We’re all stressed, damn it, Yongguk.”

Himchan slams his hand against the wall, irateness tripling in his veins. Another bout of awful silence lingering.

“Honestly, Himchan,” Yongguk breathes, “I think this is beyond what we think it is.”

“What do you mean?” Himchan murmurs. He watches as Yongguk twiddles his fingers and his adam's apple bobs up and down. They both know this whole commotion brewed from Daehyun disliking what others thought of Youngjae and him. Misinterpreted, to be more exact.

The hesitance in Yongguk's voice is undeniable. "Don't you feel like Daehyun's going overboard?"

"Yeah. Everyone thinks that, Yongguk." Himchan furrows his brows, unable to follow Yongguk's line of thought.

"I just think it's more than what we think it is. Daehyun isn't avoiding Youngjae just for... that," Yongguk surmises quietly.

"So, what do you think he's trying to do?" Himchan questions, a little lost. "Are you saying Daehyun's trying to break it off because he honestly hates Youngjae?" Himchan has considered the prospect several times, but he can't think of anything Youngjae has done to piss Daehyun off to such a grave extent.

"No," Yongguk firmly rebounds. "Daehyun obviously still cares for Youngjae. That time, when Youngjae went missing, already shows it."

"Then, what's the reason?" Himchan presses. "And honestly, Yongguk, Daehyun would be heartless not to care. It doesn't mean anything. After that, he still continued acting as if Youngjae didn't exist."

Yongguk gnaws on his lower lip. His eyes flick back up to meet Himchan's and he coughs, "You know, Daehyun asked me for Youngjae's key card that night."

"You mean on the day when Youngjae got lost?" Himchan frowns upon seeing Yongguk nod.

He doesn't remember anyone coming into their room. However, the day after, Daehyun had questioned him why he and Youngjae had slept together when Himchan was supposed to sleep with Jongup. On another occasion long before that, Daehyun had asked the same thing. It was on a night where Himchan had eavesdropped on Youngjae's conversation with Jaebum, and he had heard Youngjae confess that he wished he'd stayed in his old agency. Himchan got into Youngjae's bed and spent the night regaling of fond memories and reasons why he'd made the right choice. No
regrets. Jung Daehyun does not count.

"He wanted to check on Youngjae," Yongguk provides, evident brooding in his knitted eyebrows.

"Oh," Himchan returns, dubiety still puncturing his tone. So what? Daehyun has his moments of guilt; Himchan has caught them on numerous occasions. It's long been established Daehyun has a bit of his conscience remaining, either that or he's an indecisive prick who wants to cut ties but can't bear to for his own sake.

"Himchan," Yongguk stresses and halts for a moment. There's an unmistakable, knowing look in his eyes, ridden with suspicion and second-guessing.

"Do you remember that day Youngjae had his nightmare, and Daehyun went out for a walk without telling anyone?" Yongguk questions, serious countenance making Himchan lift himself off the wall. He vaguely recalls that day—when Daehyun had returned and learnt of what happened, he had hesitated before trekking into Youngjae's room.

With his ear pressed against the door, Himchan caught the seams of a linen-like lullaby, woven from Daehyun's sturdy voice. With it came hope in all its saccharine, unadulterated form, and Yongguk had advised Himchan to sleep in Daehyun's bed that night. He woke up to Daehyun's nudge, gesturing for him to return to his own bed and saying quietly that Youngjae had fallen into a dreamless sleep.

Nothing changed. Nothing changes every time a lapse in Daehyun's aversion happens, so rare under tender fingers and that obvious, undeniable fact that Daehyun still loves Youngjae—at least a meagre part of him remains so. The inertia traps Daehyun to his cycle and Himchan really wants to know why Daehyun wants to torment himself like this.

"Daehyun was in your room that night."

Himchan raises his head and arches a brow in question. Yongguk squirms under Himchan's hefty gaze and his words come tumbling out.

"I... I woke up to use the bathroom, and I passed by your room. Your door was ajar so I peeked in. Daehyun was kneeling by Youngjae's bedside."

"I saw he kissed him."

Intimacy between the members aren't too rare, though they aren't superbly touchy with one another. Daehyun is the type to indulge in skinship the most amongst the other members, but only Youngjae
takes to kissing, which occurs exclusively with Junhong (since Youngjae had developed some sort of little brother complex). Quick pecks here and there, Junhong's irked face and irritated yelps, Daehyun laughing horrendously, ear-piercingly loud and roughly prying them apart.

"Yeah. He was kneeling there for very long. Just... looking at Youngjae," Yongguk remarks, six feet deep into his thoughts.

Himchan scrunches up his nose in scepticism and a hint of discomfort. It's strange and disconcerting, perhaps because Daehyun avoids Youngjae so deliriously to the point it almost seems it'll be game over if they ever meet eyes.

Yongguk bores his stare through Himchan's head, expectantly anticipating his take on the situation, as if he's been waiting for a long time to hear a second opinion.

Himchan runs a hand down the nape of his neck and unsurely starts, "I guess he's sorry to Youngjae for all the crap he's putting him through?"

Yongguk purses his lips and lets out a soft sigh. He shrugs, evidently disappointed by the reply—more of because he's hoping for a revelation, less of that he has any concrete conclusions. Of course not, who would guess any further than eccentricity? What are they supposed to think?

"In any case, I don’t think we should leave them together." The urgency in Himchan's voice clamors through to Yongguk, who purses his lips in thought.

"Let’s… let’s keep them apart for the day,” he suggests softly. “They can sleep together, but till then, we’ll keep Daehyun out of the room. Alright?"

Himchan nods. The plan isn't too difficult, since Daehyun stays out for most of the day, finding himself amid the sharp outline of mortar and the watchful, judgmental throng of menacing eyes. He doesn't come back till a long, long time, but unlike Youngjae’s previous escapade, he bothers to reply Himchan’s text about when he’s returning to the hotel.

It's nine o'clock by the time Daehyun materialises at the lift lobby, Himchan waiting for him at the front desk. His back is drenched in deep, moldy darkness as he trudges in, treading snow onto the pristine porcelain floor. Himchan rises and pads over to him, Daehyun listlessly lifting his head.

He looks exhausted. It's not the type of exhaustion where he solely evades sleep like a constricting plague, one that gnaws out from his bones and drains out his arteries. It's the kind that screams helplessness. For the first time today, Himchan takes a good, long, daring look at what Jung Daehyun has become, and he realises how frightening it is.

The black underneath his eyes are beaten in. The red threads carved outside the circumference of his irises are prominent, and they ravenously engulf white. His skin is drooping, and he looks tired. Very, very tired. So tired, that Himchan reaches out to hold him up just in case.

Daehyun recoils acutely and his tense shoulders are hauled down again, the ground demanding his body in the soil as repentance. Himchan quietly retracts his arm and clears his throat.

"Are you okay?" Himchan tries.

Daehyun doesn't bother to look at him. He nods wordlessly and remains staring at his feet, mapping the outline of his weighty boots. His footprints are embedded into the quilt of snow behind him, where only the sun and blinding light can hope to scare them away.

"Do you want to tell me what happened?" Himchan exhales.
This time, Daehyun lifts his head. Himchan learns for the first time how the living dead breathe and he nods to himself, emitting a lengthy sigh. He guides Daehyun to the lounge and Daehyun rots against the chair, head lolling back and staring at nothing in particular.

Himchan shifts a tiny bit closer and he churns out, "Daehyun, you can tell me anything. You know that, don't you?"

Daehyun doesn't respond. A potent silence hangs in the air and Himchan stresses, "You don't have to pretend that everything's okay. Instead of acting like you're fine-"

"What else can I do?"

Daehyun's feeble interruption slices through Himchan's speech. Daehyun's blinks go according to a calando tempo, a seven bar rest in between each, dragging out the time.

"The truth, Daehyun," Himchan heaves. "You can tell me the truth."

"It's scary," Daehyun rebounds in the same enervated tone. It withers away into grief as Daehyun churns out limply, "The truth. It's really scary, hyung."

Himchan flutters his lashes and apprehension swarms him. The truth has always been that Daehyun didn't like the romantic perspective people saw him and Youngjae through. What else is there to it? Unless Daehyun and Youngjae really fell out, because Youngjae had done something absolutely unforgivable.

(He made him fall! He made him fall so hard his head broke! You're in trouble, Yoo Youngjae!)

Daehyun lifts his hands and spends an extended while just staring at his palms. The edge of his fingers are trembling ever so slightly, and Himchan's misgivings multiply with a tint of trepidation. Perhaps they fought yesterday, and things got too physical, too scarring, too much when Daehyun laid his hands on Youngjae.

"I'm scared," Daehyun whispers weakly.

Himchan softens. He exhales inaudibly and comforts, "Daehyun, you have us. You don't have to suffer alone. Just tell us what happened."

Daehyun continues staring hard at his hands, regret scribbled horrifically dark into his irises. He looks like he cried not just once, nor twice, but endlessly for the whole day.

"I ruined him."

Himchan stops himself from leaning forward. "You ruined Youngjae?"

Daehyun winces at the mention of Youngjae's name, but other than that, he makes no gesture to affirm the insinuation. Himchan sinks back into the cushion and broods on his following words.

"You can always fix what's ruined, Daehyun," Himchan offers earnestly. "If you tell us what happened, we'll help you fix everything."

Daehyun merely drills his gaze through his hands, and the dim lighting shades his face a gruesome black. Himchan waits eternities for Daehyun to speak, eternities more for Daehyun to catch that elusive breath, and concludes eventually that Daehyun will remain mute. Out of cowardice, Himchan thinks, when in actuality, it's out of noble self-sacrifice, as Daehyun has already broken the love of his life and will not put his friends on the line.
Himchan is silly. What is broken cannot fixed what is broken.

"Is... he okay?" Daehyun breathes, so softly that Himchan second guesses what he heard.

The distant scream from this afternoon thrashes in the back of Himchan's mind, and he can't erase the devastating agony through Youngjae's fragmented sobs. Daehyun is clearly remorseful about whatever he did last night that made Youngjae so upset, so why does he keep this stupid tumult going? Why can't he just accept once and for all that not everything is under his control and it's childish to let something so insignificant affect years of friendship?

"Yeah," Himchan replies anyway. He remembers Youngjae clutching on to him as though he's his last lifeline, pleading him through incoherent bawls to get him away from Daehyun.

"I calmed him down. He should be fine now." Himchan pats his own thighs and looks out to the corridor. "We should go back up. You need some rest."

Himchan makes a move to get up when Daehyun stops him.

"Hyung."

Daehyun's head is arched over the back of his chair, painting the semblance of it weighing a thousand tonnes and pulling him straight to the ground. He looks ready to keel over, in all honesty.

"Do you think he'll forget?"

Daehyun's question bleeds more uneasiness into the atmosphere. Himchan questions softly, "Forget what?"

"The things I've done to him," Daehyun croaks. He gradually closes his hands, and he squints at the wrinkles etched into his peeling knuckles.

Himchan bites back a sigh as he involuntarily envisions the silhouette of Youngjae's crumpled form against him, shattering into insurmountable debris and excruciatingly pained eyes shrieking for help. How can one forget the person who tore them down to ruins?

"I doubt he will," Himchan says honestly, noting the manner in which Daehyun shuts his eyes. He is at the brink and anymore will dig tears out from his eyes.

"But that doesn't mean he won't forgive you, Daehyun. Just... don't take too long to come to your senses."

Himchan gestures to the clock glaring them down in the side hall. "Come on. Let's go."

Daehyun's feet are unusually heavy. The walk to their room is silent, and Daehyun plays dead for most of the way back. From how tormented Daehyun's slouch is and how he inhales like he's eternally just catching a breath, it feels like he's looks at a crippled soldier laying limp in a trench. Crumpled against the soil and empty pellets, begging wordlessly through his desperate tears for the landfill to just bury him in the ground.

Daehyun thought he escaped the treacherous warfare above his head as he shovelled hysterically a refuge for himself in the mud. A little shelter, where he would wait out the incessant bullets (carved out from Youngjae's languid blinks) and the ruthless grenades (Youngjae's boisterous laugh, the little crevices by the side of his nose, prettiest smile Jung Daehyun has ever laid his eyes on).

All Daehyun wanted was to return home. But instead, he dug his own grave and collapsed right into
the margin of hopelessness. And he dragged Yoo Youngjae down with him. Yoo Youngjae, oh, poor Yoo Youngjae, the apple of Daehyun's eyes, cursed forbidden fruit Daehyun tried to tear his gaze away from. Ended up ripping his eyes out of his sockets and his heart right out of his ribcage.

"Have you been sleeping?" Himchan queries, in a manner in which one would mistake them for two old friends taking a long stroll in a park.

Daehyun shakes his head. It's a no-brainer, considering charcoal is scorched into Daehyun's eye bags and he looks much older than he should be.

"Why not?"

Daehyun continues schlepping dirt along the carpet. "Can't sleep."

"You can't sleep? Or is it that you're keeping yourself awake?"

Himchan's question stagnates in the atmosphere, and they leave it at that as Himchan walks Daehyun all the way down to Youngjae's room. Daehyun stands outside the door and simply stares for a second, two minutes, three hours more if Himchan had left him alone.

"He should be sleeping," Himchan coaxes. He nudges Daehyun forward and signals for him to open the door.

"I can't."

Daehyun turns to him and pleads, "Hyung, please." He's looking at Himchan with the same eyes he did this morning, bordering on absolute hysteria and traces of purgatorial sin. Himchan can't fathom what exactly Daehyun could have done for him to see it as so unforgivable.

The fact that he doesn't even come close to the truth already highlights how devastating the revelation would be.

"You can, Daehyun." Himchan grabs Daehyun by the shoulders and urges, "Whatever you did, just say you're sorry."

"Tell me what happened, Daehyun. I promise you; we'll fix this together," Himchan tries once more, earnestness difficult to miss. He grasps Daehyun harder and forces the younger boy to look him in the eyes.

The silence that chases after Himchan's prying words is exasperating. Himchan releases Daehyun and disappointedly sighs, "You can't keep running away from it, Daehyun. Avoiding Youngjae won't do you any good with whatever you're trying to achieve."

"You're losing yourself, do you know that?" Himchan lowers his voice, sincerely locking their stares. "It's not just you that's suffering. Everyone is. It hurts us all to see you like this, Daehyun."

Daehyun's pupils flicker and there's stark uncertainty woven into his gnawed bloody lips.

"Who cares what other people say?" Himchan whispers. "We just want the old you back." He averts his gaze at this moment before sighing.

"Youngjae wants the old you back."

Daehyun sinks into his deformed stature and his adam's apple bobs up and down. Himchan pats his arm and paces down to his own room.
"Don't make him wait any longer."

Before he shuts his door, he hears Daehyun strain out.

"I'm trying, hyung," he strains. "To go back to normal. I really am."

Midnight toils in the autumn wind and Himchan stays up in wait for a hopeful, happy ending. He periodically tosses the extra key card to Daehyun and Youngjae's room in his hand, and ruffles a sleeping Yongguk's hair just before he exits the room.

It's been two hours since he had last seen Daehyun. Sleep threatens his adamant eyelids but he determinedly pats to the opposite room, hesitating at the door.

He enters. The room drowns in impenetrable black, and Himchan can barely make out his hands with the help of the scantily revealing moonlight. It casts a luminance that only just suffices and exposes the two shrouded figures on the bed. Himchan drops the key card and stares wide-eyed at the two huddled under the sheets, a forlorn attempt to escape the malevolent, merciless moonlight.

Youngjae is ensconced in Daehyun's embrace, cheek pressed against Daehyun's chest and his arm wound sweetly around Daehyun's hips. Daehyun's hand is similarly draped across Youngjae, and with their gentle, fragile breaths, the world stills into a breathtaking peacefulness. The stars watch in innocent curiosity as the pair shy away from their gazes and the fireflies of the night bristle miles and miles away.

They fit so well it seems they melt into one another's grasp, glittery stardust on a late night in June. Simmer into one another's metacarpals and the chime of their peal-like laughter, just that little bit of unadulterated purity for this temporary few hours.

Himchan remains looking, looking long and hard, awe-struck. With this, he prays for a better tomorrow. Prays hard, because every time hope comes like this, it's crushed back through his windpipe into weightless nothings.

BEHIND THE SCENES — WHAT I NEVER KNEW

In the dead of the night, I heard him come to me in my dream. I heard him push open the door and he stood there, right there, by my feet. I saw the surprise in his eyes; I saw him drop the key. He stared, and stared, and stared, until daylight broke me out of my sleep. It was then that he asked me this:

Why were you two sleeping together?
The cold beeping tone across the receiver cuts off and Himchan pries his phone away from his ear, gazing down at his phone in consternation. He had cut short his shopping trip with the rest of the members to bring home lunch for Youngjae, but he isn't answering his calls.

Himchan swings the small package of beef around and pockets his mobile, glancing down the road. He'll reach the dorms in just a few more minutes, anyway. Youngjae is probably sleeping as usual, which is why he isn't picking up his phone.

Nothing has changed. Since that night where the stars fell and Daehyun and Youngjae met under the watchful gaze of the moon and Himchan's wide eyes that never should have, nothing has changed. Daehyun and Youngjae are rigorously kept apart and the evasion battle has bled into a disconcerting ease. Their presences are disposed to one another like shreds of one soul, but in an ironic, almost comedic manner. They stay away from each other like rehearsing the bitter farewell of a couple at sea, kept tragically separated out of their own sadism.

Youngjae doesn't even try nowadays at concerts. The fans are scrutinising them amid hushed whispers and worried glimpses, but they disregard the harsh reprimands to persist in their avoidance game.

Himchan doesn't understand. He really doesn't, so he keeps quiet and watches furtively from afar. He has an inkling that they may have made amends but still aren't comfortable enough to speak to one another, which is why the hostility seems to have toned down into mere disregard and apathy.

Youngjae has regressed back into his compulsion of sleeping excessively. Unlike the last time, no matter how much slumber he catches in between their breaks, curled up in the back seat, it seems as if nothing can restore the glow in his cheeks and the honey in his boyish, playful grins. His lifeless, despondent irises have come to resentfully resemble Daehyun's, perpetually etched on something in the distance, far out of his grasp. Sometimes, he stumbles and Himchan catches him just before he falls and smashes straight onto concrete. He is barely able to string out a 'thank you' in return.

(No, thank you. I'd rather you not. Himchan doesn't know how someone looks like when they want to die. Maybe he does, but he doesn't dare think of it, else it'll pierce into his heart and he'll come to realise he cannot mend Youngjae. Thankfully, he has not heard Youngjae weeping in the bathroom after he touches himself while thinking of Daehyun, nor does Himchan know how he lies about his puffy, sore eyes. Youngjae dreams no more of glistening sand and cheeky Daehyun who speaks of pretty girls, but of the fragile present and the shame of how his heart beats toxically fast when Daehyun kisses him. Disgusting.)

On the other hand, Daehyun seems to have changed, though almost unnoticeably, for the better.
There are no more aggravated outbursts or frenzied rage, sparked from the most minuscule and most petty of things. Daehyun's bloodshot eyes tell how far out at sea he is, but somehow, just miraculously somehow, he looks a bit happier. And it's rather ominous as Himchan wonders if Daehyun can smile a little more now because Youngjae scraped out the curl of his lips and plastered it onto Daehyun's drooping, bleeding mouth.

Himchan fingers out his keys from his pocket and exits the lift, meandering down the aisle while humming a soft tune. Youngjae has been skipping his meals lately. Himchan isn't sure if it's because he truly does not have an appetite or if he's dieting (his stretch marks deathly reminders of being labeled 'ugly'), but whatever the reason, it isn't healthy. Youngjae is growing thinner and more gaunt by the minute, and it claws down his skin along with his venomous insomnia.

A distant, dissonant noise resounds vaguely from afar and Himchan furrow his brows, pacing down the hallway. They sound like cries, so grievous in nature it imitates that of mourning for a loved one. The incoherent apologies echoes head-splittingly like crumbling debris and trembling fingers, violent and frantic sobs tearing through one's throat as he grasps at hopeless, twisted joints and the mangled corpse. Nails clumped with blood, snapped neck; the deed is done. It teeters on insanity, and it's unsettling.

The cacophony amplifies with every step and so does the apprehension. The moment Himchan acknowledges the possibility of it being Youngjae's voice, he breaks out into a wild sprint, panic imploring he come see the bloody mess on the bedroom floor. That of a boy murdered, dismembered and put back together into a genderless freak sitting in his shadow. It's a view a passer-by catches from the three storeys high window and makes him turn away with a shake of his head, deciding it'd be better not to see someone else's deepest, darkest demons.

All dread grapples at Himchan once he's near enough and his worst fears are realised. He curses when he nearly drops the key and flings open the door, dropping the box onto the ground upon hearing just how clamorous and harrowing the shuddering cries are.

He stumbles and rushes straight for Youngjae's room. The evidence trail made up of eyeliner pencils (silly marker pens) and powder brushes (toddler's paintbrush) tauntingly beckons Himchan to the crumpled form in the corner. Youngjae is sobbing, sobbing so sorrowfully Himchan's breath cracks.

"Youngjae," Himchan churns out, dashing forward and scooping the screaming boy into his arms. Youngjae's hands are plastered to the fibre of his atrocious face, hoping to serve as a mask to cover up how humiliating his existence is.

The surgeon's tools are scattered around like an operation gone wrong, make-up accessories and embarrassing lipstick, and the hilarious scars drawn all over Youngjae's cheeks are proof of the twisted set-up. The gangly clown digs his nails into the edge of his face in hopes the disguise sews on and no one will ever see how pathetic he has become.

Himchan trembles. "Y-Youngjae, what's wrong?" He shakily breathes, grasping Youngjae's face as the boy unceasingly weeps. The despair is so stark and severe it claws out tears from Himchan. How can a boy who once grinned so blindingly have his thousand-watt smile ripped straight off his face? How can Yoo Youngjae, confident, intelligent and oh so bright, be reduced into this clutter of smithereens?

Himchan's shivering fingers attempt to pry Youngjae's hands off his face but Youngjae stubbornly glues it to his face, bawling without even giving himself a chance to take a breath. Himchan slowly begins to crumble as he quivers, "Youngjae, please. Tell me what's wrong."

It takes three minutes for Himchan to successfully wrench Youngjae's shameful palms away. Two
seconds for the blue-back punctured into Youngjae's eyelids and the cherub, artificial blush on his cheeks to register in Himchan's mind. One hiccup and swollen, tearful eyes pleading to be salvaged for Himchan to break. It has been a long time since he has been at a complete and utter loss as to what to do.

Himchan grasps Youngjae tighter and cradles him against his chest. He tries to speak with the calmness a brother should have but all he does is cry out just as agonisingly as Youngjae is.

"Talk to me, Youngjae," Himchan croaks. It's all desperation and incomprehension as Youngjae falls apart right in his arms and Himchan watches him die once more, this time, at such an alarming and horrifying rate. The mascara runs down Youngjae's cheeks and he keeps crying, won't stop crying, just can't stop crying. There are so many gruesome colours on pale white that Himchan doesn't know if he can recognise Youngjae anymore.

"Please," Himchan weeps, "I'm begging you. Tell me what's wrong." His tears drip onto the stream of black marring Youngjae's jawline and he cranes himself lower, embracing Youngjae as tightly as he possibly can. Stains of numerous mocking colours like stamps at a carnival taint Himchan's arm and he can't feel anymore helpless than now. He lifts his head to gasp for breath and wills the tears away, clutching onto Youngjae's violently shivering fingers.

"Is it Daehyun?"

He clasps Youngjae's fingers and Youngjae chokes on his own tears, make-up running free. He looks so worn-out and wrecked, so unlike the boy years ago who donned bubbly smiles, snarky remarks and annoyingly rich laughter.

Himchan's heart breaks.

"Tell me, Youngjae. I won't tell anyone..."

Himchan knows it is, even if Youngjae doesn't tell him. So, even as Youngjae speaks none but lets his incessant tears beg for mercy on his behalf, Himchan offers him solace and lets him sob his heart out for an undeserving boy.

The make-up comes off after a dreary half an hour, nothing but blood clots of black ink lining the sink. Youngjae is put to sleep with the lull of Himchan's tender strokes and soothing promises he'll tell no one. As Youngjae's bare, pristine face relaxes against the pillow and he finally slithers into a consoling slumber, Himchan remains by his side on the bed. He fists his pants so hard a tad bit of his nails tear off his flesh and he wants to smash something against the floor.

Youngjae's battered, abused lips are parted, missed crimson hiding in the corners of his lips. The gory memory of Youngjae's head sprawled over his arm, the baffling make-up hacked into his pores and asphyxiating foundation, has Himchan laying back against the headboard.

He has coaxed no answers from the curled up boy on the mattress. Neither can he formulate even a possible reason as to why he had found Youngjae in such a grim state. The lump in his throat is still present and he swallows back the bout of tears rising from his lungs, wracking his brains.

Himchan spends hours thinking about nothing. The more he mulls, the more the questions come and the answers slip away. Nothing makes sense. Why would Youngjae wear make-up? What more, he didn't just draw on the usual eyeliner like they do before concerts. He'd drenched himself in foundation, so pale he held an uncanny resemblance to a geisha, and the blush on his cheeks were a
compatible blood red with his accentuated, painted lips. Coupled with eerily thick lashes and glittery lips, he almost looked like... a girl.

The only conceivable conclusion lies with Jung Daehyun, and so, Himchan shoots up when he hears the unwitting, uproarious voices loitering in the hallway. The irascibility swells with Youngjae's tortured shadow and Himchan storms towards the door. He roughly throws it open, slicing through the hearty quips and lively laughter.

Yongguk stares at him with wide eyes, keys dangling from his fingers. The tension throttles each and every one of them as Himchan lividly glares.

Taken aback, Yongguk begins, "Himchan..."

Himchan shuts his eyes in a bid attempt to calm himself. The debris composed of a five foot ten boy hauntingly ghost the skin of his arms and he can't shake the way the make-up had decorated Youngjae's face. Like incisions, dictating where the scalpel should cut through Youngjae's jawline.

He wants Daehyun to see the damage. He wants him to cough up his heart in regret because Youngjae used to grin widely and border on arrogance with his proud declarations and numerous accomplishments. But he can't let Daehyun anywhere near Youngjae if he doesn't want the little fragments of Youngjae to grind to dust.

"Youngjae's sleeping," he grits. "Don't wake him up."

He snaps his warning gaze to the tired boy behind. Daehyun stares back in confusion and Himchan swivels on his feet, stalking back in. He nearly steps on the overturned food box on the ground and goes to grab a mop. If he wants to save Youngjae that little thread of pride he has left, he had better scrub away all traces of... whatever the hell Youngjae was doing. Clean up the crime scene else the rest will squint too hard and find something terribly wrong with Youngjae.

Himchan sends Yongguk a glance and he immediately understands. He wastes a good few minutes brushing harder than necessary the ebony down the porcelain sink and winds back to Youngjae's room, settling by his side for the remainder of the afternoon. He tucks Youngjae into the white haven of clean blankets and soft linen, reflecting a purity befitting of his now clear face. When late evening dawns, he can't find it himself to wrench Youngjae from the peaceful slumber he has made a temporary asylum out of. So, he reluctantly leaves Youngjae's side and joins the rest at the dining table.

Dinner is quiet. Himchan submerges himself in his rumination and he starts to worry about the acids abrading Youngjae's stomach, chewing out ulcers into his flesh.

He gets up and heads to Youngjae's room. Having awaken, Youngjae burrows into the sheets when the door gingerly creaks open, a hint of his raven hair laid out against the mattress. Himchan holds back his sigh and musters up a smile, settling down on the bed.

The atmosphere is fragile. Youngjae continues to play dead, hoping Himchan will forget the miserable oddity from this afternoon and never lay his eyes on such a revolting rag doll again.

"You should eat something," Himchan starts. He wants to stroke Youngjae's hair but restrains himself for the sake of Youngjae's sanity. "You didn't eat lunch."

"Just a few bites, okay?" Himchan whispers when no answer comes. "Everyone's worried about you."

When Youngjae understands Himchan will not leave him, he slowly reveals the top half of his face,
half-lidded eyes drained and hollow. He blinks sluggishly, as though every movement hurts him.

"You didn't tell anyone?" Youngjae croaks, remnants of his feverishing sob pulverising Himchan's ears. Himchan smiles harder.

"I didn't."

It takes a while for Himchan to guide Youngjae out of the room, frail and vulnerable. Everyone's heads raise and Youngjae cowers into Himchan's hold, Himchan grabbing tighter to remind Youngjae that even if the world laughs at him for the mistake he made this afternoon, he'll always be by his side.

The only chair left is the one opposite Daehyun's. Himchan hurries over to take that seat instead but Youngjae does not falter in his steps, settling down wordlessly.

Daehyun is staring. Himchan can't decipher the manner in which Daehyun latches his unrelenting gaze onto Youngjae, but he wonders why Daehyun even bothers. Why, when he refused to spare him even a merciful glimpse for so many god damn months, and tries to make up for it now with fixated eyes.

Himchan hopes he's sorry. Even if Daehyun isn't, it doesn't matter, because any chance to redeem himself has been grounded into unrepairable pieces.

Once Youngjae finishes, Himchan promptly leads Youngjae away from Daehyun's clutching stare and back into the soothing sanctuary consisting of the bedspread and monochrome. He watches Youngjae bury himself away into non-existence and begrudgingly rises, gesturing succinctly for Yongguk to follow and swinging the front door shut behind him.

Yongguk joins him outside in solely a few moments, but Himchan's rage has already been re-ignited. His hands are balled into fists and Yongguk tries to hold him, only to be lashed out at.

"I don't want Daehyun to ever go near Youngjae again."

Yongguk winces, unknowingly on behalf of the woeful Romeo waiting for his Juliet to emerge from her casket and endless slumber. It's a tragedy because Romeo doesn't know Juliet cut herself open and underwent an operation to divorce herself from her roots, just so she could give him back his incandescent, painless smile. So they could have a happy ever after in a world that would look upon their marriage kindly.

"What happened?" Yongguk begins softly.

"What happened?" Himchan repeats mockingly, guttural laughter pressing back his repressed wails from a few hours ago. "You don't want to know what happened, Yongguk. Keep Daehyun away from Youngjae. I'm through waiting for him to get back to his senses."

"Himchan," Yongguk exhalles. He clasps Himchan's sleeve and Himchan finally notices just how mad he looks in Yongguk's forlorn eyes.

Himchan grinds his teeth together and he spits, "Don't try to defend Daehyun, Yongguk. I've had enough of his bullshit. We said to wait it out and it's given us so much progress, huh?"

Himchan scoffs. "I don't give a shit anymore. Daehyun wants to avoid Youngjae? So be it. I'll keep Youngjae away from him since he's practically dying for it."

Yongguk remains silent. He stares Himchan down with a mixture of sternness and tender coaxing,
along with the unmistakable exhaustion.

"Tell me what happened, Himchan," Yongguk breathes. A stifling quietness bangs and Himchan grips Yongguk's arm.

"What happened," Himchan dryly laughs. "What happened." His fury sets his bloodstream ablaze and he never, ever wants to see Youngjae so broken and unfixable in his embrace again.

"What fucking happened was that I came back home and found Youngjae crying, Yongguk." His voice pounds through the corridor and the chagrin multiplies the decibels into a jarring crescendo. "I found him crying as if someone died, Yongguk."

"And you know what else I saw?"

Himchan's close to screaming. Tremors run free in his voice and he grates his teeth into dust. He's sorry to Youngjae, for both letting his dirty secret out into the open and for not saving him earlier.

"Youngjae, was, wearing, make-up," Himchan enunciates scathingly, demanding Yongguk feel a pinch of the horror he witnessed this afternoon. "He was wearing make-up, Yongguk. Fucking make-up!"

A beat of silence, heads hung low as the coffin is lowered into the mud pit. Yongguk's jaw slackens and he unsurely echoes, "Make-up?"

"Yeah, make-up," Himchan bites back, emphasising the words like Yongguk is an imbecile. "I came back home and I saw him completely caked in it."

He massages his temple and the breathlessness seems to catch up to him, unravelling his fury into hopelessness. "He put on lipstick, Yongguk," he lowers his voice in fatigue. "Eyeshadow, blush, mascara..."

Yongguk squeezes Himchan's shoulder and Himchan runs a hand through his own hair, releasing a hefty sigh. He swallows painstakingly and struggles to find his words, shaking away the sobbing child etched into his memories. It feels like a nightmare.

"I didn't know what I was looking at," Himchan murmurs feebly. Yongguk steps forward and slips his hands around Himchan's shoulders. Himchan grasps his own hair hard to punish himself.

"He was sitting in one corner and... he just kept crying—he was crying even before I reached home. It was so loud I heard it all the way from the lift. And he wouldn't let me see, he kept covering his face." Himchan heaves toilsomely and rubs at his stinging eyes.

Yongguk thins his lips, offering comfort with his warm hug. Himchan wants to deny the spinning inferences from the dolled up boy from today, but he can't scrape them out of his mind.

"It felt like... It felt like he was trying to look like a girl," Himchan chokes out.

A deathly silence ruminates in the minimal space between them. Yongguk squeezes Himchan harder and Himchan isn't sure if he's doing it to console him or himself.

"Why would he do that?" Yongguk whispers. Himchan shakes his head mindlessly and blurts, "I don't know. God, I really don't know, Yongguk."

"Did he say anything?" Yongguk tries softly, patting Himchan's back.
"No," Himchan gravely murmurs. He locks his jaw and seethes, "I know it has something to do with Daehyun. Don't you think it's time we actually did something?"

"Youngjae's suffering, Yongguk," Himchan pleads, shifting back to lock eyes with the other. "Just look at how he's like nowadays. He looks as if someone gorged out his soul. I've had enough seeing those two look as if they're about to die. We can't do anything about Daehyun, but we can do something about Youngjae."

"All we've been doing is telling Youngjae to wait for Daehyun to find himself. It's not going to happen. I'd rather tell Youngjae to forget about Daehyun and live like he doesn't exist," Himchan finishes firmly.

Yongguk folds his lips. "You know it's not that easy, Himchan."

"Then, what, Yongguk?" Himchan rebounds. "We're always trying to push them together. We're forcing them to fix things and it's only making it harder for Youngjae."

"It's not about that," Yongguk mutters. "It's whether Youngjae can let go of Daehyun or not."

Himchan parts his lips to argue but Yongguk interrupts him. "Youngjae still loves Daehyun. You know he does, Himchan. We both caught him buying those throat lozenges for Daehyun that day."

Himchan does not try to churn out a protest. Last Sunday, Daehyun had a hacking cough and the music show did nothing to help his sore throat. Youngjae had slipped out during their short break and handed it to one of the back-up dancers, who passed it on to Daehyun. They are disposed to one another—this cannot be denied. Even if Youngjae glues his eyes shut and turns away, he still hears the reverberations of Daehyun's voice and raspy chuckles, out of all the white noise. He still cares, and it's terrible.

Beat. They stand dumbly in the hallway and Himchan's head reigns with a thousand and one aggravating thoughts, crashing and burning against the side of his skull.

Why in the world had Youngjae been putting on make-up? So much, that even Himchan questioned the person laying incapacitated in his embrace?

Had he seriously been trying to look like a girl?

"I'm sick of it," Himchan wheezes out. He lifts his head and drills his steadfast stare into Yongguk's pupils. "I don't want to ever see Youngjae cry like that again."

Yongguk licks his lips and he deliberates for a lengthy while. He seems equally as flabbergasted by Himchan's revelation but is suppressing his emotions, not wanting to distress Himchan any further. He tugs Himchan out of his own consuming thoughts with a quiet grunt.

"Junhong told me," Yongguk pauses, doubting his own words, "that he saw Daehyun and Youngjae sleeping together some time ago. In the same bed."

Himchan raises his head.

"He seemed really sure of it." Yongguk scratches the back of his palm. "And I thought of what you told me before. That they slept together that night the day after Youngjae's birthday, in the same bed, too."

Himchan remembers. When they returned from overseas and Daehyun and Youngjae were ordered to room together in the dorms, he and Yongguk checked on them for the first few nights. They slept
in separate beds, expectedly, and Himchan concluded it was a one-time thing that never truly fixed things what with their skittish evasion.

Obliviously, Himchan and Yongguk tear their concerned gazes from Daehyun and Youngjae before the dusk pulverises absolute darkness into their sight. It is there that they miss the atrocity hiding behind the closed door. The repulsive construct their wedding altar out of charitable black where no one can sieve out their interlocked hands and moulded lips.

The magic happens way after twelve, unlike the fairy tales that purport otherwise. When everyone is blind and even the lovers themselves are too, where the ignorant souls cannot tell one another apart (male or female), Daehyun and Youngjae find each other through pounding hearts and thoughts of endless sweet nothings. They caress each other's faces without the need of cruel sight and whisper vows in hopes of a better tomorrow. And when the sunlight comes, they scatter like petrified shadows and hide away till night falls.

Himchan nods, unable to churn out anything at the moment. He questions what Junhong had witnessed, alike to the children who spout out nonsense about things that go bump in the night. The unnatural, the monsters that shroud themselves in the closet and only walk the streets when the sensible are asleep.

"So? This happened, still," Himchan mumbles. He pinches his nose bridge and waits for Yongguk to continue. Yongguk bites his tongue, visibly conflicted.

"Do you think maybe they've made up?" Yongguk questions dubiously. "Just that they don't want us to know?"

Himchan blinks once and harshly ricochets, "Oh, so, they're just pulling a harmless little prank on us, huh? That's why I found Youngjae bawling his eyes out on the floor, looking like that, right?"

Yongguk keeps mum. Himchan guiltily sinks back into his posture and after a long while, provides, "If what Junhong said was true, then I guess it's possible. But why would they hide it from us?"

Yongguk shrugs, pursing his lips in deep thought. Himchan tries to haul himself out of the abyss that claims Yoo Youngjae undeniably tried to imitate the form of a woman, that he had done himself in that afternoon and cried because of his own ministrations. There was no perpetrator that broke in and scrawled messily onto Youngjae's face like it was a kindergartener's drawing block. It was Youngjae himself who coloured in the blood on his own cheeks, and Himchan cannot comprehend why.

"Yongguk."

The leader hums softly. Himchan hangs his head lower.

"What happened today?" His voice almost sounds like he's imploring for any reason other than the deriding one residing in the back of his mind. "What happened to Youngjae?"

A one, and a two, and a three. No one knows of the bride to be, and Youngjae's fleeting, precious glee. Pretty, pretty, pretty. Daehyun will be so happy.

"Maybe he was playing around. Trying something new out," Yongguk offers hoarsely. "And he... scared himself."

It's funny. Yongguk talks as if Youngjae is a child.

"You're tired." Yongguk's hand rests on Himchan's shoulder. Himchan is thankful, because Yongguk holds him up even when he's being worn down himself.
"Let's talk about this tomorrow, okay?" Yongguk promises with a pacifying smile.

Himchan nods mutely. "I'll sleep with Youngjae today. Ask Daehyun to take my bed."

He schlepps back to the gate and readies a smile by the doorstep. One both him and Youngjae can hide behind.

**BEHIND THE SCENES — WHAT I NEVER KNEW**

In the dead of the night, I heard him come to me in my dream. I heard him struggle with the door knob and he stood there, right there, far from my feet. I saw his confused, heartbroken eyes; I saw the paranoia consume him. He stared, and stared, and stared, until daylight broke me out of my sleep.

It was then that he asked me this:

*Why were you two sleeping together?*

**ACT FOUR: THE GRAND FINALE**

Morning tears Himchan's eyes open as he stirs from the couch. He blearily glances to the disappointed clock above him and finally shoots up after a few moment, panic assailing him. He had fallen asleep instead of staying up like he had planned to.

Youngjae. Himchan staggers to his feet, gogginess hauling him back. Yesterday had been an absolute disaster, Daehyun having stormed out of the house after getting supposedly pissed off at him and Youngjae. All childish fury and stark pettiness, Daehyun had stayed out for most of the day
before returning home. Even then, his irateness had not alleviated one bit, and he refused to switch rooms with Himchan.

Himchan and Yongguk had waited up to ensure a brawl didn't ensue between the two. They heard Daehyun's voice briefly through the door, a clear indication he had raised his voice more than necessary, and some miscellaneous noises. But otherwise, the dorms had been wholly silent before Himchan let his exhaustion lure him to sleep.

It's almost 6 AM. Yongguk is nowhere to be seen. Himchan distinguishes a repetitive noise from the kitchen and paces over, finding Daehyun crouched over in the bathroom. Himchan stands wordlessly by the door frame and observes the younger boy quizzically as he scrubs at his bedsheets.

"Daehyun."

Daehyun flinches and he whips his head back with enlarged eyes, startled. Himchan expects him to scream at him, like he does nowadays with his escalated sensitivity, but Daehyun merely withers back into his drooping eye circles and gangly form. There is no resentment and vexation from last night scorching past his countenance.

"You're awake, hyung."

Daehyun subtly sweeps the basin out of Himchan's line of view and continues scrubbing hard.

"Why are you washing your bedsheets so early in the morning?" Himchan questions in bewilderment. He notices Daehyun's ministrations have doubled in haste, speedily trying to finish up his cleaning.

"I couldn't sleep. So I thought I'd do some chores," Daehyun plainly answers. The conversation assumedly ends there and Himchan grunts, spinning on his feet.

"Hyung."

Himchan glances back, meeting Daehyun's stiff stare deadlocked on him.

"Where are you going?"

Daehyun's mien is unreadable, but there is no animosity in his tone. Himchan awkwardly rubs his neck and spouts, "Back to sleep."

Seemingly satisfied with the reply, Daehyun slowly nods and returns back to scrubbing the dreadfully white bedspread. Himchan lingers for a moment before meandering away, throwing a look behind his back before heading to Daehyun and Youngjae's room.

Himchan creaks open the door and is greeted by utter quietness. Morning hangs somberly from a ceiling and a musky stench wafts the room. Himchan frowns, sniffling his nose.

Youngjae's bed is empty. Himchan almost trips into perturbation when he notices Youngjae curled up on Daehyun's bed, wrapped up in Daehyun's sky blue blanket. He is blissfully asleep, and Himchan stands by the door frame, squinting at Youngjae's bare mattress.

Why is Daehyun washing Youngjae's bedsheets? And why is Youngjae in Daehyun's bed?

The unidentifiable scent is not too strong, but it reeks of sweat. Upon hearing the front door unlock, Himchan shelves his thoughts and retreats, sauntering towards the living room. Yongguk emerges, empty-handed and draped in his navy blue windbreaker.
"Yongguk, where have you been?" Himchan questions worriedly. He meets Yongguk's gaze, eccentrically distracted and nonplussed, and recoils when he notices how ghastly pale the other man is.

Yongguk blinks once. Twice. Then incessantly, but in a dreary, lethargic manner, one that underscores his drowsiness and inability to comprehend.

Yongguk gulps. His jaw remains ajar for a long time as he attempts to pry words from his voice box. When he finally does speak, his guts can only churn out a hoarse whisper.

"Himchan."

Yongguk is blatantly out of it. He persistently fixes his eyes on his feet, motionless.

"We need to talk."

BEHIND THE SCENES — WHAT I NEVER KNEW

In the dead of the night, I heard him come to me in my dream. I heard him unlock the door and he stood there, right there, by my feet. I saw the colour drain from his face; I saw him how he stumbled and wanted to flee. He stared, and stared, and stared, until daylight broke me out of my sleep. It was then that he shakily asked me this:

WHY WERE YOU TWO SLEEPING TOGETHER?

GAME OVER
We have come to the end of our performance!

Thank you for coming! You have been a great audience.

What a shame you could not guess what the mutes were screaming.

Please do not touch the human exhibits on your way out.

And no, I'm sorry. This circus is a one-time event.

The answer, you ask?

Silly child, it was love.

Prince Jung Daehyun from the nearby kingdom seems to be scouring the shore for someone. You learn he is looking for a girl who had rescued him from a violent storm, where the prince had almost drowned.

The prince has just recently refused an arranged marriage and claims he can only love the woman who saved him. Unable to find his one true love, he miserably leaves the beach.

You contemplate asking him to take a look at the corpse—just out of curiosity (eerie suspicion)—to see if the boy is the one who had saved him.
To know nothing is the happiest life.

Do you still want to play?
crime scene, take 4

HOW DID HE KILL HIMSELF?

INNOCENT CHILD

Knock knock.

THE MONSTER IN THE CLOSET

Who's there?

INNOCENT CHILD

Yongguk.

Daehyun, please come out.

Why are you hiding from us?

Youngjae has been waiting for months.
In the middle of the forest, you find a corpse laying on a grass patch. Rolled a distance away is a bitten apple, presumably having fallen out of the deceased's hand. The dead woman is stunningly beautiful; her skin is as white as snow, lips as red as blood, and hair as black as ebony.

Four dwarves return and begin to weep deliriously, kneeling down by the corpse. They place her in a glass casket surrounded with dandelions. The mournful wind takes away dozens of their seeds.

**LET'S PLAY HIDE AND SEEK!**

(I hope you're not afraid of the dark, because that's where the demons lurk.)

You're it! Close your eyes and count to ten! Let's see if you can catch those freaks.
Morning dew lingers poignantly in Yongguk's inhales, a frangible stillness weaving an illusion of time having frozen. Yongguk remains by the doorway and continues peering through the narrow gap.

Daehyun is standing by Youngjae's bedside. Yongguk holds in a soft breath and rests his head against the frame, discreetly watching Daehyun stand guard by the sleeping boy's side. He hasn't moved in a long while, simply slouching over Youngjae with his back turned to Yongguk. The moment warps with a cherished tenderness, unbeknownst to a boy trapped in his dreams.

Why does Daehyun dare look at Youngjae only when he's asleep? Yongguk sighs and fiddles with the end of his shirt, cheek pressed against the wall. He half hopes Youngjae will wake up to see the boy lingering by his side, but then again, he isn't sure how Youngjae will react. With how hostile and aggravated he is nowadays, it is probably better he remains blissfully unaware.

A hand falls onto Yongguk's shoulder and he glances back. Himchan glimpses past Yongguk and wryly smiles.

"This isn't the first time," he breathes quietly. They both return their attention to the pair in the room, Daehyun caught in a motionless standstill.

"I caught him kneeling by Youngjae's bed once, while he was asleep. He didn't stay for long, though." Himchan whispers into Yongguk's ear. Yongguk melts into a thoughtful look and he wonders what sort of mien Daehyun is wearing at this very moment. One of reluctant guilt? Or one of thrashing hatred?

Daehyun extends a hand slowly. The two observe pensively and Daehyun drapes the covers closer to Youngjae's chin and over his shoulders.

"Hyung." A loud voice resounds behind the two older members and Daehyun abruptly snaps his head back, catching them red-handed. Junhong bats his lashes obliviously and before Daehyun can escape from his slip-up (the uncharacteristic moments of undeniable longing, where the undeserving beggar gazes too long at the kingdom's most treasured prince), Yongguk swiftly steps over to him. He blocks his exit and traps him in his place, acting as though he had witnessed nothing. Himchan leads Junhong away, rambling about their schedule for the week.

"Youngjae, it's time to wake up," Yongguk hums, patting Youngjae's knee. He laughs when Youngjae does not stir and veers his gaze to Daehyun, gesturing slightly to the weary boy in bed. Yongguk shrivels a little at how intimidating Daehyun's glare is, demanding to know his elusive intentions, and so he quickly turns back to Youngjae.

"Youngjae." Yongguk shakes Youngjae several times and tries to loosen the tight-lipped ambience. "Youngjae, wake up, you idiot."

Yongguk tugs down Youngjae's blanket and reveals the sleeping boy's shirt riding up his gaunt stomach. Daehyun attempts to move but Yongguk abruptly steps back, once again preventing him from leaving the cramped margin separating Youngjae's bed and the neighbouring one.

When the sunlight crashes onto Youngjae's shut eyes, he whines and rolls over, grasping at his sheets. Yongguk meets Daehyun's eyes and gestures towards the adamant boy. "Help me wake him up."

"Come on, Youngjae," Yongguk chuckles, poking Youngjae in the tummy. The boy groggily moans as he curls up onto his side, snivelling his nose.
Daehyun hesitantly reaches out at this moment and Youngjae happens to swat away his hand, the contact making Daehyun shrink back. However, Youngjae grasps Daehyun's hand in a bid attempt to stop who he believes is Yongguk and Daehyun blinks rapidly, gazing down softly at Youngjae.

"He's not going to wake up if you do that, Daehyun," Yongguk laughs heartily. Almost instantaneously, Youngjae freezes, and he shoots up from the mattress. He spares one glimpse at the knobby, rugose hand and lets go of it, tossing the covers off him.

"I'm up." Youngjae stumbles off the bed and his initial, peaceful countenance mashes into an irritated scowl. Yongguk forces out a chuckle as Youngjae heads for the door, and glimpses at Daehyun.

"Is he okay?" Yongguk asks, even though he knows Youngjae has been far from fine for a long, long time. He merely wants to know what Daehyun has to say, about prying his closest friend from his skin to save himself from suffocating rumours, and about how it's beginning to leave a mark.

As expected, Daehyun churns out no reply. Yongguk waits for a moment more before understanding that all Daehyun will give is silence, and exits the room.

Indeed, the cracks are starting to form on Youngjae's skin, the longer this evasion theatrical spans out. Out of spite, Youngjae has begun to play along, the irony of being a good sport lost on the cruel aim of the montage. Youngjae is petty, so it had been more than expected he would hit the rebound sooner or later, upon realising Daehyun's intents.

Yongguk doesn't like it. The more Youngjae delves into the game, the lower the chances of him emerging unscathed. From his gritted teeth to the pulsing vein shrouded by his fringe, Youngjae's acrimony and the dire need to protect his pride will only cause the resentment to mount.

Daehyun is unrelenting. For now, it seems like the only way out would be to wait out the tides of revulsion and wait for the waves to simmer back down into the calm sea. Yongguk hopes it's a phase, because if neither of them backs out, he can be sure it'll stretch out into a menacing war.

He prays Youngjae knows he still means the world to Daehyun. Only that Daehyun behaves like a child, petulant and irrational, and he crawls to the first toy he sees instead of his playmate at the very back. Daehyun prizes his emotions over his logic eternally, and Youngjae is absurdly the same, despite how he defaults to technical terms and intelligent strategies.

Even then, he's not so sure Daehyun won't be blinded by his hate for the voices around him—to the point he sees red not only when it comes to silly fanboards and adorable drawings, but Yoo Youngjae as well.

Practically the entire group knows that Daehyun has been avoiding Youngjae, but none of them speak of it in front of the two, and it's a good thing they are smart enough not to. The moment Youngjae learns they're starkly aware he's unwanted, Youngjae will only dwell in his hostility more in an attempt to nurse his hurt pride. And that means he'll cover up, mask himself in layers and layers of mortar, so no one sees his pain and vulnerability. When he's locked too far in in desperation to protect himself, no one will be able to get to him then.

Yongguk settles down on the floor and flicks on a random gag show, Jongup and Junhong plopping onto the couch. Youngjae does the same and Himchan spares a glance at the seating arrangements, before breaking it by adamantly seating himself on the arm rest by Youngjae's side.

Daehyun emerges from the kitchen. He spends a minute scrutinising the arrangement, one, two, three, four, one, and sits down beside Yongguk. Yongguk steals a glimpse at him and notices the crease between his brows, warning of an incense likely to blow up in the middle of the day.
Himchan and Youngjae are talking. As the conversation between the two conjoined quavers bleeds into the background, Yongguk finds Daehyun shifting closer. Youngjae sounds notably annoyed and Himchan lowers his voice into a soothing serenade.

(Luckily, Yongguk doesn't hear the hushed whispers in Daehyun's head, demanding to know what Himchan is saying to Youngjae and why the hell he has to lean in so close. Why he's sitting there, when there's clearly not enough space. Is Himchan stupid?

Even more thankfully, Yongguk cannot tell how hard Daehyun's straining his peripheral vision as his malicious imagination draws Himchan much closer to Youngjae. So close that Youngjae shies away from Himchan's intrusive breath and Daehyun thinks of autumn nights where Youngjae fell asleep on his shoulder. Clash of undecipherable envy and daunting terror. Heart beat, two, three, four. Just a little closer. Snap!

Daehyun, stop staring at me. It's annoying.)

Yongguk edges away the moment Daehyun's brawny arm hits his. Out of nowhere, Daehyun roughly slaps him on the back, booming laughter reverberating between them. Yongguk stumbles as Daehyun wrings an arm around the older man, casting him a boyish grin and gesticulating wildly at the television screen.

"It's funny, huh, hyung?" Daehyun exclaims, voice so deafening it incites a headache in Yongguk. Yongguk awkwardly grins back.

The tempo of Himchan and Youngjae's porous conversation taps into the background like a waltz. Himchan grasps a beanie off the rack along with a mask and tosses it over to Youngjae.

"It's hilarious!" Daehyun nearly shouts this time and his chokehold around Yongguk tightens, the skinny leader squirming uncomfortably. Daehyun hurls out another blaring bout of laughter.

"It's so funny, god! I'm going to die."

"Let's go get breakfast," Himchan's measly voice echoes in the backdrop. Daehyun's grip starts to become painful, and it is a little terrifying, because he seems to have no idea how much strength he is using.

Youngjae acquiesces with a lengthy sigh. He swings open the door and fumbles at the doorstep, putting on his shoes.

Yongguk fidgets and starts, "Daehyun-

"We're going down to buy breakfast," Himchan unknowingly interrupts Yongguk, adjusting his cap. "You guys want anything?"

"No, thanks," Yongguk manages out, folding his lips when Himchan shoots him a look.

"Chicken noodles!" Junhong yells, nearly clambering off the sofa. Jongup mentions something about a combo meal and Daehyun's half embrace strangles Yongguk.

"Same," Daehyun echoes with an all too radiant, off-putting smile that warps his head inside out. Yongguk hastily attempts to wrest Daehyun's limb away from his neck but Daehyun abruptly grabs Yongguk's wrist, keeping him still. Youngjae doesn't look back and walks straight out without a word.

"Alright. I'm still buying breakfast for you, Yongguk," Himchan remarks, sauntering out the house.
"You're borderline underweight and you still want to skip meals," he sighs, kicking his shoes against the floor and shutting the door behind him.

"Daehyun," Yongguk tries, but the boy in question barely notices the other struggling in his hold. Yongguk glances up to find Daehyun's glistening grin from before wholly cleaved off his face, a shadow of a glower stapled onto his cheeks. His line of sight is now trained on the closed door, perforating through like a razor-sharp missile.

"Daehyun, you're hurting me," Yongguk raises his voice and nudges Daehyun aside. Daehyun parts his lips in surprise and apologetically lets go of Yongguk's arm, his vicious grip leaving an ugly, vermillion circumference around Yongguk's wrist.

"Shit. Sorry, hyung," Daehyun mutters, slinking his arm off and allowing Yongguk to catch a breath. He fixates his ruthless stare on the door, paying no heed to Yongguk rubbing his sore bruise and moving aside. Yongguk traces Daehyun's relentless stare and Daehyun rises from the floor to leave no clues.

.Yongguk blinks in confusion. He questions just as Daehyun spins on his feet, "Daehyun, don't you want to watch the-"

"No," Daehyun curtly hurls back and in a split second, he disappears into his bedroom. Yongguk stares after him, bewildered, and he exchanges glances with Junhong and Jongup.

Daehyun has been toiling through these type of mood swings more frequently, being unnecessarily acerbic and seeking to provoke. He unconsciously digs out other people's misery so he doesn't have to feel alone, a symptom of a cynic who is prohibited from a happy ending.

No one knows of the voices in Daehyun's head wrecking a cacophony in his room, where he hides away to dwell on disturbing notions. Himchan and Youngjae were in too close proximity with one another, and it ignites something absolutely heinous under his skin, charring the outline of Youngjae's lashes and his pouty lips into Daehyun's ligaments.

Push, pull. Push, pull. No one knows what Jung Daehyun wants, not even himself. He brutally shoves Youngjae aside and yet loiters in the corners, grappling at Youngjae's acute silhouette. He maps out Youngjae's contours under his eyelids where darkness immerses him, inhales the scent of an exhausted boy's withered smile and thinks of fingernails bitten blood. Daehyun's sweet dreams are cunning, deceitful nightmares and so, he tapes his eyes open so he won't ever dream of his own lips pressed against Youngjae's.

Daehyun isn't getting better. He is only getting worse, and he knows it.

Himchan and Youngjae return home after half an hour, sufficient time for Daehyun to recuperate just barely and put himself back together. Yongguk remains oblivious to the rotting boy confined within four walls and gets up to help Himchan and Youngjae with their bags. Himchan insistently shoves him a packet of fried noodles.

The camaraderie of a few minutes, all bared teeth devoid of animosity, does not live long enough for today. Junhong snarkily calls Youngjae out on his feminine gestures. Youngjae retaliates with a threatening glare. Daehyun enters the kitchen and Youngjae freezes glaringly, coil of his chapped lips gone with the blink of an eye.

Youngjae sets down his meal. Yongguk extends a hand to grasp him, but he is too late, as always. Youngjae barges past Daehyun roughly like rushing for the next flight and heads for the front door.
"I'm going down for a stroll." He doesn't even bother to formulate a sensible excuse and swings the door open, hint of choler biting at his rapid footsteps.

"Youngjae, finish your food first," Himchan instructs but Youngjae has already barrelled out the house. "Youngjae!"

By then, Youngjae is much too far to hear him, burrowed into heinous thoughts wishing Daehyun would just burn in hell. Himchan shuts his eyes in fatigue and squeezes past the group, hurrying after the boy.

Silence. Daehyun is staring out the door with his lips parted and eyes unmoving. There is no rancor or the repetitive petulance embedded into his countenance, merely indiscernible years deep emotions ravishing at his ribcage.

Yongguk can tell he's sorry. He wants to spurt out something to soothe the tension but out of the blue, Junhong pushes Daehyun towards the gate.

"Go after him, hyung."

Junhong's lips are pulled into a taut line, demand twisted into his syllables. Daehyun throws him a dirty look and Junhong's annoyed tone doubles into indignation.

"Go after him!" Junhong seethes, shoving Daehyun much harder than needed. Daehyun stumbles and gapes back at their youngest member. He catches Junhong's wrist before Junhong can ram him out the kitchen.

"Why should I!?" Daehyun flares up.

"Daehyun, let go of him," Yongguk orders strictly and grabs Daehyun's shoulder. "Junhong, stop provoking Daehyun."

Junhong's expression borders on incorrigible and he daringly glares Daehyun down. Their stare-off drills graves into each other's heads and Yongguk silently gestures for Jongup to stay away.

"Now, Daehyun," Yongguk warns, Daehyun making that slight deviation in gaze and persevering in his splintering glower. Yongguk sinks his nails into Daehyun's flesh and Daehyun begrudgingly releases Junhong. Their stare-down does not falter, riled look inscribed into their clamped jaws.

Yongguk heaves and nudges them away from one another, Jongup grasping Junhong's lanky arm and hauling him back. Junhong cocks his head one side incorrigibly and furiously elbows Daehyun aside, storming to his room. Jongup patters behind to help abate his pique and Daehyun and Yongguk are left standing in the wilting quietness.

Yongguk steps up to Daehyun.

"Why are you avoiding him?" He whispers softly. Yongguk has sat him down and asked this question one too many times, only to receive scowls and flimsy denials in return.

Daehyun bats his lashes against darkened eye bags, drained. His reply is incredulous, incomprehensible, insane, dug deep inside the recesses of his brain.

"I have to."

Yongguk can only make out a glimpse of agony before Daehyun retreats, and shrouds himself once more in the darkness where his demons can run free. Yongguk lets out a jagged sigh and flings
himself onto a chair, rubbing at his temple in disbelief.

COME OUT

“Daehyun, where are you going? Daehyun!”

Yongguk swiftly sprints after the boy storming down the hotel corridor, Himchan chasing after. Dread tramples over Yongguk's nerves as Daehyun does not falter, barging forward.

“Searching for him. Doing something,” Daehyun snarls heatedly. He violently hurls open the door to the stairwell and it slams against the adjacent wall. Daehyun stalks down one flight after another with furious footsteps.

“Didn’t you hear what our manager said?” Himchan yells, but Daehyun pays no heed, vanishing with just the aggrieved, jarring rhythm of his footsteps left behind. Himchan growls and smashes his fist onto the railings, descending a few steps in a bid attempt to follow after.

Yongguk hauls him back.

“Take care of Junhong and Jongup. I’ll go after him,” he orders.

With that, Yongguk bolts down the stairs, expeditiously tailing Daehyun.

"Daehyun! Come back!" Yongguk huffs, swinging past floor after floor and speeding up the moment he hears a door bang shut. He tugs it open and dashes out of the hotel lobby, a blast of freezing air crashing against his skin. He sieves out Daehyun ramming his way through the crowd and slips between the gaps hastily, managing to clasp Daehyun's arm. Before Daehyun can retaliate, Yongguk pulls him aside, panting heavily.
"Daehyun, the staff will find Youngjae," Yongguk pleads, and Daehyun brutally snatches back his arm. The latter swivels on his feet and Yongguk barely manages to grasp the hood of Daehyun's jacket before Daehyun takes off once again.

"Daehyun, listen to me! You can't just go around searching for him on your own! What if you get lost too?" Yongguk urges desperately.

Daehyun cocks his head back and his eyes are flared up with such a deranged irateness Yongguk recoils.

"So, we're just going to sit around and do nothing? That helps, doesn't it, hyung?" Daehyun scathingly barks, several passers-by whirring their heads at the commotion. "He could fucking dead by now, for all we know!"

Panic clouds Daehyun's ashen face as though his own conjured prospect scared himself, and he steps back. His lower lip trembles and Yongguk grabs Daehyun tighter in case the other boy runs off into the night.

"Daehyun, calm down. I want you take deep breaths." Yongguk lugs him into the alleyway where the paparazzi won't snap incessantly and slap them with misleading headlines. It's strange, because at this moment, Daehyun doesn't seem to care even in the least bit about the wandering eyes of the passers-by. It's strange, because Daehyun spends his life elongating the distance between Youngjae and him to direly underscore that it's all platonic between them—and if the love in their friendship can be misinterpreted, he'll just wrench it out himself to avoid misunderstanding. Dig deep into his guts and wrest his heart straight out of his throat.

"Calm down? You want me to calm down when Youngjae's lost out there?" Daehyun grits in disbelief.

"You acting rashly won't help at all!" Yongguk snaps. They struggle against one another, Daehyun evidently winning with strength but Yongguk twisting himself to ensnare Daehyun back to place.

"I'm going to find him." Daehyun insistently tugs at Yongguk's clutch with delirium to last the next few centuries, panting shallowly. "I'm going to find him." His chant deliquesces into frantic squirming, frenzy alike to that of a mad man.

"Let me go!" Daehyun screeches, freeing himself for a split second before Yongguk hurriedly clings on to Daehyun's arm. "I'm going to find him! I'll-"

Yongguk raises his hand slaps Daehyun across the cheek harshly. Daehyun freezes as the sting simmers sobriety into the raving, incoherent boy, his eyes darting about feverishly.


"Hyung," Daehyun quivers. The trace of surreptitious tears Daehyun has crushed down into a mask of rage surfaces and Daehyun wheezes, "Youngjae's lost out there, he's lost and-"

"Deep breaths," Yongguk coaxes, coordinating his own inhales and exhales for Daehyun to emulate. He wholly loses Daehyun's attention for a split second as Daehyun snaps his neck at the sound of a horn, and the blood drains from his cheeks.

"Deep breaths," Yongguk blurs, anxiety doubling his pallor. The tempo of his inhales triple and slice themselves up into a clashing 15/8 time. He's essentially gaping for air and Yongguk would have mistaken him for having plunged into deep waters if he had heard just the echo of his
disconcerting gasps.

Daehyun is drowning. He shrieks for help. "Hyung, I can't just fucking leave him out there on his own-"

"Daehyun, deep breaths," Yongguk repeats in a louder voice, grasping Daehyun's shoulders and quelling the turbulent tremors through the other. Daehyun swallows and chokes, heaving once more.

"Come on, Daehyun," Yongguk urges and clasps tighter. "Breathe in, breathe out."

Daehyun finally focuses on Yongguk and his hefty, frayed breaths begrudgingly form a more steady rhythm. Yongguk nods encouragingly as it slows down into normalcy, Daehyun's frazzled nerves easing into cheap composure.

When the air clears and Daehyun tries not to dream of Youngjae with eyes wide open, Yongguk pats his shoulder lightly. He consoles, "Youngjae is fine. Alright, Daehyun? Youngjae's okay. Don't worry."

Daehyun nods, because children like to hear stories with a happy ending, regardless of whether it's made-up or not. He does it for the sake of his sanity because Youngjae is bleeding out on the road by the concert hall and he's battered with his wrists bound and mouth gagged miles down in a cruddy apartment and he's standing on the street where they got their lunch, weeping for Daehyun to bring him home and-

"Daehyun," Yongguk raises his voice, grip tightening. Daehyun snaps back into the better reality and Yongguk stresses, "Youngjae is alright. He's just throwing a tantrum and doesn't want to come back yet. I'm sure of it."

Daehyun nods again. He nods, keeps nodding, nods till he breaks his neck and his mind wanders once more. Yongguk has to haul him back to his senses with a soft hum.

"Let's go back to the hotel," Yongguk persuades. Daehyun glances at him and Yongguk offers a gentle, kind smile. For the hundredth time since the loss of Daehyun's sanity and how he yearns to see his parents, Yongguk plays the loving mother and perhaps, wife, if one is sick enough to think that far.

"I'm not going back."

Daehyun's voice is more tranquil, though there hints of ripples beneath his rasp. Yongguk melts into a frown.

"Daehyun-"

"I have to search for him, hyung. It's... all my fault," Daehyun croaks. He lowers his head and the unmistakable trail of tears slashes down his cheeks. He presses his rough palms to his face and lets out a shaky sigh.

This is how Daehyun cries. He chokes it back in not for petty reasons but because he doesn't like to cry, simply because it's sad. He wheezes out the vapour that manifests into tears by the corner of his eyelids, and tells himself he doesn't have time to wail when there's so many people counting on him.

Youngjae cries differently. He shoves it down into his windpipe and stomps it down, far down into his stomach, and tries to act like nothing bothers him. Any deviation in his stoic expression will shatter the dam, which will draw utter embarrassment if he has an audience. This is why Youngjae spends a longer time in the bathroom as compared to the rest, where he sobs silently into his hands,
and then drowns his head in water to rid all evidence from his face.

Yongguk squeezes Daehyun's shoulder. At times like this, he is reminded of their age gap and that Daehyun lost out on being a child just as much as the younger members. He feels a bit guilty for being so stern with Daehyun, castigating him constantly for his volatile, poignant temperament and how boorish he can be sometimes.

Himchan deals better with Daehyun, in all honesty, but he's taken it upon himself to care for Youngjae because neither Yongguk nor Himchan are suited to pry out his deepest fears. They both still love them all equally as younger brothers, regardless.

"If I'd followed him out," Daehyun breathes, clenching his teeth and letting out another tattered exhale. "He'd be back by now. If I'd just..."

Yongguk hums to assure him it's okay, Youngjae's okay, and Daehyun doesn't tell him how much he resembles his mother. Form delicate like a frail autumn leaf, but drawn with maturity and benign tenderness.

Yongguk retracts his arm. He glances out at the bustling throng, chugging down the streets and flitting past easily.

"I'll help you search for him."

The crowd swarms as they go against the current, the exhaustion teething at Daehyun's seams. Every shimmer of hope smashes him out of his trance as he begs for a boy his heart came to echo. Delectable lips, gaunt collarbone and the curve of Youngjae's stomach, was it years before that Daehyun began drawing Youngjae in the darkness of his shut eyes? Perhaps, had he always been moulding his form out of the sand clumping his eyelashes, filthy eye crust, and dreaming of his flushed cheeks and breathtaking whispers?

Yongguk doesn't know, but the day Daehyun first recoiled from his touch was the day Daehyun saw Youngjae in blood red. Red, because Youngjae's lower lip tore and he had not bothered to wipe out the vermillion stain. Red, because Daehyun's heart pounded so hard his bloodstream ran like a violent creek in the monsoon season, and he wanted, he wanted-

Red, because his eyes bled a horror of things that should never have been thought of. Things, or demons, more accurately, that had constantly been thrashing in the back of his mind.

Youngjae had rolled his eyes and said he was overreacting when Daehyun admonished him for being lazy one summer afternoon. *What are you, my mother?* He had then curled up on the floor and continued tapping on his mobile, white dress shirt still unbuttoned and in just his black boxers, pants tossed aside. His skin was a pale silk that gently curved over his hipbones and slim thighs, and Daehyun tore his gaze away, briskly leaving the room.

It was not normal to live with his breath caught in his throat, Youngjae's mischievous whispers and camellia-like laugh against his neck. Youngjae's annoying, snarky remarks and crude snorts. The way he always struggles to stay awake, eyelids shutting momentarily before his eyes widen in adamance, and how the cycle repeats till he's too tired.

It was long after that Daehyun came to learn Youngjae wove a noose around his neck from his exuberant, stardust smiles. The joking words of others verbalised his illegible thoughts and he pinned the fault on the catalyst and the reagent. Daehyun suffocated and grappled for air, and ripped himself away to save himself. He tore down Youngjae in the process and he was so, so sorry he chose his sanity over his friend.
All Jung Daehyun wanted so badly was to return back to normal.

But Yongguk doesn't know. And so they frantically trudge through the sea of faceless in unwitting search for Daehyun's one and only, the love of his life with silver lips and golden pupils. Daehyun whips his head back every few seconds in case he missed Youngjae and storms forward the next, frenziedly trying to sieve out a familiar face. Yongguk scrambles to catch up with him and has to pull him back whenever he blindly crosses the road, walking right into traffic because someone on the other side resembles Youngjae.

Hours later, Yongguk's phone rings. Their manager screams at him the moment he picks up and demands they return, else they'll be punished severely. Rustle. It's going to rain. Tell Daehyun we found Youngjae and bring him back.

Yongguk opens his mouth to protest but the line cuts off. A thunderous rumble and the overcast sky forces him to wrench up an affable smile, Daehyun waiting anxiously with trembling hands.

Yongguk sighs. "They've, um, found Youngjae."

Daehyun's breath hitches and he brutally grabs Yongguk's shoulders, questioning him with enlarged eyes. The ferocity in his countenance draws a cut-throat line in which he teeters on cruelly, like a lover pacing outside the operation room.

Yongguk cringes and nods, supplying reluctantly, "They'll be... back in a few hours."

Daehyun's jaw loosens and he blinks several times, staring blankly at Yongguk. His shoulders collapses and the relief mars his weary face, all grief and nerve-racking agony allayed with the snap of a finger. He licks his lips and releases Yongguk after a prolonged moment and nodding quietly. He licks his lips and releases Yongguk after a prolonged moment and nodding quietly. The distance in his pupils stretches far and wide, and falls deep into his thoughts.

The treacherous grey threatens to pour and Yongguk gestures down the road. "Come on. Let's go back to the hotel and wait for him." They've already got a missing member; the two of them getting sick will only add to the burden.

The walk back is deathly silent, Yongguk pressing back his remorse as Daehyun's lethargy brims at the fibre of his skin. His shoulders are drooping and he drags his feet past the numerous bystanders, on the verge of collapse.

Daehyun manages to last till they reach their hotel floor, his desperate eyes searching out Youngjae behind shut doors. Their manager lashes out at them, only to be cut off by Daehyun's frenzied question of whether Youngjae has yet to return.

As expected, he hasn't. Yongguk keeps the crushing disappointment to himself and continues to wear a look of unbreakable assurance. They are told to wait in their respective rooms and their manager strides off, this time, hopefully because he has found Youngjae this time round.

Yongguk folds his lips and hopes the regret does not show on his mien. They stand silently in the aisle and Yongguk nudges Daehyun lightly towards his own room.

"Go to bed. I'll tell you when Youngjae comes back, alright?" Yongguk whispers.

Daehyun nods. Yongguk turns to leave, but stops in his tracks when Daehyun speaks.

"Can you tell him I'm sorry?"

Yongguk heaves inaudibly and returns, "Tell him that yourself, Daehyun."
Daehyun remains silent. Yongguk shifts and starts, "Look, Daehyun. I know what people say can be scary. But you have to choose what matters most to you. Is what you're doing now really worth it?"

Play dead. Yongguk continues in a more benign tone, "People are always going to say things you won't like. It's a part and parcel of life, so you can't keep this up every time you hear something you don't want to."

Yongguk presses, "Why are you so afraid of people thinking wrongly of you two? No one actually thinks that way, Daehyun. This kind of thing has been around long before you debuted, and you know that. It's not going to change."

"What are you so scared of?" Yongguk breathes.

Daehyun says nothing. Can't say anything, but his mind screams till the lights burn out and his cherished voice box demolishes into muteness. He's afraid of his own reflection. While he's been running so hard from Youngjae and the rumours he came to loathe for distorting his mind, Daehyun realised his enemy was in the mirror all along.

Yongguk sighs, this time, louder and hearable. "Go and sleep, Daehyun. It's late. Youngjae will be back by morning."

He waves Daehyun in and goes to wait in Youngjae's room with the manager. He gnaws on his knuckles and prays hard for Youngjae to return safely. A part of him hates himself for letting this happen when he's supposed to be the leader of the group.

He buries his head into his hands and broods for a long time. The fact that Youngjae is intelligent and the most well-versed in Japanese is comforting, but Yongguk's biggest fear lies with how obstinate the boy can be. He has faith Youngjae will show up sooner or later, that he just wants to get revenge and will come back when the loneliness accumulates past a breaking point. But with the heavy, relentless downpour, the worry begins to claw at him.

The door knob rattles. Yongguk perks up and he hopes to God it's Youngjae, because it's already past midnight and the trains have stopped running.

Their manager opens the door and Yongguk catches sight of Youngjae just before a resounding slap reverberates through the room. The relief is so staggering Yongguk has to bite his tongue to stop himself from tearing up.

He steps in before their manager can lay another hit and coaxes him out of the room, promising to deal with the mess. When it's solely him and Youngjae left, Yongguk crosses his arms and squints at the boy. He's dripping wet from head to toe, and he looks pitiful.

"Himchan told me what happened. What were you trying to prove? That you'll be able to return, even if you lose your way?"

Youngjae keeps mum. His eyes are gravely hollow and he looks utterly lost, as though he's still stuck in the heavy rain on his own. Yongguk grabs a towel and towels Youngjae's hair dry, softening upon realising he cannot tell if Youngjae's crying or it's simply the unrelenting rainfall lingering behind.

"We were all really worried, Youngjae. Don't do it again, alright?" Yongguk chides. He pushes Youngjae towards the bed and spares one last glance before walking out, leaving the door ajar.

He immediately heads to Daehyun's room. A few seconds after he knocks, Daehyun creaks open the door. His eyes are swollen and bloodshot, nose a strong tint of crimson. The tear streaks remain blatantly against Daehyun's pimply skin and Yongguk pretends not to see.
"I told you to turn in. He's back. You can go to sleep now." Youngjae's door clicks shut, moments too early for he misses Daehyun's harsh grunt. Yongguk notices then how thrashed the room is with the door edged open more, items strewn about haphazardly and furniture scattered around.

He deliberates on saying something, but decides on leaving it for tomorrow, meandering over to inform Himchan of Youngjae's return. Dusk is battered into the overhead empyrean, noise of the city toned down several notches with most fast asleep. Yongguk schlepps back to his room and crumbles in exhaustion onto the mattress, laying on his side and staring blankly at the wallpaper.

A firm knock has Yongguk crawling reluctantly out of bed, wondering if Himchan is done talking to Youngjae. He swings open the door and to his surprise, it is Daehyun who is outside his door.

"Daehyun, I told you to go to sleep," Yongguk says.

"Hyung." Daehyun's lashes bat aggravatingly slow against his eye circles. He rasps, "Can I have Youngjae's extra key card?"

"Why?" Yongguk rebounds quizzically. "Daehyun, if you want to apologise to him, you can just knock, you know. Himchan will be done talking to him in a few minutes, so you can do it then."

Daehyun thins his lips and rubs his thumb repetitively over his palm. He murmurs finally, "I just want to see him."

Yongguk tilts his head one side in question before comprehending the underlying meaning behind Daehyun's words. He wants to see Youngjae, but without the latter knowing.

Yongguk sucks in his lips and nods tiredly, fingering out the card from his pocket. He tosses it to Daehyun.

"Don't stay up too late."
At night, the shadows on the wall come alive and chase after the corners of enervated eyes. When the sun goes out and things go bump in the night, good, proper children learn never to stray from the pathway that guarantees the light from lampposts will look upon them kindly.

Yongguk blearily wakes from his stupor and rubs at his eyes, crickets chirping in the distance. He moans softly and tumbles off his mattress, schlepping quietly towards the bathroom. He washes up and slips out, face dripping wet, and carelessly wipes his cheeks with his shirt.

As he paces down the short corridor, a draft catches him and beckons for him to play naughty spectator to what hides behind the door. Yongguk frowns upon noticing the ajar door to Himchan and Youngjae's room. Naturally, he peeks in before moving to shut the door, when he discerns an eccentric blob of black sitting on the ground.

Yongguk cranes his neck as the midnight breeze bristles eagerly, proud of its find. Hushed whispers brew amid the silence as Yongguk squints, making out the form by Youngjae's bed to be that of a person.

Daehyun?

Bewildered, Yongguk furrows his brows and instinctively holds his breath. The boy clothed in bits of moonlight and shudders of ebony kneels beside Youngjae's bed, almost as if dead from how still he is.

Daehyun had done the same thing once, quite a long time ago. Yongguk purses his lips and watches cautiously, Daehyun slowly tilting his head to the side. He is merely staring, reminiscent of the previous instance. It reminds Yongguk oddly of a viewing, Daehyun on his knees by an open casket.

It is even more disconcerting that the parallel fits sinisterly well with what is happening now. Youngjae seems to be trapped in an eternal slumber nowadays, seizing the short breaks and rare, decent late nights to sleep. That is all he does nowadays. He wears the shell of a boy that never lets dusk tear him down, perky even when the clock strikes 4 AM and sustaining his rigour for whatever he's doing. Be it gaming, studying, assembling complex toys the fans give him, Youngjae has never been fond of sleeping early.

Yongguk is grateful Youngjae is comparatively more well-rested these days (contrasting the nights Yongguk resorted to yelling at him so he would sleep), but he has been out of it as well. He lights up whenever he hears of meagre free time given and rushes backstage, curling himself up on a plastic chair for that few minutes of sleep. He skips out on group outings and even meals sometimes, uncannily choosing to rest instead.

Yongguk enshrouds himself behind the wall, unable to tell what exactly he is seeing. One moment, Daehyun acts as though he doesn't care if Youngjae breaks his neck and bleeds out on the road, and the next, he's doing things like this. Incomprehensible things someone suffused with irk would never come close to doing. He pretends to fall asleep so they skip over his turn and let Youngjae bathe first and go to bed earlier—Yongguk has seen Daehyun promptly crack open right after the bathroom door shuts, waving away Himchan's apologies for letting Youngjae go in first. He quietly questions
Yongguk as to where Youngjae is if he doesn't show up for breakfast, still fast asleep, and asks him to order in Youngjae's stead so he doesn't have to wait for his food. Yongguk cannot forget how delirious he'd looked when Youngjae got lost.

For someone who claims not to care, Daehyun does a hilariously horrible job of showing otherwise. As much as he yearns to rip himself away from Youngjae, he still cannot let go, like a child who tosses aside his old toy but shrieks when his parents want to throw it out.

It's all up to Daehyun now to choose what matters to him more. How the eyes of others view him and whether he will fall prey to their traps, or how the emptiness gnaws at him when he's a few feet too far from Youngjae.

Still, why would Daehyun be doing this in the middle of the night? The last time, Yongguk had questioned his intentions, but it's even more suspicious now at this hour.

It feels intimate, to the extent Yongguk cannot shake off the sense of foreboding that he's gravely intruding. Regardless, Yongguk remains by the door frame, for such a long time he wonders if Daehyun had been frosted into the ground, bound on his knees with his perpetual gaze set on a sleeping boy.

Nearly half an hour passes. Yongguk has half a mind to finally open his mouth and order Daehyun to go to bed, when Daehyun moves. Yongguk shrivels back and observes with bated breath.

Daehyun straightens up. He lifts an arm and with the scarce moonlight lending opacity for just that delicate instance, Yongguk sees Daehyun caress Youngjae's cheek. He rests his palm gingerly against Youngjae's jaw and the falter in tempo extends impatiently with the fluttering curtains.

Daehyun leans down. Yongguk flutters his lashes in surprise, and steps back when Daehyun audibly sighs, shaky breath breeding tremors in the stillness. Daehyun attempts to rise and Yongguk briskly returns to his room, creaking his door shut behind him.

Daehyun kissed Youngjae. Yongguk is sure of it even with Daehyun's back facing him. The knowledge makes him somewhat uncomfortable as he climbs back into bed, Jongup snoring beside him.

All of them aren't the type to be touchy with one another to the point they kiss, as compared to some others. The only exception is Youngjae who pecks Junhong quickly, mostly because he dotes on their youngest and it's become a running joke.

The hour broods along with Yongguk as he chews on the inside of his cheek, curled up against his pillow. It feels more unsettling than it should be, mostly because they aren't too enthusiastic about these kind of affections, and the situation between Daehyun and Youngjae leave the kiss far too inappropriate.

Is it an act of saying sorry, and asking for forgiveness? Because Daehyun cannot churn the words out from his foaming stomach when daylight rests upon their shoulders, where someone may mistake their proximity for romantic intimacy, he takes to the night in order to spout out the concealed secret that he still loves Youngjae. Just like the last time, where he'd bid Yongguk give him the key card to Youngjae's room, so as to quell his worries but never unravel to Youngjae that he still cares.

It must be so. Yongguk will have to bring this up with Daehyun again and finally push him to make a decision between his closest friend or the distorting eyes of bystanders. It will only torment Daehyun if he keeps recoiling into the dilemma.
Yongguk lays on his side and shuts his eyes, clasping at his blanket. His rumination and the peaceful eventide vehemently breaks into smithereens when a scream resounds, Yongguk shooting up immediately. He recognises Youngjae's voice and scrambles out of bed, fearing the worst.

He barges into Himchan and Youngjae's room and flicks on the light switch. Himchan is already beside Youngjae, embracing the frail boy and chanting placating words to alleviate Youngjae's blatant distraught. Yongguk scour the room for Daehyun to find no trace of the boy.

"S-Sorry," Youngjae breathes, Yongguk whipping his head back. Youngjae offers a watery smile and his fingers are twitching. "Nightmare."

The tension unwinds from Yongguk's back and he nods silently. He glances to the two youngest members and instruct, "Get some water. You, go get the medicated oil on the countertop."

Jongup and Junhong obediently scamper off. Himchan continues to stroke Youngjae's back, providing consolation and assurance everything will be okay with him by his side.

"I'm okay," Youngjae states, this time with less of an assailable wobble. Yongguk briefly feels bad for suspecting Daehyun would do anything to actually harm Youngjae and walks over to Youngjae.

"Hyung.," Junhong pops his head into the room with creased brows, eyeing Yongguk. He winds over to hand the oil to Youngjae.

"I can't find Daehyun-hyung."

Yongguk lifts his head. "He's not in your room?" He swiftly exits and circles the entire dorm, ruffling his hair frustratedly. Daehyun is nowhere to be found. He must have snuck out after Yongguk returned to his room. The only question is why he would do something so rash as to leave the dorms so late into the night without informing anyone.

Himchan emerges from Youngjae's room as Yongguk grabs his phone. "Daehyun went out?"

"I'm guessing so," Yongguk heaves, dialling Daehyun's number.

"Where the hell does he think he's going at this hour?" Himchan grunts in askance. Yongguk shrugs, waiting impatiently for the call to get through.

"How's Youngjae?" He questions.

Himchan provides, "He's alright now. Still a little on the edge." He chuckles quietly, tone more concerned than amused, "I wonder what that kid dreamt of to scream so loud. I nearly had a heart attack."

"He probably dreamt of you," Yongguk sniggers remorselessly. Himchan smacks Yongguk upside the head and jokingly wrenches his collar. The speaker clicks and Yongguk swats Himchan aside.

"...Hello?" Daehyun coughs diffidently.

"Daehyun, where the hell are you?" Yongguk crossly addresses the boy on the other end, folding his arms.


Yongguk exhales wearily. "Be back in fifteen minutes. We're all waiting up for you," he pointedly remarks, cutting the call without another word. The form of Daehyun's slouch is etched into the back
of his mind and he wonders for a moment if Daehyun had anything to do with Youngjae's aghast nightmare.

The front door screeches open ten minutes later. Daehyun emerges while momentarily drenched in the auburn, tungsten glow of the overhead corridor lamps, before kicking the door shut behind him.

"Daehyun," Yongguk resounds crossly, staring up at the boy from the couch. Daehyun does not meet his gaze and the troubled mien of his does not go unnoticed.

"I'm sorry, hyung. I couldn't sleep, so I went out to clear my mind." Daehyun shifts his weight to one leg, staring at nowhere in particular.

"You should have told us," Yongguk heaves.

"I'm sorry. I was only out for a few minutes."

With how preoccupied Daehyun seems and the remnants of Yongguk's furtive glimpses sitting on his mind, he concedes with a slight nod.

"It's alright. Don't do it again, okay? Go get some rest."

"Hyung, you're so unlucky," Junhong calls from the kitchen cheekily. "You go out for a walk secretly and the entire house wakes up and finds out about it."

"What woke you guys up?" Daehyun strains, evidently uninterested in the conversation. Yongguk glances behind to the only shut bedroom door, darkness seeping through under its peep-hole sans gap.

"Who," Himchan nonchalantly fills in. "Youngjae had a nightmare and screamed."

Daehyun does not respond. The glimmer of consternation slits his face for a split second and he lowers his head, clawing out desperate answers from the floor tiles.

"Is he okay?" Daehyun hesitates, voice lowered. Himchan absent-mindedly taps on his tablet and bundles up in a more comfortable manner against the arm rest.

"Why not you go check for yourself?"

The suggestion lingers in the air, pulled across teeth as an amiable input with snapping seams. Daehyun stares at his feet for a long while and Yongguk holds himself back from asking why he had been kneeling by Youngjae.

Daehyun nods. He slowly shuffles towards the door and Himchan looks up from his tablet, discreetly craning his neck to follow Daehyun's movements. Daehyun uncertainly hovers outside Youngjae's door and they hear a distinct creaking noise, before it clicks shut.

Himchan slinks back into his position. "I didn't think he'd actually do so," he whispers to Yongguk. "Should we let him near Youngjae when they're... you know?"

Yongguk peers over at the shut door and reclines into the sofa.

"They'll be fine."
"Can't be helped."

Himchan's words loiter poignantly in the air, and Junhong's face crumples into an irritated scowl. He stalks back into the room and Himchan gestures for Jongup to go to bed as well. When the two youngest members are ensconced safely in their rooms away from the potent war field, Himchan pivots back to face Yongguk.

"We should start telling them about these things, Himchan," Yongguk sighs. Junhong has shown his annoyance on numerous occasions that they withhold any information about Daehyun and Youngjae's straining relationship, saying he doesn't like to be treated like a kid.

"Let's deal with the problem at hand first. I don't think we should let Daehyun sleep in the same room as Youngjae tonight," Himchan pointedly remarks, all lightheartedness drained from his countenance. "Whether he wants to or not."

Yongguk opens his mouth but Himchan beats him to it. "I don't want a repeat of yesterday to happen, Yongguk," he states firmly.

Yongguk can understand why, considering how irrationally angry Daehyun had gotten. He'd become riled up over what Yongguk can really only describe as nothing—he'd seen Himchan and Youngjae this morning sharing the same bed, watching videos together, and suddenly stormed out and slammed the door. He'd just returned and barely even spared a few glances at the other members, evidently still incensed, before stomping straight to his shared room with Youngjae.

Yongguk sinks into the couch and begins contemplating solemnly. What Himchan had relayed to him yesterday has been enmeshed in his nerves for the entire day, outlandish and unsettling. Today's spectacle hurls more fuel to the fire as Yongguk attempts meticulously once more to piece together the chaotic, fragmented mayhem coiling Daehyun and Youngjae together.

It is definitely not as it seems. Some time ago, Yongguk had pinned it all on the fact that Daehyun
was at a fork—he was torn by a dilemma that would not wither away unless he decided on one of
the two paths. But with the recent events piling up more and more misfitting pieces to the clutter,
Yongguk isn't so sure about his presumption anymore.

After Youngjae's birthday, where the two had been haggardly distraught to the point it was utterly
perplexing, Yongguk has been checking on the pair before he goes to bed. Himchan had alleged he'd
cought Daehyun and Youngjae sleeping together in the same bed on the same night Daehyun had
got on his knees and begged so grievously for Yongguk to switch rooms with him, just anything as
long as he does not have to be near Youngjae.

When Junhong had told him he'd caught them sleeping together once again, this time before the sun
rose, Yongguk took to waking up early to check on them. Lo and behold, he'd learnt the routine of
the confounding two boys, that they dared hugged only in the dead of the night and acted as though
one another didn't exist in the day. A few times, Daehyun woke up earlier, and Yongguk would
peek in to find Youngjae moved to his own bed, snoring peacefully.

Yongguk didn't understand why in the world they needed to act as though they were still on bad
terms, when every single one of them would be absolutely thrilled to learn the bosom buddies have
finally reunited. Why did they insist on maintaining the stubborn pretense of having fallen out with
one another?

With the air so fragile and Yongguk afraid that a revelation would cause Daehyun to flee once again,
he told not a soul of his find. The new antagonist plays clandestine spy to the two lovers, racking his
brains to solve the evergreen riddle. A sprinkle of sugar (Youngjae's tears and his face caked in
make-up), a dash of salt (Daehyun watching by the door frame and his bout of anger and jealousy),
stir the appalling concoction and wait for the smoke to unfold the secret.

"Himchan," Yongguk breathes, the discomfort pounding through his head. He wants to know what's
going on, no matter how complicated the situation is.

"You're telling the truth, right? You and Youngjae were just watching videos and Daehyun got
upset?"

"Why would I lie?" Himchan huffs, offended. "Do you want a frame by frame narration or
something? I brought in some bread for Youngjae to eat. We sat down and we were watching
random videos. He said thanks and kissed me. Then, bam! Daehyun went mad."

"Wait, what?" Yongguk sits up, frowning deeply. "Youngjae kissed you? You didn't tell me that."

"It's not such a big deal. But yeah, I was surprised too," Himchan mumbles, massaging the nape of
his neck. "Seriously, Yongguk. What's more to it than Daehyun being pissed off I'm doting on
Youngjae, because he wants him to be left all alone?"

"Youngjae kissed you, and then Daehyun stormed out?" Yongguk ignores Himchan and ricochets,
his hair bristling on his arms.

Himchan replies, "Yeah. I'm telling you, he doesn't like it that we're close now. I told you he was
interrogating me this morning about why we slept together."

Yongguk keeps mum. A lump forms in his throat and he isn't sure what to make of the situation.
Himchan rises and paces to the door, when Yongguk hastily gets up and pulls him back.

"Wait," Yongguk intercepts, Himchan hurling him a look.

"Let's leave them alone," Yongguk wheezes, staring at the shut door.
"What?" Himchan simmers into a glower. "Yongguk, I told you what happened yesterday. I'm not going to let that happen again."

"Himchan-"

"You weren't the one who saw what happened, Yongguk," Himchan grits, incredulity and disappointment ground into his grimace. Yongguk shrinks back apologetically, knowing how affected Himchan had been by what he'd seen all on his own.

"Himchan, listen," Yongguk softly mumbles. He hears Daehyun's muffled but evidently raised voice, and Himchan whips his head abruptly to the door, ready to pounce.

"I think we should let them talk it out," Yongguk suggests. "None of us know what's going on; only they do. Only they can settle this."

Himchan argues sceptically. "The last time I let them 'talk it out', they ended up begging us to keep them away from each other."

"That's precisely it," Yongguk rebounds. "They keep running away from each other. It's good that they're actually confronting one another now."

A comforting silence fills up the initially tense air, and Yongguk thanks the heavens things didn't blow up behind the closed door. Besides the measly trace of Daehyun's somewhat loud voice, it is all quietness, which means things are okay.

Far from it.

"Let them deal with it themselves, Himchan," Yongguk pleads. "We'll stay up and make sure things don't get violent between them."

Himchan melts into an expression of threadbare conflict, darting his pupils from Yongguk's earnest face to the door. Here, Himchan and Yongguk are blind to what occurs in the silence. Daehyun places a bar rest above their miserable, miserable heads and shines just a thin ray of light onto Youngjae's face, in case the ceiling caves in to peer at them. He thumbs the artificial red from Youngjae's cheekbones, perhaps a little bit of blood along the way, and he smothers down his sniffles as they suffer in the silent film.

"Fine," Himchan eventually concedes, resting a hand over his forehead. Yongguk proffers him a grateful smile and squeezes his hand.

They settle down on the sofa, wrapped up in their blankets and watching the television drama at an exceedingly soft volume. No one can make out what the main characters are saying and their poise wilts into that of the comedic, their lips mutely moving.

Hours decompose with the absence of sound, a rendition of The Little Mermaid who gave up her voice for a foolish chance with the prince. Tired out from the commotion, Himchan and Yongguk wind up falling blissfully asleep.

It's four by the time Yongguk stirs from his slumber, groggily stretching himself and snapping into soberness. He hurriedly plops Himchan's head onto the arm rest and tiptoes to the door, praying against bad dreams the animosity has been resolved. He cautiously clasps the doorknob and turns, frowning when he realises it is locked.

Yongguk patters away to find the spare key, clawing it out from a dusty drawer by his cupboard. He pads back to the door and a sense of foreboding grapples at him, pleading him to leave the pair alone.
The oblivious man heeds no warning with the dialogued omitted from the film roll and slips in the key.

He unlocks the door. The metal screeches at him to leave but Yongguk merely turns the doorknob as quietly as he can, creaking open the door.

The ghostly echoes of tragic grievances and torturous tears seep into the night air as darkness first greets Yongguk, the last shield standing by courageously. The deathly sounds of the night, made by the monsters children fervently claim so to be, lend charitable help to their kin and attempt to distract the wandering, treacherous soul. The wind wheezes and the cicadas cry out as ghostly as they can, but to no avail.

What catches Yongguk next is a wallowing, musty scent. Gingerly, he pushes open the door fully and even the hinges shriek, but these sounds miserably scare away only kids.

The traitorous moonlight reveals the lovers meshed together on the bed, blanket draped over just their feet sloppily. Yongguk frowns deeply and glances down to the pool of clothes on the floor.

Daehyun and Youngjae are bare, legs tangled and their faces so close their lips are almost touching. The scent of perspiration grips Yongguk and he rapidly blinks, approaching the two.

His face turns ashen. Yongguk's mind draws a blank and the white noise in the background slithers away into non-existence, all emptiness pervading his head. The blood drains out of his head and he wonders if he's seeing things. Yongguk shakily steps back and he stares dumbly, jaw agape.

He must have mistaken. The taunting scent assaults his nose and he tears his eyes away from the glimpse of stains on sheets. Cold pricks at his skin and he remains rooted to the floor for a pregnant pause. Eventually, he pulls himself together and stumbles out of the room, hastily shutting the door as he holds his head in disbelief.

He must have mistaken, no doubt. Yongguk feels terribly light-headed and he gazes at Himchan sprawled over the couch, sleeping soundly.

Yongguk grabs his cap. For the next few hours, it's nothing but a mess splattered onto white as he mindlessly walks down the sidewalk. Blank, blank, blank, because Yongguk doesn't dare think for those few hours even though his mind thrashes violently. Heinous scrawls, erratic scribbles, all white.

He must have mistaken. They slept together as per usual and the smell and clothes on the ground are proof of nothing. He feels ghastly cold and the hairs on the back of his neck are standing. His footsteps prick pins and needles into the soles of his feet.

No. He must have mistaken, right?

Everything involuntarily falls into place and Yongguk finds it hard to breathe, all of a sudden. As he steps harder, faster, further from home, his mind inadvertently fills in the blanks for him. Why Daehyun had been avoiding Youngjae. Why he'd begged to be separated from him like his life depended on it. Yongguk doesn't know what to think, so he walks till the sun adamantly seeps into the spectrum of blue-black and demands light upon the man walking the streets alone.

Blank. Yongguk circles the block five times before dawn breaks and his feet haul him home, his mind still caught in a daunting whirl. The red from the sunrise pierces his eyes as he trudges back upstairs, every step horrendously slow. This was the reason why Daehyun never let himself be without distance from Youngjae. And yet, he'd shoved them together in hopes they'll fix their broken
friendship. No, he must have mistaken.

One step, two step, three step. He reaches the doorstep and he remains staring for an elongated while, keys clasped in hand. It takes a longer while for him to unlock the door, wondering how exactly he'll face the two if they've woken up. How indeed. What will he say? As the leader, as a big brother, as a friend, it's his duty to take care of them.

He must have mistaken.

What the hell is he going to do?

He nudges open the door uncertainly, catching thankfully the sole silhouette of Himchan as he rounds the corner. Himchan blearily pads up to him and questions, "Yongguk, where have you been?"

Himchan's dreary eye circles are comfortingly familiar. Yongguk wants to vomit out everything right now, but nothing comes out of his mouth. He stands there, gaping for a while as he struggles to find his words.

"Himchan," Yongguk croaks, his name clawing out an outlandish amount of effort from his guts. Himchan creases his brows in consternation.

Blank. Yongguk blinks away the red slashing through the window sills, and he momentarily glances to Daehyun and Youngjae's room. It must be a mistake.

"We need to talk."
Some time later, a prince stumbles onto the coffin. Absolutely enchanted by the woman's ethereal beauty, Prince Jung Daehyun pries open the casket and falls in love at first sight. As he kneels down to kiss her, you vaguely make out from a distance a bump along the woman's throat.

The prince declares that he will bring the corpse to his kingdom and promptly does so. As the carriage carrying the coffin rattles away, the dwarves mourn the empty grave nearby, lamenting how the deceased never found a princess to love. It is then you ponder over asking the prince to take a closer look at the girl—just out of curiosity (eerie suspicion)—to see if she is actually a boy.
You watch quizzically as the prince kneels beside the corpse, staring silently. He gingerly lifts the cold arm out of the confining chalk outline and you warn of contaminating the evidence and never finding out the truth. He whispers that cadavers do not speak, and begs you to leave the dead in peace.

He speaks only of regret and futile wishes, and carries the dead body away from the suffocating white tracing. It now demands a new occupant, and so the prince asks if there were any other way out.

He gently places the deceased down in the sand so he can be cremated. The prince lays himself inside the outline and offers himself up instead to the brutal, prejudiced autopsy.

"Where's Youngjae?"

Yongguk ruffles his hair in confusion as the four children stand in front of the cupboard. Junhong scours the place and tilts his head. "Youngjae-hyung was always sitting here everyday, right in this spot! Where did he go?" He steps forward and pats the ground where Youngjae sat at, peeking past the cupboard to find not a single soul.

"I think Youngjae-hyung gave up," Jongup bleats, ends of his lips curling downwards. "He waited so long for Daehyun-hyung."

"Daehyun!" Silence drifts from the closed doors and Yongguk raps on the door, awaiting a reply. No response comes and Himchan frustratedly kicks the door, crouching with a sulk. "It's all your fault, Daehyun! You chased Youngjae away for good. Now, Youngjae is gone!"

"You're mean for leaving Youngjae-hyung behind, hyung," Junhong blubbers, whining through the
Quietness greets them and Jongup frowns, knocking on the door several times. "Daehyun-hyung?"

Again, there is no reply. The four kids peer curiously at the cupboard, not a trace of a sound emanating from within. Himchan tries to pry it open but to no avail.

"I don't think he's inside..."

Himchan puts his ear against the door and shuts his eyes in concentration. He shakes his head with wide eyes, spouting, "I hear nothing!"

He then squints into the minimal margin between the two doors and yell, "I see nothing!"

"So Daehyun-hyung is not inside?" Junhong exclaims and attempts to peek into the minuscule gap too, only to see darkness.

"It's scary; I don't want to look anymore," Junhong whines. "Where did Daehyun-hyung and Youngjae-hyung go..."

"Maybe Daehyun-hyung came out and they restarted their game of hide and seek!" Jongup suggests. Yongguk crosses his arms in thought.

"Maybe. I hope Daehyun won't be a sore loser like the last time. Youngjae found him but he locked himself in the cupboard."

"Let's go find them," Himchan cheers, leaping into the air. "It'll be our own game of hide and seek! They'll be 'it' and we'll find them!"

The three other boys bellow in excitement and they patter off noisily, eager to hunt down their friends.

The darkness drenches the two little boys sitting in the cupboard, the measly speck of sunlight avoided fervidly in case anyone from outside catches the two within. Daehyun and Youngjae are huddled together, legs folded and Daehyun's short arms wound around Youngjae. They keep absolutely quiet as the numerous familiar voices fade into the distance.

Youngjae pulls his knees closer to his chin. "I'm scared," he whispers, burying his face into his pants. Daehyun hugs him tighter and musters, "I'll protect you."

Youngjae nods wordlessly, slowly slipping his hands around Daehyun's chest and embracing him
back. The impenetrable abyss of black rips them of their vision and Youngjae has to grope around before his hands find one another, interlocking them securely around Daehyun.

"I'll protect you too."

They drown within the gloomy shadows, each other’s warmth the only source of comfort and consolation. Youngjae rests his head against Daehyun's bony shoulder and exhales softly, nuzzling his nose into Daehyun's familiar scent.

"How long have you been in here?" Youngjae asks in a hushed tone. Daehyun slants his head in thought.

"Um... I don't know. Very long." He presses their cheeks together and mumbles, "I told you not to come in."

"But I want to be with you," Youngjae snivels. "I thought you were angry with me, because I told you I couldn't be your princess."

He twiddles his thumbs while recalling the day at the playground. Daehyun had insisted that him and Youngjae would rule the same castle. Yongguk had pointed out that each castle could only have one prince and one princess, and so, Daehyun had declared Youngjae his princess. Youngjae had argued with him and adamantly stated that only girls could be princesses, and when the rest had agreed, Daehyun had thrown a tantrum and wailed.

Youngjae whines, "I'm sorry I called you stupid..."

"It's okay," Daehyun returns softly. "I'm sorry I yelled at you. You were right; boys are princes. My Omma said so too."

Youngjae nods lightly and purses his lips. He trembles and starts to cry, tears streaking down his plump cheeks and incoherent sobs slipping from him. Daehyun squeezes him tighter and pats him while Youngjae continues to wail.

"I-I thought y-you hated me," Youngjae whimpers through sniffles. "I missed you."

Daehyun shakes his head firmly against Youngjae's cheek, reaching around and dabbing Youngjae's tears with his palm.

"I missed you too, but I didn't want you to see me..."

Daehyun bites on his lower lip and blubs, "I'm a monster. You, Junhong, Jongup, Himchan-hyung and Yongguk-hyung... You'll all be scared of me."

Daehyun snuffles, "M-Monsters need to hide in the dark..."

Wet warmth swarms his eyes and he chokes on a soft sob. Youngjae retracts one of his arms, squirming it to pat Daehyun's face.

"So you can't come out of here?" Youngjae asks quietly, calming down from his bout of crying. Daehyun shakes his head and sniffs boorishly. They lay their heads against each other and Youngjae thinks for a short while, nestling into Daehyun's touch.

"Then... I'll be a monster too." Youngjae gently pulls Daehyun's wrist and holds his hand firmly. Daehyun grunts confusedly, blowing his nose into his shirt.
"I'll stay here with you," Youngjae courageously announces.

Daehyun rubs his nose and interlocks their mess of fingers, asking softly, "Really? You won't leave me alone?"

"I won't," Youngjae hums his promise, reaching up and kissing Daehyun on the cheek. They huddle closer and the darkness holds a tinge less of peril with each other's safe grasps.

"We'll be monsters together."

When Bill came in how he did weep
To see Jack's bloody plaster;
Heaven vexed did whip him next
For causing Jack's disaster.

READY OR NOT, HERE WE COME
The other statues, those of monsters and demons, had no hatred for Daehyun—he resembled them too closely for that. It was rather the rest of mankind that they jeered at. The monsters were his friends and kept watch over him. He would sometimes spend whole hours crouched before one of the statues in solitary conversation with it. If anyone came upon him then he would run away like a lover surprised during a serenade.

"Dance you shall," said the angel, "dance in your red shoes till you are pale and cold, till your skin shrivels up and you are a skeleton! Dance you shall, from door to door, and where proud and wicked children live you shall knock, so that they may hear you and fear you! Dance you shall, dance!"

"Mercy!" cried Daehyun. But he did not hear what the angel answered, for the shoes carried him through the gate into the fields, along highways and byways, and unceasingly he had to dance.

One morning he danced past a door that he knew well; they were singing a psalm inside, and a coffin was being carried out covered with flowers. Then he knew that he was forsaken by every one and damned by the angel of God.

He danced, and was obliged to go on dancing through the dark night. The shoes bore him away over thorns and stumps till he was all torn and bleeding; he danced away over the heath to a lonely little house. Here, he knew, lived the executioner; and he tapped with his finger at the window and said:

"Come out, come out! I cannot come in, for I must dance."

And the executioner said: "I don't suppose you know who I am. I strike off the heads of the wicked, and I notice that my axe is tingling to do so."

"Don't cut off my head!" said Daehyun, "for then I could not repent of my sin. But cut off my feet with the red shoes."

And then he confessed all his sin, and the executioner struck off his feet with the red shoes; but the
shoes danced away with the feet across the field into the deep forest.

THE ELEPHANT MAN

*Died from asphyxiation, due to the weight of his head when he laid down*

He often said to me that he wished he could lie down to sleep 'like other people'. He must, with some determination, have made the experiment. Thus it came about that his death was due to the desire that had dominated his life—the pathetic but hopeless desire to be 'like other people'.
It's cold. The sea breeze wheezes past Youngjae and pricks at his skin, warning him of the threatening ocean a few inches away. He's sitting on the sand bed with nothing but the ceaseless expanse of sapphire tossing before him, merging with the horizon to mould a dome of infinitesimal, miserable blue.

The tides crash deafeningly against the shore and the ripples climb up hastily, nightfall suffocating its presence. They grapple for Youngjae's feet and the boy edges away hurriedly. A boisterous laughter resounds all the way from the other side and Youngjae swivels his head, melting into an embarrassed scowl.

Daehyun persists in his irritating, teasing grin, sauntering over. His ankles are drenched with sand grains and stray seaweeds, sleeves of his long pants rolled up to his knees. His finger slings a bucket with a spade around candidly and he kneels down beside Youngjae.

"Scaredy cat."

Youngjae slaps him on the arm—but not too hard, in case the Daehyun of his dreams falls apart. The one who knows nothing, the one with cherub cheeks and a saccharine innocence. The one who thinks they're still friends forever.

Daehyun tosses him the spade and settles down on the sand. "Let's build a sandcastle," he declares with an amiable smile.

Youngjae rolls his eyes. He shifts away from the tideline and throws a wary look to the menacing waves, before plopping down opposite Daehyun.

"Why are you so scared of the waves?" Daehyun snickers, piling up some wet sand from the shoreline. Youngjae heaves a sigh when the waves mercifully recede at that precise moment.

He shrugs and grabs a pile of sand before the sea dares erode the coast line. "I don't know."

Youngjae manages to escape the next bout of waves, splashing against the shore cacophonously. He stares a little harder as the foam froths, bubbles popping unanimously.

"It's... transparent."

"Yeah, water is see-through," Daehyun snorts, crossing his legs and yawning widely. The sand sticks to the few scars on his legs. "I don't know what kind of water you've been drinking."
Youngjae doesn't laugh. He furrows his brows and glares at the waves, silently warding them back to bay. All the residue washed up ashore is blatant, revealed by the truthfully opacity. The ocean chews up whatever it can find and spits it up onto land mockingly, unveiling all carcasses (the missing, hoped to be alive).

"When did you become like this? I never knew you were afraid of the sea. Or waves, water, whatever," Daehyun remarks, moulding his damp sand lightly into that of a circular base. "Why would you be scared of it because it's transparent?"

It's raining in Youngjae's memories. Tokyo is broad and runs down two thousand kilometres square of harsh neon lights and piercing blinking signs. The relentless, faceless crowd brushes roughly past him with umbrellas clacking and queer glances spared for the abandoned boy.

Moments before the downpour, Youngjae had determinedly waded his way through the throng. He held his head up high and he knew he would find a way back. The train station was in that direction and he just needed to navigate from there. He needed nobody but himself. It would be even better to stay out later and waltz right back into the hotel, regaling how the city burns with a fervour alike to his insatiable adrenaline, and he had a good chat with one store owner. It had been so fun. He'll tell Jongup proudly about this amazing gyoza store and promise to bring the group along the next time he goes wandering.

Yet, when the rain fell, the red bled away from his hell-bent eyes. The raindrops ran down strands of his hair and down his cheek, dripping off the brink of his jawline. The late night throng melted into fathers, sisters, sons, friends, all rushing to catch the last train home, and the city lights were so cold.

For the first time in the ten hours he had been lost outside, Youngjae felt miserable. The rain tore away his tinted crimson lenses of hatred, spite and an unwavering resolve of payback, and lent him a transparency to see how sad he looked. His legs were aching and he was exhausted. All he wanted was to go home. But he could not let himself, because he was a pitiful, freezing mess dumped on the sidewalk, and it would be too humiliating to return. Daehyun would most definitely be wrapped up in bed, sleeping soundly without another care in the world. And here Youngjae was, utterly lost and drenched from head to toe. Pathetic.

At that moment, Youngjae had finally seen the cold-cut reality. Daehyun didn't care anymore.

Fortunately, the rain had been kind enough to lend him a camouflage as he cried. Just like a little boy forgotten, bound to garner sympathetic gazes and penny tosses. His tears wore away the sandy eye crust that glued his eyelids together, promising him blissful, consoling dreams of Daehyun holding his hand.

That's it. For those few minutes, Youngjae had pried his eyes open and woke up to reality. He was nothing to Daehyun.

It had been ages ago, and Youngjae knows now Daehyun kept so staunchly away to preserve the remnants of his sanity. Their close proximity threatened the fibre of his resolve and he turned his back to his closest friend for the greater good. But it still hurts to think about what had happened, even now.

Despite falling asleep in Daehyun's embraces, his lullaby Daehyun's lingering kisses and endless sweet nothings (promises he'll love him tomorrow night, even though he pretends he's dead in the day), Youngjae wakes up clutching the bedsheets and wondering if it's all a dream. That perhaps the real reason he wakes up all alone is because Daehyun has abandoned him once again.

A wrinkled finger swipes at his nose. Youngjae breaks from his stupor and recoils, afraid to think of
something so potent when he's so near the Daehyun of his dreams. I can't taint him. Youngjae hastily sweeps away all thoughts and prays the rotting, pest-like reality stays far, far away from the boy before him. Daehyun, the boy who resides in his dreams and is carved out of Youngjae's loneliness and sandy memories, does not know what has become of himself in real life.

Daehyun chuckles. Youngjae shifts further from the shoreline.

"I don't know. I just don't like it," he concludes. "You can see everything underneath."

Youngjae shovels the sand which buries all, patting it lightly and watching in consternation as it crumbles at the edges. Daehyun shakes his head.

"You need some water." He makes a move to get up, but Youngjae swiftly halts him.

"I'll get it," Youngjae breathes, grasping the pail and gingerly stepping up to the waves. He shies away when they grab his toes but straightens up gradually as they leave, only the prickly cold left behind. He expeditiously lugs back a pail of water and patters back to Daehyun.

Daehyun scoops up a bit of water and Youngjae observes nervously. The tension alleviates when nothing disastrous occurs, though Daehyun cringes slightly, apparently stung. He still successfully moulds out the base of the sandcastle, anyhow. They silently work their way up to the top, floor by floor, brushes of fingers every now and then and then with Youngjae's heart brimming in his throat.

It's nice. The waves bristle against the warm sand and gurgles against gargantuan, mossy rocks, the noise bearing an uncanny semblance to whispers breathed by the ocean. The wind nuzzles past their skin and blows their hair into a tussled mess. Daehyun looks dashingingly handsome, in an endearing, heart-thumping manner, what with his bangs comically hauled upwards by the cheeky sea breeze.

There is no one out there for miles and miles, just them on the deserted seaside, splashes of salt clogging tear ducts and hefty sighs alike to the serene ambience. Youngjae wants to stay here longer, but sunrise is bound to come. It's still nice, Youngjae thinks as he slaps more sand lightly onto their structure.

Their hands touch. Youngjae's small, sandy palm rests gently above Daehyun's crinkled fingers, and he lifts his head.

Daehyun is already staring at him. He melts into another breathtaking smile, chapped lips torn and teeth coffee-stained. Youngjae thinks of imprinting it into his skin, hiding it under his clothes and giddily peeking at it every once in a while.

Their sandcastle is not too tall, up to their collarbones when they are sitting and slouching over it. Youngjae grasps a stray seashell and plants it at the very top, grinning in accomplishment. The little palace is quite pretty, smooth walls running down plain, unmarked territory. Youngjae takes a stick near by and draws in several indents, filling in the exquisite details of their fairy tale kingdom. A dream of them both, constructed from the eye crust pasting Youngjae's lashes together and ensuring a peaceful sleep.

"We'll have to make another castle," Daehyun remarks thoughtfully, sweeping the excess sand off the very top. He dabs some more water onto the foundation, so as to ensure the dream does not crumble without its shards of reality to hold it together.

"Why?" Youngjae questions, roughing out the edges and hurriedly fixing the dent he accidentally makes.

"We can't both rule the same castle, can we? There can't be two kings," Daehyun laughs, boyish
innocence radiating off him. The wind whistles loudly as though in agreement, urging them both towards an empty spot.

"Rule? What are you, five?" Youngjae rolls his eyes, amusement sitting off the brink of his lips.

"That's coming from someone who's making a sandcastle with me," Daehyun points out, a sprinkle of a teasing tone in his words.

Youngjae snivels his nose and concedes, dusting the sand residue of his legs. He proposes, "We could be brothers."

"Only one of us can be the heir to the throne," Daehyun announces dramatically. "That'll start a whole fifty-episode drama of us trying to kill one another."

Youngjae folds his lips and shoots Daehyun an incredulous look. Daehyun remorselessly shrugs back and flattens out the uneven sides of their castle with the spade.

"You can have this castle, then." Youngjae squirms over to one side and piles up some sand, grabbing the pail of water. Daehyun gazes at him for a moment before extending out a leg, landing it right on top of Youngjae's sand heap. Youngjae yells and slaps Daehyun's calf, shoving him away. He sulks at his squashed mound and glances back at Daehyun in disbelief.

"We both made this sandcastle, so let's share it," Daehyun says, muffling back an entertained laugh.

"We can't rule the same castle, can we?" Youngjae mimics tauntingly. He earns himself a light slap across the head.

Daehyun simmers into a playful smile. He purses his lips as he deliberates, before raising both his brows. "How about I be the king, and you be the queen?"

Youngjae grabs some sand and tosses it over, hitting Daehyun square in the chest. "Screw off."

Belly-like laughter smelts from Daehyun's lungs, reverberating through the frail atmosphere. Youngjae involuntarily melts along, bouts of peals ringing soothingly. The ocean waves abruptly crawl up towards them and recede when they cannot grab hold of the sandcastle. The motion vaguely reminds Youngjae of tapping on someone's shoulder.

Crash. Youngjae squawks and speedily places his arm onto the sand bed, protecting the castle from the oncoming splash. He scowls, "We should have built our castle further away from the water."

He points accusingly to the ocean's second try, demanding they relinquish their palace. "See? The waves are going to eat it up sooner or later."

"It's fine. We can always build another one," Daehyun provides easily. Youngjae opens his mouth to protest, but upon seeing Daehyun's relaxed and carefree mien, he bites back his complaints.

Daehyun gazes out to sea and Youngjae does the same. The water surface shimmers in an oddly fragile way, as if composed of uncountable smithereens. There is too much blue, and it looks utterly depressing.

It is nothing but pure quietness for a long while.

"Haeundae beach," Youngjae begins. The ocean thrashes out a dozen of ripples and the gloom clogs Youngjae's lungs.
"I promised I'd bring you there, right?" Daehyun finishes with a hum.

Youngjae bats his lashes slowly against his eye circles. The despondency clambers onto his back and he misses their brotherly hugs and the assurance of steadfast friendship.

"Yeah," Youngjae breathes softly. "You promised me."

"Remind me to bring you there when you wake up," Daehyun says. When he receives no reply, he glances over, Youngjae's eyes fixated on bleeding blue black.

"I forget things, Youngjae," Daehyun mentions, an attempt at an apology. Youngjae doesn't listen because Daehyun here is nothing but a puppet, spouting out the excuses the ventriloquist conjures to placate his brewing sorrow.

Youngjae turns away from the sea. He digs out an entire chunk of sand and plops it in front of himself, adamantly piling up more sand by the side of the castle so it will not crumble. His mind violently hurls him back to that night in freezing Tokyo, trapped in a cluster of strangers with nowhere to go.

He wipes at the silhouette of tears against his cheeks from then—just in case Daehyun pries it out from his memories. Even in his dreams, he cannot risk looking like a charity case.

Youngjae claps more sand onto the walls. He feebly breathes, "It's nice to cry in the rain."

Daehyun gazes at him and shifts to face him fully. "Why?"

"No one will be able to tell your tears from the rain," Youngjae heaves.

*It must have been scary.*

He hated it that Himchan hit the nail right on the head. Indeed, he was right—it had been frightening, being out there all alone. Youngjae walked till the road shrivelled into mud and he believed he would never find his way back.

Daehyun reaches out. Youngjae shrinks back but Daehyun leans over more, cupping Youngjae's cheeks firmly with his damp palms.

"I'll know if I feel it," Daehyun exhales, tilting his head to the right with a small, empty smile. "Blood's always warm."

Youngjae flutters his lashes. "Not if you leave it out for too long," he whispers, and the crushing sadness rises in his throat once more. He knows Daehyun doesn't mean it, but it still hurts. The months he spent seeing through Youngjae still hurts.

Daehyun thumbs Youngjae's eye bags and dashes away the imaginary tears gently. He lets go and hums a quiet tune, before divulging, "I'll know, even with just a glance."

The crows caw loudly, wailing out at the horrific display of affection. Daehyun's warmth lingers on Youngjae's face and seeps away with the rush of cool air, mending the agonising burns. Youngjae looks down at his knees and then out to sea once more.

"I'm scared of the ocean," Youngjae wheezes fleetingly, "because I can't swim."

"You can't?" Daehyun returns, surprised. "I thought you could. We went to that pool the last time in Osaka."
Youngjae shakes his head. He insists, "I'll drown. The waves—it'll drag me down and I'll die."

He instinctively shifts away from the shoreline, sprawling himself out when he maintains a safe distance away from the ravenous tides. The sand welcomes him lovingly and delicately embraces him, the boy sinking in with a starry comfort and amber dreams.

Footsteps resound. Daehyun's feet grates noisily across the shore and Youngjae blearily opens his eyes when Daehyun takes his hand. He stumbles onto his feet and Daehyun continues to lug him towards the bank.

"Daehyun, stop-" Youngjae recoils frantically and tugs Daehyun back, the latter turning back with an assuring smile. Daehyun squats down and beckons the reluctant boy to do the same, fingering out some empty shells along the coast. As Daehyun admires the fragments of chiselled ivory, Youngjae sighs and bends down unwillingly.

"The sea isn't scary," Daehyun coaxes, the cacophony of splashes brewing with his husky voice. He flings the shell outwards and peers at the calm stream, ripples echoing across. He angles his head towards the barren shells strewn all over and Youngjae relents, picking one up and flicking it into the water.

Daehyun extends his arm. His mischievous fingers approach the seemingly innocent bubbles and Youngjae's breath hitches.

"Wait, Daehyun, don't touch the water-"

Too late. The curious boy dips his fingers in and pulls back abruptly with a hiss, the tips of his fingers burning off along with the nails. Taunting speckles of sand trickle from Daehyun's stubbed fingers and Youngjae hauls him back anxiously.

"I told you not to touch the water!" Youngjae admonishes, frenziedly scouring the place for help. He snaps his head back when Daehyun clutches his head, unfocused eyes darting about unnervingly.

"Youngjae..." Daehyun breathes. He grimaces and clenches his hair, missing fingertips still spilling sand.

"Youngjae, we... Why are we..." Daehyun glimpses up forlornly, confusion scribbled all over his face. Youngjae widens his eyes and quickly shoves him to sit, scraping up some sand. Please don't let him find out, Youngjae implores, dabbling the grains onto Daehyun's incomplete fingers.

He can't know what's become of us in reality, Youngjae begs, clumsily dropping the sand as he tries to mould back Daehyun's fingertips. Daehyun winces and stares harder, demanding the truth with his deepening frown. Youngjae's guise begins to shed and reveals the filthy freak shrouded within.

Please, please. Don't let him know.

As Youngjae's gentle ministrations persist, the crease between Daehyun's brows subsides, the pain assuaging noticeably and the illusion warping Youngjae's face once again. Relief floods Youngjae as the bewilderment drains from Daehyun's expression, light smile returning.

"Sorry," Daehyun chuckles, wiggling his fingers and experimentally clasping Youngjae's shoulder. "Thanks a lot."

The separation between them is minuscule, breaths intermingling. Youngjae licks his lips and steps back, heat beating into his bloodstream. He edges away to the far end and settles down on the sand. Expectedly, Daehyun joins him, their knees touching as they sit cross-legged.
Over here, they are safe. Midnight blue submerges the beach and batters shadows over the two. Youngjae relaxes against the camouflage and withers away into delusional comfort. He raises his hand and places his palm over the skin of the sky, illusion drawn along the kilometres stretched apart.

A shimmering, sole star hangs from the empyrean. He whispers a soft wish for things to be okay, and foolishly promises himself that if he catches a star, the heavens will have to grant his wish.

He clasps onto the star, and opens his palm to reveal he caught nothing. He tries again, and again, and again. Still nothing.

The futile attempts seem to stir something in Daehyun, for he leans over and grips Youngjae's wrist. He lowers the boy's fist and pries open his hand finger by finger, pointing to the sand trapped along the ridges of his knuckles.

"Oh!" Daehyun gasps dramatically, sweeping a finger across and clawing some grains with his newly made nails. "You squashed it."

Youngjae glances up at him questioningly. Daehyun provides cheekily, "You squashed the star. Now, you've got stardust all over your hand."

Daehyun pretends to clap a star from the night sky and shuts his eyes, declaring playfully, "Go on! Make a wish."

Youngjae snorts. He sneakily slaps Daehyun's cheek, sand rubbing off. Daehyun cracks open an eye and pushes Youngjae, the latter cackling unapologetically. They wind up wrestling one another, boyish screams and hilarious insults thrown both ways.

Daehyun manages to grab Youngjae's hand and they fall into a breathless standstill, panting through tight lips and awful smiles. They waste moments simply staring into one another's eyes, Youngjae's fingers curling shyly. Their proximity writhes with a scorching desire and Youngjae seeps into his memories. Daehyun pressing him into the bed, gently nipping at his lips. Daehyun's starry eyes that refracts into a dream in the darkness. How he smiles away the misery demanding the lights wake up, and how he seems so happy for once.

Youngjae edges closer. He shatters their eye contact by veering his gaze to Daehyun's thick lips, and the insatiable yearning beckons he just swipe a taste. Daehyun is beautiful and he knows nothing else but him at this moment.

Youngjae does the forbidden by inclining forward and kissing Daehyun sweetly. It lasts just a mere few seconds, Youngjae chastely pressing their lips together like on first dates in winter. He pulls back and it all seems fine at first, till he flutters open his lashes and finds Daehyun staring at him, flabbergasted.

Youngjae's blood runs cold. He swallows thickly as Daehyun hits back with enlarged, bewildered eyes, jaw dropped.

"W-What are you doing?" Daehyun interrogates, incredulity dousing his harsh words. The mistake scalds Youngjae as he struggles to find his words.

He falls back and frantically rubs his hands, croaking, "I..."

He desperately tries to conjure up a proper excuse, but none comes with the clashes of waves playing a shocked spectator. Youngjae digs his nails into his knuckles and stammers, "I- I'm sorry, Daehyun. I was just- I didn't mean to."
Crash. A flush of saltwater and the merciless tides smash into the both of them and tears away their castle, destroying all structure and leaving just debris and sand residue behind in its wake. Daehyun shatters into drenched sand and broken remnants, crumbling in just the blink of an eye into absolutely nothing.

Thump, thump, thump, the beat of Youngjae's dying heart, lost tempo of Daehyun's breaths. No lashes left behind, no broken fingernails, not a single drip of blood in the nothingness Daehyun had disintegrated into.

Youngjae's lip trembles. His mind draws a blank for a moment as he stares at what remains, mere golden grains with no form scattered into an unidentifiable, disintegrated mess. He stares dumbly and his skin turns cold.

Daehyun is gone.

Youngjae shakes. He shivers violently as he stumbles forward, grasping at the minuscule sand grains with tripling hysteria. The horrific sand trails from the gaps between his fingers and so do the scarring tears, no flesh remaining. The freezing seawater soaks Youngjae from head to toe and gives him shade once more from the embarrassment of crying.

"D-Daehyun," Youngjae quivers in terror, grabbing distraughtly at the shore. He shakes his head fervidly as the nightmare sets in maliciously, looming over the helpless, wailing boy. "No, Daehyun, Dae- Daehyun-"

No, it's fine. It's okay. He musters up vehement, tear-stained determination and madly claws at the sand bed, thrashing out a pile somehow. He wills himself to calm down and bites his lower lip bloody. He'll put Daehyun back together. He did it before; he can do it again.

"First, his smile, his smile..." Youngjae bleats to himself and kneels on the demolished castle. He poorly draws out a crooked grin in the sand with shuddering hands. Youngjae tries once, twice, and then incessantly, pulling his finger across, but only zigzags form. Even as he tries to lift that wry, broken half-smile, the sand relentlessly disperses through his fingers.

The panic erupts into a blaze and Youngjae goes berserk. He clasps tightly on the residuum of a boy named Jung Daehyun, the boy who knows not of the misery his real counterpart and Youngjae has imprisoned themselves in. The scathing tears slit down his cheeks.

Youngjae screams.

It's cold. Youngjae wakes up with a rude start and shoots up with a brash inhale, fistig the sheets. His eyes frantically scour the place for Daehyun as he pants rapidly.

Daehyun is standing by the cupboard, shuffling through his worn-out clothes. He spins around in surprise upon hearing Youngjae's sharp gasp and their eyes lock for a moment, Youngjae just barely breathing through his teeth. Daehyun glances to the door before swiftly striding over, pulling Youngjae into his chest.
Paired with Daehyun's warmth, the sunlight streaming in is excruciatingly unfamiliar and out of place. Youngjae grasps Daehyun tightly to make sure it is all just a dream, squeezing harder to verify he isn't made of fragile stardust.

It's morning, but he isn't abandoned. Not yet, at least. Daehyun's still here so it's okay. Youngjae embraces Daehyun tighter and presses his cheek against Daehyun’s, shutting his eyes tiredly.

"It's okay," Daehyun breathes hushedly, allowing Youngjae to ensconce him in his embrace. "I'm here."

Still here, Youngjae smiles. He briefly wonders what Daehyun would say if he learns Youngjae dreamt he died, but says nothing. They part and Youngjae chastely kisses his forehead, taking a good look at how much Daehyun has grown. He wonders how the same, untouched face can age so drastically. Is it the work of misery?

A knock resounds and Daehyun pulls back abruptly, spinning around just in time. Junhong creaks open the door and the madly in love rip their eyes away from another.

Junhong murmurs, "Hyung wants us all to be downstairs by the time he pulls up. I think he'll take around fifteen minutes. Hurry."

Daehyun saunters out first and Youngjae follows behind after a rehearsed four-beat moment. He opts out of bathing and wets his bangs in the kitchen sink, combing them down messily. Jongup chuckles as he passes by.

When Youngjae exits, he brushes past Himchan. Himchan blinks at him instead of tossing out the usual annoyed grunt, and parts his lips silently. Youngjae exhaustedly stares back.

Both Himchan and Yongguk have been treating him strangely these few weeks, but that's expected, with what transpired that day. Himchan has never been one to keep secrets between the members, so Youngjae had already expected him to tell Yongguk. He's just thankful it was Himchan who found him, because Jongup and Junhong do not deserve to see such a mess on the bedroom floor. A gender tangled freak show by the lamppost in lace with low rates, swooped away by fraudulent midnight romance, the sick tycoon down the block and one night stands.

Youngjae lowers his head in prayers that Himchan does not remember the disfiguring make-up. He ambles past the older man whose gaze distinctly follows, lingering for a while before vanishing.

Their concert is as usual. Youngjae's insides have shrivelled so far in he has to reach to hold his skin up and put his smile in place. He mulls over what his fans would think if they knew how disgusting he was and his heart grows heavier with every beat. His voice cracks during 'One shot' and he's sorry for not being good enough.

So, he stays by the left wing and grins as bright as he can, the memory of light so distant (no, he holds a blinding star in his arms every night in darkness). He evades Daehyun vigorously and the lack of interactions does not go unnoticed by their manager.

Another scolding, harsh words. Youngjae's used to it. He's more afraid of the overhead stage lights burning through his skin and revealing his bones.

He doesn't know what to do. When the curtains fall and the withering reverberations thrum through his feet, and everyone is hugging one another and the air fills with praises, he feels guilty. It's selfish to love when you put others on the line for it. Even if he and Daehyun weren't in the limelight and kept to themselves, what about their families?
Does Daehyun love him?

It's scary. Youngjae wilts against the car window and curls up silently, Junhong's soft snores resounding throughout. The van is uncharacteristically silent, not a hint of Himchan's usual rambles echoing. Youngjae glimpses to the two men sitting in front of him and edges away from the two sleeping boys by his side.

Himchan and Yongguk have been avoiding him. Youngjae feels a bit, a little, very hurt, for Himchan had taken care of him and promptly abandoned him just a day after. The humiliation and shame has long settled down with the bile in his throat, so he is still able to swallow it down when Yongguk meets his eyes and hastily excuses himself.

At least they know only of one freak. Youngjae sinks back into the cushion and glances in front to the passenger seat. He can see just a glimpse of Daehyun's hair, his back expectedly slouched.

It's better if they didn't love each other.

Youngjae looks to the rear view mirror and stills when he finds Daehyun staring at him—since how long ago, he doesn't know. Through dreary blinks and soft gazes, Youngjae hopes to God they can find it in themselves to forgive each other. That perhaps, they can let each other go as the days pass.

It is easier said that done. If a chaste peck to Himchan's cheek can stir up a repulsive jealousy in Daehyun, if Daehyun tussling with Jongup can make Youngjae narrow his eyes, then surely, there is little hope left for them. If they acknowledge whatever it is that makes them interlock their fingers and dream of sweet nothings together, where will they go from there?

Youngjae looks away. It starts to drizzle and the raindrops knock on the window, concernedly asking if he has come to his senses. There is no abundance of sand to glue his eyelids together, so he stares as the rain pounds on the glass, urging to be let in.

He has been thinking lately. He'd thought he and Daehyun were playing tug of war, where Daehyun pulled at the sole rope tying them together and threatened to haul Youngjae into the mud. The way Youngjae saw it was that if he were to lose, he would lose Daehyun in the process and humiliatingly crash into the mud too—so he wrenched back as hard as he could.

He didn't understand that the rope was tied around Daehyun's neck, and he was only suffocating Daehyun by pulling him back. He should have let him go but his pride (truly, devastation) made him hold on.

He should have let him go a long time ago.

The more Youngjae thinks about it, the more he convinces himself the whole mess they're dismembered in will fix itself with time. They are simply confused and a bit more experimental than they should be. When they finally have the time to date girls outside their schedules, things will revert back to normal and they will laugh over how childish and ridiculous they had been at this point in time.

Everyone strays from the path from time to time; it's no big deal. They're both just lost. Ever since that night where they'd made love for the first time, no, ever since Daehyun started looking at Youngjae the wrong way, Daehyun had lost himself out there. He isn't himself right now, so Youngjae will sit with him by the pier and wait for the real him to come back. Rebuild their fort of friendship and let go of this Daehyun by his side, watch him wade back into the sea and disappear into the depths of hilarious kiddish memories. Then, Youngjae can go back to being himself as well and everything will be okay.
Maybe what Daehyun needs is some time away from him. Being around each other nearly every minute of their lives must be toll-taking. The more Youngjae thinks about it (through the seconds, hours, tormenting days), the more it makes perfect sense. It is all because Daehyun could never catch a breather from seeing Youngjae, so Youngjae has ultimately come to a decision.

He will go. If Daehyun needs time to recover on his own, then he will quit. It's no big deal; it's not like he has nowhere to go since he can enroll once more. Leaving may be difficult but it isn't impossible. There are times where dreams have to be put aside for the better.

The way home is foreign, till Youngjae remembers they have to hop straight to the next town tomorrow morning, so they're staying at a hotel for tonight. Naturally, Daehyun and Youngjae are allocated to the same room. Behind their manager's disgruntled mutters and the dim light of the lift lobby, Youngjae catches Daehyun smiling to himself a little. He resembles a silly middle schooler that has just been paired with his crush. It's nauseatingly precious.

Youngjae turns to Himchan and the latter wears his customary deer in headlights expression, darting his gaze away before looking up once more. Youngjae flits his lashes and hangs his head low, rubbing hard at his lips in case the red hadn't been fully wiped off.

He bumps into Yongguk when he steps back. Turning around is a mistake, as Yongguk stares down at him with large eyes. His reflection in Yongguk's irises throw back simply a tired boy but he can't help but imagine Yongguk seeing nothing but make-up and a demented doll that never was.

Youngjae gulps back the embarrassing indignity. "Sorry," he whispers, but forgets to add that it's for everything.

That seems to snap Yongguk out of his dumbfounded stupor and he waves hurriedly. He deliberates on his words before extending an arm hesitantly.

He clasps Youngjae's shoulder, the gesture somewhat nervous and awkward. "You're- you're okay, right?"

Youngjae wipes his cheek and hums. Yongguk's touch lingers for a short moment before the man clears his throat, retracting and nodding absent-mindedly.

"Good, good," Yongguk trails off. He sighs after a while and churns out a small smile. "We'll... always be there for you. Always."

Youngjae doesn't like crying. So, he sucks in his lips and nods, afraid his word of thanks may crack in the cool air. He speedily swivels on his feet and heads down the hallway to his accorded room.

Things are starkly different behind the door. Before Youngjae meets Daehyun at night, it is always a race against time in his heart and where madness comes unabashedly alive. Delirium tails him around during this margin of time when he is all alone and out of the public's sight, left to shelved, manifesting thoughts.

Night is where they become lovers once again, so Youngjae has to jump from one role to the other as quickly as he can. It's funny, because he acts like nothing bothers him in the day and determinedly states he will be able to solve things when he can't even fix himself.

He stumbles to the bathroom and dashes to the sink upon finding the door has no lock. Washing his face, he pats his hair down and dries his face slickly. He hesitates by the mirror and once more, he wonders if drawing on a bit of red will help Daehyun love him more today.

It is routine to regret removing his make-up yet forget again when Daehyun comes. The bathroom
door creaks open and Daehyun stands by the door frame, waiting a few seconds out of courtesy before entering. Youngjae spins around and discreetly rubs at the pimple scar from yesterday, anxiously fidgeting in his position.

He's not pretty enough today. The receptionist at the counter had been downright prettier than him, the one that helped Daehyun out when he was looking for the vending machine. He's not pretty enough today, so Daehyun won't like him all that much, and he'll be left alone in bed-

Pause.

It's warm.

Daehyun's chapped lips are warm. It is winter now, but his lips are still warm. Youngjae leans back against the sink and he forgets how to breathe all over again, forgets how repulsive he is in his own skin for another night.

Their lips mould against one another and Daehyun mouths the word 'beautiful' against Youngjae's skin to remind him never to scrawl all over himself again. He crushes the remnants of Youngjae's dying demons into dust and anyone can tell just how sorry Daehyun is from his broken smile.

It's a sweet, modest kiss, one that grows spring in the depths of unearthly December. Just gentle nips and light squeezes, flutters of lashes and bare partings. Youngjae opens his eyes and sees that Daehyun looks the same as before—perhaps loads more lethargic and too bitterly mature for Youngjae's liking—but he's still him.

No, Youngjae argues, because this cannot be Daehyun. Daehyun isn't supposed to be so miserable. Youngjae won't let him be.

The regrets deluges him fragment by fragment and he gently nudges Daehyun away. The atmosphere is too romantic, too affectionate, too loving, so Youngjae playfully flicks Daehyun's forehead. Daehyun flinches and simmers into a soft laugh, smile growing as Youngjae caresses the lines down his cheeks.

Youngjae's sorry, but it's for the best, isn't it? All Daehyun wanted for those heart-wrenching months was for Youngjae to leave him alone and let him go. He's just giving him what he wants. Daehyun needs the distance more than anything right now to find himself.

It's pitiful. Youngjae thinks of tearful farewells and runaway brides into the dead of the night, and he emits a shaky sigh. His mind flings him back to his nightmare and Daehyun shatters once again before his eyes into unfixable sand.

"I want to take a shower," Youngjae breathes, churning out a small smile.

"Okay," Daehyun whispers, still delving endlessly into Youngjae's eyes. They speak quietly even though the door is closed and it's only them two. Just in case the walls are listening in on them and the mirror mimics their intimate confessions.

They stand silently for a long while, simply staring at one another. The lovelornness scathingly drips from Daehyun's misty irises and Youngjae can't bear to look any longer.

"Go out," Youngjae murmurs, gently pushing Daehyun's shoulder.

Daehyun reaches out and thumbs Youngjae's lashes. Youngjae blinks in question before frowning in amusement.
"What are you doing?"

"Nothing," Daehyun sheepishly returns, his touch lingering on Youngjae's cheek. "You... looked like you wanted to cry."

Youngjae peers at him wordlessly and exhales quietly, nudging Daehyun's arm aside. "I wasn't," he assures.

Daehyun nods slightly and hesitates, running a hand messily through his hair. Leaning over, he presses his lips to Youngjae's cheek and slips out without another word.

Youngjae pats his eyes lightly and spins on his feet, scrutinising his reflection in the mirror. The leftovers of his dream draws imaginary red down his face, warm blood trickling over his jawline.

*How long have I looked like this?*

Youngjae doesn't ask if Daehyun knew all throughout but never bothered about it. Maybe Himchan could see through his anger too, so he kept to his side in case he broke.

It doesn't matter. He washes up thoroughly, scrubbing himself a bit harder than usual. He exits with a towel draped over his bed and Daehyun pulls him towards the bed, crouching over him and towelling his hair dry.

Youngjae lowers his head and stares blankly at his knees. From his gentle ministrations, Youngjae can tell Daehyun is still coughing up his heart for what happened. The unmistakable agony clouds Daehyun's irises and he bends down further, cupping Youngjae's cheek.

"You're beautiful."

The earnestness in his voice is hard to miss and they stare ceaselessly into each other's eyes. This is how Youngjae forgets that he needs to wear make-up the next time they meet. For Daehyun's sake, Youngjae nods without protesting, though he forces himself to stay still when Daehyun comes close enough to see he's a boy.

Youngjae's heart swells when Daehyun dissolves into a radiant smile, contentedly stroking his cheek.

"Get some sleep," Daehyun wheezes.

The awful bile shrinks back down Youngjae's throat and he scoots away, laying down against the headboard. Daehyun clicks the light switch by the table and black douses the room.

Darkness is sweet, Youngjae realises belatedly. It is here he musters up the confidence to pat the space beside him, coaxing Daehyun to stay the night. This is why children cover their eyes when they're afraid, for the darkness ensonces their eyes and hides monsters from sight. This is why Youngjae smiles a little more when it's night time, for Daehyun cannot see him clearly.

Tomorrow, when they get back to the dorms, Youngjae will call his parents. He'll tell them they were always right and he'll go back to school. There'll be a way out of the contract for sure.

Daehyun gets onto the bed. He kneels over Youngjae and rests his hands on the headboard, staring down at the boy under him.

"I want to tell you something," Daehyun says, moonlight glow scarcely shading the left side of his face.
Youngjae flutters his lashes. He asks softly, "What is it?"

Their breaths ghost over each other's lips and Daehyun melts into a watery smile. Silence twirls between their latched gazes and Daehyun leans just a little closer. He parts his mouth and looks away for a moment, before meeting Youngjae's eyes.

"I love you."

Stillness. Youngjae blinks slowly, silently staring back at Daehyun.

He has never heard these three words from Daehyun before. In the time they had spent holding hands under the sheets and meshing their contours in the tired, painstaking night, Daehyun has never once told him the reason for what he did.

Why? Was it out of lust?

I don't know what to tell you.

Perhaps because it was a little grim, maybe it was too scary to do so, but Daehyun had constantly left Youngjae with no answers. Day after wretched day the question seemed more petrifying to Youngjae himself and he decided it were better left unanswered.

After all, there would be no escape once Daehyun declared he gave up his heart to what was never just a friend. So, Youngjae covered his ears and never thought about the answer till he saw Daehyun look away for a moment and set his eyes on a woman.

Youngjae learnt then he was afraid Daehyun only saw him as a mere toy. However, the fact that he feared losing Daehyun to another was much more frightening.

His lungs thrash with fragile blood and he averts his gaze, folding his lips. The air is stale and feeble, ready to break apart any minute. Daehyun persists in his wobbly smile that threatens to rip through his skin, adam's apple bobbing up and down.

I'd rather you not, Youngjae croaks but nothing leaves his throat. This is not Daehyun. Daehyun is lost and confused, and he'll be back to normal once Youngjae mercifully allows him the distance he begged for.

The tears welling up on Daehyun's lashes glisten charmingly under the weak lighting. It reminds Youngjae of just a few weeks ago, where the agony had been so scathing through Daehyun's livid eyes and his mien begged Youngjae to see how hurt he was. Youngjae left Daehyun with nothing that night he slept with Himchan instead, leaving Daehyun to wonder if everything was a mistake—if he was a mistake.

Daehyun smiles.

"I love you," he repeats in a quiver, smiling so hard it seems painful. "It's okay if you don't love me back. I just... wanted you to know."

Daehyun edges back and Youngjae hastily clasps his arm, holding him in place. He searches Daehyun's pupils but it's too dark to see anything.

"I want to see you," Youngjae breathes. He clumsily flicks on the bedside lamp and an auburn glow tints Daehyun's beautiful face. Youngjae tenderly cups Daehyun's cheeks and searches Daehyun's eyes once again.
It's him. It has always been him since the day they first kissed, and Youngjae has to gulp his tears back down. How could he have found it in himself to say Daehyun's just lost right now? That it is only a phase and it will blow over, and Daehyun will find his true self in what lies beyond the war field of now?

All Youngjae had been doing during the torturous months Daehyun evaded him was search for a boy he could recognise. Yet now, he's refusing to see Daehyun for who he is right now—himself.

Youngjae pulls him down for a kiss. Daehyun grasps Youngjae's jawline and presses him into the bed, inhaling sweet misery from Youngjae's bones. They nearly suffocate when they come up for air, tender touches and breathless flushes deluding Youngjae for just tonight, again.

They draw the curtains and their hands interlock tightly, Daehyun nipping down Youngjae's collarbone to his hips. His warmth fraudulently makes his delirious love seem like a blessing, so Youngjae melts against untidy sheets and Daehyun's slick tongue.

Trembling fingers, quivering lips, Daehyun's fingers feel him inside out and Youngjae muffles back a feeble whimper. The world is kind enough to lend utter silence so Youngjae can hear Daehyun's heartbeat and the rhythm of his breaths. Youngjae's toes curl and he gasps when Daehyun pushes himself in.

Daehyun's skin is smooth along his shoulder but crinkled over his knuckles. Youngjae locks their lips and swallows up Daehyun's moan, tangling his fingers lovingly through his hair. He wraps his legs around Daehyun's waist and squints his eyes shut.

For the first time in his life, Youngjae understands what bittersweet truly means. He curls back into the bed and every one of Daehyun's thrusts has his hands weakly clenching. Daehyun coaxes Youngjae's eyes back open with gentle nibbles and lovesick gazes, and they fall apart into each other's arms for another night.

With peony strokes and ivy fingertips, Youngjae spills white onto the sheets, writhing under Daehyun's intoxicating warmth. Daehyun releases into him, thick and warm, and Youngjae seals their lips fervently.

He doesn't know why he's crying.

Despite Youngjae's fervid insistence and stubborn clutch, Daehyun pulls back and opens his eyes, remorse gnawing at his rueful expression. He wipes at Youngjae's relentless tears and shakes his head despairingly, unable to churn out a plea for Youngjae not to weep.

"I'm sorry," Daehyun whispers in sorrow as he chokes back his own cries. "I'm sorry, Youngjae."

There are always tears when they're together. But today, Youngjae can't tell if he's crying out of sadness or happiness. It's love, so there's no such thing as inherently good or bad. It's where it sprouts, between who, and when that moulds the outcome.

"I love you," Youngjae sobs, winding his arms around Daehyun's shoulders and holding him tight in his embrace. "I love you so much."

The freshly bloomed, honey-like smile against Youngjae's neck is mixed with a mess of tears and firmer grips. This is what they are now and it's so, so sweet. Youngjae never wants to let it go.

They can think of the future later. Even if mornings are cold and they have to hide from the others, it's okay. They can go back to being friends and be excruciatingly careful during the day around the rest.
Youngjae burrows his nose into Daehyun's warm shoulder and inhales deeply. No one needs to know, so it'll be okay.

They'll be okay.

It's cold. Youngjae blearily grasps sand underneath him and he hears the distant crash of tides. Someone is wading through the water, slow and heavy splashes pattering into the cool air.

Youngjae rubs the sand out of his eyes and pries them open, his vision steadying after a moment. A soldier clad in a dark green uniform trudges through the sea currents towards the coast, dripping wet from head to toe. With his head lowered, Youngjae can make out the lesions across his jaw and the dried blood underneath his nose.

Youngjae's heart stops. He stumbles to his feet and breaks out into a wild sprint, the wind rushing past his skin and his tears blurring his sight. His damped footsteps resound more audibly against the clamorous waves as he gets closer, feet dipping into the ocean. Determined, he sloshes through the tidal surges to get to the figure.

The soldier lifts his head. Youngjae slips his arms around Daehyun's shoulders and pulls him impossibly close, stifling back his tears.

"You came back," Youngjae whispers, incandescent smile brimming with sweet tears and Daehyun's heartbeat against his.

It's warm again. Daehyun wraps his arms around Youngjae and nods firmly, nestling his nose into Youngjae's hair. "Yeah."

The sea gushes around their legs and Daehyun lets out a breath.

"I came home."
It's cold. Daehyun deliriously grabs at the surface of the sea, bubbles of foam brimming as he struggles to breathe. The water clogs his windpipe and he feels himself fade into black, gushing sea gnawing at his bones. He swims harder, harder, harder till his tendons scream for him to stop, straining against his veins and skin.

His lungs are on the brink. The tides lug him down mercilessly but Daehyun fervently persists, determined to make it to shore. All he can see is despondent blue wrapping around his vision and he can barely tell if he's swimming in the right direction.

The suffocating blue closes in on him and he does the forbidden—he closes his eyes. The darkness submerges him and he lets himself fall prey to sleep, horrendous dreams clawing for a space in his fabricated night.

There's light. A piercing red glow brims on his eyelids and he adamantly swims towards the surface, resolve unwavering.

Daehyun washes up ashore, spluttering frantically as he sprawls out feebly on the coastline. He coughs up seawater and the shadows of the darkness underneath, freezing cold air scraping at his carcass. The crows caw deafeningly and the ocean mercilessly tries to wrench him back under, tides washing over the soldier and flooding his airways.

Daehyun pitifully gags as he stumbles onto his knees, holding his head up above the water surface. He retches out more sickening, rotten seawater and shudders violently. The tides sadistically push him back and forth, praying for him to collapse beneath the water surface once more, but Daehyun grits his teeth and tenaciously clammers to his feet.

From here, he can see someone standing on the beach, waving a white handkerchief. Daehyun wobbles frailly and raucously heaves, the world dissolving out of its watery state into a razor-sharp lucidity. It's dark, but the moonlight charitably lends him some clarity. The aggravated waves crash against the back of his knees and scream at him to return to the asphyxiating indigo.

Daehyun presses on. He aggressively hacks, melted salt dribbling from his torn lips. He wipes at his dripping forehead, wet fringe plastered to his marred face. The blood from his dried scars seeps into the ocean and leaves a faint trail of red as he trudges sluggishly.

One step, two step, three step. The beat of his pounding heart is dying out in his dizzy mind and his legs are about to give way. He groggily raises his head and his heart misses a beat.

Splash. Youngjae pulls him gently into a sweet, sweet hug, just the warmth from his soft touch and light sniffs enough to crush the begrudging cold. Daehyun parts his lips in surprise as thin arms wind around his waist, Youngjae's strained sobs trembling by his ear.

Youngjae presses his cheek against Daehyun's filthy face, grabbing tighter and spilling the remnants
of cold seawater from Daehyun's lips. Daehyun wants to lean back to take a good look at Youngjae's face—something he carves out from his memories, what he avoids so desperately in his dreams, the precious little glimpses Daehyun swallows down discreetly because he can't afford to look longer—but he doesn't.

(When Youngjae's standing on stage and Daehyun's stealing glances from behind, afraid the cameras will catch him, he wonders through the blinding light and Youngjae's starry smile how pathetic his heart will seem if he offered it up. No one can possibly understand a man who avoids someone so frantically as though he is diseased, yet cherishes the moments their eyes meet like collecting little pennies.)

"You came back," Youngjae croaks, the unmistakable happiness causing his voice to shake.

It's warm again. There's so much relief immersing Daehyun that he feels himself simmer into Youngjae's safe embrace, the trauma carved into his battered bones rubbing away soothingly. He doesn't see bloody red anymore as the seawater trickling from his head washes away all traces of the ugly crimson, revealing that the heart-thumping, beautiful boy before him had never been a distortion.

Daehyun twines his arms around Youngjae's shoulders and pulls him closer, so close he can feel the tempo of Youngjae's shivering breaths and his shrivelled tears on his skin. It's lovely to hold him like this again and Daehyun never wants to let go.

"Yeah," Daehyun rasps, nuzzling his nose into Youngjae's hair and inhaling deep. His lower lip quivers and he lets out a light breath, basking in Youngjae's comforting heat.

"I came back."

The waves sloshes around their legs and Youngjae reluctantly leans back, their gazes latching deeply with withered exhalles and shaky smiles. Their noses brush and Youngjae cups Daehyun's cheek with a fragile tenderness, afraid to open the vehement wounds slashed into his jaw. The ocean drowns out into but a pathetic shrill in the faded distance as they unyieldingly stare into one another's eyes, breathless chuckles composed into the sea air. It must be nice to be this happy, Daehyun thinks, to forget the imminent danger swarming them and to know he's finally back where he belongs.

"It must be nice to be so deeply in love.

The white handkerchief trapped between Youngjae's fingers flaps vigorously before the wind pulls it away. It flutters into the brooding nightfall like a surrender flag, the lovers watching as it wilts into a speck of glimmer. Youngjae intertwines their hands and leads Daehyun to shore, both settling down a distance from the shoreline.

Though the view before them is quite stellar, flush of the maroon waves against golden glitter and the seamless mesh of the ocean with the dawdling darkness, they can't seem to take their eyes off each other. Like high school students sitting tables apart, they steal glances at one another before unabashedly locking eyes, engulfed in saccharine love.

Daehyun learns how to smile again as Youngjae places his hand over Daehyun's maimed fingers. As they gaze out once again at the calm seas and how the moon bleeds out into a glowing mess into the ocean, Youngjae sways his feet lightly. He's wearing red sneakers, folded dandelions and muddy grass blades smeared against the sides.

They lock eyes once again. Youngjae slowly bats his lashes and asks, "Did you miss home?"
No matter how hard Daehyun tries, he can't look away from the gentle brown of Youngjae's eyes. "I missed you."

Youngjae bites back an amused laugh and they melt into kiddish grins and little chuckles here and there.

"Stupid. I asked you if you missed home," Youngjae hums, sandy fingers discreetly inching further over Daehyun's hand. The remnants of sand is ticklish against his skin and Daehyun wonders for a moment if stardust would feel the same way.

"I missed you, so yes, I missed home," Daehyun answers simply, unembarrassed simper worn over his drooping cheeks.

"That doesn't make sense. I'm not a place," Youngjae snorts, though his giddy smile and the tinge of red over his ears give him away. He edges even closer and bravely clasps Daehyun's hand.

"Doesn't have to be a place," Daehyun replies, daringly laying his head against Youngjae's broad shoulder. He cringes slightly as he presses against his wounds, but regardless, he continues resting on Youngjae.

"Just somewhere I want to be," Daehyun breathes, nestling into Youngjae's warm neck. "With you."

"Yuck."

Daehyun erupts with guttural laughter, snuggling against Youngjae's warm body and the rise and fall of his bones. He stretches out a hand and juxtaposes it against the skin of the night, coagulated blood leeching on his knuckles drawing a saturated blend with the ebony. The lesions are starting to heal. They'll leave a scar for him to remember but that's okay.

For the months he was out at sea, he fought against the monsters that grew in the recesses of his gall and the deformed darkness that chased after him relentlessly. He sawed at his flesh and hoped to remove the horror residing within his ribcage, digging his hand into his stomach as he screamed through the seething agony. He ran as far as the sun went so he could escape the black that tauntingly tailed him wherever he went.

Daehyun saw it as an infection that consumed him day after wretched day, greedily feasting on his sinews. Thus, he persistently crushed down the devils that dared rise and beg for Yoo Youngjae and sprinted till his legs wore out. He only realised belatedly the fallen demons were his dying heart and the darkness following him was but his own woeful shadow. He was at war with himself and there would never be a victor.

As Youngjae's silhouette and the fibre of his smile bled through Daehyun's tears, he dropped his knife and gave in to what he would become. He was always himself, just that he could not accept it as the truth, so he took to hilariously fighting himself like a mad man.

"You look so tired," Youngjae whispers, worry dousing his tone. He reaches up and thumbs Daehyun's grimy eye circles while Daehyun obediently shuts his eyelids.

"I haven't been sleeping much," Daehyun breathes. He doesn't like closing his eyes. The darkness on his heels extends to overwhelm him and he plunges straight into helplessness, leaving him unable to flee with the black surrounding him all over.

When he's awake, he can control himself—stop himself from looking, stop himself from dreaming. He can turn away and find a distraction so he can take his godforsaken eyes off of Yoo Youngjae. But when he's asleep, he's chained to the crevasses of his subconsciousness. It is when he sleeps that
these sweltering, pulverised thoughts come to life and he can't stop himself from dreaming of a boy who he hopes will run while he still can.

"You can sleep now," Youngjae offers, shifting closer to Daehyun can lay his head more comfortably on his shoulder. Daehyun attempts to shake his head, though he keeps his eyes closed and listens to the thickness of the waves.

Silence. Daehyun can feel the fleeting trembles beneath his ear.

"I tried to look for you." Youngjae's confession is watery, trembling a slight bit on the shimmers of the syllables. He emits a weary sigh and tightens his grasp on Daehyun's hand.

"I waded through the sea as far as I could. It was so cold," Youngjae murmurs, weighty remorse dragging down his words. "I couldn't swim and I almost drowned, so I didn't dare go any further."

"I'm sorry," Youngjae lowers his head and shakily exhales. "I'm so sorry, Daehyun. You were out there on your own and I was so weak-"

"Don't blame yourself, Youngjae," Daehyun interrupts firmly, lifting his head off and guiding Youngjae's head to face him. He gingerly raises Youngjae's chin and their eyes meet, forlornness permeating Youngjae's misty irises.

"I was too far out for you to reach me," Daehyun's voice softens and he affectionately caresses Youngjae's cheek, churning out a small smile. "I know you tried. Thank you."

Daehyun leans closer, urging the other boy to relent. Youngjae reluctantly averts his gaze and nods. His eyes find back the stretch of midnight blue swathing the sand bed, devouring even the murky horizon with no end in sight.

"I was scared I wouldn't find you," Youngjae admits, residue of his sorrow reflecting from his eyes. "I was scared I'd go out there and find out you were gone, so I waited here. Maybe you forgot about me. Maybe you didn't want come back."

"If I didn't go out there, at least I could wait forever, living on the hope that you'd come back," he finishes with a soft wheeze.

"And I did," Daehyun whispers. He thumbs Youngjae's cheek and the exhaustion impaled into his swollen eyes. For the months Daehyun was stupidly fighting himself, he wonders how long Youngjae mourned for his return. While he was out there finding himself, Youngjae waited along with him and cried saltwater as a custom so Daehyun could drift back.

"I came back," Daehyun says because Youngjae needs to know for sure that he won't leave again.

Youngjae smiles. It holds an uncanny resemblance with the froth against the shoreline, like those smiles that shudder and border on the edge of tears.

Their hands clutch firmly and it's suddenly warm again. Very warm. Daehyun's lips quirk and he chastely kisses Youngjae's cheek, watching the ocean wash ashore its shaky smiles. The moonlight drenches Youngjae's red shoes and underneath the sand trapped on Youngjae's palm, Daehyun thinks maybe it's okay to dream sometimes.

"You did."
It's noisy. Daehyun squeezes through the throng and apologises when he bumps into one of the faceless, waning nightmares of scrutinising eyes and bleached teeth now silhouettes that disperse as quickly as they turn. The gossip withers in his ears as he briskly strides towards the arcade at the far end of the street. Fervent whispers tail him incessantly but his engrossed shadow sits upon the ugly rumours rounding corners.

There are people looking but he's used to it. There are people talking but he's used to that, too. He winds into the arcade and scours around for a boy with jet black hair that poofs up over his forehead, making him look way younger than he actually is. Apple lips, button nose, high cheekbones and boyish grins. The children here do not spare him a glance as he jostles past the game consoles since they cannot pinpoint what's wrong.

The innocent chatter over arcade games, little tokens and mounds of tickets surrounds him in a lively string. He spots Youngjae over by the racing games and melts into a goofy grin, hurrying over. Face mashed up in a scowl, Youngjae chews relentlessly on his lower lip and grips the steering wheel tight. He slams his feet against the pedal and mutters under his breath, concentration dead set on the screen.

Daehyun hovers behind Youngjae and purses his lips. He doesn't want to disturb Youngjae, but he can't stop himself from calling out.

"Youngjae."

He feels like a child for doing that so he abruptly shrinks back, wondering if Youngjae will yell at him for breaking his focus. Surprisingly, Youngjae jolts and immediately whips his head back, an incandescent grin bubbling from his pretty lips.

"What took you so long?"

His lips are really pretty. Daehyun stares longer than the world says he can but Youngjae merely sends him a quizzical look, still smiling toffee-like boyhood from his really, really pretty lips.

His hands are off the controller. Daehyun pointedly gesticulates to the console yet Youngjae pays no heed.

"Let's go," Youngjae cajoles, not sparing another look at the screen.

"I can wait for you to finish the game," Daehyun offers quickly. Youngjae dismissively waves and hops off the seat, grabbing Daehyun's arm to steady himself. Just then, Youngjae's car crashes in his game and the taunting Game Over screen flashes glaringly in acute carmine.

"Aw man, you lost," Daehyun laments, lugging his lips to the side.

Youngjae shrugs and grasps Daehyun's wrist, guiding him aside when several kids bolt past them. "Whatever. It's just a game."
Daehyun flits his lashes and shoots the other a teasing grin, almost questioning who the boy is before him. It's not like Youngjae to give up on even the smallest of games because he wants to win in just about every little thing. From getting the last word in an argument to tic tac toe, the last round has to conclude with Youngjae's victory else he won't have the capacity to look elsewhere but the game board.

Before Daehyun has a chance to comment on it, Youngjae tugs at Daehyun's arm and leads him to the exit.

"I'm hungry. Let's go before the lunch crowd comes," Youngjae remarks grumpily, short fingers brushing against the teem of Daehyun's palm. It makes Daehyun smile a little silly, smile as if Spring comes straight from Youngjae's pinkish cuticles and the short wrinkles over his knuckles.

"Okay."

It's raining. A consistent patter drums against the canopy of their umbrella, their feet wading in puddles of withered rainwater and benevolent obscurity to mask their loving smiles. As the downpour maps out the rise and fall of the thin crevices and looming concrete, Daehyun and Youngjae are shrouded by the arc of their transparent umbrella where the blind rain feels but cannot see.

Youngjae is almost backed up against the wall as they stand alongside the sidewalk, streets doused in misty splashes. His kiss lingers still on Daehyun's cheek, sugar melting into the fibre of Daehyun's skin and tickling honey disaster into Daehyun's hazy irises.

They have been walking for hours around the same statues of uniform faces and unrelenting stares, watching as the two try to find their way home together. They've stopped here because Busan is too far out of reach and Daehyun has already missed the last train home a hundred times over and over. They're lost and scared, but they don't dare to tell each other. Daehyun knows from how Youngjae's lips are pursed and he tries to mar his possible look of fear with a well-made frown.

They are so close that Daehyun's fingers are trembling and their breaths intermingle with a startling audacity. Youngjae is gazing up at Daehyun with a precious, fragile patience, nothing to be read from his eyes except conversations with the afternoon and all that is unsaid. He's waiting for a chaste peck on the cheek as Daehyun had requested, yet Daehyun can't veer his stare away from the tangible glass of Youngjae's pupils and how his lashes curl like the heavens spent a little more time drawing him than they did with everyone else.

Daehyun leans forward. He stops short, breath staling as he clenches his fingers. His heart thumps nauseatingly in his throat and his eyes fearsomely deviate to the curl of Youngjae's lips and the little bit of torn rosemary skin on the seams. Daehyun shuts his eyes and cranes his neck, just barely missing the end of Youngjae's mouth as he presses his lips to Youngjae's cheek.

He pulls back as quickly as he comes and they fall into a coy standstill of six feet deep thoughts. Youngjae bats his lashes mesmerisingly and the moment he parts his mouth to speak, Daehyun
grasps his face with one hand and seals their lips.

A bolt of lightning rips through the cacophonous rain and the thunder claps furiously behind them, warning signs stark and demanding to be heed. Daehyun pays not an ounce of attention and pulls Youngjae closer, nibbling softly on his lips as the warm wetness melts his blood into his bones.

Youngjae muffles back a gasp for breath as he clasps his hands over Daehyun's wrist, Daehyun pressing them closer against one another and meshing their lips as seamlessly as he can. His heartbeat thumps deafeningly in his dazed mind and he finds himself wanting to know nothing but Youngjae at this very moment.

He parts when the asphyxiation desperately hauls them separate, panting for oxygen. He meets Youngjae's eyes and freezes, the inclination to vomit out his heart and apologise profusely brimming at the edge of his shivering fingertips. He doesn't know why he did that. He really doesn't, so he hopes Youngjae can forgive him. (He does know, but he doesn't know why he let himself do that.)

He tries to speak. Nothing leaves his lips, not even the choruses and high notes he has stolen from Youngjae who he always feared would loathe him for that. His throat is eerily dry and he thinks his heart is clogging his windpipe.

Youngjae's eyes are empty. He's staring, staring, staring and it's so frightening that Daehyun doesn't dare utter a word. He wants to tell him he's sorry and that he should have just kept his heart buried in his gall—like on that night Youngjae snuck him out so he could visit his parents, and Daehyun couldn't stop thinking thought how very nice it was to have a friend like Youngjae.

It's then that Youngjae shifts. Daehyun steps back, ready to run as far as his legs will take him and till the soles of his feet bleeds out into his tendons—but then, Youngjae smiles. It's a soft curl of the lips, one that comes gradually like how tulips shyly curl out in the midst of their blossoms, and it takes Daehyun's breath away.

"I think home's just up ahead," Youngjae starts, still breathless with a peony blush sprouting on his pale cheeks. It makes him look more handsome than the make-up the stylists wrap his face in perpetually. Daehyun wants to kiss it till it never leaves.

"Oh, really?" Daehyun coughs in a shrivelled voice, more for the sake of giving an answer.

"Yeah. If we go straight, the dorm's right there, see?" Youngjae hums, pointing down the road with conviction and eagerness. He tenderly slips his hand over Daehyun's and interlocks their fingers firmly, the watchful passers-by evanescing into cold shadows.

Youngjae turns back and a pretty smile blooms over his chapped lips. Daehyun's breath catches in his throat. Even if this isn't love, and no one has a name for it but derogatory insults and scornful glares, Daehyun still never wants it to end.

"Let's go home."
prologue

Morning breaks in with a startling tenderness in spite of the traumatic months where Daehyun left before the sun rose. There's glitter in the air as Youngjae wakes up for once to Daehyun's lashes and his squashed cheek, flattened hair leaving little scribbles into his skin. The smile Youngjae melts into is watery like the fluttering linens and he curls his fingers gently.

A part of him fears inevitably the man before him dispersing into sand, a mere mirage that his nightmare has tauntingly painted under his eyelids. But the world seems too lucid for that, the naggy sunlight pricking at his eyes and reminding them to part before the outsiders seek.

Under the covers, Daehyun and Youngjae make a sandcastle of their own in a dome of pure, unblemished white. Youngjae doesn't dare breathe to harshly in case he shatters both their sweet dreams and glances down to the arm tightly coiled around his waist.

He wonders if he would snort at his own expression if he saw his own reflection in the mirror. He's never one to enjoy these sappy romances, yet he can't help the smile simmering over his cheeks. He gingerly lifts a hand and hesitates for a moment. The memories ominously swarm him—that of fleeting windchimes and how he deliriously conjured up Daehyun because his heart and subconsciousness bled for him, yet he never came to terms with the yearning with his eyes open.

Youngjae retracts his fingers reluctantly but ultimately inches forward, wanting to hold on for once instead of letting Daehyun go in the wee hours of the morning and molt into a stranger for yet another day. His thumb grazes the puffy flesh beneath Daehyun's almond-shaped eyes with as much delicateness as he can muster.

Instantaneously, Daehyun comes to with a light grin, eyelashes fluttering without a hint of sleep cluttered in the crevices of his eyelids. Youngjae blinks in surprise before shying away as Daehyun gradually leans down, nuzzling their noses.

"You weren't sleeping?" Youngjae whispers, afraid to hear his own voice and leave an imprint on the oblivious quietness.

Their exhales are tickling one another's lips. Daehyun persists in his giddy simper and croaks, "I woke up an hour ago."

"You should have brushed your teeth, then. Your breath stinks." Youngjae nudges Daehyun away with a feigned grimace, inciting a belly laugh from the other. Daehyun obediently rolls onto his back and though his arm naturally slithers away, he searches for Youngjae's hand and grasps it.

"You're one to talk. Your breath stinks too," Daehyun remarks, absentmindedly playing with Youngjae's small fingers. They remain like this for a long while, no words exchanged as they listen to the tempo of each other's inhales. One, two, one, two. Just to make sure the other is still there and to preserve the invaluable calmness. Youngjae wishes it can last, but once they step out of their tiny home of priceless white, the snap of the clapperboard awaits the first foot they extend beyond the door frame.

It's okay. They can always build another sandcastle.

Daehyun shifts over and fractures the impeccable stillness. The brief disappointment is swiftly replaced by Daehyun's lips and nipping teeth, Daehyun brushing the tip of his nose against Youngjae's cheek as they attempt to bridge themselves closer. Youngjae weaves through Daehyun's
messy hair and pulls him down harder, bashful tongues skimming and taste of dry morning flagrant.

They separate with flushed cheeks, Daehyun clasp the bedsheets as he stays crouched over Youngjae. The familiar misty look in his eyes has Youngjae shrinking back out of habit. Whenever their eyes lock, Daehyun always looks so lost with the haze shrouding his irises and Youngjae had blamed only himself for it. After all, Daehyun had lost himself within the strange distortion that was Yoo Youngjae and couldn't crawl out of the pernicious trap he was caged in.

Daehyun seems to notice the recoil for he flits his eyelids before leaning down, cupping Youngjae's cheek and brushing their lips shyly. He unwillingly clambers back onto his knees, squeezing Youngjae's hand and getting off the other.

The door to the bathroom shuts and Youngjae lightly pats his tingling lips. Now, it's okay. They'll find a way out together.

Dawn drizzles out into daily ablutions and sweet touches here and there, the two leaning against one another as they watch television. It's barely enough time before the clock glaring signs that it's ten o'clock and they need to go out to the lobby to meet the rest for breakfast.

Youngjae lowers his head and picks at the seams of Daehyun's bedsheets. Daehyun is putting on his shoes in the doorway and Youngjae can't bring himself to move. How long will it be till they can see each other again? Until when do they have to turn away from one another till they can rip off their pretense and hold hands once more?

Youngjae isn't sure. Shuffling footsteps resonates through the room and Daehyun leans down, scooping Youngjae's hand up and intermeshing their fingers. Youngjae lifts his head and Daehyun flashes a reassuring smile.

"We're still friends," he starts softly, guiding Youngjae up onto his feet. Youngjae stares back in surprise before Daehyun unwinds their fingers, slipping an arm around Youngjae's shoulder and leading him to the door.

The hinges creak and the warm air vigilantly standing outside breezes past them, the intimidatingly large corridor warning them of their endeavour. Youngjae wants to ask what if everyone else finds out the meaning behind their shared gazes, but the blissful happiness along the ridges of his eye smile has Youngjae keeping quiet. Daehyun is right; they're still friends at the bottom of it all, even if anyone squints and dissect their loving smiles. They don't have to stay apart to ensure they'll live to see their tomorrows.

It doesn't matter if they spend some nights making love and Daehyun feels Youngjae inside out with cut nails and gentle fingers, because they were friends at the beginning and always will be. The overstaying melancholy engulfing themselves and the others have skinned them layer by layer into exhausted bones and perpetual eye circles. Maybe they can be happy both when it's bright and dark.

Junhong and Jongup are standing outside their room, glimpses of Yongguk, Himchan and the rest of the staff cluttered in the far-end lobby. As Jongup fumbles with his belongings, Junhong glances down the hallway.

He parts his lips. He regards Daehyun and Youngjae with doe eyes, Jongup tugging at his heel tab before glimpsing towards the pair pacing towards them. He immediately deliquesces into the same expression as he stills in his movements.

Youngjae sinks back apprehensively into Daehyun's hold but Daehyun does not falter in his slow footsteps, smile brimming on his worn-out cheeks. Youngjae places his faith into Daehyun's firm
grip and his memories of late nights and soothing kisses and meets Junhong's eyes.

It's warm. Junhong envelopes the both of them in a brotherly embrace and Jongup belatedly joins in, stringing his arms over the two lightly. The lovely joy in their irises—composed from thankful wonder and relief—translates into groggy grins and smears of toothy laughter, four silly friends hugging the life out of one another in the middle of an empty corridor. Youngjae misses this so much that he can't stop himself from tearing up.

He can't stop smiling,
chapter one

WE SAW WE KNOW DON'T HIDE IT HOW DO YOU TWO EXPLAIN IT MUST BE AN ACCIDENT IT'S DISGUSTING IT'S DISGUSTING IT'S DISGUSTING IT'S FILthy VULGAR ABNORMAL OBSCENE SHAMEFUL DIRTY IMMORAL DESPICABLE VILE REVOLTING FOUL

DON'T YOU FIND IT HORRIFIC DIDN'T YOU STOP TO THINK WHETHER OR NOT IT WAS WRONG DO YOU TWO HAVE NO SHAME

DON'T YOU TWO REALISE IT'S A SIN IT'S SO PUTRID LOVE IS BETWEEN A MAN AND A WOMAN WHO DID YOU TWO TAKE AFTER

WE SAW WE SAW WE SAW WE SAW WE SAW WE SAW WE SAW WE SAW WE SAW WE SAW WE SAW WE SAW WE SAW WE SAW WE SAW WE SAW WE SAW WE SAW WE SAW WE SAW "Are you two in love?"

JUST THINKING ABOUT IT MAKES ME WANT TO HURL I CAN'T IMAGINE HOW YOU TWO CAN EVEN DO THIS WITH EACH OTHER

WHY WERE YOU TWO SLEEPING WITH EACH OTHER AREN'T YOU TWO BOTH MEN HOW CAN YOU DO THIS WITH ONE ANOTHER

DID YOUR PARENTS NOT RAISE YOU RIGHT HOW DID YOU TWO BECOME THIS CORRUPTED WHAT INFLUENCED YOU TWO TO

CHOOSE A LIFE LIKE THIS HOW SICKENING HOW REPULSIVE HOW NAUSEATING WE ARE SO ASHAMED WHY WOULD YOU TWO

"We are."

The windchimes ring from the window with a blissful obliviousness that reminds Youngjae of his
own tattered one. It's a breeze of innocence against a somber atmosphere of shame and humiliation, one that makes Youngjae churn out a watery smile and pick at his skin. He wonders if he had kept that innocence and left Daehyun alone, would they have went through so much misery? Would they be sitting here with their heads lowered, waiting for a sentence from Yongguk and Himchan?

The living room is a homemade courthouse and the jury sits before them in silence, judgement gnawing into their irises. Daehyun and Youngjae are pleading guilty to a crime against nature where mothers would turn away in abhorrence and fathers would cover their sons' ears. Youngjae suggested pleading insanity, explaining that they were out of their minds, but the insane are given a chance at recovery from their sickness. They're meant to be fixed and mended, put back together in one piece with a repaired sanity.

Daehyun and Youngjae are sick, indeed. It's unnatural for Youngjae to spread his legs and tremble in pleasure as Daehyun buries himself inside him. It's wrong for Youngjae to kiss Daehyun goodnight and let their lovelorn stares pull them together for a moment more. It's sickening, but neither of them are willing to let go of it all. It's no more a question of being fixed and turning over a new leaf, but whether or not they can get away with it.

(These scum never learn. All they do is rinse and repeat, no remorse in their disgusting kisses and interlocked hands. Look at the way they smile at each other like they're in love when it's nothing more than a wicked indulgence in a twisted fetish. Even though we've hung them, they've got no regret in their rotten eyes. How can they lift their heads when they've committed such a sin?)

Perhaps this is their insanity. They would rather live so miserably in the dark, loathed by the world and their loved ones, just to be together. This is where Youngjae finds himself wrapped up in the cliches he and Daehyun used to watch on TV. He'd elbow Daehyun and mockingly laugh at him for getting emotional, telling him that there's no girls to impress here with his empathy for sappy romance stories. Funny, because Youngjae's the one that ends up crying harder in the end.

It's love, isn't it? Love, what makes you give up your life when no sum of money would. What has you crying for a person who gave you wounds and bruises. What Daehyun ran so desperately from yet could not escape.

That's the word they're looking for.

Yongguk is staring at them, lips pulled into a thin line. Himchan's gaze is a tad bit softer but dripping with uncertainty, as though the two in front of him haven't spent years training to death with them in those four walls. The windchimes sing another oblivious tune to cover up the humiliating conversation between the four.

When Yongguk had called them to the living room, Youngjae had thought it would be a scolding and a reminder to them never to fall back into that petty feud everyone saw on the surface. After Jongup and Junhong had gleefully lugged them into the lobby, excitedly getting Yongguk and Himchan's attention, Youngjae assumed it would be the end of it all. Yongguk and Himchan churned out a few rusty smiles that seemed too mild for a war that lasted ages, but Youngjae brushed it off as Daehyun slid an arm around his shoulders. They learnt to smile in daytime while standing beside one another; they picked up again the habits of making crude jokes and roughly hitting each other, like boys do. For a moment, Youngjae believed this sense of normalcy could last.

Someone would have found out eventually. Still, Youngjae thinks it's a bit too cruel that they were exposed barely weeks after they learnt how to live again in the light. He hadn't known where he and Daehyun were heading together, but he just wanted to spend some time with Daehyun away from the darkness. He only wanted to be able to look at Daehyun with the sunshine carving out the mole beneath his left eye.
How silly of Yoo Youngjae to believe he belonged anywhere out of darkness.

In this lifetime of insanity, Youngjae realises late that the rabbit hole had always been sealed. They foolishly waited for their flesh and bones to return, deeming these bodies of theirs that touch ever so often as caricatures, funny parodies. They were part of those humours skits on TV where the boys kiss by accident and the audiences laugh their heads off.

Dear Alice and the White Rabbit ran with a vain hope towards the only way out of a bizarre imagination. Now, Youngjae realises this hilarious theatrical of theirs was always their home. Time was never on their side as they idiotically waited to be rescued from themselves. Time can't alter what they are if that's the way they're meant to be.

"Was that why you two were avoiding each other?" Himchan breathes. There's grey beneath his eyes and Youngjae remembers the fatigue from their yesterdays, Himchan insistently staying up to keep Youngjae company. He's taken care of Youngjae all this time he suffered, and this is all Youngjae can give back to him—another terrible mess the older ones have to clean up.

Daehyun's hand discreetly grazes Youngjae's fingers, offering the solace Youngjae gave when they first delved into their mute charade. "Yes," Daehyun says. His voice is surprisingly firm, as he answers for two.

When they first sat before Yongguk and Himchan, they had fabric conversations ready in their minds. They had sewn together bits of now with chunks of then so they would be believable enough. What they never expected was for Yongguk to whisper that they knew what happened behind their closed door. Of that disgusting, disgusting thing which took place between them two, of the revolting stench left behind and the nauseating stains on the sheets.

Youngjae wants to think of the skin he's wearing as disgusting like he once had. It's scrawled with the clownish silhouette of make-up that mockingly spills his thoughts of wearing skirts and hourglass figures. Worst, it's stained with his lewd orgasms from nights with a man, and burnt with Daehyun's touches. But he can't, simply because Daehyun kisses as much of his skin as he can and won't believe it to be anything else but beautiful.

Silence toils in the atmosphere as Youngjae thinks of sand between his fingers. Daehyun's grasp is so elusive though they're sitting right beside each other, afraid Yongguk and Himchan's dissecting stares may rot into repulsion. Youngjae still yearns direly to interlock their fingers for comfort. It's too quiet, so quiet that Youngjae can feel the absence of words slit through his skin. The nylon tightens around his neck and he feels like crying.

Youngjae does not turn to look at Daehyun, his peripheral vision accustomed to stealing blurred glances. I just want to love you, he sobs within his lungs, not letting his composure break when Daehyun's being so strong, so brave, so shameless. Why won't the world let us? What did we do so wrong for them to hate us?

His throat burns. Yongguk and Himchan stay utterly still, Yongguk's eyes darting back and forth from Daehyun to Youngjae. Himchan seems to have given up wholly on the pair as he examines the texture of the dining table. They used to tell crude jokes here as they lamented being single. Himchan bet Daehyun would be the first to get a girlfriend while Youngjae would be the last. Youngjae flicked a rice grain at him for that.

Suddenly, they're so distant. Youngjae wants to feel angry at the way Yongguk and Himchan are staring at him, but he can't muster up that indignation because he himself feels revolted. Just because of this, years of closeness have become icy kilometres of distance.
It's cold. Youngjae forgets how Himchan held him and sobbed with him, doesn't remember on purpose because it hurts. No wonder he was so uncomfortable with him that day when just before, his eyes had flared with such fervour to protect Youngjae.

Youngjae didn't mean it. If he could, he wouldn't love Daehyun and cause so much trouble for everyone. Who in the right mind would choose to be so repulsive, to love someone of their own sex? No one would voluntarily put themselves through this much pain when there's a much easier route. He just can't help his imbecilic heart from being drawn to a lonely boy from Busan.

"How long?"

The question breaches the air and makes Youngjae flinch. Daehyun's hand brushes his once more, hoping to comfort despite the smallness of the gesture. It's sufficient, because Youngjae is long used to it. It's almost a luxury of the months they kept their gaze on the ceiling so their eyes would not meet.

"Since Youngjae's birthday," he rasps, voice brittle yet determined. Youngjae wonders how he can show so little shame.

Yongguk looks to Daehyun, taking some time to find his words. "Was this why you were troubled?" He asks softly.

Daehyun lowers his head. "Yes," he says, this time in a whisper. He wears scars along the croak of his voice, those Youngjae couldn't decipher till a long time after.

Youngjae bites his lip. It must have been lonely for Daehyun to run from a boy he loved, especially when Youngjae was his closest friend who he told his deepest worries to. When was it that Daehyun started to feel differently? When did the fear take over so much that he was scared to even look at Youngjae on some days?

Yongguk heaves. Just that one breath makes Youngjae want to sob his lungs out and beg for forgiveness on behalf of both of them. He's sorry he caused everyone so much trouble; he's sorry that instead of fixing things, all he's done is make things so much worse.

The silence that clogs the room is unbearable. Yongguk clears his throat, phlegm grating against gullet. Youngjae flickers his eyes up gingerly like he's nothing but filth with no right to set eyes on anyone else.

"We won't tell the company what happened."

Youngjae flutters his lashes. Himchan lifts his gaze and parrots Yongguk's sentiments with a wordless nod. With his lips slightly parted, Youngjae stares at them, fingers curling while tears prick at his eyes. It's a shred of mercy they're offering, despite the underlying connotations. At least when he and Daehyun split, they have a way to start anew with the world oblivious to their atrocious past.

"Thank you," Daehyun breathes. He bats his lashes slowly and the words desperately dangle from the edge of his lips, Daehyun clenching his shorts restlessly.

Underneath the table, he takes Youngjae's hand. "Give us a week." He holds it firmly like a soldier in war, wanting nothing more than to protect. The tears are starting to burn Youngjae's eyes. He's grateful that they spared them (Daehyun), even though they'll have to close this chapter and file it away in the fire. Burn off the memories and pretend it never happened, because the world doesn't deserve to know of such atrocity.

"For what?" Himchan furrows his brows. Daehyun clasps Youngjae's hand tighter, the view of it
"To stop this," Daehyun says softly, resignation permeating his words. "Just a week more," he bargains, pleads.

*It was nice while it lasted,* Youngjae thinks as he holds on to Daehyun's hand. *It was really, really nice while it lasted.* His throat tightens and he churns out a pitiful smile, those beggars give as they receive their only penny for the day. He's thankful that for a few weeks, they could love each other like a man and a woman could.

Yongguk exhales. He looks at them (oh, so filthy) and speaks with the tone of a mother.

"We're not stopping you two."

The words are deafeningly unexpected. Youngjae slowly raises his head up in surprise, instantly gripping Daehyun's hand.

Yongguk churns out a small smile. "If you're happy, we're happy," he manages out. He seems to think over his words again but ultimately nods. "We'll help you two keep it from the management, but we need you two to be careful too."

Youngjae's fingers tremble. He replays the words once, twice, thrice just so it can sink into his mind, and he delves into Yongguk's soft eyes for confirmation. The emotions start to cloud his windpipe while his thinned lips melt into drips of water, unsteady stare darting to Himchan. He blurs away with tears into the memories of laughter from half a decade ago. Them in the training room, so oblivious to how things would turn out, fringes too long and skin still touched by acne.

They accept them.

Youngjae swallows and he quietly gasps for air. He tries to understand the words as he searches their irises in hopes of ending his delusion earlier. But Yongguk and Himchan gaze back firmly, like the friends they've always been.

Himchan raises his hand and leans over to knock Daehyun's head gently. "You two went through so much just to hide it from us. Why didn't you just tell us?" He chides gently.

"Did you think we'd turn our backs on you?" Himchan sighs, voice soft. "Sure, it's shocking... I'm still shocked, actually. But we're your friends."

Youngjae's tears finally spill over. He trembles as Himchan looks to him, such undeserved concern permeating his eyes. Youngjae's even more sorry now and it's so bittersweet as he clasps pathetically on to Daehyun's palm, feeling, remembering, holding for another day longer. He inhales the breathes he starved himself of because he felt he shouldn't live, exhales the utter gratefulness that he has Yongguk and Himchan.

"Always crying." Himchan looks sad, regretful perhaps that he didn't understand the misery Youngjae lived in. He smiles and thumbs Youngjae's cheek. "Stop it. You look terrible."

"Hyung," Youngjae weeps, and Himchan's eyes well up with tears through his smile. "Hyung, I'm so sorry.," Youngjae cries as the wet warmth scratches down his face. He wants punishment. He masochistically looked forward to it as he felt he deserved it. He never expected such unconditional love in return.

"What are you sorry for?" Himchan sighs. He brushes away every tear drop that seethes down. Youngjae continues sobbing as his ribcage bouys with a nauseating, unaccustomed relief. He'll get to
hold Daehyun tomorrow, and just perhaps, more tomorrows to come.

"We'll talk to Jongup and Junhong about it, since they still don't know. Don't worry," Yongguk hums, reassuring.

"Just keep it under wraps, okay?" He continues. His eye circles are just as dark as Himchan's. "I don't want anything bad to happen to you two."

Daehyun smiles. He's not crying but his voice gives away his happiness and an irreplaceable solace. "We will," he breathes, all suppressed misery boiling over through hoarse words. He squeezes Youngjae's hand. "We will, definitely. Thank you."

Daehyun drops his head low. "Thank you, hyung," he repeats with a shuddering voice. "Thank you."

"Thank you, hyung." He'd drop to his knees if he could, and so would Youngjae.

"Thank you," Daehyun finally cracks as he chokes up, shoulders wracking with silent sobs. "Thank you so much."

It's bright. Youngjae sprawls himself on the sofa while Daehyun sits beside him. He surfs through the TV channels while Daehyun groans at nearly every one of them.

"Shut up," Youngjae snorts. "You choose the channel since you're so picky."

"Everything's boring." Daehyun makes a face as he lolls his head to one side.

"How about we watch a movie?" Youngjae suggests. The windchimes swing in the wind. "Jaebum lent me this movie and I thought it was pretty good. It's slice of life; about a beggar boy who goes on a journey after running away from the police. He has a dog." Youngjae lights up as he mentions that fact, inciting a small chuckle in Daehyun.

Daehyun purses his lips in thought. "Does it have a happy ending?"

"Well, sort of, I guess? It's an okay ending. But it was good enough for me."

"I don't mind. But Jongup reserved the television from 4 o'clock to watch some anime marathon."

"Nerd," Youngjae raises his voice as Jongup walks by. He squints at Youngjae and temptingly lifts his hand, but does not follow through with any insulting gesture once Yongguk passes him.

"The movie's just one and a half hour, though."

"Let's just watch it," Daehyun suggests. His head lolls a little further and touches Youngjae's shoulder. Youngjae's cheeks tickle with warmth.

"Mm, okay," Youngjae agrees. He gazes down at Daehyun and tenderly brushes his hair. It's blonde now, and Daehyun complained about it being too flashy the other day. Youngjae said the biggest
problem was that he was ugly.

"Your lips are chapped," Youngjae says once he notices. He brings up a thumb and pulls away when Daehyun meets his eyes.

"They are?" He doesn't bother feeling his own lips, merely staring up at Youngjae.

"Mm, a bit. Go put on some lip balm."

Daehyun acquiesces with a hum. He lifts his head off Youngjae and remarks, "Your lips are chapped too. A little."

"Oh. Yeah, my lips keep drying up," Youngjae heaves. He averts his gaze when Daehyun focuses on his lips and touches it with a sole finger, like understanding the shape of a petal.

"You should drink more water," Daehyun reminds.

"You should too."

Daehyun's stare remains even though his finger falls to Youngjae's chin, and then away back to the safe confines of his lap. Youngjae glances to him and his eyes soften at the lost look Daehyun wears. It's been one month since they were allowed to walk freely at home, and by some miracle (Youngjae's debilitating insecurities), Daehyun hasn't gotten tired of him. In the crawling fears that whisper how Daehyun will flee for a woman who can give him the ideal home and a lovely child, Youngjae finds he has never been proven right.

Daehyun's eyes bloom with a heavy mist. He wants to lean in; Youngjae has memorised this look off him from shy nights under the blankets. It makes Youngjae's heart flutter as he indulges in his lovesickness that Daehyun mirrors so foolishly.

Some loud noise resounds from the television, the game show hosts rambling as confetti erupts over the screen. Junhong walks into the living room with a bag of crackers and settles on the floor, scrolling through his messages. Those in love look away in a laughable embarrassment, Daehyun's hand inching closer.

"I'll go get the CD." Youngjae gets up. He lowers his head when Daehyun tails him into the room a moment later. As Youngjae kneels down to rummage through his messy drawer, Daehyun crouches down.

They gaze at one another for a few standstill seconds. Afternoon sunlight simmers over their skin, emphasising Daehyun's tan that reminds Youngjae of summers lost at the beach.

Daehyun slowly leans forward and presses their lips together. It's chaste and innocent, lasting for just a while. Daehyun pulls away and points to Youngjae's mess.

"You never bother to clean up your stuff."

"Do it for me, then, since you like cleaning so much." Youngjae sieves out the CD and holds his breath when Daehyun cups his cheek, kissing deeper this time.

"Are you going out tonight?" Daehyun asks.

"No. You?"

"No," Daehyun answers, melting into a small smile. "Tomorrow, since it's our free day, let's go
"Where do you want to go?" Youngjae shuts the drawer. "I'm craving for barbeque."

"Let's eat that for lunch then. I want to go see the festival downtown." Daehyun ruffles his own hair. "I should wear the cap you got me."

"You should. It's so hot lately. Everywhere's so sunny." Youngjae thinks to himself. "Isn't there an arcade near the festival? The really big one?"

"Oh yeah, we went there a few times, didn't we? We should drop by."

"So you can waste all your money like that last time."

"The claw machines are rigged!" Daehyun huffs, inciting a light laugh in Youngjae.

"That's why I'm smart. I go for the racing games," Youngjae proudly announces.

Daehyun cocks a brow. "You choose them because you suck at driving in real life."

"I suck at driving?" Youngjae incredulously rebounds. "I suck at driving? You nearly mowed down a lamppost yesterday. You drive like a freaking mad man."

Daehyun covers Youngjae's lips with a hand. "Stop nagging. I'm saying that you're always so careful." He yelps when Youngjae sticks out his tongue.

They go back out to the living room to watch the movie. Jongup tries to wrestle Daehyun when it's four o'clock, demanding his rights to the television. They call Yongguk out to resolve the situation but Yongguk refuses to get involved, instead locking his room door.

Himchan cooks dinner for them. Daehyun rants about how the MSG will shorten their life span and Himchan yells at him for being ungrateful. Together, they eat at the table, boisterously chatting about today's happenings. Junhong says his mission for this year is to get a girl idol's number. Yongguk continues penning down his new song while he eats. They laugh at the stupid things Jongup says amidst the warmth of a humid summer evening.

Dusk falls with a cool breeze and cobalt blue. Moonlight douses Youngjae's form over the bed, the fluttering curtains shedding some clarity in the darkness. Daehyun checks that the door is locked before climbing onto the mattress.

He kisses Youngjae slow and firm, giving space for them to breathe between their erratic heartbeats. Youngjae pulls Daehyun down insistently to preserve their liplock, needy and yearning.

Daehyun breathes Spring into Youngjae's bones as his lips touch skin, nipping softly. They pause every now and then to stare at one another, nothing but the silence they're accustomed to. Whispers, hushed voices, only see and touch. They're as careful as a long time ago, but now without the spine-breaking tension and the sense of horrid disgust. Youngjae still discreetly covers up where he can, not over his inhibitions of what he'll never be able to give. Though he can't understand why Daehyun loves him unconditionally, he at the very least knows this truth.

With utmost care and tenderness, Daehyun slides a finger into Youngjae, kissing up his thighs. Youngjae shrouds his face behind his arm and bashfully spreads his legs, heaving shallowly. Another finger enters him and he stiffens as Daehyun explores him inside out.

All the while, Daehyun watches his expressions with misty eyes. He crawls over Youngjae and
inhales deep to remember another day's worth of Youngjae. They don't have a happy ever after, free from all dangers in a world sickened by their kind. Neither are they a fairy tale couple that live in bliss and happiness 24/7. They're petty sometimes. They fight over small things. They have momentary cold wars. But they learn to love amidst their faults.

Pushing himself in, Daehyun soothes Youngjae by showering kisses over his face. "Does it hurt?" He mumbles in concern.

"No," Youngjae wheezes, shutting his eyes at the intoxicating feeling of being filled to the brim. He feels all too vulnerable, bare and so intimately intertwined with another. But despite his worries, he basks in the comforting proximity between him and Daehyun.

Youngjae caresses Daehyun's cheek and nods. Daehyun moves, watching as Youngjae bite on his lip to muffle his whines. He leans down to bring them closer, hearing every shudder of Youngjae's exhales.

"I love you," Daehyun whispers, voice heavy and ragged. He thrusts harder and Youngjae whimpers, Daehyun promptly placating him with a kiss.

"I... I love you too," Youngjae murmurs. He parts his legs wider, hoping to feel Daehyun even more closely. He thumbs Daehyun's jawline and wraps his arms around Daehyun contentedly.

Their sheets wind up stained, remnants of what they are prominently left behind. Youngjae nestles his nose against Daehyun's chest as they count the minutes that go by in their heads. Daehyun interlocks their hands tight because they can't outside on their dates, but it's okay. At least at home, among their friends, they can be who they are.

It rains. Daehyun holds the umbrella above their heads as they pace down the streets together, night obscuring many of the dimly-lit buildings. They're worn-out and sore from a long day of training in the practice room, some sweat still trickling down Daehyun's neck.

"How do you think I should sing it?" Youngjae questions, mulling over the song he'd been given.

"I'd sing it in a more breathy tone since the lyrics are so wistful. Hey, should we go get something to eat?" Daehyun angles his chin towards some of the restaurants on the other side of the road.

"I'm kind of full. But if you want to, I don't mind." Youngjae shrugs.

Daehyun folds his lips. He ultimately decides, "No, it's alright."

They continue strolling through the rain, drizzle pelting the canopy of their umbrella. "Are you sure?" Youngjae asks. "My stomach still has room for some more."

Daehyun shakes his head. "If I make you eat now, you'd probably skip your meals tomorrow," he drawls.

"I won't. Come on, let's go eat." Youngjae takes Daehyun's wrist and tries to tug him across the road.
"It's fine. I'm not hungry," Daehyun returns.

"Wow, really? What a miracle." Youngjae sarcastically widens his eyes. Daehyun shoves him.

The downpour lessens as they amble in the comforts of the darkness, hands brushing discreetly. The faceless strangers pass in numbers and flickers, sparing not a glance at two boys with black face masks on. They bear such a riveting semblance to close friends because they are, Youngjae has realised over the months. Sure, nobody can write off their intimacy as just being friends, but at the core of it, Youngjae never has to pretend that he does love Daehyun as a friend.

Pitter, patter. Daehyun takes Youngjae's hand out of nowhere and they halt under a lamppost, tungsten glow falling over them. Youngjae gazes up with doe eyes and Daehyun spends a few seconds just admiring the sight.

"Why'd you stop?"

Daehyun hands over what seems like two tickets from his pocket. Youngjae scrutinises them and recognises that they're KTX tickets from Seoul to Busan.

"We're going to have our break soon, so I was wondering if you wanted to come with me." Daehyun says it with just a tinge of shyness, so odd in a boy that brashly speaks his mind. "I promised you I'd bring you to Haeundae beach."

"You... actually remembered? That was so long ago," Youngjae breathes. He flutters his lashes at the two tickets in his hands, startled.

"Yeah. I wanted to give them to you in a restaurant or something before we got home, instead of here. Can't believe you haven't been there when you're twenty years old," Daehyun teases, though his bashfulness still lingers.

"Hey, there's always a lot of people there, okay? My parents didn't want to go there because of that," he snorts. Despite his response, his ribcage blossoms with a touch of forgotten March in the rainy days. His heart palpitates quicker and he feels breathless. He can't help the piteously lovelorn smile drawing over his lips.

Like they're pieces of Daehyun, Youngjae holds the tickets firmly.

"Okay." He lifts his head. "Let's go together."

Youngjae falls a little deeper when Daehyun melts into a radiant smile.

The wind weaves through Youngjae's hair and falls away into the endless expanse of blue. In his dream, Youngjae meanders through a familiar, vast meadow, grass stalks poking at his feet. He's wearing Daehyun's plain slippers as he scour for Daehyun. Yet, there is no one as far as the eye can see.

In the impenetrable stillness, Youngjae continues treading. The leaves rustle underneath him and he
narrowly misses the mud puddles. He nears the sound of gurgling water amidst the sparrow chirps, carefully stepping through the soiled field to find a modest river.

Youngjae settles down by the ribber bank and watches the calm ripples vanish with the breeze. His muddied red shoes rest on a rock nearby, but Daehyun is nowhere to be found.

Youngjae plucks out a dandelion and blows away its seeds. He stares at his empty hands, closing them as if grasping nothing, and waits for Daehyun to come.

Morning simmers in with a burst of sunlight through the blinds, distant everyday conversations drifting towards their window. Youngjae blearily opens his eyes to his shared room with Daehyun, making out Junhong and Himchan talking to each other outside. They’re laughing over some comedy series blaring on the television.

Letting out a small yawn, Youngjae curls his fingers to clasp something. He glances down to find his hand entwined with Daehyun's. Daehyun sleeps peacefully beside him, a vague hint of a snore leaving his lips every now and then.

With his free hand, Youngjae reaches up to brush Daehyun's fringe out of his eyes. He thumbs Daehyun's lips to find they aren't chapped anymore.

Youngjae smiles.

END OF CHAPTER ONE

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