Brotherhood

by sugamins

Summary

Seven boys, hundreds of roads, a single adventure.

A chance for a few of them to enjoy the last of their fleeting childhoods before adulthood starts to take over their lives; a chance for the others to taste a little of what it used to be like not that long ago. The roads aren’t straight and simple, the miles aren’t easy or entirely enjoyable, but no adventure is without hard work.

Seven boys hitting the road to try and find something at the end, but they might just end up finding themselves instead.

“Youth is the spirit of adventure and awakening. It is a time of physical emerging when the body attains the vigor and good health that may ignore the caution of temperance. Youth is a period of timelessness when the horizons of age seem too distant to be noticed.”

Ezra Taft Benson

Notes

Soundtrack for this story available at: X
Also, big thanks to my friend for creating this for me X

And thanks to cyphertrio for creating this lovely piece of art for me: X
The piece of scrap paper was shoved underneath the gap in the front door at exactly 1am.

Yoongi hadn’t been paying much attention because he had been drifting in and out of consciousness, not really looking at the TV across the room but doing so only to keep himself awake. The lights from it blared enough so that with every change of scene the walls of the room seemed to flash with colour for a few seconds, burning the image onto his retinas so that when he blinked he would see the outlines of people or objects. He wasn’t sure what it was about the TV that managed to keep his attention, for there wasn’t a single interesting thing on it. Perhaps it was just the static drone from the speakers, the sound much like that of a swarm of annoying flies, or just the bright colours and lights that made his eyes latch onto it, but after nearly an hour of borderline vegetative staring he had finally gotten to his feet to leave the room. He hadn’t bothered turning the TV off, rather letting the white noise fill the house, and he had been in the act of going down the narrow hall when he had heard the scrabbling noise, and when he had looked over his shoulder he had seen it.

The tattered and wrinkled sheet of paper, slipping between the wooden bottom of the door and the bare concrete flooring.

Yoongi cocked his head and watched it slowly emerge through the gap, heard the slight rustle of it rubbing against the concrete until it was most certainly inside the hallway. For a second he was almost certain that he could see the slightest hints of fingertips holding onto the corner before whoever had shoved the sheet under let go and no doubt got upright to turn on their heel and step off the porch. He considered racing down the hall to open the door, to see who it was, and yet that seemed too much trouble. With the lights off, the only hints of illumination coming from the frosted glass window on the front door, he could barely see a thing and he didn’t want to end up tripping over one of the countless things left in the hallway. Whether it be shoes, boxes, an umbrella, there was so many things that he could trip on. So instead he waited a few seconds and then he slowly made his way down the hall to get to the door. After some momentary blind fumbling he stopped and bent down to snag hold of the sheet, holding it up so that he could use the light from the window, squinting to see what it said.

Trainyard, 4am. Wakey wakey!

The paper might have been white once upon a time, came from a notebook or perhaps a school exercise book, but in his fingertips it looked more grey with dirt. It was so badly wrinkled that if he
put it down the sheet wouldn’t lie flat against a surface, rather parts of it would bump up from where the deep set creases refused to flatten out. The message wasn’t scrawled in pen but a thick smear of black that he knew would rub off against his fingertips if he touched it. Eyeliner. At least he had an idea who had left the message then, who would now be on their way across the rest of the city hastily shoving other sheets under doors, through letterboxes, climbing up trees to shove paper into the gaps in windowpanes.

4am? Well, that gave him enough time to get dressed and set out on foot. He might just get there by that time if he got his ass in gear.

Yoongi sighed and then scrunched the sheet up, tossing the ball over his shoulder so that it likely landed in the corner of the hallway, with the rest of the garbage that was cluttering the narrow area up. Then he made his way down the hall to get back into the sitting area. In front of the settee he had been lying on there was a small coffee table. The top was covered in random shit, newspapers, food wrappers and containers, a beer can or two, and just in front of it he spied his boots, so he bent down to grab hold of them and then perched on the edge of the settee. As he leaned forward to knot the laces he eyed the frayed twine wrapped around of one the legs to keep the table together, the thin material wrapped tightly and then snaking around and under the table top to snag onto the opposite leg and stop it from wobbling too much. Considering how bad it was he knew that a good hard kick would make the rickety leg snap clean off, so that the coffee table careened to the side and all of the shit on top would just crash to the floor with a thud like a bomb going off. He moved his eyes away from the table to study his boots, chin propped on his knee so that he felt the rough denim of his worn jeans rubbing against his skin. He knotted the first one securely and then moved onto the second. When he was done he shifted to look across the room before sighting his jacket tossed rather messily on top of broken lamp shade, so he got to his feet and shrugged it on, feeling the smooth polyester material rubbing against his bare lower arms as he did.

On the TV there was an advert playing for a cosmetic surgery clinic. He saw smiling, fake faces staring back at him from white backgrounds, hideously modified. He wondered how many other people were watching the TV like he was right now, how many were slack-jawed and struggling with insomnia or some other dreadful malady. How many were puffy-eyed just like he was, squinting out from under heavy eyelids that didn’t seem to want to close for more than a few minutes before shooting open again. He reached up to rub at his eyes before running a hand through his hair, feeling the messy lengths against his fingertips that were tousled from the cushion of the settee. Then he picked the remote up and hit the button to kill the machine, plunging the house into a silence that was no longer punctuated by the static sound of white noise.

It was time to head off to the trainyard.
The water in the bathtub that he was sitting in wasn’t clear or tinted from soak of any kind. It was practically a deep grey in colour from the dirt that had been coating his skin, that still was coating it in some parts. When he lifted his hand out from under the water he saw that his palm and the back of his hand were clean, but deep under the nails remained dirt: oil from the engine, dust from all of the old bolts that kept the car together. He had tried his hardest to help fix it, well and truly as hard as he could, and yet he knew that there was no way that the car was going to work again. There was only so much jerry-rigging and fiddling one could do with an engine before it really did need replacing, and yet a replacement cost money. A lot of money, of which his father most certainly did not have.

Jimin sighed and settled back against the rim of the porcelain tub, feeling that it was hard and cold against his bare back and neck. He wished that he could have taken a shower instead but of course that had been broken for few weeks now. On the grand scale of importance the shower attachment ranked rather low in regard to the busted car engine, but that didn’t mean that it didn’t irritate him. He didn’t feel clean sitting in the water and yet he needed to to let the dirt wash off his skin. The oil wouldn’t wash off so easily, it required scrubbing and soaking, and he knew that there would be smears of it all over his face too: on his chin from leaning forward to study the engine, on his cheeks and forehead from his fingers brushing against his skin to stop his hair falling in his eyes. Right now that could wait, he just needed to get the filth off his arms and neck first, from his stomach because a stupid valve had blown and spewed oil all over his tee, so much so that it had soaked through to his skin and had been dripping all over the floor of the garage. That had earned him the first slap upside the head of the evening, and by the time his father had given up on the stupid car he had managed to amass a grand total of four such knocks to the head.

That was actually a few less than usual.

He didn’t know why his father insisted on dragging him into the garage to help out, considering that no matter what he did it never seem to be enough for the man. Had he somehow miraculously fixed the broken engine then there would have been something else wrong with it. A valve, the battery, a scratch on the paint job. And yet he still always demanded he help out. Jimin wasn’t sure whether or not it was so that his father could blame someone else when he couldn’t do something right, or whether the man really did think that one day he would do something helpful. Either way, he had told him to help fix the engine and by the time he was finished with it Jimin had managed to somehow make a valve explode and make it even worse.

Helpful indeed.

Jimin reached over to grab the bar of soap, lathering it in his hands before spreading the mixture up his arms for the third time that evening. At least this time the smears finally decided to come free, turning the father a milky grey colour before he washed it off. A quick glance over his skin showed no more obvious smears so he hastily got out of the tub, wrapping a towel around his waist securely.
He pulled the plug and watched the filthy water draining for a moment before turning to face the sink. There was a mirror overhead and it was covered in a fine layer of steam so he rubbed it free with the palm of his hand, which felt wrinkled against the glass. His reflection stared back at him. He had brushed his damp hair back off his brow and it glistened in the light from the naked light bulb overhead. As he had predicted there were marks all over his face, light smears from the backs of his knuckles along his jawline and cheekbones, a few little smudges here and there on his hairline, and there was even a thumb-sized print on the tip of his nose. He hastily cleaned all of it off, rubbing a little roughly to ensure that it did, and when he was finished he settled for brushing his teeth before leaving the bathroom to go along the hall into his bedroom.

He could hear the TV from downstairs, likely his father watching it because it was a convenient distraction, and when he closed the door he could still hear it faintly.

Jimin sighed before getting dried and changing into something to sleep in, settling for a loose cotton shirt and his underwear because the weather was horribly warm. His room was a state like always, for he always told himself he would sort it out and yet never got around to it. He was always too busy trying to finish something else in time that he never managed to put aside an hour or two to just clean it up. It would be another thing that his father would get pissed at him for and yet he was too tired to do anything about it right now. Maybe another day, when he wasn’t breaking car valves and getting himself in even more trouble. He was about to climb into his bed when he noticed that the window, the one that he had left open to let in a breeze, was pulled down rather than open, and he studied this for a moment before crossing his room. When he got closer he saw why and he couldn’t stop a grin from appearing on his lips.

The window had been pulled down because it was currently holding a sheet of paper in place.

The other boy had reached inside from the outside with one of his arms, dangling over the gap between the blossom tree branch and his window, so that he could unlock the latch and lower the window down to stop the sheet from blowing away in the breeze. It was smart, very smart, and he pulled it free before fixing the window once more. He scanned the crumpled piece of paper to see a scrawled message on it.

*Trainyard, 4am. Tidy ur room Dumbass!*

Jimin’s grin widened somewhat as he scrunched the sheet of paper up and left it on the windowsill. 4am? Why, that was hours from now. He would be able to get a small nap to refresh himself before sneaking out, but first that required him doing something.

He crossed the room and pulled his wardrobe door open. Just like everything else it wasn’t entirely secure and creaked loudly as he did. He pulled out some clothing and lay it on the bottom of his bed
and then he dropped to his knees to pull a pair of boots free along with something else. He got changed into his clothes to save him the trouble of doing so later, slipping into his polo shirt and jeans and leaving the boots because he couldn’t sleep in them too. Then he grabbed the other item he had pulled out of his wardrobe and set about unraveling it. He always made sure to roll the bed sheet rope up tightly and store it away so that his parents wouldn’t find it. When it was done, the lengths wrapped loosely in the crook of his elbow so that he couldn’t trip over them, he went back over to the window and leaned as far out of it as he could. After a little maneuvering he managed to toss the looped end and snag it on the end of the tree branch, and then he left the rest of it dangling across the gap between the tree and his window. Later, when he was using it, he would just toss the ends down and climb out onto the tree branch before shimmying down the rope. It was so much easier than trying to make his way down the trunk in the dark.

With that done he went back over and lay down on the bed, setting his mobile phone on a vibrating alarm for 2am just so it wouldn’t wake anyone else in the house up but him. He tried to settle down and sleep and yet he suddenly found it hard to do so, now that he had plans.

The sound of the kettle boiling filled the room and when he glanced across his shoulder he heard the crisp *click* of it turning itself off, the steam billowing out of the metal neck in great plumes. Hoseok studied this sight for a moment before crossing the room and picking it up from the port, tipping the kettle so that the boiling hot water poured out into the instant ramen polystyrene cup. He filled it up halfway and then put the object back down before folding the lid over to help speed up the cooking process. His chopsticks were to the side on the desk so he picked them up and placed them on top to hold the lid in place securely. Then he unplugged the kettle and went to go lie back down on his bed again, sketchbook left open on the covers along with a scattering of pencils and erasers, little nubs that were smeared with lead and practically nonexistent, and a sharpener that had a blunt blade.

The kettle was a new installation in his room, which was now something closer to a tiny apartment room than an actual bedroom. He had managed to fit a lot of things inside, potted plants on the windowsill so he felt like he got outside even when he didn’t really do that anymore; a medium-sized trash can by his door that would fill up and be left in the hallway to be emptied by someone else, usually his mother; and now a kettle so that he had his own mediocre kitchen. All he needed was to install a toilet and shower and he really didn’t need to leave his room any more.

That would be a blessing.

He knew that there was a cooked meal waiting for him downstairs at this hour but he didn’t want to
go downstairs right now. He didn’t want to leave his bed at all if possible for the time being, whether that be hours, days, maybe even a week or two.

He lifted his pencil up and held it in front of the paper, staring at the sheet and trying to figure out where to pick up from where he had left off. He bit down on his lip and it was then that he dropped the pencil and instead tore the page out, crinkling it up into a ball and tossing it on the floor with the rest of the cast-off pages. His sketchbook was getting terribly thin because he kept tearing everything out, usually before he finished it but sometimes when he had finished a piece and hated it it went on the floor of his room too. Whenever he scrunched finished pieces up the lead would often smear all over his skin like blood, lifted from the porous paper by the palms of his hands. He watched it pathetically roll a few inches and then he was about to try another sketch when something caught his eye and he turned his head to see the leaves of one of his plants dancing. It was as if it was caught in a rather strong breeze from the window but he knew otherwise because he could see the paper aeroplane sticking out from the foliage. It had crashed right into the leaves and gotten stuck, so he got to his feet to collect it with a heavy sigh. Piece of paper just as crumpled and destroyed as the ten balls on the floor of his room, he unfolded it to read the message.

*Trainyard, 4am. Bring ur sketchbook + pastels!*

He folded it back into up into an aeroplane and then tossed the sheet of paper back down and he was just about to turn away from the window when he heard the other boy make a noise down below.

“That got me in the eye, you ass!”

“Don’t throw one in next time then!” he called back down, trying to keep his voice low as to not alert anyone of the other boy’s presence.

“C’mon, 4am, the trainyard. You know the drill.”

“What if I don’t want to follow the drill, huh? What then?”

“Then you’ll miss out, duh!” the younger boy shouted and his voice carried as if amplified by a megaphone. He could be so loud sometimes it was almost ridiculous. “Trust me, bring the pastels! Bring chalk! Bring a fucking easel and paint if you want!”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever...” He took a step back and the plane once again flew up into his window, this time not getting caught on the plants and instead landing on the floor, the nose of the creation
crumpling as it crashed. If that had been a real plane then most of the people on-board would likely have died.

“Are you OK?” He heard his mother’s voice through the door and he mentally cursed his friend for making enough noise to alert her that he was awake in his room. The door across the room opened before stopping suddenly, the unmistakable sound of the metal chain getting in the way to stop it opening fully. He had drawn it across hours ago just in case, and it seemed that it had came in handy after all. “Hoseok, dear?”

“I’m OK,” Hoseok replied as he set his jaw and looked at the crumpled paper aeroplane by the window. “A friend just called to ask about a piece of homework so I was, uh, helping him.”

“That’s nice, aren’t you going to come down and eat dinner? There’s a lot still left, I could heat the noodles up for you and-”

“I have something to eat,” he replied as his eyes moved over to the kettle and the instant ramen that was most certainly cooked by now.

“Honey, I don’t think instant ramen counts as a proper meal. At least let me hand you some kimchi and maybe a little of the kalbi. Wouldn’t you like that, hmm?” Hoseok made a noise in agreement just so that she would leave him alone, and she replied in a tone that sounded both relieved and happy. “I’ll be right back.”

He heard her footsteps, light and delicate, going along the landing and then down the stairs and he knew that he was going to have to draw the chain lock across so he went over and did it. The links of metal felt a lot heavier between his fingertips then they had when he had drawn it across in the first place, almost like an anchor. He dropped his hand by his side and a moment later he heard her rapidly ascending the stairs again, no doubt wanting to get in his room before he changed his mind like last time. Hoseok pulled it open because he knew her hands would be full and he took hold of the tray before she could take more than a few steps into the room.

“You know it would be nice if you came downstairs every now and again, honey.”

“I’m busy,” he lied, the words rolling off his tongue with little effort, “with school work and everything. You know how crazy it is, with the summer coming up and-”

“The college entrance exams to cram for.”
“Exactly,” Hoseok offered her a smile that he had practiced enough times in the bathroom mirror this morning to know looked perfect, “very busy.”

“OK…well, make sure to get plenty of rest and try leaving your room on the weekend, when school is finished for the summer. You need a little sun, you look too pale these days and-”

“The headaches are pretty bad so, uh, I don’t really like going out in the sun.”

“You could always wear sunglasses, just like the doctor suggested,” his mother countered and he studied the tray for a moment before offering her that same dopey smile.

“Sure, I could.”

The minute she was gone he put the tray down on his bed and went over to his closet to grab something to wear over his pullover, pulling the khaki coat out without a second thought. It might be summer but he knew the streets outside would still be a bit cold and the walk to the trainyard was going to be a long one.

After all, his friend had told him that he was going to miss out on something good.

He turned the worn poker chip over in his fingers as he looked over the sheets of numbers, letting his eyes scan all of the odds and his brain calculate the rest of it. He knew that it wasn’t the best idea gambling the last of his cash away but the winnings would come in real handy in a week or two, when he would really need more than what he was currently stuck with. It sounded like a good excuse to him and it was the one that he was planning on sticking with because it was better than admitting to the actual reason that he was placing the bet in the first place. The cash, it was always the cash and that was a good enough excuse but it wasn’t the one that should be used this time around. If people thought that gambling was done in an emergency then it was more socially accepted, but gambling because of boredom? Well…that wasn’t a good reason at all.
Namjoon lifted his pen and hastily scrawled a circle around one of the entries, adding a quick number beside it, before moving his eyes back down the page to carry on looking at the odds. Quite a few goods one tonight at least, ones that he thought he might be able to work with unlike yesterday’s pitiful offerings. He would have had to have been desperate and crazy to attempt betting yesterday, or just plain stupid.

If there was one thing that he could admit about himself it was that he was most certainly not stupid. His exam results showed that, and his college credits would have too if he hadn’t spontaneously decided to not go. That probably wasn’t the best idea, but Namjoon had set his plans out pretty damn well. He was going to compose tracks for idol companies, ones that wanted to debut ‘hip hop’ idols without a shred of ‘hip hop’ in their bodies, and he was going to make a name for himself in the scene whilst he was doing so. But that required money, that required a studio and equipment of some sort. Of course he and Yoongi were going to put the cash together, it was just taking quite some time to do that. His friend spent hours crashing in hip hop clubs, spitting and dissing and trying to build up hype and a nice backing and then working as many shitty part-time jobs as he could handle, and he spent his time gambling in backstreet dens because there was no way they could afford a studio without a little bit of luck. They had 3,303,359₩ saved up so far and that was barely more than enough for three or so months of recording. They couldn’t use it all up until the time was right, until they could actually start selling the tracks and lyrics.

That required luck and attention, of which they both seemed to be greatly lacking in.

So of course, when he told his father he wasn’t going to college, even though he had been accepted into one of the most prestigious ones in the entire city, that had not ended well at all. Luckily for Namjoon however he had been working a part-time job of his own for the entire last year of high school, saving the cash up in advance because he knew that the moment he told the man he was out on his ass; which happened a grand total of three days after he had refused to go to the college. If only he was as good at predicting odds as he was at predicting his own sorry future.

Across the room from him was a man called Choi. He wouldn’t exactly call him a ‘friend’ but he often spoke to the man when crashing in the den, purely because he would at least talk back to him rather than glare like the rest of the bouncers. In fact Namjoon had made a habit of showing up only on days that the man was working just because it was a lot easier to concentrate without a shadow falling over his shoulder, telling him to cough up money or get out. At least the man let him study everything before betting, which was fair. The only kind of betting that should have been allowed should be fair but he knew that the den made more cash from intimidating people into tossing their bets without thinking, by turning the occasional regular into a compulsive and obsessive gambler in just a few visits. They got to the point where they wanted it all fast and easy, cash in hand, bets placed, cash lost, onto the next. Namjoon knew that that was not the way to go, it was no different from binge-drinking. How could one enjoy the taste of wine if they downed five glasses without taking the time to let it settle on their tongue?

No, gambling was a sport to be enjoyed for him; something that required time and effort or else it...
was a waste.

He was in the act of circling something when he saw Choi shifting to go across the room, in the direction of the front door where he could see a small crowd of people milling around. Was someone kicking off on the curb outside because they had been fleeced of cash? Was someone trying to get in when they weren’t allowed? He thought he could hear voices but he couldn’t even make words out so he just settled back into scanning the odds and sure enough a few minutes the bouncer reappeared and when he glanced up he saw that he was heading right towards him.

“Some kid outside making enough noise to raise the dead ‘cos we wouldn’t let him in.” Namjoon furrowed his brow at the description because that could have applied to a great many of the boys that he knew. But he had a particular idea in mind who he was talking about. “Told me to give you this.” And Choi reached into his suit jacket pocket to pull a card out and hold it in front of his face. He stared at the Joker card before taking it out of his hand and turning it over. On the red backing of the card he saw the smeared remains of a message, most of the eyeliner rubbing off onto his fingertips.

*Trainyard, 4am. Y so serious??*

“You know the kid?”

“Oh yeah, I know that stupid punk too well.”

“Yeah? Then tell him next time that kids ain’t allowed in a place like this, ‘specially not one as fucking loud as he is.”

“Got it,” Namjoon said as he shoved the card into the pocket of his checkered shirt, “but you know, you could get that kid to make you quite a bit of cash. Hire him to holler at the people in den, I bet a lot of them would make bets just to get him to shut the hell up, am I right?”

“Speaking of bets, you gonna actually make some tonight or you just gonna stare at the sheets of paper like yesterday?”

“Gambling, much like war, is a game of strategy,” he retorted as he glanced back at the pages, “and strategy takes time.” Choi made a noise at this remark that sounded stuck between a sigh and a groan.
“Ah yes, I forgot the great philosopher Kim is here tonight, ready to give us all words of wisdom whilst losing all of his spare change.” The remark made him snort laughter as he circled another set of odds. He had maybe thirty minutes before he would have to leave and make his way over to the trainyard, which he thought was enough time to at least pick one thing to bet on for the night.

“Nu-uh Choi, I’m not losing my change tonight. I’m gonna make a killing.”

The library was practically empty at this hour and he knew why. It was because there was a rather large party going on across the campus, the kind that was so loud that he could hear the music faintly through the open windows across the room, a dull pulse much like an irritating headache. It was the kind of volume that would no doubt result in complaints to the police soon enough, but it wouldn’t be a ‘proper’ college party if that didn’t happen. If someone didn’t end up arrested for indecency, if a few people didn’t need urgent medical treatment, and the grounds outside didn’t look like a hurricane had swept across the place and left shit everywhere. A brisk walk from his dorms to the library or the auditorium the day after such a party would reveal streamers hanging from blossom branches and the statue in the centre of the grounds which was usually also clad in clothing of some kind that was often a bra because someone thought that it was hilarious to leave leopard print bras on the brass statue of the founder of the college. Sometimes Seokjin wasn’t sure if he was in college or first year high school. He often felt like he was the only mature person in the entire current enrollment, that perhaps he should have been giving lectures rather than receiving them.

He glanced up at the window just in time to catch a gaggle of people passing, all of them talking loudly and laughing at something that probably wasn’t funny at all. When he dragged his eyes back to the stack of books in front of him he felt his stomach sinking. He had been sitting in this seat for nearly four hours now and yet he hadn’t done more than copy down a handful of references for his assignment, scrawled a detailed bibliography at the bottom of the page that he had smeared with the side of his hand that was barely legible. He picked up his bottle of water and took a sip, noting that it was nearly empty and that he could at least use that as an excuse to get up and stretch his legs to fill it up at the fountain in the small hallway just outside the room. His back was aching from sitting in the stiff chair and he thought that when he did stand up his legs would likely struggle to bend. He would walk like a wind-up toy.

Across the room he could see a young woman browsing the selection of art books, a pile already open on the floor at her feet, and she stood on tiptoe to try and get a rather large volume out. So Seokjin got to his feet to go over and get it for her when it was apparent that she really couldn’t get it on her own.
“Oh!” she said before letting out a surprised laugh, no doubt startled by his arm reaching over her shoulder. “Thank you.”

“I couldn’t just sit there and watch you struggle,” he said with a soft smile, “you were practically jumping.”

“The one day I don’t wear heels,” she said before rolling her eyes, accepting the book from him and hugging it against her chest for a moment. “Wait…don’t I know you?”

“Uh, I don’t think you do, I’m not an art student.”

“Me neither, I sketch as a hobby so I was just getting these out for reference. You’re in…philosophical studies right?”

“Yes, I am,” Seokjin said before cocking his head at her. He couldn’t recall seeing her before and yet she seemed to know him.

“My friend’s in that class, remember when Yoobin left her laptop when there was a presentation? And a friend came in to hand it to her and interrupted you in the middle of your presentation?”

“That was you?”

“Yes, sorry about that.”

“No need to apologise,” he said with a head shake, “I barely even registered it.”

“Aren’t you interested in parties?” she asked suddenly and he took a moment to reply, saying that he had no interest and also a rather large assignment that needed to be started. “It seems everyone is theee tonight, don’t know why. It’s just a party. All of my friends are there, I begged all of them to not go and offered them something else instead. Movie night on the dorm projector or something like that, and all of them said no.”

“I wouldn’t say no to you,” Seokjin remarked and this made her laugh sweetly, reaching up with one
hand to cover her mouth, the other still clutching onto the art book. “But sadly I really can’t put this assignment off any longer.” She said that she understood completely, that she had been in his position a great many times too, and then she proceeded to sit down on the floor, cross-legged in her skinny jeans so that she could open the large book on her lap. He studied her for a moment before turning on his heel to go back over to the table he was sitting in, settling back down in the seat with another heavy sigh.

He didn’t want to write this stupid assignment. He didn’t want to spend several hours writing about dead old men when he should have been doing more interesting instead, but he had put it off for the last week and now he was rapidly running out of time. If he didn’t start it soon then he was in deep trouble, and if there was something he would prefer to avoid it was trouble.

Seokjin scanned the book in front of him before realising that he didn’t need it and closing it over, adding it to the small pile that he had already amassed that was by his left elbow. To his right and stacked by the corner of the table were the books that he still needed to check, lifting quotations and references from. It wouldn’t take that long to do but it required in depth reading to make sure that he didn’t miss anything, sometimes having to slowly read an entire chapter just to be able to pull out a single sentence. And then came the cross-referencing and bibliography. He thought that if he had to read another tiny footnote then he was going to get cross-eyed from it all.

Seokjin picked his pen up and held it over the notebook for a moment, forcing himself to at least think of the introduction for the assignment so that when he left the library tonight he wouldn’t just have a page full of quotes and nothing more than that; several hours just spent copying things down rather than doing the actual work himself.

What is a ‘soul’?

He paused and stared at this sentence before adding:

Such a concept has been the debate of philosophers for centuries.

He stopped and tapped his pen against his lower lip before closing his eyes. This was going to take forever, this was going to be the death of him. Had someone ever truly died of boredom? Was that something philosophers had debated on in the past? Why, the way he was feeling like now he thought that he could give a presentation on such a concept, write an entire dissertation.

Seokjin opened his eyes and glanced over at the young woman on the floor just a few feet away, who was preoccupied with looking at the book on her lap. Then he looked back at the page.
Nothing. His brain had went blank, had dried up in his very skull. He shifted to sit back in his seat and that was when he caught sight of something in the window, something sticking in from outside that was undoubtedly an arm, one clad in a denim shirt so that the sleeve was rolled up to show a tanned skin tone. There was something clutched in their hand and he saw that it was a party streamer. Seokjin studied this for a moment before getting to his feet and going over to the window. He took hold of the streamer and pull it free and then arm withdrew. When he leaned out of the open gap he caught sight of a rather tall person quickly making their way across the lawn outside. In the lights on the footpath he could just see the back of a beanie hat and no face. He didn’t need one however, because he knew who exactly that had been. He lifted the streamer up and studied the scrawled message on the length of the crepe material.

*Trainyard, 4am. It’s not ur party so u can’t cry, even if u want 2!*

Seokjin couldn’t stop himself from grinning at the message and he quickly rolled it up before shoving it into his jeans pocket. If he was fast then he might just be able to jump a night bus most of the way there, because otherwise he was going to have walk pretty damn fast to get there in time. He went over to the table and got his satchel bag off the back of his chair before opening it and shoving his notebook inside. He didn’t even bother putting the books back as he shrugged it over his body and fixed the leather strap. As he went across the library he felt the other student’s eyes on him, no doubt wondering if he had had a sudden change of heart on her and was going to that stupid party after all.

He had plans, and they were a lot better then the party could possibly be.

The summer air wasn’t that cold on his skin because his bomber jacket was blocking most of the slight breeze that occasionally blew the stray trash in the gutters across the road to the other curb. Sometimes it was rather musical, a bottle rolling along the tarmac or a wrapper rustling like the sound leaves would make in the fall, but mostly the streets were rather quiet. Almost eerily so. He knew that soon enough he would start to see and hear signs of life however, because he was starting to get closer to the hub of the city. Soon club music would start pulsing not only in the air but also in the ground underneath his boots like tremors, soon there would be flashing neon signs like grotesque fireflies rather than just scant streetlights here and there, and soon he would start to walk past other humans rather than just have them pass in vehicles down the roads beside him. They would be one of three things: people coming back from work or in the midst of making their way to work, drunk, or just lonely people hitting the streets in the hopes of bumping into someone.

Or maybe they were like him, he didn’t know but he doubted that that was so.
If there was one thing Jungkook was not looking forward to it was the drunkards. He could walk past everyone else fine, even if he did sometimes feel lingering gazes on his back as he did from random men that were somewhat unsettling, but drunk people were another matter entirely. He couldn’t handle them deciding to latch onto him as he passed like they usually did, usually young women that did so to stop themselves staggering in high heels, or because they mistook him for some guy that they were supposed to be leaving with. He didn’t want to have to make his way around people lying on the pavement crying or puking or shouting, like human hurdles. But the worst of it all wasn’t the grabby hands or stepping over piles of vomit, it was most definitely the drunken men.

Jungkook knew that it was impossible to pass a club without at least a few hanging around outside, loudly goading each other on to do something stupid. Sometimes they were already arguing and fighting amongst themselves, but whatever the case it didn’t take much for them to get pissed off. He could walk past such a group and they could call out to him and if he ignored them then one would come walking after him demanding to know what his ‘problem’ was or asking him why he was acting like a ‘bitch’. If he responded to them then they would try and drag him into their little gang and if he refused and just tried to carry on walking then the same would happen too. Sometimes all he needed to do was look at them and they would think that he was trying to challenge them. They probably saw the expression on his face, the down-turned corners of his lips that likely looked like a scowl. Jungkook didn’t want to get involved in anything but he often found himself dragged into shit anyway because he couldn’t seem to avoid it.

Hell, maybe deep down he was after a little trouble and they could just sense it by looking at him. He wouldn’t be surprised if they did, for he had been told by quite a few too many teachers that he gave off a ‘threatening’ air towards the other students and that he needed to stop being so ‘aggressive’. Often times this was said when he was just sitting in his seat doing nothing. Jungkook often wondered if it was possible for someone to look aggressive when just staring at a wall and every time he tried to come up with an answer he found that he couldn’t quite figure it out.

It was the black hoodie he wore over his uniform shirt and loud rock music blaring from his headphones, that was it.

Jungkook shoved his hands into his pockets and carried on walking down the street at a moderate pace, not entirely sure where he was going but knowing that he would get there soon enough. It wasn’t like there were many places for him to end up in, and judging from where his feet seemed to be directing him it was likely the park. That meant very little chances of encounters with drunken men hanging around outside clubs, but he still needed to pass a street or two packed full of them to get there. He turned the corner at the end and carried on along the next street, deciding to lower his head in the hope that no eye contact would mean that people would just leave him alone. He didn’t look up any higher than knee-level and he could see that the entire stretch of road was packed full with vehicles: taxicabs, parked cars, friends or relatives coming to collect people from the clubs. The headlights flashed on and off sporadically as cars pulled up to the curb or pulled away and he felt himself squinting slightly just because the constant flashing made his eyes hurt. How people could stand being inside clubs with strobes light he could never understand. Didn’t their heads feel like
exploding?

“Wooyoung, hey Wooyoung-” he felt a hand trying to snag onto his jacket and he just carried on walking, “Wooyoung! Don’t walk away from me after flirting with that bitch! You’re sleeping on the settee tonight if you don’t come back!”

“Don’t you mean park bench?” he muttered under his breath before biting down on his lip to stop himself from laughing out loud. Wherever Wooyoung was right now, he hoped it wasn’t with another woman or he was in a lot of trouble. Another woman stumbled and nearly fell on her face in front of him so he instinctively reached out and grabbed her upper arm to save her from doing so.

“Thank you hun...honey,” she slurred before getting upright and he let go of her arm, “you’re kinda cuh...cute and-.” Jungkook barely broke stride as he just weaved around her and a small gang of people that were right in front of him, having to go right to the edge of the sidewalk to do so. He could feel his jaw aching from clenching it so hard and he knew that he just needed to get to the end of this stretch of street and the park was on the adjacent street. It was another minute of walking if that.

In that time he was called ‘Youngjae’, ‘Minho’, ‘Jaerim’, and ‘Sungmin’ by random women he didn’t know. He was referred to by several men as that ‘bastard that spilt soju on my shoes’, as the ‘son of a bitch that tried hitting on my girl’ and for some reason ‘that fucker from the bathroom’, and he just made sure to shove his way through any crowds that were present on the sidewalk to avoid any of them catching more of a glance of him before he vanished from view. When he finally got to the entrance gates of the park he actually stopped to sigh in relief, finally not needing to clench his jaw or fists in his pockets to make him just walk and ignore the hurled insults and swinging elbows and feet that annoyingly got in his way.

Jungkook glanced inside quickly to see if it was empty yet it was hard to tell. The gates were closed but he didn’t let that stop him from scaling them like usual, and he did so hastily and without fault. He did have a few years of experience. His boot soles came down on the tarmac path inside with a soft thump and he brushed his hands off before walking the length to get to the bench. The grass was perfectly manicured to not grow much higher than his ankle and he could see the thick bank of trees against the length of the metal fence, most of them blossoms judging from the scent in the air. There was a pond somewhere within the park because he often heard the sound of birds splashing around and occasionally making noises, yet he hadn’t been here in the day to try and locate it. He knew there was a small area that served as a rollerskating and skateboard pit but he hadn’t been there either.

He reached the bench and sat down with a sigh. Then he felt something strange underneath him, digging into his thigh. For a moment he thought that someone had been too lazy to get up and use the trash can a few feet away, that they had folded up their food wrapper and shoved it in the gap between the bench slats, so he shifted to look down at it and he saw a sheet of paper instead.
Jungkook eyed it for a moment before letting out a soft laugh and then he stuck his fingers into the gap and slowly teased it free, having to pull quite a bit because it was shoved in rather tightly. When he managed to get it out he unfolded it and looked at the page.

*Trainyard, 4am. No benches but u can sleep on the tracks if u want!*

Jungkook rolled it into a ball and launched it at the trash can, seeing it land in it perfectly.

“4am, huh?” he said as he glanced back down at the slat in the bench. That gave him just an hour to get to the trainyard, and that meant one thing: he was going to have to run.

Taehyung had learnt a very important lesson in life quite some time ago and it was this: if you want something doing, do it yourself. He didn’t rely on text messages or phone calls to get himself across even if that was what the others liked to use, because it was quick and convenient. No, he rather liked making both his presence and his intentions clear and direct. It was so much easier to say no to someone on a phone, by typing two letters onto the touchscreen and hitting send, but if it was face to face then people suddenly found it hard to come up with decent enough excuses. He found that people were a lot more eager if he showed up and annoyed them enough. Which is exactly why he had created his own message system, one that usually varied depending on the time frame that he had to work with.

One time, a few months back, he had spontaneously showed up in all of their classrooms or workplaces like the most strangest and unwanted piece of mail, singing at the top of his lungs until he was either roughly escorted out by whoever was the most authoritative in the room or until his friends had agreed to his proposal. None of them said no to him then.

He had picked the locks on doors and let himself into houses during the night, often leaving with random shit he had managed to pilfer from the fridges before an adult threatened to call the police on him. Not a single no, though he had suffered a few bruises as a result of that one, mostly from Hoseok’s mother attacking him with a broom until her son had decided ten wallops had been enough and told her to stop.

He had contemplated doing something with animals because it seemed pretty cool and yet he
couldn’t seem to figure that one out just yet. It was a grand plan that required much preparation, but he had found that the age-old paper through the door trick always worked perfectly well.

Mostly because he always timed it to perfectly coincide with most shittiest week of the month, when the bad got real bad and there seemed to be no good in sight. That was when the paper trick worked its finest, because none of them could possibly say no when they felt the ways that they did. That would be like turning down a free holiday.

Except Taehyung knew that the summer break was coming up in just a few days and he had the most perfect idea in his mind, something that he knew that none of them were possibly expecting. All that he required was for them to show up like always at the location of choice and then he could tell them, could share the idea at the most optimum time. None of them would be too busy with work to reply to his texts, would miss it and get back too late for it to work, or just plain ignore him because they weren’t in the mood for him.

Taehyung reached up to rub at his eye for a few seconds. It still stung slightly from where the stupid paper aeroplane had hit him and he wouldn’t be surprised if he had a paper cut on it, the thought enough to make him stick his tongue out and make a disgusted noise at the back of his throat. He couldn’t think of something more gross than that but he was willing to try.

He had already posted all of the pieces of paper except for Yoongi’s, for he knew that the young man wouldn’t be in his house until past midnight. He had planted Jungkook’s not too long after the park had been shut up in the evening, scaling the fence and landing on his ass on the other side, shoving the paper into the slat because he knew that the boy would end up there tonight without a doubt, like always. Then he had went to Jimin’s house, having to climb the blossom tree outside even when that meant scraping his palms on the bark and losing quite an amount of skin as he did, having to dangle over the precipice between the end of the branch and the window and pray that the stupid branch didn’t bend under his weight and make him slide right off it. Next had been Hoseok, who he had known would be refusing to leave his room. He hadn’t expected the paper plane to fly right back down seconds after he had tossed it however, standing on tiptoe to make sure that it actually went into the room only for it to drop down and the corner to poke him right in the eye. He hoped that Hoseok had decided to take his words to heart about not wanting to miss what was in store because he wasn’t that certain that the boy would actually leave his bedroom, never mind his house, if he didn’t. It was a good thing he had kept an eye on the meteorological calendar. He had followed this by picking Namjoon next, no doubt hanging in that stupid gambling den like always poring over papers like a professor. Getting inside had proved incredibly hard even with his height, and though he had lowered his voice down to a baritone the bouncer had taken one look at his face and refused to let him in. But at least the man had been willing enough to take the card and pass it along to his friend, even if he eyed it wearily as he did. Then it had been Seokjin’s. That hadn’t been hard at all, for he had gotten onto the campus rather easily, almost scarilly easily. He had walked the campus grounds, hollering back whenever a drunken gaggle of people had started hollering random sports chants at him as if he was a student and not just crashing the place. He didn’t know if he got any of them right but the men and women had just cheered and laughed and wooped and he had walked as fast as he could to avoid them. He had been planning on using a plain sheet of paper but when he had found a long stretch of pink party streamer he had been unable to stop himself from
scrawling on that instead. And now it was his time to leave Yoongi a message.

Taehyung dropped his skateboard from the crook of his elbow and jumped on it, practically sailing down the empty street in the direction of his friend’s house. The area he ended up in was nearly abandoned, most of the buildings and houses falling apart as if they were centuries old and not just mere decades. Nestled away in these boarded-up and desolate houses would be Yoongi’s house, but it was hardly the kind of place someone would look at it and assume to be inhabited. He jumped off the end of a curb and went across a road before jumping up onto the other curb, board flipping as he did. No, it looked rather empty and lonely, which was probably rather fitting all things considered.

“Pft, don’t think shit like that,” Taehyung muttered under his breath as he scanned the buildings to figure out which street he was on, “he’s not lonely he’s got us, right?” The question was enough to make him smirk to himself, for he didn’t need to answer it because he knew he was correct.

After another minute of scanning he located the right building and he let his board come to a stop just in front of the small gate, stepping down hard on the back so that it bounced up and into his hand as he stepped off it. He looked at the gate before deciding to not open it and rather just climb over the low brick wall to the side, placing his board down on it as he did so that he could pull his backpack off and open it, slipping the writing pad out and into his hands. He opened it, flipping past a few pages that still had his school work on even though it had been quite some time since he had sat behind a desk, and he got to a blank sheet before tearing it out, slipping his eyeliner pencil out and pulling the lid off with his teeth so he could hastily write a witty message on the sheet. The head was soft and the black kohl smudged rather messily but it didn’t matter because he had nothing else to write with. He recapped the pencil, shoved both it and the pad back into his bag before shrugging it up onto one shoulder, and then he went over to the door. No letter slot, but a rather sizable gap at the bottom between the wood and the porch. He dropped to his knees and started slipping it forward slowly, making sure that it wouldn’t hit a draft excluder of some sort and stop, unable to go through, but after a few seconds he felt his fingers slipping under the gap too so he knew that it would.

He got to his feet and went back down the short path to get to the gate, picking his board up and jumping the small wall before stopping on the sidewalk. He checked his watch, which was still working even though the screen was nothing more than cracked glass waiting to spill out next time he hit it hard on something. 1am. He was so far from the trainyard that it was almost laughable but he had his board and that meant that he could get there fast if he used all of the right roads. He wasn’t finished with his plan yet however, he had to hit up a few stores still.

Taehyung got back on the board and kicked off with a hard shove of his boot. The night was still young and there was some hours to go until the morning started to come.
The skateboard wheels made a clattering noise under his feet, the wheels rolling over little chunks of pebbles or knocking them aside so that they skittered off the platform and landed down by the tracks. He turned his head and watched one such chunk bouncing; a jagged slate coloured shard that hit one of the metal lines and rocketed off out of sight. He couldn’t possibly trace its movement in the dim lighting because the sky was still a mottled shade of purple overhead, a small scattering of stars nestled here and there and the moon hanging pregnant and glowing in the sky. Soon enough the moon would be going away once more, the sun rising to take its place, but there was also going to be something else in the sky this morning, right at dawn according to the reports he had checked.

Taehyung didn’t glance at his watch because he didn’t need to see the time, he was more or less already at the trainyard and so he stopped skating, kicking hard on the back of the board so that it jumped up into his palm. He tucked it back inside his backpack, not able to zip it up and rather just leave it open, and then shoved both of his hands into his jeans pockets to turn and scan the place.

He had been here countless times in the past, they all had, and though the place was still in use the sights rarely changed in the spaces between each visit. The tracks that were just beside him weren’t in use anymore, that much he knew, rather the area was used to store large freight containers that would be moved from the location in the backs of massive juggernaut-like trucks. He had caught sight of a few of these leaving the trainyard over the years but had never been told off by any workers. He always made it his goal to not be seen by any of the men just to avoid the trouble and it wasn’t hard to do so. Whenever there was a truck around he would be able to hear the loud rumbling noises of things being moved, of shutter doors being rolled up, the sight of the cranes moving visible over the tops of the metal boxes as they shifted the goods for them to transport, and often he would even hear the men shouting to one another as they worked. Therefore he just stuck to moving about the lanes between the walls of containers and that was usually enough. Right now he could hear nor see anything that revealed that there was anyone in the trainyard but him at this current moment; but pretty soon there would be six more people arriving.

Taehyung glanced down at the tracks and then turned his head to the right. The view it offered him led even deeper into the trainyard, a small stone tunnel that was only a couple of feet in length that the trains used to pass under. Back when it had been in use people used to wait on top of the small bridge, for he had been up there a few times and saw that there were worn-down benches in place. He could imagine kids stepping up on tiptoe to glance over the metal railing and the sight below; the colourful and speeding trains shooting out under their feet as they did. Had he perhaps been here as a child and that was why he could visualise it so strongly? He couldn’t recall, but it seemed that he might just have been here at least once; back when the area had been bustling and full of life and not cold and desolate. Back when it had contained lines of humans waiting for trains and tickets and not just metal shipping containers that stretched for miles and miles on end. He ran his eyes up the front of the bridge for a moment, taking in the deep grey stones that it was made of, visible dirty cement in the cracks to hold it up. Here and there across the high walls there were graffiti tags, even more
inside the interior even though it was pitch-black in there during the daylight hours. Some of them were so old that the weather and time had aged them into faint markings like cave art and none of them were that impressive, except for maybe the one that they had left behind.

He could remember that day clearly in his mind, that late winter night when they had all climbed up the chipped stone steps to get onto the bridge, stepping in piles of filthy slush snow filled with rotting leaves and litter, boots pounding on the steps like drums. It had been his idea at first of course, like always he was the one to come up with the ideas, but unlike usual he hadn’t been shot down. His friends hadn’t shaken their heads and called him crazy for the suggestion, nor had they just ignored him and discussed something else as if they hadn’t heard. No, his friends had listened to what he had said and then rapidly started rallying questions back and forth amongst each other; making it sound like his plan had been a very good one indeed. What was the tag going to look like? How big? Who was going to do it? How were they going to do it? After some crazy discussion they had finally settled on the idea and that was when Hoseok had slipped his backpack off and unzipped it to pull out spraycans. The other boy had been experimenting with them as an art form and had found them noisy and irritating and it had been his suggestion about getting rid of them that had started the great debate, but Taehyung had been the one to take the suggestion that one step further. Then they had all slipped their scarfs free from their necks, even when the weather was below freezing and they had started shivering as they had, and Jimin had set about knotting them into a long rope; for he had had the best knowledge on the matter with his bed sheet creation they had all marvelled over.

When it had been nice and long both he and Jungkook had pulled hard on the opposite ends to make sure that the knots didn’t come loose, the boy had hunkered down in front of Yoongi and got to work securing him with it. They had picked Yoongi because he had been the smallest and lightest at the time, and he still currently was despite his age. Jimin had wrapped the scarf rope around one thigh first, before knotting it and then looping it around his waist. Another knot around the other thigh and then back around his waist. There was a few feet of length left and so it had been tied tightly around the metal railing. Yoongi had sworn that if it come undone or tore in anyway that he would have come back and haunted them all and then Namjoon had helped him climb over the railings and Seokjin had grabbed a handful of the rope and held on tight just in case it had come undone. It hadn’t, and the boy - who had yet to become a young man - had rapidly shook the can of paint before starting on the tag. Jungkook and Taehyung had raced down the steps again to watch him from below, offering tips on what colours to use, or telling him to make it a little bigger. It had taken just ten minutes for him to complete the task and yet even now, after the few years it had been, the tag was still in place; where it would be long after ten years had passed.

He ran his eyes over the tag slowly, taking in the sight and colours with a soft smile on his face. A red bullet zooming across the bridge, white and black details added to make it stand out copied from Hoseok’s rushed sketch that Yoongi had followed perfectly without a mistake. It was red of course because they had decided that it looked cooler that way, that it had looked like it had already been fired and punched through a body, red with blood. A rather ghastly image and yet they had all enthusiastically jumped at the idea.

Taehyung turned his head and looked at the sight that the left side offered him. He was still currently standing on one of the old train platforms and he could see the building behind him out of the corner
of his eye. It was another brick creation and it hadn’t even been boarded-up over the years so he
could see the door and windows. They were still there even though it seemed they would have been
broken and destroyed anywhere else in this city, and he had often wondered about picking the lock
on the door and going in one time to see what the interior looked like. But he didn’t need to because
one glance through the windows revealed it to him, even with the thick dust on the panes. Long
stretch of counter along the length of the room behind which tickets would have been sold, row of
padded benches on the opposite side for people to sit on whilst waiting. He would even be able to
see the metal and rope contraptions that used to be used to create orderly queues back when the
trainyard had been thriving. The metal was brass and the ropes were a red that matched the brick
walls outside.

Across from where he was standing there was another platform but no building and rather just a
small copse of trees and bushes instead. If he followed the tracks with his eyes he would see them
run straight ahead in the direction he had just come from, the wide area that seemed to stretch for
miles on sight with nothing more than trees and fences on either side. The trainyard was set down at
the bottom of a ditch and he could see highways in the distance that he had been skating under not
that long ago, and if he turned around and looked at the view behind the building he would see a
harsh sloping hill that led up and onto a main road. Occasionally he would hear cars and trucks
zooming past up there, maybe even a horn or blare of music before they disappeared, sometimes
flashing lights. He was about to settle down on the platform and await the arrival of one of the other
boys when he heard a loud noise and he turned to look behind him. It was the unmistakable
exclamation of a truck horn and after it had stretched for several seconds in length it cut off again and
then he heard loud laughter. He didn’t even need to see faces because he knew exactly who he was
listening to.

There was a blur of movement at the top of the hill and he saw two bodies rapidly running to get off
the main road, before another truck tried to run them down or perhaps a car swerved to avoid hitting
them and ended up driving right down into the ditch.

“Uh-oh!” one of them called out before letting out a giggle, the noise revealing it to be none other
than Jimin. The sound was sweet and giddy, but also a little nervous and he knew why. The hill
looked rather easy to get down but in reality it was not, and only after stupidly attempting to descend
it did everyone realise that. The soil was loose and not at all sturdy underfoot, filled with chunks of
pebbles that would get underfoot and make one lose their balance, or jutting outcrops of stone and
gnarled roots that would snag on trouser cuffs and the front of shoes to trip up and break ankles.
“Not a good idea!”

“You never have good ideas Dumbass!” the other boy called as he made his way down the hill:
Jungkook. The boy didn’t go slowly or even try to watch his steps, he rather just bounded down as
fast as he could, letting his boots come down on the soil for barely a second before he was taking
another step, managing to avoid most obstacles because of his speed. Taehyung watched him as he
descended, knees bent slightly, head dropped and arms out on a low angle. Every time he nearly
tripped on something his fingers would curl up against his palms and when he didn’t they would
loosen up again, and within five or so seconds he was right down at the bottom of the hill.
“Someone’s stuck!” Taehyung called, pulling one hand out of his trouser pocket to cup it around his mouth like a megaphone.

“Not stuck!” Jimin retorted. “I just don’t wanna break my neck!” Jungkook’s boots clomped on the concrete of the train platform loudly and then he twisted to look back at the other boy too. Jimin was still up high on the hill and he seemed to be scanning for his next step, to make sure that he didn’t take the wrong one and end up falling. But there really was no right step to take on the hill, it was simply a game of luck and stupidity, and he would have been better just getting down as fast as he could like the other boy had.

“You won’t break your neck,” Jungkook said with a smirk, “but you might bust your ass.” The other boy muttered something under his breath and then started off down the hill again. His posture was a little different. He didn’t bend his knees but rather kept his legs as straight as he could, and he leaned back slightly just in case he found himself slipping forward so that he could throw his weight back, arms held out at his sides so that they were practically level with his shoulders. The younger boy had moved with quick and confident steps and yet he was moving with slow and cautious ones. He was just under halfway down the hill when his boot caught on the first object and he tripped to land back on his ass with a jarring thud and a surprised noise. He slid a few feet down and then grabbed something to stop himself before awkwardly getting back to his feet.

“I can’t see in the dark!”

“Excuses, excuses!” Taehyung shouted and he heard the boy once again mumbling under his breath, no doubt cursing him whilst he was still up on the hill and safe from any ass kicks. “Just run down the last part! C’mon!”

“Or jump!”

“Yeah sure, and you two can carry me to the hospital!” Jimin said before sighing and plucking up the courage to get down the hill. He stumbled again before he did, once again falling on his ass except this time there was no roots to snag hold of and he just ended up rolling down with a strangled yelp until he landed on the platform on his back. “Shit...” he moaned as he stared up at the sky for a few seconds, chest rising and falling as he took a few quick breaths. “Next time I’m not taking the stupid hill.” Jungkook remarked that that sounded like a smart idea and then the boy slowly sat up. He wasn’t wearing a jacket of any kind but he did have one knotted around his slim waist, denim from the looks of it. Instead he was wearing a black polo shirt with yellow details on the collar and as a result he had managed to catch his bare arms on a few pebbles and chunks of rocks. He saw a few nicks in his skin and a long scrape on one elbow because he had folded his arms on his up-drawn knees. His jeans had leaves and other pieces of debris stuck onto the material, the ends up rolled up a few times so that he could see a glimpse of his shin from under the cuffs and then his boots which
looked to have gotten scuffed in his awkward descent, if they hadn’t been already.

“You OK?” Taehyung asked him before holding out a hand to help him to his feet.

“Yeah, right now I think only my pride is wounded and—” Jimin grabbed his hand and then seemed to notice the cuts on his arms. As he dragged him upright the boy lifted both of them up to check them out, no doubt wanting to see that they were all shallow and not too deep. From a few feet away Jungkook bent down to pick up a chunk of rock that the boy had knocked free and he hefted it a few times, letting it bounce off his palm with a soft noise. Then he turned on his heel and tossed it hard. The movement made his black bomber jacket lift up with a rustling sound, so that a flash of his red tee and lower back was on show. A second later they heard it connecting with the opposite platform, the rock either splitting from the force or skittering along it as if it were skipping on water.

“Why aren’t there any signs around here?” the youngest boy asked he turned and tried to locate another object to toss. “Speed signs, warnings, anything on a nice tall pole that I can use as a target?”

“There are windows over there but I wouldn’t recommend breaking ‘em,” Taehyung said as he picked up another chunk, this one a lot larger so that it fit in his palm and he had to curl his fingers around it. “Why do you wanna do that?”

“Cos I’m bored and the others aren’t here yet,” he said, before cocking his arm back and throwing the chunk at the platform they were standing on. “So we have to wait.” The rock hit the concrete with a horrible thump and then he bent down to pick it up again. Another drop and a piece of it chipped and flew to hit Taehyung on the shin. It stung for a moment but didn’t cut his skin because of his thick jeans.

“Hey, stop doing that.” Jimin complained. The boy asked why as he once again tossed the chunk. “It’s annoying and...” he stopped talking for a moment and Taehyung turned his head to look at him. He had his right arm twisted so that he could look at his elbow and the back of his upper arm and he followed his gaze down to see something wedged in the skin just above the joint, something that looked rather sharp. “Oh fuck.”

“Damn, is that a chunk of glass?” At this question Jungkook stopped playing with the rock and also looked over at them, it still held in one hand and significantly smaller than it had been before. “Oh damn, that’s a chunk of fucking glass!” Taehyung leaned forward to study it, nose inches above his skin. It looked to be a deep green to his eyes and that meant one thing. “Came from a bottle of soju.”

“I don’t care where it came from,” Jimin said, voice a little panicked, “I care that it’s in my fucking
skin!” The other boy came over and studied it too, before reaching over to poke at it. “Can you get diseases from broken glass?”

“Uh...”

“Yeah or no?”

“Dunno.”

“Probably,” the younger boy said as he poked at it again and their friend knocked his hand aside with a pained noise.

“Better get it out quick,” he pulled his eyes away from the chunk of glass, so much like a piece of emerald in the dim lighting, “just in case. Wanna do it? Or want me to do it?”

“You.”

“OK.” Taehyung reached over and pinched the chunk between his thumb and forefinger. “Want me to go slow or just-”

“Shit, shit, just pull it out man!” Jimin whined, so he pulled on the shard and it slipped free with no problem, less troublesome than a splinter. The boy scrunched his face up rather than look but if it hurt he didn’t make a sound. He tossed it aside and then watched the blood start to well and run down over his elbow, some dripping onto the concrete.

“Hey!” They all twisted at the sound of another voice, husky and very familiar. “What’re you all shouting about, huh?”

“Guess what Dumbass did?” Jungkook called out, and as Namjoon walked the last couple of feet to get to them and stepped up onto the platform he asked what. “Rolled down the hill and got glass stuck in his arm.”

“Shit, you get it out?”
“Yeah, but it’s bleeding,” Taehyung explained. Namjoon reached into his pocket and he saw his hand bulging the fabric slightly as he did before pulling something free that looked like a napkin. But when he unraveled it he saw it was actually a bandanna. He asked him why he had it and the young man looked at him for a moment before turning his attentions to the injured boy.

“It’s my lucky bandanna. I had this back in high school when I aced all of my tests so I like to carry it around with me, in my pocket.” He grabbed hold of the boy’s arm and furrowed his brow as he studied the cut, which was deep and still bleeding profusely, then he folded the square of fabric in half twice, so that it resembled a thick long rectangle, before slipping it around his arm. He pulled the knot in tight and then knotted it again to keep it secure. Jimin reached down to poke at it experimentally before thanking him. He just waved it off. “Rolled down the hill, huh? Let me guess, after you pushed him?” Jungkook snorted but said that he hadn’t for once. “But you goaded him into it, right?”

“Goaded?”

“You told him it would be cool or something so he’d do it.”

“Oh? Yeah, I did that,” the younger boy nodded and then tossed the chunk of rock aside before wiping his hand on his jeans.

“He’s always doing that,” Jimin said as he ran his eyes along the bloody lines still on his forearm, “‘cos he thinks it’s funny.”

“Hey, if I didn’t then you wouldn’t try anything. You’re such a scaredy cat.”

“Am not.”

“Are too. You have that bandanna ‘cos you’ve been gambling again, right?” Jungkook pulled his eyes away from the other boy to look at Namjoon openly. “‘Cos you need a little luck?”

“What makes you think I need luck?” the young man asked with a soft smirk as he reached down to fiddle with the braces that he was wearing. He wasn’t wearing a jacket of any kind but rather just a short sleeved shirt that was red and black checked, a pocket on the left breast from which he could see the card that he had given him peeping out. If he was cold in any way he didn’t show it so
thought that he might not be. “Maybe I’m lucky without it?”

“If you were lucky without it then why did you have it?”

“Well…” he paused before glancing over at Jimin, “it came in handy, right?” It wasn’t the answer that Jungkook was looking for but it was a good enough excuse and he didn’t press any further. “Tae, you’re not allowed in the den.”

“Why not?” he asked in joint confusion and annoyance.

“Cos you’re not old enough, and you’re so loud man I could hear you outside on the street when I was inside of the building!” Namjoon laughed at this and then let go of one of the braces to slip the card out and wave it at him. “Why did you think they would let you in? It’s like a club, you know, you need I.D., you can’t just walk in.”

“Y’know what happened last time I used fake I.D.,” Taehyung said as he rolled his eyes, “I nearly got arrested.”

“Like that’s the first time that’s happened.”

“Yeah, well I meant that I nearly got arrested for that and later I did get arrested.” At this joke, that wasn’t truly a joke, the others snorted laughter and he just beamed at them all in turn. “Why do I need I.D. to get into a place that’s already breaking the law, huh? Isn’t that a bit pointless?”

“…Good point.”

“At least I look like I might be able to get inside. At least it wasn’t Dumbass trying to talk to you, right?” Jimin made an annoyed noise under his breath and then complained that he wasn’t that young-looking, quite a petulant whine in his tone as he did. Taehyung didn’t even have to retort and instead folded his arm up on his head, using him like an armrest and placing his chin on his forearm as he did. The boy practically huffed at this and he felt him wriggling underneath him, hair rubbing against his shirt sleeve as he did.

“I look older than you,” Jungkook said as he started scuffing his boot on the platform.
“You don’t, you’re just taller, that’s all.” Jimin did have a point. Despite his height the youngest boy still had a youthful-looking face, eyes too large and round to look anything other than childish, slight buckteeth revealed behind his smile that showed his true age. But Taehyung wasn’t going to agree with him because it was much more fun to annoy the boy instead. “You still have the safety wheels on your bike.”

“At least I can ride a bike,” Jungkook retorted without missing a beat, “and my legs aren’t too short.” At this the boy did more than mumble and puff his cheeks up, he wriggled free from under Taehyung’s arm, nearly making him fall flat on his face as he did, and he raced along the platform before tackling the other boy. Jungkook let out a surprised laugh and managed to not fall over, twisting him around hard and then bear-hugging him so that he couldn’t get away from him. Jimin took a moment to realise that his plan hadn’t worked out and then it was too late and no amount of wriggling could free him this time. The taller boy placed his chin on top of his head and he was grinning widely, arms wrapped around his shoulders so that he couldn’t escape.

“Kookie, seriously!”

“Kookie, huh? Oh I’m not gonna let go all night now.” Jimin tried kicking his legs and twisting to loosen his arms and yet the other boy just tightened his grip on his shoulders. “I’ll let you go if you say this,” Jungkook paused for a moment, “I’m such a short-ass that I can’t even ride a bike but at least I can still play in the ball pit.”

“Never!”

“‘When I leave the house alone people want to know where my mom is and ask if I want to hold their hand until she comes back.’”

“I would rather die!”

“That can be arranged.”

“Kids, stop fighting right now!” Taehyung turned to look over his shoulder at the figure coming towards them, walking along the gap between the train tracks rather than on them, boot soles crunching on the pebbly ground. He knew from the voice that it was Seokjin and when he turned back sure enough Jungkook let go of him. But he shot the other boy a look that said that he would get him again later, when the young man wasn’t there to stop him. Jimin rolled his eyes in a
“whatever” expression but when later came around he would magically find every reason possible to leave with one of them just so he wouldn’t get stuck with Jungkook.

“Thank God,” Namjoon said with a theatrical sigh, “I thought I was stuck with them for the night.”

“No, I saved your ass.” Seokjin picked up his pace so that it was less of a walk and more of a slight jog, hands shoved into the pockets of his black coat. The lengths reached down to his mid-thighs but the material looked rather thin. He hastily crossed the tracks as if a train really would come speeding down them at any moment, and then got to the platform. Rather than climb up onto it he just pulled himself up so that he could sit on it, brushing his palms free of any concrete dust as he did. The platform would likely leave smears of dust and dirt all over his coat but he didn’t seem to mind.

“What are the kids fighting over now?”

“Over how much of a short-ass Jimin is,” Jungkook said and the remark made Seokjin grin for a moment before he replaced the expression with a more stern one.

“He can’t help it, that’s mean Jungkook.”

“He’s such a bully,” Jimin said with a head shake, “and I have to put up with him.”

“You have the patience of a saint.”

“And the face of a cherub,” Taehyung added. This earned him a glare off the boy but at least he didn’t try and tackle him too; he had learnt his lesson on that matter it would seem.

“How would you like it if someone made fun of your appearance Jungkook?”

“They can,” the boy said as he held both hands out and gestured at himself, “but there’s nothing about me that you can make fun of, right? I look good.”

“What happened to modesty?” Seokjin asked wearily as he studied the youngest boy.

“It died right around the time Jungkook got taller than Jimin,” Namjoon explained, “and he finally
had someone to pick on.” The boy just grinned at this and didn’t argue against it. After a moment of silence Seokjin sighed and lay back against the platform so that he could stare up at the sky and Taehyung decided to sit down a few feet away from him. His legs were a little tired from running across the city all day long and he could take a few minutes break whilst he waited for the last two friends to show up.

“I’m surprised you didn’t crash the party,” Seokjin said as he turned his head to look at him, “because that seems very much you.”

“The thought crossed my mind,” he replied, “but the music they were playing sucked and everyone was so annoying. I’d have ended up getting drunk and starting a fight or something, y’know me.” Taehyung swung his legs over the side of the platform and felt the heels of his boots hitting against the low concrete wall. “Why weren’t you there, huh?”

“Well, I was supposed to be writing a four-thousand word essay for class but that didn’t happen.” Seokjin laughed under his breath before looking back up at the sky. It wasn’t 4am yet but it was getting close because when he followed his gaze he saw that the sky was starting to lighten a little at the very horizon, the deep purple going a lighter shade of murky pink. “I should have stayed in the library but it was too hard to concentrate, or at least that’s the excuse that I’m using right now.”

“Four-thousand words? Shit, I couldn’t write four.”

“You’re not supposed to brag about that,” Namjoon retorted as he sat down on Seokjin’s other side, “you know?”

“Who said I was bragging?” Taehyung said as he raised an eyebrow at him. The young man studied his expression for a moment before shrugging slightly and then leaning back on his wrists with a sigh. Behind them he could hear the two other boys messing around with something, the door of the ticket area from the sounds of it. Jimin was talking about they could use a hairpin to unlock it and when Jungkook was asked why the fuck he would have a hairpin in the first place he said that he thought he used one to style his hair. The joke resulted in a punch by the sound of it, hopefully not on his injured arm. “The last piece of school work I did was…shit, I can’t even remember it.”

“That’s because you never did school work.”

“Hmm, oh yeah, you’re right.” He smirked at this and then shifted forward to eye the tracks. He could see no sign of the other two anywhere and that meant that they were still on their way here or they had both decided to not show. He was desperately hoping for the first even though a horrible
sensation in the pit of his stomach seemed to tell him that it might just be the second, because he didn’t want them to miss this. He was so into his thoughts that it took him a moment to feel that something was prodding his backpack and he pulled his eyes away from the tracks to look at Seokjin. The young man was poking at the bag with his forefinger.

“What’s in this thing?” he asked curiously. “You never have a backpack ever, everything is always shoved into your pockets, and I can feel that it’s packed full.”

“You’ll find out,” he said as he shrugged the straps back up his shoulders more securely, “so stop being nosy like Jimin.”

“I heard that!” the boy called as the sound of the ticket station door handle rattled loudly.

“Stop messing with that, it’s locked for a reason,” Namjoon said without looking back at them and after a few seconds the noise stopped.

Taehyung sighed and shifted to bring both of his knees up in front of him, placing his chin on them and wrapping his hands around his ankles as he did. Now that the young man had reminded him of the bag he was consciously aware of the weight on it on his back and of how that was starting to ache a little too; likely as a result of climbing trees and fences over the hours, and getting his ass kicked to the curb by old man Go once again because he had looked a little too shifty in his store and the man had forcibly removed him. That hadn’t stopped him from lifting a few things first of course, but it had ruined his plans and had meant he had needed to find another store he could hit up. And the old man had used quite some force. The backs of his thighs still hurt from where he had whacked him a few times with a broom handle before he had managed to dodge him, and he was aware of the fact his aim had improved since the last time he had caught him out, but at least he didn’t bother calling the cops any more. That meant that he had to respect him despite everything because at least he hadn’t ended up in the back of a squad car for the evening. That would have ruined the plans considerably.

“You wanna know what’s in there?” Jungkook asked, now that the door couldn’t preoccupy him. “You already know, it’s half the contents of whatever convenience store he hit up tonight. Like always. Am I right?” Taehyung ignored him and instead looked at the trees across the other platform. His eyes had adjusted to the lighting in the area enough for him to make out snaking roots that had started to punch through the concrete like fingers, thin little tendrils that would carry on growing until the platform was buried underneath; nature reclaiming her ground once more. When he didn’t get an answer the boy let out a laugh. “Silence is an answer in itself.”

“I didn’t know you invited Confucius?” Seokjin asked and this made Namjoon shift before asking him ‘what?’ in a confused voice. “I was joking about Kookie, not you.”
“Oh.”

“Stop calling me Kookie,” the youngest boy complained, “you know I hate that nickname.”

“Would you prefer Kookie or baby?” Jungkook retorted that that was Jimin’s nickname.

“I didn’t know you thought I was cute.”

“I- what?”

“Babies are cute, you just said I’m baby.”

“You’re not cute, you’re annoying and you cry like a baby.”

Taehyung dragged his eyes away from the opposite platform before getting back to his feet to wander the length of the one that they were sitting on. He was starting to get impatient and a glance at his broken watch showed him that it was 3:47am. If the other two didn’t show soon then there was a chance that they weren’t going to and they were going to have to go into the trainyard without them.

“Oh yeah? Well cookies aren’t even that nice either. They’re hard and the crumbs go everywhere, I much prefer cupcakes.” Jimin’s voice revealed that he was rather proud of this comment even though it was lame. Jungkook took a few seconds to respond and when he did he apologised for calling him ‘baby’ because he had gotten his nickname wrong, it was actually ‘dumbass’. “Stop calling me that, I’m not dumb I’m just a little…clumsy.”

“Hey,” Taehyung called, lifting a hand to wave it at them, “shut up a sec.” And for once the others actually fell silent for him. He cocked his head and listened for a moment and sure enough he could hear something under the distant drone of traffic, something that sounded like bike wheels rolling, the spokes a little rusted and creaking with each rotation. After a few seconds he saw slight movement down the tracks and within a minute or two whoever it was would have gotten close enough for them to see, so he just walked to the end of the platform and waited. Even in the dim lighting he could see a flash of pale skin and a messy mop of hair that was most certainly a bright shade of red rather than black. It appeared that Yoongi had decided to arrive on his bike to save himself the trouble of having to run to the trainyard, and he pedalled it a few more times before letting it drift the
rest of the length of the tracks, wheels going over the pebbles and making him bounce on the seat as they did.

“Look who decided to show up.”

“If I didn’t you wouldn’t shut up about it,” the young man said as he stopped the bike and stepped off with one leg, still holding onto the handlebars for a moment as he studied the platform, “and I didn’t wanna come back from working a shitty shift to see twenty pieces of paper shoved under the front door.”

“Y’know me too well.”

“Wakey wakey?” Yoongi asked as he got off the bike fully and proceeded to push it over so that he could lean it against the platform wall. “Was that supposed to be funny?”

“Kinda.”

“It wasn’t,” the young man sighed and then climbed up onto the platform, struggling for a second or two before managing to wriggle onto it. He looked tired and a little pissed off but he had still shown up and that was a good sign. If not then he was willing to bet that his friend would have been lying back at his house doing nothing but staring out into space until his eyeballs started to bleed. He wiped his hands on his jeans and then seemed to notice that his laces had come undone on one of his boots so he dropped to his knees to do it up again. Taehyung noted that the simple task took him several attempts because his fingers didn’t seem to be quick enough and the loops kept coming loose before he could knot them. He finally did them only after furrowing his brow and sticking his tongue out the corner of his mouth, deep in concentration. As he straightened up again he went to shove his hands into his jacket pockets when his eyes landed on Jimin and he stopped. “What’s that on your arm?”

“Huh?” Jimin raised his eyebrows for a second before twisting said arm to stare at the bandanna blankly. Then it hit him and he made a soft noise under his breath. “Namjoon’s lucky bandanna.”

“Yeah, so what’s it doing on your arm?” Yoongi walked past Taehyung without even glancing at him and went over to the boy and when he got close enough to him he reached over and grabbed his arm. “Blood? You pushing him around again?” He looked at the younger boy and Jungkook didn’t reply. “What? Is this like that stupid blood pact that you came up with that time and he nearly cut his fucking thumb off?”
“No, I was running down the hill and I tripped,” Jimin explained as the young man rubbed at the blood still on his skin with the cuff of his jacket, smearing it slightly as he did, “and I got caught on some glass. You know me, I’m so clumsy.”

“Next time you won’t do that then, right?” The boy agreed with a sheepish smile and Yoongi stopped cleaning his arm. “And if you had something to do with it Kookie, y’know not to do it again too.”

“Hmm,” the boy said before once again turning his attentions back to the ticket station door, kicking his boot against it a few times so that the dried out paint flecked down in little clouds.

“How is work these days?” Seokjin asked him and Yoongi snorted loudly.

“What’d you think? It’s hell.” He shoved his hands into his pockets and moved to sit in the spot that Taehyung had been occupying before his arrival, legs crossed in front of him so that he could slouch forward comfortably. “I imagine if I asked you how college was going you’d say the same right?” The other man shuddered dramatically. “Nah, you’re just messing around. It’s going good for you like always, you’re smart so you don’t need to worry about it. Now if it was Tae we would all know the answer.”

“What? What answer, I wouldn’t get accepted in the first place.” At this joke they all laughed and he once again turned to look back down the tracks just in case anyone was moving out there. “Don’t you have to finish high school first?”

“Yeah, you do, and when are you going back again?” Namjoon asked him.

“Going back? I just left.”

“Tae you haven’t been in school for a year now, don’t even pretend that you have. The last time I saw you in a uniform was practically a year before that seen as you just decided to stop wearing it.” He said that the shirt fabric irritated his skin and this earned a few scoffs from his friends. “The others are gonna graduate: Hoseok will right before the break after being put back a year for messing around, Jimin’s got another year if he behaves, Kookie’s got two, but they’re gonna do it so why not you?”
“It requires brains.”

“You’re not stupid.”

“Nah, that’s Dumbass remember?” Jungkook interrupted Seokjin with a wide grin and Jimin didn’t even bother complaining this time.

“You’re not stupid or anything like that, you’re actually very smart,” the young man continued, “you just like to act otherwise.” Taehyung made a noise that might have been an agreement and didn’t reply. “Sometimes I think you’re as smart as Namjoon but that’s not funny or cool so you pretend not to be. Don’t you guys think so too?”

“I do,” Yoongi said before yawning loudly and then turning to look over them all. “Why’re we all sitting here anyway? Why aren’t we in the trainyard?”

“Hoseok’s not here yet,” Jimin said as he started fiddling with the knot on the bandanna. “So we’re waiting for him.”

“You think he’s actually gonna show?” When Namjoon asked why he wouldn’t Yoongi shrugged. “That means he has to leave his bedroom and I heard that he doesn’t do that much these days.”

“Probably the stress from the finals,” Namjoon said quietly, “coupled with those stupid entrance exams. Who wouldn’t wanna lock themselves up and lie in bed all day, huh?”

“I supposed,” Yoongi said, but his expression seemed to show that he thought otherwise.

“It’s 3:52am, right now,” Jungkook said as he checked his watch. “I don’t think he’s gonna show. You guys coming?” The boy started walking along the platform in the direction of the tunnel and after a few seconds Jimin started jogging to catch up with him. Yoongi got to his feet with a sigh and followed after them and Taehyung watched the two other men shifting and then he turned his attentions back to the rails. Hoseok was coming because he had told him that he was going to miss something, and he knew that the boy wouldn’t risk missing something really cool. They just had to wait a few minutes was all. He thought about calling out after them to tell them to wait but it wasn’t worth the effort; he could wait for him on his own. He started chewing on his inner lip and counted in his head whilst he waited and he had just reached one-hundred-and-fifty when he caught sight of someone walking at the ends of the tracks, at a rather slow pace as if they were dragging their feet.
“Hoseok’s here,” he called before jumping off the platform. “Hey, hurry you’re gonna be late!” He cupped his hands around his mouth and yet the other boy didn’t pick up his pace. Taehyung sighed and lowered his arms before quickly walking along the tracks to get to him, quite prepared to carry him if it would mean they would get inside the trainyard on time. As he got closer he noticed that the boy was squinting even in the dark and he had his held low as he did. “You OK?”

“No,” Hoseok said without missing a beat, reaching up to rub one eye, “I have a headache. I’ve had one for three days now and it won’t go away.” He commented that it was the stress and he could do nothing more than make a noise in agreement that sounded like a “hmm.” He had a leather satchel on, crossed diagonally over his body so that the bag was down by his mid-thighs, worn over the top of his olive green coat so that the deep brown clashed against the colour; bark against leaves. He could see his white pullover underneath and when he reached up again to rub at his forehead gingerly he saw the cuffs covered most of his fingers and that the fabric was smeared with pencil lead.

“Want a lift?” His friend opened his eyes fully to look at him for second, and when he turned to show him his back, bent over slightly so that he could jump on, the boy relented. He grabbed onto his thighs as he shifted to let him up on his back and a moment later he felt his arms go around his neck. “Off we go!” And before he could say anything in response Taehyung started running off down the tracks back towards the platform. He heard the other boy make a pained noise, likely because he jostled his aching head as he did, but it would only take a minute or so and they would be in the trainyard and he could put him back down again. He ran as fast as he could, boot soles clomping on the wooden slats on the tracks as he did, and he took over the others before they had even gotten through the tunnel because they had stopped for them both. He heard Jungkook holler something about a race and then a loud thump as he no doubt jumped on someone else’s back.

“I should have said no,” Hoseok groaned down his ear and he could do no more than laugh breathlessly as he darted through the tunnel. It was so dark inside that he couldn’t see a single thing but he didn’t trip and instead emerged on the other side and carried on for a few feet before stopping and letting his friend down off his back. He glanced over to see the others coming through the tunnel and he saw that the youngest boy had decided to jump onto the oldest. Seokjin looked like he regretted coming out with them as the boy complained that he wasn’t going fast enough. He would have whipped him if possible. Jimin stumbled on something but didn’t trip, letting out a surprised laugh as he did. The object clattered and he saw it was an empty soda bottle, which he had lucky not fallen on himself because if he had and Hoseok had smacked his head on the ground then he would have gotten his ass kicked so hard; a lot harder than what old man Go had done.

“OK, so now what?” Namjoon asked as he walked towards them, slowing down to scan the interior of the trainyard as he did.

“We need to get up on one of ‘em,” Taehyung said as he gestured at one of the freight crates, “and
then the show can begin.” Yoongi asked which one as he eyed the long stretch of metal warily. “The blue one, y’know, like how the best seats in the cinema are always right in the centre? Well, that’s the centre so let’s sit up there. Right?” He looked them all over and saw no one agreeing nor disagreeing with what he had said, so he jogged along the containers for a moment before spotting an abandoned train carriage, one with an open doorway. He went to climb inside when Jimin hastily cut across him and jumped in first, and he could hear one of the others on his heel. Taehyung climbed up and inside before cutting across the narrow interior to stick his head through the other doorway.

“Hey, there’s a ladder on the side here! C’mon, we can use it to get up.” He grabbed hold of the rusted bars and started climbing without a second thought, hearing it creaking slightly under his weight but not wobbling at all. He got to the top and looked over the side to see Jimin following him up and Jungkook waiting at the bottom. He went to the other side and glanced over to see the others walking over to the carriage, Namjoon not in sight so he was presumably already inside of it. “Hurry up, hurry up, we can’t miss this guys!”

“Yeah, yeah,” Yoongi called up at him, still looking grumpy. “We heard you the first fifty fucking times.”

“The blue one! I’ll be waiting!” Taehyung beamed down at them and then started running along the carriage before taking a small jump to land onto the next one. It was just a few feet in width and he could have stepped over the gap easily but it felt a lot more fun to jump and hear his boots pounding on the metal tops of the containers as he did. From behind him came a cacophony of footsteps and the unmistakable sound of Jimin giggling as he ran after him. When he got to the deep blue container he stopped to look back, seeing all of them up and moving over apart from Hoseok. Seokjin was on his knees helping him climb up the last few ladders steps and he had to more or less drag him up because he didn’t seem able to do so on his own. “Ten seconds! Ten seconds or you’ll miss it!”

“Stop shouting,” Hoseok said as he rubbed at his temples and then walked the length of the metal walkway. Jimin and Jungkook reached him and proceeded to sit down and a moment later Namjoon joined them, followed by Yoongi who nestled between the first two boys, and lastly Seokjin and Hoseok got onto the blue container. The eldest sat down beside Namjoon so that he was on the far end and Hoseok sat down beside Jimin, so Taehyung hunkered down between him and the other young man before checking his watch. 3:58am. Any moment now it would happen.

“We’re looking for something, right?” Namjoon asked as he kicked his legs over the side of the container and twisted his head around to look at the sights around them. From their perspective they could see quite a lot of the trainyard: the countless rows and rows of shipping containers that seemed to go on until the very edge of the horizon and the lanes between them all, the cranes that were currently solitary like statues, the abandoned and destroyed train remains way up at the back of the yard that were nothing more than rusted skeletons. He looked up from his watch and glanced at the skyline for a moment.

“See that, right there? That bright light?” he asked as he pointed at the light now starting to appear on the horizon, in the pinkish coloured section of sky that would soon be filled with strong beams of
“Uh, what about it?” Jungkook asked as he followed his pointed finger to look at it.

“That’s Venus.”

“Oh yeah?” Jimin leaned back on his wrists, boots clanging off the side of the freight container as he did. “How do you know that, huh?”

“I saw it in a newspaper this morning,” Taehyung explained without missing a beat. “I was checking the weather forecast on the street, not wanting to have to pay for the thing ’cos y’know, spending 2000₩ on a bunch of pieces of paper is fucking stupid. So, I was checking it out and there was a little box underneath it all and I saw something about how Venus would be visible this morning at exactly 4am.”

“That doesn’t look like Venus…” Jungkook remarked, and he wished that the boy was sitting beside him so that he could elbow him hard in the ribs.

“Nah, I think he’s right,” Yoongi shifted slightly, bringing one knee up to fold his arm on it, hand dangling over the side. “Why would he make that up? That requires a brain, remember?” At this joke most of them snorted laughter and Hoseok moved to slip his sketchbook free from his satchel bag, flipping it open without taking his eyes off the sight in front of them. Taehyung reached inside the bag and pulled the thin cardboard box of pastels out for him and he had only just removed the lid when the other boy’s fingers snatched one of them and he started hastily scribbling with it on the sheet of white.

“I thought it would be bigger,” Namjoon said as he cocked his head, squinting across the tops of the freight trains at the light on the horizon. “You know, like the size of a marble or something, and that it would be a strange colour?” The light in front of them was mostly white but the very edges of the glow could have been described as blue, and it was a lot larger than the stars that were hanging in the sky around it. It might not have been a marble but it was still a considerable sight to behold, and he couldn’t believe that they weren’t as in awe as he had expected them to be. But he thought that the chances were that they were very impressed, and they were playing it all down to sound cool.

“It’s pretty,” Jimin said after a few seconds of silence, “in a weird way.” Jungkook asked him to explain what he meant by that and he paused for a moment as if thinking his thoughts through. “It’s just a star in the sky, you know? It shouldn’t really be that pretty or important but it kinda is.”
“It’s not a star Jimin,” Yoongi retorted as he reached over and thumped him on the back of the head, not hard but enough to make his hair ruffle from the contact. “It’s a planet. What’d they teach kids in school these days, huh?”

“Not much it would seem,” Seokjin said as he folded his legs with a sigh, “seen as they don’t seem to teach anything in college either.” Yoongi asked him how that was going and he let out a laugh. “Let’s not talk about college right now, please? I’d rather pretend that that’s not a part of my life for a few hours at least.” The other young man made a noise in agreement before slipping a packet of cigarettes out of his jacket pocket and he had only just pulled a stick free when he saw them all staring at him.

“I’m not sharing.” Yoongi said around the stick between his lips, shoving the box away and instead getting his lighter. He lit the end up and took a deep drag as it smouldered before shifting to get more comfortable, dropping his leg back down over the side. He breathed the lungful out in a sigh and that was when Jungkook muttered that he was such a punk for not sharing. “Hey kid, I work nearly eighteen hours a day and you want me to share a smoke with you? Haven’t I earned this thing? Get Tae to lift you a free packet next time, huh?” But even as he said that he took another drag and then held it out for the boy to take a pull on. Then he offered it to Jimin and the boy accepted it and took a small pull before handing it back.

“Trade you an actual stick for one of these?” Taehyung shrugged his backpack off and then opened it to pull out a six-can pack of beers.

“Where the fuck did you get those?” Namjoon asked as he eyed the cans.

“Stole ‘em.”

“From where?”

“A market stall in Dongdaemun or something, I forget where it doesn’t matter. What’d you say, huh?” Yoongi eyed the can that he had pulled free from the plastic ring and then slipped the packet out to toss it to him. Taehyung pulled a stick free, jabbed it into the corner of his lips and tossed the packet back and then the can too. Luckily the young man caught both of them. After a few seconds he pulled the ring and it foamed considerably so he held it over the side of the carriage to let it drip down onto the ground rather than all over his lap.
“You shouldn’t keep stealing things,” Seokjin said in a disapproving tone, “just in case you get caught again.” Taehyung was too busy locating his own matches in the bottom of his bag to reply but he could feel the young man’s eyes on him as he did. He lit the cigarette and then offered him a beer and he shook his head before turning back to the sight of Venus on the horizon.

“I’m not gonna get caught ‘cos I’m too good for that.”

“This is _Cass_ beer,” Yoongi said as the last few suds dripped from the bottom of the can, “so you didn’t get it from old man Go’s, which means you got caught and he kicked your ass to the curb, yeah?”

“Wow, with brains like that you really should’ve gone to college,” Taehyung said as he breathed his first lungful of smoke out and tossed two of the cans down to Jungkook and Jimin. Namjoon also shook his head at the offer and he waved a can at Hoseok. The boy was so busy drawing that he didn’t think he would notice.

“Can’t drink beer,” he replied as he smeared his thumb along the sheet without looking, eyes pinned to the sight in front of them as he did.

“Why not? You usually do.” Hoseok seemed to stop for a moment, faltering for just a second before carrying on, and he just said that he couldn’t and left it at that. A quick glance at the page showed a mix of blues and blacks that he was soon going to be adding to, and he grabbed a paler blue before adding a sharp slash of colour on the page. “…OK.” Taehyung popped the lid up for himself instead and settled down so that he could sit rather than hunker, legs folded in front of him. He pulled the cigarette out of his lips and took a sip of it before sticking it back into the corner. Jimin popped his own can and it spurted foam all over his lap and he let out an annoyed noise before Jungkook smacked him hard on the back with a laugh.

“Why does this always happen to me?” He whined as the suds rapidly soaked into his jeans.

“Has to happen to someone,” Namjoon said in his usual cryptic way. Yoongi offered the boy another pull on his cigarette as condolences and he gladly took it.

“Y’know…the break’s coming up soon right? Just three days left and then it’s here, isn’t it?” Taehyung played with the pull ring on his can for a moment before looking up at them. “We should do something.”
“Something like what exactly?” Yoongi asked as he sipped his own beer and looked at him over the rim of the can.

“A trip.”

“That requires cash,” Namjoon retorted.

“A journey, it doesn’t need to be by bus or train or anything like that. We’ve got two legs, we can fucking use ‘em, right? Just the seven of us going out into the world for the week. What’d you think, huh?”

“I can’t take a break with work unless I wanna get fired-”

“Stop talking about work for like five fucking seconds,” Taehyung said with a laugh, “and think about fun instead.”

“I don’t know,” Seokjin agreed, “I don’t have-”

“Where’s your sense of adventure?”

“It’s dead like my childhood and future aspirations,” Yoongi said, and the remark coupled with his dramatic expression made a few of them snort laughter.

“Look,” he got to his feet, dumping the can down on top of the freight carriage as he did, “let’s just talk this over for a moment, no ifs, no buts, just talk. Do you wanna go back to working eighteen fucking hours for nothing more than a couple of hundred won?” He pointed at the Yoongi before wheeling to point at Seokjin. “Do you wanna go to college and sit there writing essays and sucking ass for credits, huh? Namjoon do you wanna sit in dens with nothing more than a couple of bills hoping for some luck, or do you wanna go and find somewhere bigger and better and really make the cash start flowing? Jungkook, you’ve walked all around this fucking city, surely you wanna find another park to crash in for the night for a nice change of scenery?” The boy thought this over before shrugging. “Jimin, you wanna go back home and get called a dumbass and smacked around the head for trying to help out? Or do you wanna get away and have some fun without worrying about being called useless?” Jimin stared at his own half-empty can of beer, brow furrowed slightly. “And Hoseok, imagine not having to worry about entrance exams for a whole week. Imagine that?”
“Hmm?” He looked up from his sketchbook as he grabbed a white pastel and then laughed. “I can barely imagine leaving my room for longer than ten minutes, how the hell would I end up on an adventure?”

“Cos it’s with it all of us; our very first one. Before it’s too late.”

“What do you mean by too late?” Yoongi asked as he narrowed his eyes at him.

“Before we all start changing and drifting apart like everyone else, before we start to grow up. What do you say, huh, just a week?” Taehyung studied them all in turn and saw that his words were starting to have an effect but he wasn’t sure if it was enough. After nearly a minute of silence Namjoon got to his feet too and he placed his hands on his hips.

“I’m in.”

“Me too,” Jimin said as he looked over at them, no doubt not wanting to try standing up just in case he ended up falling off the top of the carriage, “I’m totally in.”

“I’ll do it too, but one condition.” Jungkook pointed at him with the hand that was holding his beer can. “We ditch the last three days of school and start the ‘journey’ tomorrow morning instead.”

“Deal,” Taehyung said with a nod.

“...Sign me up,” Seokjin said after a moment before letting out a soft laugh, “I’ve got nothing better to do I guess.”

“I’m not going to promise anything,” Hoseok said as he paused in the act of applying pastel, “but I might show up tomorrow.” He told him that it was better than nothing and the boy moved his hand to grab the edge of the page as if he was going to rip it out but then he stopped himself. Yoongi was the only one left that hadn’t given them an answer yet and he shifted with a sigh as he pulled his cigarette free and blew a lungful out between his lips. He held the stick just an inch or so away from his mouth as he seemed to think it over.

“If I miss a shift they’ll drop my ass, y’know that? The dishwasher job, the cleaning job, and the one working that shitty little food stall in the market. I’ll lose ‘em if I don’t show up.”
“Then you’ll get better ones, or a better one, rather than working like a fucking slave.” Taehyung said as he looked down at him. The young man cocked his head at this and thought it over for a moment before sighing heavily.

“Fuck it, sign me up too.”
Jungkook fiddled with the back door lock for a moment before he felt the little piece of copper wire slip into the keyhole and start jimmying up and down. Jimin might have told him that a hair slide worked but this little piece of twisted metal was just as good for opening locks and he pressed his face forward so that it was against the cracked and peeling paint and listened to it making the tumblers inside shift up and lock into place. He did this often enough so that he knew exactly how to get the door open, the only trouble was that it took a steady hand and patience and he didn’t have that right now. He wanted to get in and out without any trouble and that was making his hand move a little too much. That, and maybe the can of beer that he had drank at the trainyard. He felt his tongue sticking out of his lips in concentration, the tip curled up slightly to touch his upper one as he slowly fiddled with the lock and then he reached up with his other hand to grab the handle in anticipation. There was a crisp clicking sound as the lock lifted and he twisted the handle hard for the door to swing inwards. He managed to not stumble and land on his face on the kitchen floor and instead stepped inside to shove the piece of wire into his back pocket of his jeans.

“Home sweet home,” he said under his breath as he scanned the interior of the kitchen. Counter free from clutter and low table clear with the cushions placed underneath it neatly. Jungkook sighed and then glanced at the clock hanging on the wall across the open-plan floor above the TV set. It was a little black cat with a swinging tail as a pendulum and it told him that it was 6:30am. He had wandered the streets on the way back from the trainyard to get back to the house and at least it had paid off: for both of his parents were out of the house on their ways to work right now. That meant that he had the house all to himself and he grinned as he crossed the floor to get to the stairs. He didn’t even bother taking his boots off and instead tracked dirt up all of the wooden steps as he went up and went into his bedroom. The interior was clean because he assumed that his mother had gotten tired of nagging him to do it and had done it herself last night, and he stood in the doorway for a moment as he tried to locate everything.

He was going to have to get a shower and changed into something else, pack a bag to hit the streets with and also make some food before he left again. He could always sleep in his bed for a few hours but he didn’t want to do that, so instead he went over to his dresser and got clean underwear out before going into the bathroom. Twenty minutes later he was brushing his teeth in front of the mirror mounted on the wall, damp hair brushed back off his brow and clothing tossed into the basket in the corner of the room along with the used towel. Jungkook patted his face dry and then hunkered down to open the drawers on the little cupboard that wrapped around the bottom of the sink. He saw toiletries and medication inside and he eyed them all for a moment before pulling a tube of toothpaste free that looked mostly full. His own was nothing more than the squeezed up ends of tube and he couldn’t pack that away because it would run out within a few days. It was probably his father’s but the man could always buy more, it was just toothpaste. Then he grabbed a packet of aspirin and hesitated before pulling the bottle of antiseptic free. He doubted that his friends would think enough to bring things like that, for none of them had been out on the streets for days on end except for him and Taehyung, so it was probably wise that he packed them just in case. There was always a chance
Jimin would roll down a hill or two on the road so it was better safe than sorry.

Jungkook went back into his bedroom wearing nothing but his underwear and he started packing the bag first. His toiletries and medical shit went inside an inner compartment and he placed a towel in the bottom too. Then he started pulling out clothes and spreading them on his bed. He needed to pack a few tees but no trousers because he only needed a decent pair of jeans to last him a week. After spending a week on the streets a few months back he had learnt the lesson of packing heavily and uselessly, so it was only the bare basics for him. He slipped into his jeans and then pulled a plain grey tee over his head before eyeing up a hoodie. He might just need one, and it was a safe option. He didn’t have to put it in the bag, for he could always knot it around his waist if it was too warm to wear. So he put that on too and then added the same boots from yesterday, sitting down on his bed to knot the laces securely. Then came the most important thing.

Money.

Jungkook got his wallet out of the top drawer of his bedside cabinet and he opened it to eye the notes. He wasn’t going to put the thing in bag for it was just asking for it to be stolen, so instead he got the money out and slipped it down inside of his left boot. If anyone wanted to try and steal his bag from him then they would get nothing more than some clothes, aspirin and his toiletries. They wouldn’t even get a phone because he was leaving his behind; not wanting to get a thousand missed calls off his parents the entire time they were on their ‘adventure’. Then he lugged the bag up onto his shoulder and went down the stairs at a brisk pace to get back to the kitchen.

He opened the fridge and saw a plastic container with a sticky note stuck to the top, mother’s print neatly across the pink piece of paper. *Jungkookie’s breakfast*, it declared and he grinned at it before pulling the note free, scrunching it into a ball and tossing it across the kitchen. It was the remainders of yesterday’s dinner of course, the one he hadn’t even been in the house for. He pulled a drawer open beside the sink and grabbed a pair of chopsticks before leaving the house again, slamming the door shut as he did.

Jungkook scaled the fence at the back of the house and then started off down the street, opening the container and picking at it as he walked. The noodles had congealed into a cold sticky mess but he didn’t mind because it was better than nothing. As he ate the breakfast he pondered on where to go for the rest of the morning and he was about to toss the container in a trash can when he thought of the subway and he stopped, hand hovering just over the bin. There were tunnels down there, and benches too, he could curl up on one of them and nap for a few hours before hitting the streets to meet the others again. Hell, it was what he did most of the time anyway and at least the subway was safer than a park. He saw the man sitting just a few feet away from the entrance with a guitar that looked busted up, little cardboard box in front of him and a tattered blanket on the ground beneath him; same man as always. He often saw him busking in the area until the police moved him and he knew that the man was homeless because he had sat and spoken to him a couple of times of an evening when he had had nothing better to do, and that was what made him wander over to stand by him.
“Hey, Yoonseok?” The man didn’t look up at him from behind his sunglasses because there was no need to of course, being blind and all. But he cocked his head ever so slightly to let him know that he had heard him.

“Oh, if it isn’t that little punk,” the man said before laughing softly, voice husky. “Running away from home again are you?”

“Yeah, but this time with friends.”

“That’s not running away, that’s going on an adventure.”

“That’s what one of them said too,” Jungkook said before hunkering down beside him. He scanned the street to see a handful of people walking past and not a single one of them were looking at them. The box had just a few tossed coins in the bottom and he glanced at them for a moment. “I don’t have any spare change like usual, but I do have some food and it seemed a waste to throw it away. Do you want it?”

“Punks that go on adventures need all of the food they can get.”

“Oh yeah? Well, punks that play the guitar need it too.” Jungkook reached over to take one of his hands, feeling that his fingers were callused from the strings, and then he placed the container in it. “And this punk has gotta find somewhere to hide from the police for a few hours.”

“I heard that line four is a pretty good one to sleep in, not very busy this time of morning.”

“Line four it is,” he said with a laugh as he got to his feet and spared one last glance over the street to make sure that there was no one watching him. He saw no blue uniforms so that was a relief, and then he shoved his hand in his hoodie pocket to find a couple of coins. He dropped them in the box before turning to go down the subway stairs. The weight of his holdall bag on his shoulder was rather light and he thought that it would make a rather comfortable pillow.
When Namjoon entered the den again it was just after 6am and he could see that quite a few people from earlier were still present but mostly it was new faces. He wasn’t surprised because not many people would want to hang around the building after losing an entire paycheck on bets, so at least that meant he could find a seat to sit on for a moment. He was just checking in to see if his earlier rushed bet had came through even though he thought that it was unlikely. He was either going to be told that it hadn’t and he had lost a couple of thousand won on it, or that he might have won a couple of thousand back. He hadn’t really been paying that much attention when he had just pulled the random odd out and decided to take it before leaving, so he didn’t even recall the full details.

Namjoon sat on a stool that was set along a length of wall, boards above his head covered in fliers advertising nightclubs that were connected to the den, random wanted ads and taxicab service telephone numbers stuck here and there on little business cards. If he looked to his left then he would see a wall devoid of any windows and rather just a few random empty tables and the door that led up into the side alley entrance. To his right were most of the people inside, crowding around other tables to play cards or make bets on various things that were playing on multiple TV screens behind a counter: football, horse racing, boxing matches and more. Directly in front of him he could see small alcove that led into the bathrooms. There was a newspaper folded up on the stool beside him and he picked it up to glance at the pages for a minute or two, not really taking any of it in but just so that he had something to look at. He was staring at the weather section, seeing the same description that Taehyung had told them about back at the trainyard: about how they would be able to see Venus that very morning, and then he heard someone calling his surname and he looked up to glance over at the people on the other side of the room. None of them were looking back so he turned to the paper and that was when he heard the voice calling out again.

“Hey Kim, put that thing down and follow me to the counter.” Namjoon lowered it again to stare at Choi in confusion, brow furrowed, and then he asked him why. “’Cos you got some winnings from that bet.” He stayed on the stool for a few seconds before placing the newspaper back down and then getting to his feet to cross the room with the bouncer. He walked through the gaggle of people with no problem and then dunked under before turning back to him, placing his hands on the wooden counter as he did. He looked down and saw his watch peeking out from under the cuff of his suit jacket.

“420,208₩.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

“That’s how much you won on that stupid bet,” Choi said as he waved the slip in his face. “Didn’t you know that was the odds, huh?”

“Nu…No I was a little distracted.”
“Oh, I thought that gambling was a game of strategy?”

“It is,” Namjoon nodded slowly. “But it’s also a game of pure fucking luck.”

“Yeah, and you got lucky right there I’ll admit it. So, you eyeing up any other bets?” the man asked as he bent down under the counter to not get the envelope out, the one that contained that bundle of notes that he would be slipping across to him in just a few seconds. “Cos you could make a real killing if you bet a bit of that away. Made 420,000 and bet say…120,000 and you might end up walking out with 800,000 or more.”

“I might,” he agreed, “but that money is reserved right now.” The bouncer made a scoffing sound at this and asked him if he really wasn’t to place another bet and he shook his head. “Nope, I already won something, no point in wasting it now. I’ve got plans and I need to get back home actually.”

“Not even a small one, huh?”

“I’m leaving the city for a few days, seems pointless to place a bet and then go running off before I can collect the winnings.” At this remark the bouncer laughed and then placed the envelope down. It was manilla and it was a similar colour to the wooden counter between both of them. “Plus, I don’t wanna bankrupt you guys.”

“Very funny Kim, you should start working the circuit as a comedian with jokes like that.” Namjoon just accepted the envelope and didn’t reply. “But listen, words of advice for you.”

“I’m listening.”

“Where you end up going for the few days, don’t go looking for dens to gamble in, alright? You dunno when a place could get busted, you dunno who’s fixing what and you could get ripped off.” Choi gestured around the room lazily with one hand. “Not every den in this stupid country is supplying cash to the local police chief, you know, so they ain’t all got immunity like we do. I don’t want you hitting up some backwater den and getting your ass caught for placing a 8,000₩ bet on some stupid race. I know you ain’t stupid, but there’s still a chance you mightn’t think.”

“I won’t,” he said with a curt nod. “Like you said I’m not stupid, I’m the great philosopher Kim remember?” The man laughed at the joke and Namjoon spared a final glance over at the TV screens on the wall behind him. Then Namjoon turned on his heel and left the den with the package in hand.
When he stepped out onto the curb he reached into the back of his jeans and then he shoved the envelope down the waistband of them, pulling the lengths of his shirt down to cover it from view. The walk back to his apartment room was going to take some time and he didn't want to carry it just in case someone figured out there was money inside.

After a momentary struggle with his bike Yoongi managed to get it inside the hallway again. In the process of doing so he slammed his elbow into the doorway a few times, smacked the back tire on his knee hard enough to make the wheel start spinning like mad, and he even hit his chin rather hard with the handlebar, but now that the bike was inside he didn’t need to worry. He couldn't possibly leave it outside because he knew that it wouldn’t be there a few hours from now. Even in the most desolate of areas someone would come along and snatch it, and speaking of stealing.

Yoongi sighed and closed the door over until he heard the lock *click* in place. At his feet he could see the scrunched up remains of Taehyung’s message. He should have been surprised that the boy had pilfered even more goods from a handful of stores and yet he really wasn’t any more. If there was an item in the boy’s possession then the odds were that he had stolen it, and if he hadn’t then he had found in on the streets. He claimed that people would be amazed at the shit he found dumped in alleys and skips, things that didn’t need to get thrown away at all and were in amazing condition. He also knew that the boy knew the exact time that a lot of stores got rid of food that needed replacing and that he used that to his advantage. Taehyung never stole food when stuff was tossed like that, when he could find entire pizzas ready for the trash because they couldn’t be sold the next day, boxed goods with several days before expiration replaced by fresher goods. No, the boy tended to lift other items instead, like the beer.

The beer he could taste underneath his cigarettes that he was annoyed with himself for accepting.

Seokjin and Namjoon had declined cans because they were trying to show their disapproval and yet he had traded a stick for one. It was immature for him to have done so but he had really needed a drink. He had been hoping that it would make him feel a little drowsy but it didn’t. Hoseok had also said no and he was still trying to figure it out but he wasn’t sure: the boy had just said that he couldn’t drink. Couldn’t in case his parents found out? Couldn’t because he had suddenly started to dislike the taste of beer over something else? Or because if another reason entirely?

Yoongi suppressed a yawn behind one hand and wandered into the sitting area to lie on the settee, not even removing his boots because he didn’t have the energy. His body was tired, his eyelids felt weighed down as if with cement, and yet if he closed them he would find them opening again several minutes later. He stared up at the ceiling for a moment before rolling onto his side and that
was when the flashing red light on his phone caught his eye.

On the black cradle he could see the light flashing on and off every few seconds and that meant that he had a voicemail, or perhaps voicemails.

Yoongi dragged himself off the settee with a groan and went over to it before pressing the button, hearing the plastic clicking as he did so.

You have three missed messages, a robotic female voice announced before beeping and letting the first one play.

“Min, this is Choi, gonna need to know if you can work the early shift. Got a lot of booked reservations for today and I need the kitchens staffed to full.” Early shift? Early as in when, he thought as he stared at the machine. “Shift starts at 2pm and goes ’til 8pm, call me when you get this message.”

Beep.

“Yoongi, this is Ara calling about the cleaning shift. There’s a free spot just like you asked for and I can fit you in for 9am to 12pm if you want it. Call me and let me know. Bye.”

Beep.

“Min, you need to work this shift tonight for the stall. I know it’s the third night in a row and I know you were supposed to get a break but that bastard Dong keeps dropping and now he’s getting fired. 11pm to 5am.”

Yoongi stared at the machine as the red light stopped flashing, unable to take his eyes off it or even blink. Right now it was nearly 7am, the sun was high in the sky, and he had a shift starting at 9: had one because he couldn’t possibly say no without risking losing the job to a more eager employee. That meant no sleep. He had gotten just four hours over the last three days and there was no way in hell he could do that. He couldn’t work from 9 until 5am the next morning or he would die. He knew that he would.

He thought about how the others had decided to meet up at 1pm and how that meant at least nearly five hours of rest if he could manage to sleep. He thought about how he would be on his hands and
knees cleaning bathrooms during that time, how he would be getting ready to go to the restaurant to stand over a sink until his back ached so badly he couldn’t bend over, and about how he would then be going to work a food stall in the market that would be noisy and packed with tourists wanting free samples of everything.

He picked up the receiver and held it to his ear for a moment, listening to the dial tone droning as he closed his heavy eyes. They would all be waiting for his reply, for him to eagerly accept or even demand more hours just for the sake of it, like he always did. That would please them of course, for they would hardly be losing any money from the pitiful wage he was getting from them all. Yoongi went to put it back in the cradle when he stopped himself and looked at it instead, looked at the little holes in the plastic mouthpiece.

Then he wrenched on it hard so that the wire popped out of the machine and he swung the cord to smack it against the sitting area wall. The plastic snapped from the impact and the inside pieces flew everywhere, little pieces of metal and chips landing on the flooring and skittering away. Then he dropped the rest of the machine on the floor, pulled his knee up, and stomped down hard on it. The heel of his boot cracked it open like an egg and the plastic covering came free to let the rubberised keypad slip out onto the floor. He stomped on it several times before kicking it for good measure and when it hit the wall beside the destroyed receiver he stopped to look at what he had done.

Yoongi had to take several deep breaths because his heart was racing in his chest. There was a sudden surge of adrenaline that lasted for a moment or two before dissipating and leaving him as exhausted as he had been hours ago. When he reached up to brush his hair back off his brow he felt that his forehead was clammy to the touch and the rest of his skin felt that way too.

“Shit…” he said as he stared at the remains of the phone. “I’m gonna regret that.” And yet he felt oddly better for doing it, almost like a great weight had been lifted from his chest and mind.

Then he lay back down on the settee and once again closed his eyes. He had to shower and pack a bag yet he thought he could rest his eyes for an hour or two before then.

The first thing that Hoseok registered when he got back home was the fact that the lights in the sitting area were on. He could see that they were through the window on the ground floor even with the curtains drawn over slightly. That meant one thing: his parents had figured out that he had left his room. Hoseok stopped at the front gate for a moment because he seemed incapable of taking another
step. If they were in that room waiting for him then there was going to be questions and staring and he wasn’t sure if he could handle that right now. He felt the urge to just sneak around to the back and get into his room via the window again using the rope trick that Jimin had taught him, but that still didn’t mean he would get away with it. He had left without telling them and that was going to result in a discussion whether or not he wanted it. In his absence they had likely been worrying like crazy, and the worst part was that he couldn’t possibly blame them for doing so. He had disappeared from his room in the middle of the night after staying in there for such a long time, so naturally they would be worried about where the hell he had gone.

Hoseok felt his teeth gnawing down on his lower lip and it took a great effort for him to stop himself. He had two choices and neither of them seemed to be good. He could sneak back into the house and hide away in his room but eventually he was going to have to face a confrontation anyway, or he could try and get it over with as quickly as possible. But getting it over with seemed to be too intimidating right now. After everything that he had been through he didn’t feel like he had the energy. It had really drained him to leave his bedroom in the first place and the walk to the trainyard had been hell, each step making his head ache even more than it had been though that hadn’t even felt possible. Every time he had stepped off a curb the movement had made a jolt of pain shoot right through his skull and walking on the tracks had been even worse, but not as much as Taehyung’s impromptu piggyback ride had. The pain had alleviated somewhat in the time spent in their company, even when they had been shouting and causing a ruckus, but now that he was back in front of his house he could almost feel it returning; likely because he had his jaw clenched so hard that it was hurting. Even his fingers were rolled up against his palm, nails lightly digging into his skin, and he didn’t seem to be able to loosen them. After a nearly an entire minute just spent staring at the front window he managed to take enough deep breaths to unclench his jaw and then he pushed the gate open slowly, hearing the rusted hinges creaking. He wasn’t sure if his parents would hear it too but in the silence of the street he thought that it might have been possible. He walked along the front path and stopped in front of the house and before he could even lift his hand and knock on the wood it swung inwards. He managed to pull his hand away before he ended up punching his mother in the face and dropped it uselessly by his side.

“Uh-”

“Where have you been honey?” she exclaimed in mixed surprise and relief. “I knocked on your door over and over and I even called your name but you didn’t reply. I could see that the light was on and yet you didn’t reply.”

“I…I went out for a little while,” Hoseok said as he dropped his eyes to his boots. “For a walk like you said. I don’t get out that much and-”

“That’s good dear, but you can’t leave the house and go for a walk in the middle of the night. You do that at 11am, or even in the late afternoon before it gets too dark.” She was leaning against the
door and he wasn’t sure if it was because she needed the support or whether it was just an unconscious thing. “It’s dangerous to be out that late at night and-”

“Where were you?” his father intoned as his head appeared in the hallway, sticking out of the sitting area so that he could look at him standing on the porch.

“I went to the trainyard with my friends.”

“The trainyard? That old abandoned place? What were you all going there for?”

“Because it’s abandoned,” Hoseok said as he looked up at him, looking over his mother’s slight shoulder as he did, “and that means that you can’t get in trouble for loitering or making too much noise.”

“Or doing anything illegal…”

“I wasn’t,” he said without missing a beat, “I was just talking and sketching with my friends.” He really hadn’t done anything wrong and yet he knew that if he got anywhere close to the man he would smell the fragrant and unmistakable scent of cigarette smoke clinging to his clothing, from Taehyung sitting beside him and blowing rings at the side of his head as he had talked. “Venus was out this morning and-”

“I don’t care about Venus,” his father said in a stern voice, “I care about the fact that you weren’t in bed at 1am in the morning and you didn’t come home until it past 4am and that your mother and I have been awake all night worrying when we should have been sleeping for work.”

“I should have left a note-”

“Where? In your room? With the lock still on the door?” Hoseok remembered this and then knew that there was a reason he should have used the window to get in: he had left the lock drawn across his door when he had left earlier.

“Dear, it’s fine now that he’s back home. I just wanted to make sure that he was OK and-”
“Have you been fighting?” his father asked in a shocked voice, and he furrowed his brow before asking him why he had asked that question. “Your face.” Hoseok turned to glance at himself in the small mirror mounted on the hallway wall beside his mother and sure enough he saw a variety of colours all over his cheeks and chin: blacks and purples and blues. He went to touch one of the smears when he caught sight of his fingers and then he held them up to the man.

“It’s pastel, chalk pastel.”

“You spend four entire days locked in your room, only leaving for school and then going right back into it. You aren’t eating proper meals any more. Are you even taking your medicatio-”

“I am,” Hoseok interrupted. “I am taking it but it gives me headaches, that’s why I’ve been staying in my room.” His mother said that he had been so busy studying for the college entrance exams that it was no wonder that his head hurt and though she meant it in a way to stop his father making another comment he found that it annoyed him. It wasn’t because of the exams that his head was hurting because he hadn’t even been studying for them. Studying required energy and he didn’t seem to have enough to get out of bed never mind study. Just holding a pencil seemed too hard for him.

Hoseok decided that now was really the time to go back to his room so he stepped off the porch and went around the side of the house, even when he heard his parents calling out to him. He scaled the small fence to jump into the garden, stabbing pain in his head as a result of the quick movement, and then went over to the rope that was dangling from his window. After a minute or two he managed to wriggle his way to the top and then climb in through the open gap. He made sure to be careful when swinging his legs over the sill as to not kick the potted plants over, and then he got upright and studied his room for a moment. Just a few feet away there was his desk chair, covered with a heavy stack of books to anchor it in place so that he could tie the other end of the bed sheet rope on the leg. Unlike Jimin there was no tree outside his house to utilise, so he had had to be inventive. The flooring was still covered in scrunched up paper balls and he could see the uneaten pot of ramen left on his desk that would now be a freezing cold gelatinous goop. He hadn’t even done much more than eye his wardrobe when he heard footsteps on the stairs and he knew that it was his father coming up them to complain some more.

“Hoseok, son, I want to talk to you. Just me and you, not your mother.” He heard him stopping in front of the locked door. “I’m not going to nag or complain, I just want to talk.”

“About what?” he asked as he moved over to stand on the other side, eyeing the metal draw chain as he did.

“Just talk.” Hoseok let this hang in the air for a moment before sighing and pulling the lock back to open the door. The man looked at him for a few seconds and then seemed to realise that he had allowed him inside the room so he stepped in. His eyes moved to his desk first, to look at the kettle
and pot of noodles, then the floor and the balls of paper, and then lastly the open window with the rope still hanging out of it. “We’re both worried about you Hoseok,” he said in a quiet voice, “because you used to be so social and upbeat and now… now you barely talk or show your face to anyone and it’s a very noticeable change. We understand that growing up is hard, that going from a teenager to a young adult and all of the responsibilities that come with it are hard. It’s not nice, and we know that.” Hoseok listened to this as he crossed the room and pulled a backpack out of his wardrobe, one that was bigger than the satchel he had used to carry his sketchbook in. “I mean, peer pressure and all that…”

“I’m going to stay with a friend for a little while,” he said as he opened it and checked to see that it was empty. “Is that OK?”

“What friend?”

“…Jimin. You know him, right?” He didn’t know if his parents did know the boy, for they had only really seen his friends on rare occasions over the years. “He has exams too so I offered to help him.” Hoseok knew that this sounded like he was changing the subject and he kind of was just so his father would stop talking.

“Well… you do need to socialise more,” the man made a soft noise under his breath as he thought it over. “But your entrance exams are-”

“Are more important, which is why I’ll be studying for them too.” He was already in the act of packing the bag because he didn’t think that he would say no to him if he said something like that. “It’s not that long at all, just a few days maybe.”

“You need to take your medication with you.” He nodded at the question even though it made his head hurt and shoved some underwear inside the bag, folded up to save room. “You can’t forget to take it, it’s important.”

“I know.”

“You weren’t doing anything bad at the trainyard?” Hoseok gestured over at his satchel and after a moment his father went over to get it, opening the bag to pull out his sketchbook. He flipped through to get to the page that he had drawn on and paused to look at it. At least the smears of chalk on his face were easily explained now and he knew that he wasn’t lying to him about that. “I could smell cigarette smoke you see, I still can now and I-”
“It was a friend smoking not me.”

“No drinking?”

“I can’t drink with the pills remember? A few sips of beer and I’d be staggering all over the place, and I’m perfectly sober aren’t I?” The man thought this over before nodding in silent agreement.

“Well, I need to start getting ready for work soon. Might as well go make breakfast.” He was about to leave the room when Hoseok called out to him, told him that he was sorry for sneaking out like that. “Just…just don’t do it again in the future without telling us, OK?”

“OK.” He watched him step out into the hallway and then close the door over and then he carried on shoving things into the bag. Not too many items of clothing or the bag would be too heavy, just a spare tee not including the one that he was going to get changed into after his shower. No spare trousers, his jeans would suffice for a few days as would a single pair of boots. Bundles of socks and underwear, he would pack his toiletries once he had gotten cleaned up. Then he turned to look at the desk beside his bed for a moment, staring at the drawer set under the top.

Hoseok moved so that he was standing in front of it and pulled the drawer open to look at the contents before reaching in to pick up one of the small bottles. A light brown plastic that looked closer to orange when held up in the light, the inside packed full with tiny little white pills. Uncoated, so that whenever he placed one in his mouth he would taste it instantly and pucker his face up. Then he went over to his bed and rifled through to find a small inner compartment before shoving the bottle in there. He couldn’t possibly lose it if it was in there, and it also meant that it was hidden from any prying eyes and fingers that might end up in his bag. It wasn’t that he didn’t trust his friends to not look through there, but he knew how easy it was for one of them to just assume and go looking. Taehyung had a habit of rooting around for lighters or boxes of matches in bags because he thought that someone else had them and he always seemed to simply forget to ask rather than do it maliciously. But he needn’t worry about that now that they were hidden out of sight.

Hoseok patted the compartment just to be sure, feeling the swell of the plastic bottle against the material, and then he decided that it was time to take a shower. The rest of the packing could wait.
When Seokjin pushed the door of his dorm room open the first thing he was aware of was music blaring. With the door closed the sound had been rather muffled but upon opening it he became aware of how terribly loud it was, which was a sure-kill sign that his roommate was inside. Seokjin pushed it open and stepped inside and sure enough Hyosang was lying on his bed on his back, study book in his hands and arms outstretched to hold it up in front of his face. At the sound of the door closing - though he had not thought it possible for him to hear it under the music - the young man looked up at him.

“Oh hey, the hell have you been, huh?”

“Out,” Seokjin said as he went over to his desk and placed his satchel down on it with a sigh. He asked him if he had been at the party and he shook his head and laughed. “That’s not my style.”

“Good thing really, the cops came again and dragged a few guys off for starting some kinda drunken brawl. Pretty sure you wouldn’t have been one of them but I’ve never seen you get drunk and having fun so.” He rolled his eyes at this remark and Hyosang grinned at him. “I thought you’d be at the library like a frigging nerd.”

“I was for a little while, but then the music got on my nerves and I had to leave.” At this he shifted to grab a small remote and then lowered the music to a more reasonable volume. “So I went out for a little while, off campus.”

“How’s the essay coming along?”

“Don’t ask me about the essay!”

“You gonna have nightmares about it? Waking up crying like last night?” Seokjin denied that happening and his roommate snorted laughter. “OK that was a little lie but hey, you didn’t see the way that you were staring at the papers the other day. I thought you were gonna pass out.” He got onto his knees and dragged a holdall bag out from under it and dropped it on his bed too, unzipping it and spreading the material wide. “Uh…where are you planning on going?”

“Why do you ask?”

“There’s no college break, remember? This isn’t high school.”
“Shit, I uh…” Seokjin turned back to him and places his hands on his hips. “I really need to leave it’s an emergency.”

“That is shit,” Hyosang said. “What kinda emergency?”

“Family, you remember that time my father was ill over the winter break and I had to go back to help care for him for a few days?” His roommate confirmed that he did with a nod and he realised that his impromptu and rather terrible lie was actually working on him. “Well, it happened again.”

“He works too hard for his age,” he said and for some reason this made him laugh as he started shoving things into the bag. “I can get in contact with your professor and the student support staff if you want, let them know you had to leave and try and get you an extension for the essay?”

“I couldn’t possibly ask you to do that,” Seokjin said as he glanced over his shoulder.

“Hey, it takes like five minutes, no problem,” Hyosang said as he lowered the book to place it on his stomach and shifted to look at him. “You’ve gotta hitch a ride or subway out to Gyeonggi, you better hurry and you might just beat the morning rush.” Seokjin started moving the rest of his things into his holdall bag and he tested the weight. Not very heavy, he could probably carry it around with ease for several hours at least.

“Uh-huh, sounds like a good idea.”

“I mean, I’d go too. College is important but family more so. Isn’t anything stopping you from doing the essay and submitting it whilst you’re in Gyeonggi, right?” Hyosang had a point and he paused in the act of zipping the bag up to glance over at his satchel. He could see the bulky corners of his notebook sticking through the leather material and his roommate was right: he could at least attempt the essay whilst on this ‘adventure’ as Taehyung called it. Why, they would likely end up crashing in a motel for the evening and he had hours to spare, and how long exactly would it last before the kids got bored and decided they wanted to go back home?

So Seokjin pulled his books free and slipped them inside the holdall before zipping it up and grabbing hold of the handles.

“Just a few days,” he said, “and then I’ll be back.”
“No sweat,” Hyosang said with a smile. “So get the hell outta here.”

From down the street Jimin could see the bed sheet rope lightly dancing in the breeze, hanging from the tree branch right where he had left it. Though his room light was not switched on he could see that the window was open because the sun had started to rise on the horizon even at this early morning hour. When he glance over his shoulder he saw that the bright light from before was still present, Venus as Taehyung had labelled it, and it was so bright that he thought it might be more powerful than the sun itself. That probably meant staring at it for too long was a bad idea and so he pulled his eyes away quickly. The last thing Jimin wanted to do was damage his vision and give everyone even more reasons to joke about him fucking up, but at least that might give him a legitimate excuse for once.

He had managed to roll down the hill that led into the trainyard even though he had ran down that thing hundreds of times. Though that was usually during the day. Maybe he could argue that that was the reason why but it seemed stupid to do so. Jungkook had gotten down it just fine and he hadn’t been able to see too well either, though known his younger friend the boy could probably see in the dark seen as he could do anything else. Of course that had been pretty damn embarrassing, and he hadn’t been lying when he had claimed that it had mostly bruised his pride, for he had most certainly felt more embarrassed at the time it had happened…well, until he had seen the piece of glass stuck into his arm of course. Then it had been more than a simple matter of pride. It hadn’t hurt that much at all really, for he hadn’t even felt the pain of the shard entering his skin, and when Taehyung had finally pulled it free he hadn’t really felt much more than a brief sting, but now it was starting to hurt. It was something akin to a burning sensation and it was even worse when he had to move his arm because he stretched the skin and made the slice open up more. Just thinking about the red slash in his skin was enough to make him feel queasy and so he pushed the thought away roughly. And that hadn’t even been the end, oh no. He had managed to trip on a soda bottle in the trainyard tunnel and even spill half a can of beer all over himself. He was counting himself lucky that he hadn’t somehow managed to fall off the top of the freight carriage during it all, that he hadn’t missed a jump between the containers or that the ladder on the side of the carriage hadn’t decided to come free just as he started climbing back down again. It was a silly thought but one that he couldn’t truly shake, for Jimin knew if something could go wrong it would always happen to him.

He couldn’t fix a car engine, couldn’t open a can of beer, and most of the time he couldn’t even walk without fucking up.

Jimin walked the length of street that ran just behind his house, a thin passage that felt a little more like an alley than a street. People never really walked along it and yet the area was filled with litter, most of it decomposing in piles all over the area. He stopped in front of the small fence that blocked
their garden off, and then he climbed over it just like always. The ancient paint often came free on his palms as he did and when he glanced down at them he saw little specks of white stuck on his skin. He brushed his hands together absentmindedly as he crossed the small garden to get to the base of the tree. The grass was too long and nearly reached his mid-thighs, and he supposed that he should get around to cutting it soon but he knew what would happen if he did. His father would complain about it no matter how good a job he did, so it really wasn’t worth the effort. He got to the base of the tree and reached out to snag a handful of the bed sheet before making his way up to the branch, rapidly shimmying his way up. He grabbed a handful and twisted it around his fingers before reaching up to grab another, holding the lengths between the soles of his boots to stop the rope from twisting him around. When he got to the top he quickly climbed onto the branch and straddled it tightly before looking at the loop. He could have removed it and brought it back inside with him but he was likely going to use it very soon. It would probably be more smart to leave it in place, and so he shifted along the branch before wriggling into his open window. He always climbed in head and arms first, so he reached down to press his palms against the floor before crawling forward so that he could pull his legs in behind him. In the act of getting through the gap his knee slipped and he accidentally banged it rather hard on the floor and the sound was very loud in the silence of the house. As he tried to lower the other one he felt his boot snagging on the sill and he managed to stop himself from smacking his face too.

“Shit,” he muttered under his breath. “That was a close one…”

Jimin got back upright with a sigh and then ran his eyes over his room. Taehyung hadn’t lied with his joke about him needing to clean it. The room was a state and he couldn’t even see where most of his stuff was. Packing a backpack to take with him was going to be real fun. He went over to his closet and managed to find one that looked pretty durable even with the obvious wear and tear that signaled that it belonged to him, so he tossed it onto his bed and set about pulling drawers out and grabbing random things: several changes of underwear and bundled up rolls of socks, clothes that he tossed onto the bed in preparation for changing into after a quick shower. He had just removed his boots and left them at the bottom of the bed and was about to leave his room when he was blocked and he walked right into someone. Of course he hadn’t been looking where he had been going because his mind had been too busy thinking about everything and he stumbled back and tripped over his own feet before looking up to see his father standing in his bedroom doorway staring right back at him.

“What’re you doing, huh?”

“I was, uh, going to get a shower-”

“You think I didn’t know you just got back from sneaking out?”

“Sneaking out? I didn’t-”
“The window is wide open and you’re dressed, that’s means you just got back from sneaking out. Again. Like you think I don’t know you’ve been doing it for months now.” Jimin didn’t look over his shoulder because he knew that he had left it wide open, had left the bed sheet rope dangling over the sill; a piece of guilty evidence. “The hell have you been?”

“I was with friends.”

“You stink of cigarettes and beer, why do you stink of cigarettes and beer?” He didn’t reply and instead decided to study the floor between his sprawled open legs because it seemed more interesting. “You’ve got school in two goddamn hours and you’re out getting drunk? Fucking around with a bunch of hoodlums? Was there girls too, huh? You messing around girls?”

“No, I was just with my friends and-” the first hard cuff around the side of the head, hard enough to make his hair fall forward into his eyes. Jimin bit down on his lip to stop a surprised noise escaping and closed his eyes, “nothing like that.”

“You should’ve been in bed,” his father said, voice not quite a shout but getting there. He sounded drunk, and he thought it was a miracle that he could smell the few sips of beer he had had over the stink of soju on his own breath. “You should’ve been getting up for school so you could try and graduate and actually do something useful for once.” Jimin didn’t say anything in the hopes he would just walk away after the rant. “But no, you’re sneaking out causing trouble just to piss me off.”

“I wasn’t causing trouble I-” thump. Another hit harder than the first, this one enough to make him physically flinch. “Dad I just-”

“You break the goddamn car engine.” He made a grab for his shirt collar but he managed to move back and not get caught. “And rather than try and fix it you go out and get drunk!”

“Fix it?” Jimin asked in dumb confusion. “How could I fix it, it was busted up and-”

“Because you broke it messing around!”

“I didn’t mean to! I was trying to help!” He grabbed onto the bottom of his bed and dragged himself to his feet. “It was an accident.”
“Oh, I know all about accidents,” his father said as he leaned against the door frame, “seen as you are one.” Jimin stared at him and he could feel his lower lip quivering, a burning at the corners of his eyes that was starting to spread across his lids and threatening to spill. He didn’t want to cry in front of him because he knew how that ended; it ended with him calling him all kinds of names and hitting him a few times and he had had enough of that for a lifetime.

“I was just trying to help,” he said in a quiet voice. “Why do you always have to bring me down when I’m just trying to help?”

“Bring you down? What’re you talking about? You bring your own self down by fucking everything up!” Jimin dropped his eyes to his shoes and sniffed hard and the sound made the man scoff. “Oh here come the tears, the little baby tears, because you can’t handle being told the truth.”

“I’m not crying!” Jimin argued, even as the first pathetic tears rolled down his cheeks.

“Crying like the baby that you really are and- where do you think you're going?” His father must have only just noticed the bag on his bed, the one he had turned to and started shoving things inside again. He ignored him and roughly wiped at his cheeks and he sniffed back more tears. “What’re you packing that bag for, huh?”

“I’m leaving.”

“Leaving?”

“I'm going out with friends,” he said and he managed to get through the door because the man had wandered a few steps inside of his room and was no longer blocking the gap. He went along into the bathroom and knew that he didn’t have enough time to clean up so he just grabbed his toiletries instead and went back into the room. He dumped them inside and was about to zip up the bag when his father started talking again.

“You’re not going anywhere, you've got school to go to. Hurry your ass up and get ready, you should be in your uniform by now already.”

“I told you, I’m going out with friends.” He dragged the zip along roughly and it made a harsh noise as it fastened the bag.
“You’re going to school and that’s final. Now start getting ready before you wake your poor mother up.” Jimin slung the bag up onto his shoulder, grabbed his boots and crossed the room. He tossed them out and heard them landing in the grass and he had just stuck his leg through the open window when his father shouted. “If you leave this bedroom and run off with your good for nothing friends then you better not come knocking on my front door again, you hear me? I won’t let you back in!” He stopped at looked at him and he could see his face contorted in anger, mouth set in a harsh scowl and eyes practically burning in his skull. “You leave right now and that’s it, you’re not a part of this family any more! You better not come back home!”

“…OK.” Jimin said before rapidly climbing onto the branch and getting down the rope as fast as he could. He was scared that the man would run over and dive through the window to try and stop him, that he would run downstairs and out the door to drag his ass in and really start whaling on him, so when he got to the bottom he snatched his boots and started running as fast as he could. He didn’t know where he was going, all he knew was that he couldn’t stop or else he would regret it. He had to carry on running until the house was no longer in sight and he couldn’t hear his father’s voice in his head any more. The bag jostled on his shoulder and the boots dangled from his fingers by the laces, bare feet padding on the paving flags as he raced along the street.

At some point he realised that he had started crying and yet he didn’t reach up to brush the tears away this time.

Taehyung walked up the stone steps that led up the building and then along the walkway to get to the other side. It would take him a few minutes to reach the floor that his room was on and so he took the steps in threes to try and speed the process up. His backpack shifted on his back with each movement, lighter now that he had gotten rid of a few cans but still containing some weight. Taehyung started humming under his breath as he got to another set of steps and went up them too. When he reached the top and went along it he saw a small gaggle of kids hanging around, middle school or maybe first year high schoolers. They weren’t in uniforms and they were all huddled together and as he passed a few of them glanced at him. He didn’t look back.

He went up the last set of steps and when he got to the door that was his room he stopped for a moment before going to the low stone wall and glancing over the side. The sight showed him several crisscrossing walkways and the occasional kid moving around down below. Bicycles left outside doors, litter and empty bottles piled up against the walls because everyone just kicked it aside rather than clean it up. There were even some clothes drying on the thin cables that ran between the floors.
Taehyung dragged his eyes away from over the side of the wall and then he turned back to the door. White paint that was cracked and peeling, kick marks on the lower half from countless pairs of shoes. Then he reached forward and rapped his knuckles on the wood.

“Knock knock princess,” he called. “Can I come in?”

“Uh…just a minute!” He heard scrabbling noises on the other side and then a moment later. “OK!” Taehyung reached down and twisted the handle before stepping inside the room. The interior was tiny, nothing more than a box room in which two beds had been forced inside along with a small broken dresser. There was a lamp missing a shade in the corner because the bulb on the ceiling no longer worked, a faulty circuit, and most of the floor was covered in random shit. He saw clothing, torn blankets, food packet wrappers and newspapers. On the left bed he saw her sitting on the very end, and there was a cat in her arms.

“Soobin…” he said in a quiet voice, “where did you find that cat, huh?”

“I’ve been feeding her,” the little girl said in a matter of fact tone, “and then I thought that I’d adopt her.” The black persian had amber eyes and a red collar around its fluffy neck that showed it was probably already owned but he didn’t say anything.

“Feeding her with what exactly?”

“Cereal, she likes the milk.”

“Oh, I see.” Taehyung slipped his backpack off and dropped it on the dresser and unzipped it to remove the last few beer cans out so he could get the other items free. “Breakfast.”

“I’ve already had breakfast.”

“And what was that?” He asked. Soobin replied that she had finished the last of the cereal, dry without milk and rather stale. “This stuff is a lot more filling.” He held a packet of kimbap out to her and she placed the cat down to come and collect the packet. The cat jumped up on the windowsill, which was mostly rotten wood, and eyed him with disdain. Her head just reached his waist in height and she pulled the plastic wrapper open to stuff a roll in her mouth. “Better, huh?”

“Mmmhmmm.” She nodded and he reached down to wipe a blob of rice away from the corner of her
“Tae Tae is going away from a few days,’kay? But don’t worry I got you covered.” He grabbed the bag and hunkered down in front of her to pull more stuff out, placing the skateboard aside. “Cash. Where does the cash go?” Soobin explained that it went under the false bottom of the dresser drawer that he had made. “What does the cash go on?” Food, because the rent had already been covered last week and if anyone came looking there was none to be collected. “What store?” The market just beside the apartment block, which meant that she wouldn’t have to wander anywhere too far. “Last but not least, the key.”

“Here,” she slipped a necklace out from the front of her sailor dress, “and another is in the plant pot over there.”

“Good girl,” he said as he ruffled her hair. “You’re smarter than me.” He handed her the rolled up wad of bills and she went right over to the desk to slip it under the false bottom. Taehyung watched her and then proceeded to collect random clothes from the floor, mostly underwear and socks that he shoved into the backpack. He popped the tab of one of beers open and he heard Soobin making a disgusted noise under her breath. “What?”

“That stuff is stinky.”

“Huh, kinda is and it doesn't taste that nice either.” Taehyung took a deep swig of it and then placed it on the dresser.

“My uncle used to drink that stuff.”

“Mine too, and my mommy and daddy too. My whole family drank the stuff and I guess I’m just like ‘em.” He sighed and shoved a bundle of mismatched socks into the bottom of the bag. “It runs in the family.”

“You shouldn't drink that stuff.”

“I’ll stop it,” he said as he crossed his fingers behind his back childishly. “For you princess.” He rifled through the bag to check how much room he had. Not much, he could fit his toiletries in the side compartments but that was it. He barely had enough room to shove a spare tee in. Taehyung slipped his denim shirt off with a sigh, shoving it into the bag, and then pulled his tee off to replace it with a fresh one before adding another to the bag. He didn’t have time to try and get a shower at the
block at the bottom of the complex. He would have to wait and see if they ended up in a hotel tonight. He pulled a hoodie on instead and Soobin collected his worn clothes before shoving them into a black bag, new kimbap piece in hand. “I’ll be a few days, ‘kay?” He reached over to ruffle her hair again. “You can do well without me, yeah?”

“Yup,” she said without missing a beat, “I’ll be good.” When she nodded the scar on her neck rippled slightly.

“Stay outta trouble, don’t leave after 5pm no matter what unless it’s an emergency. Room 103, go there if you need help. The lady there will help you, alright?” She nodded and he felt her hair between his fingers, silken. “Lock the door all the time.”

“I know, I know, I’m not a baby!” Soobin declared, despite the fact she was just six.

“No, you’re a princess,” Taehyung said before bending down to kiss the top of her head. She beamed at him and he left the room and pulled the door shut tightly behind him. He waited for a moment to hear her slipping the lock across and then he started off along the walkway. He slipped his toothbrush and paste out along with a bottle of water and proceeded to brush them quickly, spitting the water and foam into the gutter as he passed. Then he shoved it all away before rooting inside for the other money he had left over. He flicked through the bills before shoving them down inside his boot and fixing the bag back up on his shoulders.

“Time to go on an adventure.”
Bad Influence

The sound of a phone ringing woke him up and it took him a few minutes to figure out that it was actually in his dream and not reality.

As with most mornings Yoongi awoke with a sudden jerk that made him roll off the settee. In the process he not only smacked his head on the flooring, which wasn’t even hardwood and rather just plain concrete, but he also managed to slam his elbow hard on the broken coffee table. Before he could even open his eyes fully he heard the loud thud of the contents sliding off to hit the floor and he knew one thing.

He had finally broken the goddamn table.

For a few minutes he didn’t want to move, to open his eyes or even breathe if it was possible. He knew that if he did he would catch sight of the time on the clock across the room and he would see that not even an hour had passed since he had been able to drift off. He would much rather pretend that it had been an entire day even when he knew that he was lying to himself. He could still hear the faintest sound of a telephone in his ears, a blaring rather than a ringing noise, much like a high-pitched siren that got right under his skin and set his teeth on edge. What had he been dreaming about? No matter how hard he tried to think about it he couldn’t seem to figure it out. Dream or nightmare? Nothing but blackness punctuated by the noise of the stupid phone? If a phone was ringing then it was a nightmare, that much I fucking know… Yoongi sighed heavily and finally opened his eyes slightly, peering up at the ceiling and seeing that the room was well lit; morning sun coming in through the window behind him. It looked bright and he could picture the sky outside devoid of clouds, a vivid blue in which the sun would hang overhead all day long. No threat of rain at all, not with the summer just now in full bloom. Where were the others right now? What were they doing? They had probably gotten everything ready hours ago and yet here he was: not even dressed and without a bag packed. What had he been doing during the early morning hours since he had gotten back home? Well…

Yoongi turned his head slowly to observe the sight beside him. The coffee table had always been broken since he had owned it, but his thrifty trick had kept it stable for quite some time. Yes, a hard knock usually made most of the contents fall off because it was rickety, but it still kept standing in sheer defiance of any stubborn slams from his shins or boots. He would just need to right it once more and stack everything back onto the top, yet not this time. This time the poor coffee table was well and truly dead. The left leg in front of him, the one he had wrapped twine around several times tightly, was no longer wobbly but otherwise stable and straight, instead it was now on such a crooked angle that he could see a snap clean through the wood, no doubt from where his flailing elbow had struck it a moment ago. He could see jagged little edges sticking out, lighter wood visible
under the dark coating revealed like teeth behind lips in a smile, and when he reached up to touch one of them he had to pull his finger away for fear of a nasty splinter. The lengths of twine that had been wound around the other legs securely was now hanging loose, not straight like a ruler but rather drooping like a hammock. It might be able to be repaired someone but right now he didn’t have time for that. He didn’t even have time to move the shit that had fallen off it anywhere else. He was counting himself rather lucky that none of it had landed on him, or more specifically on his head. The near mountain of newspapers and wrappers, food containers and cans, had spread across the floor but he could see the telephone directory just a few inches away from the tip of his nose, having fallen to land open on the floor, pages bent under its weight and spine folded inwards slightly. Had that landed on his head then there would have been two outcomes: a crushed and gushing nose, or he’d have been knocked unconscious, which right now sounded rather preferable to being awake.

There was an open, half-empty packet of cigarettes by him so he reached over to retrieve them, thumbing the top to check the contents: eleven little filtered sticks in two neat rows. Yoongi lifted the packet to his mouth and pulled one free using his teeth before tossing the packet onto the settee and shoving his hand into his jeans pocket to get his lighter. He sat up slowly and held the flickering flame to the end of the cigarette, taking a quick drag as the tip smouldered to help it alight and breathing the smoke out his nose as he did. He flicked the lighter close again with a quick flick of his wrist and then took a deep pull on the cigarette, holding it in his lungs as he reached up and got the stick between his middle and ring finger. He was in the act of blowing the smoke out of the corner of his mouth when he caught sight of black wires snaking along the floor and he stared at the sight across the room dumbly, cigarette hovering in front of his slightly pursed lips.

The shattered remains of his telephone lying all over the floor.

Yoongi lowered the cigarette slowly as he ran his eyes over the device. He could see a gaping hole in the back where the receiver should have been plugged in. He located it a few feet away, or most of it anyway. It was no longer looked like it had yesterday and it barely even resembled a phone anymore. The receiver should have been a rectangle of plastic with rounded curves connected to the cradle by a kinked black wire, but now it was nothing more than half a chunk of plastic attached to the wire, metal and chips inside visible, the rest of it scattered across the floor in large shards. One such piece was just by his boot and looking at it reminded him of the bandanna on Jimin’s arm, Namjoon’s lucky bandanna covering a gash in his elbow from a sliver of glass that he had landed on and gotten stuck in his skin. The cradle was on the floor rather than the little table by the TV it was usually on and it wasn’t even plugged into the wall either; no flashing lights to alert him of missed messages. Black plastic cradle shattered in several places, a deep enough chunk missing in the top so that the rubber keypad was on the floor rather than inside of it. He couldn’t take his eyes off the piece of white rubber for some reason and it was only a chunk of ash falling onto his jeans that brought him back to reality.

“Shit…” He brushed it off roughly with his other hand and saw that it had actually burnt a slight hole through the fabric, enough so that he could stick his little finger through it. The edges were stained black from the ash and his skin looked rather pink through the hole. Yoongi lifted the cigarette and took a drag on it before looking back at the phone. It looked like it had exploded and he knew that was not the case. It had not exploded at all but rather he had, and his anger had resulted in the device
being broken to nothing but chunks of plastic and torn out wires. He was lucky that that was all that he had broken in the moment and rather not the TV too. Well, if he ignored the destroyed table just beside him that was. He closed his eyes as he reached up to rub at his brow as he sighed under his breath again. He felt like he was getting a headache and that would just make everything even better. He spent a minute or two just sitting there with his eyes closed and then he turned to look at the clock. 10:30am. Three and a half hours of sleep. That was nearly the amount he had gotten over the last week and it was better than nothing, even when he felt terrible.

What would Ara be thinking now, now that he hadn’t called or showed up for his cleaning shift that he had practically begged for? Had she and the others tried calling him only to get a dead line? Nothing but a droning noise in the receiver like a flurry of bees until they put it back in the cradle… or smashed it to shit just like he had?

Yoongi took a pull on the end of the stick and thought about what had happened last night, the meeting in the trainyard that had went into the early morning hours. He had been thinking of going back shortly after leaving the house because he had thought it rather childish to go running off like that. A couple of years ago he would have raced there without a care but that was not now. Back in high school he had had both the energy and the time for such things, would have ran there on foot just because of the others, but now he could barely talk himself into doing it. Too many shifts, no spare time, too tired physically and mentally to travel half of the city, there were just too many things stopping him from being able to meet them. But then he had thought of them all and what they were also going through and he had forced himself to go to the trainyard, pedaling his bike a little faster. Taehyung, who was on the streets more often than not when he wasn’t holed up in some shitty hostel room that he rented with cash saved up from selling stolen goods; Jimin who needed time away from his useless father just so he could breathe without risking a slap across the back of the head; Jungkook who liked to run away every now and again and was always out looking for trouble of some kind; Namjoon squirreling away money to try and keep their combined dream alive; Seokjin and college and all of the hell it brought with it, and Hoseok…

“The enigma,” he muttered as he flicked ash on the coffee table mountain, breathing a plume out of his mouth as he did so. What exactly was going on with the boy? He at least had an idea about the rest of them but not him, he was still figuring him out. He knew that it wasn’t just the entrance exams that were affecting him, not at all. There were certainly more things going on with him and it wasn’t very easy to ascertain. He used to be talkative but not that much anymore, just like he didn’t seem to have the old energy he used to possess, and the sudden change of disposition was almost frighteningly obvious; another person entirely. Yoongi thought about how Taehyung had spoken about going on an adventure before it got too late: “before we all start changing and drifting apart like everyone else, before we start to grow up,” he had said and his wide eyed expression had been believable enough; perfect amounts of horror and yet resigned belief.

The boy was right. They were already starting to change and before the end of the year… The kids would stick together of course, and Hoseok might hang around for another year or two of college until he found his own clique. He and Namjoon had a partnership going and Seokjin always made sure to call every few days. It was only natural that it happen and yet he didn’t want anything like that happening just yet. If left without guidance the kids would end up on the wrong road. Taehyung
was already well on his way there, high school dropout runaway with nothing but the clothes on his back and a head packed full of stupid ideas, and Jungkook was getting there too. If left with them both Jimin would fuck up his only chance at a decent future; the boy really needed the graduation to his name and he couldn’t afford to fuck it up.

Yoongi was so into his thoughts that it took him a moment to realise that there wasn’t much more than the filter left of his cigarette. He stared at this dumbly before stubbing it out on the broken table and getting to his feet with a groan. His muscles were stiff from work and lying on the settee rather than a bed and he took a few seconds to stretch, rolling his shoulders and bending to touch his toes and twisting to loosen his lower back. He saw that his jacket was on the arm of the settee and so he picked up his packet of cigarettes and shoved them into the pocket for later. Then he dropped to his knees and hastily removed his boots before carrying them upstairs. The steps were bare wood against the soles of his feet and he took great care to not step on any of the protruding nails as he ascended them. Onto the first floor and down the hall to the bedroom. He tossed the boots at the bottom of his bed and then wondered where the hell he would have left a bag, one large enough to fit stuff in. He checked under the bed to no avail and he eventually located one at the very back of his closet. It was a khaki canvas bag with tan details and handles, an army duty style holdall with various compartments. He hadn’t used it in so long that it was covered in a fine layer of dust and he carried it over to his bed to unzip it. Interior empty. He had a handful of receipts and a train ticket shoved inside one of the compartments, which revealed to him that he had last used it a few years ago, back in high school when he had lied about sleeping over at Namjoon’s and had instead traveled half of the country to see a hip hop concert with them all, one Jungkook had barely managed to get into. Thirteen year old face but height back then still enough to work in his favour much to Jimin’s annoyance. He blew most of the dust free and wiped the remainders off roughly, grimacing at the sensation of it clinging to his fingers.

He needed to pack it and pack it well, so he grabbed a stray pen from his bedside drawer and scribbled on the back of his hand until he saw ink. Then he sat down and used the back of one of the receipts to jot down a list. After a minute he stopped and looked at it: money, underwear, spare tees, medication, toiletries, electronic items AND chargers. Yoongi tapped the pen against his lower lip as he eyed the list. The boy might have claimed that they wouldn’t need money but they most certainly would, for food and accommodation. They weren’t going to be rummaging in trash cans and sleeping on benches. Underwear and spare clothing was obvious but not too much. They would manage to find a way of cleaning what they had so he thought that packing lightly would suffice and save him from lugging a heavy bag around all day long. Medication meant the contents of the bathroom cupboard even if it seemed stupid. If any of them got violently ill from eating badly cooked instant shit rather than real food then they would thank him for it. Toiletries and a decent-sized towel could be packed after his shower, but he would make sure to wrap them up in a plastic bag just in case they leaked to save any accidents. Lastly his phone and the charger, just in case. He didn’t want to imagine an emergency situation but it was smart to do so. He made sure that that was everything he would need, reading the list over once or twice and waiting to see if anything would come to mind, and when he was certain that it was he left the receipt on his bed and got to his feet to go into the bathroom.

He turned the shower on and listened to the water making its way up the old pipes before it burst out of the head. It was freezing cold of course, just like always, and so he left it to heat up as he got undressed. When he stuck his hand under the stream he found it was warm but not hot and he
He wondered if that was the best that he was going to get for the day. He stepped into the bathtub but it actually managed to get close to hot as he started getting washed at least. Whilst he let the stream wash shampoo suds out of his hair he thought about that stupid phone again. As he lathered the shower gel and let it cover his skin he knew that he had made a massive mistake by breaking it like that but he knew that it was too late to be thinking things like that now. He splashed his face with freezing cold water and then brushed his teeth whilst looking at his reflection in the mirror over the sink, the one that had a hairline crack across it. Puffy eyelids that made him look half-asleep even when he was wide awake, dark smears underneath, lips a little chapped from his chewing on them between cigarettes. He looked like shit and it was fitting because he felt like it too.

Yoongi went back into the bedroom and got dressed without much care, plastic bag of toiletries and medication left beside the holdall for packing. He slipped into a pair of jeans and shrugged a white cotton tee over his head, ruffling his damp hair as he did. The weather from the window did look pretty hot so there was no point wearing anything else. He spread the towel out on his bed and then placed underwear and socks on it before rolling it into a neat little bundle that went into the holdall. Then he added a layer a tees and a pullover just in case the weather turned for some reason. No extra shoes needed and just his boots, which he got on and knotted tightly. Then he opened the plastic bag and sorted it out. Boxes of aspirin and cheap painkillers, allergy tablets and other random boxes went in an inside compartment along with a roll of bandage. It wasn’t like he was packing with Jimin specifically in mind but it would be a lie to deny that his little accident last night had nothing to do with it. That done he tied the bag and shoved it inside before grabbing his mobile and charger, wallet and holdall and moved downstairs.

He charged the device whilst making breakfast, placing it on the settee with his bag and jacket so that he couldn’t possibly leave the house without it. Yet as he attempted to eat he found his eyes being pulled over to the broken phone on the floor, plate on the counter in front of him being picked at rather than actually consumed. He felt guilty, the remains a constant reminder of his temper tantrum and he barely took more than a few mouthfuls of rice before finding it sticking in his throat and refusing the go down. Rather than trash it he shoveled the kimchi, rice and tofu into a container which he secured in a layer of saran wrap and then shoved into his bag.

“Waste not, want not,” he muttered as he unplugged the phone and placed the charger into one of the outer compartments, snaking the wire up tightly around the plug head. His phone and wallet went into his jeans pocket with his lighter and he grabbed his jacket before knotting it around his waist tightly. Satisfied that he had everything prepared he left the house after locking it up securely. Then he took a deep breath as he hefted the bag up onto his shoulder and he started walking down the front path to get out onto the street.
Yoongi felt his headache starting to alleviate not long after he left the house and he wasn’t surprised at all because he felt that strange sense of weight being lifted once more; no stress dragging him down like usual. Why, he practically skipped down the streets and would have done so if he was certain that people wouldn’t stare at him if he did. Not that he saw many people for quite some time walking on the streets anyway, rather just passing in cars or buses, bicycles or motorbikes. That was because most people were in school or work of course, like he and the others were supposed to be and yet weren’t. He would have been on his way to the restaurant right now after finishing cleaning up an office block and being stared at by workers like he was some kind strange animal rather than a fellow worker, yet here he was strolling down the streets of the capital with a cigarette between his lips and a holdall on his shoulder that was theoretically his home right now: a mobile home with nothing more than the bare basics in it.

The meeting place was a coach station not too far from the trainyard, one that only really had coaches that traveled out of the city rather than around the inner centre. The same one that they had used to get to the concert those few years ago. He was going to walk there because the weather was pretty good, bright but not too hot, a slight breeze out that played with his damp hair as it dried. He thought that they could travel quite well in this weather, wherever they were travelling of course, for he didn’t have a clue.

“Knowing Tae it’ll be fucking Timbuktu,” Yoongi said before laughing to himself. He didn’t particularly care where they ended up truthfully, which he found rather strange too. He usually liked to plan in advance and stick to a schedule, like his list from earlier, and yet he found that he didn’t really care at all. Was that the joy of an adventure? Not knowing but rather discovering? The answer was likely ‘yes’ but he wouldn’t admit this to his friends for it sounded rather silly; something Jimin might declare before the other kids poked fun at him. But he still felt that little rush of excitement regardless, that sensation in the pit of his stomach he hadn’t felt in quite some time. He slipped the stick free and tapped ash off the end of it before sighting the first familiar flash of white across the road: a school uniform shirt. A mixed bunch of high schoolers ditching a class or two outside a convenience store, pullovers knotted around their waists just like his jacket, cellphones and soda cans in hand, lollipop or ice cream sticks in the corner of mouths. Had they ever ditched that way? For as along as Yoongi could remember when their gang had ditched it had not been with candy and soda in hand, it had been with cheap booze and cigarettes always, even when the kids had been in middle school. That probably explains a lot...he thought whilst picturing Taehyung pulling a six-pack of beer out of his backpack last night. He watched them as he passed and then carried on down the street, eyes finding his boots more interesting. With each step his laces bounced and he saw that one of the loops wasn’t very secure at all.

When he next looked up he saw the coach station coming up, the large glass and metal building visible from quite some distance because it reflected sunlight annoyingly back at his eyes. He squinted unconsciously and tossed the used-up butt of cigarette aside so that it landed in the gutter. He could see a small gathering of mostly black clothing on the steps and he knew exactly who it was. Who else would be dumb enough to wear black in his heat? His friends of course, without a doubt. He didn’t bother counting heads and would instead see who showed up when he got there. One of them must have noticed him walking up to the building because he heard a loud yell, undoubtedly Taehyung, and he lifted his hand and offered them all a slight wave.
“You sleep in?!” the boy joked and he couldn’t see his eyes rolling from their distance at the comment.

“I wish!” he called and this elicited a few laughs. He got closer and squinted to see exactly six heads and that meant that he was the last to show up. A quick glance at his phone showed him that he was early, twenty minutes or so, and yet he felt strangely late. They were spread out on the stone steps on three levels: Jimin, Seokjin and Jungkook on the steps at the bottom, bags on laps hugged against chests or shoved under their legs out of the way, Hoseok and Namjoon were perched on one of the concrete walls beside the steps, legs stretched out in front of them, and Taehyung was standing on the top of the steps so that he could pace back and forth. He took a moment to observe them all as he crossed the last stretch of street.

Namjoon was sitting on the edge of the wall and his bag was just below his feet, which were bobbing in a random rhythm so that his tan Timberland boots hit the wall with a soft thumping noise. Jeans and a white tee under a black hoodie, he also had a baseball cap beneath the hood to block out the sunlight and hiding his dyed blond hair from view. Sitting behind him so that he was sideways on the wall, legs shoved out in front of him so that he could rest his feet on the steps, was Hoseok. He had not expected to see him today, that he wouldn’t show up or that he would have at least been late, yet he was there and judging from his expression he looked rather serene. Thin black coat shrugged down off his shoulders to puddle around his elbows, grey tee on show that revealed his slight frame, he had a bottle of water in hand that looked nearly empty. Jungkook was on the right of the steps and he had his knees drawn up to rest his elbows on them, black hoodie on but hood down to not hide his face, just the neckline and hints of a logo on his tee visible over his holdall bag. On the left was Seokjin, own bag tucked behind his legs neatly out of the way, same clothing on as yesterday that revealed that he had been in a rush. Between them both was Jimin and he also hadn’t changed. He wondered if he had even packed before noticing the backpack on his lap. At least he had been smart enough to wear a polo shirt, the others were going to get overheated rather quickly in this weather. Taehyung was just like the rest, black hood up hiding his dark brown hair, white cotton tee that wasn’t stained or had little holes in the hemline for once, backpack stashed against the wall beside Hoseok’s boots. Yoongi walked right up to the bottom of the steps and stopped to look at them.

“Good afternoon children,” he remarked.

“And the elderly,” Jungkook added before their eldest friend shifted to glare at him.

“What, we jumping a coach now?"

“You wish,” Taehyung retorted, “’cos that means you’d get to sit down all day but no.” He bent down to retrieve his backpack and shrugged it on as he bounded down the steps. “We’re walking.” At this a few of them made theatrical groaning noises. “’C’mon babies, off we go.”
“Where exactly would that be?” Hoseok asked as he got off the wall, backpack swinging from his free hand. He didn’t wince so perhaps that ever present headache had finally left him in peace.

“Wherever I go.”

“Follow you?” the other boy raised his eyebrows at this and snorted. “That’s a bad idea.”

“You’d follow me to the end of the world, stop talking shit.” Taehyung got to the bottom of the steps and threw his arms out dramatically. “You’d follow me into a volcano, to antarctica, to outer space.”

“One of us is talking shit and it isn’t me,” Hoseok muttered and the boy offered him a wink as he stepped around Seokjin to get to the bottom and stand on the sidewalk too. Yoongi glanced at his face and then asked him if he was okay and he returned his gaze. “Yes, I’m good. Are you?” He just shrugged at the question but it seemed a good enough answer for Hoseok.

“Where exactly are we supposed to end up if we follow you?” Namjoon asked, also jumping down off the wall and stretching to grab his holdall. Taehyung said the outskirts of the city. “OK, so how do we get there?”

“We go…thatta way!” Taehyung whirled on his heel and pointed at the wide stretch of road beside them and they all glanced in that direction for a few silent seconds. “C’mon, get off your lazy asses.” So their three other friends got off the steps, shrugging backpacks on or grabbing holdalls to carry, suppressing yawns behind hands. “We’ve gotta cover enough ground today to at least be outta the city and there’s lots of miles to go, Seoul is fucking huge.” Taehyung started walking at a brisk pace and Yoongi held back for a few seconds to let the others fall into formation: Jungkook and Jimin right behind, Namjoon and Hoseok winging on the sides, and lastly Seokjin, so he decided to walk alongside the young man.

After a few minutes of walking he glanced over his shoulder and the coach station was getting smaller and smaller with each passing second. He could see people through the glass walls moving about like ants and when he looked back Taehyung had raced quite a distance ahead of them. The street they were on was wide and both sidewalks were narrow, only them moving on the right and the left side completely empty of life. There were barricades running the lengths and after a while shrubbery started to grow on the side, spindly branches bare of blossoms and rather just tiny little buds, unruly bushes with wrappers and plastic bags tangled within, and dry, pebbly-looking soil. The boy jumped up and snapped one of these branches free before waving it around like a conductor’s wand. He could picture him prodding them with it should they all start bickering or refuse to believe some shit that he had said. It was so fitting in fact that he was waiting for Jimin to get poked with it first. He slipped his phone free to check the time: 2pm. He didn’t have a clue what was going to happen but he decided to just go with it.
The road they were on got narrower and started to run into a freeway of sorts, one that had concrete walkways with high metal fences that blocked them off from the thin roads. Mostly trucks passed them by, backs massive and no doubt packed with goods, engines rumbling and throwing great plumes of acrid smoke in their faces. Yoongi pulled his cigarettes out and watched Jungkook climb onto the narrow edge of one of these fences, quickly walking along it as sure as a cat, bag not seeming to slow him down at all. The kid was too confident sometimes and he briefly wondered when his first real fall would happen before laughing under his breath. The answer was never, for the boy was just too damn lucky. Seokjin looked at him as if curious and he just waved it off, it wasn’t important. He pulled the stick free to dab ash on the paving flags when Jimin decided to launch himself up and copy his actions. He scrabbled to grab onto the chain link fence and twisted to start bounding along behind him. The boy actually managed quite a distance before his ankle started wobbling and it seemed that he was going to fall. Yoongi pictured him toppling over the side and falling the few feet to land on the solid concrete ground, hitting it hard enough to split his head open or break an arm, and he shoved the stick back in his mouth hastily and was about to dart over and try and grab him when Jimin recovered and carried on running along, letting out a little shocked laugh as he did.

“Get down from there before you break your fucking necks!” Yoongi shouted.

“The square’s here!” Jungkook declared as he near skipped along the narrow ledge without a care.

“Rather be a square than dead!”

“He’s just pissed ‘cos he’s too short to get up there,” Taehyung said as he turned and pointed the branch right at him. “Am I right?” Yoongi glared at him before shoving his holdall into Seokjin’s arms and pushing through to get to the side of the road. He grabbed hold of the ledge and dragged himself up, tee lifting so that his stomach brushed against the side of the concrete. He got to his feet and hastily wiped his hands before taking a few steps along it. It was a lot more narrower than it looked and his boots stuck over the edge by an inch or so. “Didn’t even need a boost!” He flashed the boy the middle finger and carried on walking at a quicker pace. It wasn’t that surprising at all that Jimin had stumbled and nearly fell off it now that he was up on it too.

“Is anyone hungry?” Seokjin asked suddenly as he shifted his own holdall onto one shoulder to carry his more easily. At the remark several of them made noises in agreement. “Alright, who didn’t eat breakfast today?” Namjoon, Jimin and Hoseok raised their arms in agreement as if answering a teacher. “Tae?”

“I had a liquid breakfast!”
“Beer is not a suitable food group!” The boy carried on walking without looking back but he could picture the wide smirk on his lips. “No breakfast and it’s past lunch already…why am I stuck with a bunch of children?”

“Children need a good mother,” Namjoon explained. “Especially these ones.”

“Says the guy that also didn’t eat breakfast,” Hoseok retorted with a grin.

“OK, fine, how about this? First place we find that sells food, it’s on me.”

“So, if we find a steakhouse,” Jimin said as he spared a quick over his shoulder back at them. “You have to pay for it?”

“Yeah, but do you think we’ll find somewhere that sells something like that out here in the fucking boondocks?” Namjoon asked.

“Only if it serves roadkill steaks!” Jungkook called as he reached the end of the ledge and jumped down with a loud thump. The joke made them laugh and then Jimin stopped on the ledge for a moment, eyeing the sizable gap in the concrete that the other boy jumped across rather easily a minute. He was no doubt aware of the fact that he would fall and so he got down too. Yoongi took advantage of this sudden height and decided to jump down onto him. The boy stumbled but managed to not trip as he wrapped his arms around his neck in an impromptu piggyback ride. Seokjin complained about carrying his holdall in an obnoxious whine.

“Sergeant Jungkook!” Taehyung intoned in a dramatic voice. “Go and scout the enemy lines for supplies before our men starve.” He even did a quick step like a marching soldier for effect.

“Aye aye Sergeant.” The boy saluted before racing along the last stretch of the walkway that looked to lead back onto a main road.

“Lieutenant!” he shouted back. Hoseok scoffed at this childish display and so Taehyung turned back and pointed the branch at him, held in both hands like a mock rifle. “Do we have a mutiny on our hands, men?”

“Honestly, I’d prefer you just shoot me now so I don’t have to play along.”
“I’ll see you get a good funeral soldier.” He puffed his cheeks up and did a pretty damn good impression of a machine gun letting rip, even shaking the branch for added realism. Hoseok threw his hands up and declared that he was dead in the most flatter tone possible and it made Yoongi snort laughter. Taehyung lifted the branch to mime blowing gun smoke from the barrel. “Who’s next, huh?”

“Does a Lieutenant shoot all of his men?” Seokjin asked sarcastically.

“When they’re as fucking useless as you all are…” he grinned at them widely even when they glared back.

“You wouldn’t get very far with no army,” Namjoon explained slowly, as if talking to a child, “and you need an army to win a war.”

“No shit Sherlock,” Yoongi muttered down Jimin’s ear, hearing him giggling at the remark.

“I’m a one man army, motherfuckers.” Taehyung pointed the branch at them both. “This soldier’s cracking up, going nuts on us men, I think he’s next.”

“I’m carrying a wounded comrade and you’re gonna shoot me?” Jimin asked incredulously, as if this was reality and not one of the boy’s stupid games. Taehyung asked what was wrong with him, narrowing his eyes suspiciously as he did.

“I’m sick,” Yoongi replied.

“Sick with what?”

“Sick of your bullshit.” Taehyung mimed slipping a grenade out of his jeans, lifting it to pull the ring free and then tossing it. Yoongi climbed off his friend’s back and caught his holdall when the other young man tossed it at him.

“Three men gone, whatever happened to brothers in arms, huh?”
“You keep killing them,” Hoseok said as he rolled his eyes.

“Three? Wait, I’m dead?”

“I just used a grenade Jimin, what the fuck do you think?” The other boy grumbled in annoyance and they had just got to the end of the walkway when Jungkook came running around the corner and announced that there were food stalls a few streets down from their location. “Dead men don’t need to eat…” Taehyung paused for a moment before racing down the street as quick as a flash, practically leaving a dust cloud in his wake.

“I’m not chasing after him.” Yoongi declared but then the others darted off after him and left him behind. It was too hot for anything even close to exercise so he just shrugged his bag up onto his shoulder and kept walking at the same pace. He exited the walkway and stepped onto the street to see a busy main road directly in front of him.

The view to his left showed apartment blocks and the one to his right was more road and a scattering of buildings and abandoned lots with fences cutting them off from the street. The gang were all nearly at the end of the first street and he could hear them hollering from his distance; Jimin in the lead with the two other kids on his heels. By the time he caught up with them they were already sampling whatever they could get their greedy hands on. Yoongi studied the buildings as he passed and saw a used car dealership with a dozen vehicles in the adjacent lot, a tea house that advertised discount herbal fusions, a rather seedy-looking tattoo parlor, and a hairdressers with a closed sign in the window. The food stalls were around a bustling area that looked to contain some houses and a building that could have possibly been an elementary school, judging from Namjoon’s joke about Jungkook being late for class. He strolled the length of the packed stalls, not really looking at the food because he wasn’t particularly hungry. Taehyung was in the midst of inhaling a kalbi skewer, stick and all, when Hoseok pointed at the fast food joint across the street and next thing he knew the kids were racing across the busy street towards it, regardless of the beeping car horns.

“Uh…wait, so how much was the- shit,” Namjoon groaned as he tried to remember how much food had been samples and how much had actually been bought.

“Go and get ‘em,” Yoongi said. “I’ll pay here. You and Seokjin stop ‘em before they order the whole fucking menu.” He pulled his wallet out of his jeans and asked the woman on the stall what the tab was.

“12,190₩.” That was cheaper than he had been expecting so he handed her a note and accepted the change before shoving his wallet back into his jeans. He crossed the road after the two other men and pushed the door open to see that boys already taking up two tables: Taehyung with near a hundred straws in front of him so that he could tear off the paper wrappers and try and spitball Jimin in the side of the head.
Yoongi watched them messing around and he knew that it was going to be a long fucking day.

He eyed the twin single beds in front of him and then realised that this meant that he might just need to share. That wouldn’t have been the most comfortable outcome but at least he was with Namjoon and Seokjin and not the kids. He could hear them even through the walls of the hostel and in his mind he saw them bouncing on the beds to try and touch the low ceiling, fighting with pillows, breaking the tiny bathroom sink. The thought was enough to make him feel exhausted. How could they be so goddamn energetic all day long, from sunrise to sunset, hollering and racing around without needing naps of some kind like other children? He couldn’t even imagine being able to do something like that, but all of the sugar and calories from their lunch had likely helped; milkshakes so thick that they had been like sludge through the straws, fries that had also doubled up as projectile missiles and burgers that had looked to have been fried buns and all. Yoongi had eaten just a few fries here and there and drank a soda to combat the heat but not much more, still remembering the remains of his breakfast in his holdall bag, but the others had happily finished all of the food without complaint. He had watched Hoseok doodling on napkins with the blunt remains of a pencil he had had shoved into his coat pocket and had figured out that the boy had left his sketchbook at home. He had had to resort to covering several napkins in various sketches: drink containers, a rifle much like the one that Taehyung had been pretending to shoot them all with, and what other items he had lain his eyes on; stopping only to grab a few fries every now and again before going back to it. But they had gone right into the trash with the containers and little leftover chunks of food. If he had forgotten that then had the others neglected to pack things too? Things that might be important?

“I’ll take the settee,” he said as he tossed his holdall on a coffee table just in front of it, this one not broken or rickety like his, “cos I likely won’t sleep tonight anyway.”

“Well,” Namjoon said as he eyed it, “not on that thing you won’t.” Then he grabbed one of the pillows off the bed by the window and tossed it on the settee. “That’s better…kinda.” From the other room came a comically loud thud and then a chorus of laughter. “We’re gonna get kicked out at this rate.”

“I’ll go tell ‘em to settle down,” Yoongi said as he unknotted his jacket and then slipped out of his boots, “or I’ll kick their asses.” Seokjin was pottering around in the small bathroom and he exited their room to step outside. There was a lot directly facing him mostly empty of cars and a concrete path that lead around the side of the building. On the horizon the sun had already set an hour ago, the sky a mottled deep purple and hues of blue that covered most but a few little stars that had managed to shine through the light pollution and clouds. At the end of the lot there were a few streetlights and
they glowed a warm orange that matched the headlights of passing vehicles on the road. The path felt cool and gritty against his bare feet and he walked the short distance to their room before opening the door, which they hadn’t even locked yet.

The interior was a mess, clothing strewn everywhere, pillows and sheets not even on the beds properly, and he stared at it before looking at the boys. All of them in various states of undress excluding Hoseok who was presumably in the bathroom because he was nowhere in sight, wet hair present that showed that at least Jungkook had already gotten cleaned up.

“Children,” he said in a low voice, “if you don’t behave then Seokjin’s gonna come and babysit your asses.” Jimin declared that he wasn’t sleepy, not even a little. “Yeah, me neither but I’m not trying out for the Olympic Gymnastic team in my fucking underwear.” At this remark he heard quite a few sniggers. “We’ve been running across the city all day after you. Tomorrow we carry on, you’ll need all of the sleep you can get, alright?”

“What happens tomorrow exactly?” Hoseok asked as he emerged from the bathroom with a towel around his shoulders, damp hair brushed back off his brow. The room went silent for a few seconds before Taehyung explained that they would end up outside the capital and that they needed to walk to the next city, maybe three or so hours on foot if they followed the road and didn’t wander.

“See, a busy day. So at least try and get some sleep.” Yoongi eyed the messy room for a moment before stepping out of the doorway and closing it again. When he went back into their room Namjoon was sitting on the edge of the bed by the window glancing over takeaway leaflets that had been in a bedside table drawer with bored disinterest on his face. “They’re getting cleaned up and will hopefully rest but the room is a real mess.”

“Joonie?” Seokjin called from the bathroom before sticking his head through the open doorway.

“Yeah?”

“Did you see the store just at the end of the block before? The one with the neon tubes in the window?” He confirmed that he had with a nod. “Do you think that they would sell detergent?”

“Washing detergent? For clothes?” Yoongi asked as he glanced over his shoulder at him. He was wearing a white vest and underwear and had presumably stepped out of the small shower, toothbrush in hand. He said that that was exactly what he meant. Namjoon shrugged and said that it probably did, seen as it had advertised 24/7 service and goods.
“See, I was wondering about the clothes situation and…there’s a tub in the bathroom. Clothes could be washed in it and left to dry, like tees and underwear. Saves running out after three days and getting in trouble, right?”

“That’s a good idea actually, the kids probably only packed another pair,” Namjoon remarked with a laugh before getting to his feet. “I’ll go check it out.” Yoongi offered to go with him but he just shook his head. “Nah, you get cleaned up instead it should only take me a couple of minutes.”

“OK, but take my jacket, it’s pretty cold out there.” He handed him it and the young man slipped it on over his hoodie with thanks before crossing the room and leaving. He heard the door closing with a clicking noise and he scanned the walls of the room for a moment. Floral print paper that looked out of fashion five decades ago, cream carpet underfoot that would stain easily, twin beds with plain white cottons pillows and covers and nothing fancy-looking at all. Then he went into the bathroom and glanced over that too: small room with a toilet in the far left corner, sink beside it and a tiny tub with a shower attachment fitted to the right with a window above it which was currently closed. Even Yoongi would have to fold his legs to fit inside the tub. No mirror on the wall but rather a different style of outdated floral wallpaper. “Remember the joke earlier about a mother?” He asked as he studied the back of his friend’s head.

“They’ll thank me when they’re not wearing three day old underwear,” Seokjin said and he heard the sound of tap water running. “But Tae’s probably used to it by now.”

“That kid’s never gonna go back to school, y’know?” Yoongi leaned back against the door frame and folded his arms over his chest. “He thinks he’s got some system going on and he can keep going forever but he can’t. Only so much stealing you can do before you get caught, if that’s all he’s been doing.” The other man asked him what he meant by this and he thought the question over for a moment. “He’s making money somehow, right? How’s he still got that shitty hostel room if he ain’t?”

“Good point,” Seokjin agreed with a nod. “I didn’t even think of that.”

“I’m scared that the kids will copy him,” he said quietly, “Jungkook’s already getting there and he’s smart, I don’t want him to waste his brains in some last ditch teenage effort to piss mommy and daddy off, y’know?” His friend finished brushing his teeth and turned around to study him. “They think that we dunno what it’s like but we do, we had all of that shit too but you were smart enough to go to college unlike me and Joonie. I want ‘em to look up to you, not me. I smoke too much, swear too much, shit…” Yoongi laughed softly under his breath and the corners of Seokjin’s lips twitched slightly. “This adventure…it’s a good time to try and get ‘em back on track, right? Get the teen bullshit angst out?”

“Just don’t tell them that it’s bullshit,” he said with a grin, “or they’ll throw a real tantrum.”
When Namjoon returned several minutes later Yoongi had just gotten out of the shower and had
been in the act of slipping his jeans back on, knowing that he wouldn’t sleep for an hour or three at
least and therefore not wanting to walk around the room in his underwear. It turned out that the store
did indeed sell detergent and he had a white plastic bottle with a lilac lid in hand. So Seokjin
disappeared to go into the other room to no doubt clean up their messes whilst their friend finally got
to go into the bathroom and clean up. Yoongi lay down on the settee and stared up at the cracked
ceiling, the material slightly itchy against his bare back. He listened to the shower running and the
muted voices from the other room as he closed his eyes with a heavy sigh. His muscles were tired
from walking for hours on end, mostly the backs of his knees, and he just wanted to sleep but it
wouldn’t come to him. He rolled onto his side to stare at the door in grumpy annoyance and after
awhile Seokjin reentered the room with the bottle of detergent in hand.

“I left Jimin to do the scrubbing,” he announced as he locked the door securely and dropped the keys
in a bowl just beside it on a low table, “because I imagined Tae starting a splash fight and blinding
one of them with the stuff, and I thought it really wasn’t worth the risk at all.” Yoongi made a noise
in agreement and his friend studied his expression silently for a second. “Are you OK?”

“No, I think I’m a fucking insomniac.”

“Trouble sleeping?”

“Just a few hours these past few days, less than eight in four days I think, I can’t remember.” Seokjin
grimaced at this and he could only laugh in response. “Pretty much, I was hoping an entire day of
walking might help but no…still feel like I’m not gonna sleep.”

“Instead of thinking you can’t,” Namjoon said as he stepped out of the bathroom and went over to
the bed, slipping a white tee on over his head as he did that matched his hair, “try thinking you will,
the power of positivity and all that.”

“Positivity my ass,” Yoongi muttered and his friend rolled his eyes at this.

“Just try.”

Yet an hour passed and still no sleep at all.

Yoongi knew that the other two were asleep from listening to their breathing, and judging from the
silence from the other room the kids had too. Either that or they were just whispering instead. He had tried counting the lumps in the ceiling plaster in the hopes that it would make him drowsy. He closed his eyes and counted an entire platoon of sheep in his head but it didn’t help in the slightest.

Eventually he moved over to sit on the windowsill and open it a crack so that he could smoke the last of his cigarettes. Just three. Yoongi ran his thumb along the filtered butts before deciding to go to the store at the end of the street and buy some more. He fished the room keys out of the glass bowl and unlocked the door before locking it securely again, shoving the keys back into his jacket pocket. He passed the other room and tried the door to see that the kids had finally locked it, the handle just budging in his grip but not opening, and then he crossed the lot to go across the street. The store was lit up neon tubes that advertised 24/7 service in green and red and when he got closer he looked through the windows, peering past the fliers and ads tacked to the glass to see that it was practically empty save for a few browsing customers.

Yoongi pushed the door and went right over to the till because that was where the cigarettes were kept, on high shelves out of reach of any wandering kid hands. He bought a packet without needing to flash I.D., all the while imagining that his sleep-deprived face likely made him look forty, and then he left again to head back to the hotel. There were a few cars rolling down the road so he crossed it in a slight jog before they could blare horns at him, and he walked the length of street to get back to the hostel.

Door locked once more, boots cast aside by the table and seated on the windowsill, Yoongi lit his first cigarette and took a deep pull on it. He leaned back against the slight jut of wall the frame was set into, one leg cocked up on the sill and the other hanging over the side, and let the smoke out in a sigh. The view outside was nothing more than blackness with flashing lights every few seconds: reds, blues and yellows of neon signs, building windows and the headlights of passing cars. He couldn’t see a single star from his position, not like they had back in the trainyard. Bright glowing Venus like another sun. He pulled the cigarette free and wet his lips before sticking it back into the corner. Like those kids outside the convenience store with lollipops this morning, like Taehyung with his pursed lips around the soda straw. He hadn’t been lying when he had told Seokjin that he was a bad influence: a chain smoking, nervous wreck that couldn’t even sleep anymore because his brain wouldn’t let him, instead thinking of the most stupidest shit possible to keep him wide awake.

Yoongi fiddled with the lighter between his fingers, flicking it open and then snapping it shut again with his thumb, the little flame flickering as it did. A miniature Venus in the palm of his hand. Before he could stop himself he lifted his free hand up, palm and fingers held flat, and held it a couple of inches above the flame. Then he lowered it slowly, feeling the air get warmer and warmer until his skin was baking. He pulled his hand away just an inch above it and flicked the lighter off again. But a few seconds later he had it back open and flicked on again. This time he quickly waved his hand over the flame. A sudden but faint heat against his palm. Yoongi breathed smoke out of his nose, cigarette bobbing between his lips as he did, and repeated the action, more slowly this time. The sensation was a lot stronger and he pulled his lips back with a hiss. It was closer to the feeling of being pricked with tiny needles, making his palm sting first before starting to burn. A dab of ash fell off the end of the stick to land on his arm and he brushed it away brusquely, seeing the smear against his inner elbow that left a pinkish mark behind. Yoongi slipped the cigarette free to see it was nearly at the end of the filter, nothing more than a slight bit of white. He glanced over at his sleeping friends, burrowed under the covers so that just hair on the pillow or a slight hint of face was visible, and then he looked down at the stick.
The end was smouldering, little flashes of orange visible amidst the black and grey ash.

It would be hot.

Very hot.

Yoongi held it between his thumb and forefinger and then hovered it above his elbow. It would be just like the lighter, a slight sting of pain and nothing more. It might just leave a mark behind too, something a little more painful than a patch of pink skin. Maybe a welt.

“I’m a real bad influence,” he muttered before reaching over and stubbing it out against the windowsill instead.
Seokjin was woken up from his slumber to the sound of heated yelling and for a moment he couldn’t seem to open his eyes or even move. He was tired, physically drained after nearly eight hours on the road with just a single stop for food, pissing in the slightest growth of bushes they had been able to find because there were no toilets out in the middle of freeways and desolate roads leading out of the city. He could hear the noise and yet it was all muffled as if his head was packed full of cotton wool, could see nothing more than blackness behind his eyelids as he tried to force them open. Something was happening outside, happening on the stretch of concrete path that ran the length of the building like a sidewalk, but he didn’t know what because he couldn’t make the words out. Were the other patrons in the hostel arguing over something? Was the owner forcibly evicting someone? He didn’t know and to find out that meant that he needed to wake up fully.

He rolled onto his side before sitting up slowly, legs swinging over the edge of the bed so that his feet brushed against the itchy carpet pile. His eyelids felt swollen but he managed to force them open and stare across the room. The first thing that he noticed was the small window on the wall facing him, open a crack to let the gauzy curtains dance lightly from a soft breeze. It brought in the scent of gasoline and the sound of droning traffic and shouting voices: shouting male voices from what he could discern. On the sill he saw the stubbed out remains of three cigarettes, undoubtedly the result of Yoongi finishing a packet in the hours that he hadn’t been able to sleep. There might be a few on the carpet too but he hoped that that was not the case. He dragged his eyes away to look at the other bed and saw Namjoon curled up tightly in the covers, bump hinting that he might have his knees drawn up against his chest in the foetal position. He could see his arm and he realised that he was pressing his pillow over his ears to try and block the noise, white lump wrapped around his head like an over-sized set of earmuffs. Seokjin reached up to rub at his heavy eyelids and then turned his head to look across the room. Small coffee table with Namjoon’s hoodie strewn over it, one arm hanging over the side so that the cuff was on the carpet, half-empty bottle of water that had dents in the plastic and tears in the paper wrapper around the body. The battered settee was just behind it and he saw Yoongi lying on it. He was on his back but twisted to the side to fit on comfortably; legs tucked up on the cushioned seat and head turned sideways against the pillow their friend had given him. His jacket was over the upper half of his body like a blanket and one arm was dangling over the side so that his fingers were grazing an inch or so off the floor. He was asleep for once, the sound didn’t seem to have disturbed him yet, mouth open in a slight pout as his eyes slowly moved under his closed lids. He eyed his arm and saw that the young man was a little too pale, thin and frail-looking so that his elbow joint looked too large between his fore and upper arm, so that the curve of his wrist bone protruded sharply from his skin. He had noticed him barely eating anything yesterday, just picking at the fries and sipping at a soda every now and again rather than eating a proper meal. The leftovers he had packed in his holdall, presumably the remains of yesterday’s breakfast, had been given to the kids last night to save it being tossed into the trash.

Yoongi had called himself a bad influence but he really had no idea. Seokjin thought that he was his
own worst enemy and that he had a much worst influence on himself than the kids. Working three jobs without a decent break, up to eighteen hours a day spent slaving away and the remaining six spent travelling between locations and attempting to sleep, smoking himself into a near coma over the entire duration. At least he seemed to have had some rest for today and hopefully he would eat more than a dozen fries over the hours on the road. He was going to make sure that he did and-

“...fucking hands off him!”

The voice caught him by surprise and Seokjin cocked his head. It sounded like Jungkook’s voice but why would he be shouting like that? Surely he had just misheard it? But it was enough to make him get to his feet and cross the room to get to the door. He went to open it when he remembered that it was locked and he stopped twisting the handle to stare at the lock. The keys. There was the table just beside the door and he reached over to snatch them out of the little cut glass bowl before shoving them into the keyhole and twisting hard. He stepped outside and felt that the concrete underfoot was cold and dusty, and then he caught sight of something moving quickly out of the corner of his eye and when he turned his head he saw a blur of someone darting back into the room beside their one: the unmistakable sight of Jungkook racing back inside.

Seokjin stared at the space he had been occupying just a second ago dumbly and then someone emerged again. He recognised the man as the owner of the hostel, the one that had been on the desk yesterday evening. He had looked rather pleasant, smiling at them from across the stretch of wood as they had paid for the night and gotten the keys, but he didn’t look very nice this morning. He was yelling back at one of the boys inside the room and then he dragged one of them out. He saw that he had a handful of Jimin’s hair snagged in his fist and the boy was trying to free himself, own fingers pulling at his hand to try and loosen his grip so he could wriggle free. Seokjin watched this all and then decided that it was high time he stepped in to control the situation.

“Excuse me, excuse me.” He took several quick steps towards them both. “What’s going on?”

“What’s going on,” Jungkook shouted as he reemerged, shrugging a tee on over his head and still clad in his underwear, “is this asshole just barged in and demanded money before throwing our stuff everywhere and assaulting Jimin!” The boy pulled down on the ends roughly and then pointed at the man. “Let go of him!”

“Pay up first and then we’ll talk.”

“Pay? Pay for what?” Seokjin asked as he stared at the owner.
“The room for the day. You paid an evening charge, you should have been out of here three hours ago.” The man let go of Jimin and he stumbled back to fall on his ass. A quick glance across the lot showed people staring at them from cracks in doorways, enjoying the better entertainment than the TV sets in their rooms could possibly offer. He was briefly glad that Yoongi wasn’t awake because if he had seen him treating the boy that way then there would have been even more yelling and roughhousing, and there was already enough as it was. “I knocked on their door ten times and I was polite. I asked them about the money and these punks started swearing at me and refusing to pay.” He placed both his hands on his hips and stared at him. Despite their differing height Seokjin suddenly felt a lot smaller in his presence, like a kid rather than an adult. He heard someone moving in the doorway behind him and he assumed it was Namjoon. “Therefore we have a problem.”

“Kids,” his friend pushed past him to go into the other room, “hurry up and pack all of the shit away, we’re leaving. Come on.” Seokjin shifted to look inside and saw the room in disarray, pillows, covers and even bed sheets all over the floor. Taehyung was attempting to shove clothes into holdalls and backpacks with eyes that looked glued shut, and Hoseok was sitting on the end of one of the beds in his underwear, rubbing at his head as if massaging a headache away, lips pulled in tightly in a thin line. Namjoon went over to help him to his feet before turning to exit the room again, to no doubt go back into theirs and start packing their stuff up too. Hoseok just stood by the bed dumbly before bending to retrieve his jeans and struggling to get into them. Seokjin dragged his eyes away again to look at the owner, aware that he needed to reply but struggling to do so.

“Uh…” Jungkook more or less dragged Jimin upright by his upper arm and roughly flattened his messy hair. “I’m sorry. We didn’t know the rates. I thought we bought them for the morning hours too I…we were so tired that we must have made a mistake and-”

“I tried explaining,” the man interrupted, cutting him off without even so much as a blink, “but they weren’t listening. They were cursing and spitting, they were threatening.” He thought about how the boy in front of him had been dragged out of the room by his hair and wondered who had really been threatening who. “And the room still needs to be paid for.”

“Fuck you,” Taehyung called from the room, “you ain’t getting shit!”

“You little brat!” The owner went to storm back inside the hostel room but Jungkook stepped in his way to block him, a few inches taller and glaring down at him unflinchingly. “You think you’re all so smart but you’re not. You’re goddamn high schools kids, at least a few of you, and you’re ditching class to cause trouble like a bunch of delinquents. I can smell booze and smoke, what would the police think if I called them right now, huh? Ditching school and underage drinking, they’d drag your asses into the back of their squad car and you’d be sleeping in cells tonight.”

“Look, we’re packing up. We’re going to leave, no more trouble.”
“Good, get the hell out of here but you need to pay up first. Two minutes, then get the hell out.” Seokjin told the boys to get their stuff and then hastily went back into the other room. Namjoon had managed to pack quite a bit away and he emerged from the bathroom carrying newly washed clothing from last night. He dropped them on his bed and started sorting through and shoving them into holdalls. Yoongi was sitting up on the settee, running a hand through his hair as he grumbled under his breath.

“He’s threatening to call the police,” he said as he scanned the room for any items that might get left behind in their rush. “And he wants money.”

“Don’t pay him,” Yoongi muttered. “Let him call the fucking cops. We’ll just blow this place before they show.”

“You’re still asleep,” Namjoon retorted as he packed underwear away. “I’d like to see you run. Jin help the kids, I’ll get this all packed up no problem.”

“OK…sure.” Seokjin stumbled back out of the room, aware of the fact he was only clad in a vest and underpants and yet that didn’t seem important right now at all. Just getting out of here before he heard the warbling sirens of a squad car was the really important thing. He felt the owner’s eyes burning into his back as he went past and into the room, a weight that he wished he could just shrug off. He had only just helped shove the last items away messily when he heard the man yelling again and they had no choice but to evacuate, carrying armfuls of clothing and bags, boots dangling from laces looped between fingers. Taehyung tossed the key at him and it landed at his feet and then the two men stepped out of the other room too.

“What was the rate?” Seokjin asked as he fumbled for his wallet, having to check his jeans pocket which should have been on his body and not folded over his forearm. He heard his friends mumbling about this but he ignored them, and when the owner told him 42,608₩ they did more than mumble, they started complaining loudly. He counted the notes out and got a little change from the inner compartment before looking up at him. “You promise not to call the police?”

“I won’t, I just want you out of here.” So he shoved the cash into his hand and then crossed the lot to get around the front of the building. Then he tossed his holdall on the curb and started getting dressed regardless of staring eyes from passing vehicles. As he knotted his boots up he glanced over his shoulder to look at his friends. They were just standing around in a mixture of confusion and lethargy; in nothing but underwear or tees, jeans in Yoongi and Hoseok’s case.

“Come on, we need to get dressed and leave.” He finished knotting his laces and then shrugged his black coat on over his vest because he didn’t want to start rummaging through his bag right now.
“But…we didn’t even get washed up,” Jungkook said dumbly.

“We’ll figure that out *after* we get dressed, there are people staring, come on.” After his insistence they all started to get dressed, shrugging into tees and jeans, sitting down on the paving flags to fasten up boots too. Seokjin turned to look across the road and scan the sights in front of them. Cars, buses and trucks rolling down the wide road, rumbling and honking and spewing fumes out into the air, dissipating before getting anywhere close to the vivid blue sky. There were a handful of clouds near the horizon, just visible over the tops of buildings, sun hidden behind a bank of them. When he looked back he saw Taehyung knotting Hoseok’s laces for him so that he didn’t need to bend down, still squinting as he held a hand up against his brow to make a temporary visor.

“Wanna know something funny?” Yoongi asked, knotting his jacket around his slight waist snugly. “I’m not wearing any underwear.” For a moment they all just looked at him and then Namjoon sniggered and seconds later they were all laughing. “Seriously,” he said with a wide grin, “no underpants, going commando.” He reached up to rub at his eyes before getting his cigarettes out, shoving one of the sticks into his mouth. “Well, today got off to a good start, huh?”

“That asshole,” Jungkook muttered, “was lying about everything. He didn’t knock at all, he unlocked the door with his keys and started shouting at the top of his lungs like a fucking lunatic. So me and Tae, we started shouting back and then the bastard skull-dragged Jimin outta the room and—”

“He did what?” Namjoon asked, eyebrows grazing against his hairline comically as he pulled his hood up.

“Dragged him outta the bed,” Taehyung said as he pulled a toothbrush out of his backpack. “By his fucking hair even though he wasn’t doing anything, wasn’t shouting or arguing and just sitting there. Right?”

“Uh…right,” Jimin agreed as he dropped his gaze to his boots because they were all staring at him. Yoongi pulled his unlit cigarette free and turned to look back at the hostel.

“That fucker,” he spat, “I’m gonna knock his fucking teeth in and- Joonie, let go of me.” But the other young man told him that it wasn’t worth the trouble now, after everything, and after a few more grumbled curses and threats he gave up trying to free himself.

“Robs us of a couple of thousand won, treated Jimin like shit and didn’t even let us get dressed
before kicking us to the curb.” Taehyung shook his head and started brushing his teeth vigorously, swilling his mouth out with water from one of their bottles. Then he went over to the entrance window of the building and spat the mouthful at it. Foamy water and spit ran down the glass.
“C’mon, let’s leave before he finally decides to call the fucking cops anyway.” He grabbed his backpack and shrugged it up onto his shoulder.

Several minutes later they were no longer on the block with the hostel though it was still visible over their shoulders, the wide lot more than anything else. They had all copied Taehyung’s idea to brush their teeth, spitting the foamy mixture down gutters rather than windows to piss people off, but they could do no more than splash water on their tired faces until they managed to find bathrooms of some kind to get cleaned up in. They actually stopped after a block or two so that they could sort their bags out, all using a low brick wall so that they could dump them on it and sort through the contents. In their haste to leave they had balled up clothing messily and that made their bags lumpy and difficult to carry. Namjoon pulled his cap free from the inside of his holdall and shoved it on Hoseok’s head just so that he stopped squinting, the brim at least blocking most of the rays for him. The boy thanked him quietly before fixing it in place so that his hair wasn’t hanging down in front of his eyes.

“You really thought he was gonna call the cops on us, huh?” Yoongi asked as he took a drag on his cigarette and blew it out again in annoyance. Seokjin folded a tee and placed it inside his holdall before saying that he had thought it. “He said that so you’d give him the cash.”

“He probably did, but no point in thinking about it now. We’re not in the hostel so it doesn’t matter.”

“I think that you did the right thing,” Jimin said softly. “We really could’ve gotten in trouble if he did call the cops.” The boy shrugged his backpack on and he eyed one of the straps to see that it was frayed terribly and that it wouldn’t last much longer. Seokjin made a mental note to find a safety pin of some kind in the future and then lifted his own bag off the wall. “Ditching school. Tae’s booze-”


“Just the cans left from the trainyard,” the boy said with a shrug, “they’re all gone now so no need to worry dad.” Taehyung started walking down the street and they all quickly finished fixing their bags to follow after him. Seokjin collared Jimin before he could race off and waited until the others were a few feet ahead of them. He saw the perplexed expression on the boy’s face, hair still a little messy from where the owner had grabbed it earlier.

“That’s all he had, right? Just a couple of beers?”
“Yeah,” Jimin said with a nod. “Shared them with me and Jungkook ‘cos Hoseok didn’t want any.” He cocked his head slightly, very puppy-like, and then asked him why he had asked. Seokjin just shrugged the question off and glanced at the road beside them, feeling his eyes on him for a moment longer. “You’re not mad, are you?”

“Over beer? No.”

“Over everything,” Jimin said in a quiet voice, and when he looked back over at him he saw from his face that he felt bad about the incident at the hostel even though he had no need to: the way he nibbled on his inner lower lip and how he reached up to fiddle with his backpack straps. He briefly remembered that the boy was so used to being blamed by his father for every possible thing that it was no surprise that he was already blaming himself for this situation too.

“Not mad,” Seokjin replied as he reached over and attempted to flatten his messy hair. “Just tired and kind of hungry.” After putting up with his patting for a few seconds Jimin bounded off to catch up with the other kids at the front and he watched him go all the while thinking about what Yoongi had said just last night about bad influences.

Only when they were passing a freeway on their way out of Seoul did Yoongi decide to announce that it was 1pm and that was when it hit them that they were in for a long day of walking to get into the next city; stomachs empty, running low on water and fucks to give. In the near hour it had been since leaving the hostel there had been little talking and rather just solid walking, passing abandoned and soon to be converted buildings, desolate streets on which their footsteps echoed, random rundown housing areas or the occasional store that looked a few days away from being closed for good. Seokjin couldn’t recall ever being in areas like this before even with all of his life so far spent in the city. It was likely because he didn’t stray very far from the bustling centre and when he did it was always by way of vehicle: subway or coach, or in the passenger seat of someone’s car. On foot everything seemed much more different, more visible to his eyes than a soft blur of grey and concrete out of the window beside him. He realised that people lived this far out and just how very large the city really was, and that made him wonder how far the next one was. Whether it would be just a few hours on the road after all, or whether Taehyung was just being very optimistic.

The boy walked in the lead once more, very much a self-appointed leader of this ragtag bunch, and no one questioned his directions today because he had been correct yesterday. He walked with a pace that showed confidence and surety, and he didn’t once pause to read street names or check whether it was a left or a right. Had he have done so that might have hinted that he didn’t have a clue
where they were going and therefore made them at least stop and think about it all, but luckily he didn’t and he actually managed to get them to the outskirts without a single spot of trouble. Which was really a relief because they had had enough trouble for the day so far.

Just like yesterday they walked in a loose formation to fit on the sidewalks, occasionally fanning out onto the road if it was empty before darting back onto the curb when a truck suddenly hurtled their way with a tremendous rumbling noise. Taehyung at the front with the other two youngest either side of him, Namjoon and Yoongi flanking them and Hoseok just a few feet in front of him. Seokjin observed the back of his head for some time, lengths of black hair peeking out of the back and his pale neck visible over the neckline of his black tee. He wasn’t exactly dragging his feet but he was close to it and he had stayed at the back just to keep an eye on him. He wouldn’t assume that the others would carry on walking and let him fall behind but it was better safe than sorry. After watching him for a few minutes Seokjin picked up his pace so that he could walk beside him.

“Are you OK?” he asked, studying his face as he did. He saw that the brim of their friend’s cap had sweat darkening the grey material just around the brim, where it would have been against the boy’s forehead.

“Hmm? Oh yeah, I’m OK,” Hoseok replied after a moment, not nodding because the movement would have aggravated his headache even more. It seemed that he hadn’t had one yesterday but it was present as ever today. Seokjin glanced over at their friends before looking back at him.

“Another headache?”

“Maybe a migraine,” he pulled the cap off for a moment to run a hand through his hair, which he noticed was also damp with sweat. The day seemed a little cooler than yesterday but looking at him it would have been hard to tell.

“I know this is a stupid suggestion but…have you seen a doctor over this?” The boy confirmed that he had with a soft noise. “Any diagnosis?”

“The pills they gave me cause the headaches,” Hoseok said before putting the cap back on. Seokjin realised that the answer wasn’t exactly what he had been expecting: because by telling him the medication caused the headaches it meant that he had been at the clinic for another reason entirely. One he didn’t know about at all that had nothing to do with the headaches. He let this hang in the air for a moment and then quietly asked him if he needed a break. “No, I’m fine really.”

“You don’t look fine,” he held out his hand. “Let me carry your bag at least.” Hoseok went to argue
against this but he just shook his hand firmly at him until he relented and handed him the holdall with a heavy sigh. “I’d offer you a piggyback ride but you would kick me, right?”

“Really hard,” he agreed with a soft smile. “I’m not one of the kids, you know? I know you guys call me it but I’m starting college soon. Not a kid.”

“You’ll still be a kid to me when you’re in a rocking chair and I’m, well, I’m dead.” Seokjin shifted to slip his own holdall up onto his shoulder, carrying the boy’s bag in his opposite hand to balance the weight out. “How’s studying for the entrance exams going? Are you as nervous as I was or?”

“Truthfully?” Hoseok stopped walking for a moment and he copied him, holding his gaze as he waited for him to carry on talking. “I haven’t been studying.” Seokjin didn’t even have time to blink, never mind question this statement, before the boy started walking again and left him standing beside the road dumbly. He had just opened his mouth to stutter something out when Jimin started shouting about a gas station at the top of his lungs; a loud distraction.

The rest of the gang were quite a distance in front of them, at the top of a soft curve of hill that they had been walking on for some minutes now. There was a sparse scattering of grass but the ground below their feet was mostly soil that was dry and dusty and looked pretty dead to his eyes. They had stopped for them both to catch up and so they hurried up the last stretch of hill, breasting it so that they were once more on level ground. Seokjin looked along the length of road to see a building not too far their location. It was a wide ground floor building that was vaguely square-shaped. Concrete ceiling and lot around the exterior, walls mostly made of glass windows that were filled with fliers and posters. There were a few vehicles parked around it and he had just observed the automatic doors opening to let a trucker out when the boys started racing towards it. He thought about his wallet and inwardly winced before quickly walking after them. As he got closer he felt that the A.C. was on, a cool breeze that actually made him shiver as he stepped inside.

The interior contained rows and rows of shelving units, covered in various goods in colourful packets that demanded the eye. Cans, bottles, boxes, packets, he could do nothing more than stare at all of them without really seeing what they were. On the opposite wall to the door were the tills, cigarettes behind them along with dirty magazines and there was a red rack with newspapers on just to the side. Along the length of window there was a stretch of counter with stools neatly tucked underneath for use. He could see plug sockets for charging devices like phones and a container filled with chopsticks and utensils. A small queue standing at the tills already, and his friends browsing the aisles eagerly. Seokjin sighed and then crossed the station to get to the fridges and collect a bottle of water. He eyed them before choosing the largest option because he could just store it in his bag whilst walking rather than buy a couple of smaller ones and have to do the same. Then he went over to look at the food. Cheap and instant shit, cooked food already prepared with just a day before expiration, it all looked to contain no nutrients whatsoever. He had just picked up a packet of kimbap and was reading the ingredients when he heard Yoongi calling out about a basket and he turned to see their friend waving a blue plastic basket around.
In several minutes they had filled it with an ample amount of food and liquids and were at the till, everyone pulling out cash and making a pile of crumpled notes and coins to pay with on the wooden surface. The young lady scanned the items whilst glancing between them in turn and he wondered if she looked at them and saw that they had been on the road for a day, rolling out of bed and getting dressed on the street whilst spitting mouthfuls of toothpaste in the gutters. Or did she look at them and just see a bunch of kids skipping class in early celebration of the upcoming summer break whilst their parents had no clue; likely having seen other handfuls of kids all day long? And their parents really didn’t know or at least most of them didn’t. He knew that Taehyung and Jungkook’s certainly didn’t, seen as the former didn’t even live with his parents and rather in a hostel across the capital with a bunch of other runaway kids. There was a chance that Hoseok had told his just to get it sorted and avoided unneeded trouble, but he wasn’t so certain about Jimin. The boy hadn’t even gotten changed before showing up at the coach station with a packed bag, so there was a chance that he had ran off too to save a couple of hits across the back of the head.

“Would you like a bag?” she asked as she gathered the notes and collected the change.

When they left the gas station there were two plastic bags in their midst, medium blue just like the basket and current shade of sky overhead. They could have stayed inside at the counter but they still had miles to go and therefore it meant food on the move instead. He had a feeling that the incident at the hostel this morning had made them a little weary that someone might just call the police on them whilst they were in the middle of eating, unable to run off because there were no back doors or windows to sneak out of when the sight of a squad car pulled up at the lot in front of them. So that meant eating whilst on the road even if he thought that Hoseok really needed a little break. He had even been tempted to suggest one but he knew that the boy would refuse to take a break because he didn’t want to cause a scene. Sipping at sodas, juices and water, snacking on various junk food whilst happily walking down the dusty side of the road. Seokjin had picked at his kimbap sparingly because he felt a little bad about the trouble from this morning. He almost felt like it was his fault and he had just eaten the first piece when he saw Yoongi eyeing him from a few feet ahead. He raised an eyebrow to ask ‘what?’ as he chewed it and the young man slowed down to walk level with him.

“What’s with the face, huh?” he asked. “You look like you’ve just been told your dog died or something.”

“Just thinking,” Seokjin replied as he looked at the packet and considered eating another piece.

“About this morning?” Yoongi tossed a bottle of iced tea from hand to hand, yellow lid revealing it to be lemon flavoured. “Jimin was right, you did do the right thing. We were just too pissed off to realise it at the time but what else could you have done?” He noticed that his friend wasn’t picking at any food and that didn’t mean he hadn’t bought any.
“I feel like it’s kind of my fault,” Seokjin said as he picked up another roll, “because I should have checked the rates properly last night, or at least woke us all up and got us out before the owner got pissed off at us.” He popped the piece in his mouth and offered him one and surprisingly enough his friend accepted a roll before glancing over at the others in front of them. “It’s probably stupid, but I still feel it’s my fault.” Yoongi chewed on the kimbap for a moment before cheeking it so that he could speak.

“We won’t make that mistake again, right?”

“Hopefully not,” he pulled the last roll free and scrunched the packet up before stuffing it into his jeans back pocket. “Lesson learnt.” His friend chased his mouthful of food down with a sip of iced tea and then sighed.

“If we keep needing the bribe assholes to not call the cops then we’re gonna run outta cash pretty fucking soon.” Yoongi shoved the bottle into his jacket pocket and then pulled out his packet of cigarettes, stick between his lips as he patted his jeans down to try and locate his lighter. “…Shit, left it in the fucking room!” Seokjin didn’t even have one to offer him. “Anyone got a light?!” He called and a moment later Taehyung was waving a box of matches overhead before tossing them back to him. The box flew in a perfect arc before Yoongi caught it, it making a soft rattling sound as it landed on his palm. He muttered his thanks as he slipped a match free and lit the end of the stick. He stared at the little flickering head for a few seconds before shaking the match out and tossing it aside. “And running outta cash has gotta be the worst thing to happen, right?”

“I don’t know,” Seokjin leaned over and spoke in a low voice, “Tae could probably figure out how to make some.” Yoongi breathed smoke out his nose with a soft laugh before shaking his hand at him, stick between his middle and ring finger. “Don’t joke about shit like that,” the gesture said. He grinned at him and then looked over at the road, seeing a couple of vehicles passing them by, exhaust fumes pluming out of tailpipes just like his friend’s cigarette smoke escaping his nose. “We won’t run out if we use our brains wisely.”

“Not a lot of brains here,” Yoongi muttered as the stick went right between his lips again.

“Maybe not in your head,” Seokjin remarked and the young man laughed again. The other boys were loudly talking about something food related from what he could hear, and he decided to take the plunge whilst he had the chance. “Planning on eating lunch today or not?”

“Not very hungry.”
“Smoking suppresses the appetite.”

“Guess it does…”

“In this heat you shouldn’t go hungry, we don’t want you fainting though it wouldn’t be too hard carrying you these days.” At this comment Yoongi’s lips tightened around the cigarette stick. “I understand the stress from working so much these past few months but you’re not working right now.”

“It’s hard to break a habit.”

“I know.”

“And stressing myself the fuck out knowing that when we get back to Seoul I don’t have a single job, never mind three…” His friend sighed, dragon smoke pluming from his nose as the stick bobbed, and then reached up to brush his red hair back off his brow. “Yeah, no wonder my appetite’s fucking suppressed.”

“At least you slept last night,” Seokjin said quietly and the young man agreed with a nod. He stepped on a packet that one of the boys had dropped and eyed it in annoyance, knowing that they would leave a Hansel and Gretel litter trail all the way along the side of the road: soda cans, wrappers, ice cream sticks on which ants were already crawling all over the sticky pink remains on the wood. “Even if the settee wasn’t comfortable.”

“I get the bed next time!” Yoongi declared.

“Let’s play fair: rock, paper, scissors,” Namjoon called back, turning to look at them with a lollipop stick in his mouth just like his friend’s cigarette. “We do live in a democracy after all.”

“Here comes the deep shit.” Yoongi muttered, furl of ash dropping off the end of the stick to land on the ground. “I’ve already drawn the short straw, you two can play the stupid game.”

“You see, that’s the important part: the shortness.” Namjoon pulled the lollipop free to point the pink and white swirled orb of sugar at him. “You’re the only one that’s short enough to fit on the settee.” Yoongi glared at him and seemed to be thinking his own biting retort over. Seokjin took a sip of
water before shoving the large bottle back into his bag, shrugging it onto his shoulder with a sigh. “So that’s why you sleep on the settee.”

“Am I a fucking dog?”

“Woof woof!” Jungkook barked from the front of the formation, packet of seaweed crisps in hand that looked large enough to feed an entire army. There was a smirk on the boy’s face that showed he was in no way affected by the earlier events of the day, rather he looked chipper and ready to piss everyone off as always. “Such a cute little puppy.”

“Your ass is grass,” Yoongi intoned menacingly and this just made him grin more widely.

After several minutes of walking Taehyung decided to stroll off the main road and in the direction of a large copse of trees that looked to grow for miles and miles in length without a break. It was the direction that they were travelling in and yet he wasn’t certain that wandering off the road was a good idea. They had a clear path to follow like a map and if they went too far from the road then there was a chance that they might just get lost. Of course the kids would love that, that would turn it all into a real adventure and there would be more chances of trouble to get into. But the boy declared that the shade would be a blessing from the heat and they all gladly agreed and chased along after him. And when they got through the first few feet of trees it became apparent that it really was cooler under the thick foliage over their heads. The air had a heady scent to it that was a mixture of sweet grass and flowers and it made his nose a little itchy. Unlike the roadside path, with the arid dead soil, the soil underfoot was a deep brown that was almost black and it was soft and looked rich and full of nutrients that no doubt nurtured the shin length grass that spread out in front of them. Seokjin eyed the trees to see thin but sturdy-looking branches and gnarled trunks, burrows in them that could have been squirrel dens or perhaps even belong to nesting birds. The plants were a random assortment: from large leafy ferns with no flowers, to thick growths of vivid coloured petals in whites and yellows and purples, to straggly bushes with berries growing on them. He caught the kids looking at these and no doubt wondering if they were edible and he told them to wisely avoid them but he couldn’t be certain that they hadn’t tried a quick sample or three.

Then Taehyung stumbled across the old train tracks.

Seokjin had just been happily strolling through the wooded area, listening to the occasional tweeting of birds or the crisp snapping sound of twigs being broken by their boots in the undergrowth. Drifting was probably a better word, for he hadn’t really been paying attention to the sights in front of him at all, but when he had heard the loud and sudden exclamation he was brought back to reality sharply. The boys’ voices excitedly talking about something, he could hear Jimin’s easily because the sound carried well in the quiet of the woods. There was a gap in the trees just a few feet in front of him and to his right, and Namjoon disappeared through it just as he noticed it. He picked up his pace to step through after him and when he did he saw another path leading off into a clearing of some kind, so he followed his friend and they stumbled into what looked like a break in the copse of trees,
a small field.

“…and what if a train comes along and runs you over, huh?” Yoongi asked. He glanced around before seeing the wide set of tracks that cut across the field: metal lines and wooden slats across them.

“It’s abandoned,” Taehyung said. “One look shows that, idiot.”

“It’s just like the trainyard,” Jimin added.

“Exactly, it’s a sign we should follow it.” A few feet away Hoseok pulled roughly on a thick tangle of moss and ivy and revealed the original barricade that used to be at the end of the tracks: a wooden post with faded yellow and black paint along the length. Somewhere under the undergrowth they would likely find the station platform too. “Why it’s…it’s…” Taehyung held both hands up in front of him, palm outwards, and he declared in an ecclesiastical voice. “It’s a sign from God.”

“The only sign I’m getting is you’re a dumbass,” Yoongi muttered as Jungkook jumped onto the wooden slats.

“Are you sure it’s not in use?” Seokjin asked and the boys groaned before calling him ‘a dumbass’ too, and ‘a chicken’ and ‘an idiot’ just for good measure. “I just want to be sure.”

“Area looks abandoned,” Namjoon remarked, “and I dunno any lines that stop all of the way out here. Twenty years ago maybe, back before all of the renovations in the centre and the subway lines but not now. I think it’s not in use too. Just look at this place, it’s damn ancient.” And just to prove his point the boy bent down and hovered his hand over the metal line. Even if the chances seemed to be that the line wasn’t in use he still told him to stop messing around. Jungkook laughed and called him ‘a pussy’ before pressing his palm down on the rail. He pretended to get electrocuted rather terribly and the flailing arms made most of them laugh except for Seokjin. “I think we should follow it, it should lead us where the road does.”

“We’ll follow it ‘cos God wants to lead us,” Taehyung said in his best baritone preacher voice. “The road to salvation is wrought with many obstacles.”

“Like what?” Hoseok asked as he wiped his hand on his jeans to clean away any moss that had clung to his skin.
“Like having to look at Dumbass’ face.”

“Hey,” the other boy whined as he prodded the metal rail with the toes of his boots, “stop picking on me! Why is it always me, huh?”

“One reason really,” Taehyung said as he patted him on the back. “It’s so easy.” He stepped onto the tracks and turned to look back at them all.

“You forgot another reason: it’s so fun.” Jungkook got upright and Jimin just muttered under his breath grumpily. “Come on, we’re not gonna pass up on this, right?” He ran his eyes over them each in turn and then echoed the other boy’s words again. “It’s totally a sign.”

Seokjin didn’t particularly believe in signs, be they of the God-delivered or just plain secular type, but he just agreed to walk the train tracks because it stopped the kids from complaining. It was really no different from walking along the road but at least the tracks ran back into the woods again and offered continuous shade. Even with the scattering of clouds present the temperature was still considerable and it seemed to get warmer rather than cooler as time went on. He found his water depleting and he wasn’t surprised at all. Between the wooden slats on the tracks there were great chunks of pebbles rather than just soil and they had been utilised as projectile weapons until a pretty sharp one had smacked Yoongi’s arm and left a graze on his skin deep enough to bleed. In the end Jimin had taken responsibility but Seokjin had a sneaking feeling that he had taken the fall for Jungkook, like always. As a result of the narrow track they had to walk in pairs but Yoongi abandoned this to walk alongside in the grass instead, and Taehyung managed to perfect walking on the thin metal line rather nimbly, one hand held out to keep him steady and the other occasionally reaching out to slap the back of whatever boy’s head was closest to his. So they walked the length of the tracks and for some minutes it was silent until the boy decided to start the military shit again, this time in the form of a cadence.

“Left, left, left right left,” he kept chanting it over and over until they joined in in an attempt to get him to stop but it just encouraged him to continue. “I don’t know but it’s been said,” he declared as he pseudo marched on the rail, waiting for them to repeat his words.

“I don’t know but it’s been said,” they copied wearily.

“Park Jimin pisses the bed.” They had only just started laughing at this when he continued. “Left, left, left right left.” Another series of repetitions. “I don’t know but I have heard.” They copied the chant and he finished. “Jeon Jungkook’s a fucking nerd. Left, left, left right left.”
“Left, left, left right left.”

“I don’t know but I’ve been told!”

“I don’t know but I’ve been told!”

“Kim Seokjin’s too fucking old!” they all repeated this back except Seokjin who bent down to retrieve a pebble and toss it at his back. “Left, left, left right left.”

“Left, left, left right left.”

“I don’t know but I’ll deduct!”

“I don’t know but I’ll deduct!”

“Kim Namjoon’s shit outta luck!”

“That doesn’t even rhyme!” The young man complained but they all repeated it anyway.

“Left, left, left right left.”

“Left, left, left right left.”

“I don’t know but it’s been said!”

“I don’t know but it’s been said!” they all parroted, waiting to see who was next on the boy’s list.

“Jung Hoseok gives real good head!” Hoseok kicked out at him with a laugh but the boy managed to
dodge, still on the metal line and not falling off it. “Left, left, left right left.” After they copied him he added. “I don’t know but I will bet!”

“I don’t know but I will bet!”

“Min Yoongi’s not strictly het!”

“Left, left, left right left,” Yoongi took up, expression showing that he had his own retort planned out perfectly whilst he waited for them to finish chanting. “I don’t know but I’ll agree.” They echoed his words in anticipation and he grinned widely. “Kim Taehyung fucks for a fee!” At this rhyme the two younger boys burst out laughing and Seokjin had to suppress his own laughter because it was very childish.

“Shit, that’s a good one,” Taehyung muttered. “I should’ve thought of that.”

The water filled the bathtub up slowly, the pipes clanging rather loudly underneath the gushing sound coming from the tap, and he tipped a small amount of detergent into it. The purple liquid stained the water almost instantly, foaming slightly where the water poured out and rippling across the tub. He stuck his hand inside and swirled it around for a few seconds to help it bubble some more before reaching up to twist the tap off. The scent of lavender wafted up from the surface and he tossed a handful of clothes in. He had already cleaned most of the messes up, leaving the kids’ clothes until last because it had taken that long to wait for them to wash up and settle down like yesterday and he needed the bathtub to be empty before he could use it. He left the clothing to soak for a couple of minutes whilst he went into the other room, leaning against the open doorway.

Two single beds which the four boys were sharing: Jungkook and Hoseok closest to the door, Taehyung and Jimin beside the window and a side table separating the beds with a lamp on it, which was turned on and glowing a deep orange like a streetlight bulb. He could see that the youngest boy was asleep, or at least drifting off enough so that he might as well have been asleep, and the others weren’t much more awake. Jimin was sitting up against the headboard with a pillow hugged against his chest, head nodding every now and again as if he was moments away from unconsciousness. The covers were mostly on the floor because Taehyung was lying on the bed and he had knocked them off, on his stomach as he smoked one of Yoongi’s cigarettes and flicked through a magazine he had found under said bed: one that was likely full of naked women or men, or both. There was a massive
strip of missing wallpaper just by the bed and it looked to have been torn free and when he looked at Hoseok he saw that the boy was drawing on it, just like the napkins and receipts. Had he torn it free? Or had one of the other boys? He was hunched forward with the triangular strip on his bare thigh and the pen in his hand as he hastily scribbled across it.

“Everything OK?” Seokjin asked and the two awake boys made noises in agreement.

“Huh… what?” Jimin jerked and opened his eyes. He repeated the question and he thought it over. “Hmm… it’s ‘kay.’

“That’s good,” he moved to sit down on the edge of the bed by the door. “Headache gone?”

“Mostly,” Hoseok replied without looking up. “Tae gave me a head massage and it kind of helped. Hopefully it’ll go away by tomorrow but I’m not too hopeful.” He reached over to ruffle his hair and he carried on scribbling on the wallpaper piece without stopping. Seokjin glanced at Jungkook to see that he was most certainly asleep, face burrowed against the pillow and back rising and falling softly as he breathed, grey tee clashing against the cotton just as much as his dark hair. He turned his attention back to the other boy and studied his expression, seeing that he looked sleepy yet was too busy doodling to rest just yet, likely because there was very little time for him to do so during the day. And so he resorted to drawing on old wallpaper that was musty and seemed to be older than he was. “Where to tomorrow?”

“We’re finally outta the capital, give it another hour and we’ll be in the next city,” Taehyung explained as he shoved the cigarette stick into his mouth and turned the magazine around to look at a spread, eyeing it with great interest. “And then the world is ours.”

“What does that mean?” Jimin asked groggily and the question made Seokjin smirk. He had a point, that wasn’t really an answer at all. The boy put the magazine down and a quick glance at it revealed that the spread wasn’t a nude one at all but rather that of a car.

“It means shut the fuck up, how would I know?” Taehyung breathed a smoke ring at him and then turned back to the page in front of him. “I got us outta the city, that’s all I know. We’re all gonna have to band together and figure out the rest together.” At least he had admitted to this and he deserved some respect for doing so rather than bullshitting about how he knew everything like usual.

“Day three on the road,” Seokjin said softly.
“On an adventure,” Taehyung corrected as he dabbed ash over the side and onto the carpet.

“Sure, that too,” he said as he got to his feet and crossed the room to go into the bathroom. He eyed the clothing floating in the tub before kneeling down beside it and reaching in to start scrubbing at the tees and socks and underwear, rubbing handfuls together roughly so that the detergent foamed and cleaned them thoroughly. Once that was done he rinsed the suds free and wrung the water out to leave the items on the porcelain side of the tub to dry over the few hours of sleep. When he was finished his hands were faintly red and the scent of lavender stuck to his skin like lotion. He hastily dried his hands on the ends of his vest and then exited the bedroom to see that Jimin had finally succumbed to sleep, slumped over to lie on the other boy’s pillow. Hoseok was still drawing but he was on the very end of the strip and he looked nearly done, eyelids drooping heavily as he blinked, and Taehyung had tossed the magazine aside and was on the last few drags of cigarette, bored expression on his face. He told them to try and get some sleep and then left the room to go along the walkway to the other one.

He opened the door and stepped inside before quickly locking it. As he placed the keys down on the table he looked over his shoulder at his friends. Namjoon was lying on the settee with the other man’s phone, playing music and seemingly a game judging from his tapping fingers, perhaps both at the same time: loud hip hop blaring from the tiny speaker.

“Cinderella has returned,” Yoongi remarked, lounged on the bed by the door. “Or should I say JinDerella?”

“Wow, you’ve been thinking of that the whole time I was gone?”

“Maybe,” he shifted to sit upright with a groan before rubbing his lower back. “The kids?”

“Settling down, Jimin and Kookie are already asleep for once.”

“He hates that nickname,” Namjoon said, head bobbing in rhythm with the beat.

“Yeah, and Jimin hates being called ‘Dumbass’ by him so I ain’t gonna stop calling him it,” Yoongi commented.

“I also hate being called ‘old’ and having eleven year olds ignoring me,” Seokjin said as he went to sit down on the end of the other bed. “So we’re even. Hoseok was doodling and Tae was smoking and looking bored as hell, and that’s better than them screaming and destroying the room any day.”
“Nothing new there,” Yoongi leaned back on his wrists and looked between them both. “Drawing on napkins again?”

“Old wallpaper,” he explained before suddenly remembering something. “Oh, actually, I forgot to say this earlier, it just slipped my mind. Hoseok said something to me today.” At this he felt both pairs of eyes on him and the music stopped, plunging the room into silence. “He didn’t look too good so I asked him if he was OK and he said that he had another headache. So I said something about going to see a doctor and he replied that he had, and that the pills he had been given caused the headaches. I’m paraphrasing of course, but that was roughly what he said. Which means…”

“He got them for something else.”

“Yes Namjoon, but what exactly?”

“You’re kidding, right?” Yoongi fiddled with a lighter he had found in the side table but there was no cigarette in sight. It was a habit now it would seem. “Isn’t it obvious?” But they both looked at him blankly. “I’ve been thinking about it and… remember in high school there was that girl in my class, Soyou? The really quiet girl with the glasses, pretty cute?”

“What about her?”

“She had headaches too. One day her bag broke, the strap snapped and all of her shit spilled out over the stairs,” he explained, “and I was on my way past so I rushed down to help her. I didn’t mean to look but I grabbed a bottle of pills and the label just jumped out at me. Prozac.” At this Namjoon also sat up, putting the phone down on his lap. “She was on antidepressants.”

“No shit?” Seokjin asked dumbly, mouth hanging open.

“Yeah shit, just like Hoseok. I’ll bet he’s on Prozac too, maybe Xanax or something like that.”

“Antidepressants do cause strong side effects,” their friend agreed with a soft nod, “it could be something like that. What happened to her? I remember always seeing her hanging on the steps of a morning and then she just…disappeared. Did she move school?”
“She killed herself,” Yoongi replied without missing a beat, flicking the lighter on and off again and staring at the flame rather than look at either of them.

“He said that he wasn’t studying,” Seokjin said quietly after a moment of silence. “But then the gas station came up before I could ask him about it all. Do you really think he’s on those things?” They both could only shrug in reply because they weren’t certain at all, but it did sound right to him now when he thought about it. It was almost obvious. “Why wouldn’t he tell us?”

“How many people wanna admit to things like that?” Namjoon asked. “Depression? Anxiety? Things like that, people don’t wanna admit it ’cos someone will say—”

“It’s pretend, it’s for attention, you’re just sad,” Yoongi continued before scoffing loudly. “All of that shit.” The other young man nodded in agreement. “I can’t blame him. I mean, I wish he felt that he could tell us without the guessing game but I understand. I wish I didn’t, but I fucking do.”

“We need to keep an eye on him,” Seokjin said as he folded his legs up on the bed. “Just in case.”

He waited to see if either of them asked him to clarify this statement, if they would argue against it or deny it or say something positive, but after a few minutes neither of them did; the hostel room just deathly silent save for the distance drone of traffic coming in through the open window.
It was exactly after his shower that he found out that his wallet was empty.

Yoongi hadn’t thought to check it out at any point because he hadn’t felt the need to, for it had been tucked away securely in his holdall bag the entire night, transferred into his jeans pocket during the day for convenience. So he had woken up with the idea of checking it right at the back of his mind, more preoccupied with the thoughts of smoking his first cigarette of the day and picking at the remains of food from yesterday just because he could feel Seokjin’s eyes on him the entire time and it wasn’t worth the trouble avoiding eating. He had chewed a few mouthfuls of rice cake just for the sake of it and struggled to swallow the dry chunks, practically sticking in his throat like rocks, and then he had taken his usual position on the sill across the room to smoke; window open and not letting in a breeze at all but rather just allowing ample sunlight in to bake the skin on his face and arms. Namjoon had joked about him finally getting a little colour, own tanned arms on display as he had collected trash up to toss it into the dumpster just across the lot. He had rolled his eyes in response and had tapped more ash onto the carpet that was littered with stubbed out sticks, matches, and other random items like pen lids and bottle caps. From the other room had come the sound of the boys, signalling that they were all wide awake and likely tearing the place apart as they packed up. Yoongi had already packed most of his stuff away, leaving clean underwear and a tee out to get changed into, and he had let his friends get washed up first because he hadn’t had the energy to do so upon waking up. Another night of fractured sleep, time spent between smoking and worrying, mostly over Hoseok and what he had said about the antidepressants.

Had he been correct? Or had he just assumed that to be the case and been a little too forward? He wasn’t sure but it seemed correct to him, but perhaps he shouldn’t have blurted it out so carelessly? It probably should have come from the boy’s mouth rather than his but the chances of him saying something were slim. The fact that he hadn’t already told them meant he was either planning on not doing so, or that he was waiting for the ideal time. If it was the latter then he had probably fucked it up for him. The kids might not know so there was that, but they could be very quick and keen on things, so they might have already figured it out too.

Yoongi had washed up quickly just so that he couldn’t possibly delay the gang, dressing even as his hair had still been damp and dripping, brushing his teeth as he had shoved everything away in his holdall. He had been in the act of going to zip it up when he had noticed his wallet lying in the main compartment. For a few seconds he had just stared at it, blinking languidly as he eyed the worn leather.

He never left it in the main compartment during the night. It went into one of the smaller side ones.
instead. But now it was in the main and he didn’t know why. He opened the smaller one where his phone should have been and yet it was empty save for his charger, the wire curled up around the plug head snugly.

Yoongi reached inside and pulled his wallet free in confusion, hearing the other young men talking to each other but not really what they were talking about: words distant nonsense to his ears. He ran his thumb along the leather slowly before thumbing it open. It felt somewhat different and yet he couldn’t seem to figure out why, or at least until he opened it and saw that the note compartment was free of money. No cash, no notes. He unzipped the inner section and saw no glinting coins inside. At the back of his mind he could feel panic clouding, yet he felt oddly calm and detached as he tipped it upside down. Not even a piece of lint fell out. He turned it right ways up and then scanned the little holders in the side of the wallet. No cards. Yoongi dropped the wallet on the bed and then patted his jeans pockets even though he knew there was nothing inside them. After coming up empty handed he actually checked his wallet again just to be sure that he hadn’t somehow missed the cash, even though he knew it was a ridiculous thought. He glanced over at his friends and then went over to the settee to check Namjoon’s bag, and only when he had pulled his friend’s wallet free did Seokjin notice what he was doing and ask him why he was rooting through the holdall.

“Check your wallets, check your jeans, check wherever the fuck your money and phones are.” Yoongi tossed the wallet at Namjoon and then reached up to tug on his hair, which was still damp against his fingertips.

“What’s going on…?” The younger man asked as he flipped it open. “Why?” Why? But he had only just finished asking the question when his eyes fell on the empty compartment and his jaw dropped open. “We’ve been cleaned out,” Yoongi said as he he dropped his hands back down to his hips. “The fucker robbed us blind whilst we were asleep.”

“Now hang on,” Namjoon said as he held his hand up placatingly. “We dunno that just yet and-”

“The fuck is your money Joonie?” he interrupted brusquely. “Not in your wallet, where it should be, so where the fuck is it?” He could only drop his eyes to the empty wallet in his other hand without a word. Yoongi let this hang in the air for a moment before storming across the room to get out, walking across the little path to get to the other room. He tried opening the door but it was locked, and so he rapped his knuckles on the wood hard and rapidly. After a few seconds it swung open and he pushed past Hoseok to get inside the room. “Check your wallets, now.” The boys all stared at him dumbly for a few seconds. “I’m being serious, check. Check for your phones too.” So Jimin shifted to shove his hands in his jeans and he pulled them out to stare at his empty palms with a blank expression. “Nothing?”
“I…uh…the cash was in my jeans and…what the fuck?”

“Where’s my money?” Hoseok asked in confusion, own wallet in his hands. “Seriously guys, is this a stupid prank?”

“Kookie?” The boy bent down and reached inside one of his boots that were on the floor, pulling a handful of notes out. He did say that the coins in his jeans pockets were missing however. Taehyung also held a small roll of notes up that he had collected from his boot and said that he still had cash. Yoongi took a deep breath and held it up for a few seconds. His initial panic had transformed into something else entirely, something that felt dangerously close to blind anger. He could feel his hands shaking at his sides and before he could stop himself he darted out of the room, ignoring the boys’ calls and confused questions. He crossed the lot without stopping and heard the sound of boots pounding on the tarmac behind him, out of beat with his own. He reached the entrance area and pushed the door open hard before storming across and over to the desk. The middle-aged man behind the desk looked up at him and he saw his expression shifting as he realised who had walked in.

“I’ve a complaint to lodge.”

“Is there something wrong with the room that-”

“Yeah, there’s a massive problem, mainly the fact that me and my friends have been fucking robbed.”

“I’m sorry?”

“We’ve been robbed, our wallets are empty. I can’t find my fucking phone.”

“There’s no need to curse-”

“I’ll curse all I fucking want!” Yoongi spat. “Either someone staying here broke into our rooms and robbed us, or you did. Which one is it?” The man held his gaze for but a second before shifting his eyes to look over his shoulder instead: guilty as charged. He placed his hands down on the desk counter to stop them rolling into fists. “This ain’t a broken shower or A.C., our money has been stolen.”
“Then that means you’ll have to call the police,” he retorted, “and file a complaint.” Yoongi let this statement hang in the air for a moment, realising the full implications of his words. He couldn’t call the police, not with a bunch of runaway, class-ditching kids in their midst, and the man knew this too. There was nothing that they could do and wasn’t that the most convenient of situations to be trapped in?

“Give us the cash and phones back and I won’t call ‘em.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” His stubbornness and flighty eyes were a dead giveaway. Yoongi sighed before reaching over to pull the receiver out of the cradle of the desk phone, rapidly hitting the plastic keys as the man stared at him blankly. He pressed the receiver against his ear and listened to the dull dial tone for a few seconds before an unmistakable sound cut through the air: a blaring hip hop track that carried from somewhere behind the counter. His ringtone.

“You fucker!” Yoongi tried to dive across the reception desk and was stopped only by someone grabbing hold of his tee. The suddenness of his movement actually broke the contact but a moment later fingers snagged on his shoulder and pulled him back. His stomach and hips slammed into the wood hard and he felt his breath leaving his lungs in a grunt of pain. He couldn’t even grab hold of the man because he stepped back out of his reach. “You piece of shit, I’m-”

“Youngi!” Jungkook shouted as he dragged back on him hard but he twisted and wriggled to try and free himself, elbow hitting the boy hard in the ribs in the process. “I’m gonna kick your ass!”

“Namjoon help me, he’s gonna-” Yoongi managed to tear free and was in the process of crawling over the counter when more hands seized him, this time the back of his jeans waistband. Before he could kick out and try and swing his legs over the side Jungkook managed to get a proper hold of him: snaking his arms under his so that he could drag him back off the counter in some kind of pro-wrestling move.

“I’m gonna kill him! Let me go I’m gonna fucking kill him!” He was pulled backwards hard, boots scraping on the linoleum as he kicked and stomped uselessly. He couldn’t believe that they were stopping him. They had been robbed, they had been fucking robbed! After more useless wriggling
he was dragged out of the entrance area and back onto the lot and that was when the boy twisted around and pushed him hard. He stumbled a few steps before whirling around but Jungkook was there to block him and Seokjin had even stepped in front of the door, shaking his head and telling him that it wasn’t worth it. Yoongi tried to get past but the boy just shifted to stop him, arms up to grab him and push him away again.

“I think he’s calling the cops,” Taehyung remarked as he peered through the window. His breath plumed up against the glass and so he proceeded to draw a cock on it with his forefinger.

“He’s got the cash, got my fucking phone!” he shouted. “I want it back!”

“If the police show they’ll arrest us too,” Jimin said quietly, scuffing the toes of his boot on the tarmac.

“Just let me…” Yoongi breathed out heavily and felt his anger starting to deflate just as quickly as it had exploded. “Shit guys, we need that cash, we need…”

“To get out of here.” Taehyung finished as he added a little flourish to his window art, little splashes of semen to make it that much more offensive. Yoongi hunkered down and buried his face in his hands as he took several deep breaths to try and calm himself down, in through his nose and out of his mouth and feeling his shoulders shaking as he did. It was just like the smashed house phone all over again, that blind rage that had consumed him entirely. “C’mon, let’s blow this place.”

“The keys…”

“I have them,” Seokjin said, and he heard them jingling as he no doubt shook them between his fingers.

“Give me ‘em.” His friend explained that it was probably best that he return them but he just held a hand out silently, and after a few seconds he gave him them. Yoongi got upright and moved to stand by the curb by the window and then he held the keys up so that the man inside could see them… before dropping them into the gutter. The keys slipped through the grate and out of sight as Yoongi flashed him the middle finger turned on his heel.

“Now we can get outta here.”
“How much?”

“34,000.” Taehyung sighed as he flicked to the last note and looked up at his friends. “Barely enough to cover a night at a hostel.” He shoved the cash down into his boot and turned to look at Jungkook. The boy had his notes in his hands and he was counting them, brow furrowed in concentration. After a minute he muttered 30,000₩ under his breath. “Jimin?”

“So far I’ve found…uh…7,300 in change from the gutters and a tear inside my backpack but that’s all.”

“We spend double that on food,” Hoseok remarked. “On a single meal.”

“Too bad now,” Yoongi said as he kicked at a crumpled soda can, “cos that’s our food allowance for the entire day. Y’know how much I had in my wallet? I had about roughly 187,300₩ from not putting my weekly wages into my account. I had an entire weeks’ worth of fucking pay and more in the bank…but now I’ve got no goddamn card ‘cos it was stolen.”

“They don’t know your pin, they can’t clean you out,” Namjoon said quietly.

“I know, but I can’t get my own fucking cash ‘cos I got no card.”

“I had about…282,700₩,” the other young man declared, “from winning a bet combined with a handful of notes already in my wallet. Imagine how I feel.”

“122,800,” Seokjin muttered, “give or take a couple of hundred won.”

“I had maybe 61,800₩,” Hoseok explained with a sigh. “All saved up with nothing to spend it on. Now I have nothing.”
“Sorry guys, I only had about 20,000.”

“You don’t need to apologise Jimin,” Yoongi said, “100₩ is better than nothing. We’ve got…what, 70,000₩ or something like that, right now. That’s enough for…maybe two days on the road, yeah?” None of them replied but Taehyung was thinking that it was a lot more than two days if they spent it wisely and didn’t pay for things they could get for free. “I should’ve called the fucking police,” his friend mumbled. “Even if they did drag us off too. Why didn’t you let me punch his teeth in, huh?”

“Cos you looked like you really were gonna kill him,” Jungkook retorted, “and I didn’t want murder on our list of petty offences.” The young man argued that he’d have been doing the world a favour by killing the hostel owner and none of them even argued otherwise.

“Pieces of trash like him,” Namjoon said as he shoved his hands into his hoodie pockets, “will get their comeuppance. Karma’s a real bitch.”

“Karma won’t get us our cash back,” Yoongi muttered bitterly. “70 ain’t gonna last long, then what? How do we get back to Seoul? Using our thumbs to hitch a fucking ride?”

“We make more cash,” Taehyung said without missing a beat, “and that’s how we keep going.”

For a few seconds his friends fell silent and he just carried on walking along the road, seeing the city limits getting closer and closer with every passing minute. Then he realised that he was the only one walking and he stopped to turn on his heel and look back at them.

“What?” he asked as he shoved his hands into his jeans pockets and looked at them all in turn. Confused expressions, furrowed brows and open mouths that would catch flies in the current heat. “Did I fucking stutter?”

“Make cash?” Hoseok asked dumbly as he blinked at him. He nodded at the question and then heard scoffing sounds coming from his gangs of friends. “It’s really that easy?”

“Course it is.”
“I can’t believe this,” Yoongi muttered, pulling his third cigarette of the morning free with one hand and pinching the bridge of his nose with the other. “That I’m actually hearing this. Tae, it took me a week and three fucking jobs to get that cash in the first fucking place. How fast and easy do you think it is to make cash? To get a job in the first place?”

“In a city like this,” Taehyung said as he gestured behind him, “real fucking easy but you just dunno it yet. Trust me, I’ve done this before. I lived four solid weeks on the road with less than 70,000₩ in my boot from working jobs no one else was desperate enough to take.”

“And stealing,” Seokjin said disapprovingly, “and likely other illegal things too.” Taehyung ignored him and instead hunkered down to slip the cash free and hold it out to Namjoon. His friend stared at it dumbly and asked him what he was doing.

“Take it,” he waved the roll of notes. “And I’ll fucking bet by evening I’ll have double that, no triple that. Keep it safe, gamble it away if you want, doesn’t matter ‘cos I’ll get more.”

“I’m not gambling the little cash we have away,” his friend muttered as he took the money and shoved it into his jeans pocket. “And I don’t believe that bet either.” He rolled his eyes at the comment. Why would he lie about this, about something as important as cash? Yet he could see from their faces that they didn’t believe him at all. Taehyung might have told them some shit in the past but this was most certainly not shit: it was the truth.

“Give me a few hours,” he said as he held his hand out, palm downwards, “I promise I’ll make some fucking cash, alright?” After a few seconds Jungkook added his hand on top without question and then Jimin copied him with a soft nod. “We’re not done yet, the break hasn’t even started yet. We’re not slinking off back to Seoul like losers, like dogs with their tails between their fucking legs, we’re gonna carry on with the adventure; aren’t we?” And Namjoon added his hand onto the pile with a heavy sigh, closely followed by Hoseok. Yoongi tossed his cigarette aside and hesitated before adding his on top and then there was just Seokjin left. The eldest studied the pile for a few seconds before looking up at the skyline of the next city in front of them. He looked like he wanted to say something but just bit down on his lower lip instead and then he shifted his gaze to stare at him. Taehyung held his eyes confidently without a single blink.

“I hope you know what you’re doing,” Seokjin said with a weary voice as he added his hand on top.

“I never know what I’m doing,” he retorted with a grin, and at least this made most of them smile. He pushed their hands up but there was no victory cheer. “Leave food to me, OK? I’ll sort that shit out no problem. What we need to do is this: get into the city and find somewhere memorable, a statue, a building, a park, whatever. We’re gonna split up and cover the place, meet back at certain hours say… 4pm and 11pm?” They all just shrugged or nodded at this. “We’re gonna make the cash.
I know we will.”

“What if we can’t?” Jimin asked in a quiet voice, eyes shifting around without rest because he didn’t want to look at him. Taehyung reached over to throw his arm around his shoulders, pulling him close so that he could ruffle his hair roughly with his other hand. The boy put up with this for a few seconds before whining. “Seriously Tae, I’m just saying!”

“Don’t say, it’s gonna happen Dumbass!” He stopped ruffling his hair and Jimin reached up to try and flatten it again. “Kim Taehyung doesn’t believe in giving up. What about you babies, huh?”

“The day I give up before Kim Taehyung is the day I fucking die!” Jungkook declared with a wide smirk. The other boy rapidly agreed with him so he messed up his hair again.

“I don’t know,” Hoseok said with a shrug, “I think you’re talking shit.”

“Would I talk shit to you, my dearest Hoseok?” Taehyung asked and his friend reached up to rub at his temples with a groan.

“You’re giving your dearest a headache,” he mumbled as he closed his eyes.

“You honestly think you can make 90,000₩ in a few hours?” Yoongi cocked his head and studied him closely so he nodded and announced that he could easily do it as he started walking along the road again. This time he heard them following after him. “How the fuck are you gonna do that, huh?”

“A true gentleman never reveals his secrets.”

He swung his legs back and forth so that his boots hit the low brick wall with soft thumping noises. His friend’s cap was in his hands and he fiddled with the fastener at the back, undoing it and redoing
it so that the little plastic tabs popped in and out of the holes, or occasionally tapped his fingers along
the brim in an offbeat rhythm with his boots. Hoseok studied the stitched logo above the brim
intently for a moment before seeing a loose thread of white cotton hanging free, so he picked it
between his thumb and forefinger and lightly tugged but it didn’t snap free. He looked back up and
along the street just in time to capture one of his friends rounding a corner to disappear out of sight,
Jungkook judging from his height and the sullen way he was walking. A quick glance around him
showed that he was alone, none of the others visible on any of the streets or sidewalks. Why,
Taehyung was already halfway across the city most likely, on his way to mega riches if his bragging
was anything to go by. No sign of the young men anywhere, nor Jimin who had went running off
not a second after the other boy had finished sorting out the plans, as eager to please as always.

And here he was, sitting at the meetup spot of the coach station without a fucking clue what he was
really supposed to do.

Hoseok blinked and Jungkook disappeared out of sight so he dropped his attention back to the
baseball cap in his hands, once again turning it over to study it. That annoying little stray thread of
cotton was still present and he wanted it gone yet another try just made it unravel a little more. Shit,
he thought as he let go of it, I feel a little like that thread.

He hadn’t woken up with a headache at all this morning, rather his head had felt rather light and
pain-free unlike the previous day and he had been glad, not wanting to spend another day walking in
the oppressive heat; having to listen to his friends - but mostly Taehyung - hollering about stupid shit
and making it even worse. No, he had been looking forward to another day of fun and no throbbing
agony shooting through his skull every time he took a step or turned his head a little too fast. The act
of accidentally glancing at the sun would be enough to make his brain nearly combust and not even
Namjoon’s cap had been able to block it thoroughly enough. A day without a headache meant an
entire day without the others staring at him when they thought he couldn’t notice, out of the corners
of eyes discreetly but not discreetly enough to rid him of the weight of their gazes on him. That was
almost as relieving as the lack of headache.

But then the drama with the hostel had happened and had ruined everything.

Hoseok hadn’t thought to even check his wallet that morning when he had been getting ready, not
even possibly imagining that he would have opened it and found it completely empty: no notes, no
coins, not even his bank card. Why the cards? It wasn’t like they could hack them and yet they were
gone too, causing even more trouble than needed for them all. It had been one of those strange
moments in which he had felt strangely as if he wasn’t in his own body but rather as if he was
floating above himself, watching everything unfolding and unable to even blink. The owner had
robbed them blind because he had known that there was nothing they could do about it, not able to
call the police themselves nor risk him calling them if things had gotten violent. Yet he almost felt
that they should have let Yoongi do something, kick his teeth in, break his nose, grab cash from the
till that rightfully belonged to them and was in no way stealing, but they had stopped him. That was
probably for the best, for he had never seen the young man get so angry before in his entire life.
Yoongi could be very quick with his tongue, as the retort in Taehyung’s cadence showed yesterday afternoon, but he never got angry enough to use his fists. He was all talk and threats and usually let someone talk him out of it, but not this time.

And because they had stopped him they were now stuck with just 70,000₩ or so and had been reduced to searching for spare change in the gutters and begging for slave labour jobs.

He picked at the thread again before something crossed his mind and he slowly lifted the cap up to study it. It looked almost like a bowl, a container in which money could be tossed, and that was when he felt an idea forming in his mind. Hoseok placed it back on his head and got off the wall, bending to retrieve his backpack and brushing his hands free of brick dust. The station was a few blocks from a nice hub of stores and when passing through it he had noticed a lot of them had been blaring music out of their open doors. It had irritated him earlier but now…now he needed the music. He hastily crossed a road to head back in the direction of the shopping area, unconsciously scanning heads just in case he caught sight of one of his friends. What were they doing to try and get cash? Searching for jobs? Begging? Stealing or gambling? Well, he had another idea entirely but whether or not he would end up earning any was another matter entirely.

He was going to busk, not by singing or playing an instrument, but rather by dancing.

Hoseok could feel the beginnings of a headache starting to develop, at his temples and behind his eyes so that there were twin twinges of pain. But right now he didn’t have time to worry about such things like that, he needed to push it aside and think about only the cash. Taehyung was aiming for 90,000₩ or more in just a few hours, so he at least needed half of that just so the boy wouldn’t brag his ass off. As he got closer to the shopping area his eyes scanned not only for his friends but also two different things: a place to set up and any uniforms that might reveal cops hanging around. He might pass for someone in college, he might still look like a high school kid and he didn’t want to take that risk. That could really ruin the reunion with the others in a couple of hours. He carried on walking until he was outside a cosmetic store and then he decided that it was the right spot. An electronic song was pounding from the speakers inside and he nodded along to the rhythm for a moment to find the right beat. Then he dropped his bag to the side, slipped his cap off and placed it down and got into position. A few people slowed down to look but most carried on walking without a care. As the beat dropped he started dancing and that was when heads really turned.

Hoseok had always had a great interest in dance and he had been told that he was pretty damn good at it, enough to even be an ‘idol’ Jimin had once declared with great enthusiasm. He was certainly good enough to make strangers crowd around to watch. Though he zoned out and just concentrated on the beat and his own steps he did catch sight of a few cellphones slipping free of purses and pockets to stay in the hands of young women and girls, all of them staring with great interest or tittering to friends behind hands. But it wasn’t just girls, quite a few men stopped to stare and he could hear them making appreciative noises under their breath as he popped and locked, twisted and dropped with the fast and manic beat of the dubstep piece. People seemed to realise what the cap was for and a few dropped handfuls of coins or a note or two in during the several minutes in which he
performed, and when the music stopped and he held a finishing pose there was quite a scattering of applause and a cheer or two.

As he grabbed his bag and shrugged it up onto his shoulder a particularly brave girl approached him and asked him if he was a trainee, what company he belonged to, and he just laughed and told her none as he picked the cap up and started walking down the street again. He couldn’t stay in the same spot for long just to avoid police showing or causing a disturbance in front of the stores, but also to keep his chances of making more cash fresh.

He wasn’t wearing his coat in the heat, it was shoved inside his backpack and weighing it down considerably, and it was a good thing because he could feel himself starting to perspire from the sun and the exertion; brow and hairline beaded with sweat. He brushed it free with a sigh and reached into the cap to check his earnings.

13,800₩ for his first attempt, not bad at all.

Hoseok shoved the notes into his pocket and the coins into a compartment in his bag to stop them falling free during his dancing. He couldn’t guarantee that he would get that much next time, or any money at all, but it was worth a shot. His aching head wouldn’t let him dance for too long and he was running low on water, but he might just reach his halfway target after all.

He slipped the cap back on his head and carried on walking until he found his next spot.

The stack of fliers were in his hand and they didn’t seem to be getting any smaller. Jimin had stuck them in windows, under windshield wipers before drivers caught him and tried to kick his ass, into passing hands only to see them dropped on the floor seconds later. At least he might be able to get a job cleaning all of them up again but he doubted it. He wouldn’t even call this current attempt a job yet he would at least get cash at the end. It wouldn’t be more than 5,530₩ most likely but for an hour’s work it wasn’t too bad. It was at least enough to buy a some food with, and if he kept adding the little cash amounts up then he might just be able to get a nice amount saved together. Not as much as his friends of course, he would never get that much, but at least he could make some and not look completely useless.
Jimin hadn’t known that his friends had been carrying that much cash with them over the days they had been on the road. Though things had been paid for, mostly with the youngest contributing a little and the eldest covering most of the costs, he hadn’t really been paying it all that much attention. It wasn’t that he had forgotten, but rather it had just slipped his mind that they had had a budget before their money had been stolen, and that they well and truly relied on it to get by. Taehyung had declared how easy it was to live on the streets without cash but he wasn’t so certain, mostly because he had never run away from home before like the other boy. He had the most experience of course, because not even Jungkook had went more than four days before slinking back home, never mind four solid weeks out on the streets. That meant that they had no choice but to believe him and though Jimin was desperately hoping that it was the case he wasn’t very certain that that was the case. It seemed to be too good to be true and their luck hadn’t been stellar so far.

Jimin sighed and once again tacked a poster in the corner of a hairdressers window before moving on. The pile in his hand was still sizable but he would find a way of dispersing them somehow, even if that meant climbing to the top of an apartment block and tossing them into the air to be carried away with the wind; all the way across to Japan if possible. He grabbed another one and eyed it wearily as he prepared to stick it in another window. Deep purple sheet of paper with the club title in bold golden print, photograph of an extremely attractive and daringly dressed lady. He doubted that she worked there and briefly wondered if she was an idol whose photo had been appropriated for the cheap dive club. It declared deals on shots and even advertised ‘hot and sexy live dancers.’ Jimin was pretty certain that only one of those adjectives was needed but whatever, it wasn’t his job to make the stupid fliers but instead just litter the city with them. He was so into his musings that he didn’t notice the uneven paving flag until his boot caught on it and he tripped up, arms flailing so that the fliers flew out of his hand and…

landed in a puddle right in an alley entrance.

“Shit!” Jimin groaned, even when a passing elderly lady glared at him. The pile practically absorbed the puddle in seconds and when he prodded it with the toes of his boot it squelched like a sponge. He had had one simple job to do and he couldn’t even do that. He’d get the terrible pay for this particular job and then he was done, he’d find something else to do instead of this. Even if it meant scrubbing toilets on his hands and knees he would accept it. He shrugged his backpack up onto his shoulders more securely and then started walking back the way he had come from, in the direction that led to the bustling club area. The place was literally only opening tonight so the decent amount of fliers he had managed to stick to windows and had handed around would probably help them out. Probably…

It took him nearly twenty minutes of solid walking to get back to the building and in that time he had checked every window and door for any signs that might mean a quick job for quick cash. He saw none, which meant that he was back to inquiring and sticking his head through open doors with his cutest smile in the hopes of it working. When Jimin got to the building he went down the alley to the back entrance and went inside, descending the slight steps to get to the basement level which served as the main area. He crossed it to get to the bar on the very far wall and quickly scanned the wide room to see that it was being stocked by a handful of men and women, and the woman he assumed to be the owner called him over with a smile. He had been anticipating an interrogation over the fliers
and yet she just handed him some cash with that same smile and informed him that there were a good
couple more piles of fliers left if he was interested. Jimin caught sight of the time on the clock behind
the counter and explained that he had to go but that he might just be back and she thanked him
before moving along the bar to help prepare tables and stools. He got out onto the street and quickly
checked the pay before shoving it into his jeans pocket. 6,800₩, not bad, but not great either.

He realised how far from the coach station he was and that he was nearly going to be be late and he
did the only thing he could think of: he started running down the street regardless of stares, sticking
close to the curb to avoid the traffic of bodies on the sidewalks. He barely even stopped for cars and
rather just raced across roads before the lights had even changed colour, knowing it was dangerous
as he heard the blare of horns and shouted curses but not particularly caring because he was fast
enough to not get hit. His backpack weighed him down as it jostled on his shoulders and he just
grabbed onto the straps and carried on running. By the time he saw the station coming up there was a
sharp stitch in his side but at least he would be able to catch his breath in a minute or so. Jimin jogged
the last stretch of road and as he got close he heard the unmistakable sound of Jungkook cheering.

“Dumbass is alive! He didn’t get hit by a car without us to help him cross the roads!”

“Fuck you!” he called back as he scaled the chain link fence to get on the other side, so that he was
in the lot with the other boys. “I was crossing roads long before you Kookie.”

“Wow, such a great achievement.” The boy smirked at him and a quick head count showed
everyone present and accounted for besides Taehyung. Jimin sat down with an exhausted sigh and
stretched his legs out as he leaned back on his wrists. The tarmac was hot against his palms from the
summer sun. He asked about the other boy and got a variety of shrugs and no real answers.
Everyone looked tired already and it had only been a few hours. He scanned the lot to see a handful
of coaches parked across it and he was about to open his mouth and say something mundane when
there was a sudden clanging noise and when he turned to look over his shoulder he saw the elusive
boy climbing the fence to drop down with a thump as his boots hit the lot ground.

“Here’s Mr. Buffet himself,” Yoongi said with a sarcastic smile, “with his bags of cash.” The boy
shrugged his backpack off and pulled a bright yellow bag out: no doubt a convenience store one at
first glance. He sat down in their impromptu formation and completed the loose circle.

“Dinner is served,” Taehyung announced as he upended the bag and let the contents fall out. “Kinda.
Not the greatest but uh-”

“Where did you get all of this?” Seokjin asked as he stared at the mountain.
“Bought most of it,” he replied nonchalantly, “lifted the rest. You’re looking at roughly 17,000₩ spent so far out of my earnings.”

“How much would that be exactly?” Hoseok rubbed at his forehead gingerly before dropping his hand back to his lap.

“42,6…no 700₩,” Taehyung started tossing packets of food at them, basic junk because it was the cheapest and only thing they could afford right now.

“Seriously?” Seokjin asked, tone revealing that he wasn’t just in disbelief but maybe also in awe. The boy reached into his boot and pulled out a handful of notes, shoving them into Jimin’s hand so that he could count, making sure to specify that there were also a dozen or so coins stashed into his pockets too. He flicked through them before laughing under his breath.

“This son of a bitch…”

“Damn, I really did underestimate you,” Namjoon said with a head shake.

“How’s everyone else doing, huh?” And as they hastily devoured the junk food chips and dried meats, sharing sodas that the boy had bought or possibly stolen, they all explained how their pockets were starting to fill up and pulling out notes and coins to count as they did. Yoongi had managed to snag a dish-washing role in a café right before the busy lunch rush and had worked three solid hours to make just 12,800₩ so far, but he added that he was eyeing up a few more possible jobs to get right back into it. Seokjin had helped an elderly lady with her food stall in a market, making sure to mention that she had told him his handsome face would bring in more customers, earning 17,000₩ over the course of the morning and early afternoon. Hoseok had busked a few times and had earned 19,600₩ to his name but judging from his current haggard appearance he wouldn’t be dancing much longer. Jungkook had managed to snag a night singing in a bar that had a vacancy to fill and had been looking for something to spend the morning hours on to no avail, so Jimin had told him about the club and the piles of fliers and he said that he would hit it up. Namjoon had helped clean a local park free of graffiti and litter for just 15,300₩ and Jimin felt rather dumb admitting that he had only managed to collect 6,800₩ so far. He had only managed to find hour’s work but he felt rather useless regardless.

“See,” Taehyung said with a grin, “the cash really is adding up.” He mock toasted them with his bottle of cola and they only mumbled in agreement. It was adding up, maybe only enough to last a day or so on top of this one, but adding up nonetheless. “We’ll be fucking rich in no time.”
“Hey,” Namjoon turned to look right at him and Jimin looked back curiously. “I was on my way to the park when I noticed something. A scrapyard not far from it, maybe a block or so. Might need a little help, you know?”

“What, you think I can help?”

“You totally could.”

“Joonie’s right,” Yoongi said with a nod, “you could earn a pretty good amount fixing things or taking ‘em apart.”

“I dunno, I’m pretty clumsy, I might-”

“You can help,” the young man continued over him, “cos you’re really good with that shit.” Jimin dropped his eyes to the pile of empty packets and bottles in front of them for a moment. “And I know you can do it.”

“…Really?” He asked as he looked up at him.

“Really really.” Yoongi confirmed with a smile and he let out a laugh and felt an embarrassed blush on his cheeks. It wasn’t often that he was complimented and he rather enjoyed it a lot. Seokjin gathered all of the trash together and shoved it back into the yellow plastic store bag and it seemed like a sign to get moving. Namjoon offered to walk him to the scrapyard and so Jimin scaled the fence after him as the others got to their feet and stretched with sighs and tired groans.

Time to get back to work.

When he checked his watch again he saw that it was 8pm and Namjoon let out a heavy sigh. Every muscle in his body seemed to be aching, particularly all the way up his back from the lower to his
shoulders, which he had been using rather vigorously to scrub at park benches. Removing graffiti that had been drawn on with marker pens or spray cans of paint: curse words, crude doodles, names and declarations of love with various years and acronyms underneath; I.D.A.T. being the most popular: if destroyed, always true. Well, he had certainly tried his hardest to destroy all of it before moving onto the next task, and that had been his morning and early afternoon hours all worked away. It had been hard work, not the kind that resulted in feelings of fulfillment and pride but rather drained him of most of his energy. 25,500₩ earned in total after finishing up after the rushed lunch break and then back to the streets to wander and search but to no luck; instead left handing out fliers just like Jimin had before he had helped him snag some work at the scrapyard. He hoped the boy managed to earn more because he had looked rather downtrodden earlier, embarrassed at the little money he had gotten. He wanted to remind him just how hard he was working, how hard they were all working, and that he was doing good regardless.

Taehyung’s cash was stored in his left pocket to keep it separate from the rest. He probably should have handed it back earlier but it hadn’t even crossed his mind. The boy had technically earned the amount back during the morning, having to spend a little of it on food, and he knew that meant one thing. It meant that the boy had been stealing again. It was no shock or surprise, Taehyung stole pretty much everything he could to save spending a couple of thousand won and he knew that he sold a lot of shit along for an instant profit. He knew what to steal, mostly medication he could palm off nice and easy, the cheap addictive shit like painkillers and sleeping tablets rather than the good stuff. Cigarettes he could grab from newspaper kiosks with a quick snatch of the the wrist before anyone noticed, anything slight enough to fit into his pockets like phone chargers and makeup palettes. The boy was good, really good, but he risked a lot every single time he lifted something and he was worried that he was going to get arrested. They wouldn’t know, they wouldn’t have a clue because he would just disappear without a single warning and leave them all hanging around in confusion.

But if he made the cash…well, it wasn’t like he was going to stop him.

Namjoon kicked a crushed energy drink can off the sidewalk and into the gutter, hands shoved in his pockets as he strolled down the streets. He kept his eyes trained for anything that might mean a quick bit of cash: whether it be handing out political fliers for parties he didn’t even know existed, washing dishes or toilets, anything at all. All he saw was neon flashing tubes on the sides of buildings, massive billboards with smiling women with flawless skin and teeth as they held up bottles of water or perfume, the constant flashing of headlights of the traffic-packed roads beside him. It wasn’t very dark, rather the sky was a purple that darkened with the passing minutes and the burnt ochre just visible behind skyscraper buildings showed that the sun was in the midst of setting. Not long left of the day but he needed that little bit more, a little kick, to make it feel like the hard work was completely warranted. But it wasn’t as easy as Taehyung had claimed this morning at all. Cash could be made but hours were needed to do so. It seemed that the city was just coming to life at this hour, likely because the night market stalls, bars and clubs were open for business and appealed to any tourists. Did that mean more chances of work? Serving shots in a bar? Possibly, but entering one and trying to locate an owner before the doors let patrons in would prove a little difficult. What were the boys doing right now? He hoped they were staying out of trouble, hopefully indoors at least rather than on the streets where danger might lurk. They didn’t need to be robbed again after what had happened today.
He was passing a small building that looked like a bar when he noticed a man smoking on the slight step outside of it, a man that looked a little like Choi: a bouncer. He was wearing a suit with the top buttons of his shirt undone and he had the ‘look’ about him, one that caught his eye.

“Hey,” Namjoon called out, “know a place where a man can make a little cash?”

“I do,” the man replied as he slipped the stick free and breathed smoke out of his nose in twin plumes. “But it depends. How old are you?” He told him he was twenty, the added year lie rolling off his tongue surprisingly easy, and he looked him up and down slowly before taking another drag on the stick. “You got a couple of thousand won in your pocket than you could make a lot of cash in here.”

“Oh yeah? What’s on offer?”

“Cards, machines, bets,” the man didn’t stub the stick out but rather just tossed the cigarette on the ground with a flick of his fingers, “you interested?”

Namjoon thought this over for a moment. He had a little earning that he really could make a lot more, but it was a risk. He could waste it all, could meet the others empty handed and they would know that he had gambled it all away like an idiot. He could make a killing or they could kill him. But imagine how they would react if he showed up at the coach station again in a few hours with a bundle of notes in hand? It was enough to make him feel a little rush of excitement, hands nearly shaking in his hoodie pockets.

“Yeah,” he said after a few seconds, “I’m interested.”

There was the scent of cigarette smoke covering most of the other scents, the tang of alcohol and the heady aromas of feminine perfume that seemed to cling to the air. It was a rather classy-looking bar considering most of the dives Jungkook had passed earlier in the day and Jungkook was surprised that he was even allowed inside, never mind able to play music on the tiny corner stage. He was out of the way at least, hidden in the corner lit only by a single stage light. He had been tinkling the piano
keys for a few minutes now, following the notes on the paper without much care because he knew this particular piece by heart almost. He had played it enough times in music class and additional lessons to have memorised it all, fingers quickly moving along the keys and thumbs pressing down hard. He had no clue who had been booked originally but the set in front of him consisted of a couple of instrumentals and songs that seemed better suited to female vocals than male. He knew a few but not all of them and so he had had to replace some of them with other pieces, thankful that he hadn’t fucked up the minute long audition the owner had given him through nerves. Truthfully he hadn’t been nervous at all because he didn’t get stage fright, but performing in high school recitals for free wasn’t the same as trying to earn cash to make sure that he and his friends weren’t sleeping in a park for the night. It meant playing as well as he could, even if it given only ten seconds to warm up his voice whilst the man had stared at him and waited impatiently, practically tapping his foot on the wooden flooring, but when he had actually started he had shown a great interest. And when he had finished one of the female workers cleaning down the counter had paused and had given him an applause with a wide smile. That had been the sign he had needed to know that he managed to secure the opening for the night.

He eyed the sheet for a few seconds before moving his left hand further down the scale.

Jungkook knew that he probably wouldn’t even get half of the wage for the bill but even that much was better than nothing, better than cleaning the gutters like a criminal doing community service for a couple of thousand won and having passing pedestrians stare at him: the kid that should have been in school on his knees in week old litter. Well, he was pretty damn certain that he wouldn’t be getting stared at much longer because this was the last day of school before the break and soon the streets would be packed with kids. Which meant no more thieving hostel owners and having to avoid the police because they were ditching. No, they had every right to be out on the roads and so long as Taehyung wasn’t lugging half a liquor store’s worth of beer in his backpack they were perfectly entitled to call the cops should the need arise. He was hoping that it wouldn’t but he wouldn’t be willing to bet on it. Was Namjoon betting right now? Probably, but he seemed to have better luck than the rest of them so he was likely faring rather well, and if he lost some cash well…nothing ventured, nothing gained. At least he had tried something.

When he next checked the sheet he saw that he was nearing the last bar so he added a little flourish on the end like always and as the last key tinkled there was some applause from across the bar. He turned to the next sheet and spared a quick glance over the interior. Quite a lot of business men and women visible, some in smart office clothing and others dressed up more finely. In the lights he saw the unmistakable flash of expensive watches and jewelry, stones catching light and sparkling just like Venus had been that night in the trainyard. A few faces looking back at him likely anticipating the next opening bars of music. He shifted on the stool to play again when he heard a voice calling out from just a few feet away.

“Excuse me?” He looked back over his shoulder to see a young woman right at the edge of the slight stage. Very pretty, tight black dress that matched her sleek hair.
“Yeah?”

“Could you play a song for me again?” she asked with a smile that parted her red lips. “You see ‘Close to You’ was the song playing when my fiance proposed to me and you sang it so beautifully that I…” She paused for a moment before holding up a note. “I’d be happy to tip you to sing it again.”

“Uh…sure, I’d be happy to.” Jungkook flicked back to the sheet for the song and stretched his fingers for a few seconds. “End the night with a song, huh?” She nodded slightly before shifting to sit at a free table close to the stage to watch him. He wet his lips, took a deep breath, and then started playing the piano again. He forced himself to keep his eyes on the sheet or his fingers and not look across the bar but he risked a glance up once or twice to see her watching him with a soft smile on her lips, and even a couple of people were slow dancing across the bar in a space between tables. He wondered what his friends would think if they were in the bar right now? Would they be wracked with embarrassment like they were every time Seokjin tried to rap? Would they be surprised and maybe impressed? Though he had no way of telling he thought that they might just be impressed enough to give an applause too. Why, Taehyung might just jump on the tables, followed by Jimin who would no doubt fall off in his excitement seconds later. When he was finished again there was a brief moment of silence and then another applause; the loudest one yet. He was a little shocked by it and as he got to the bottom of the stage the young woman came over to press the note into his hand before he could possibly tell her that he didn’t want the tip.

“Um, thank yo-”

“No, thank you,” she said before going back across the bar. He watched her going dumbly before looking across the room and the owner was standing in an open doorway behind the counter looking at him. The man gestured at him so heducked under the counter and followed him into the small storage area.

“Did pretty damn well for a high school kid,” he remarked and Jungkook just waited for him to continue without saying anything in return. “First time I’ve heard an applause here in…months.”

“Thank you.”

“Fair to say that you earned this,” the owner held out a roll of bills to him so he accepted it, “and if you’re ever in need of more I won’t say no to you kid, but I’ll bet your parents will.” Jungkook, whose parents probably thought he was on the streets of Seoul hanging around with the homeless like usual and not in another city entirely, just laughed softly in fake agreement. “You’re going home now, right?”
“I’m staying with friends, we’re going on a…trip for the break.”

“Then be careful out there until you meet up with them. People will try and rob you blind so no walking down alleys, alright kid?” He nodded and didn’t feel the need to mention his friends had practically been robbed of cash already today. “I’m serious, heck I’d even open another live night just for you to come in and entertain, the patrons seem to love you.”

“Thank you, you might just see me again,” Jungkook said with a smile as his eyes landed on the clock across the room. Running late, very late, so he excused himself and left the bar at a quick walk as he exited to get out into the alley. He was about to start running when his boot kicked something and it skittered across the ground. He dropped his gaze to see a black rectangle and when he reached down to retrieve it he felt the familiar sensation of leather against the fingers. A wallet. There was a wallet in his hands and he instinctively opened it to look at the I.D.

Decent amount of notes inside.

Jungkook glanced up and down the alley but no sight of anyone. No one could see him holding the lost wallet that didn’t belong to him, one with cash in that could really come in handy right now. I shouldn’t take it, he thought as he ran his thumb along the leather, ‘cos that makes me no different from the hostel owner.

“Is it really stealing?” he asked himself under his breath as he looked at it, voice barely above a whisper. “Finders keepers…” he scoffed, “is such a childish thing to say.” There was a corner of something sticking out from the inner compartment behind the I.D. so grabbed it and pulled it free to see a Polaroid shot of two little kids: boy and girl.

It’s the wrong thing to do, he has a family…

but someone else will probably rob him anyway.

That doesn’t excuse my actions at all and I know it. Look at those kids, the cash isn’t mine, they need it. Just leave the fucking thing and walk away.

But…
“I have a family too,” Jungkook said before shoving the Polaroid back inside. Then, before he could talk himself out of it, he slipped the notes out and shoved them down inside his boot with the rest of his money. The wallet was tossed unceremoniously back onto the floor where he had found it and he carried on walking down the alley without looking back over his shoulder.

When Seokjin stepped out onto the street Yoongi was sitting on the curb, as recognisable by his red hair as he was by the waft of cigarette smoke floating into the air around his head. He took a moment to study him before walking the few feet of pavement to nudge him with the toes of his boot. His friend grumbled about his back, even reaching down to rub at it, and he just bent down and dragged him to his feet.

“You sound like my grandpa.” Seokjin laughed as the young man fixed with tee with a huff, ash falling off the end of the stick as he did. “And guess what, he’s dead.”

“You’ll be dead too if you do that again,” his friend intoned but it was useless. The threat might have worked on anyone else but not on him. “Wait, your grandpa’s dead, since when?”

“Yoongi, he’s been dead for five years, you came to the funeral remember?”

“Oh shit, yeah,” he pulled the stick free for a second to wet his lips, tip of his tongue darting out slightly. “I do remember. I’m that tired that my brain feels like it’s melting, OK? So just ignore me.” Seokjin didn’t feel that much better and he could only silently agree with him. College work might have been brain-numbing to the point of nearly painful but it wasn’t the same as this. The work over the day had been frantic and stressful and his back was hurting a little too from constantly standing and running around with little breaks. Is this what Taehyung went through most days? Was this the price to pay for running away from home? How had he managed to put up with it day-in, day-out? The boy was deserving of quite some respect it would seem. “Still gonna brag about your handsome face now you’re stuck cleaning dishes like the rest of the ugly kids?”

“Well, I was washing them with you,” he pointed out as they started walking down the empty street. From the blocks behind them came the pounding of music from clubs, the drone of traffic and voices signalling that the nightlife had started to thrive. Yoongi forced a laugh at the remark that quickly evolved into a cough. “Uh-oh, you need to start cutting down,” he tutted disapprovingly, “and what
better time to start than when we’re all broke and can’t afford to buy any.”

“I’d beg Tae to steal me some,” his friend replied without missing a beat. “I mean Jin, I’m really not proud to admit this but…I’d suck dick for a packet of cigarettes, alright.”

“What a good idea! Why not make a little extra so we don’t have to sleep on the streets tonight?”

“Says the pretty one,” Yoongi retorted, smoke pluming out of his nose. “Guys might actually pay you but me? I’d have to pay ’em.” At this wisecrack Seokjin snorted laughter and the corners of the other man’s lips twitched into a smile. “But let’s not joke about shit like that, we’re not that desperate and I don’t wanna give the kids any bad fucking ideas.” Yoongi tossed the used-up butt into the gutter and let the last drag out with a heavy sigh. “I’d rather the little assholes sold drugs, at least that’s less dangerous.”

“Tae’s already ahead of you,” he muttered, “selling aspirin and other pills because he can make a couple of thousand won on them.” He felt his friend’s eyes on him and he just looked straight ahead as they walked. “If he could get the strong stuff he’d lift it and sell that too.”

“You serious?” He nodded and his friend could only make a series of annoyed noises under his breath. The coach station wasn’t too far from their location, just several minutes of walking, and he was hoping to get there quickly just so that any of the others wouldn’t be waiting on their own in the dark. They walked in silence for a block and then Yoongi broke it in a quiet voice. “I know I joked about the cigarettes but really, the kid can’t keep doing shit like that. He can’t live like that his entire life. A couple of weeks, yeah whatever, but…ten years down the line?” He was right, completely right, but there was very little they could say to the boy now. Maybe when it was all over and they were back home in Seoul they could talk to him about his bad habit. Maybe it would even get through to Taehyung if they tried hard enough. Before he resorted to things a lot worst than fobbing cheap painkillers off to soft addicts on street corners.

As they got closer to the station they saw that it was lit up and people were moving around inside, no doubt getting prepared for a ride on a night coach, perhaps to get to the capital or as far down as Busan. People with holdalls just like them but not wearing the same pairs of jeans for four days straight now. Not like them. On the street outside there was a single bench and he could see two forms sitting on it and after a moment he discerned that it was Hoseok and Jimin, the former with his legs stretched out in front of him and the latter with his legs folded up on the bench, both bags shoved out of the way underneath it. In the time that it took for them to reach the station Jungkook came running around a corner and nearly slammed right into him.

“Kookie’s ass is on fire,” Yoongi declared as the boy bent over to catch his breath. “What’s the rush?”
“I’ve been running…all over this…fucking city so I…wouldn’t delay you all.”

“Still waiting on Tae and Namjoon!” Hoseok called from the bench and Jimin shifted to let the other young man sit down on the end of the bench to save him complaining about his back. “You’re not late at all.” The boy straightened up and then moved to sit on the pavement just in front of the bench, and so Seokjin joined him, relishing the fact he was finally no longer on his feet even if it meant sitting on the cold hard stone. “Any luck?” The question was aimed at their youngest friend and the boy grinned before slipped a handful of notes out.

“You know I got it.”

“You got that much in tips alone?” Jungkook shoved it back into his boot but he didn’t hold Hoseok’s gaze entirely when he nodded. “Damn…”

“Tae’s got competition,” Yoongi remarked before asking Jimin how he had fared. The boy said that he hadn’t counted his cash just yet but it was a better amount out fliers any day, wide smile on his face as he did. “We’re just waiting on the return of Joonie and the prodigal son to knock us all dead.”

It took maybe fifteen minutes before Taehyung finally showed and in that time they pooled all of the cash together and discovered that they had 136,500₩, which might not have been much but combined with Jungkook’s 30,000 already and the other boy’s presumed 34,000 from this morning and the rest he and Namjoon likely had made, they were nearly back at the amount that they had had before getting robbed. In terms of a single day it was pretty damn impressive and Seokjin was actually amazed. When Taehyung came strolling down the street he did so with confidence in his gait, backpack jostling with every step. That was a good sign, a really good sign.

“I didn’t get 90,000,” he said as he grabbed hold of a streetlamp and leaned against it. “I got…108,000₩.” When they all loudly exclaimed and demanded proof he pulled a roll out of his boot, held together with a broken hair slide rather than a money clip, and Seokjin rapidly counted it before declaring that he did indeed have that amount, allowing bonus for a couple of hundred in coins in his pockets. Taehyung started laughing and proceeded to dance around the post, swinging off it like a monkey. “Am I good or am I fucking good, huh?”

“Fucking good,” Jimin said before grinning, “real fucking good.”

“Time for a celebration, who wants some soju-”
Taehyung was just about to shrug his backpack off to no doubt pull out a bottle of soju when there was a sudden rumble of an engine and a car rolled down the street before pulling up right in front of them on the curb. For a few seconds they all just stared at it dumbly and then the driver-seat window unrolled and Namjoon’s head popped out.

“Sorry I’m late,” he called with a wide smirk, “but I think this makes up for it, huh?”
Jungkook wasn’t particularly a car person. His father owned one, a model he didn’t recognise nor care about but apparently boasted low energy emissions to help save the planet. In his opinion, if someone wanted to save the planet then walking would probably be a smarter option. The legroom was cramped and the seats not that comfortable for the price tag which was why he much preferred walking to school. It hadn’t even crossed his mind that a vehicle of some kind would have really helped them out, would have gotten them from city to city in a few hours rather than two entire days, and when the car pulled up in front of them he had just stared at it blankly, wondering who was going to climb out. Possibly someone dropping a friend or relative off at the station to board a coach? He had even been about to look away when their friend’s head had popped out of the window and he had felt his jaw dropping open in complete confusion. What the hell was he doing in the car? Was he getting a lift off a stranger? Yet the wide grin on his face had been enough to show him that that was not the case at all.

“Sorry I’m late, but I think this makes up for it, huh?” And Namjoon held his hand up to dangle the keys in front of him, and that had been the final piece of the puzzle snapping in place for him. The young man had the keys and was sitting in the driver-seat because he had driven the car to them, because he seemed to own the car even though the idea was so absurd he couldn’t possibly figure out how or why. Judging from his friends stunned silence they didn’t have a clue either and there was nearly an entire minute of silence before one of them broke it.

“What. The. Fuck?” Yoongi asked, punctuating each word with a pause and summing all of their thoughts up in just three simple syllables. He even had his mouth hanging open as widely as his, and had he had a cigarette between his lips it would have been burning a hole right through his jeans by now.

Jungkook slowly ran his eyes over the vehicle to take it all in, seeing that the paint all over the body was a medium blue like faded denim. The shape was long and had a rectangle-shaped hood and boot that made it look somewhat vintage. Long and wide windows set into chrome and low headlights shaped like circles rather than squared. He saw some wear on the paint so that the metal underneath was on show, rusted from age, and that one of the windshield wipers was missing. It wasn’t a new car, that much was certain, but it still looked in pretty good condition and that was just the exterior and not the interior, the engines seemingly in a good way judging from the sound it had made just a few seconds ago.
“A Chevy 1960 Impala Convertible as I live and fucking breathe!” Taehyung declared before whistling under his breath and racing over to run his hand along the hood. “Hot damn!”

“OK, so are we getting an explanation for all of this?” Hoseok asked dumbly and Namjoon popped the door open before stepping onto the sidewalk. He stretched his legs and then leaned back against the side of the car. “Because I really need one right now.”

“Won it in a bet,” he replied with a wide smirk, “well actually, I won it playing poker if you can believe that? I can’t, I’m still reeling from it but hey, talk about crazy good luck, right?” Namjoon was playing with the keys, fingering the ring so that it tinkled melodically between his fingers. Taehyung was still observing the vehicle with wide eyes, expression showing that he was keen and interested, eyeing it like a slice of cake. Yoongi also got to his feet to wander over and glance in through the open door at the dashboard. “I mean, it’s not brand spanking new or anything like that but we woke up this morning robbed of pretty much all of our cash and now…now we have a fucking car.” Namjoon started laughing and after a few seconds they couldn’t help but join in. He had finally explained it all up for them, put the entire situation into perspective, and it really was so insane that Jungkook briefly wondered if he was actually awake and reached down to pinch between his thumb and forefinger hard. He didn’t wake up of course, because he was already awake. “And Choi actually told me to not gamble outside of Seoul. Shit, I nearly took his advice.”

“Win any cash too?”

“Oh, the car isn’t good enough for you, huh, Yoongi?”

“Nah, just curious.”

“Got about…80,000₩. It’s not much but-”

“Don’t matter, we got about 244,000₩ all together,” Jimin explained, “and Tae got 108,000 of that on his own.” Namjoon furrowed his brow and asked him if he was being serious and Seokjin showed him the roll of notes still in his hand. Namjoon stared at it and then Taehyung grabbed it back before shoving it into his boot.

“You upstaged me man! I said we could earn cash not win fucking cars!”

“324,000₩ and a car,” Jungkook said, the first thing he had managed to say since their friend had arrived a few minutes ago. “I don’t believe this. What the fuck?” He started laughing again before
getting to his feet and moving to stand by the other boy. He saw a few dents in the hood and several stickers in the corner of the window, in which the glass was unscratched and looked in perfect condition. “Is this a good car, huh?” he asked stupidly and Taehyung snorted before slinging his arm around his shoulders and ruffling his hair roughly just like he always did with Jimin to annoy him. “What, I was being serious?”

“Look at this baby! A good car? Fuck you Jeon Jungkook!” He tried to wriggle free but his grip was too tight and it didn’t work. Seokjin decided that it was a good time to pop the back the boot open and drop his holdall in it and they all hastily tossed their bags at him, making him complain after Jimin managed to smack him in the face with his backpack rather hard. The other boy didn’t hand his bag over because it meant letting go of him, and possibly also because there was some booze inside of it. “I haven’t seen one of these in forever, no one drives the cool-looking cars any more.”

“Probably because this car is older than our grandparents,” Hoseok remarked and it made Jungkook grin. “Or maybe because they guzzle gas like you drink beer?” Their eldest friend slammed the boot shut and they all stood around the vehicle for a moment as if they weren’t entirely certain what came next.

“One question,” Jimin asked, breaking the silence, “who actually has a license?” The question hanged in the air for a few seconds and then they all burst out laughing again. The boy looked at them all in comic confusion, eyes wide and lips pouted in a little ‘o’. “What? I don’t get it? What’s so funny?”

“God Jimin, you wonderful child,” Yoongi grinned widely. “Since when did we care about licenses or shit like that, huh?” Jimin furrowed his brow as he thought this over and then he smiled slightly, but he still looked rather confused by it all. “The real question is: who’s driving the car first?” Namjoon looked at Seokjin silently and the young man thought it over before confirming that he’d drive for the first few hours until they were out of the city just because he had at least had some driving lessons in the past before giving up the idea of being able to afford a car. He finally didn’t need to buy one after all. He tossed the keys at him and Seokjin caught them better than the bags before moving to climb into the front. Namjoon went around the side to dive into the passenger-seat before any of them could even shout the word ‘shotgun’ and then there was the sudden realisation that they all had to fit in the backseat. Jungkook managed to wriggle inside before Taehyung could, forced to slide along to the middle because Jimin had also beat the two others to the other window seat.

“Respect your elders,” Yoongi complained as he stood in the doorway and glared at them.

“Shift over a little, there might be enough room.” Jimin elbowed him hard in the ribs so he pressed up against his friend and managed to free up enough room for the young man to sit down, having to place one leg up on the other boy’s knee so that he could slam the door shut. Hoseok walked around to the back to climb into Taehyung’s side, sitting on his lap because he had no other choice: there
wasn’t a single inch of seat left. No seat belts to keep him in place the boy had to wrap his arms around his waist to make a temporary one and Jungkook shifted to try and allow him a little legroom.

“Why didn’t you win a bus?” Yoongi asked and they all snorted laughter because the comment was really apt right now. Namjoon twisted to look back at them and the grin on his face showed that he was enjoying their discomfort greatly. Jungkook felt a little like a tin of sardines, pressed between his friends so much that he couldn’t even wriggle on the seat.

“A bus isn’t the most stylish of rides,” Hoseok commented as he moved to rest his back against the window, long legs awkwardly folded up so that he didn’t slam his knees into the back of the front seat, boots hitting against Jungkook’s shin a few times as he tried to get comfortable. “We look so much cooler in this tin can.”

“This car is a beaut,” Taehyung argued with a shake of his head, “and stop moving around, I feel like you’re riding me right now…”

“You wish,” the other boy scoffed.

“Not in front of the kids lover boy, I’m not really into the kinky, voyeuristic shit.”

“There’s something sticking into my back, what the fuck is sticking into my back?” Hoseok asked suddenly.

“…I promise it’s not my dick.”

“It’s the mechanism for the windows,” Seokjin explained. “Surely you can remember cars back when you needed to roll the windows down?” Yoongi reached over to grab a small handle beside him and rolled his wrist a few times so that the glass slipped down and let in a soft breeze that played with his and Jimin’s hair. “You two remember them, right?” He and Namjoon both confirmed this and he sighed in mock relief before sticking the keys into the ignition.

“Yeah, but back in your day the tires were made from stone,” Jungkook joked.

“Seokjin invented the wheel, dude,” Taehyung added and their friend laughed theatrically as he started the engine and gently twisted the wheel so that it pulled away from the curb and onto the empty road. As it rolled down the street Jungkook spared one last glance out of the window at the
coach station. He saw the coaches parked across the lot like sentries and most of the interior because there were large windows along the length of the building. It wasn’t like the station back home, made of brick rather than metal and without steps and ramps to get inside. It hadn’t really registered with him that they were already an entire city away from Seoul and currently in the act of making it two. They had had some shitty luck these past three days but it was starting to look up at last, a break of sun through the storm clouds that would let the sky turn back to bright blue once more.

“You know Tae,” Seokjin said, “one day you’ll be my age too. How’s that for a nightmare?”

“Well… I wasn’t planning on sleeping tonight,” the boy muttered as Jungkook shifted to try looking out of the other window. Hoseok was blocking most of the view but he could see a peek of street, rows of colourfully lit up buildings in the distance and a glowing beacon of some kind of radio tower. When he looked out of the front window he saw the headlights glowing brightly, illuminating the road in front of them. After a minute Jimin asked where they were going. Like always at least one of them had to venture onto this topic, in the hopes of perhaps getting a proper answer for once. “Wherever the road takes us.”

“What if the road takes us back to Seoul?” Yoongi asked with a mischievous expression. “What then?”

“Then we go to Incheon,” Taehyung explained without missing a beat, “and then we could go all the way to North Korea if we tried hard enough.”

“Try getting over the DMZ without being blown up by a landmine,” Namjoon said with a soft laugh as he turned back to the front window. “Though you could probably find a way Tae…”

“Then we can get all of the way to China! And then Europe!”

“Seriously Tae, Europe?” Hoseok asked, weary but amused look on his face.

“Don’t you wanna go to France? Speak the language of love?”

“No, not really.”

“Mi amor.”
“That’s Spanish.” They could only roll their eyes at this but it didn’t stop Taehyung from loudly declaring that they were totally going to Europe with a wide grin. “All I really want to do right now is sleep, and hopefully not wake up in France.” So Seokjin told them that there was nothing stopping them from resting up whilst he took charge of the driving for a few hours.

“That’s easy for you to say, you’re not being crushed to death right now,” Jungkook mumbled as he tried to get more comfortable. The seats were kind of nice, not overly padded leather but enough to still feel plush against his tired back. There was a headrest attached to the top and he settled back against it with a heavy sigh. It wasn’t a hostel bed by any rights but it sure as hell beat sleeping on a park bench or down a cold subway line any night. He couldn’t see the time on the dashboard clock but the watch on Taehyung’s wrist was visible, revealing the time to be way past the allotted final meetup of 12am. It was now something closer to 2am judging from the fingers behind the shattered glass face and he felt seconds away from passing out from exhaustion. They had been awake since 8am, walking constantly in the heat since then, and he thought that he could happily sleep for twenty-four hours straight no problem…if he could just get comfortable first that was. He closed his eyes and folded his arms across his chest and…

The slamming of a car door woke him up again.

Jungkook opened his eyes before closing them again with a hiss of pain. When he had drifted off the sky outside had been pitch-black, the interior lit only by the dim ceiling light on the roof of the vehicle. But right now there was bright sunlight streaming in from the windows to hit him right in the eyes. After a few seconds he opened them again but more of a squint than wide open, allowing his eyes to adapt to the change more easily. The sky was now a light pastel blue that revealed that the sun was starting to rise, tinged with lilac across the horizon like watercolour paints washed gently across a canvas. A scattering of clouds that might mean it could be a cooler day than the last few. Not that it would matter with the windows open letting in a breeze.

Jungkook groaned under his breath and reached up to rub at his heavy eyelids before dropping his hands back down on his lap only to find that his palms brushed against something that wasn’t his thighs but rather someone’s knees: Hoseok’s. He looked up to see that the front seats were empty and a quick glance out the window showed his two friends were standing beside the car stretching their legs and jumping up and down on the spot to wake up their stiff muscles. He shifted to look across the backseat and study the others. Hoseok was stirring awake, maybe because he had just knocked his legs and woke him up or because of the slamming car door. Still sitting on Taehyung’s lap, the other boy’s face burrowed against his shoulder and presumably asleep because he was completely still. Jimin was to his left, leaned over so that he was using their other friend’s chest as a pillow, and Yoongi was slumped back against the seat, head balanced on the window and so deeply asleep that he looked near unconscious. What time was it? He moved forward to lean over the gear stick panel and eye the dashboard. 6:12am. He had been asleep for barely four hours. Now he knew what Yoongi felt like. Jungkook sat back in the seat and that was when Jimin jerked in his sleep.
“Hmm…what happened?” he asked in a heavy voice, eyes still closed.

“The car stopped, Namjoon and Seokjin are swapping roles I think.”

“Mmm…’kay.”

There was a sudden movement to his right and he turned his head just in time to see Hoseok climbing out of the car. The act of doing so woke Taehyung up and a second later he rolled out of it, muttering about how he missed real toilets as he stumbled over to the side of the road. When he looked back over his shoulder at the other boy Jimin seemed to be asleep again so he left him and shimmied along to the end of the backseat so that he could swing his legs out of the open doorway, sitting hunched forward and folding his elbows on his knees.

“Why am I awake this early? I thought this adventure was supposed to be fun?”

“I dunno, pissing on the side of the road after two hours of sleep with someone sitting on my lap crushing my boner…that’s my idea of real fun.” Taehyung declared as he zipped his jeans back up and then stretched his arms, reaching up and behind to touch his opposite shoulders with a satisfied noise under his breath. Jungkook raised an eyebrow at Hoseok to confirm if this was the case and his friend flashed him the middle finger before going around the back to pop the boot open.

“The others?” Namjoon asked, hunched forward to touch his toes so that his hood fell down to block his face.

“Sleeping,” he explained, “want me to wake them up?”

“No, let them rest,” Seokjin said as he waved this off. “At least until we get to a gas station.” From a few feet away came the sound of Hoseok rummaging around in the boot and a moment later he slammed it shut again and reappeared with a bottle of water that had been in his backpack. “There should be one coming up in couple of miles or so, which is good because we need the gas.” Jungkook thought this over for a moment before getting out of the car and walking over to get into the passenger-seat. He had just settled back in the seat and put his boots up on the dashboard when the young man moved to lean in through the open doorway. “Excuse me?”

“Yeah?”
“You’re sitting in my seat.”

“Huh, I don’t see your name on it.” Seokjin rolled his eyes at the comment. “Hey, I had Jimin elbowing me for four hours straight, Tae snoring and Hoseok using my lap like a foot stool. Just for a little while? I mean, you might be more cramped than me but…oops, you snooze you lose.”

“I haven’t slept in twenty-four hours,” his friend muttered before moving out of the doorway again. After several more minutes of stretching, toilet breaks and complaining, the rest of them milled back into the car. Namjoon climbed into the driver-seat and actually snapped his seatbelt in place before starting the engine. Jungkook shifted to look over his shoulder at the rest of the gang, unable to keep the smirk off his face at the sight of them squished together so tightly. Jimin and Yoongi actually looked rather comfortable on the right but the other three most certainly did not. Taehyung had demanded a window seat and had ended up on both Hoseok and Seokjin’s laps because he had been too stubborn and as a result he had actually rolled the window down fully and had shoved his legs out of the gap in what was most definitely a traffic violation. If a police car went past they were going to get pulled over but he doubted that one would appear this far out from the city. Hoseok had looked annoyed by this predicament for a few seconds before resigning himself to it and Seokjin looked like he wasn’t going to get much rest whilst the boy wriggled about until he could get comfortable. He was just about to turn back to the front when Taehyung unzipped his backpack and actually pulled out a bottle of soju, the one he had been talking about last night.

“Tae… it’s 6am right now.” Jungkook said in disbelief.

“And it’s like… 5pm in America. Probably.” The boy bit down on the cap and actually managed to dent the middle enough so that he could pull it off. “What, don’t you want any?”

“Driving without licenses in a car with no registration,” Hoseok remarked, “and a bottle of soju in tow.” He laughed under his breath before adding. “We really are determined to get arrested, aren’t we?”

“Things only really get fun when there’s a jail sentence involved,” Taehyung took a sip of the soju and the scent wafted through the car to hit Jungkook in the face. The last time he had drank soju had been months back and he vaguely remembered fireworks for reason, which wasn’t the smartest combination. The boy lowered the bottle for a moment as if about to add something onto this but after a few seconds of silence he just took another sip.

“Try to not get too drunk before 10am,” Seokjin muttered, eyes closed as he no doubt tried to rest them even though it was probably useless.
Jungkook sat back in the seat and then unrolled his own window, working the handle a few times until there was a sizable gap. His father’s smart eco friendly car most certainly did not have manual windows. He stuck his arm through the gap and let the breeze blow against it, amused by the force needed to push back against it. The view outside showed a dirt road surrounded on both sides with dried grass rather than the lush green that had been back in the woods with the train tracks. No fences ringed them off in any way so that the yellowed blades just danced in the breeze and reached out to dangle just a few inches away from the body of the car. If he stretched out a little further then he might just be able to touch them. Some trees in the distance and hints of what could be farmland judging from the neatly kept hillocks and hints of barns and buildings in the early morning sunlight, reduced to the size of children’s toys. The sky was practically the same shade of blue as the car body; that faded denim. When he dragged his eyes away from the window his gaze fell onto the dashboard and he saw some wear on the plastic, gouges from keys, starburst burn patterns from the smouldering ends of cigarettes that had been stubbed out on it for convenience. But apart from the nicks and dents, the burns and wear, the car was in pretty damn good shape overall. Almost too good for their current run of luck.

“How did the performance go?” Namjoon asked, breaking the silence that had fallen over the interior. Jungkook turned away from the window to look at him in confusion so he clarified. “The bar gig?”

“Oh that,” he paused for a few seconds, “it went good, real good. I got a lot of applause, the owner said that he’d let me perform again.” The young man looked impressed and reached over to pat him on the shoulder and he laughed at the gesture.

“He got a lot of tips,” Hoseok added from the backseat.

“I…uh, yeah I did, and several requests. That’s how I made a nice amount of cash.” Jungkook let his eyes wander over the dials of the radio rather than look at any of them. Was the lie as obvious on his face as it felt? Or wasn’t it at all, because he had technically made quite a bit of cash and it wasn’t that much of a lie? But the image of that photograph floated up into his mind, the little boy and girl on the Polaroid trapped inside the wallet he had tossed aside like trash after stealing their father’s hard-earned cash. Or likely hard-earned anyway. *I’m turning into Tae,* he thought before pushing it away.

“When are we gonna hear this talent, huh?” Taehyung asked and before he could even open his mouth to argue against this the others started asking too, voicing annoyance that they had had to wait this long to begin with.

“I charge for my talents,” he retorted.

“So does…Tae,” Yoongi muttered from the backseat, apparently capable of witticisms even when
asleep.

“I got a bottle of soju, three shots payment enough?” Jungkook thought this over for a moment before agreeing and the boy shifted to get comfortable. “Sing your heart out, dude.”

“OK but…” he paused before sighing, “if I fucking suck don’t laugh, OK? Just give it to me straight and say “Jungkook, you fucking suck and-””

“If you sucked you wouldn’t be getting tips, would you?” Namjoon interrupted with an eyebrow raise but he didn’t take his eyes off the road, hands at 11o’clock and 3o’clock precisely just like his father always drove. “No laughing, I promise.”

“I got asked to sing this song so I’ll sing it to you guys even though it’s not the same without the piano.” Jungkook cleared his throat and hummed a few bars to warm his voice up before opening his mouth and singing the open notes of the song.

“Why do birds suddenly appear? Every time you are near? Just like me, they long to be… close to you. Why do stars fall down from the sky? Every time you walk by? Just like me, they long to be… close to you.”

When he was finished his voice trailed off inside the car and he was suddenly aware of how silent it was. He longed to break it but felt too embarrassed to do so and instead just looked out of the window because it seemed like the best thing to do. After a near minute of silence there was a low whistling sound.


“The perfect lullaby,” Yoongi mumbled, “to send me right back to sleep.” This made Jungkook laugh and when he pulled gaze away from the rolling scenery he saw that his friend was smiling widely at the wheel. Had they really liked his singing that much or were they just playing around to make him feel better about it all?

“That song put me in the mood for love,” Taehyung said as he shifted to hand him the bottle of soju. Jungkook accepted it and took a single sip, swallowing the hot and grainy liquid with a slight hiss because it burnt on the way down. “What about you Hoseok?”
“It was amazing,” Hoseok said, moving so that he could look around the boy on his lap and hold his eyes. “Seriously Kookie, you could make it as a singer with that voice-” Taehyung swung an arm around his neck and proceeded to nuzzle against his hair and he ignored him to carry on talking. “You should really try sending an audition tape to a company and, Tae please?”

“Stop pretending, you love it.”

“I don’t have a headache, I don’t need a head massage.”

“Yeah yeah lover boy,” Taehyung said as he stopped nuzzling and instead pressed his cheek against the top of his head, “I’d massage more than your head, if you know what I mean…” Jungkook had been in the act of taking another sip of soju and he nearly sprayed it all over them both, swallowing hard and coughing even as he laughed. At the sound of his choking Jimin made a noise and lifted his head off Yoongi’s shoulder to open his eyes, looking over them all slowly with his brow furrowed.

“What did I miss?”

He grabbed his holdall bag out of the boot and shrugged it up onto his shoulder before turning to look over the gas station, which was currently empty save for their vehicle. The building was like most gas stations, a ground floor square made of glass and metal, automatic doors on a ramp covered in grey rubberised pads. There were eight pumps set across the sprawling lot and another area to the right that looked to be a hand car wash judging from the buckets and coiled up hoses snaked across the concrete. The pumps were set into rectangle receptacles, buttons and screens, slots for cards and cash, diesel and petrol options. White and green with the company logo above the screen, paint scratched off to reveal the metal underneath. The pumps themselves were also metal with a thick red plastic bottom from which the black hoses flowed from and down into the ground. To the left of the building was a block of restrooms and he eyed them before formulating an idea in his head. The others were either standing just beside the vehicle or sitting in the open doorways, and Namjoon wandered over to uncap the petrol tank before turning to look at the machine.

“I’ll fill her up,” the young man said, “someone else go into the store and see what food they have. We’ve got nothing more than a couple of bottles of warm water and crumbs.”

“I’ll check it out,” Seokjin said and Yoongi also agreed to tag along. “But don’t expect booze and sodas from me.”
“Gee mom,” Taehyung muttered, “you’re such a fucking square.”

“Say no to drugs,” Seokjin called as he crossed the lot. Yoongi followed after him but turned on his heel to look back at them. He shook his head vigorously in denial of this statement first, and then he nodded and gave them all a thumbs up with a wide grin before disappearing into the building and letting the doors swish close behind him.

“I’m gonna go get cleaned up in the restrooms,” Jungkook said as he looked over them. “Sinks and running water…actual toilets.” At this he saw interest, piqued expressions on their faces. “Clean underwear.” He had only just started walking across the lot when he heard them all shifting to grab their own bags from the boot and then Jimin raced ahead of him to push the male restroom door open. They all spilled inside and a quick scan of the interior showed three sinks on the left wall, urinals directly opposite them, and a double stall to the right. Cracked and grimy mirrors over the sinks, washing soap dispensers drained dry and a hand dryer built onto the wall just beside the door. There was a trash can inside and Taehyung grabbed it before dragging it in front of the door.

“Trust me, done this enough times to know that you don’t want truckers walking in when you’re buck ass nude.” Hoseok went into one of the stalls and the lock clicked in place: green vacancy becoming a red occupied. “It’s a…how do I put it? A very surreal experience.” The boy had already dropped to his knee to unlace his boots hastily and within seconds he was shrugging his open denim shirt off and shoving it inside his backpack.

“I might be the only guy here who hasn’t washed in a public restroom,” Jimin remarked as he eyed the sinks and then the linoleum floor. “Isn’t it a little messy?”

“The owner might pay us to clean it up,” Jungkook joked as he dropped his own bag and hunkered down to unzip it and grab random supplies: toothbrush and paste, shower gel and shampoo. He balanced the bottles on the rim of the sink in front of him and then started brushing his teeth as he unknotted his own boots. His friend thought this over for a moment before copying them and the sound of the toilet flushing sounded before Hoseok emerged from the cubicle.

“I’m gone for a single minute and you’re all planning an orgy without me.”

Jungkook rinsed his mouth out before shoving the toothbrush back in his bag and searching for his towel he had nearly left behind in the hostel yesterday. He found it and proceeded to continue getting undressed and Taehyung was already ahead of them all: tap water running hot as he dunked his head under it to wet his hair, jeans left over by his backpack so that they wouldn’t get soaked through during the process, tee and underwear lying by his feet without a care.
“It’s like we’re on a camping trip, I guess?” Jimin commented as he unzipped his own jeans. “But without tents and campfires or marshmallows…basically anything camping related.”

“Is it cold in here?” Taehyung joked as he started lathering shampoo messily in his hair. “Or are you just really unlucky Jimin?” The other boy feigned laughter as he turned the tap on. Hoseok wandered over to stand by his sink seen as there were just three and then he dropped his backpack and slipped his own tee off over his head.

“I never thought I’d miss something as mundane as a shower,” Jungkook muttered as he lathered gel between his hands and spread it up along his arms, thick white foam coating his skin. When he splashed water on them the gel started to bubble, great blobs of it falling free to land in the sink and get washed away by the running tap. The other boy finished rinsing his hair through and proceeded to shake his head vigorously like a wet dog, splashing water all over them and the mirrors above the sink. So Jungkook cupped a handful of water and splashed it back at him. Taehyung stared at him with an unreadable expression before he realised that he had given him an idea.

Jungkook followed his gaze across the restroom over to Jimin to see that the boy had finished cleaning his face and was in the process of washing his hair, eyes closed because the suds were running down everywhere. Taehyung walked over and quickly shoved the plug inside, the water filling the shallow bowl rapidly, and then he grabbed the back of Jimin’s head and dunked it into the sink. The boy let out a little shocked noise before there was a loud *splash* as he went face first into the sink. He flailed and elbowed their friend rather hard in the ribs and then Taehyung let go of him and he shot back upright, spitting a mouthful of sudsy water out like a whale’s blowhole. It hit the sink mirror and ran down in rivulets that cut through the steam that had started to form from the heat of the running water.

“Tae you little fucker!” This just made the boy laugh even harder.

“That was mean,” Hoseok said, using water from Jungkook’s sink to clean his own skin with. “You’re such a bully Tae.”

“I told you he was,” Jimin practically whined as he continued washing the last of the shampoo that their friend’s dunking hadn’t managed to get. “He and Kookie are always bullying me.”

“Hey, I’m just getting cleaned up here,” Jungkook retorted. “I’m not bullying anyone.”

“How would you like it if someone did that to you?” Hoseok asked.
“I would find it hilarious but no one ever will ‘cos I know all of the tricks.” And as Taehyung walked back over to his own sink he quickly threw his arm out and slapped Hoseok hard on the ass. “Like that one.” Their friend jumped slightly from the sudden contact before rolling his eyes with a weary sigh. When Jungkook looked down a moment later he saw a perfectly formed red hand print on his skin like a cattle brand.

“I’ll get you one day Tae,” Jimin said as he brushed his soaking hair back off his brow. “Just you wait.”

“With bated breath Dumbass,” the boy said around his red toothbrush.

He didn’t exactly count how long they were in the restrooms for but it didn’t seem that long to him at all. Splashing sink water on his skin and dunking his head under a tap wasn’t exactly ideal nor easy but it did make him feel refreshed and a lot more awake than he had been in the car. At least there had been the bonus of a hairdryer in the form of the hand dryer which had been rather amusing to mess around with, the force of the air coming out of it enough to whip their hair around as if it were a tornado and not just a small box machine. Jungkook got dried and dressed just after Taehyung, avoiding stepping in puddles even though it was a difficult task thanks to the splash war he had accidentally initiated just a few minutes prior. He didn’t shove his damp towel and dirty clothing back into his holdall but rather balled them up together instead. They would get the rest of his stuff wet and so he would just shove it all into the boot to be washed whenever next possible. The two other boys hastily got dressed and he leaned against the wall beside the door and waited for them so that they could go back to the vehicle as a group. Toiletries back inside bags, clean clothes and skin that smelled of honey and milk or berries and other combinations, hair dry but messy, they all milled out and across the lot to get back to the car. Namjoon was lying in the open backseat, Seokjin was in the driver-seat, and Yoongi was perched on the hood with his legs dangling over the side.

“What took you so long?” he asked, cigarette stick bobbing in his mouth as he did. Jungkook explained about about the impromptu restroom shower and he saw interest flicker across his face at this as Yoongi eyed the eldest through the front window. He took another drag and dropped the butt on the ground, stepping down to grind it out under his boot with a hard twist of his heel. “Good, watch the car whilst we get cleaned up then.” Seokjin climbed out to hand him a white bag, telling him that their breakfast was inside.

“All of it?”

“We already ate whilst waiting for you,” Namjoon explained as he got out of the back and stretched his legs.
“Won’t be long, don’t drive off without us,” Yoongi joked as he tossed a practically empty packet of cigarettes at Jimin. “I mean it, any of you little assholes touch those keys and I’ll kick your ass.” Jungkook turned and watched them crossing the lot before tossing his holdall and clothes into the boot, which was currently empty save for another white gas station bag and empty water bottles. His friends copied him and then he was climbing into the backseat and sliding along to the middle so the rest of them could join him. He upended the bag and various packets and cartons landed on his lap. He saw iced coffee drinks that looked to be laced with more sugar than any soda, pastel blue plastic containers with golden letters and cartoon coffee beans printed all over. Packets of kimbap and flavoured rice crackers, even a bag of candy that Seokjin had likely caved and bought for them.

“One day we might just get to eat hot food,” Hoseok joked as he took a sip of coffee.

“Hot food is expensive,” Jimin explained as he chewed a mouthful of kimbap, colourful vegetables nestled in the centre of the roll. “We can’t afford expensive. But Kookie could make enough with his singing and treat us all, right?”

“…Right,” Jungkook said, cracker hovering just in front of his lips, “next gig I get it’s burgers and fries on me.”

“What about pizza?” Taehyung asked as he moved onto his third slice of triangle kimbap.

“Make your own fucking cash and buy pizza,” he retorted and they snorted laughter, sound echoing across the still empty lot. “Fine, burgers and fries and pizza, what else huh? What food group have we missed out?”

“Dessert: ice cream,” Jimin said.

“Dessert isn’t a food group, it’s a course,” Hoseok corrected with a wide grin.

“Dumbass strikes again.” And the boy seemed too happy about the food to even complain at Taehyung’s nickname for once. In the time that it took them to eat it all, sharing the candy out in handfuls, the others didn’t return. They were still getting cleaned up and that left them alone in the car. Jimin thumbed the packet of cigarettes open to reveal three, sticking one into his own mouth before handing the packet to him. Jungkook slipped one out and tossed the last to Taehyung and the boy rooted around in his jeans pocket before pulling a box of hostel matches free. He hastily struck one and lit his own stick before holding the flame out for them to lean forward and light theirs. He shook the flame out and then threw the match out of the open doorway.
“Throwing matches in a gas station?” Jungkook took a pull on his own cigarette and held it for a few seconds before breathing it out again. “And you’re calling Jimin a dumbass…” Jimin grinned at this and the stick rolled into the corner of his mouth.

“Take risks, live a little,” Taehyung countered as he pulled his cigarette free, held between his thumb and forefinger. He moved his tongue around his mouth for a moment as if savouring the flavour on his tongue and then took another drag before offering the stick to Hoseok, holding it in front of his lips. The boy eyed it for a moment before leaning over and getting the filter between his lips. Jungkook saw the way that Taehyung’s eyes dropped to study his mouth, gaze lingering even after he let go of the stick. When Hoseok breathed it out through his lips the boy inhaled the smoke and then exhaled as he put the cigarette back in his own mouth.

“Do you think our parents are pissed at us?” Jimin asked suddenly and they all glanced over at him. The boy had the stick between his middle and ring finger, exactly how Yoongi held his. Jungkook had read something about how particular smoking techniques reflected personalities and he seemed to recall that one being the ‘artist’. When none of them said anything he quickly added. “For running off, you know?”

“Did you run off?” Hoseok asked and the boy redirected the question back at him. “No, I told my parents that I was staying with a friend for a few days, I actually used your name in my haste to lie. Well, kind of lie. I am staying with friends…just not in the way that they’re thinking.” Another drag off the shared cigarette, another lungful of smoke that Taehyung chased after greedily. “Kookie?”

“I just left the house that morning without leaving a note. My parents were in work,” he explained, dabbing ash onto the car carpet, “so I got ready, packed my holdall and left right away. Slept on a subway bench for a couple of hours before going to the bus station. They probably think I’m still in Seoul right now.” He took a deep pull on the stick and glanced at the other boy, raising an eyebrow at him.

“My dad’s pissed, like really pissed at me,” Jimin said, cigarette seemingly abandoned for the current moment, smouldering between his fingers. This statement hanged in the air for a few seconds and they waited to see if he would say anything else. “I fucked up.” He muttered as he lifted the stick and took a drag, plumes coming out of his nose and hand shaking slightly as he did.

“How’d you fuck up, huh?” Taehyung asked, no longer inhaling second-hand smoke but rather smoking his own cigarette properly. So the boy explained that he had argued with his father over school, over a broken car engine he had been unable to help fix, over the trip that he wasn’t supposed to be on with them. They all listened to him and Jimin shifted uncomfortably as he talked, clearly aware of himself and his words and the sudden attention he was getting, reaching up to run his fingers along his brow and then into his hairline. “He hit you whilst talking all of that shit?”
“Uh, yeah, a few times. I wasn’t really…counting.”

“Your dad’s a piece of shit,” Taehyung said without even blinking. It was as if he had said nothing more normal than how nice the weather currently was and not insulted their friend’s father so bluntly. Jungkook glanced at him before eyeing Hoseok, also seeing surprise mirrored on his face. What he had said was a lot different to making a remark about his situation like they usually did: “that fucking sucks Jimin” or “don’t let him get to you, yeah?” No, the boy had cursed about the man and even they were all thinking it none of them would have dared said something like that out loud. Except Taehyung of course. Taehyung had his own reasons. Jungkook looked back at Jimin and saw a resigned expression on his face as he nodded.

“I know, but I did fuck up the engine so maybe I deserved it.”

“Don’t say that,” Hoseok said quietly, leaning over so that he could look around him and Taehyung to see their friend, one leg hanging out of the open doorway to fit onto the seat. “Don’t ever say shit like that. You don’t deserve treatment like that, no one does.” Jimin just finished his cigarette without another word and then tossed the remains over his shoulder to land on the concrete outside the car.

“What about you Tae, what did you do?”

“Left the hostel room that morning like always. I’m rooming with someone right now, Soobin, a beautiful six year old princess who fell through the cracks of the social services and ended up in the hostel. Uncle tried to kill her,” Taehyung said as he smoked his cigarette. “And she’s got this big scar from here,” he reached up to touch the side of his jaw by his ear before tracing his forefinger down and stopping by his collarbones, “to here. Six fucking years old. I gave her enough cash to last a couple of weeks for food and shit. The room’s been paid for the next month so she’ll be alright without me for a little while.”

“When’s she gonna start hanging with us, huh?” Jungkook asked with a grin.

“What? You want a girlfriend?” Taehyung retorted before giving the last drag to Hoseok. “That’s my story.” In the next minute Jungkook was also finished and he had just shifted to lean over Jimin’s lap and toss the used-up butt out when he caught sight of their friends crossing the lot to get back to the vehicle. Holdalls tossed into the boot and the door slammed shut. Yoongi climbed into the back again and they all shifted to try and fit comfortably. The two other young men got into the front.

“Right,” Seokjin asked as he looked back at them, keys stuck in the ignition. “Before we leave no one needs the restroom, do they?” The car went silent for a moment.

“Actually…”
“Jimin.”

“Sorry, I’ll be real quick.” The boy had to climb over Yoongi because he didn’t get out and then he raced across the lot to disappear through the restroom doors.

“Everything OK?” Namjoon asked, eyeing them all using the rear view mirror. Jungkook asked him what he meant by this and he thought his words over for a moment. “Dunno, car seemed really quiet. I thought we’d come back to see you all messing with the wheel with the radio blaring, jumping up and down on the hood like kids but…behaving? That’s a shock.”

“Smoking and drinking cheap soju is your idea of behaving?” Hoseok asked with a grin.

“Behaving more than usual,” Yoongi corrected. He took advantage of Jimin’s absence to settle into the seat more comfortably for a minute, stretching his legs with a sigh. In a minute or two they would be back to lap-sharing and crushed legroom to all fit into the backseat and Jungkook was not looking forward to it. “Where is said soju?” Seokjin glanced back at him and the young man shifted. “That was a joke by the way.” Taehyung pulled the bottle out from behind the back of the passenger-seat where he had stashed it and waved it at him with an eyebrow wiggle. “…Maybe later.” He had just shoved it back when Jimin popped the door open and eyed the backseat quietly for a moment. After some temporary bickering the boy ended up on Yoongi’s lap, sitting just like their two other friends had been over the last couple of hours.

“OK, now we can leave right?” They all mumbled in agreement and so Seokjin twisted the keys and started the engine. He had just rolled the car onto the road when a truck finally pulled up at the station behind them, slowly turning into the lot to stop at one of the pumps. Jungkook looked at it before it vanished out of sight and then he turned back to the window in front of them.

The view outside didn’t change by much over the time spent on the road. The dried grass gave way to dirt paths that seemed to snake up to farm houses, little wooden posts and signs warning people from trespassing. Sometimes animals were visible grazing out in the pastures: cows, sheep, even a few horses, tractors and troughs and wells here and there. It seemed that the roads outside of the cities were just like the countryside and it was somewhat strange to see such rural sights thriving between the industrial building-block sights that they would soon be seeing once more. He almost enjoyed the view because it was a pleasant break from repetitive metal, concrete and glass, a breath of fresh air not heavily polluted from gridlocked streets. Taehyung’s legs went right back out of the open window as he lounged over both his and Hoseok’s laps, one foot bobbing in rhythm with the low music coming from the radio. If a song came on that he knew then he sang random parts under his breath, voice deep and a little husky in a pleasing way, but never loud enough to be heard over the actual song. There was a relaxed sense in the air for the first time in days and everyone at least seemed to be regaining their spirits back after the horrors of yesterday. It was starting to feel like a
real adventure now.

“You know,” Jungkook said to break the silence whilst an MC started reading out traffic reports, “we haven’t passed another car for awhile now, just a few trucks. You should try something cool.”

“Cool like what?” Seokjin asked as his eyes moved up to the rear view mirror.

“Do a trick like outta the movies, you know, drifting or something like that.”

“I’d rather not blow a tire,” Namjoon remarked. “Or have the car upend trying to drive like a NASCAR driver.” But Jungkook persisted, obnoxious whine in his voice, and when they ignored him he dropped the ultimate: he called them all pussies. As expected this got a reaction, laughter off the other boys, indignant glares from the young men in the front seat.

“Come on,” Jimin added enthusiastically, “just a single trick. We’ve got the entire road to ourselves right now!”

“You want to go home without trying at least one?” Jungkook asked. Yoongi muttered about how it would be better going home without broken bones. “We’re not gonna crash! Seokjin’s not that bad a driver!”

“I bet 10,000₩ he’s too scared to do it,” Taehyung said with a wide grin. “That he’s a little pussy.” Seokjin didn’t say a thing and rather just carried on driving down the road. The boy started making bold declarations about just how much of a pussy he was and the back of the car filled with laughter. But he had only managed a bare three of these when the vehicle took a sharp twist off the road and they all shifted from the sudden movement, Jimin yelping in surprise as he nearly rolled off Yoongi’s lap.

The car shot across the tarmac and onto a stretch dirt beside the road and Seokjin span the wheel hard as he stomped his foot down on the pedal. The tires screeched and then the car was starting to drift in a circle and after a moment it was rapidly spinning around. Jungkook had to hold onto Taehyung with one hand and Jimin with the other to help keep them in place, the former holding onto the back of the passenger-seat and hollering at the top of his lungs, the latter in Yoongi’s makeshift arm seatbelt as he snagged hold of the driver-seat headrest and started laughing. The view outside the window blurred and was then obscured by clouds of dust and thick exhaust fumes and the pressure from the movement made them all lean to the left slightly. There was no way of counting how many circles he completed but after a few seconds Seokjin pulled on the gear stick and hit the brake before pushing it forward again and shooting back onto the road.
“Goddamn,” Yoongi muttered breathlessly, lowering his hand from the overhead handle. “Thanks for the heart attack.” Jungkook twisted to look out of the back window and he saw a thick dust cloud still clinging to the side of the road where they had just been, deep tire tracks cut into the soil.

“Where did you learn to do that?” Namjoon asked in surprise.

“Action movies,” Seokjin replied without missing a beat.

“That was the coolest!” Jungkook declared with a laugh before grinning.

“Who’s a pussy now?”

The sky was starting to darken when Jungkook felt his eyelids getting heavy, the blue becoming vibrant shades of pink and orange as the sun began to set on the horizon, thick bank of clouds rolling in to drift lazily overhead. In the distance the sight of another city was becoming visible, already glowing like a lighthouse of neon colours, an aureole of light floating around it like a halo. Yet, much like a fabled desert oasis it didn’t seem to be getting any closer, rather just staying the same size as if the road they were driving along was never ending, like the wheels were rolling in place rather than forward. For the last few hours the atmosphere had varied between sleepy mumbling and sudden bursts of energy, everyone wanting to be out of the car for longer than a couple of minutes for toilet breaks and to grab water or snacks from the boot. Soon enough they would hopefully be pulling up outside a motel for the night, able to roll right into beds or perhaps go for a brisk walk for a few blocks to burn up energy. And Jungkook had very much been planning on taking a walk even if it was just him on his own, to clear his head and make his stiff legs feel alive again, but then his eyelids had been drooping and closing for a couple of seconds longer than usual. Jimin was already way ahead of him, asleep and slumped against the window on Yoongi’s lap, but he could feel the rest of them drifting off too. He was just about to nod off when there was a loud noise and he jerked his head up again.

It was a deafening noise much like a gunshot or a crack of a whip, loud enough to echo along the nearly empty road. It surprised him so much that his heart actually skipped a beat in his chest, shooting right up into his throat. He sat upright and was about to ask what it was when the car bucked hard and he felt his ass leaving the seat before coming down hard. He couldn’t even make a
noise in surprise because he bit down on his tongue and cut himself off and that was when the sleeping boy rolled forward and smacked his head on the back of the driver-seat. There was a loud thump and then a crunch and he woke up with a cry of pain, clapping his hand over his lower face as he did.

“The fuck?!” Taehyung shouted as he bolted upright, back of his head slamming into Jungkook’s chin and almost making his bite his tongue again.

“Uh…I think that was the engine,” Seokjin said as he shifted in his seat, eyeing the dashboard as he did. “But I don’t really know. Cars aren’t really my specialty but—” another slight lurch but then the vehicle carried on moving forward rather smoothly, “if it was philosophers then I might just know a thing or two.” None of them even laughed at this feeble attempt at a joke as they were too busy anticipating the next jerk that would spill them free of their seats. Yoongi batted the boy’s hands away from his face so he could look and sure enough his nose was pouring blood, enough so that a few drops even dribbled down his chin to land on his tee, which was luckily black and wouldn’t stain. The young man cursed and then told him to pinch the bridge of his nose and Jimin did, wincing from the contact and smearing more gore across his face. It didn’t seem to be broken but it was going to swell, just like Jungkook’s tongue was currently doing in his mouth, leaving a faint taste of blood as it did.

“What’s the gas look like?” Hoseok asked and Namjoon told him that it was over halfway full, the needle bobbing on the glass screen comfortably far away from E. “OK, maybe the engine is a little overheated or something?”

“I dun dink so-” Jimin said, voice muffled and nasally, “I dink a valve broke or sumdink.”

“Meaning?”

“Nuh gud.”

“Well, look there’s another couple of miles until we’re in the city right?” Seokjin said in an optimistic tone. “The car just needs to last until then and no problem. We can sort it all out tomorrow.” But he didn’t think that they had that long at all before it died. “So, fingers crossed.”

Maybe a minute passed before the engine started making choppy noises again and then it did more than buck, it stalled for a few seconds before rolling forward and stalling again: like a child’s race car that was running out of charge but would speed up when prodded with a little burst of energy before stopping again. Every time that it stopped they all prepared themselves for the hard jerk of it shooting forward again and at least no one else smacked their noses on anything. After a couple of stalls it
seemed to cough, a great plume of deep grey smoke coming out of the exhaust pipe. The scent of it bled in through the open windows, acrid and enough to make Jungkook pull his tee over his lower face to try and block the scent. It was almost toxic and he knew that that was a really bad sign.

“Come on, come on,” Namjoon muttered, “just a little longer and-” the car gave another shuddering lurch and then backfired loudly again. The noise died off into an almost pitiful wheeze and that was that: the final breath of life.

The car was dead.

It didn’t stop right away but rather rolled forward a few feet before the wheels stopped turning and then nothing. For a moment the interior fell silent and none of them seemed to know how to break it, all sitting there staring at the dashboard as if something was going to happen. A miracle perhaps. But all that did occur was the steady cloud of exhaust still coming out of the pipe. Seokjin twisted the keys but not even a slight rumble came from the engine no matter how many times he tried. He stomped on the pedal, fiddled with the gear stick and then gave up trying.

“You said this was a good car,” Jungkook said as he turned to look at his friend. “Fuck you Kim Taehyung.”

“Yeah,” he mumbled, “fuck me.”

Chapter End Notes

Lyrics taken from The Carpenters "Close To You"
Writer(s): Hal David, Burt F. Bacharach
The sky overhead looked like a bruise, a mottled patch of purple starting to dominate the horizon and push away the orange glow of the setting sun. He didn't need to check a watch to know that it was roughly 9pm or later, for the summer evening didn’t start until at least then. Which meant that they were out in the middle of nowhere with nightfall on its way stuck with a broken fucking car. Right now the situation was so ridiculous that he decided to pretend that it wasn’t happening. Hoseok even had his back turned away from the road so that he didn't have to look at the stupid vehicle, instead sitting on a low wooden fence that stretched across the length so that he could stare at the vast expanse of field in front of him. From behind him came the sound of his friends talking and bickering amongst each other and he really wasn’t listening to their words, rather just hearing a mumbled load of nonsense like background static. There was very little to discuss and yet they had to, for there was little else for them to do: too shocked and confused to register it all. After a few minutes they would finally figure it out and start making actual plans to combat it, but for now they were just standing around stupidly.

Hoseok shifted to pull his legs up, balancing his boots on a low rut on the bottom of the fence so that his knees were cocked in front of him. The wooden fence was horribly uncomfortable and he hunched forward to fold his elbows on his knees. The grass was dancing in the breeze and the sound it made was rather like a chorus of sighs, a whispering noise like women’s voices chatting amongst themselves. In the evening dusk the blades were starting to look black and the field looked like an oil spill. He snagged a handful of blades and fiddled with them for a moment, feeling them against his fingertips. They were waxy and the bottoms were wet, likely leaving grass stains all over his fingertips like blood.

“Wanna see a cool trick?” He turned his head to see Jungkook just a few feet away from him, elbows on the fence and head cocked as he studied him. The boy looked tired and yet he had forced a smile on his face regardless. He glanced over his shoulder to see the others still by the car, and then looked back at him. He shrugged and said “why not?” and his friend held a hand out to him. “Give me one of those blades then.” Hoseok handed him the entire palmful of grass and he glanced over it all before plucking one free and holding it up to him. “I’m gonna make music with just this piece of grass.”

“Oh yes?”

“Yeah, just watch.” So Jungkook held the blade up to his lips and took a deep breath before letting it out again. He hadn’t been expecting much at all, that perhaps the boy was pulling a gag to make him laugh, but when he exhaled there came the most strangest sound and he could only stare at him in
wonder, mouth hanging open. It was a little like a kazoo, a thin reedy noise that wasn’t particularly musical but close enough. He blew air out in a random tune, stopping and starting to try and make it sound like he was humming a line from a song and then he started laughing and lowered his hand for a second, blade of grass stuck to his lower lip rather cutely. “Told you I could do it!” He declared with a grin and then he pulled the blade free roughly and tossed it aside so that it landed on the ground out of sight. “You didn’t believe me, did you?”

“Not really,” he admitted, finding no reason to lie and instead tell him the truth, “I thought you were gonna do something stupid instead but that was…kind of musical, I guess?” The remark made Jungkook snort laughter. “How did you learn that, did someone teach you?”

“My dad did.”

“When you were a kid?”

“Yeah, showed me how to do it way back. Must’ve still been in elementary school. He said it was hard and not a lot of people can do it, but he knew I would be able to. So he showed me and three attempts later I was doing it better than him.”

“But of course,” Hoseok said.

“Probably the only useful thing he’s ever fucking taught me,” Jungkook shifted slightly to glance across the field, tongue darting out to wet his lower lip which probably tasted like the grass blade, “was how to make music with grass. Hardly the kind of thing I’d get into college with, huh?”

“Pretty sure your brains will get you in no problem,” he reached over and tapped on his head with his rolled up fingers but he didn’t laugh or even smile at this. He just continued staring across the sea of grass instead as if not wanting to talk about the topic anymore. “The car?”

“Haven’t got a fucking clue,” Jungkook muttered wearily. “I’m not a car person, like Tae already knows. Engine problem I think? They’re all looking at it but there’s very little they can do to fix it. Haven’t got any tools.” They both thought this over for a moment, more than aware that that meant one thing: they were back to walking again. It was enough to make him feel exhausted and he would take hours of cramped riding in the backseat of the car over walking up hills and along freeways with exhaust fumes hitting him in the face and making him choke. But they didn’t really have a choice. If the vehicle was broken it was well and truly gone and there was nothing they could do about it. They would just have to get going again, holdalls swinging and backpacks shrugged up on shoulders as they hiked the last few miles to the city. For a moment the air between them was silent and then the boy dragged his eyes away from the horizon to look at him again.
“Maybe you’ll learn to make music whilst waiting for the engine to get fixed?” Before he could even respond to this Jungkook turned on his heel and wandered across the road, once more leaving him alone on the fence.

Hoseok listened to his boots crunching on the dry soil before leaning forward to grab another handful of grass. He sorted through them just like his friend had done, eyeing long and short, straight and kinked blades until he found one that looked good to him. He held it up in front of his lips and then tried blowing but nothing. The blade wriggled in the air but it didn’t make a sound. He tried wetting his lips and trying again but still no music. He mentally cursed the boy for not only showing off and making it look easy, but for also giving him enough reason to want to be able to do it. Yet he couldn’t make music no matter what; no matter how fast or slow he exhaled, whether the blade was long or short. There had to be a method behind it and he just had to discover it. It wasn’t like he was in a rush, he had all the time in the world right now. So Hoseok got as comfortable as he could on the fence and just tried over and over even though it was pretty obvious that he was never going to be able to do it, eyes trained on the sky overhead until he heard the familiar sound of an engine rumbling and he twisted sharply to look down the road.

The unmistakable sight of twin headlights coming right towards them getting larger and larger with every passing second, sodium arc headlights bright like blue-tinged stars.

Hoseok finally took this as a sign to look back at the others and yet he didn’t see the reactions he had been expecting at all. He had thought he would see his friends jumping for joy, arms pointed up at the sky and jubilant expressions revealed in the dim glow of their own headlights, a saviour coming to help them get out of this current hellish predicament. Yet what he did see was rather neutral, why none of them even seemed to be looking over at the approaching vehicle. Had they perhaps not noticed it because they were so distracted by the possible busted engine, hadn’t heard it even though the rumbling was so loud on the still air that it sounded like an earthquake? The thought was so absurd that he couldn’t even imagine it being the case and as the car started to get close enough for him to see the license plates and grill on the front he slowly turned on the fence so that he was facing the road. A few seconds later the vehicle just rolled past without stopping and he watched it go in dumb confusion. Why hadn’t it stopped? They clearly needed assistance and yet the vehicle hadn’t even slowed down. Were they supposed to flag it in some way, thumbs out like for a taxicab? Hoseok just stared at the sight of its retreating taillights and then looked back at his friends dumbly.

Then it hit him.

The reason the car hadn’t stopped was because of them, a bunch of boys standing around on the side of the road in worn clothes with haggard faces and messy hair: boys who didn’t seem to be in the position to have such a car and yet no sight of an adult anywhere close. To anyone passing it looked like they had stolen the car, had went on a stupid joyride in it before it had broken down on them: karma getting them back in the end. That was not the case at all but there was no way someone passing would know that. They would see their street-battered appearances, Yoongi chain smoking
and chain cursing, and they would see troublemakers. Potentially dangerous troublemakers. Kids with booze and drugs - which Tae did have in the form of a half-empty bottle of soju - and maybe other things. Kids that might brandish knives and steal wallets and cars just like this one. Yet they were just in dire need of some assistance, just a couple of tools or a bit of helpful advice. He was now aware of it and it was pretty obvious that his friends had already come to that conclusion some time ago, the reason for them not jumping for joy just a few minutes past. For a moment he had actually been hopeful and in just three seconds it had been crushed once more.

“Any luck?” Jungkook called, sitting in the backseat of the dead car, legs out of the open doorway and stretched in front of him. Hoseok flashed him the middle finger and the wide grin on his face just made it more annoying that he couldn’t seem to do it.

“Are we gonna flag any vehicles?” Hoseok asked. He had another handful of grass to sort through, tossing useless pieces aside.

“Nope,” Namjoon replied bluntly.

“Any particular reason why not?”

“No licenses.”

“…OK, but why would they want to see licenses?”

“Imagine some good excuses now then ‘cos they’ll probably offer to call a breakdown service for us,” Namjoon explained, “and they will wanna see them. No licenses, no insurance, no registration. Right now it looks like we’re riding in a stolen car. So no breakdown services, no tow trucks to get us to the mechanics, nothing.”

“…Shit.”

“That’s what I said,” Yoongi muttered, perched on the boot of the vehicle so that his boots dangled inches above the dirt road. “We’re in a real fucking dilemma right now, huh?” None of them said anything against this because he was completely correct: a very stupid and serious problem. No one to call and no way to do so seen as their cellphones had been stolen yesterday, too many risks of someone calling the police on them for driving a car that didn’t truly belong to them. Loudly declaring “we won it in a game of poker!” was in no way a legitimate excuse and would get them into even more trouble. It just kept getting worse and stupider every minute that he thought about it.
They might as well have flashing signs on their heads to make them easier for the police to spot and therefore arrest.

The day had started off so well considering the last predicaments, had actually seemed to have been going so good that the entire day might just have been great. Even if that meant waking up cramped in the backseat of the car, muscles stiff from the awkward position he had fallen asleep in, only to have to get washed in the sink of a gas station bathroom like a vagabond (which he technically thought they could be classified as right now) and eat more instant food as a brunch and get right back to being crushed in the car. It had still been better than walking for miles on end and begging for cash on street corners. The ‘adventure’ had picked up any without a hitch like the previous days and he had even woken up minus of headache and that had been a blessing itself. But of course it had gone wrong somehow. He briefly wondered who they had pissed off so badly to suffer this much and then he remembered their parents, and in Yoongi and Seokjin’s case their bosses and professors respectively. Why, they had left quite a few people pissed off in their wake so it really was not that much of a surprise.

“What if it’s something simple and it can be fixed?” Seokjin asked in a hopeful tone. “Jimin?”

“Uh…about that…”

“What?”

“This is definitely not something simple,” Jimin said, voice muffled from leaning over the hood and examining the interior. “The engine is actually broken.”

Hoseok knew nothing about cars but he got to his feet and wandered over to look at the problem just because he was the only one that hadn’t checked it out. Taehyung actually moved out of the way to let him glance at it and he studied the sight in front of him stupidly. Large square section filled with various parts of machinery, valves and knots and bolts and even a fan, and he didn’t have a clue what any of it was. Just a little off centre there was a large metal block that took up most of the interior and little furls of grey smoke were still coming out of the grilles across the body.

“The battery?” Namjoon asked.

“No, if it was the battery we would’ve had no problem. We could get a boost and be on our way. See this here, this belt?” Jimin reached in to tap his finger on a stretch of black rubber. “It’s snapped clean through and I think it might’ve knocked this,” a quick gesture at a valve just beside the metal block that was pouring smoke, “free. It was leaking a few minutes ago but it stopped now. The carburetor is broken. It needs tools, maybe a replacement, and hours of work.” The boy sighed
heavily. “I tried fiddling but it’s useless, I’m useless.”

“You’re not useless,” Yoongi said, still sitting on the boot. “Don’t say shit like that.”

“Well, it’s true,” Jimin muttered as he shifted and let his eyes run along the interior for the hundredth time.

“He’s right, you did what you could and that was more than we did,” Hoseok agreed.

“All I did was tell you all what you already knew: the car’s fucking broken.”

“Yeah, but we know you know cars,” Namjoon argued. “So if you say it’s useless we know it is.” The boy just ran his fingers along the belt and didn’t say anything in reply. “Which means we need to let it go and start moving again.”

“Fuck…” Taehyung groaned and a moment later the youngest boy echoed the sentiment. “Start moving now? The moon’s about to say hello!” The remark made Hoseok smirk to himself but it really wasn’t a funny situation at all. He was right, it was the hour that they usually were getting ready to settle down in a hostel and they were most certainly never out in the middle of nowhere with miles to go. “Maybe we could just-”

There was another rumbling sound, an engine of course, and it cut through the air like a blade. They all turned to look around the side of the dead car at the sight of headlights. Another vehicle that would possibly go past without stopping, disappearing into the night and leaving them at the side like trash in the gutter. Except after a few seconds the vehicle started to slow down and when it stopped just beside them they could only stare at it stupidly. Hoseok spared a quick glance at Namjoon and he saw the young man was incredibly confused.

“Hey,” a man called through the open window, “looks like you’re in a spot of trouble, huh?” None of them seemed to know what to say exactly. He studied the stranger for a moment because he couldn’t stop himself from doing so even if it seemed rude. Perhaps mid-thirties at youngest, rather average-looking face but a smile that seemed friendly enough. Perhaps too friendly. “Need any help?”

“Um…” Jimin shifted from the front so that he was no longer hidden behind the open hood. “Do you have any tools? Like a spanner or anything like that?”
“I don’t,” the man said as he looked them over slowly, “but I could call-”

“We can’t call anyone,” Seokjin interrupted with a sheepish smile. “I haven’t got my registration, you know? I’d rather not get a ticket or points on my license.”

“Already got a few?” the driver joked and they made appropriate laughing noises in response. Hoseok noticed his eyes lingering on Jungkook for a longer than considered polite and he wondered if the boy did too. There was something so unsettling about it that he actually felt a strange shiver run down his spine. But why? He wasn’t certain but he found it off putting enough to wander around the car and stand by the open backseat.

“Just need a few tools,” Jimin said before disappearing behind the hood, no longer interested.

“You could probably got a mechanic out here,” the man continued. “That could fix it for you.”

“Don’t know any local mechanics,” Namjoon explained. “We’re from Seoul, you see?”

“Long way from home…”

“Yeah, long fucking way,” Yoongi muttered and Hoseok glanced over to see that he had shifted to stare at the man too. His expression showed that he looked rather wary of the stranger. The man looked at him for perhaps a second before shifting his gaze again.

“There’s one not too far from here,” he said, “I could give one of you a lift there. You could ride back here in the mechanic’s van. Sounds like a good idea, right son?” He looked at Jungkook with that same smile and the boy shifted uncomfortably on the seat before looking over at Seokjin through the front window. Their eldest friend had an unreadable expression on his face but the way he dropped his eyes was as obvious as a curt head shake. “That would get the car fixed up nice and easy.”

“Thank you for the offer but we’ll pass,” Seokjin said with a soft smile. “It’s practically fixed anyway, right?” Jimin made a soft noise in agreement from the interior of the hood, messing around just for sake of it.

“Without those tools you needed? Look, I understand you’re a little weary of strangers and I understand. I wouldn’t hitch these days with all of the freaks too, too risky, but I’m not like that. I’m
not a serial killer or a pervert or anything like that, I just want to help out.”

“He said we’d pass,” Yoongi said as he climbed off the back of the car and moved to stand by the open doorway, blocking the youngest from view. For a moment the man just looked at them, as if thinking of something to say, and then he shifted to turn back to the wheel, starting the engine again. The sound of it rumbling was bittersweet, bitter because their car didn’t work like that, but sweet because the man was finally leaving. As it pulled back into the lane and drove off they all turned to watch it go, and only after the headlights had faded to nothingness in the distance did Hoseok break the silence.

“God,” he muttered, “he gave me the creeps.”

“Did you see the way he was looking at Kookie?” Jimin asked as he peered around the hood.

“Yeah, I’m totally gonna climb in the car in the middle of fucking nowhere,” Jungkook said with a smirk, “and drive off with a stranger. He thinks guys haven’t tried that one a hundred times already?”

“Hey, he could’ve been a nice guy,” Namjoon remarked. “But it was better to not take the chance, you know?”

“Joonie, just admit it he was a real fucking creep,” Yoongi said.

“I…well…OK, he was weird.”

“No one stops to help these days, ‘specially not for kids. Everyone wants something. If there was a girl with us I’d bet you my fucking smokes that about ten more cars would’ve stopped and offered her a ride to the ‘mechanics’.” He spat at the side of the road in disgust. “Don’t trust strangers, ever.”

“We were all strangers once,” Hoseok replied. “But we trusted each other, right?”

“We were never strangers,” Taehyung retorted. “We were long lost relations that got reunited.” There was nothing on his face that showed he was joking and he seemed rather serious. “A real family.”
It took a few more minutes before it finally became apparent that there was nothing to be done with the car. In that time Hoseok counted several vehicles zooming past: three vans, four massive trucks and two cars. As Yoongi had rather aptly pointed out none of these stopped for them or even slowed down. He did see heads turn to stare at them as they went past however, and in the case of one of the cars he felt multiple pairs of eyes on them from the backseat. Yet no one stopped, slowed down, called out from windows to ask if they needed help. It was rather depressing and pessimistic but clearly their friend was also a realist. He was glad of it, for he rather didn’t like the idea of more awkward questions and creepy stares. He would very much like to avoid that if possible even if it was just for Jungkook’s sake; not having guys eyeing him up like choice morsels with borderline predatory smiles. Why Jungkook he wasn’t sure, for though the boy had a young face he didn’t give off the same impressions as Jimin, small and more youthful-looking. Or maybe he just seemed that way to them all but was completely different to strangers? They probably saw him and saw nothing more than a kid, which was really the truth. And if he was a kid then there was a chance of him being naïve and possibly agreeing to such things, to try and be helpful for the sake of the rest of them, but luckily the boy had a smart head on his shoulders and six friends to stop the temptation.

It was Seokjin who finally suggested that they get moving by foot rather than all stand around the dead car. He said this in a quiet voice, almost as if he didn’t expect anyone to really be listening to him or take his words seriously, but then Taehyung wandered around to the boot to pop it open, grabbing the bags and dumping them on the dusty road before retrieving his own from the backseat. He shrugged it on with a sigh and then took a sip of soju, carrying the bottle by the neck because there was no cap to be placed on top. He didn’t even wait to see if they followed and instead just starting walking, not along the road but rather in the grass instead. Hoseok collected his own backpack without a word, hefting the familiar weight up onto his shoulders and knowing that it would start to make them ache after a short while. After a moment the others moved to get theirs and he noticed that there were smears of oil and rust on Jimin’s jeans from where he had wiped his hands on them hastily. That was going to leave stains but that didn’t really matter any more, several days on the road meant that their jeans were already worn and torn just like the rest of them.

“So wait,” Namjoon asked as he got his holdall onto his shoulder and went around the vehicle. “That’s happened to you before?” The question was aimed at Jungkook of course. “Guys have tried to get you into their cars before?”

“Yup,” Jungkook agreed with a curt nod, turning on his heel and walking backwards in the high grass, “happens a lot actually. I mean, not all of them. Most of them are just wanting to get me off the streets ‘cos it’s ‘dangerous’ and all of that shit, but there’s no point. Don’t they realise I’m on the streets for a reason?” He paused for a moment before adding. “But there’s been a few creeps, you know? Sometimes they get all defensive and mad at me for accusing them, and they start calling me the pervert. Some of them follow me down the street and say all kinds of shit, you wouldn’t believe it. I’ve been offered cash before.”
“No shit?” Yoongi asked in complete disbelief.

“Yeah shit, it’s funny but kinda scary,” Jungkook slowed down his pace and dropped his eyes to his boots, which were buried beneath the thick growth of grass. “A couple have tried to drag me into their cars before but I’m too fast for them.” He turned back around and carried on walking, holdall swinging in his hand. Seokjin asked him why the hell he continued running away and staying on the streets if that happened to him. The boy didn’t reply and the air went silent save for the rustling in the field and drone of traffic.

“Tae, anything like that ever happened to you before?” Namjoon asked.

“Hmmm…?” The boy twisted to look back at them and then furrowed his brow. “What? I wasn’t listening?”

“Have guys ever tried to pick you up before? Or followed you or anything like that?”

“Oh uh…” Taehyung paused and remained silent.

“Or dragged you into their cars?” Jimin added as he fixed his backpack.

“A few times,” he replied nonchalantly, “one time I was actually dragged into a car but I got out again. Had to roll out and nearly broke my fucking neck but I got out.” Taehyung took another sip of soju and then eyed the remains for a second before tossing the bottle aside. The alcohol sprayed out of the open top before it disappeared into the grass. Hoseok watched this before glancing over at the others to see if anyone was going to say anything in response but they seemed incapable of doing so. “That’s pretty much me, I always get out.” Yes, except one day you’re not gonna get out Tae, and I’m not just thinking about the cars.

“Why are we just hearing this shit now?” Namjoon asked, voice hinting at a mixture of annoyance and confusion.

“Why’d you think?” Taehyung retorted. “Cos you’d nag me to death.”

“It’s not nagging,” Seokjin said quietly. “It’s concern.”
For a moment no one said anything and Hoseok sighed and ran his eyes along the road beside them. No cars right now but a few would likely pass soon. He glanced over his shoulder and saw their own stalled car not too far from their location: headlights still glowing and hood open wide to show the interior with the smoking engine and broken belt. Within a couple of minutes they would no longer be able to see it and yet the lights on the horizon didn’t seem to be getting any closer.

“I told you, I always get out,” Taehyung said without looking back at them. “So I don’t need the concern. Really. Save it for Kookie, he needs it more.”

“Fuck you.”

“Or Jimin, yeah Dumbass totally needs it.”

“Yeah yeah, you can say that Tae but it’s a load of shit,” Jimin snorted. “You need all of the concern you can get.” The other boy flashed him the middle finger and he grinned widely at this, fixing his backpack for the hundredth time because one of the straps was so badly frayed that it was a miracle it hadn’t snapped yet.

“I’m concerned about you all,” Yoongi muttered under his breath, “‘cos you’re all fucking stupid and have death wishes.”

“I don’t,” Hoseok retorted. “I’m not running away and nearly getting abducted.”

“Yeah, but you don’t leave the fucking house,” Jungkook announced with a laugh and he felt his jaw setting in annoyance. “So you can’t get abducted!”

Hoseok shrugged his backpack back onto his shoulders and didn’t bother replying to the boy. There was no need to explain anything to him because he didn’t want to, especially not just because he happened to be the butt of a joke. Why bother telling them about how sometimes the headaches were so strong that his head felt like it was going to explode if he did so much as move, about how the sunlight irritated him enough to need to keep the bedroom curtains closed and how just lying in bed and wishing for unconsciousness to overcome him so the pain would go away seemed to be the only good thing that could possibly happen? No, he would rather let them share a cheap laugh over it instead.

“Keep making jokes like that,” Taehyung said after a moment, “and the next car that goes past, I’ll
push you into the backseat myself.” This remark was a little insensitive all things considered but the youngest boy snorted laughter regardless. The boy looked over his shoulder at him and Hoseok held his gaze for a few seconds before looking away again. “You won’t be laughing when I do it.”

“Let’s not do that,” Yoongi said, “‘cos we need him to keep making us cash.”

“Oh? So that’s all I’m good for, huh? Making you all cash and nothing more?” Jungkook turned around and pulled a sad expression. “I have emotions, you know?”

When an engine next rumbled on the still air they had been walking for quite some time and none of them even glanced over at the road to look at it. There was no point, for they were so far away from it and deep into the field the driver likely didn’t even see them as they past, the headlights not illuminating more than the thin dirt road in front of the vehicle. It was actually smart travelling at a distance because it meant less chances of an accident, or any swerving cars possibly hitting any of them should a drunken idiot start weaving down the road, but it also meant being able to travel in peace too. Hoseok didn’t want to imagine someone being as cruel as to toss trash out at them as they went past but he still thought that there was a chance. Or a chance that someone might grab out at one of them, shout something disgusting before speeding off, car filled with the sound of laughter. They were easy targets standing right beside the road but out in the field they weren’t at all. He supposed it was just like the age-old trick of walking against vehicles for safety purposes, always making sure that the traffic in front was heading towards rather than away. It helped stop accidents, it reduced chances of abductions, and it was just smart to follow. Plus, there was the nice bonus of not having exhaust fumes floating in their faces constantly, rather just the scent of grass and damp soil instead.

Rather than walk in the usual huddled formation that allowed them to stay on the sidewalks and in a tight little group, they all loosely spread out across the field because there was no need to stick together. But they still ended up in their own little groupings. Taehyung, Jungkook and Jimin ended up on the left, not exactly walking in a triangle but close enough, quite a distance ahead of them like usual. Seokjin and Namjoon stayed rather central, both walking together at the same pace, and he and Yoongi were a couple of feet to their right, not sticking in a pair but rather just walking at their own pace. In the case of the young man he wandered in more of a meander than a straight line, curving to the left and getting closer to him before bobbing back to the right and drifting away again like a soft tide. Because of the distance they were more or less silent for the occasional remark every now and again, and he had went deep into his thoughts when he heard one of them making a loud noise and Hoseok looked up sharply in time to see Taehyung standing bolt upright, head turning to look across the field like a dog trying to locate a squirrel.

“Woah, holy shit!” he announced before letting out a sudden laugh. “You hear that? That’s a fucking train!” The excitement in his voice was so strong that he could only stare at him in confusion. Why was he so excited over a stupid train? They must have seen dozens of abandoned trains at the old yard back in Seoul for him to not be that amazed by them anymore and yet that did not seem to be the case. He understood that it was kind of cool seeing an actual train these days and not a subway shuttle, seen as they were damn near extinct but still... perhaps he needed to lower his level of
maturity down to the other boy’s to really get it.

“Uh yeah,” Yoongi said after a moment. “That’s definitely a train. Thanks for the announcement. I’m sure we couldn’t have figured that out on our own.”

“Dumbass couldn’t have,” Jungkook retorted and Jimin just let out a heavy sigh and rolled his eyes rather than respond. He looked tired and considering the events of the night he had every right to be: smacking his head on the driver-seat and busting his nose, hunkering over the broken engine and getting acrid smoke floating up into his face, and now having to put up with the boy’s jokes.

“What? You guys don’t get it, do you?” Taehyung turned on his heel to look back at them. A quick glance across the horizon showed no sign of the vehicle and it was likely some distance away, for sound traveled very well out here in the middle of nowhere. But the tracks weren’t that far away from them for Hoseok could see a sign mounted that seemed to be a level crossing: flashing light on it and orange and black stripes up the length of the pole.

“Get what?” Namjoon asked as he shrugged his holdall up with a sigh.

“We can ride the fucking train,” the boy said before laughing again. They all stared at him and he turned back around to start walking across the field a little faster, no doubt wanting to get close to the tracks for when it went blaring past.

“I’m sorry, did you just say we can ride the train?”

“Yeah Seokjin, keep up with us. I know it’s hard you being so old.” Taehyung’s backpack jostled on his back in rhythm with his steps and Hoseok found his own pace getting a little faster in response to keep up with him. “But we can ride it. This baby’s probably got about ten freight carriages on the back. All of us run alongside it and get one open and voila! Instant ride and a place to sleep for the night!”

“What if the carriages are locked?” Seokjin asked, a valid and smart question.

“Why would they lock the fucking carriages?”

“To stop people riding in them!”
“C’mon! We won’t find out if we miss it, hurry your asses up!” And so the boy actually started racing across the field and a few seconds later the other boys were right on his heels. There was still no sight of it so Hoseok thought he didn’t need to run just yet and rather just kept at a fast pace. No point in wasting energy that would soon be needed to chase after the train. He was a couple of feet away from the tracks when he heard the noise it was making get louder, signalling its arrival.

The train made a noise that sounded a little like an army of huffs, air being sucked up and expelled loudly over and over until the air seemed to vibrate from it all. The ground certainly did, for he could feel the slight tremors under his boots and even see a few pebbles quivering in the soil as the vehicle got closer and closer. The first thing he saw was a blaring light, then a heavy plume of smoke, and then the front of the train. It was bullet-shaped and looked to be a slick black metal in the light from the moon, red details on the grills and around the lower section of the body by the wheels. He stared at sight of it and then Taehyung was running along the tracks towards it so fast that he was surprised. The carriages must have most certainly been open because he saw him grabbing onto something and then a moment later he was diving up and out of sight, legs kicking for a second or two before he pulled them in.

The other boys had seen his success and decided to copy him, no doubt wanting to show off just as much as he had done and make it look so simple. Jungkook tossed his holdall in first and then jumped inside and a hand shot out to grab hold of Jimin’s forearm and help pull him inside. It looked surprisingly easy and yet he knew that that was not the case. The train got closer to them down the tracks, not moving at a particularly fast speed but rather nice and steady, and as it did Taehyung and Jungkook leaned out, the youngest shouting about their bags and the other holding his arm out for assistance. Seokjin tossed his bag at the boy and then took his chance, quickly darting forward and getting his upper body onto the floor of the carriage before dragging himself up and into it. Namjoon just grabbed the side of the carriage as it passed him with both hands and then used it to pull himself up and inside in a quick jerk.

“Why did I agree to this fucking adventure?” Yoongi muttered before also tossing his bag. The carriage was practically in front of them now and so his friend jogged a few feet before accepting Taehyung’s hand and letting him drag him up into the carriage. Hoseok tossed his own backpack but Jungkook had been in the act of throwing the other one behind him and as a result he fumbled and dropped it.

For a second he didn’t register this but then it hit the floor with a loud thumping noise, cloud of dust taking to the air as it did and then the open doorway moved right past him.

“Shit!” Jungkook called out. “I missed the fucking bag!” Hoseok retrieved it and realised that he was going to have to run alongside the freights to catch up, cursing himself for being the one that had to do it. “Throw it again!”
“Why?! So you can miss it again?!” he shouted and he heard his friends laughing from the interior of the carriage just a few feet in front of him. He picked up speed before swinging the bag up and into Namjoon’s hands instead and his friend shoved it behind him. Taehyung was practically hanging out of the open doorway, lying on his stomach and waving an arm out to him and so he grabbed onto his forearm, feeling his hand seizing onto his arm tightly too, and then he let him drag him up and into the carriage roughly, grabbing onto his shoulder so that he couldn’t possibly lose his grip. He felt his knees scraping along the floor for a moment and then he pulled his legs inside fully and a split second later the pole from earlier went flying past. Had he been a second late then he would have smacked right into it, and that would have most certainly hurt.

Hoseok shifted to sit down and took a moment to catch his breath, running his eyes along the interior as he did. Empty carriage that wasn’t connected to the others and had no other doors excluding the one they had gotten in through. The floor was dusty against the palms of his hands and there was a faint musty scent in the air that seemed to hint that it hadn’t been used in some time. At least the boy hadn’t picked one that had been packed with boxes and no room for them to fit inside. That was pretty damn lucky.

“Never play football,” he said after a few seconds, looking right at Jungkook as he did, “if you have to play in goal.” The boy grinned at him and he could only shake his head. “Chasing after a fucking train, what am I? Five?”

“You run like a five year old,” Jimin said with a smirk. “Even Yoongi managed to get in before you did.”

“Hey,” the young man said around a cigarette stick, “give me a break, huh?”

“At least it wasn’t a joke about me for once,” Seokjin said with a laugh.

“Wait wait wait,” Taehyung held a hand up at them all. “A minute ago you were all looking at me like I was fucking nuts and now you’re all grinning and messing around. Was it a good idea or what?”

“It was a good idea,” Hoseok said with a nod, seeing the boy beaming at him. “But where is it going?”

“Pft, like I know?”
“So we just ride it to the end of the line?” Namjoon asked as he shifted and placed his holdall behind him like a makeshift pillow. Taehyung confirmed this with a nod before saying that they could ride it until morning also. “What happens if we sleep and wake up in Busan?”

“We’ll figure that out if and when it happens,” the boy said with a nonchalant shrug.

It wasn’t much longer after they had managed to get into the freight carriage that they started to settle down in it, spitting mouthfuls of foamy toothpaste out of the open door so they could at least wash up a little, tossing wrappers from any leftover snacks out so that they were dragged under the wheels and crushed on the tracks, using backpacks and holdalls as temporary pillows and allowing them to actually lie down and rest. Hoseok didn’t think that he possibly could rest seen as the floor vibrated rather annoyingly underneath them, enough to make him feel an unsettled sensation in the pit of his stomach that wouldn’t go away. Namjoon stayed in his original position to the side of the door but the others seemed to gravitate towards lying in a rather neat line in the middle of the carriage, far away from the open door to save any of them falling out in their sleep; which Jimin would somehow manage to achieve. Seokjin was on the end by the wall and to his left was Jungkook, the both of them sharing his light coat like a blanket because there was nothing else to use. To the boy’s left was Jimin, Yoongi’s jacket tucked up under his chin securely. The young man was to his side, turned so that he could only see the back of his red hair fanned out against his own holdall, and if he was in anyway cold then he didn’t show it even when he was just wearing a thin cotton tee. Then Taehyung with his denim shirt blanket, and him against the other wall. Not long after they had all managed to get comfortable on the hard metal floor he heard the sounds of soft snoring and breathing that revealed that his friends were all asleep, or at least drifting off, but yet Hoseok couldn’t sleep at all. He stared at the wall and ceiling in turn, at Taehyung lying beside him with his beanie hat pulled down over his eyes like a sleeping mask to block any light out from the doorway across the carriage.

Eventually he sat up with a heavy sigh and shifted so that he could get his backpack and look at it. Dust on the bottom from the floor, a slight tear on the hemline so that a little thread hung down annoyingly on one of the compartments. He reached down to unbuckle the clasp and then pulled the material open to look inside. The sight of his clothing mostly neatly folded inside, toothbrush sticking out like an antenna. He eyed the inner compartment for a few seconds before glancing over at his friends. Then he shifted to move away from the line and into the corner opposite Namjoon.

He had just gotten the plastic bottle between his fingers, pulled free from the compartment, and was about to apply pressure on the lid with his other hand to twist it free, when he heard a rustling noise and he glanced over to see Taehyung sitting up.

He reached up to pull his beanie off and then stared right at him from just a few feet away. For a moment the freight carriage seemed to go deathly silent, punctuated only by the vibrating floor and the sound of the wind blowing past the open gap, and then he felt his breath leave his lungs in a sigh.

“Shit Tae, you scared me to death and-”
“What you got there?” Taehyung asked as he eyed the bottle, as if it wasn’t terribly obvious what it was in his hands. He wasn’t even talking in a whisper like him, rather just a low voice, and he was terrified that he might just wake the others up.

“Medication.”

“Like flu medication?” Hoseok didn’t reply and instead considered putting the bottle back but it was stupid. There was no point in which trying to hide it away now that one of them had seem him with the bottle. So instead he just looked at it quietly for a second. Then the other boy was crawling along the carriage, denim shirt blanket slipping off him as he did so that his palms and knees brushed against it with a soft rustle. When he was but a few inches away, knees touching his own, he stopped and stared at the bottle too, eyes no doubt trying to scan the white label attached to the side.

“No, it’s not flu medication.”

“Gimme one.”

“Give you…what?”

“Hey, first rule of drugs: always share what you got.”

“Tae, it’s not drugs it’s medication.”

“Same thing.”

“It’s not Valium, you can’t get high off it.” But Taehyung was holding his palm out to him anyway as if expecting him to tip a pill on it so Hoseok sighed and shook two free before giving him one. He told him not to chew it so the boy just tossed it into his mouth and swallowed hard.

“What is it?” he asked, the first thing he should have rather than requesting one.

“Xanax, and I shouldn’t be giving you any because it’s addictive and mixes bad with alcohol.”
“Makes it easier to get drunk, huh? Too bad I’m already drunk.” Taehyung shifted to look at the bottle. Hoseok hesitated before handing it to him, swallowing his own pill with a sip of warm water. “Xanax, 40mg, directions for use: take one a day with water, do not exceed stated dosage.” The boy made a soft noise at this before shaking it slightly. “This is the more addictive version of Prozac, right?” He didn’t say anything as he screwed the lid back on the battered plastic bottle of water. “Giving this shit to kids… might as well spread a line of coke on the doctor’s desk whilst they’re at it. How long have you been taking ’em?”

“Three weeks.”

“That long and you managed to keep it a secret from us? I’m impressed.” Taehyung grinned at this and then dropped the bottle on his lap. “It’s not doing shit, is it?” He could only let out a soft laugh in response as he shoved the pill bottle back into the bag and zipped it up, the sound loud in the quiet carriage. “Is it the stupid exams?”

“I…uh, I don’t know what it is,” Hoseok said as the put the bottle down and reached up to run his fingers across his brow gently, fingertips swirling against his skin. “It just happened, you know?”

“Know what? What happened?” Taehyung shifted so that he was seated beside him, balancing his weight on one wrist and leaning close to keep his voice at a low volume, chin brushing against his shoulder as he did. He could smell the faint remains of soju on his breath and he knew that he shouldn’t have given him one of the pills.

“I just started to feel…weird, I don’t know I just-”

“You can tell me,” the other boy said in a reassuring tone. “You don’t have to act all skittish about it all. Just be straight, tell me all of the shit and just get it over with.”

“What if I don’t want to tell all of the shit?” he asked quietly, eyes moving over to look at his sleeping friends to see if any of them moved. They didn’t. “What then?”

“You trust me, don’t you?” he asked and he let this question hang in the air before turning his head to look at him. Taehyung’s face just a few inches from his own, features readable from the light coming in through the open carriage door: eyes wide and attentive and slightly glassy in the dim lighting, corners of his mouth neutral and lips pouted ever so slightly. He held his gaze for a moment and then the boy’s eyes dropped to his mouth for a second before going back up to his eyes; faster than a blink.
“I trust you, I trust all of you.”

“So why not?”

“I don’t want to burden anyone with my shit,” Hoseok replied brusquely, “because everyone’s got enough of their own. They don’t need mine weighing them down too.”

“You think you’d weigh us down?”

“I do.”

“Then... don’t we weigh you down with our shit too?” He shook his head and told him that that wasn’t the case at all. “How come? And don’t say “just ‘cos” or I’ll roll you out of this fucking carriage.” Hoseok smirked at this remark and took a minute to sort his thoughts out in his head before even beginning to speak. This was the kind of conversation that required a little pre-planning and yet Taehyung had sprung it on him so suddenly that he hadn’t had time to prepare at all.

“Because you all have reasons and I don’t,” he said bluntly and his friend didn’t say a word, the carriage plunging into silence again. “That’s why. I don’t have an abusive asshole for a father or money troubles, I’m not a runaway or struggling with addictions or anything like that.” He felt his eyes shifting to look at the bag for a second before forcing his gaze back to the wall instead. “I have no reason.”

“You do have a reason,” Taehyung said in a quiet voice, “and that reason matters just as much as our reasons do. Your reason is that you just do. That’s it. You just need the medication ‘cos you’re struggling with something. Doesn’t matter if there are ‘reasons’. Shit, depression doesn’t need fucking reasons.” At the word ‘depression’ he felt himself flinching. That was it, the word was finally out in the open. No longer coming out of his doctor’s mouth in a clinical fashion, no longer whispered by his mother because she thought he couldn’t read her lips from across the room; no, he had finally heard it coming right out of his friend’s mouth and he felt a strange sensation as a result. It didn’t feel as...dramatic or ugly sounding as it did in his head. It seemed ‘normal’. “So you don’t need to feel like you’ll burden us, OK?”

“…OK.”

“Cos we care about you Hoseok,” Taehyung continued, moving his hand along the floor of the
carriage so that his fingertips traced lines in the dust. “And if we can’t handle you at your worst we
don’t deserve you at your fucking best.”

“What’s that like again?” he asked in a quiet voice. “It’s been so long I’ve forgotten what my best
feels like.”

“Your best is…it’s the fucking best,” the boy said with a wide grin and Hoseok let out a laugh at
this, “it’s just the best. You could make us all smile even if it was the shittiest day of our life, I mean
you really chased the blues away.” He asked him if he was being serious. “Yup, as serious as I’ll
ever be.” Taehyung’s fingers advanced along the floor until he could feel them brushing against the
side of his thigh, against his jeans.

“How? How did I chase the blues away, huh?”

“Your smile,” Taehyung said without missing a beat. “Could just do it.” He studied his friend’s face
and he darted his tongue out to wet his lips. “But it really does seem like forever since we last saw it;
I mean really saw it at it’s brightest, y’know?”

“I’m not feeling my brightest these days…”

“But you still shine like always.” The comment was enough to make him smile softly and he looked
over at their sleeping friends. He could see Yoongi shifting slightly and he wondered if he was
awake or asleep. If he wasn’t sleeping then he had probably heard absolutely everything they had
said and that meant not just one of them knowing. How long until it was all of them? And then
what? He was so into his thoughts as he stared at his friend that it took him a moment to realise that
Taehyung had moved his face along his shoulder and before he could even mutter something at him
the boy’s lips were brushing along his cheek. He managed to get them to the corner of his mouth
before Hoseok turned his face away.

“Let me guess,” he asked, “you’re really drunk…again?”

“I…uh-”

“You always do this when you’re drunk,” Hoseok said before sighing. “You’re too predictable Tae,
really.”
“I…well the soju was pretty strong and—” Hoseok moved the backpack from in front of him so that he could lie down and use it as a pillow instead, settling against the bulky material and staring up at the ceiling. “I probably shouldn’t have had that pill but…oops.” After a few seconds he heard him shifting to lie down on the floor beside him, on his side because he could feel his gaze on his face; a weight to it as he stared at him in the dimness of the carriage. “What’d you mean, I always do that when I’m drunk?”

“You always try and kiss me when you’re drunk,” he explained, “so stop pretending that you don’t remember.” Taehyung stayed silent for a moment and he wondered if he would carry on playing dumb with him or whether he would just leave it and go to sleep instead. “That’s the…fourth, yes, the fourth time.”

“Are you pissed off ‘cos me?”

“Pissed? Why would I be pissed off because you?”

“I dunno, you just…” the boy paused and thought his words over for a moment, “you moved your face away and I thought that you might be pissed off.”

“I’m not,” Hoseok said and he closed his eyes with a sigh. “Good night Tae, get some sleep.”

“What about a goodnight kiss?” He didn’t respond to this and a few seconds later he felt his friend’s face hovering over his before he leaned forward and kissed him. It was nothing more than the lightest brushing of his lips against his and then he heard him settling down on the floor beside him. After a minute Hoseok opened his eyes again to stare at the ceiling and then came the rustling sound of someone moving across the carriage. He didn’t move to see who it was because he soon detected the scent of cigarette smoke and he knew that it was Yoongi, lighting up because he couldn’t sleep like always. Then he turned his head slightly to look at Taehyung. The boy had his arm folded up under his head as a makeshift pillow and his hair had fallen over his closed eyes.

The faintest tastes of the pill was still on his tongue and when he ran it along his lower lip he was pretty sure that he could taste soju too.
Namjoon rolled over and for a brief moment he was aware of the fact that he was falling, that he had fallen out of bed and he was going to hit the floor...except he didn’t. His head did slam on something, something hard but not the carpeted floor of a hostel and rather cold and metallic. He fumbled his hands along the floor and then he remembered where he was, where they all were. They were inside a train, not riding like passengers because that was too normal for them. They had hitched a ride in a freight carriage and slept inside it like vagabonds, like a ragtag bunch of Tom Sawyers going on an adventure. No, he thought with a smile, we’re ‘The Railway Children’ instead. This was enough to make him laugh to himself and so he opened his eyes and scanned across the interior.

Namjoon had been lying against the wall the door was on and though he couldn’t see out of it without twisting around he could see that it was morning because the sun was coming through the gap and illuminating the interior. Unlike yesterday evening he could see it all with a clarity, no dark corners hidden away. He shifted to sit upright and glanced back to see that he had rolled off his holdall, the one that he had been using as a pillow during the night. There was a soft dent where his head had been, the canvas wrinkled deeply. He reached over to smooth this out and then turned to look back across the carriage. The floor was metal and covered in dust, patches clean here and there from where they had been sitting and meaning that they would have filthy clothing as a result. When he eyed his own hands he saw dirt coating his palms and stuck in the grooves of his skin so he hastily wiped them on his jeans before rubbing at his heavy eyelids. He yawned and then rolled his shoulders a few times to try and loosen his tight muscles. His neck felt a little stiff and it was no surprise, he had been lying in a very uncomfortable position. It was a miracle that he could even turn his head. The walls were corrugated sheets of metal, not smooth but rather bumped across the length like store shutters. Unpainted and rusted in parts so that the copper coloured stains looked like mold, it was hard to tell if the carriage was worn down from age or whether it was new and just so frequently used that it had been damaged from the constant packing and unpacking of goods. Perhaps the dust hinted at the former but he couldn’t be too certain.

To his right and across the carriage he could see most of his friends and they seemed to be asleep. They were in a sort of line, holdalls and backpacks as pillows, coats and jackets as makeshift blankets that covered their arms and chest, heads visible above the black wool and khaki polyester material. Seokjin was on the right end, lying on his side so that he was facing the wall, light brown hair fanned out on his bag. Beside him was Jungkook, lying so they were back to back and sharing his coat. Unlike Seokjin his own dark hair was messily sticking up in places because he had likely tossed and turned a lot in his sleep. Lying beside him and on his back was Jimin, head on a slight angle and one arm peeping out from under Yoongi’s jacket. He looked deep in slumber, chest rising and falling with soft exhales. Next came Yoongi and he was lying on his side. He had nothing as a blanket but the carriage wasn’t particularly cold and rather warm right now. The young man had his arms folded in front of his chest, skin not too different in tone from his white cotton tee. The sunlight
coming in through the open doorway fell on his face, making his red hair almost glow. There was quite a space between him and the other wall and yet the two other boys were not lying with the group. Namjoon turned his head and sure enough he located them in the corner of the carriage directly opposite him. They had probably been uncomfortable with the original position and had moved to stretch out instead and he couldn’t blame them. It was likely a little stifling and cramped being crushed together like that, just like the back of the car and-

The car.

Namjoon took a deep breath and let it out in a heavy sigh as he closed his eyes. The car, the stupid car that they were supposed to be riding in, that was to get them along all of those annoying roads and save them so much time and energy. The stupid goddamn car that was now abandoned in the middle of nowhere, left to rust and smoke like a corpse to rot in the woods. He couldn’t believe that the vehicle had only lasted a single day before dying on them when it had looked so good upon first glance. The interior and exterior had looked pretty damn good to his eyes and he had had every reason to believe that it would run good too, but he had been wrong. He felt foolish for expecting it to work, for being hopeful and also a little jubilant about it, but it had went wrong and it wasn’t that much of a shock at all. He supposed it was only a matter of time until it had broken down and that it was probably for the best in the end. It was very risky for them to drive through a city. Out on the empty roads between cities with hardly any vehicles passing them by meant little chances of a police siren sounding, lights flashing in the rear view mirror and forcing them to pull over. Why, it had saved them the trouble of being arrested by breaking down in the middle of nowhere like that. But still…

He opened his eyes and then moved to get onto his knees, shifting over so that he could stare out of the open carriage doorway at the sights outside. He saw that the fields outside were starting to give way to more roads instead, freeways and tunnels visible rather than the farmland and trees from yesterday: green and yellow grass replaced with grey concrete and black tarmac. The train traveled along the tracks and he could see vehicles zooming by and disappearing out of sight seconds later, travelling a lot faster than they were. A variety of models and colours, roofs and convertibles, trucks and cars. The sky was filled with clouds for the first time in days and when he looked up he saw an aeroplane flying through one of them, white trails of condensation trailing behind it like exhaust fumes. He studied it for a moment before dropping his eyes to the view in front of him again. A break in traffic before more vehicles started rolling down the road like usual. He settled down and observed this for a minute before he heard something moving behind him and then a loud groaning noise. Yoongi was awake, without a doubt. He didn’t even turn around and instead just carried on looking out of the open door and a moment later the young man moved to sit beside him.

“You know what day it is, right?”

“I don’t even know the year right now,” Namjoon retorted and his friend laughed as he swung his legs over the side. “What day is it?”
“Monday,” Yoongi sighed. “Kill me now.”

“No Monday morning shifts to worry about,” he said and he thought this over for a few seconds before shrugging. “Just…everything else really.”

“I woke up about an hour or so ago,” his friend said as he slipped his packet of cigarettes free. “Back when the there were still fields visible out here, and you know what I did?” He stuck a stick in his mouth as he retrieved his lighter, and Namjoon briefly wondered how many of them he had smoked in that hour. “I needed to piss like…really bad, so I thought ‘hey there’s an open door right here, it’s like the side of the road.’” He lit the end and took a quick inhale as it smouldered, blowing the smoke out of the corner of his mouth a second later. “So…I unzipped my jeans, I prepared myself for sweet relief and…” Yoongi pulled the stick free and paused dramatically. “The wind blew it right back at me.”

“Jesus,” Namjoon snorted laughter.

“Pissing in the wind, I finally understand that saying now.” His friend wet his lips and stuck the cigarette back. “At least I’ve had my shower for the day, huh?” He smacked him on the back hard and he grinned around the stick.

“Lessons learnt, right?” Yoongi nodded and went silent for a minute, just staring out the open doorway. Namjoon studied his face for a few seconds and then looked over his shoulder at their still sleeping friends, seeing them all lying in the same position as earlier. Then he ventured forward with his question. “You OK?”

“Joonie…if you heard something you weren’t supposed to, something important, would you tell me about it?”

“Yeah, if it was important I definitely would. Why are you asking?” Yoongi shifted slightly and he saw that he was thinking something over in his head. He reached up to pluck his cigarette free, dabbing ash as he ran his free hand through his hair.

“I heard the kids talking last night, Tae and Hoseok,” his friend said in a quiet voice, as close to a whisper as he could. “I didn’t mean to but I couldn’t sleep you know, it’s not like I can close my ears like my eyes. They started talking after Tae interrupted him, after Hoseok was messing around in his bag and, well, it’s uh…”
“What?”

“I was right,” Yoongi sighed. “That first night in the hostel, remember? I was right about the pills.”

“Prozac?”

“Xanax.”

“Shit,” Namjoon looked at him for a moment, at the little smouldering tip of cigarette stick, and then he glanced back at the sleeping boy again. Hoseok was lying on his back with his head turned to the side, face hardly visible because Taehyung was in the way, nestled against his side like a baby animal clinging to its mother. He looked so peaceful sleeping that he found it so very hard to believe that that very same boy had antidepressants nestled away in his backpack like contraband, that his currently slumbering mind wasn’t so peaceful after all. He dragged his eyes away to look back at Yoongi. “You hear anything else? Anything about why he has them?”

“I…uh,” Yoongi tossed the stick away and he saw his eyes shifting along the scenery outside, not settling for more than a second or two. “He didn’t say. I guess we’ll have to find that part out ourselves.” He leaned back on his wrists and sighed heavily. “Leave it to Jin, he’s good at the detective shit.”

“Mmmm…good at what exactly?” A sleep-heavy voice asked from behind them.

“Talking shit,” Yoongi retorted without missing a beat.

“I didn’t know we were talking about Tae?” Namjoon shifted so that he could look between his two friends and Seokjin sat up slowly. His hair was messy, eyes puffy from sleep, and yet he still looked a hell of a lot better than they all did. Jungkook moved beside him, eyelids opening for a second before he grabbed the rest of the man’s coat and pulled it over himself with a sleepy groan.

“Don’t wake him up just yet, let us have some peace and quiet for a few more minutes,” Namjoon said and he snorted laughter before trying to flatten his hair. “Before we’re back on an ‘adventure’.”
“I always thought that adventures had princesses and dragons?”

“We got you,” Yoongi explained with a grin, “Jinderella.”

“Oh, so you must be the dragon then? There’s finally an explanation for all of that smoke.”

“I always wanted to be a dragon as a kid,” their friend said, “and people used to laugh at me but hey, you hear that haters? I’m a fucking dragon.” Seokjin got to his feet and wandered over to glance out of the open doorway, not sitting down but rather just standing in place instead. After a few seconds he asked them where they were exactly and neither of them could give him an explanation, rather just stare dumbly at the freeways. Namjoon pulled his hoodie sleeve back to glance at his watch and he saw that it was 11:34am and he was suddenly aware of the fact that they had been asleep for over twelve hours before he was hit with a singular thought and he felt his mouth dropping open.

“Damn, we might just be in France right now, wake the kids up.” He got on his knees and crawled over to collect his holdall bag. “We gotta blow now.”

“Blow what? Who has a bomb?” Jimin asked as he sat upright and squinted at them. He could only smirk at this as he shrugged the bag up onto his shoulder and went over to the two other boys, lightly kicking Taehyung’s boot to wake him up. The boy jerked and headbutted Hoseok awake too, saving him the trouble.

“God Tae, why is your head so fucking hard?” he groaned as he rubbed at his chin gingerly.

“That’s not the only hard thing right now,” Taehyung muttered as he actually reached up to pry his eyes open with his fingers. “What’s going on, who died? Was it Seokjin? I know his heart’s so weak these days…” The boy had been awake for roughly three seconds and he was already making wisecracks like always, the joke making Jungkook grin as he hugged the eldest’s coat around himself like a cape.

“You look wrecked,” Jimin commented as he fixed one of his bootlaces, knotting it up nice and secure. “That bottle of soju is looking like a bad idea now, huh?”

“Yeah I look wrecked, but have you seen your mom?”
“Don’t you mean dad?” Jungkook corrected and the carriage filled with laughter.

“Eh…both.” Taehyung said with a wide grin that revealed both rows of teeth like always. “No seriously, what’s going on?”

“What’s going on,” Namjoon explained as he watched Hoseok shrugging his backpack on, the one that contained those not so secret pills, “is we slept on a freight train for over twelve hours and it’s still moving, which means we’re probably all the way down in fucking Busan. Hopefully it made a few stops, or we’re half a country away right now.”

“Twelve hours?” Yoongi’s eyebrows brushed up behind his messy hair, eyes opening comically wide as they did. “Fuck me.”

“I’m not joking, I wish I was, so we need to jump outta this thing before we end up at the depot. Come on.” Taehyung got to his feet with a series of disgruntled noises and he crossed the carriage to lean out of the open doorway. After seeing that the train wasn’t moving that fast he jumped out and landed at the side of the tracks with a loud thump. Yoongi copied him, practically sliding out rather than jumping and then catching the holdall bag that Seokjin tossed at him. Namjoon steelied himself and then also jumped out. It was just a foot or two drop, his feet in the air for a second before they came back down again. He felt the vibration of the impact go all the way up his legs and make his stiff knees ache. He took a few steps away from the tracks and then turned on his heel to see Seokjin exiting the carriage. Next came Jungkook and then Hoseok leaned against the doorway, looking over them all.

“You going to miss again?”

“I’m open!” the boy declared as he threw his arms out wide. The other boy laughed before jumping out, stumbling a little before righting himself and then Jimin’s head popped out like a meerkat.

“Anyone wanna catch me before I break my neck?!?” he called and they all rolled their eyes but were likely thinking about the truth in what he had said. For once he had beaten one of the younger boys to the punchline.

“You’re not gonna break your neck!” Yoongi retorted as they quickly walked along the tracks and Jimin eyed the ground for a second before looking back at them. “C’mon, just jump!”

“You can do it Dumbass!” the youngest boy hollered in support. Taehyung took up the chant as he
pumped his arm up in the air and Yoongi just jogged a few ahead of them and held his arms up too, gesturing with his hands for him to jump. Jimin hesitated and then jumped down and he didn’t even need the help. The young man just grabbed onto his upper arms to reassure and steady him and the boy shot him a grateful smile.

“I give it a…six,” Taehyung said as they caught up with them. “Good execution but you could’ve worked on the landing.”

“I should’ve landed on you instead.”

“I’d pay to see you in one of those costumes, what’re they called again?”

“Leotards,” Hoseok said wearily.

“Yeah, a leotard,” Taehyung repeated with a smirk. “A cute one, sparkly and tight.”

“Please keep your fantasies to yourself.”

“Pft, like you don’t wanna see it too Yoongi,” the boy retorted as Namjoon fixed his holdall in place and glanced around them quickly. Roads to their right, train tracks to the left, and the train now nothing more than a small dot on the horizon getting further and further away, plume of steam taking to the sky just like the clouds overhead. In front of them he could see a bustling freeway covered in cars, hear them speeding past above them with loud engines and beeping horns. They were maybe a mile or two away from the entrance to the city and he tried scanning for signs but he couldn’t see any, being so far from the main roads. “Pink and sparkly, and so small that you can see most of his cute little butt.”

“Oh god!” Jungkook declared. “Now I’m imagining it too!”

“Anyone have a clue where we are?” Seokjin asked in confusion, deflecting the course of conversation away from Jimin’s ass. He glanced around them too as if trying to see anything that might reveal an answer but he wouldn’t see a thing. The only sign was a billboard, one that advertised a new car model: a shiny black one that would most certainly not break down after a single night on the road. “Or is that part of the fun?”
“Every time something goes wrong it’s apparently part of the ‘fun’,” Hoseok muttered from the back of the formation. “Though I’m sure that we could argue against it.”

Namjoon dragged his eyes away from the billboard to instead look at the city on the horizon in front of them. Same glass and concrete towers like always, cold fingers brushing up against the warm sky: radio towers and other large structures that he couldn’t yet identify, but as soon as nightfall made them all start glowing it would turn into a miniature sun. It looked just like every other city to him, no different than Seoul to his eyes, and it meant that he had absolutely no way of figuring out which one it was. He could have pointed at the map of the country and picked any city out and likely ended up correct.

“Does it matter where we end up?” Taehyung asked as he fixed his backpack.

“Yeah,” Jimin retorted. “Of course it matters.” But when the other boy asked him why he didn’t seem to have an answer and he went blank instead.

“It matters,” Yoongi explained on his behalf, “cos we’ve gotta get back to Seoul at some point Tae. We don’t have a fucking clue where we even are right now.” He had a good point and he paused to let it sink in before continuing. “I think you forget that they are multiple pairs of parents back in Seoul waiting for their annoying sons to come back home.”

“They just finally got some peace and quiet,” Namjoon joked. “I don’t think all of them are waiting…”

“Look, we got here by train, we’ll leave here by train, right?” the boy said, as if this was the most obvious outcome and he couldn’t believe that they hadn’t figured it out yet. Jungkook asked him if he knew the train routes, sarcasm both audible in his voice and visible on his expression. “Do I fuck? No, but we’ll hitch our asses across the country no problem. It’s not like we have to pay for tickets. Just use your brains and we’ll get back to Seoul easy, no sweat.”

“I doubt it…” Yoongi muttered under his breath.

It took them several minutes of constant walking to reach the beginnings of the outskirts of the new city. Namjoon didn’t count but he knew if they’d have stayed on the train a little longer it would have cut the time in half easily. Except he knew that it was smarter to get off the vehicle in advance and save any possible trouble. The last thing that they needed was to have followed it to the end of the tracks and get collared by a worker for sneaking onto it in the first place. At least outside the city they had done so without getting chased all the way back out again by a security officer. Whilst they
walked he thought about what Yoongi had said to him not that long ago at all in the carriage: about Hoseok and his medication. Including Taehyung that made three that knew about it, unless the other two boys already did. Should they both tell Seokjin? After all they had discussed their friend that night in hostel and it only seemed fair that he knew too…but did they have the right to do so? Yoongi wasn’t even supposed to know, it had been a complete accident that he had heard the boys talking and it didn’t seem right to talk about it so freely like that. Yet at the same time he felt that their friends should know to save Hoseok feeling the pressing need to hide it from them. It must not have been easy carrying and hiding the knowledge from them and at least with them knowing he didn’t have that weight on his shoulders.

As they walked the ground in front of them started to change, started to widen and turn into actual roads with sidewalks, rather empty ones in terrible condition, but roads nonetheless. But he was so into his thoughts that he barely even registered this, rather just watching his own boots moving left, right, left, right, just like Taehyung’s cadence, laces dancing with each step and soles crunching on grit. He was so oblivious that he didn’t notice that they had stopped walking and he bumped right into Jungkook.

Namjoon stumbled but didn’t fall over and he looked up sharply to see his friends all motionless on the sidewalk. For a second he just stared at them dumbly before realising that they were looking at something, and so he followed their gazes across the road to see a town sign mounted on a low billboard. He read the name and then furrowed his brow in confusion.

“Wonju,” Jimin said quietly, pronouncing each syllable precisely, as if he had never seen such a word before. “Welcome to Wonju, population: 327,000…”

“Wonju,” Seokjin repeated the city name and then blinked twice rapidly. “I know where we are.

“We’re in fucking Gangwon.”

The grassy knoll that they were sitting on was perfectly manicured unlike the fields they had passed on the roads outside of the city. The blades were cut so short that they looked like little green needles and when he placed his palms down on them they felt very springy, bouncing back into position as if made of rubber rather than real grass. Even the colour seemed too bright, too artificial, yet he knew that it was real and not AstroTurf or another brand for little beads of soil clung to his skin whenever
he placed his hand down. Namjoon found himself studying these little brown specks with great interest because he had little else to do. The dirt looked the exact same as that in Seoul, had the scent of earth just as fragrant as the parks of his childhood and yet it was so completely different. It didn’t feel or look like the same soil to him and he wiped his hands together brusquely to knock the specks free. It was ridiculous but he couldn’t push the idea away because he couldn’t stop thinking of the stupid town sign.

It was still perfectly clear in his mind, the billboard sign with the large black letters dancing across the surface, declaring the name and population in such a matter of fact way. Everyone passing by would likely have glanced at it without a care and yet to them it had been so much more: a revelation. They had all stopped on the roadside to stare at it as if they had never seen a town sign before, mouths hanging open and brows furrowed, and then Seokjin had announced that they were in Gangwon in the most flattest voice. Gangwon, hundreds and hundreds of miles across the country and most certainly where they had not intended to end up. Why, Namjoon had expected to have woken up maybe a city away at most, two or three at worst, but he had not thought that they would jump out of the train carriage and be in another region entirely. He wanted to kick himself for managing to get into such a ridiculous situation but he couldn’t; he had kicked himself enough times already since beginning this ‘adventure’.

“Hey,” Jimin’s voice brought him out of his thoughts and he looked over at his friends. He was sitting at the very end of the knoll beside the road, separated from them by a couple of feet of springy grass. They were sitting huddled together in a small group, or in Hoseok’s case lying, and Seokjin and Taehyung were nowhere in sight because they had left to go find somewhere to get food. He could see bored and weary expressions on all of their faces, except Jimin’s, for the boy had something like wonder on his face.

“What?” Hoseok asked without moving his arm off his eyes, blocking the sunlight from his gaze.

“What bug is this?” The boy lifted his arm up and sure enough there was something on his skin, a little creature moving along the back of his hand. Namjoon couldn’t see it clearly from his distance but it looked like a beetle of some kind.

“Why do you care?” Jungkook asked.

“Is it poisonous?” The question was so childish that they couldn’t help but scoff at it but there was a grin on his lips rather than fear. “I was gonna put it on Seokjin’s back as a joke and tell him it was.”

“You’re just saying that,” Namjoon joked, “so we don’t think you’re scared, right?”
“He’s such a baby…”

“What? I was being serious Kookie, it would’ve been funny, real funny.” Jimin pouted in annoyance and the bug advanced along the back of his hand, little legs brushing against the knob of his wrist until it settled down in place. He could see twitching antenna and a glossy back that shone a variety of iridescent colours: metallic blues and greens and even red. “What bug?”

“Lemme see…” Yoongi grabbed his arm firmly and turned it over so that he could eye it more clearly, squinting down at it with his tongue sticking out between his lips. “Definitely not poisonous. It’s a jewel beetle.”

“Huh, pretty name…”

“Is it really, or are you just saying that to impress him?”

“Why do I need to impress Jimin?” Yoongi retorted as he let go of him and raised his other hand to stick his cigarette back into his mouth. “Specially over something as stupid as that, huh? A bug?” But Jungkook just stared at the passing traffic rather than respond. The young man breathed the smoke out before turning back to him. “It’s a jewel beetle, I dunno what variety but it’s one of ‘em.”

“Kinda looks like a jewel,” Jimin remarked as he lifted it up to study it. “It’s cute.” He grinned as it slowly trundled around to his inner wrist and Yoongi studied him for a moment, own lips lifting in a smile around the stick.

“Cute? It’s a bug,” Jungkook said as he rolled his eyes. “You should kill it.”

“Kill it? But it’s tiny, why would I kill it?”

“Just let it go,” Hoseok mumbled, “and let the bug live. Don’t need to ruin its day too.”

“You don’t have to destroy everything nice Kookie.” Jimin lowered his hand to the grass and gently prodded at the bug with his free hand to get the beetle to climb off him. “And you don’t have to pick fights with a bug just ‘cos it’s smaller than you.”
“I’ll pick fights with whoever I want,” Jungkook replied matter of factly as he shifted on the grass, “be they bug or man.”

“You’d fight…an old person?” Namjoon asked and the boy nodded and said if they were assholes he totally would. “You’d fight…a baby?”

“Who doesn’t wanna punch a baby?” The question was one-hundred-and-fifty-percent Taehyung influenced and they snorted laughter at the boy’s reply.

“OK, OK, so you’d punch a girl?”

“I…uh…” Jungkook paused as he thought this over for a moment. “Nah, I wouldn’t punch a girl.”

“OK, but I thought you’d fight anyone?” Yoongi asked as he breathed out a lungful of smoke.

“Hey, I said any man not any woman.”

“Kookie’s scared that a girl would kick his ass,” Hoseok said as he sat up slowly. “That’s why he wouldn’t fight one.” The boy rapidly explained about how dangerous so-called ‘cat fights’ were and they all just rolled their eyes at this convenient excuse. “Where the hell are those two?”

“Known Tae they’re probably in Gwangju,” Namjoon joked…well, mostly joked. “He can’t steal shit with Seokjin in tow so it’s taking longer than usual.” It wasn’t like they were operating on a stringent budget right now, for they still had quite a decent amount of won left. They had spent a chunk of it on gas and food yesterday morning and he knew that they had a nice amount left if they used it wisely, not including any deducted from the upcoming breakfast, or perhaps more aptly called lunch judging from the time. It was enough for rooming in hostels for another couple of days no problem but he wasn’t entirely certain how many more days they had left in them.

Namjoon hadn’t said anything to the others of course, but he had been thinking about it all afternoon since waking. How long exactly were they planning on staying on the road before heading home? It had been four days so far, five including the current day, and they were nearing a week on the road; a week in which they had lost money through bribing dirty hostel owners, been robbed of cash and phones by another, had hustled for enough to get them through the day, had won and lost a car, and had hitched all the way to Gangwon in a freight train carriage. In terms of ‘adventure’ he was certain that all of this constituted as one, a grand one at that. Not many people would be getting into such hijinks, that much he was certain of. For most high school kids and young adults an adventure meant a
trip to the beach or some kind of amusement park, perhaps even a camping trip. It did not mean what they were currently on because that would likely be classified as a ‘disaster’ instead. But, disaster or not, he had to admit that it was kind of fun even with the downsides to think about. Yet how much longer could they possibly go? Another four days? Then they were edging dangerously close to being called runaways on account of the kids. He wouldn’t put it past photographs of them hitting the news, or at least in Hoseok’s and Jimin’s case. He didn’t want that, he didn’t want even more trouble for them when they got back to Seoul.

That was when a coach rolled down the road in front of them and he thought about how convenient it would be to just jump on one.

Of course it wouldn’t be that simple, wouldn’t be as cheap and easy as the freight train ride. Getting from Gangwon to Seoul would require multiple coaches and multiple coaches meant lots of tickets, lots of tickets which would need bundles of won. He doubted that they had enough to get them back in one constant trip, changing coaches at stations without a break, rather they would have to stop and raise more cash throughout it all to afford the next sets of tickets; more hustling and slaving away on the streets. It required planning and teamwork but he wasn’t that certain that they would be able to achieve it. They couldn’t even get Taehyung to stop stealing things or Hoseok to open up about his medication, but perhaps it was a different kind of teamwork that was needed. After all, they had managed to raise a decent amount of cash already as a team, what would stop them from sticking to such a plan to get home? Well, other than the fact he didn’t even know if the others even wanted to go home yet. It was something that he would need to talk to the others about, perhaps Seokjin and Yoongi next time they ended up rooming together. He would broach the subject cautiously of course, test the waters and find out how they felt about it all rather than blurting out his own reservations about travelling for much longer. Seokjin would need to get back for college soon and he doubted that the other young man wanted to be walking all across the country again for a few more days. It was just the boys that would prove troublesome, particularly a certain someone by the name of Kim Taehyung.

Namjoon tracked the white and blue coach down the road until it was out of sight and then shifted to cross his legs with a heavy sigh. His jeans rustled against the grass softly and his movement caught the attentions of his friends and he felt their gazes falling on him. Before he could do so much as attempt to mumble and break the silence he heard Jungkook loudly wooping and he turned to look along the street and see the two others making their way towards them. No bags in Taehyung’s hands but he knew they would be shoved away in his backpack, a small brown paper one curled up in Seokjin’s palm. Their eldest friend had the unmistakable sight of a coffee container in hand, matching logo on the bag also on the polystyrene cup. Despite downing a nice hot drink of freshly brewed coffee he looked tired and he knew that they all likely looked that way too: messy hair and wrinkled clothes, puffy eyes and nails and lips that had been gnawed on over and over. In Jimin’s case there was still a slight patch of dried blood around his nostrils but at least his nose hadn’t swollen or bruised from his accident.

“Good morning sunshine,” Taehyung declared as he skipped the last few feet, wincing only slightly despite the fact he most certainly had a raging hangover from a mostly drained bottle of soju last night. His backpack jostled from the movement: a turtle shell.
“Good afternoon,” Hoseok corrected as he sat up and wrapped his arms around his drawn-up knees.

“Same thing lover boy,” he argued as he sat down on the knoll with a groan, stretching his legs out in front of him. “I hate this city already and we’ve been in it like… what, a whole fucking hour?”

Seokjin moved to perch on the edge of the grassy ledge and he held the container out at him. Namjoon asked him what it was and he explained that it was a caramel macchiato, which explained why he didn’t offer it to Yoongi. Their friend would only drink coffee as black as Hoseok’s hair. So he accepted it and took a deep sip, enjoying the sensation the hot liquid left in its wake as he swallowed it. The caffeine buzz was an added bonus, he was just glad to be swallowing something that wasn’t cold for once. “Breakfast is the same as fucking always, but with a nice twist.”

“What kinda twist?” Jungkook asked as the boy shrugged his backpack off and unzipped it, the sound loud in the quiet air.

“I bought us a treat,” Seokjin explained as he shook the paper bag. “Dessert, well kind of dessert.” Namjoon took another sip of coffee and Taehyung pulled a bag out just like he had imagined. When he upended it little plastic cartons of flavoured milks and water fell out, even a small glass bottle he recognised as a hangover remedy bouncing off the grass. Then came the packets of potato and seaweed crisps, shrink-wrapped dried meats and even little plastic boxes of fruit.

“How much did that cost?” Namjoon asked curiously and the boy just tapped on his nose in response; telling him that he was being nosy. It wasn’t like he had to worry about the budget right now, but it was more food than usual and he was a little worried that they might just get into the habit of overspending.

“I feel like we’ve been on some kind of weird diet,” Hoseok said as he grabbed one of the fruit boxes. “Like a two meal a day diet packed with a few mouthfuls of junk food and nothing more. All calorie, zero nutrition.”

“I bet idols wish they had that diet,” Jungkook joked as he tore a packet of crisps open and grabbed a handful before shaking the bag at Jimin.

“Like idols even need to diet,” Yoongi muttered under his breath. As usual he wasn’t even looking at the food but rather studying his worn boots.

They all finished the late breakfast/early lunch without much need for conversation, rather using their
magnificent mouths for chewing instead of talking. Namjoon didn’t really care about the nutritional value because food was food and they couldn’t afford to be picky, but he did enjoy eating fruit for the first time in days for sure, and he knew that the others did too. Yoongi picked here and there between smoking his fifth cigarette of the day, likely running low on his supply by now. The young man would probably get through a packet a day if not for their judging eyes watching him every time he lit up. The habit was annoying but right now he thought pointing out his penchant for smoking rather than eating, along with not sleeping enough hours, wasn’t going to be helpful. His friend was obviously already aware of this fact and did not need constant reminders. Upon finishing all of the food Seokjin opened the brown bag and revealed little baked pastries from the coffee store and though they were likely all full not one of them refused a bite. Even Jimin conveniently forgot about the ‘poisonous’ bug trick because their eldest friend had dodged the attack by treating them all. He didn’t attempt it with Taehyung because the chances were that the boy really would find a poisonous bug and plant it on his pillow one night as revenge.

“So,” the youngest boy said as he drained his milk and tossed the container aside. “Are we going further into the city or are we leaving again to try and get outta Gangwon?” The plastic container bounced along the grass and left beads of white milk on the blades like dew. For a moment they were all silent as they thought the question over. They hadn’t even spoken about it and he raised a good point. “Cos it’s probably not a good idea to get even further away from Seoul, right?”

“I’d be happy to get the fuck outta Gangwon,” Taehyung agreed as he started pulling handfuls of grass out and tossing them aside. “But it’s not like we got a map. Any of you know the best way outta this place?” When none of them replied he shrugged. “Yeah, me neither.”

“We should leave,” Namjoon said after a moment, “cos Kookie’s right.”

“Back the way we came?” Hoseok asked as he rubbed at his forehead. “What, along the train tracks?” He said that that sounded like a good idea and the boy nodded in agreement. “I guess we could, I mean, it shouldn’t take that long right? A few hours maybe?”

“What about a train?” Jimin suggested, looking between them all. “If we got here by train we could leave here by train…”

“Yes, but we risk ending up even further away from Seoul,” Seokjin countered. “So that’s not very smart.”

“I hear Busan’s lovely this time of year,” Yoongi said with a smirk and they couldn’t help but laugh at the remark. He had meant it as a joke but it was also rather apt. If anyone could jump a train in the hopes of getting to Seoul and end up in Busan it would be them. “How many hours we talking here?”
“Maybe as few as three, maybe as many as six…” Taehyung said, pausing before adding, “or more.” The young man made a disgruntled noise under his breath and then shifted to lie down and stare up at the sky. “Vote. We need to get moving soon before it gets too late, so let’s vote.”

“Don’t you think it’s too late already?” Jungkook remarked. “It’s nearly 1pm right now. Usually we’re already a few hours on the road. What if it’s a lot longer than six hours?”

“Vote,” Taehyung repeated, “I vote we leave Gangwon.”

“Me too,” Jimin said with a nod.

“I guess we should,” Hoseok agreed with a shrug.

“I vote that we stay the night,” Yoongi ventured, still staring at the sky in boredom, “and decide tomorrow instead.” After a moment Jungkook nodded and said he thought that sounded the best.

“Actually…I-”

“Dumbass you can’t just change your vote!”

“Says who?” the boy asked, ignoring Taehyung’s glare.

“I vote we stay the night and we leave tomorrow,” Namjoon said suddenly. “First thing tomorrow, no ifs, no buts-”

“No coconuts!” Taehyung interrupted with a wide grin.

“Exactly. We’ll figure out a quick route somehow, ask around for directions or whatever, but we leave no matter what,” he finished as he leaned back on his wrists, looking at them each in turn and studying their expressions. They were clearly thinking it over and he waited to see what they would say. Then Seokjin agreed that it sounded like the best idea that they had. “Kookie’s right. we don’t
wanna risk leaving and getting stuck on the roads at 2am. That would be a really bad idea, right?”

“So long as we get to not move for a few hours, I’m game.” Yoongi said wearily.

Namjoon was beginning to believe that all hostel rooms looked the exact same. Much like how the interiors of bus carriages or subways looked the same but with slight variations: the colour or material of the seats, the amount of overhead handles and the shape of the plastic molds, the posters stuck up above the windows. But despite the variations they still felt the same, it was just the views outside that changed and let the truth be known. Every single hostel room they entered also seemed that way. Though the view outside was different; new lots and all kinds of vehicles parked in place, long roads and passing traffic, sometimes billboards and other buildings, sometimes just bushes and streetlights, they were duplicates. Every room felt like a copy and pasted version of the previous, tweaked here and there to keep it fresh but not enough to make it new. Gangwon’s first offering had been just like Seoul and Gyeonggi’s, and he studied it as he stepped inside.

Four walls covered in cream paint rather than the outdated floral wallpaper that they were used to seeing. Dark brown carpet that would smartly hide stains from sight, the pile tight and not plush. There were two windows, a small one on the wall beside the door and another directly opposite, both with blinds rather than curtains. Bathroom to the left with no door at all, beds to the right with lemon yellow sheets and covers. Side table between the pair with a lamp, matching brown glazed body with a white material cover around the bulb, and above it hanged a watercolour print. It was a little yacht bobbing on pastel blue waves with dabs of white sea foam, a little amateurish but appealing in its own way, but a strange choice considering that they were nowhere near a beach or the coast. A print of a field probably would be a better choice, or perhaps that of a ugly industrial skyline instead. Why, that would be the exact same as the view out of both of the windows. It took him a moment of looking over the room before he realised that there was no settee. There was the usual coffee table in place a few feet away from the bed by the window but no settee, which meant someone was sharing tonight.

Or Yoongi was sleeping on the floor.

The thought made him laugh to himself and earn a curious look off the young man as he tossed his holdall at the bottom of one of the beds, almost as if marking his territory by placing it there. No, Yoongi would leave more clearer markings than that, mostly in the scent of cigarette smoke stuck to the sheets and the stubbed out butts all over the covers, maybe even a slight burn on a pillow from a scattering ash. Namjoon had already noticed two such holes in his jeans from where some had fallen
and his failure to notice had let the ash burn right through to his skin. He was counting it lucky that his friend hadn’t fallen asleep and burnt one of the hostel rooms down yet, or perhaps his own house. Really lucky, considering the fact he had a stick between his lips already.

“If you’re thinking about the bed situation I want you to know that I will wrestle for one of ‘em.”

“Doesn’t seem fair wrestling you, like fighting a kid.”

“Ha-ha,” Yoongi half-laughed, half-coughed as he sat down on the bed. “You won’t say that when I kick your ass.”

“He fights dirty,” Seokjin remarked as he emerged from the bathroom and perched on the edge beside his friend. “He will trip you up and pull your hair and bite, I kid you not.” Yoongi nodded in solemn agreement and the cigarette stick bobbed between his lips from the movement. “I’m willing to share so you two can wrestle, I’m not breaking a rib over a stupid hostel bed.”

“I’ll guess I’ll have to play dirty too,” Namjoon sighed as he moved away from the door and sat on the other bed. Not particularly comfortable but better than the freight carriage and grassy knoll without a doubt. No clock on the wall but one of the table beside him, one with an alarm by the looks of the metal fixtures on the top of it. It was an old model, a bright cherry red with nicks in the plastic, and it would require some fiddling to figure out how to work it - and if it even worked in the first place - and so he glanced at the face for a moment before turning it around to check the back. 5:35pm. A few hours spent wandering the outskirts of Inje County before finally settling down in some cheap hostel for the rest of the day. Seokjin had been certain to check the rates thoroughly but he couldn’t help but feel that they had paid too much for this place already. At least the shitty Seoul hostels had had a goddamn settee in the room and a door for the bathroom. “7am?” He felt his friends staring at him so he looked up from the clock. “Do I set an alarm for 7am tomorrow?”

“Do you wanna die tomorrow?” Yoongi asked in a deadly serious tone as he pulled his cigarette stick free.

“I said an early start,” Namjoon muttered as he started messing with the clock.

“You think the kids will be asleep before 4am?”

“There’s no TV, the hell can they do until 4am that would keep them all awake, huh?”
“Drink ten liters of soda and eat more junk food than the whole of fucking America,” his friend retorted as the stick went back between his lips, “like they do every night.”

“I think you mean beer,” Seokjin corrected. “Or at least in Tae’s case. He asked me to buy some today because I wouldn’t let him steal any. I have to respect him for actually asking.” Namjoon asked him if he had bought any and he shook his head and denied it. “No, which probably means that he’ll go out later and get some anyway, though I feel like I’m jinxing it a little by saying that.” He studied his friend for a moment before sensing Yoongi’s eyes on him and when he glanced over at him he could see why: he was silently asking him about their conversation this morning, about whether or not they should tell him. He didn’t know whether to shake his head or nod. Eventually he shook his head in a ‘not now’ manner. “But hopefully I’m wrong, right?”

“Right,” Yoongi quietly said in agreement.

“No beers and no junk food,” he added with a nod.

“What else can we afford?” Seokjin asked with a soft laugh.

“Well, I don’t know about afford but I was thinking about what Hoseok said about crazy diets earlier and how we can’t keep going on junk, you know? I was thinking about hot food for the first time in forever.” At this he saw their interest piquing. “Cos I found this pamphlet on the check-in desk,” Namjoon explained, “and I was thinking…shit I could really enjoy some jajangmyeon right now…”

“Enjoy it? I’d fucking drown in it!” Yoongi declared and his fervent tone revealed that he wasn’t even joking.

“I mean, we can’t order too much but it’s better than nothing, yeah?”

Namjoon had been expecting a little trouble over the orders because it was only natural that they would all struggle to settle on three large orders rather than seven. That was too many and he reasoned that the order sizes would be big enough to have leftovers anyway. But he had not expected the sheer chaos that had erupted upon the kids hearing the words ‘takeaway’ and ‘hot food’. He wouldn’t have been surprised if the owner of the takeaway joint had heard them all hollering about noodles and meat and finally flavour! No more cold, pre-prepared junk that had been on a shelf all day long, just real food that had actually touched a stove. It was enough to trigger a debate that would be right at home in Congress, orders being shouted out and complaints hurled.
Taehyung took it upon himself to loudly repeat the word ‘samgyeopsal’ over and over like a broken record in the hopes of them relenting and picking that as a dish. Hoseok refused to believe that they would happily eat something other than japchae and Jungkook decided that he suddenly wanted pizza even though that was not a choice. Jimin seemed just happy that there would be food and at least he didn’t cause unneeded trouble. By the time they had finally agreed Namjoon felt his head spinning, filled with random order numbers like a lottery machine. At least it made the boys all sit down and behave for a few minutes.

Yoongi’s joke about drowning in the jajangmyeon wasn’t that absurd when the order finally arrived: two large orders of it along with a small japchae and samgyeopsal and the complimentary side dishes because that was the only order they could agree on. The container seemed almost deep enough to drown in, making it worth the cost in the end. It did bite into their cash but he thought that it was well worth it. So they sat cross-legged on the floor of their room in a loose circle with the dishes in front of them, taking mouthfuls here and there. Jungkook practically devoured the kimchi before anyone else could get any and the pork didn’t last too long either. Taehyung decided to try and reenact a movie scene with help from a noodle, trying his very hardest to get Hoseok to accept the other end of it, bean sauce dripping from the end to land on the brown carpet. The boy just left him hanging because it was funnier making him sit there with a noodle hanging out of his mouth then take part in the gag. Jimin offered to do it and Taehyung sucked the noodle up so fast to stop him that he nearly choked on it.

When the food was finished, with the expected leftovers of course, Namjoon waited for the kids to once again race off but it seemed to have calmed them down considerably. Maybe it was the lack of sugar they had joked about, but it was probably because their stomachs were too full for them to move, thick sauces and noodles congealed like rocks in the pits of their empty stomachs. In fact they looked half-asleep and Jimin actually drifted off before they left to go back to their own room. Jungkook jumped to his feet first and disappeared without a word, followed by Taehyung who managed to snag a cigarette off their friend, tucked behind his ear like a pencil, and lastly Hoseok, who at least made sure to thank them for the food.

“What do we do with Goldilocks?” Namjoon joked as he eyed the sleeping boy on the floor, curled up on the carpet without a care for comfort or the fact that it was likely filthy. “Wake him up or just leave him?”

“Leave him,” Yoongi replied. “I’ll share with him—”

“Oh, so I’m sharing with Jin now, huh? When did I agree to this? Where was the wrestling match?”

“Never wrestle on a full stomach,” the young man retorted as he bent down and slowly shook the boy awake. “No sleeping on the floor, that’s rule number three. C’mon, bed.”
“Hmmm...? I’ve slept on the floor...‘fore.”

“Oh yeah? Why?”

“Tae kicks me outta the...bed,” Jimin replied in a mumble, eyes not even open as he was helped over to the bed, “and sometimes he screams in his sleep it’s...crazy.” He sat down and then proceeded to lie on his side, knees pulled up in front of him and one arm under the pillow. “What’s the first two rules?”

“Number one: no drinking outta the toilet bowl,” Yoongi explained as he pulled the covers up over his waist. “Number two: don’t believe a word Tae says, it’s all shit.” The boy let out a soft laugh, lips lifting at the corners for a second before going slack, once again back asleep. “And rule number four: don’t wrestle Min Yoongi.” He finished as he sat down on the end of the bed.

“Yeah, yeah.” Namjoon waved this off and his friend grinned at him before glancing over at Seokjin. The remains of food were being dutifully wrapped up by him, for tomorrow’s breakfast most likely. “Today was fun, huh?” He said sarcastically. At this Seokjin laughed and continued with his task. “Go asleep in some town in Gyeonggi and wake up in Gangwon. Can’t say I expected that to happen.”

“I’m surprised it took us that long,” their eldest friend joked. “I mean, four days? I expected we’d have been a lot further than Gangwon by now.”

“Don’t jinx us,” Yoongi muttered as he shifted on the bed. “Don’t you have some clothes to wash Jinderella?” Their friend told him to do it for once and he snorted laughter. “I stopped cleaning dishes, shit I’m not going back to cleaning. ‘Specially not underwear, nu-uh.” He ran his fingers along the covers for a moment before shooting him a glance. His expression practically goaded him into saying something. Namjoon just stared back and silently told him to say something. “Jimin?” No reply. “Jimin, you asleep?” Not even a mumble from the sleeping boy. “Jin, Joonie’s got something to say to y-”

“Whoa hey, not cool man!” Namjoon said as he threw his hands up.

“What?” their friend asked as he stopped in the doorway of the bathroom, presumably on his way inside to get washed. “What do you have to tell me?”

“I...uh...” Yoongi reached up to rub his fingers along his lips as if not aware of the fact there was no
cigarette there. “Well, I overheard something last night, that part doesn’t matter, all that matters is that I heard Hoseok and Tae talking and—”

“Is it about the headaches? The medication?” Seokjin asked, tone anxious and revealing that he greatly wanted to hear this.

“Both,” Yoongi said quietly. “He’s taking Xanax, antidepressants and pretty fucking addictive.” He thought this over for a moment and then sighed.

“At least we know, right? It’s better to know, isn’t it?”

Not long after Seokjin was finished in the bathroom Namjoon also showered and prepared himself for some sleep. Despite sleeping most of the morning away on the train he still felt tired and he knew that it was the lack of sleep over the last few days added with all of the walking, miles and miles that felt like hundreds to him. He didn’t care about clean clothes but rather just how soft the pillow looked, and even sharing the bed didn’t bother him at all. Yoongi left the bathroom and got on his usual perch, the windowsill across the room, sitting on the low sill and rolling the blinds up so that he could smoke inside rather than leave the room. He looked at him sitting there, lights from the lot softly illuminating his profile in a harsh orange, and then he felt his eyelids getting heavy and eventually closing, finally drifting off to sleep and-

a series of loud banging noises woke him back up again.

Namjoon started and felt his legs swinging over the side of the bed before his eyes even opened. He didn’t know who was knocking at this hour and he couldn’t even think because his brain was most certainly not awake. The owner? But they had paid her correctly hours ago. Why would she knock? He heard Yoongi cursing under his breath and then the sound of him climbing out of the other bed to stumble across the room. Then the chain being pulled across, metal scraping.

“…believe it and— oh Yoongi,” Hoseok’s voice sounded from outside their door. What was he outside for?

“Huh? What’s going on?” Seokjin asked, sitting up too, the covers shifting as he did.

“Dunno,” he muttered honestly.
“Kookie?” Yoongi asked in confusion. “What the fuck?” Namjoon shifted to look across the hostel room but he couldn’t see anything through the gap in the door. “Get inside now.”

“God, you’re all overreacting!” Jungkook’s voice was a little slurried and he didn’t know why. Was it drunken slurring or something else entirely? “I’m fine, let go of me.”

“How the fuck are you fine, huh?” Taehyung’s voice was nearly a shout and he heard a slight rustling sound that sounded like him shaking the other boy, presumably by his arm.

“Look who’s talking…”

Yoongi pulled the door open fully and it wasn’t to let them past but rather so that he could step outside and drag the boy into the room himself. Then he hit the light switch on and made them all cry out in surprise from the sudden brightness.

For a few seconds Namjoon could only squint at the boy in sleepy confusion before he realised what had happened, saw the slight tear in his hoodie sleeve and his messy hair. A tattered clump was hanging forward across his brow but it couldn’t hide the bruises all over his face, nor the deep split in his lower lip that was pouring blood down the front of his shirt.
Jimin was aware of the fact that he always missed things, usually important things, because they always seemed to happen whilst he wasn’t there, or when he was asleep. It was incredibly irritating that he was constantly left asking ‘what?’ ten minutes after everyone else already knew, after it had already happened and no one wanted to talk about it. Sometimes it wasn’t important but rather something amusing, a joke he hadn’t heard because he had been distracted, something cool like Jungkook singing those few days ago in the back of the now broken car, the one thousands of miles away. This time it was neither of those things, it was something very important and he finally hadn’t missed it, or at least not entirely.

He hadn’t really been asleep when the knocking on the door had loudly sounded but rather trapped between his dreams and reality. He had been sleeping when Yoongi had climbed into the bed beside him and had accidentally woken him up. That had been rather disorientating because it had taken him a moment to remember that he had fallen asleep in their room, curled up on the floor with a stomach full of hot food for the first time in near a week. At first he had felt the sensation of the bed shifting and then a waft of cigarette smoke coming from whoever had climbed in the bed beside him. Could have been Taehyung, who he usually shared with, for the boy often smelled of cigarettes, but there had been no obvious scent of booze coupled with it. That had been the first hint that it hadn’t been the boy. The second had been the fact the covers hadn’t been wrenched off him rudely, and the third had been the sensation of someone actually lying beside him. Taehyung either spread out like a starfish and hogged all of the mattress or he stayed on his side, back against his. He most certainly didn’t share the bed in such a manner; a manner Jimin had greatly appreciated because it meant not waking up on the floor and discovering he had been pushed out of the bed at some point in the night. He had felt the young man settling down beside him, doing so gently to try and not disturb him, legs brushing against his and his tee against his back, and he had closed his eyes again and felt himself drifting off once more. Well, at least until the pounding on the door had jolted them all awake and Yoongi had climbed back out of bed to answer it. He had just gotten comfortable too. So Jimin had pried one eye open to see Namjoon sitting up in the bed facing them, looking as wrecked as he felt, and their friend hastily pulling the lock back with fumbling fingers.

He had been caught too much by surprise to have even guessed who had been knocking on the door because he didn’t even have time to sit up before Yoongi was dragging someone inside, someone that looked and sounded like Jungkook. Then the young man hit the light switch hard and plunged the room in a harsh yellow light. Jimin squinted with a hiss of pain to see that it was indeed their friend, but he looked drastically different than he had when he had last seen him.

The boy’s hoodie had been worn from use but in a pretty decent shape with just some scuffing on the elbows, but there was now a massive tear in one of the sleeves, on the shoulder seams so that he could see the grey of his tee-shirt sleeve peeping through the hole. For some reason his eyes focused
on that first, as if that was the most obvious and shocking thing about his appearance. Dark hair a
tattered mess that looked to be the result of snagging hands, from a few hard tugs that would have
hurt a lot, but not as much the bruises and grazes all over his face. There was a blemish on his right
cheek that looked like it would darken into a hideous bruise and a similar one on his jawline. No
black eyes but a split in his lower lip that was deep enough to be bleeding profusely. It was just a
little off centre, to the left, a slice that looked like a trench to his eyes: angry red against his lips.
There was blood all down his chin and throat soaking into the neckline of his tee and making a rusty
 crimson bib its wake.

He had been in a fight again, perhaps something more closely described as a brawl.

Jimin knew that Jungkook had a tendency to get into fights and it was no secret. It came about
because the boy was always wandering the streets in the dead of night and bumping into drunks, or
at least that was what he told them. He always made it sound like they picked the fights first, that he
was just walking when they crashed into him, all slurred words and waving fists, and he tried his
hardest to avoid the confrontation. Except Jimin knew that that was not the case at all and he was
pretty certain that the others did too. Maybe the drunks started it, but he certainly carried it on, let it
escalate to the point of blows just because he wanted it to happen. Jungkook liked to pretend that he
didn’t want the trouble but he did. The boy carried around a lot of anger, anger that he kept in check
around them, but that he certainly vented somehow, thanks to his fistfights on street corners with
complete strangers. Why he had so much aggression he wasn’t sure because he didn’t want to ask
but it was there, just beneath the surface. Sometimes it was visible in the brief downturn at the
corners of his lips, the narrowing of his eyes, but then it was gone as quick as it had appeared. And
tonight it had burst free and gotten him into a spot of trouble.

“I know, I know,” Jungkook sighed. “But hey, you should see the other guys.”

Jimin dragged his eyes away the boy to look at his friends. Hoseok and Taehyung were still standing
by the door, which was open a crack and letting a breeze in. They were both in states of undress,
underwear and wrinkled tees, and judging from their tousled hair they had been sleeping just like
him, or at least attempting to. The older boy looked tired but the younger did not; he was alert and
wide-eyed, arms crossed over his chest and fingers scratching at his elbows restlessly. Yoongi was
standing just in front of Jungkook, also in his underwear, and he just looked annoyed primarily.
Their two other friends were still seated on the bed but at least everyone was awake. Namjoon was
on the very edge, legs over the side and twisted to look at the boy, and Seokjin had the covers pooled
around his waist. There was a strange sense of deja-vu about it all, about something always
happening and rudely waking them up disorientated and confused, and Jimin could do nothing more
than look back at his friend and wait for someone to break the silence. Eventually Namjoon did.

“Guys?” he asked in a low voice. “What do you mean by ‘guys’? How many were there?”

“Doesn’t matter,” the boy mumbled.
“What matters is that it’s 1am right now,” Hoseok said as he reached up and roughly rubbed at his eyes to get them to stay open. “And you just stumbled into the room covered in blood and—”

“That’s a little dramatic, don’t you think?”

“wipe your chin, we’ll see who’s being dramatic.” So Jungkook wiped at his chin and then lifted his hand to look at his bloody fingers. There was confusion on his face and he hastily tried to wipe the rest of the blood off, only really succeeding in smearing it all over his skin rather than cleaning it. He knocked his lip and winced from the contact before experimentally prodding the tip of his tongue out to feel the cut. “I told you so,” Hoseok muttered.

“Yeah OK, thanks mom—”

“Hey,” Yoongi interrupted, “cut the cute shit and tell us what the fuck happened.”

“He left about two hours ago,” Taehyung said as he finally reached behind himself to close the door and leaned back against it. “To go out for a walk or something. I offered to go with him but he kept saying it was fine, just a walk around the block for a few minutes. So I thought ‘fine, whatever,’ but I should’ve known he was lying and—”

“I wasn’t lying,” Jungkook declared.

“You’re lying right now you crazy son of a bitch!” the other boy practically shouted. “Two hours? A walk around the block took two hours? How big is this fucking block?!” Despite everything Jimin couldn’t help but snort laughter, getting a glare off the youngest boy as a result. “You went to the clubs again didn’t you? To get into a fight like always. Been a couple of days since you punched and kicked the shit outta someone, must’ve been getting restless.”

“I didn’t go to any clubs,” he retorted. “Or bars either before you say that.”

“So where did you go?” Jimin asked, seeing his friend shifting at the question.

“I…I went to a park,” Jungkook said quietly, “cos I wanted some fresh air. That was all. I didn’t go
to clubs looking for fights, I just wanted some air instead of being cooped up in some shitty hostel room with linen that stinks of bleach and cockroaches in the walls, OK?"

“Kookie, just tell us what happened.” Seokjin gestured for him to sit down on the bed, patting the covers softly, and after a moment of silent studying he did sit down with a heavy sigh.

So Jungkook explained exactly what had happened, from him leaving the hostel not that long after they had finished the food. At that time Jimin had already been asleep, curled up in the bed and completely oblivious to the world. He had repeatedly turned down Taehyung’s offers to go with him because he claimed that he didn’t need a chaperone but judging from his bruised and bleeding face he really had needed one, and he had left with the aims of going to walk around the block. And he had done just that before catching sight of a street sign alerting him to the presence of a park pretty close to the hostel, so he had went off to find it, knowing that it would likely be empty at such a late hour. He had been correct and during his stay in the park only a handful of people had walked through it: three dog walkers, a couple holding hands, and a group of girls returning back home with convenience store bags that seemed to hint at there being a sleepover of some kind. The boy had sat on the bench and meditated on his thoughts for some time, had messed around on the swings and roundabout in the kid’s playground area and also skipped rocks across the surface of a small pond and scared off a small gathering of ducks. That was it, two hours or so of complete solitude before leaving the park and heading back to the building. Except he hadn’t counted on bumping into guys on the way back and getting caught up in their meddling that had ended in blows.

There had been three of them according to Jungkook, and judging from his description they were just a bunch of young men after trouble. College dropouts or perhaps they hadn’t even enrolled in college at all. They had been up to no good by attempting to break into a closed store, an electrical goods one from what he had been able to see; two of them loitering around and the other on his knees trying to jimmy the shutter lock on the door open. Jungkook admitted that he should have crossed the road, that he should have avoided them because they were clearly trouble, but he had stupidly just tried to walk past instead. At least he also called his actions ‘stupid’, something that they could all agree on. So he had just looked at his boots and carried on walking in the hopes that they would let him pass with no trouble but of course that hadn’t happened. One of the men had decided to stop right in front of him, so that he had collided with him and then it had all spiraled out of control.

“I didn’t want any trouble but the bastard grabbed me and slammed me against the shutter, hard enough so that I bounced off the metal. And it hurt, like it really hurt and it pissed me off,” Jungkook explained. “He had his hand around my tee, right around my neck, and he tried to get me into a choke-hold so I pushed him away. He was pretty drunk, I could smell the booze on him, and he stumbled and tripped over his own feet. That made him even more mad and his stupid buddies jumped in too, and next thing I know some dick’s punching me in the mouth. So I had to fight back. I had no choice. I couldn’t just run off, I had to at least rough them up too.”

“Did you?” Taehyung asked and he nodded. “How badly?”
“I busted one guy’s nose and made him squeal, hit another hard enough that he might get a black eye… and I elbowed the guy that grabbed me enough to wind him pretty bad.” The boy reached up brush a tangled mess of hair off his face and Jimin saw grazes on his knuckles, pink marks and gouges deep enough so that he might be missing skin. It looked painful but not as much as the split in his lip, which likely hurt more than his nose had when he had slammed it on the back of the drivers-seat. “They’ll regret jumping me.”

“Why didn’t you just cross the road?” Namjoon asked with a shrug.

“I dunno…”

“You must’ve have known that they would cause shit, that they were drunk and after trouble, so why didn’t you just cross the road or go back the way you came and go around them?” Jungkook didn’t even reply and the room fell silent for a few seconds.

“We know why,” Yoongi finally muttered to break the quiet. “It’s ‘cos he wanted the trouble too.” The boy had been looking at his battered hands in his lap rather than at any of them, but at this he looked up and across the room to glare at the young man. There was a flicker of anger on his face but he curbed it back and instead nibbled on his lower lip, stopping only when it dribbled more blood down his chin. “Just admit it, you won’t piss us off. Just admit it and tell the truth: you wanted the fight.”

“I don’t have to admit anything.” The tone of his voice sounded petulant and if possible he likely would have pouted in annoyance. Yoongi rolled his eyes and seemed just about ready to argue against this when Jungkook got to his feet and stormed across the hostel room, pulling the door open and slamming it shut hard enough for it to shudder in its hinges.

“The lady doth protest,” Taehyung remarked after a few seconds. Jimin was surprised that the boy even knew a single line of Shakespeare but of course he knew enough to make wisecracks. If he asked him which play it came from he could likely stare at him dumbly.

“It could have been worse,” Seokjin said quietly. “He could have been seriously hurt but he wasn’t. Maybe he’ll think about this before wandering off and getting into fights again.”

Jimin shifted to get out of the bed, swinging his legs over the side so that his bare feet brushed against the thin carpet pile. He was still dressed from earlier and he got upright to also cross the
room. As he twisted the handle he heard Hoseok asking him where he was going and he ignored him to instead step out of the room, hearing the lock *click* as he closed it behind him. Their room wasn’t beside this one like usual but rather across the concrete path and closer to the entrance area. He walked the length of the L-shaped building and then entered the room to find Jungkook was not in the bedroom area. For a moment he was convinced that he had ran off in anger, that one of them was going to have to run after him to drag him back, but then he wandered over to look into the bathroom and he saw that he was in there.

Jungkook was seated on the floor beside the bathtub so that his back was against the porcelain. The room was so small that he needed to keep his legs drawn up for the toilet was in the way and his long legs couldn’t fit around it. It didn’t look comfortable at all and he was slumped back with his hands balanced on his knees. Now that he was alone he finally had that pout on his lips, sullen and swollen from the gash right near the middle. He looked like he wanted to be left alone but he didn’t go back into the other section, rather he just leaned against the door frame and studied him.

“You don’t believe me, do you?” Jungkook asked in a soft voice. He sounded a little like he was trying his hardest to not cry and his pouted lip even quivered.

“I…” Jimin paused before finishing, “I do believe you.” He wasn’t lying to him, he really did believe that he was telling the truth because there was very little reason for him to lie. He might have a penchant for trying to dodge or deflect the blame sometimes, often on him because he was the regular fall guy, but this entire situation just didn’t seem to be the case. It wasn’t like he was trying to avoid getting into trouble for he already had, so if he said that that was what happened then he would believe him.

“It was stupid,” Jungkook muttered under his breath. “Real fucking stupid.” He sighed and then rubbed at his eyes roughly.

“Are you OK?”

“…I guess,” he shifted to look at him. “They’re pissed off with me, aren’t they?”

“I don’t think so,” he replied, “but you should uh…maybe try and avoid that in the future, right?” The boy made a soft noise in agreement. “You should clean that up,” Jungkook said that there was some antiseptic in his holdall but he didn’t seem to want to move and so Jimin went into the room and collected it for him, hastily going through the inside compartment until he found a little plastic bottle. The contents were not green like he had expected but rather a murky brownish shade and when he unscrewed the cap the scent wafted up to hit him in the face. He went back into the bathroom and hunkered down in front of him. “This is gonna hurt like a bitch.”
“Seems fitting,” Jungkook muttered as he grabbed a towel that had been on the side of the bathtub. When he tipped the bottle the liquid stained the white cotton. Jimin reached forward to gently dab at his lip and his friend hissed loudly, making him pull his hand away again. He asked him if he wanted to do it instead and he shook his head. “It’s OK, just go quickly.” So dabbed at the cut a few times before moving down to his chin to clean it, wiping the dried and tacky blood off his skin. When he was done he moved onto his hands, making sure to wipe the towel across his knuckles even when he saw his hands shaking from the horrible stinging pain. “I should’ve stayed in the room…”

“Maybe, but you didn’t mean for it to happen.”

“You really believe me?”

“I do,” Jimin said as he hastily ran his fingers through his unruly hair, checking for any slight cuts on his hairline.

“You’re so naïve Dumbass…” Jungkook said with a soft laugh. “But I really didn’t mean for it to happen, even if the other don’t believe me. I don’t blame them, I’m a bad liar, you know?” He just carried on cleaning his cuts for him without a word and after a few seconds the boy sighed. “I’m sorry for causing trouble.”

“Hey, Tae causes shit all the time and he doesn’t apologise,” he remarked and this made his friend grin, wincing as he did because his split lip protested. “By tomorrow no one will probably even care. They’re just mad ‘cos you disturbed their beauty sleep. Which they all clearly need except me.” He winked and the boy rolled his eyes with a weary groan. “And speaking of sleep you really need some. We’re leaving early tomorrow, remember?”

“The walk was supposed to clear my head,” Jungkook said as he finished wiping the grazes and cuts in his skin. “To help me sleep, but maybe the five kicks to it will help instead?”

“Don’t joke about concussion, come on.” Jimin grabbed his upper arm and dragged him to his feet, pulling him across the room and to the bed beside the window. His friend sat down with a sigh and then proceeded to remove his boots. His were already off his feet and on the floor of the other room. “You might get three whole hours if you’re lucky.”

“Dumbass do…” Jungkook paused before continuing, “Jimin, do you wanna share beds tonight? Instead of with Tae?”
“I was sharing with Yoongi,” he said, “and it was a relief ‘cos I didn’t keep getting knocked outta bed for once. You don’t kick, do you?” The boy shrugged and said he didn’t know, but he thought that he didn’t. “…Yeah sure, why not?” Jimin hastily undone his jeans and slipped them down just as his friend removed his hoodie.

“Shit, this is wrecked…” Jungkook held it up and studied the massive tear in the shoulder seam. The band hoodie looked to have cost a decent amount of cash and now it was as worn and destroyed as his oil-stained jeans. “Does Seokjin know how to sew?”

“I think Hoseok does,” Jimin replied as he slipped his tee off and climbed into the bed. As he lay down he detected the underlying scent of bleach from the covers just like he had mentioned earlier. “But it’s not like we have a sewing kit…”

“Tae can steal one,” Jungkook retorted as he pulled his own tee off over his head. He checked the massive stain on the front and grimaced. “Oops. that’s one tee down and I only have three.”

“Wear it back to front, no one will know.”

“That’s…pretty fucking stupid but also kinda smart,” Jimin replied that he had street smarts and the boy laughed as he got out of his jeans. “Sure, whatever you say.” He settled down in the bed beside him with a weary sigh, wriggling under the covers to try and get comfortable. “Hey Jimin?” Jimin made a noise under his breath to let him know that he was listening. “Do you think what happened tonight was a bad thing?”

“…Not really,” he said as he slipped his arm under his pillow. “It was a little stupid and reckless but I don’t think it was a bad thing. Why do you ask?”

“What if I did a bad thing? Like, something that wasn’t stupid or reckless, but was actually bad?” Jungkook was lying on his back so that he could stare up at the ceiling and he could only study his profile and try and gauge what he meant by that. After a few seconds he turned his head slightly to look at him and Jimin just held his gaze steady. “They would be pissed with me then, wouldn’t they?”

“Bad like what?” he asked quietly.
“I told myself that I wasn’t doing something bad in the end by taking it but I knew that I was ‘cos I had to tell myself it wasn’t, you know? If it wasn’t bad then why would I have had to tell myself that?”

“Kookie?”

“And it was stupid and it was selfish, and I didn’t have to take it but I did and—”

“Kookie, what’re you talking about?”

“I…” His friend paused for a moment as if thinking his words over. “Jimin, I—” but before he could continue talking, could explain himself, the door across the room swung open and the two other boys entered the room, Taehyung yawning loudly as he locked the door. “…Never mind.”

Jimin finished patting his face dry as he stepped out of the bathroom. His friends were practically ready but they were still in the midst of packing their bags, lacing shoes, suppressing yawns behind hands. He had glanced at the clock on the side table not that long ago to have seen 6:15am lighting up the black screen with glowing green numbers, the sound of someone knocking on the door to wake them up: Seokjin calling into the room as good as any alarm. By the time he had managed to sleep it had been nearly 2am but he had at least gotten a little more rest from his nap before the boy had woken him up and all of the trouble had started. He didn’t feel that tired at all but he wasn’t entirely sure that his friends weren’t. Maybe four hours wasn’t the greatest amount but it was better than nothing and it was probably more than Yoongi usually got anyway. Yet if they were in any way tired they didn’t really show it, they just packed and dressed without much fuss.

Jungkook hadn’t said more than a few words since waking up, rather he had went right into the bathroom and gotten cleaned up first. Over the early morning hours they had been asleep his lip had stopped bleeding at least but it still looked very painful; a horrible red gash and a deep pink mark around it where it had swollen considerably. His knuckles were equally as marred and they would likely scab as they healed but they weren’t as obvious as the blemishes on his face. There was a bruise on his jawline that was a faint yellow mark that wasn’t as bad as the one on his opposite cheek. That one was a deep purple that would take a week to fade, that looked just like the pastels that Hoseok had been using back in the trainyard. He looked a lot worse than he had yesterday and he wondered if the others would comment on it. He had also caught sight of a bruise on his back,
around his shoulder blade from where he had slammed it against the metal shutter most likely. He probably had even more around his ribs and stomach but he hadn’t been able to see them whilst he had been brushing his teeth in front of the sink. Their friends would be thinking about the fight from last night but he was thinking about what he had said to him instead, what he had been about to tell him when they had been alone before they had been interrupted.

Jimin crossed the room to go over to the bed, grabbing his backpack from the floor and dumping it on the bed to unzip it. He pulled his polo shirt out and shrugged it on, quickly flattening his messy hair as he did. Jungkook was on the end lacing his boots up and humming under his breath as he did.

“Someone left us a present,” Taehyung declared as he closed the door and turned on his heel. There was something dangling from his hand and he saw that it was his boots, that Seokjin had likely dumped them there a few minutes ago. He was holding them by the laces, tangled between his fingers, and they lazily rotated clockwise before going anticlockwise, unable to fully complete a rotation. “It looks like a dog chewed on these, why’re they so scuffed, huh?”

“Just ‘cos,” Jimin retorted as he zipped his backpack up. He had a terrible habit of scuffing them on curbs, on the pavement when he was waiting or thinking, and as a result they were badly worn down in parts. He held a hand out to him and the boy tossed them both at him as if they were nothing more than a ball of rolled up socks. He managed to catch one of them but the other went flying off and narrowly avoided smacking Jungkook on the back of his head; another bruise to add to the collection. It bounced off the bed and landed by his feet so at least he didn’t have to cross the room to retrieve it, and it luckily hadn’t smashed one of the windows either.

“Who wants to make a bet?” Hoseok asked suddenly, looking out of one of said windows to check the weather, coat still spread out on the bed rather than shoved in his backpack. Jimin sat on the floor to get his boots on as he let go of the blind and looked over at them. Bright expression on his face that hinted at no headache, even if his eyelids looked a little heavier than usual from lack of sleep.

“You’re asking the wrong guy,” Jungkook said quietly, the first proper thing he had all day, “I don’t see Namjoon here…” The joke actually made them laugh and at least it dispelled the awkward sensation in the air.

“What kinda bet?” Jimin asked as he finished knotting his laces and got back to his feet.

“Yeah, what’re the odds?” Taehyung added, as if this was a legit gambling venture.

“Uh…I didn’t actually think of any.” Their friend smiled sheepishly.
“You’re supposed to be the smart one!”

“Damn it Tae, I wasn’t being serious.” Hoseok rolled his eyes theatrically. “Let me see…losers have to do what the winners tell them to do, so long as it’s not illegal.”

“Define ‘illegal’.”

“I bet that we’re gonna get lost on our way out of this city and spend the entire night on the road,” he said, ignoring Taehyung’s wisecrack, “because we haven’t gotten lost yet and that seems kind of crazy, I’m not counting the freight train incident of course.”

“You’re gonna jinx us,” Jimin remarked.

“I bet we won’t,” Jungkook said after a moment of thought, “cos we surely can’t end up getting lost if we follow the road, right? And twelve hours is a long time to get fucking lost, so I think we’ll be fine.”

“I think we’ll be stuck on the road but I dunno about being lost,” Taehyung said with a shrug, “cos I think we’ve been lost the entire time.”

“What happened to the power of positivity?” Jimin asked, feigning a shocked expression as he looked between his friends. “I’m with Kookie, no way we can get lost with the road. We’d have to be fucking stupid, right?”

“Yeah Dumbass, real fucking stupid.” Taehyung was about to lean back against the door when the handle moved and he hastily dived away before he was knocked flying. The door opened and Namjoon’s head popped through the gap to study them all.

“You ready?”}

They left the hostel building just several minutes later, on a relatively good note for once because they hadn’t been dragged out or robbed blind. Backpacks and holdalls packed, stomachs only half-full with cold leftovers, it wasn’t the best start to the day but Jimin was still relatively optimistic
because they would hopefully be leaving Gangwon and be on their way back through Gyeonggi to get to Seoul. He knew that it might take a day or two to get out but at least they would get back to the capital eventually. Truthfully speaking he didn’t particularly care how long it took because he could still recall his father’s voice in his head, his yelling and waving fists, the threat about him not being allowed back into the house still fresh in his mind. It could take them an entire month and he wouldn’t mind in the slightest. At least he wouldn’t get smacked around the head and called useless by his friends, and that alone was enough to make him feel happy enough to not mind the hours on the concrete sidewalks and dirt paths out in the middle of nowhere.

The hostel they had been staying in hadn’t been very far into the city, rather just on the outskirts, and as a result it had taken just under an hour of walking to get out of Wonju, but like Taehyung had joked about just yesterday they had no map and they didn’t even know where they were going. Jimin hadn’t even known from the beginning and he wondered if any of them had or if they had just taken to the roads without a care. His other joke about being lost from the start didn’t seem that outlandish with that knowledge. The immediate area around the outer limits of the city had stayed industrial for quite some time, freeways and subway lines, train tracks constantly visible on the hilly rises not far from the road that they stuck to. No wandering away from it to seek shelter in the woods and skip along abandoned tracks like eager boy scouts on their first camping trip, no, they instead stuck to the road because it was smarter. The weather stayed rather mild for the first time in days, a cool breeze that actually made him shiver every now and again until Yoongi shrugged his jacket off and handed it to him. Jimin gladly accepted it and felt a little stupid for not packing something like that himself. The jacket smelled like cigarettes but it was a familiar scent, one that he was very much used to. Same annoying straight road that never seemed to meander in any way, walking against traffic to spare great gout of exhaust fumes hitting them in the face, he had thought that it would take them most of the day to reach the first city but when they started to see more industrial block buildings in the distance Taehyung’s watch revealed it to be no later than 11am. They had an entire day still left open and it seemed like their friends’ pessimistic thoughts would be proven wrong, for they hadn’t gotten lost at all on the road into Hoengseong County.

They ate another hot lunch rather than cold convenience store shit, that of burgers and fries like the very first day on the road, enjoyed eating it inside the actual building rather than sitting on some knoll or walking across a city as they ate. That sorted they all discussed their options and finally decided on carrying on through the city in the hopes of getting to the next one. They couldn’t just spend the entire day wandering around Hoengseong County before settling down for the evening because they had already wasted yesterday just like that. And so they set off across the city, walking down streets and waiting at traffic lights beside vehicle-packed roads. Hoengseong County wasn’t like Seoul at all, maybe a little like a lesser bustling area like Nowon, and it wasn’t all high-rise offices and glass walls, rather it contained wider streets and much more brick and concrete. No massive digital billboards but rather just paper poster advertisements, more houses than apartments. There was even less people on the streets too. Even with it being the break it felt calmer than Seoul, which would have been so full of pedestrians that the sidewalks would have been impossible to walk on. The only places that looked to be even close to bustling were the shops, the parks and markets they passed, and they steered clear of these just for convenience. The city looked nice, almost nice enough to spend an entire day sightseeing if they had the time, which they didn’t. They had to get through the place as fast as possible: taking as many side streets as they could find.

For a while it seemed that they were going to make it to the next city just like they had made it to
Hoengseong County because it had taken just a few hours to make the first run. But then the minutes rapidly turned into hours, and the hours bled into a horrible cycle that didn’t seem to end. The view varied from freeways for miles to scant fields. Jimin had enjoyed the sights of the grassy fields and farmland back around Gyeonggi and Seoul, but he didn’t like the ones on offer today: gravelly scrub and telephone pylons like monolithic metallic trees. The weather didn’t get any warmer nor cooler but luckily for them it stayed the same so at least they weren’t caught out in the rain, though that seemed to be the only good aspect of the entire situation. When the sun started to dip on the horizon Yoongi took it upon himself to start complaining and for once it was completely warranted, for it had been nearly twelve hours of walking and nowhere to crash for the night at all in sight. Jungkook, who had spent quite a couple of nights on park benches didn’t seem bothered by this at all and neither did Taehyung but he could sense his friends starting to get tired physically and mentally, yet there was little else for them to do but keep walking along the side of the road and hope to find a field with deep enough grass that they could risk crashing in for a few hours. Yes, the idea of lying in the dirt with bugs crawling all over them wasn’t the most appealing but it seemed better than possible countless more hours: hours in which they would likely end up sleep-walking. The mental image of them all staggering around like zombies was enough to make him laugh under under breath.

“What’s so funny?” Namjoon asked him, holdall swinging from his hand that looked to be as heavy as an anchor right now.

“Nothing, just thinking…”

“Seems like me and Tae are going to win that bet after all,” Hoseok called from the front of the formation for once, turning back to look at them. Seokjin asked them what bet and he yawned loudly. “We had a bet this morning. Jimin and Kookie bet that we’d be tucked up in bed by now and me and Tae bet that we’d be out here, lost in the wild.”

“Not lost technically…” Jimin muttered under his breath.

“And here we are,” Hoseok waved his arm around them. “Still on the fucking road.”

“I was being hopeful,” the youngest boy said before sighing, “which was bad idea, clearly.”

“Don’t you remember the wager?” Taehyung asked, glancing over his shoulder at them with a wide grin. “Losers do what the winners ask. Dumbass, you’re all mine now.” He rubbed his hands together with a wicked laugh and he dragged his eyes over to look at the other boy.

“Nu-uh,” he balked, “not if Hoseok makes me do something first.”
“Well I…uh… I want you to…” Taehyung trailed off for a moment, no doubt struggling to sort his nefarious ideas out.

“Jimin, go run ahead and check if you can see anything, like a gas station,” Hoseok said before he could think of something. “Instant coffee would be good right about now, huh?” They all murmured in agreement and he grinned at the clearly annoyed Taehyung.

“Gladly,” Jimin replied as he shrugged his backpack up onto his shoulders, straps rubbing against Yoongi’s jacket with a soft rustling sound. He started running at a jog to wake up his tired legs and he heard the other boy now turning his attention to Jungkook, promising all kinds of hilarious prompts with glee audible in his voice. The youngest boy just muttered something under his breath and he didn’t catch it because he was too far ahead.

After a few seconds he started running at a quicker speed and it didn’t take long for him to get far away enough to not hear them at all. Instead his friends’ voices were replaced by the sound of his boots pounding on the gravelly path beside the road, beating in rhythm with his jostling bag, the faint drone of passing traffic that never seemed to fully fade away no matter where they were. He really didn’t expect to find anything at all but rather that he would just run for a couple of minutes and wait for them to catch up, mission failed and energy wasted, but then he thought about being positive. It hadn’t helped them this morning at all but it really didn’t hurt to try, so he just kept his head up and scanned the sight of the horizon in front of him, eyes trained to see the faintest hint of light that might signal a gas station or even a hostel of some kind as crazy as it sounded.

He didn’t find either of those things, but he did find something.

Jimin slowed down when the stitch in his side went from a stinging sensation to a white hot flare of pain but he didn’t stop and just carried on at a slower speed. His legs felt a little heavy from walking all day, particularly around the shin and knee area where his muscles were beginning to cramp tight. He knew that walking tomorrow would be sheer agony but it wasn’t like they had the car any more. At first he caught sight of the building and he didn’t think much of it. It was unlit and imposing in the evening dim, but as he got closer he found his interest piqued enough to make him stop completely. It was a square-shaped block of concrete judging from the sensation against his fingers and when he pulled his hand away he felt brick dust on his skin. Jimin rubbed his fingers against his thumb before hastily wiping them clean on his jeans. What was it exactly? As he walked around it he rapidly discovered that it wasn’t a building at all but rather part of a structure, one that went down into the underground by the way of a now dead escalator. At the bottom of the impromptu staircase he saw an opening that looked as deep as the maw of a cavern, pitch black. For some reason he bent down to grab a loose pebble from by his feet, tossing it down there as if checking for water at the bottom of a well. It skittered at the bottom and echoed on the still air, not rousing any scrabbling rats or biting bats out. He stepped back to study it fully when he realised what it was.
He was staring at an old subway entrance. Why was there one so far out here he didn’t have a single clue but it meant one thing: shelter.

“Hey!” Jimin called before waiting for a reply. When he didn’t get one he cupped his hands around his mouth and tried again, shouting loud enough to make him throat hurt. “Hey! I found something!”

“...nd what?!” Yoongi hollered back, almost as loud as Taehyung when he actually tried.

“An old subway! Looks abandoned!” He lowered his hands and a moment later his friend angrily yelled back about how much he had wanted it to be a hostel instead. “No sign of one of them! But hurry up and check this out!” He didn’t count but it took them at least a couple of minutes to catch up with him, minutes in which he tapped his foot impatiently and gnawed on his lower lip. Jungkook was the first to reach him, Taehyung piggybacking because the boy had no doubt demanded it of him, and he didn’t even stop and instead just shrugged him off his back to practically skip down the dead escalator. Jimin felt the most pressing urge to call after him and tell him to not go into the subway but that would have encouraged him to do it even more so he just held his tongue.

“Huh…would you look at that,” Taehyung announced as he stared at the structure, hands on his hips and mouth hanging open.

“I don’t like it,” Hoseok said as he drifted over. “It looks pretty…creepy.”

“How many dead bodies you think have been dumped in there?” the other boy asked with a sadistic smirk and their friend just grimaced and took a couple of steps away from the entrance. “I bet there’s some kinda hobo city down there.” Taehyung said as he reached out to run his fingers along the concrete just like he had done. “They ride shopping trolleys instead of cars and their cash is recyclable glass and plastic.”

“Stop making fun of the homeless,” Namjoon said disapprovingly. “Tae, I think you forget the fact that you’ve been homeless three times since dropping outta high school.”

“I wasn’t making fun of my brothers and sisters of the streets, I promise.” The three young men wandered over to the structure and also eyed it in a mixture of confusion, interest and dislike. “There’s probably a whole bunch of ‘em down there already and Kookie’s gonna interrupt their supper.”

“I complained about sleeping on a settee,” Yoongi muttered, “but I’d take the most under-stuffed,
flea-ridden settee over whatever the fuck is down there. Concrete floor? Old subway lines? Thanks but no fucking thanks.”

“Who said we were sleeping down there?” Hoseok asked dumbly. “I didn’t vote for that, I wouldn’t vote for that.”

“It’s OK lover boy, if you get scared you can cuddle with me,” Taehyung offered.

“We do need to rest,” Seokjin said after a moment of thought, “or we’ll all pass out. Do you want to all walk another six miles in the hopes of finding somewhere ‘hospitable’?” He had a very good point but Jimin still didn’t like the look of the dark entrance below them. “Even if just for a couple of hours, it’s better than nothing, right?” He let this hang in the air for a minute or two, so they could all think about the pros and cons of going down there. So far there seemed to be quite a few pros and the only con was that it was a little bit ‘creepy’. Their eldest friend had just opened his mouth to add something else when Jungkook’s voice sounded from the darkness of the entrance.

“Hey guys! Come check this out! It’s so fucking cool!” Taehyung didn’t need much encouragement and he bounded down the escalator two at a time, followed by Namjoon, then Seokjin, then Yoongi. Jimin watched them going down and then turned to look at his friend. Hoseok looked like he would much rather take the six miles over what was down there but he had no choice. So he reached over to snag his wrist and gently pulled him down the broken escalator to get inside the subway.

“You know how much I hate scary things…” the boy muttered under his breath.

“Yeah, me too,” he replied as they both stepped into the subway. For a few horrible seconds they were completely blind and they could do no more than take cautious steps but after a minute their eyes started to adjust and the interior became more visible; shapes in the shadows rather than just sheer darkness. The light from outside at least bled in enough to allow him to study the sight in front of them.

The main area of the structure was a wide square and there were thick concrete support beams in place here and there, wider than his frame by a considerable few inches and going all the way up to the high ceiling. When he glanced up he saw the dead bulbs that had used to be lit up, massive glass domes growing out of the ceiling like eyeballs. To the right of the square there was a drop that showcased three rows of tracks and an opposite platform. Judging from the condition the line was clearly not live but he wasn’t going to jump down and check. The area seemed to stretch for a mile in length and there were various off-shooting corridors that would lead into other sections of the subway of course. Jimin kicked at the pebble he had tossed down and it bounced off to land on the tracks with a clattering sound. Hoseok jumped and pulled his wrist free to grab his hand instead, almost painfully tight. Then he let out an embarrassed laugh and the sound echoed off the walls and
high ceiling. Jungkook’s head popped out of one of the corridors and his eyes had adjusted well enough for him to see that there was animated interest on his face.

“All kinds of tunnels,” he called, “and different lines. Seems abandoned from what I can see, but there’s signs that people have crashed here ‘cos there’s beer cans and condoms.”


“We could totally sleep here for a few hours,” Jungkook leaned against the wall and glanced around them. “Not ideal but it’s like the freight carriage. Bags as pillows, jackets as blankets. What kinda person’s gonna stumble in here at this hour except for maybe a homeless person or two? They won’t want any trouble, they’ll leave us alone.”

“You’re talking like you know a few,” Namjoon remarked.

“I do, back in Seoul. Know a few by name and face from crashing with them on subway lines like this. Usually there’s people travelling to work and security workers to dodge but not this time.” The youngest boy looked between them all slowly. “I say we find a nice line a little further in and just settle down.”

“I second that,” Taehyung agreed with a vigorous nod.

“Sleep? Rest my legs? Sign me the fuck up,” Yoongi said, a complete 180 from his previous statement. After a moment Namjoon shrugged and said ‘why not?’ and Seokjin added his name onto the list. Jimin glanced back at Hoseok to study his expression for a few seconds. His friend didn’t look as confident as the others, like he was going to say something against it, but then he just sighed and reluctantly nodded.

“...OK, it’s better than nothing,” Jimin said and Jungkook popped back down the corridor like a rabbit down a hole. They crossed the main area and followed after him and after a minute they all settled on a line that looked to have almost been untouched. The narrow corridors and beams were often marred by graffiti, amateurish just like the stuff back in the trainyard: names, signs, cartoonish shapes and logos. It was almost eerie walking through the subway system as it felt like a labyrinth; a concrete jungle with platform signs like strange way posts to guide them. When they finally found the right one Taehyung wandered off across the vast area, shouting back over his shoulder that he was just looking for something, and they all let him go and instead sat down on the platform with weary sighs. Jimin lay down and stretched his aching legs out yet when he closed his eyes sleep did not come like yesterday. His body was exhausted but his mind wouldn’t settle so he sat up again,
drawing his legs up to rest his elbows on them. When he glanced over his friends he saw that Jungkook and Hoseok were lying down and shrugging coats or jackets over themselves, already prepared to sleep the minute their heads hit their lumpy bag pillows.

“We doing a watch? Just in case?” Namjoon asked, looking at the two young men and not in his direction at all.

“Yes, you sleep first,” Seokjin confirmed, “and I’ll keep an eye open just in case anyone wanders down here.” Yoongi added that he’d share the shift too and though their friend looked like he was going to argue otherwise he managed to hold his tongue. So Namjoon also lay down, pulling his hood up over his eyes as he shifted to get comfortable. The two other men didn’t lie down but rather sit, in Yoongi’s case with his back propped up against a nearby support beam. After a moment there was a strange sound echoing through the subway system and then Taehyung emerged whilst dragging something behind him. Upon first glance it looked to be a steel trash can but when he got closer he saw that it was actually a small oil drum.

“Look what I found,” he declared as he dragged it over to them and left it in the rough middle of their formation. “There’s some stuff in the bottom, might be able to light it with some luck.” Taehyung shrugged his backpack off and opened it to rummage inside for a moment, pulling out his battered exercise book and a box of matches. He tore a few pages out and scrunched them into balls before tossing them into the drum and when he struck a match and dropped it in too it seemed that it wouldn’t work, that it would smoulder for a few seconds and then go out. But after a moment he heard it starting to crackle. Jimin got to his feet and moved closer and sure enough he detected hints of burning gasoline, for the last person to have used it clearly had more brains than they did. “That’ll scare all of the spooky ghosties away, right lover boy?”

“…Fuck…you,” Hoseok replied in a sleepy mumble and Taehyung grinned widely. “Go to sleep.”

“Yeah yeah, why aren’t you sleeping huh?” he asked as he nudged Seokjin’s thigh with his boot.

“We’re keeping watch.”

“What? You’re scared of the ghosties too?”

“No, we’re scared of drunk teens coming down here to fuck,” Yoongi retorted, “and trying to rob us whilst we’re all unconscious.”
“Hey, so long as they share the booze I don’t mind,” Taehyung said as he sat down on the opposite side of the drum and crossed his legs. “Wake me for the second shift, not Kookie or Hoseok, they need the rest. I’m good, I just need a quick nap.” Seokjin confirmed that he would and so the boy lay down and wriggled to get comfortable. A few minutes later he heard light snoring that signaled at least one of his friends was fast asleep.

“Why aren’t you sleeping?” Seokjin asked quietly and his voice stirred him out of his thoughts.

“Mmm…? Oh me? I… dunno, just not sleepy,” Jimin replied. “Thought I would be but I’m not. Muscles are sleepy but not my brain.”

“Boy oh boy, do I know how that feels,” Yoongi remarked as he slipped his packet of cigarettes free of his jeans and pulled a stick out, using some shitty hostel room lighter to light the end. He took a drag and breathed it out in a sigh. “Anything you wanna talk about?” Jimin furrowed his brow at the question and his friend pulled the stick free. “If your brain can’t sleep it means you can’t stop thinking, so what’re you thinking about, huh?”

“Uh…” he paused and felt his fingers moving down to fiddle with his bootlaces. “I guess, I mean a lot of stuff has happened, you know? Maybe that’s why I can’t sleep?”

“Are you talking about the stuff like the train and the hostels troubles?” Seokjin asked as he crossed his legs and shifted to get comfortable. “Or something else?” Jimin stared at the shimmering air above the oil drum as he wrenched on his bootlaces, the heat almost making it ripple. He felt like he should say something and yet at the same time he didn’t feel it was the right time to do so, especially considering that he wasn’t just talking about himself. It wasn’t that he couldn’t trust them but rather he felt in the wrong for possibly talking about the others in such a way.

“What about you?” he asked after a moment, dragging his eyes away to look at the pair. “What’s on your minds?”

“Not much,” Yoongi said, smoke pluming out of his nose. “Jin?”

“I… well I guess I’ve been thinking of college a lot,” Seokjin said in a low voice, coat shrugged over his shoulders like a blanket. “And what happens when I get back to it. Hyosang, my roommate, he informed everyone important of my absence. I gave a shitty excuse about my father being ill, which isn’t good because you know what they say: be careful what you wish for. I needed to make up an excuse you see, because I wasn’t supposed to leave. I wasn’t even on a break but I needed one, so I lied and ran off. I’m as bad as the kids.” He laughed softly to himself. “I’ve been thinking about how
I might just get kicked out but I don’t care as much as I thought that I would. Is that weird?"

“I don’t think so…?” Jimin replied, Seokjin unzipped his holdall and pulled a large book out, opening it to slip a couple of pieces of paper free. He held them up for a moment as if studying them and then scrunched them up before tossing them into the drum. “What was that?”

“My essay. Well, the first sentence anyway. I can’t write it.”

“I’ve been thinking about work,” Yoongi said, “like always… ‘cept I don’t have any jobs any more, right?”

“I’ve been thinking about my dad,” Jimin said quietly.

“Why?”

“Cos I don’t wanna go back home,” he explained without looking at them. “My dad he…well, he was pissed with me when I got home and we got into an argument and—"

“Did he hit you?”

“What do you think Seokjin? Yeah, he hit me a couple of times and he yelled at me and he told me to never come back home. That’s what happened, that’s why I don’t wanna go back to Seoul.”

“Your mom?” Yoongi asked and he sighed heavily in response.

“Doesn’t care, or doesn’t get involved I dunno.” Jimin finally stopped playing with his laces. “So I wanna stay on the road, on this stupid ‘adventure’ or whatever it is just so I don’t have to face him again. Face him and his flying fists and curses…if he even lets me back into the house to begin with.” He glanced between them both and saw that they were thinking his words over. “It’s kinda sad and pathetic right? That I’m scared of my own fucking dad.”

“We’re all scared of something,” Yoongi replied, cigarette poking out between his fingers like always.
“So what’re you scared of, huh?” His friend didn’t say a thing and he wasn’t sure if it was because he was thinking or because he didn’t want to speak.

“I’ll tell you what I’m scared of,” Seokjin said after a moment of silence. “I’m scared that…well, that I’m doing something wrong with my life, you know? That I’m making a mistake.” Jimin asked him if it was something to do with college and he chewed on his lower lip before shrugging. “I don’t even know, but it still scares me.”

“What am I scared of?” The question was rhetorical and Yoongi didn’t seem to really know how to answer it, instead stubbing his cigarette out on the concrete wall and flicking it hard, the butt skittering off to disappear over the edge of the platform and land on the tracks. “I guess I’m scared of…I’m scared of everything really.” He laughed under his breath but the corners of his lips stayed in place. “My life, those stupid fucking jobs I don’t even have any more, my bad habits, everything. That’s pathetic, not you.”

“I don’t think it’s pathetic, I think it’s natural to be scared of things like that, everyone is.” Jimin looked over at their friends, all of them seemingly sleeping. “What do you think they’re scared of?” Neither of them replied and he made a soft noise under his breath. “There’s one thing we’re all scared of.”

“What’s that?” Seokjin asked.

“…Growing up.”
Yoongi awoke with such a violent start that he barely managed to clamp his hands over his mouth and stop a scream from escaping. His heart was racing in his chest so fast that it seemed to pulse through his body, throbbing waves moving along his veins and making him shake like a leaf in the wind; perhaps more of a storm considering the intensity. After several deep breaths he managed to remove his hands and so he reached up with one to press his wrist against his forehead. Skin clammy and sweat beading on his hairline, so very much unlike what he had been expecting to feel. He wiped it away roughly and dropped his shaking hands to his lap whilst he carried on taking deep breaths to try and calm himself down.

“You OK?” The voice caught him off guard and he twisted his head sharply to see Namjoon seated just a few feet away, legs folded up in front of him and elbows resting on them. There was concern on his face and he knew why. His friend was probably looking at him and seeing that he was ghostly pale, sweating and shaking, and the sight would be enough to cause most people to ask him how he felt. As it was he currently felt like shit, but he wasn’t going to say that to him.

“Nuh-nightmare,” he managed to reply, not liking how dry his mouth felt. “I had a nightmare.”

“I’m not surprised, Jimin and Hoseok did say this place gave them the creeps…”

Yoongi tore his eyes away from his friend to glance around and that was when he remembered where they were. They were in the abandoned subway line of course, the one Jimin had accidentally stumbled upon in his quest to find a gas station, the one they had all agreed to spend the night in because they had had no choice. He had relished the idea of finally being able to stop walking for a few hours and the darkness hadn’t bothered him in the slightest, nor the coldness of the concrete walls and floors that seemed vaguely reminiscent of a mausoleum of sorts. He had spent the first few hours awake like always, smoking and hating everything because he had been restless and grumpy, but he hadn’t been alone for once. No, he had been sitting watch with Seokjin, who had wanted to keep an eye on them and save any more trouble, and Jimin, who had wanted to talk because his own troubles had kept him awake too.

He looked across the sleeping figures of his friends to see Seokjin lying nestled between Jungkook and Hoseok, wisely using the space to keep warm and feel more secure. Though he could only see the back of his head he looked to be asleep. He couldn’t believe that the other man had tossed his essay into that oil drum last night like it was trash and admitted to ditching college all for the sake of
this stupid adventure. Had Yoongi had known then he would have demanded that he blow it off, that he just stay in college instead and not risk pissing his professor off and getting kicked off the enrollment, but he hadn’t known and now it was a bit too late for such conversations. Why had he done that? He wasn’t sure at all. He thought that there was a chance his friend was a little tired of his course but every college student must feel that at some point. That wasn’t a good enough reason at all to risk getting kicked out, and he knew that Seokjin was very much the type to keep his head down and get on with something rather than quit. He prescribed to the belief that effort bred results, much like how Namjoon liked to preach the power of positivity, and it certainly was not in his nature to just act so carelessly.

And then there was Jimin…

Yoongi knew that at least one of the boys must have pissed their parents off in the act of leaving for this break, and he had always assumed it to be Jungkook rather than the other boy; purely on the basis that the youngest liked to cause trouble the most, as the bruises and split lip proved. As a rule Jimin tended to avoid trouble because it always ended up backfiring on him, and even if he didn’t start it he would be the one to suffer as a result. Jimin, who nearly ended up in hospital for stitches after Jungkook and Taehyung had decided to make some stupid blood oath and had sliced into his thumb with a kitchen knife deep enough to cut to the bone; who took the blame for nearly everything the two youngest did in the aims of getting them to stop teasing him yet to no avail; who couldn’t even please his own father and ended up getting hit over the most trivial of things.

He supposed it was rather stupid of him to have not thought it possible, and if there was any opportunity for the man to treat him like shit then he would go for it. But to threaten the boy like that, to swear and hit him enough times for him to not even recall and tell him to never come back home…that was too far. Way too fucking far. Yoongi would be happy to teach the man a few basic lessons about his behaviour but he knew it was not his place to act nor say anything. What was his mother doing whilst all of that was happening? The boy might not talk about her much but he knew that she barely left the house these days, a combination of her nervous countenance combined with a fuckload of pills she took. Did she not care? Did she not want to get involved for fear of fists swinging her way too? Or was she too fucking stoned out of her brains? He didn’t know and he wasn't going to ask. Jimin had enough to worry about already, no need to give him any more.

Jimin was seated a few feet to his right in front of the oil drum, and though he was sleeping he was still upright, slouched over his backpack with his chin against his chest, arms hugging it to his stomach. He was still wearing his jacket and he looked warm at least. He was so busy studying him that it took him a moment to realise that Namjoon had said something and he jolted back to reality.

“Huh, sorry what did you say?”

“I asked what the nightmare was about,” he repeated. “If you don’t mind me asking?”
“I, uh…” Yoongi paused for a moment and swallowed hard, not liking the way that his mouth suddenly went dry. Of course he should be able to tell him about it, after all it was just a stupid nightmare, and yet he didn’t seem capable of doing so. He didn’t want to tell him because he could still feel himself shaking at the thought of it, and that alone was enough to make him not want to go through it all again.

He had dreamt that he had burned to death. Not in an accident, a freak occurrence in which he had been unable to escape or get away in time. No, he had dreamt that he had started the fire himself.

It had been in one of those hostel rooms, so much alike that it was hard to tell if he had actually visited it or whether it was a figment of his own imagination. Deep blue carpeted floors, plain boring cream walls, white linen covered beds; a completely normal scene…if not for the sight of gasoline splashing out all over it. Yoongi had seen it all from his eyes, not a spectator watching on in horror but rather committing the actual act himself, own hands visible on the red plastic gasoline container as he flicked it hard and spilled the liquid everywhere. Deep brown and pungent enough to make his eyes sting, flowing from the black nozzle like tea from a pot. It hit the walls and ran down in rivulets, it stained the gauzy curtains and white covers a hideous colour, and it made the carpet soaking wet against his bare feet. He remembered that part vividly, his bare feet squelching on the damp pile, the sensation of the liquid against his skin and the container in his hands so very real. He had felt the weight. Crossing the room, tossing the liquid everywhere without a care, no sign of the others, he didn’t seem to be sharing with any of them.

It was only after he had coated the place did he start to feel that it wasn’t a hostel room at all, that it was actually his bedroom back in his shitty rundown house in Seoul.

Then came the lighter, which had also had that same weight to it, the cold metal against his fingers. He had flicked it on and held it up, saw the flickering flame just floating in front of his nose; the gasoline smell so strong that he felt lightheaded, nauseous, somewhat distant. The scent of it coming from everywhere, from his own clothes because droplets had splashed back and soaked his skin. The lighter getting warmer and warmer in his hand as he kept his thumb in place; the flame not growing but staying that same tiny size.

Just like Venus.

It was fascinating how such a tiny thing could hold so much power, could burn with the heat and strength of wildfire just from that little start. Yoongi had felt his breath catching in his throat and then the panic had started to kick in. He had started to realise what he was doing and tried to stop himself, frantically racing around his thoughts as if he was trapped in his head and unable to escape, unable to stop his fingers from letting go.
The lighter had hit the soaked carpet and there had been a loud *fumph* that had rapidly turned into a roar; the sound of the little flame suddenly expanding, greedily eating up all of the gasoline like a ravenous monster. The carpet had turned into a sea of flames that danced up and onto the hanging edge of the bed covers. The cotton had burnt black within mere seconds and then Yoongi had became aware of the fact that he had been trapped. He was on the opposite side of the room to the door, just the window behind him, but he knew that the ugly gauze curtains had already gone up in flames, had turned the window into a ring of fire that he would have had had to leap out of like a circus act. Yet he hadn’t wanted to leap. His legs had seemed to very much want to keep him in place and he had been too powerless to escape.

Yoongi had burnt himself in the past, always as an accident because he wasn’t thinking or looking at what he was doing. He knew the sensation all too well, the instant pain and the immediate throbbing that followed, but nothing had prepared him for this. This hadn’t been anything like those burns from pot handles or cigarette ash, it had been something so painful that he doubted he would ever forget it; a searing that had robbed him of his ability to even scream before he had woken up and felt one escaping his lips.

It had been a dream but he had felt it. He had felt his flesh burning like those cheap bed covers, cooking until it was charred black and as tough as leather and even upon waking the ghost of the agony was still in his mind, making him convinced for several seconds that he actually had set himself on fire somehow, that the nightmare had been reality.

And now Namjoon wanted to know what it had been about and he didn’t want to say.

“I dreamt it was a Monday,” he finally said, not even intending for it to be a wisecrack but because it was the first thing that came to mind as an excuse.

“I’ve heard that one before,” the other young man said with a grin. “Seems you can’t escape from those damn Mondays. They hunt you down like vampires.”

“And suck all of the happiness outta my life,” Yoongi said as he fished for his packet of cigarettes and managed to thumb it open. Six left, he was going to need to restock. He shoved it between his lips and then retrieved his lighter before flicking it on. When he saw the flame he suddenly lost the ability to lift his arm and light it, instead just staring at it dumbly as if he had never seen anything like it before. He noticed that his hand was shaking and after several seconds he dipped his head forward and stuck the stick in the flame. He managed to flick it off just before it slipped out of his grip and landed on his lap and he took a deep pull before letting it out with a sigh.
“You should cut down those,” Namjoon remarked as the first of their friends stirred with a sleepy groan. “Smoking ten before sleeping might be messing with your brain, causing those nightmares about Mondays.”

“Joonie, I’ll cut down on ‘em when I’m dead.”

“You’ll have to, you’ll be fucking dead,” Jungkook retorted as he sat up and pried his eyes open.

“Promise you’ll bury me with a pack or two, please?” Yoongi asked as he pulled the stick free and leaned back against the concrete support, nibbling on his lower lip for a few seconds. Then the stick went back into his mouth and several quick pulls later he felt his shaking hands start to ease off, his terrified mind starting to settle.

“Seriously Yoongi, if the stress doesn’t kill you those will,” Namjoon said as he got to his feet and stretched his legs, soles of his boots scuffing against the station platform and echoing off the high walls.

He dabbed ash off the end of the stick with a steady hand and rolled his tongue around his mouth for a moment as he eyed his friends, no longer dry but rather tasting of tobacco. The youngest boy turned to rudely shove Seokjin in his sleep, rolling him from his side and onto his back so that his head went off the holdall and hit the concrete floor. He sat up and then slowly reached up to touch his head before grabbing the boy roughly. Perhaps he would lay off the old person jokes now. At the sound of him laughing Hoseok shifted to roll onto his side and a few seconds later he opened his eyes slowly. The headache? To appear or not appear, that is the question. Then Jungkook’s flailing leg kicked out and hit Taehyung rather hard on the back of his thigh and he awoke instantly and squinted at the commotion beside him before deciding to aid the eldest rather than free the boy. After Jungkook hollered loud enough for his voice to echo off the walls and ceiling and almost make the air vibrate, Jimin finally lifted his head off his backpack and that meant everyone was awake. He watched the boy reach up to rub at his eyes with the heel of one hand, the other still holding onto the bag, and then he stuck the stick back between his lips and looked over at Namjoon.

“We all die in the end, right?”
In an almost strange twist of fate they ended up finding the first city after just a bare hour on the road. Had they all followed Hoseok’s cautiousness and stuck to walking then they would have actually been able to sleep in beds last night, but it was too late for such conjecture. Yoongi hadn’t minded sleeping in the subway at all, save for his nightmare, because he had been just too tired to possibly walk any further last night. His legs had seized up to the point in which bending them had seemed impossible, ankles and knees aching in sync, and his lower back had also started to hurt too. That was likely the result of carrying his holdall bag but it could have also been the result of walking along rough and uneven ground all day long, up and down slight hills, tripping on gravelly scrub. It took them an hour to reach the city today but last night it could have taken twice, or thrice that because they had been dragging their feet. Therefore the subway really had been the best choice even when it had been cold and uncomfortable.

Yangpyeong County was the first city they entered that took them back into Gyeonggi and they didn’t even stay long enough to sample the sights and air, rather just hurrying through to reach the next one. Geography wasn’t his strongest subject but he knew there had to be a good handful more cities between them and Seoul, and miles of road between each one. That meant trying to cover at least two cities a day if possible, even if it made their legs ache and it sapped all of their energy. When they got back to Seoul they had all of the time in the world to rest their muscles and Yoongi was planning on spending at least three days just lying on the floor of his house so that he didn’t have to move, not thinking about work or anything like that. Just like his two friends he wanted to push it all away and not let it disturb his thoughts more often than they already did. His nights were already sleepless, he didn’t need his days to be wasted worrying too.

It wasn’t going to be easy but he reckoned that if the others managed to keep getting into trouble then it might just be enough to keep his thoughts preoccupied. Like Jungkook and his street brawls, like Hoseok and his medication. He had a little information on Jimin and Seokjin too, what about Namjoon and Taehyung? What secrets could the former be hiding from him? He didn’t think that his friend would keep anything from him, or at least nothing drastically important but he also hadn’t thought that of the others and yet he had discovered that they very much were. He always trusted the young man to tell him most things, seen as he and Seokjin were probably the closest friends he had. Maybe Jimin too, but he did feel that horrible drifting sensation that Taehyung had described back in the trainyard; the unmistakable pull of life taking them all in different directions. It hadn’t affected them too badly yet but in time it would, in time they really might just not talk or see each any more, as scary as the idea seemed. Okay, maybe Namjoon wasn’t hiding anything from him but the boy… There could be hundreds of things that Taehyung was hiding from not only him but the others too; his bad drinking habit, his stealing and impulsive lies that rolled off his tongue just as fluidly as his wisecracks. Living on the streets wasn’t easy on anyone and he doubted that the boy was immune to it, no matter how impervious he liked to act. It was just pretend, a facade, he was almost convinced. It was Taehyung’s way of making sure that they didn’t worry about him…or stop him.

After leaving Yangpyeong County they ended up on another long stretch of road except this time they actually found fields once more, deep and wide fields filled with emerald coloured grass and rows of rice paddies visible across the hillocks that dominated the horizon. The sight was refreshing and the fact that the road never seemed to get packed with cars was even more so, for they must have picked a relatively offbeat road. Perhaps a dirt road, a long scenic drive that wasn’t as popular as a nice quick freeway. After nearly an hour of walking they stumbled across the first sight of water to the side of the road. The path started to slowly slope down onto an embankment of some kind, one
that had great amounts of trash piled around it, likely blown down by the wind. The road became a bridge and luckily for them it had a sidewalk to the side of it, narrow but usable.

Yoongi somehow ended up at the front of the formation and he started walking along it without a care. There was a low wrought iron railing along the length of the bridge that reached his ribs, and he turned his head to look down at the water. It looked to be a river and it widened out considerably as it lapped under the walkway they were on. It wasn’t a vivid blue like the sky, in which the sun hanged overhead and practically cooked them from the heat of its rays, but rather a murky colour. It looked to be packed full of sediments and pollution and it made him feel nauseous looking at it. The surface occasionally rippled and one time he was even convinced he saw a fish breaking the surface.

“Whoa, did you see that?” Jimin called out just as he saw the slight hint of silver disappearing once more. “There’s fish in there! I thought it looked too dirty for fish.”

“Here’s an idea Dumbass, ever heard of catching fish by bare hand?” Taehyung asked. “Go down there and get us some lunch.”

“Lunch? How the fuck would we cook it?” the other boy retorted, eyes still stuck to the surface of the river whilst he looked for more of these elusive fish.

“Using Yoongi’s lighter,” Jungkook said with a wide smirk.

“We could make a campfire outta his cigarettes,” Taehyung elaborated, “and cook it no problem. See, I always have a plan.”

“You got a plan for food poisoning too?” Namjoon asked with a laugh. Yoongi tore his eyes away to look at the road in front of them once more. The bridge was starting to near its finish and in another minute or two they would be off it and back to dirt path again, but he could see that the river still ran strong. It stretched out for what looked like miles to his eyes, and walking beside it seemed to make the air feel more cooler.

“If it wasn’t so dirty it would be nice to jump in there,” Jimin said and Yoongi turned to look over his shoulder back over his shoulder at his friends. “Don’t you think? It would be refreshing, I’d like to do that.”

“That can be arranged,” Taehyung declared before seizing hold of his upper arms. Jimin let out a cry of surprise that turned into a laugh but when their friend actually managed to lift him up, boots
hovering a few inches above the concrete, his laughter turned into protestation. “Kookie, grab his
legs he’s a kicker.” And the youngest boy moved to attempt this, making the boy kick out at him.

“Come on Tae, that’s too much,” Hoseok said as he stopped walking a few feet ahead of them and
watched the unfolding events with a cautious eye. “Remember the gas station incident?”

“I do, it was fucking hilarious,” Taehyung replied as Jungkook got his first leg, snagging hold of
ankle.

“It was bullying…”

“Seriously, it was funny, real funny,” Jimin said quickly, “but uh, put me down now. Please?”

“But you wanted to go for a swim, right?”

“Hey,” Yoongi called, “stop that.” He had been waiting for the best moment to jump in and it was
now. It might just have been a joke but it was rapidly escalating into something else, like it always
did when Taehyung and Jungkook decided to tag team on the other boy; just like the blood pact
prank that had ended badly. He greatly doubted that Taehyung would actually toss the boy over the
side but he really wouldn’t be that surprised if he did.

At his voice the pair actually stopped messing with him and Jimin froze, leg cocked up to try and
stop the youngest grabbing it. Jungkook didn’t look over his shoulder at him and after a second or
two let go of his other leg and got upright to carry on walking, but Taehyung didn’t. His friend just
held eye contact as if he was thinking of defying him, hands still tight around the other boy’s arms.
He saw that his jacket was wrinkled in his grip, deep creases in the polyester sleeves. Hoseok
glanced at him, shifting to look back, and he became aware of the fact that the two other young men
were looking at him too. He didn’t take his eyes off Taehyung however so he couldn’t study their
expressions.

“Tae, let him go,” Yoongi said in a low voice.

“God, it was just a joke,” the boy complained.

“It stopped being a fucking joke when he asked you to stop and you didn’t. Hoseok’s right, that’s
bullying. Let him go.” Taehyung let go of him as he rolled his eyes and Jimin’s boot soles hit the concrete with a loud thumping sound. Then he started walking along the walkway and Yoongi felt his shoulder brushing against his arm as he passed him. He didn’t move and instead let the others carry on walking until he was right at the back of the formation with Jimin. The boy scuffed his boot against the railing and then looked at him, so he gestured for him to walk alongside him.

“You OK?” Yoongi asked, letting a couple of feet form naturally between them and the rest of the gang.

“Uh-huh,” the boy said without missing a beat. “He wouldn’t have thrown me over, you know?”

“I didn’t know,” he replied, “and that’s why I told him to stop. Did you think that was a joke, huh? ‘Cos I didn’t hear anyone laughing.” Jimin went silent for a moment before shrugging.

“I’m used to it.”

“You shouldn’t be, you’re not the butt of every stupid joke Jimin, ‘specially not Tae’s.” He paused and studied his face, noting how the boy looked at his boots, at the ground, rather than hold his eye contact. “Is he like that a lot?”

“No, not a lot I mean-”

“Is he like your father?”

“No,” Jimin said sharply as he dragged his eyes up to look at him, “nothing like that, he just…Tae sometimes doesn’t know when he’s taking a joke too far. He doesn’t want to hurt me or anything like that…”

“But you’ve been hurt by his ‘jokes’ before, a couple of times.”

“I’m fine,” Jimin said, with emphasis just to make sure he got the message. “I’m not a baby, I don’t need you to rescue me like some damsel in distress, you know?” He said this with a soft smile as he reached up to fix his backpack straps. “If you keep doing that they really will start calling me ‘baby’ again…”
“It’s better than ‘dumbass’, right?” The boy just shrugged and he eyed one of the straps, convinced that it would slip back down again with the movement. “I can’t help it. I suppose I should stop but so should Tae. I don’t want you getting hurt ‘cos he wants some cheap laughs. Kookie only jumps in when he tells him too, but let him push you around enough and he’ll start doing it too.”

“Nah, Kookie just calls me names and makes fun of my height, he wouldn’t do that.”

“You haven’t pissed him off enough yet…”

“Hmmm?” Jimin’s eyebrows raised to disappear behind the tangle of hair on his brow and the expression was so very puppy-like he expected him to cock his head too.

“Nothing,” Yoongi said before reaching over to ruffle his hair. The boy made an annoyed noise at this but the smile stayed on his face. When he stopped this and looked back in front of them he saw Taehyung walking backwards so that he could watch them. His expression didn’t look annoyed in the slightest, which was a surprise for he had thought he had pissed him off. Clearly he didn’t have a temper like Jungkook at least. After holding his gaze for a few seconds he just gave him a slight nod and turned on his heel to carry on walking normally.

Like he had predicted the river did run along the road for quite the distance, babbling down at the bottom of the slope and giving off a scent that wasn’t exactly like the sea but close enough. The embankment wasn’t entirely covered in trash but actually started to get cleaner and so did the water, a rather clear shade rather than murky and thick with sediments. Jimin was right about how nice it would be to dive into the water and he found himself thinking it over for a few minutes before studying the slope. Not too deep, it could be scaled both ways with ease he reckoned, and with that he decided to attempt to get down it.

“Yoongi?” Seokjin called, amusement audible in his voice. “Going for a swim?” He ignored him and instead descended the slope hastily. The soil underfoot changed from firm to a little damp, almost black to his eyes, and he didn’t want to slip and fall into mud. When he got to the bottom he dropped his holdall, bent down and dipped his fingers in the stream and he pulled them back out in shock. The water was surprisingly cold and he cupped a handful and lifted it up to study it. Crystal clear. The water leaked out of the cracks between his fingers and trickled down his wrist and he had just opened them up to let it drip back into the river when he heard the sound of someone else descending the slope.

“Don’t,” Yoongi intoned as he felt a shadow fall over his back. “Push me and you die.” He shifted to look over his shoulder and see Namjoon looking down at him with a smirk on his face. “You think
“That trick will work, huh? Must’ve done it fifty times already.”

“Pretty sure they’re aren’t fifty fountains in Seoul.”

“Fountains, park ponds, swimming pools…”

“OK, good point,” Namjoon said as he bent down and also stuck his hand in the water.

“I left my swimming trunks back in Seoul!” Hoseok announced and they all laughed at the comment. “So no swimming for me.”

“You couldn’t swim in this,” Yoongi called back. “It’s only shallow.”

“How shallow?”

“Hang on.” Yoongi got back upright and went to step into the stream when he suddenly realised that it was a mistake. It only looked shallow of course because of light refraction but it was too late because he had already stepped down and felt his boot going into the water. “Shit, oh shit!” The sole didn’t hit the bottom but rather disappeared right under, then his shin. He threw his arms out wildly and smacked Namjoon’s arm but didn’t managed to snag hold of him and he lost his balance and stumbled. Luckily he didn’t trip but he did end up knee-deep in freezing cold water.

“Was that part of the plan?” Hoseok asked with a grin and he glared at him as he hastily got out of the river. His boots were soaked through and he had no choice but to remove them, and as he dropped to do so he caught sight of Taehyung and Jungkook bounding down the slope, tossing their bags without a care. Yoongi knelt down on the damp embankment and unlaced his boots in annoyance. The two boys had already removed theirs of course and he saw that they had tied the opposite laces together so that they could hang them around their necks rather than carry them. The youngest jumped into it and splashed water up high enough to hit the ends of his tee.

“Ah, it’s freezing!” he shouted with a laugh and then Taehyung dived into the river too, also splashing the water a considerable amount.

“If I’d have known you would do this I’d have packed a kiddie pool,” Seokjin joked.
“Yoongi would love that, he’d be able to swim it.”

“Fuck you Taehyung.” The boy beamed at him and Yoongi decided to copy their lace trick, slipping out of the boots and knotting the soggy laces up tightly. He placed them around his neck and the boots dangled just above his ribs.

“Why didn’t we actually end up in Busan?” Namjoon asked as he cupped a handful of the water and quickly splashed it on his face.

“I thought it was lucky we didn’t,” Hoseok remarked as he slowly descended the slope. “Isn’t that why we’re going back to Seoul?”

“I know, but a day on a beach sounds heavenly right now.”

“Patbingsu,” the boy agreed as he eyed the water, seemingly not certain on whether or not to get in it. Yoongi looked back up at the top of the slope to see Jimin still standing beside Seokjin. He probably didn’t want to come down after the bridge incident, so he cocked his head at the water before mouthing something at him. Jimin watched his lips before grinning wildly and then he was also racing down the hill. “But at least we don’t have the sand to worry about.”

“I for one love getting sand absolutely everywhere,” Taehyung said. “Though it can be a little annoying getting it outta my ass crack.”

“You go to nudist beaches?” Yoongi asked as he watched Hoseok methodically rolling up the ends of his jeans and the other boy hastily getting out of his boots.

“Best place to get action,” his friend retorted with a grin.

“Ah yes, I do love the sight of naked old ladies,” Seokjin remarked sarcastically as he sat down on the top of the slope to watch them.

“Age means experience,” Taehyung replied without missing a beat and they all snorted laughter. Jimin succeeded in getting out of his boots and he just left them on the embankment without a care as
he shrugged out of his jacket, backpack falling on the floor with a thumping sound, and then jumped into the water, also exclaiming about how cold it was. Yoongi waited a moment before getting in too, already hatching a plan in his head. He edged closer to Taehyung, who was too distracted splashing water at Hoseok whilst his fixed his jeans to notice and then hastily gestured to Jimin. Then he hooked his leg out and actually managed to trip the boy up.

“Yah, you little asshole!” he shouted but he didn’t have time to recover because Jimin grabbed hold of his arms and pulled back hard, making him do more than trip. Taehyung stumbled backwards and landed on his ass in the river and then Jungkook decided to join in and dunk him under before he could fight back. Hoseok burst out laughing at the sight of the boy diving back up, hair hanging soaking wet over his eyes and tee soaked through. Yoongi watched it all with a grin as Jimin threw himself on top of Taehyung and tried to dunk him for a second time. Within seconds the three of them were practically wrestling in the stream.

“Don’t do that to me please,” the other boy said as he finally got into the river. Though he had rolled his jeans up considerably the cuffs still managed to get wet and he sighed heavily. “Of course that had to happen to me…”

Yoongi didn’t have to dunk Hoseok because the others took it upon themselves to do it for him. He shifted to sit on the embankment beside Namjoon instead and watched them all moving around enough to make near waves ripple across the surface, to splash water so far that he was surprised that Seokjin didn’t get soaked through too. Their eldest friend didn’t get in the water but he did come down the slope and after a few minutes he cleared his throat loudly.

“I hope there aren’t any leeches in there…”

“Lee…leeches?” Jimin asked dumbly, hands still holding onto Taehyung’s tee collar tightly as he tried to push him under the water.

“Yes,” Seokjin said with a sly smile, “they live in rivers like this.” Yoongi studied his face for a moment before twisting to look at Namjoon and he raised an eyebrow at him to ask if he was telling the truth. The other boys did too and after a moment he slowly removed his own feet from the water.

“Uh…they do actually.”

For a few seconds they all seemed to freeze as this sunk in, Namjoon’s confirmation hanging in the air. If he said that Seokjin was telling the truth then he must be right, and that meant one thing: there really was a chance of leeches in the water. Then Hoseok let out a cry of disgust and this seemed to
spur them all into action. Yoongi copied Namjoon and when he pulled his legs out of the water he saw that his skin was perfectly free of any pests but that didn’t stop the boys from darting to get out of the river, nearly tripping over in their haste to get onto the embankment.

“I fucking hate leeches!” Jungkook declared even though he had likely never seen one of them in his entire life.

“Is there any on me?” Jimin asked and Hoseok confirmed that there wasn’t.

“I swallowed about three mouthfuls of water,” Taehyung said. “I swear if there’s a fucking leech in my stomach I’ll kill you all.”

“I was just joking,” Seokjin said as he laughed at them all, touching their legs and arms as if to feel for anything lumpy stuck to their skin. “But leeches do live in water like that, that’s the truth.”

“Pretty sick joke,” Yoongi said with a grin and his friend offered him a hand so he accepted it and let him pull him to his feet. He collected his jacket and knotted it around his waist before looking at the kids. They were soaked through, jeans dark and tees clinging to their bodies. Hair that was dripping water, rivulets of it running down their faces in Taehyung’s case, and bare feet that was going to be covered with mud soon enough.

“Well,” Namjoon said, “it’s not an adventure without leeches, right?”

The sight of the hostel in front of them was so wonderful that Yoongi could have cried in relief, could have gotten on his hands and knees and kissed the hot tarmac lot even if people started staring at them. They had been staring for quite some time already and he was used to it by that point. It was the soaked clothing of course, and the bare feet in his case. Even in the heat of the day the sun hadn’t dried everything. It had dried their hair and skin but their clothing stayed damp and started to smell like soil just like that of the embankment, and his boots were so sopping wet that he couldn’t even put them back on, instead having to walk along the streets of Yeoju barefoot and attracting the attentions of pretty much everyone, whether they be pedestrians or driving past in vehicles. It had been irritating at first but then he had realised how very stupid they looked and he really couldn’t blame them for staring even if it was rude.
As usual Seokjin and Namjoon went inside whilst they waited outside rather than all crowd the check-in desk. It meant that a cautious owner wouldn’t see all seven of them, worn clothing and faces, and ask them to leave rather than give them rooms, and though that hadn’t happened yet he wouldn’t be surprised if it did today. They looked a lot more worn and weirder than usual, maybe even like drifters. So he just sat down on the curb by the building and checked his cigarettes to see that they were damp. The packet had been in his jeans and the river water must have somehow splashed up high enough to soak the packet and damage the sticks. Yoongi eyed this before tossing the box into the gutter and muttering under his breath in annoyance.

“There’s a store just over there,” Jungkook said as he eyed the packet.

“You think they’d serve me in this state?” he asked with a laugh. “No shoes, no service.”

“You have shoes,” Hoseok remarked. “You’re just not wearing them.” Taehyung had been leaning against the wall of the hostel but at their conversation he straightened up and then walked over to the curb, leaning forward to watch the traffic keenly.

“What does that mean?” Jimin asked. “The whole ‘no shoes’ thing?”

“I think it’s anti-hippie…” Yoongi said as he watched the boy jogging across the road whilst there was a break in the traffic. “Or something like that.”

“Hippies don’t wear shoes?”

“Eh…sometimes.”

“Yoongi the hippie,” Hoseok said before making a soft noise under his breath. “Kind of suits you, you’d look good in floral shirts.”

“Not my style,” Yoongi muttered as Taehyung disappeared into the store without a glance back at them. He reemerged a minute later and was hastily crossing the road once more. As he got closer he reached into his jeans pocket and pulled something out before tossing it at him. Yoongi caught the packet of cigarettes, still wrapped in plastic and eyed the label to see he had even gotten his favourite ones. Suddenly the joke he had said to Seokjin all of those nights back wasn’t that funny, because Taehyung had actually stolen him a packet.
Not long after that their two friends exited the check-in building with keys and they went across the lot to locate their rooms on the first floor rather than the ground for once. Up rusted metal steps and along a walkway to the corner of the L-shaped building and into their rooms. Yoongi dived into the bathroom before anyone else could and he relished the sensation of the hot water washing all of the dirt from the streets away, ridding him of the scent of the river after it had clung to him for hours. When he was finished he went back into the other section of the room to see that Seokjin was using the settee so he sat down on the bed and looked at the window across the room. Deep orange sky that looked like it was on fire, bringing back memories of his nightmare and making a wave of uneasiness swirl in the pit of his stomach. The streetlights weren’t even on yet but he felt exhausted, enough that he actually settled down and felt himself falling asleep.

He woke up to see that the hostel room was pitch-black and he sat up slowly as he fumbled for the clock on the side table. He held it up and squinted to see that it was 3:17am. He had fallen asleep during the late evening and now it was the early morning and he was awake... Yoongi put it back with a sigh and then rubbed at his eyes roughly. He hadn’t eaten anything since way back in Yangpyeong County and stomach almost felt hollow so he shifted to climb out of bed with a grumble of annoyance. Sure enough there was something placed on the coffee table by the settee Seokjin was sleeping on. Food and a note. He picked it up to see that his friend had left it in place in case he woke up, claiming that this was the food that had been bought for him and ending the message with a heart: typical Seokjin. Yoongi sat down on the floor and proceeded to eat it, hoping that a full stomach might put him back to sleep again. The kimbap was cold and not exactly the most pleasant sensation in his mouth but he was too hungry to care and he devoured it before chasing it down with a whole bottle of water. Satisfied that his stomach would stop growling at him he retrieved the cigarettes and went to sit on the window like always.

He tore the plastic free and dropped it on the floor before turning the packet over in his hands; the packet that Taehyung had stolen for him. He hadn’t asked him to but his habit had let the boy indulge in his own again, and he supposed that he should feel guilty but he didn’t. He just wanted a smoke really bad. He thumbed it open and pulled a stick free with his teeth before settling back against the window frame and glancing over the room. He saw that the carpet was a medium blue shade and he paused in the act of retrieving his lighter. Just like his nightmare. For a few seconds he could almost smell the gasoline and then he grabbed the lighter and flicked it on hard.

Why had he thought of something like that now, when he had no need to? Why had he had that stupid nightmare in the first place was also a good question, but it was one that he did not have the answer to. Yoongi didn’t know why he had dreamt of himself burning to death and he doubted that looking into it would yield any satisfying or pleasant answers. It was likely some stupid metaphor for his life. People liked to think that dreams were important like that, didn’t they? That they reflected some inner aspect of a person’s psyche?

Yoongi was so distracted by this that he didn’t even realise that he had had the lighter flicked on for nearly thirty seconds, and he only realised that he had when the flame suddenly licked against his thumb and he dropped it on his lap in surprise. He shook his hand for a few seconds before pulling
He took a deep pull and looked out the window at the lot and road just in front of it. Cars blurring past, a few parked sedentary in the lot parking spots, a couple of people walking along the sidewalk even at this late hour. They weren’t thinking about nightmares of self-immolation. The drivers weren’t imagining crashing into cement blockades so that the gasoline ignited in the engine block and made the vehicle erupt into a flaming ball of metal and leather. No, that was just him and he couldn’t seem to push the thoughts out of his head now. Much like how a noise in the middle of the night would put one on edge, convinced that the serial killer in the last movie they had watched was lurking in the shadows just outside their bedroom, Yoongi was also haunted with his own little nightmare and it wasn’t even something that could be laughed over and brushed aside; silly thoughts. It was something vivid and graphic and it was going to take more than falling asleep with the lights on to chase it all away.

Yoongi tore his eyes away from the window to instead look at his sleeping friends. Namjoon in the bed furthest away with his back to him, covers pulled right up to under his chin. Seokjin lying on his back with his face turned to the side, deep in slumber with a peacefully blank expression on his face. Why couldn’t he do that? Why couldn’t he just close his eyes and drift off to sleep? How come he had to smoke several cigarettes in a row whilst pacing up and down and nearly pull his hair out before he ended up feeling remotely drowsy? It was enough to make a flare of annoyance course through him, an angry little flare that was hot just like fire.

He pulled the cigarette out from between his lips and looked at it carefully. He ran his eyes along the thin white body and light tan filter, the smouldering little end like a furnace. There was a little chunk of ash starting to form but he didn’t dab it off just yet.

For a moment, just a moment, he had felt something when the lighter flame had touched his skin just moments ago. Just like the game he had played with it last week, moving his hand above it until the heat made his flesh start to bake. It was a sudden jolting sensation but it wasn’t unpleasant. What would it feel like if he pressed the end of the stick out against his skin? Would that be a sudden jolt too, or would it be something else? Before he could stop himself he moved his hand to hold it just above his inner elbow, pausing with it just an inch above the crease in his skin.

“I’m being stupid,” he muttered under his breath. “I know what it’ll feel like. It’ll fucking hurt…” And yet the obvious knowledge of this fact didn’t make him move his hand away. What was it about the idea of doing it that held him in place, unable to just stub it out on the windowsill like always? He wasn’t certain but the urge to just do it was so overwhelming that he took and deep breath and
lowered the stick down.

When the end touched his skin there wasn’t a second or so delay before the pain, it was instantaneous. The heat didn’t increase like it did with the lighter, it was hot enough to burn his skin with the slightest contact and he heard himself hissing as he pressed down on the cigarette and stubbed it out. Then the crumpled butt fell out of his grasp to land on the carpet and he stared at the sight it left behind.

There was a smear of ash stuck to his skin and when he hastily brushed it away, wincing when his fingers brushed against the spot, he revealed a bright red welt that was already starting to swell on his skin; a circle around it in a deep pink like a strange halo. It was right above his inner elbow and it stood out like a tattoo - or rather a burn brand - against his pale skin. Though he had dropped the stubbed out stick a few seconds ago it still felt like he had it pressed on his arm, an annoying prickling sensation that wouldn’t stop unless he doused it with freezing cold water.

Yoongi let his pent up breath out in a heavy sigh and it was then that he realised how very...clear his mind felt. No more panic and stressed thoughts racing around in his head like trapped rats, making him feel on edge and gnaw at his lips until they were as raw as the welt on his arm. No, he felt rather serene, and it was enough for him to get off the windowsill and lie down in the bed again. As he shifted to get comfortable Seokjin made a soft noise under his breath, moving his head so that it was no longer on an angle facing him but rather so that he could now only see the back of his head from across the room. He stared at this sight for a few seconds before lying down and looking up at the ceiling and when he closed his eyes he imagined that he wouldn’t sleep, that he would just lie there like always and-

Someone shaking his arm roughly to wake him up, dragging him out of his slumber rather rudely. Yoongi didn’t open his eyes fully and instead just a crack and he caught sight of someone leaning over him. Jimin? What was Jimin doing in the room? He sat up in confusion and stared at him through his puffy eyelids and sure enough it was the boy sitting on the edge of the bed rather than Seokjin or Namjoon.

“Huh...wuh-what?” he asked, hearing his own voice and thinking it sounded like a stranger’s to his ears; too heavy, too old. “What’re you doing?”

“Waking you up,” Jimin retorted without missing a beat.

“Yeah yeah Jimin,” he said as he reached up to rub at his eyes. “I figured that much out. I meant what’re you doing in here? Why aren’t you in your room getting ready?”
“‘Cos I woke up an hour ago and already got ready,” the boy explained, “and I knocked on the door and woke Namjoon up. That’s why he’s ready too, Seokjin’s just finishing up in the bathroom and then you can get washed up too.”

“Ummm... Don’t wanna, wanna go back to sleep instead,” Yoongi mumbled and he heard a laugh from across the road so he turned to look past the boy just in time to catch Namjoon zipping his holdall up. “What’s so funny?”

“You sound like a kid right now,” Namjoon said. “One that stayed up past their bedtime and is too sleepy for school.”

“I never had a bedtime,” he replied before suppressing a yawn. “They were for babies.”

“You were a baby once, remember?” Seokjin said as he stepped out of the bathroom, towel around his shoulders. “We all were.”

“It’s that long ago he's forgotten,” Jimin joked. Then he reached over to snag hold of his wrist and drag him out of the bed. “Come on, time to get ready.” Yoongi groaned theatrically and tried to dig his heels into the carpet pile but it was too thin for proper purchase and he ended up in the bathroom anyway. The boy leaned over to turn the shower attachment on and the stream came on loud and hard, bouncing off the porcelain sides of the tub like rain on a tin roof.

“I wish I had wings,” he muttered as he eyed the stream of water.

“What, why?” Jimin asked with an amused smile.

“So I didn’t have to walk for one fucking day.”

“No, you’d fly but that would be tiring too, a form of exercise.”

“Exercise? No thank you,” Yoongi retorted as he reached up to grab the neck of his tee and drag it off over his head. “I’d rather not do any more of tha-”
“What’s that?” Jimin asked suddenly and it took him a moment to realise that he had even said something. Then he asked him what he meant, brow furrowing in confusion. “That thing, that thing on your arm?”

“The thing on my what…” Yoongi let go of his tee, hearing it land on the floor with a soft rustle, and then dropped his eyes to study his arm and that was when he saw the mark on his inner elbow; the ghastly red welt that looked so very obvious on his pale skin. He stared at it dumbly and felt his lips moving before he managed to get his words out. “I…uh, I dropped my cigarette last night and I must’ve burnt myself…or something.”

“It looks like a burn,” Jimin said before grabbing his forearm rather roughly so that he could twist it and get a better look. “A really bad one. Doesn’t it hurt?”

“A little,” he said as he studied the boy’s face whilst he studied the welt. “I didn’t even realise it, it’s kinda only hurting now you’ve made me notice it…”

“It happened last night?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Did you fall asleep and accidentally burn yourself?”

“No, I uh…well I kinda drifted off into my thoughts,” Yoongi stammered, “and it must’ve fallen out of my mouth or something.”

“I bet that brought you back to reality, huh?” Jimin asked as he let go of his arm. He could have sighed in relief and was about to when the boy looked right at him. His gaze was unflinching and so strong that he could barely hold it. “It was definitely an accident?” Yoongi nodded and agreed it was so but he felt that his reply was flighty and forced and he wondered if he thought so too. Jimin remained silent for a few seconds, the sound of the shower across the bathroom as loud as a roaring waterfall, and then he smiled brightly at him once more. “Be more careful, right?”

“…Right,” Yoongi agreed as he returned a smile that felt rubbery at the corners. Then the boy left the bathroom and closed the door behind him and he let his pent-up breath out in a whistling sigh.
The burn on his skin felt itchy now, almost as if his lies had made it start to hurt once more.
Taehyung watched Jimin exiting the hostel room to go outside, presumably to go to the other room. The boy might have been planning on running to the store but he doubted it, for he knew his friend wouldn’t do anything without some kind of permission from their older friends. Especially since the Jungkook incident it seemed that no one wanted to sneak out for a little fun anymore, and it made all of his attempts at leaving even harder. There was always someone there to ask questions, usually Hoseok who would give him a look as if he were his father as he raised his eyebrows. He didn’t know whether he loved that look or hated it, for he noted that Hoseok reserved that expression solely for him and that was probably a bad thing. He hadn’t even given the youngest boy the look after the brawling in the streets the other night, but Taehyung had managed to amass it several times already, usually whilst in the act of messing around with Jimin for some reason.

He couldn’t believe that his friends had seen his actions yesterday as a form of bullying. Did they really think that he would be stupid enough to actually throw Jimin over the side of the bridge as a joke? Not that he could have anyway, for the boy kicked and wriggled quite a considerable amount and nearly freed himself even with Jungkook to help him. That wasn’t the point of course, for if he said that it would most certainly not end in laughter, but it was the truth. He had just been playing around, nothing serious. But Hoseok had called it bullying and then Yoongi had jumped in and made it suddenly seem like a bad thing. Taehyung probably should have expected it, for the young man had an annoying habit of jumping in whenever Jimin was involved. He likely thought that he was helping but he just made it look like the boy needed a guardian, when he most certainly didn’t; Jimin could fight back quite well on his own, he was scrappy and quick.

Taehyung turned his head to look across the room and he heard the sound of the door clicking shut, making Jungkook stir in his sleep as he did. It was probably a good idea to wake the other two up but he had to get cleaned up so he supposed he could do it after. But first he wanted to check something, something very important. He climbed out of the bed and hunkered down at the bottom of the other one. He picked up the younger boy’s boots and stuck his hand inside to pull out the cash he had shoved in it. It didn’t include coins, which were in his jeans pockets, but he didn’t need an exact amount, an estimate would do. He flicked through them quickly and then put them back before reaching over to snag hold of Hoseok’s jeans, which were on the floor in a crumpled heap. Another quick check of the pockets, adding the amount up with the other boy’s. Then he checked his own boot and let out a heavy sigh.

67,000₩.

That was all they had left right now, not including their friends’ cash. Taehyung thumbed the notes
and then shoved them back into his boot out of sight. He knew that he should have protested against
Seokjin buying all of that food the other day, against the recently lavish spending on hot food over
instant shit that he could steal for free. Combined with hostel costs and the gas that Namjoon had
bought for the broken car, they had blown through their cash and were starting to get dangerously
low. With all of the cash added together they could afford another night or two in a hostel but he
didn’t want them to waste another won if possible. Sure, it might not have been that hard to get the
cash in the first place but Taehyung had thought them very lucky to have gotten that amount. It had
required luck and hard work and he didn’t think that his friends had that in them now. They were
tired of everything: the roads, the empty stomachs, the adventure, and if he told them that they
needed to spend another day washing dishes and scrubbing park benches then they would probably
beat the shit out of him. That meant that he was going to have to make some cash on his own without
them knowing, whether it be from lifting and selling or something else entirely.

“Hmmm, what time is it?” Jungkook asked, eyes just visible over the tops of the covers as he
squinted at him, dark hair fanned out messily on the pillow.

“7am,” Taehyung explained. “Go back to sleep for a few minutes, I’m gonna shower now.”

“Mkay,” the boy replied and he got to his feet to cross the room and enter the bathroom.

Taehyung hastily brushed his teeth and used the toilet before stepping into the shower, having to
fiddle with it several times because the fixture was broken. Yesterday he had been too happy to wash
away all of the river water to even care that it was faulty but now it rather annoyed him. Folded up
neatly and placed across the bathroom were their clothes: tees and underwear and socks and even
jeans - except for Hoseok who had been smart enough to roll his up and save them getting soaked-
and as a result they had ran out of detergent, something they would desperately need again. In the
future they would have to refrain from diving into rivers like children, for it caused too much trouble
it would seem. After showering and getting dressed he went into the other section of the room and
woke his friends up before sitting down on the edge of the bed by the window. No sight of Jimin, he
must really be irritating the young men right now with his incessant chatter even at this ridiculous
hour. How the boy could be so goddamn chipper was both intriguing and slightly terrifying. Perhaps
Yoongi would regret saving his ass yesterday now that he was bouncing around like a puppy and
getting on his nerves? Fifteen minutes later the two boys were finishing up with their packing and so
he got up to leave the room and walk along the path to get to the other one. He didn’t bother
knocking and instead went right in, swinging the door inwards and stepping inside.

“The kids ready?” Namjoon asked as he leaned against the door and studied the interior.

“Give ‘em a minute or two and they will be. Jimin in here?”
“Was, he just ran to the store with Jin about a minute ago.” Taehyung eyed the deep blue carpet, which greatly clashed with the brown in their room, and then glanced up to look at him. He asked him why they had went there and his friend shrugged. “Probably to get food or something? Didn’t say.” He thought this over for a moment before realising that that meant even more cash being wasted and he managed to not wince outwardly. “Kookie and Hoseok OK?”

“Yeah, why’d you ask?”

“Just wanted to check,” Namjoon said as he leaned back on his wrists, “‘cos they don’t really talk, you know? I didn’t even know that Kookie had went out that night he got into that fight until you two dragged his ass into the room. They don’t seem to talk that much with me, probably ‘cos they think I’ll say something philosophical and annoy them, so I thought I’d ask.”

“You OK?”

“Yeah, just tired as hell is all.” At this reply Taehyung smiled in agreement, it was certainly something they could all agree on. “Another day on the road ahead of us, Seoul nowhere in sight. I miss that stupid Chevy…”

“Join the club, we all fucking do,” Yoongi declared as he stepped inside the room, hair slightly damp from the shower. Taehyung studied him for a moment and when the man reached down to grab his jacket from the floor by the bed he saw something on his arm, something very strange. It was a red mark that looked to be a welt of some kind, angry and sore-looking: a burn. Where had that come from? Had he dropped a cigarette on his arm? But it was such a weird location that he couldn’t see how it could have fallen there. No, it looked like it might just have not been an accident…

“You think I’ll win another one?” Namjoon asked he the other man slipped the jacket on, strategically hiding it from sight. No one else would know it was there if he kept it under wraps of course, but Taehyung had seen it perfectly clear.

“I hope so.”

“Maybe I’ll win us coach tickets instead?” Taehyung slid his eyes over to look at his friend. Coach tickets? Was he possibly thinking of buying some? Did he know how much that would cost? A lot more than they had now for sure. He was imagining that they wouldn’t be able to afford much more than a day or two of basic living if they carried on spending and yet his friends were thinking of coach tickets.
“Coach tickets?” Taehyung asked. “C’mon, at least try for plane tickets instead.”

“OK,” Namjoon laughed, “I’ll win us our own private jet. We can get back to Seoul in style, right?”

“Right,” he agreed with a grin, “and land it on Jimin’s house.” Yoongi looked at him disapprovingly so he held up his hands to show that it was just a joke, palms outwards. The young man dropped his gaze to study this and then quietly told him that they needed to ensure that his father was in the house at least, the jibe making both him and Namjoon burst out in surprised laughter.

“Don’t tell him I said that, OK.” Yoongi muttered under his breath. “It was stupid and I shouldn’t have said it.”

“Stupid but true,” Taehyung said with a soft shrug. “We’re all thinking it but none of us wanna say it…‘cept me ‘cos I called his dad a piece a shit.”

“You did what?” Namjoon asked in comic disbelief and he saw a similar expression mirrored on the other man’s face.

“It was a couple of days ago, we were talking at the gas station and he mentioned his dad hitting him so I called him a piece of shit. Was I wrong for doing so? Nah, I don’t think I was. I don’t think I’d ever be wrong in that situation. I might push him around a lot, y’know, but I wouldn’t ever do something like that. He’s a piece of shit, just my dad, just like most dads I know.” He paused before adding. “He wasn’t mad at me, he didn’t seem to care really.”

“Just ‘cos we think it don’t mean we should ‘say’ it,” Yoongi said after a few seconds of silence. “But…I agree, you weren’t wrong for saying it.” He turned back to his holdall to start shoving things inside it and so Taehyung decided it was time he left their room and went back to the other one. He was just closing the door shut behind him when he saw movement out of the corner of his eye and he turned his head to see his two friends crossing the lot. He raised a hand to wave at them, nothing more than a slight wiggle of his fingers.

“Oh you’re awake?” Seokjin called with a grin. “Good, I was worried that we might need to drag you out of bed kicking and screaming…”

“Not me,” he retorted. “Not the others either, they’re awake and packing up.”
“Good good,” their eldest friend said as he got to the door and pulled on the handle. Taehyung reached out to grab Jimin’s elbow to stop him from going inside and the other boy looked at him blankly. His arms were bare of course, for the other man now had a reason to wear his jacket, but the weather looked like it would stay warm enough for him to not need it. As soon as the door closed shut he asked him if he was okay.

“Yeah,” Jimin said with a vigorous nod. “I’m good, why does everyone keep asking me that?”

“Probably ‘cos of what happened yesterday,” Taehyung explained as he let go of his arm. “You didn’t mind it did you? The joke?”

“The joke? Oh no,” the boy let out a laugh that sounded sweet but a little forced, “I didn’t mind I knew that you weren’t gonna do it. It was just a joke, right?”

“Right,” he agreed quietly.

“I mean, you know how Yoongi is-”

“Grumpy? Lazy? Prone to bursts of temper?” Taehyung suggested with an eyebrow raise.

“Overprotective,” the other boy corrected with a soft smile. “He can be a little overprotective sometimes.”

“Only towards you.” Jimin furrowed his brow slightly at this remark, as if it confused him, but he didn’t ask him to clarify so he didn’t. “Actually, I wanted to talk to you about Yoongi.”

“…OK.”

“You were in their room before, right?” His friend confirmed that he had been in there with a curt nod of the head. “You spoke to him, to Yoongi?” Another nod, this one a little slower than the first as he shifted from one foot to the other. “Did you notice anything…unusual?”
“Like what?”

“Like on his arm, a mark on his arm, the inner elbow?” And Taehyung actually lifted his own arm to circle the area he was talking about with his forefinger, tracing a lazy circle around his inner elbow. The other boy’s eyes dropped to study this and then went back up to his face. “‘Cos I could’ve sworn that I saw something there before he put his jacket on.” Jimin asked him what he thought it was, the thing that he had seen, and he shrugged lightly. “A burn.”

“I dunno, I didn’t really look at his arms so I didn’t notice anything,” Jimin said, and he held his gaze rather steady save for a second or two when his eyes moved ever so slightly to the left as if looking over his shoulder.

“You notice anything like it a few days ago? Like when you were sharing beds with him?”

“No, definitely not then.”

Taehyung decided that he wasn’t lying regarding that particular thing but he wasn’t so certain about his first denial about to seeing the mark on his arm. How could he have not seen it? It was as obvious as the split in Jungkook’s lip and he would have had to have been blind to miss it, but at the same time he didn’t want to assume. It was Jimin, and the boy would likely miss the end of the world because he would be daydreaming. Had he maybe caught sight of it and he didn’t want to admit in for fear that he might try and get him to ask him about it? That seemed to make more sense than him missing it. Maybe he was lying on both accounts but the adamant tone in his voice seemed to reveal that the mark on the man’s arm was very recent, perhaps just a mere few hours old. Should he be blunt about it and tell him that he had a feeling that Yoongi had burnt himself, or was it wrong to do so? It would be like loudly yelling about Hoseok’s medication, and though Yoongi hadn’t told him and asked him to keep it a secret he felt that maybe he shouldn’t, that he should let someone who was a lot better with words talk to him instead. Someone like Seokjin or Namjoon…maybe Jimin if the boy had the courage. It wasn’t like Yoongi would get pissed off at him, if anything Jimin was in the most safest position of them all.

“You sure?” he asked and his friend nodded once more.

“Uh-huh, hundred percent sure.”

“…OK, if you notice it, or anything else like it, you’ll let me know, right?” The boy said that he would and so Taehyung reached over to ruffle his hair and then went back along the path to get to their room.
Every one of his friends seemed to be distracted by someone else’s problems right now; from getting into fistfights, to possible self-harm and maybe other things too. That meant that at least none of them would have reason to suspect him of doing anything bad, or at least more worse than usual…

It was exactly 10pm when Jungkook finally succumbed to sleep and he had been waiting impatiently for the last thirty minutes, trying to not fall asleep himself from a mixture of boredom and tiredness from walking all day long. Why did the boy have to stay awake just to vex him, just to make everything even harder? Taehyung had spent the entire day worrying himself stupid over the fucking won notes he had counted that morning. He hadn’t been able to stop himself, and though he knew that the others would probably be pissed with him he had lifted a few items from a gas station. Not a great amount, nothing that would count as more than a mouthful of food. It might save a couple of thousand of won in the future, and if he kept doing it then it would add up…supposing that he managed to do so without the others nagging him to death. He was doing it to help them and yet they acted like it was a bad thing.

If only they knew how much more worse his actions could get.

Taehyung didn’t rush out the second that Jungkook fell asleep of course, for that would have been pretty stupid. Instead he waited for several minutes to make sure that the boy sank deep into his slumber and was therefore harder to wake up. He didn’t think he would have a problem with Hoseok, for his friend had downed his Xanax in the bathroom like always where the other two couldn’t see him and then he had drifted off to sleep without a single problem. Jimin was hard to gauge, for he could either sleep like a baby or jerk awake from any sudden movement; likely because he was so used to him kicking him out of the bed that he had somehow trained himself to wake up just in case. So he slowly slipped out from under the covers and got out of the bed, trying his hardest to not make the bed springs creak as he did. Luckily for him they didn’t and he got to his feet and quickly got dressed, slipping his cash out of his boot to shove it into his jeans pocket. He didn’t sit on the bed to lace up his boots but rather on the floor, which was hardwood for once instead of carpet. It was cheap and chipped and scratched all over, but it was still better than filthy carpet for sure.

Knotting his laces proved a trifle difficult because his fingers seemed to be trembling badly and he had to bite down on his lip and furrow his brow in concentration so that he could do it, chin balanced on his knee and the faded scent of detergent still clinging to the worn material. Satisfied that they would at least stay knotted up he got back to his feet and crossed the room to collect the room keys from a small glass bowl by the door. He wrapped his fingers around these and he slowly slid the chain lock free and unlocked the door. He stepped outside and locked it again before shoving the
keys into his jeans, alongside his miserable amount of cash. The little metal and plastic object seemed to have a substantial weight in his pocket, as if he had shoved a large rock inside instead. Perhaps an anchor.

Taehyung took a deep breath of the warm evening air and glanced along the path to his left to see that it was empty, no one in sight. Then he crossed the lot at a fast pace and didn’t slow down, didn’t stop or look back because he would end talking himself out of it; telling himself that he should go to the market instead and steal a few things, try and sell them back for a profit even if that took time and effort. But the market was quite some distance from the hostel, he knew that from passing it by just this morning, and the bars and clubs were most certainly not. They were practically in the same neighbourhood and he could hear the throbbing bass line of music already in the air. He stared at his boots rather than study the streets in front of him because they all looked the same in the night; illuminated by dull orange streetlights with trash lined gutters. He barely passed a soul on his way across the block and he wasn’t really surprised. Everyone was either in already and having a great time or standing in a line waiting for club doors to open. He wouldn’t see people on these streets until about 3am in the morning and he wasn’t planning on being out that long, he was hoping to be back at the hostel before midnight if possible. It took several minutes of solid walking to finally start to see the sights of neon signs, to taste the familiar scent of booze in the air like sour perfume, and that was when he lifted his gaze and started to study the signs, to find what he was looking for.

Taehyung knew that if the others found out that he was doing this then he was going to get into so much trouble. This wasn’t lifting a few items here and there from a market stall or slipping some cash out of a charity pot when a cashier wasn’t looking, this was a whole new level of illegal and bad ideas and he thought that if they knew about it then they might just drop his ass as fast as they could, refuse to take him along with them wherever they ended up next. But they needed cash desperately and he had been in that very same position countless times before. With desperate times came desperate measures and right now he was counting this as a desperation situation to be in. They didn’t have time to wait around for Namjoon’s bets, for the shit wage that Yoongi and Seokjin and Jimin could hustle together working at entire evening in front of a sink or handing out fliers on street corners. They needed a quick fix and he knew exactly how to get one of those.

Taehyung stopped outside of the bar and eyed it for a moment. He had never been in this city before but he knew a gay club when he saw one because he had learnt to read the signs, quite literally. It was all in the details and a quick look at the exterior showed him all that he needed. No one hanging around outside drunk like the other clubs and bars on the circuits because it wasn’t smart to do that, just in case gang of drunken men walked past and decided to beat the shit out of whoever was taking a quick smoke on the curb outside. On the side of the door frame he could see a faded sticker stuck to the wood, a rainbow that stuck out more to his eye than the flashing neon tubes on the side of the building. His mouth felt dry and when he tried to wet his lips he found that his tongue really didn’t help. Taehyung had had his hands shoved into his pockets whilst he had been walking and he forced them out to reach up and pull his hood down before going down into the alley to get in through the side door, which was wide open and blaring electronic music into the early morning air.

There was a bouncer on the door but he didn’t ask for any I.D., rather just scanning his face quickly before deciding that he was old enough. He usually never got asked for it and a part of him almost
wished that the man had to stop him from entering the club without it. But he didn’t and so he stepped inside and went down the small set of stone steps to enter the interior of the club. Blaring strobe lights assaulted his eyes and he squinted with a moan of surprised pain. It was enough to make his head hurt and he knew that Hoseok would go running back out of the place after just a second. He probably should too, and yet he found himself sticking to the wall of the club as he walked his way over to the bar. He needed to buy a cheap drink just so he could sit there and so he ordered a glass of whiskey just because he could nurse it unlike a single shot. When the female bartender placed it down in front of him he had to take a quick sip just to wet his mouth, feeling the warm liquid burning down his throat as he swallowed.

Then he shifted on the stool and glanced over at the club interior. Surprisingly packed full of men and women, the dance area was a sea of bodies writhing to the electronic music. He saw hair fanning out, arms reaching up into the air, feet leaving the floor in jumps. Everyone seemed to be having a good time and yet he was clutching the square glass of alcohol and feeling nervous as hell. After a minute running his eyes over the mass of bodies and faces he turned slightly on the stool and eyed the rest of the people at the bar: three girls sitting huddled together talking over shots, a middle-aged man on the very end with a pint of beer, and a younger man just a few seats away from him. Taehyung shifted so that he was facing the bar again but he kept his eye on the young man beside him just to be sure that if he glanced over he could quickly turn his head and look at him.

After a few minutes of darting his eyes from the rows of bottles to the man he finally managed to maintain eye contact with him. Hair that was a little longer than the current style, falling down to his jawline loosely tousled rather than poker straight, he looked to be in college, perhaps Seokjin’s age, or maybe a little younger and closer to Hoseok’s. Round eyes and a button nose, but full lips that seemed quick to smile. The stranger offered him one and Taehyung returned it and hoped that he might just snag him nice and easy. Back to his whiskey, which he eyed for a minute; deep amber liquid on the rocks of two large ice cubes, square based glass that felt very familiar in his hand. He didn’t have to wait long for he felt someone moving beside him to sit on the spare stool and when he glanced up there he was.

“Wooyoung,” he said as he got onto the stool.

“It’s nice to meet you Wooyoung,” he replied, “Taehyung.”

“Aren’t you a little young to be in a club?” He asked him how old he thought that he was and he paused for a moment. “You’re a high school kid, I can tell from one look.”

“Oh really?” he teased with a mischievous smirk, all the while hoping that he wasn’t going to sit beside him like some kind of bodyguard all night and that he was actually interested regardless of the fact he had admitted to knowing his age. “Am I in trouble?”
“No, I won’t tell a soul,” Wooyoung reached up to mine zipping his lips and Taehyung took a moment to study him. Had the man mentioned his age as a sign to show that he wasn’t interested, instead playing the cool older brother role because he wanted to keep any creeps from approaching him, or had he done so in the hopes of possibly making himself seem cooler and thus more interesting? Was he put off by his age, did he not care because he wasn’t interested, or did he move to sit beside him because he was very much interested? It was hard to tell and the next few interactions would be the revealing that he was waiting for.

“Still, it was pretty naughty of me to sneak in here, ‘specially when I have class tomorrow.”

“Oh, so you actually go to class and don’t ditch?” the young man asked with a surprised expression and Taehyung laughed and reached down to put his hand on his knee as he did. He didn’t move it away. “That’s a surprise.”

“Y’know what else is a surprise?” Wooyoung asked him what and he cocked his head before moving his hand up and onto his thigh. He was most definitely interested. Taehyung left it in place without finishing this question and he instead gently squeezed down with his hand. Wooyoung shifted on the stool and picked up his own glass to look cool and casual, so Taehyung leaned forward and whispered down his ear. “I am a high school kid and I’m a long way from home right now and I thought, wouldn’t it be a good idea to busk for cash but no one gave me a single fucking coin.”

“That’s a shame,” the man said as he ran his fingers along the inside of his thigh, fingers brushing against his jeans.

“I really need cash, y’know? But it’s so hard to get even a couple of thousand won but then it hit me.” Taehyung glanced down the bar and saw no one even looking their way. “I know exactly what to sell.”

“Oh yeah? What?”

“My body.” He eyed his face and saw that his interest hadn’t faltered in the slightest. He could probably go for the lie now, in the hopes that it would be enough to really tempt him. “I mean, I’m really nervous right now. I haven’t done this before, I’m a virgin, but you seem so nice and I thought—”

“How much?”
“How much are you thinking?” he asked quietly.

“100,000.”

“Make it 150,000 with protection and I’m all yours.” Wooyoung hesitated for a moment before giving him a soft nod and then getting to his feet, so Taehyung drained the whiskey and slapped the cash down before watching him go into the bathroom. After a few minutes he emerged and headed off to the exit so he got up and followed after him and when he got to the front of the building he felt a hand snatch onto his wrist. The man pulled him down a few streets to an alley and then the both went inside.

“150,” he said as he shoved a rolled up wad of bills into his hand, “and this.” He waved the condom he had gotten from the bathroom to show him and Taehyung shoved the cash inside his jeans pocket with a nod. Wooyoung started to undo his belt and he studied this for a moment before unzipping his own jeans. His hands were shaking and it wasn’t just pretend nerves now. He had only just gotten them down when the man turned him around roughly and he felt his cheek brushing against the brick wall as he wrenched down on his underwear. Taehyung closed his eyes and took deep breaths as he heard him tearing the condom packet open and he briefly wondered if 150,000 was really worth something like this.

“Will this hurt?” he asked, knowing the answer because he asked it every single time he found himself in this situation. Sometimes the guy he was with lied and said that it wouldn’t, one or two had been truthful and said it would with perfect amounts of sympathy in their voices, but quite a few had said it with wide grins and he wondered which one Wooyoung would go with.

“Maybe.” That was new. He felt his hands on him, one on his hip and the other slipping down the curve of his buttocks. Taehyung opened his legs wider and a moment later he slipped his fingers inside. No lube but he prayed that the condom was lubricated. He tried to not clench but it didn’t matter because he didn’t even try and open him up, slipping his hand free to thrust into him a few seconds later. He couldn’t help a moan escaping his lips and he felt his hands going up to press against the wall, nails scratching at the cement trapped between them. “It depends.”

“On…on what?” he asked as the man pulled out and rocked into him again. The condom was lubricated but it still burnt terribly from the friction.

“On how good you are.” Taehyung opened his eyes to look down the alley and he mentally cursed himself. He hadn’t found a guy that would be quick and easy, a few thrusts and grunts and all over in minutes. He hadn’t found a guy that would be a little sweet to him despite everything and at least
make the experience less awkward for them both. No, he just had to go and pick the guy that was going to make him roleplay.

“I can be good if you want?” he asked in a soft voice. “I can be a really good boy.”

“But you told me you were naughty,” Wooyoung said, rocking his hips into him a little slow until he could go deeper.

“Am I in trouble?” he asked again, shifting to give him a better angle. “Are you gonna punish me?” Taehyung had just closed his eyes again when he felt the man’s fingers snagging in his hair tightly and he opened them again in pained shock, involuntarily clenching around his cock.

“Good boys don’t ditch class,” he said with a tug and he bit down on his lip hard, “or go to bars or run away from home, but they most certainly don't fuck strangers.”

“I’m such a…naughty boy,” Taehyung groaned. Wooyoung was thrusting into him more steadily now and he tried to imagine that it was someone else, someone he would actually want to fuck him. It hard to do so considering the fact he knew that his friend wouldn’t treat him like this, but if it would him stop clenching and make the ordeal a little less fucked up then he would do it. He had just pictured the boy’s face when the man spanked him hard and he jumped from the contact, slamming his cheek against the brick wall hard enough to hurt.

“Naughty boys must be punished.” Taehyung was certain that he could taste blood inside his mouth. “Consider this punishment.” Before he could even try and explore for a possible cut with his tongue Wooyoung thrust into him so hard that he did more than moan in pain, he actually let out a surprised shout. Head slamming against the wall again, but this time also his hips. The man was in deep and he was going so rough that Taehyung had to turn his face aside and press it against his upper arm to mute the noises coming out of his mouth. The burning sensation was just like whiskey at the bar and he couldn’t block it out this time, couldn’t picture his friend’s face and play pretend. He could feel each thrust like a stab and he was aware of he fact he was bleeding but he just squeezed his eyes closed and waited for him to stop.

After a minute or two of sheer agony he could hear him breathing heavily and sure enough the man orgasmed, moaning against his neck with another hard tug on his hair. When he let go of him he felt a horrible sensation along his scalp and that revealed that it was probably bleeding too. Wooyoung pulled out of him and tossed the condom on the floor by his boots and Taehyung just stared at it as he listened to him leaving the alley. Then he slowly bent down and pulled his jeans and underwear back up, wincing at the flare of pain the movement caused. After he had fastened them up he slipped the wad of bills out and looked at it.
He shoved the cash back and felt his eyelids burning so he reached up and rubbed at them roughly, lower lip quivering.

He had just prostituted himself for just 150,000 and the others didn’t know about it.

Taehyung slipped the hotel room key out of his pocket and eyed it for a moment, running his thumb along the square fob and looking at the little image printed on it: a cottage with a thatch roof and a little trail of smoke coming out the chimney. Quaint. He lifted his gaze to look at the metal lock underneath the door handle and suddenly he didn’t want to open the door. He was scared that he would unlock it and step inside only for the three boys to dive out of bed and demand to know where he had gone wandering off to, having been woken up by the sound of him slipping out barely an hour ago. That he would wake one of them up when he stepped inside and they would follow him around sleepily, asking him why he stunk of alcohol and why he was dressed. But he couldn’t stand outside all night and so he forced himself to slip the key into the lock and turn it slowly, hearing the tumblers shifting in the silence as he did. Then he pushed the door open and stepped inside.

His eyes had adjusted to the dark and he saw Jungkook first, one leg free from the covers to show a flash of skin, the rest over him messily as he lay on his back with his face turned away from him. Then he saw the slight bump of Hoseok under the covers, black hair fanned out on the light blue pillow like an oil slick. Lastly, lying in their shared bed was Jimin. The boy was facing the door and lying on his stomach, arms under the pillow and covers just over his waist. He took a deep breath and closed the door, hearing it click slightly before he fumbled to lock it again, and then he waited. Nothing. No noise other than soft snoring coming from one of them and the drone of traffic through the open window across the room.

Taehyung let his pent up breath out in a soft sigh as he pressed his forehead against the cool wood of the door. His heart was racing so he took a few deep breaths to slow it down whilst he removed his shoes. Bending down made stabbing pains shoot up into his lower stomach and he just clenched his jaw tightly to stop any pained noises escaping his lips. He wrenched on the knots and got out of them as fast as he could and then got back upright. He had to lean against the door because his legs felt unsteady and his head was swimming. He wasn’t going to faint, he had been through this before and worst, but the sensation was horrible and it left him so weak that he considered getting on his hands
and knees to crawl across the room. He would have done it if he hadn’t known that the movement would once again cause him sheer agony.

He opened his eyes and looked at his sleeping friends as his head started to clear up. They were dreaming right now, or blissfully unconscious to reality, and yet he wasn’t. He was currently residing in something that felt like a nightmare but he couldn’t just curl up beside his friend and sleep. Oh no, he still had work to do; evidence to clean up.

Taehyung crept across the room slowly, hands out in front of him like a blind man as he navigated the room by with his feet alone; stretching his toes out to feel for any obstacles so that he wouldn’t trip over, for any stray shoes or food cartons. After a dreadful minute he felt his fingers touching a wall and he moved along it until he felt a door frame, glossy paint against his fingertips. He stepped inside and got to the sink before pausing for a moment. He could see his reflection in the mirror on the wall thanks to the small window by the shower and tub. It let in a harsh yellow light that was undoubtedly from a streetlight. He stared at himself in a mixture of disgust and pity and then slowly reached up to start parting his hair. After a few seconds of feeling with his fingers he found the cut on his scalp and when he pulled them away again he saw a clump of hair come free to land in the sink. Taehyung stared at it and once again felt the urge to cry overcome him.

“I don’t deserve to fucking cry,” he hissed at his reflection under his breath, seeing his own lips pull back in a smear that revealed blood still caught between his teeth from earlier. He turned the tap on to wash the clump of hair away and after a few seconds he moved the plug to block the hole and fill the sink up. He was going to need to clean the cut on his scalp out but first he had a more important matter to attended to.

He reached down to touch the top button of his jeans as he watched the water streaming out the tap. He knew that he should get it over with, not look at all and rather just do it as fast and cleanly as he could, but he couldn’t seem to undo the button. He didn’t want to step out of his jeans and underwear to see a massive stain of blood all over the white cotton. He didn’t want to look at his own thighs and see smears on the insides, smears that would go all the way along to his buttocks; the coppery scent hitting his nose and getting under his nails so that he couldn’t get his hands to stop stinking of blood even days after no matter how much he scrubbed. But he had to do it because he had no choice. He had already gotten the worst part over with, and this was practically nothing in comparison.

“The fucking isn’t the worst part,” he muttered as turned the tap off and pulled his zipper down, “it’s the guilty feelings and disgust afterwards that is.” Which was true, was so painfully true.

He had just slipped his jeans down when he heard a loud gasp and he whirled around to see Jimin standing in the doorway.
Taehyung could do nothing more than stare at him dumbly, and the other boy stared right back. He must have woken him up when he had entered the room somehow and he hadn’t noticed, too preoccupied with his own thoughts, for he saw that he was clad only in his underwear and his hair was sleep-tousled to stick up in messy points and fall across his brow. He had actually been carrying a pillow in his arms but he had dropped it in shock, the white lump sitting on his feet like a strangely flat and lifeless cat.

“Shit Tae, the blood what the fuck? What the-”

“Shut the fuck up,” he hissed at him, painfully aware of the fact that Jungkook and Hoseok were asleep in the other room and that any loud noise could wake them up too. Why, they could all mill into the bathroom and point and stare at him: Kim Taehyung the zoo exhibition, complete with bloodstained underpants and a bruise on his cheekbone.

“What happened to you?” Jimin asked in the most confused and scared voice he had ever heard coming from his lips. The boy’s eyes were latched onto his underwear and he knew that he could see the blood all over them because he could feel it sticking to his skin, meaning that he would need to peel the material off like tape. “Tae, you need to tell me what the fuck happe-”

Taehyung grabbed hold of his shoulder and wrenched him out of the open doorway before clamping his other hand over his mouth. He didn’t mean to push him hard but the boy smacked into the bathroom wall and there was a soft thumping noise as his back hit it. Above his hand he could see Jimin’s wide eyes looking at him, no longer sleepy and half-lidded but fully awake.

“Don’t wake the others up,” he said in a quiet voice, “or I’ll fucking kill you Jimin, I swear I will.” Then he lowered his hand slowly and the other boy didn’t say a word as he stared at him. “They can’t know, you’re not supposed to fucking know.”

“Know what?”

“…Know nothing, OK, I got cash that’s all that matters.” Jimin furrowed his brow slightly at this and he could see his mental cogs turning slowly as his sleepy brain processed it all. “So, don't tell the others.”

“Tae…” he said in a quiet voice, barely above a whisper and showing that he had learnt the lesson about talking too loudly. “Please tell me what happened. Please.” But he just shook his head. “This is serious OK, like really serious and I don’t think that you should be pretending it’s not. If the others-”
“The others aren’t gonna know ‘cos you’re not gonna fucking tell ‘em.”

“No, I know, but if they did they’d say this too. It’s real fucking important so tell me what the fuck happened.” And for once Jimin managed to sound surprisingly authoritative, furrowing his brow in annoyance and using a stern tone that made him remember the fact that the boy was actually older than he was. He could see that Jimin was frightened, he wasn’t even trying to hide it, but he wasn’t backing down in the slightest.

“I went to a bar.”

“OK, so what then?”

“I left here to go looking for cash ‘cos we really needed it, alright? That’s why I left, it wasn’t about me, if wasn’t about getting drunk or any of that shit it was about the cash.” The boy nodded and told him that he understood and Taehyung took a deep breath. “I met a guy in the bar, we talked, I had a plan, I always have a plan when I need cash. So I told him the plan, he agreed and-”

“What plan, you didn’t tell me the plan?”

“Jimin…Look, I don’t wanna tell you,” he whined, shifting as he did so that he could look across the bathroom. “I don’t wanna, can’t you just forget about the plan?”

“Tae.”

“I…” he paused. “Promise me you won’t get mad or tell the others. That you…be disgusted with me or call me shit or-”

“I promise, you can tell me anything.” And Jimin held up his hand to show him his upright pinky, waiting for him to accept. So Taehyung wrapped his own finger around his tightly.

“Jimin…I let the guy fuck me.” His friend studied his face without saying a single thing but he heard him take a sharp little intake of breath at his words. “In an alley outside the bar.” For a horrible minute the boy didn’t speak and he waited on tenterhooks to see what would be the first thing to
come out of his mouth. Jimin’s lips quivered as if he was trying to get words out, like he was still thinking it all over in his head, and eventually he managed to let a soft whisper escape his pursed lips.

“Please say that there was protection.”

“There was, there was,” Taehyung said in relief, relief that he hadn’t slapped him or called him a whore or something equally as ghastly like he had been imagining in his head. “A condom.” He felt a sob moving up into his throat and he couldn’t seem to swallow.

“Thank god…” Jimin said before reaching up to cover his mouth. After a few seconds he moved his hand up along his brow and brushed his hair back off his brow with a sigh that didn’t sound even. “Tae, let’s get you cleaned up.”

“What? No, I don’t need you to…” But he could see on his friend’s face that it wasn’t going to work, that he was going to refuse to leave him to do it on his own. “There’s a…a cut on my scalp you can help me clean. I can’t see it.” Jimin got onto tiptoe and he pulled his hair aside to show him it. He heard him wincing as he studied it, making a soft noise under his breath.

“Let me get a few things, hang on.” The boy disappeared into the other section of the hotel room and he closed his eyes and sagged against the wall again. This wasn’t supposed to happen, no one was supposed to know and yet Jimin had gotten tangled up in it all in just a matter of seconds. His secret was out and there was nothing he could do about it other than trust the boy with his solemn promise to not tell anyone. He had thought earlier on that everyone was too busy to find out about him and now the boy had completely ruined the idea. When Jimin returned he did so with a small bottle of something and a towel. “This is gonna sting, you might wanna bite on something.” He tipped the bottle to splash some of the liquid on a corner of the towel, deep brown murky liquid, and the smell hit him just as he lifted it to wipe at the cut.

Antiseptic.

Taehyung shoved his hand in his mouth and bit down hard on the curve of skin just below his thumb, feeling the tendons shifting under his flesh as he clenched from the pain. It was like someone had poured gasoline on his head and flicked a lit match on top and his very brain seemed to be on fire. He heard several noises coming out from his mouth, muted by his hand, and Jimin made sympathetic sounds as he quickly cleaned the cut. When he lowered his hand again Taehyung saw that the white cotton of the towel was stained a rusty red with his blood, vision blurred because tears of pain had welled in his eyes. As the stinging faded to a dull burn he pulled his own hand free and looked at it to see perfect indents of his teeth in a crescent-shaped mark on his skin.
Then Jimin was pulling his underpants down before he could even do so much as blink the tears away.

He tried to snatch hold of the waistband but he was too slow and they just dropped to the floor with a soft rustling noise. His friend’s eyes dropped to them and Taehyung couldn’t stop himself from looking down even though he knew what he would see. Like a blooming rose on the cotton; the perfect crimson stain of blood.

“I’m sorry,” he said in a choked voice, “I’m sorry.”

“What’re you apologising for?” Jimin asked in complete confusion as he dragged his eyes up to look at his face.

“For fucking up,” Taehyung gasped as the first sob forced itself up and into his mouth. “For always fuh-fucking up and-” His friend cupped his face roughly and turned it so that he was looking right at him.

“You didn’t fuck up, OK. You don’t need to apologise ‘cos this didn’t happen, right?”

“Ruh-right.”

“We’re gonna clean you up and go to sleep and tomorrow none of this happened,” Jimin said in a quiet voice. “And it’ll stay that way until you do wanna talk about it.”

“Oh-OK,” Taehyung sobbed, breathing uneven as he tried to get himself under his control. “Nuh-nothing hah-happened.” Jimin took his wrist and gently led him over so that was closer to the sink and then he dipped his hand in the water that he had filled it up with. After a moment he felt his palm on the back of his thigh and when he looked down he saw water running down his legs, tinged slightly from the blood. “It’s just... we nuh-needed the cash so I tuh-thought it would be a guh-good idea.”

“Has this happened before Tae?” Jimin asked quietly and he twisted slightly to look at him, hunkered down beside him as he cleaned blood off the backs of his thighs.
“A fuh-few times.”

“Promise me you won’t do this again, even if you’re desperate?”

“I wuh-won’t do it Jimin.” The boy silently accepted his promise and Taehyung just stared at the puddle forming on the linoleum at his feet dumbly. “150,000. That’s how much cash I got. All of this for... for such a pitiful amount.”

“It’s not a pitiful amount,” Jimin said quietly. “So don’t talk about yourself like that. You felt like it was desperate, you made a rash decision in the heat of the moment. We all make mistakes Tae. This is no different.”

“Not many people prostitute themselves for quick cash Jimin.” At the word ‘prostitute’ his friend flinched slightly, now that the actual situation had been brought to light so bluntly. “‘Specially not high school kids.”

“You don’t go to high school,” he retorted without missing a beat and despite everything Taehyung felt a laugh leaving his lips. Jimin had finished the backs of his thighs and he felt his hands gently moving towards the inner section to get rid of any smears too. The worst part was yet to come and they both knew it. “A mistake is a mistake, that’s all there is to it.”

Taehyung stood there as still as a statue whilst the other boy cleaned his skin free of blood, fingers moving gently along his skin wet with soapy water that helped wash it away. He should have been doing it himself but he lacked the strength to do so and he knew that it was pathetic. But his friend doing so for him in a strangely motherly way, made him feel that his words were right: that it was a stupid mistake. This was no different from skinnning in his knee falling from a tree and having one of their mothers kiss it better and stick a band-aid on the gash seen as his own mother wouldn’t have done so. Jimin was washing away all of the bad with his gentle hands and calming his anguished brain with his soothing words. When it came to the most obvious part of the clean up Jimin wet the towel instead of his hands and he just wiped that along his skin instead, all the while humming under his breath just so that the air wasn’t silent and awkward. When he had cleaned to his best abilities he patted his skin dry and got to his feet.

“Let me get you some clean underwear.” He looked at the white towel, covered in antiseptic and bloody smears, and didn’t take his gaze off it until the boy returned a moment later. “Put these on but first,” he went to the toilet and rolled a great handful of toilet paper before wadding it up, “put this inside.” Taehyung stared at the wad of paper and if he hadn’t already cried his eyes swollen and dry he’d have burst into tears again. “Just in case.” He took the underpants and paper roll out of his hands and did as he told him too, even when he felt dirty just shoving the wad inside; like he was hiding evidence. He would wake up tomorrow and flush it away and none of the others would even
He had just slipped them on when Jimin opened the cupboard under the sink and made a soft noise
and when he turned the boy pulled out a sanitary towel that had been forgotten by a previous person
in the room. Taehyung stared at the white and pink plastic wrapper, floral prints and so very cute,
and he felt his stomach lurching.

“No,” he moaned rather than said.

“Don’t ‘no’ me,” Jimin said, “use this tomorrow. Stick it in your underwear, I’m not fucking around.
Do you wanna risk bleeding through your jeans and having everyone see it? Do you?” He shook his
head and he shook the pad. “Then use it.”

“I’m not a fucking girl Jimin.”

“No, but you need it, and right now you’re acting like a baby.” Taehyung eyed the sanitary towel
and he knew that he was telling him the truth, but the idea of using it, of peeling it free and sticking it
to his underwear, was the final insult that he would have to endure. The act itself, the pain and the
knowledge that his friend knew about it, and now the spiral of disgust and shame. “I’ll leave it here,
where I found it. Be smart and use it, OK?”

“…OK.”

“Now go to bed.” He studied him for a moment before eyeing the mess on the floor, the bloody
puddle and the stained underwear like a crime scene corpse. “I’ll clean this up, no one will know.”
Taehyung stayed in the bathroom for a moment longer because he couldn’t seem to get his legs to
work, and then he slowly went to the other room and crossed it to get to the bed. As he sat down he
felt another stab of pain and a strange warmth and he was thankful that the other boy had thought
about the toilet roll wad and saved the underwear and the sheets. It took him some effort but he
managed to lie down on his side and pull the covers up to his hips. His skin was clammy to the touch
and he felt that strange sense of dizziness overcome him again as he stared at Hoseok in the bed just
a few feet away, sleeping serenely and without a single care whilst he lay bleeding and Jimin cleaned
up the mess he had made all over the bathroom.
When Jimin opened his eyes the first thing he saw was a messy spray of dark brown hair right in front of his face. It was fanned out on the pillow and the wispy locks of hair looked softer than the cotton, sticking up at the ends in messy little kinks like the edges of eyelashes. For a few seconds he could just stare at this as his brain started to wake up and then he felt something moving, something brushing against him that felt like someone else’s fingers. Before he could even move his head to look down the fingers became a hand and then an arm, which reached over to lie lazily across his chest. Jimin was on his back with his head turned to the side and so he slowly shifted to look down. An arm lying across his chest that was lightly tanned, the backs of the hand scratched especially around the knuckles which were slightly pink or paler than the rest as the scarred skin healed over. He followed the hand up to the wrist and then the forearm, the elbow and then the upper, but before he could reach the shoulder a head got in the way. Same messy brown hair that had been on the pillow that revealed it to be none other than Taehyung.

The boy had shared beds with him mostly whilst on the road but he had never awoken to him in this position before, usually because the other boy seemed to be out of bed before he even opened his eyes. If he wasn’t sprawled out and hogging all of the space he tended to turn his back on him whilst sleeping and not take up much legroom despite his height but he slept with a pillow hugged against his chest as well as under his head just to be awkward. He never snuggled up against his back, face against his shoulder and arm over his waist, and rather just seemed to stay in his own half of the bed. Yet this morning he had woken up to his friend practically fused to his side. Arms hugging him close, legs tucked up and wrapped around his own because he could feel the weight even though he couldn’t look down to check, face burrowed against his chest.

This was because of last night.

Jimin wasn’t stupid. He knew that he had caught Taehyung in a very compromising situation last night and that he really shouldn’t have entered the bathroom. But when he had heard the door lock opening and then the sound of someone shuffling across the room he had been unable to stop himself from getting up to check. The bed had been empty beside him, an automatic sign that it had been Taehyung and not one of the other two boys sneaking back into the hostel room. He had thought about the way Seokjin had asked him about the alcohol the morning after the first day on the road and how he had wanted to know if that was all the boy had been carrying in his backpack, and that had made him want to get out of bed and go into the other room: full of curiosity that maybe, just maybe their friend had been scared of him carrying anything worst than cheap beer. Something like drugs, for example. So he had stupidly stumbled into the bathroom after him only to see a sight so absurd and shocking that for a moment he had been convinced that he was still sleeping.
Taehyung in front of the sink, jeans around his ankles and the bottom of his tee unable to cover the sight of his underwear; his blood soaked underwear.

Jimin hadn’t seen that much blood before, for he had never injured himself enough to end up in such a way. The soju bottle shard in the elbow had been nothing more than a dribble in comparison, Jungkook’s torn and swollen lip just a graze. Even his own bleeding thumb that time the two boys had sliced it with a kitchen knife seemed nothing to the sight that had been in front of him. The material had been a soft cotton white and yet last night in the bathroom it had been slick enough to have been damp to the touch, most of the seat and lower leg area near the upper thigh crimson. He had felt his pillow falling out of his hand as he had gasped in shock and then the boy had whirled around to look at him with the most cornered expression he had ever seen. Taehyung had looked like a rabbit caught in a snare and he hadn’t even been able to wonder why, done nothing more than stutter when he had slammed him against the wall and threatened to kill him. At that point he should have left and crawled back into bed but he had been unable to, honestly too scared about his friend to leave it all alone.

Taehyung had prostituted himself out just to make sure that they didn’t wake up tomorrow with nothing more than a couple of thousand won between them all, and he had been planning on keeping it a secret until he had walked right into it and fucked it all up.

He stared at the head of hair burrowed against his chest, seeing how messy it was. He reached up to lightly part it and after a few seconds he saw that deep cut on his hairline, the one from which a handful of hair had no doubt been pulled out of. It was an angry little wound on his pale scalp, resembling an open patch of skin that hadn’t scabbed over yet: raw red and pink around the edges. He had cleaned it out with a dab of antiseptic so he was certain that it wouldn’t get infected if he made sure to clean it out a few more times, and had it not been in such an awkward place he would have stuck a band-aid on it too but it was impossible. The wound was horrible to look at and that wasn’t even the worst part.

Jimin would have been convinced that the boy would have refused to let him clean the rest of the blood off him, that he would have argued and argued and then maybe hit him upside the head just like his father did when trying to get a clear message across, but he hadn’t. He had feebly tried to pull his underpants back up before giving in and letting him do it. He had been a little like a child and he had been scared that his friend might have been in shock of some sort, but he had then rapidly figured out that he was too tired and ashamed to try fighting with him and that was why he had relented. Jimin had seen him and the others naked quite a lot over the years they had been friends. A strange force of habit, stripping down to get changed or cleaned up whilst crashing at each other’s houses or hotels on trips. He wasn’t in anyway embarrassed by Taehyung’s nakedness save for his tee, but it had not been the nakedness his friend had been trying to hide, rather a different matter entirely.

Jimin didn’t know a lot about how to stop bleeding other than to apply pressure to a wound. That was basic knowledge and yet it was in no way applicable to the situation last night. He hadn’t been able to stop the blood that had occasionally trickled down his inner thigh as he had gently wiped the
smears away, hadn’t been able to do much more than press the towel against his skin as he had tried
to staunch the flow. He did know however that he shouldn’t have been bleeding so heavily unless it
meant that he had let the man from the bar really do a number on him. Yet as he had cleaned he had
thought that the results clearly showed that Taehyung had had nothing at all to do with the situation;
that rather his inability had been what had caused the damage. Jimin kept thinking about how such
injuries might require stitches and yet it was pointless to even think such a thing. Stitches required
hospitals, hospitals required cash or insurance, none of which they had to offer. Taehyung would be
really pleased with him if he went through all of that hell and he ended up dragging him to a clinic
and racking up a bill that was triple the amount he had been given. Why, Jimin would have had to hit
up a bar or two and see to it he made a little cash too.

The boy shifted on the bed with a soft noise under his breath, something that sounded like a moan.
Hearing it reminded him of the way he had sobbed last night, of how he had apologised over and
over when he had no need to, and it suddenly made him feel cold. Taehyung had been caught in one
of the most worst situations possible and yet he had told him, he had told him and shown him
everything and that meant one thing: the boy trusted him. But should he trust him when he had such
a great track record of fucking up? It’s not like I gave him much choice, he thought, I did barge in
like an idiot…

But Jimin wasn’t going to fuck up because just like the Yoongi situation he wasn’t going to tell
anyone. The young man’s burn mark on his inner elbow might have been worrying signs but the
secret that he might just be self-harming seemed rather small in regards to this one The worst that
could happen with Yoongi was that someone else noticed it first and asked him, like Taehyung
nearly had, saving him from carrying the burden alone but that wouldn’t happen with this situation.
No one was going to notice anything that might make last night come to light because neither of
them were going to say or do anything.

Jumin reached down to fiddle with his hair again and Taehyung snuffled before rolling over onto his
back. The boy opened his eyes and stared up at the ceiling before glancing over at the two sleeping
boys. Then he twisted to look up at him and he just stared right back.

“Good morning,” Taehyung said in a low voice. “Why’re you awake this early?”

“You woke me up,” Jimin retorted, “headbutting me and nearly squeezing me to death.” The boy
thought this over for a moment before shifting to lie on his stomach, wincing slightly as he did. He
folded his arms on his wrinkled sheets and balanced his chin on his forearms to look right at him.
Jumin saw a mottled bruise already forming on his right cheekbone, a deep brown tinged with yellow
that blossomed on and along the curve to his outer corner of his eye. “Are you OK?”

“Not really,” Taehyung said with a soft attempt at a shrug, shoulder blades sticking out against his
skin as he did. “You?”
“Uh, I guess.” He studied his face but the other boy moved his eyes to look at the pillows instead, the ones his hair had been fanned out on just a few minutes ago. “I mean, it was kinda stupid me asking that question. It’s pretty obvious you’re not gonna be OK after that.”

“I’ve done it before,” he replied in a whisper, “and I got over it.” He asked him if it had been like last night before he didn’t seem to want to give him a direct reply. He ran his eyes along the pillow before twisting slightly to look at the two boys again. “Yeah, it has.” Jimin wondered how he could have possibly been through something like that before, on his own with no one to help clean him up or tell him that it was all okay, and he didn’t want to even think about it. Taehyung stared at Hoseok for a moment in silence, the boy lying on his back so that just his bare upper half and the back of his head was visible, softly falling and rising as he breathed. “Isn’t that fucked up?”

“Isn’t what fucked up?”

“That I’ve crawled back to the hostel bleeding like that and patched myself up and then the next time I was desperate for cash I did it again?” There was something in his voice that sounded like venom, a bitter self-hatred.

“No, I don’t think it is,” Jimin replied quietly as he reached down to fiddle with the covers, flattening out creases in the cotton with his fingers. “I think that it’s a sign that you needed help and you had no other choice, but now you know otherwise.”

“What’d you mean?”

“Now you know you have a friend that knows and understands, that doesn’t want you to get hurt again.” Taehyung turned back to look at him and he cocked his head so that he could rest his cheek on his folded up arms, hiding the bruise from show. “’Cos I don’t want shit like that happening to you to Tae, to any of you. Shit, I don’t want it to happen to anyone at all.”

“Do you think the others would be mad at me if they knew?”

“I think they’d be upset that you went to that length and that you got hurt. I think they’d care deeply about your mental and physical state, and that they might be mad at you. But not mad like, pissed off or disgusted mad, kinda just that they feel…mad at themselves ’cos you felt that you needed to do that, you know?” The boy made a soft noise at this. “Is that why you won’t tell anyone, ’cos you think they’d get mad?”
“I was scared that you’d all kick my ass to the curb.”

“Why would we do something like that?” Jimin asked him genuine confusion but he didn’t reply. “Tae…” He went to say something to him, something comforting to take his mind off it all, but then there was a sound from across the room and Jungkook stumbled out of the bed to go into the bathroom. A minute later came the sound of the toilet flushing and then the boy staggered back into the room to climb into bed.

“I should get cleaned up,” Taehyung said quietly before shifting to sit up. He tried to not show anything but Jimin saw him wincing as he stood up and nearly limped to get into the bathroom. He sat up and watched him for a few seconds before also deciding to get cleaned up. It wasn’t that he was in a rush at all but rather that he wanted to keep an eye on him. He stepped through the open doorway and Taehyung was brushing his teeth in front of the sink, vigorously brushing with one hand and parting his hair with the other to check out the cut on his scalp. He leaned against the doorway and the movement reflected in the glass and let his friend notice he was watching him. “Help me think of an excuse for this?” He asked as he gestured at his cheekbone before splashing cold water on his face.

“I punched you in your sleep,” Jimin said without missing a beat and the other boy laughed as he patted his face dry.

“Jimin?”

“Yeah?”

“I need you to…to check something for me,” he said in a quiet voice. He didn’t need him to ask again and he reached behind to close the door over and let the other two boys know not to barge in. Taehyung just fiddled with the towel for a moment before hastily slipping his underwear down and Jimin noticed that the wad of paper was stuck to his skin. He hunkered down and grabbed hold of it to lightly peel it off. “How does it look?”

“Uh…” He stared at the mottled bruises that coated the backs of his thighs and even around his buttocks, not light brown like his blemished cheekbone but rather a livid purple and blues that mixed together. “Lots of bruising.”

“Still bleeding?”
“I uh…I don’t wanna,” Taehyung reached down and parted his own buttocks with hands that were shaking slightly and he saw dried blood he had missed last night, or that had carried on leaking out after he had cleaned him up. “Doesn’t seem to be bleeding right now. There’s dried blood around the uh…everywhere but I think it’s clotted. Is that a good thing?” The boy didn’t reply as he let go and placed his hands back on the rim of the sink. Jimin looked down at the wad of paper to see that it was soaked through and stiff with blood, but at least it had stopped him from bleeding all over the underpants and bed sheets. Then he tossed it into the toilet with a sigh. “Does it hurt?”

“It feels like someone stuck a carving knife right up my ass,” Taehyung remarked, and it was enough to make him wince.

“What about moving? Is it OK?”

“No, but I’ll deal with it.” Jimin glanced over at the bathtub for a moment to see the evidence from yesterday still in place. He had soaked the underwear and towel in freezing cold water to lift the stains and had used various washes to clean them through, but there was still faint marks on the cotton that would likely never come out. So long as he made sure to not let the others see the pair then they might just be able to keep it a secret.

“Do you wanna shower first?”

“I can’t shower, not like this I’ll fucking collapse,” Taehyung groaned.

“Then I’ll fill the tub up for you.” He hastily shoved the plug in and ran the water hot. “There should be plain soap around here somewhere, you don’t want any fragranced or alcohol filled shit irritating your skin, right?”

“Just pour some antiseptic inside my ass and it’ll all be fine.”

“I’d rather not,” Jimin retorted as he checked the medical cupboard under the sink again, being certain to leave the sanitary towel on clear display for the other boy to glare at. No soap. “Ummm, well just water alone can clean the…the injured area I guess?” Taehyung twisted the tap off and awkwardly climbed inside after tossing his tee on the floor and he dunked his head in the water before hissing and slapping his hand over the area where the cut no doubt was. He studied him for a moment and then moved to stand by the doorway. “If you need me just… call or something.” The boy confirmed that he would and he opened the door to go into the other section of the room. He was greeted to the sight of Hoseok sitting on the edge of the bed rubbing at his eyes.
“Shit…” he groaned before dropping his hands onto his lap. He looked like the headache was present and that marked at least the third day that he was aware of him having one since starting the adventure.

“You OK?” Hoseok shrugged and then muttered something under his breath that sounded like ‘peachy’. Jimin went over to sit on the bed facing him and the boy lifted his gaze from the carpet to stare at him.

“Tae?”

“In the bathroom.”

“Why is the door closed?” Jimin turned his head to eye it before reaching up to fiddle with the neckline of his tee he had slept in.

“I uh…I just closed it out of habit,” he said dumbly and his friend yawned loudly before getting to his feet. “Where are you going?”

“The bathroom,” Hoseok said as he retrieved his backpack with a visible wince of pain, lips pulling back from his teeth as he did.

“But Tae-”

“I’ve seen him naked a gazillion times I’m sure he doesn’t care,” he explained as he waved him off and Jimin bit down on his lip and wondered what the hell he was supposed to say to stop him but before he could think he was already crossing the room to go into the bathroom.

“Oh fuck…” He waited for the sound of loud voices to boom through it, for the door to fly open again and the boy to storm out and demand to know why he hadn’t woken him up last night and told him, and yet after a minute there was nothing. He heard the flushing of the toilet and then the briefest sound of water running and then his friend came back into the room before dropping his bag on the floor and folding his legs up on the bed.

“I’m bored,” Hoseok announced after a couple of seconds of silence, and Jimin realised that he
hadn’t noticed anything amiss, that he had either been too tired or that he really hadn’t caught sight of
the blood tinged water in the tub Taehyung had been sitting in.

“We’ll be back on the road again soon, you won’t be bored then.”

“No, I’ll just be tired, stiff and pissed off.”

“And hot,” Jungkook added as he rolled over to look at them both. “Don’t forget hot.”

“Thanks, you’re not so bad-looking yourself,” Hoseok remarked and the younger boy reached over
to lightly punch the back of his arm.

“Lots of walking,” Jimin said quietly. “I miss the car.”

“We all miss the car,” Jungkook agreed, but he was thinking about it for another reason entirely. He
was thinking about how the nice padded leather seats would save Taehyung from hours and hours of
limping along streets and roadsides. “Is Tae in the shower?”

“Bath,” Hoseok explained. “Otherwise one of us could have shared for quickness but I wasn’t going
to share a tub with him. With one of you two, maybe, but not Tae.”

“Why not?” Jimin asked curiously.

“Just because,” the other boy said, “I don’t need to explain my reasons.”

“Do I detect…embarrassment in your voice Jung Hoseok?” Jungkook asked with a wide smirk and
their friend’s mouth opened and closed a few times quickly as he tried to think of something to retort
with. “What’re you embarrassed about?”

“Nothing.”

“Doesn’t sound like nothing to me.”
“Shut up Kookie.”

“He’s right,” Jimin grinned, “you’re really blushing right now, why?” And Hoseok actually reached up to touch his cheeks to check and this made them both laugh.

“Am not,” he replied petulantly. “You’re just trying to make me react but I won’t.” The younger boy pointed out that he was reacting by saying that and he huffed loudly. “What am I supposed to say?”

“Why you won’t share with Tae. Why you won’t share beds with him either,” Jungkook said as he shifted to cock his elbow out and rest his cheek on the palm of his hand. “That’s what you’re supposed to say.”

“I don’t need to say anything.”

“Come on, we’re all friends here. We can talk about stuff, right Jimin?”

“…Right,” he agreed with a nod, all the while thinking about how he and Taehyung were very much carrying secrets that would never be talked about.

“You two are little assholes, you know that?” Hoseok muttered before glancing over at the closed bathroom doorway. “You really want to know the reasons, huh?” When the boy nodded the boy paused. “I think that…well I kind of know, not just think, that Tae is interested in me.”

“Interested,” Jungkook narrowed his eyes for a moment, “like a…crush?”

“Yes, like a crush.”

“OK, but why are you avoiding him?” the boy asked and Hoseok took a deep breath before sighing.

“It’s not just about the crush thing Kookie, it’s a lot of things. A lot of complicated annoying things.”
“Did he say something to you?” Jimin asked quietly. “Did he…kiss you?”

“…He has in the past, when he was a little drunk. He would play it off on his drunkenness the next day but I don’t know, I don’t think he was ever that drunk to begin with, that it was all an act.”

“Has he kissed you since we started the trip?”

“Once, when we hitched a ride on that freight train, and that’s why I don’t want to get too close right now, OK? Because I’m confused about it all.” For a moment the hotel room fell silent and none of them seemed to know what to say to break it but then the sound of water draining came from the bathroom and their friend got to his feet. “I’m going for a shower.”

The street in front of them turned into another narrow walkway, much like the one back in Seoul that they had all bounded along just a bare week or so ago: Taehyung in the lead followed by the fleet and sure-footed Jungkook, then him and lastly Yoongi, who had really only gotten up onto the narrow ledge because the other boy had taunted him about his height. Right now Jungkook was happily walking along it, occasionally reaching out to run his fingers along the diamond-shaped patterns in the chain link fence as he hummed under his breath. He had quite a pleasant voice judging from the rhythm alone and he wondered if the boy would add words to the sounds at some point. His voice might just cheer them all up, considering how dour the air felt right now.

The young men were walking in front of him, in a trio huddled together like always. Jimin thought about how they looked like a group of grandmothers sitting on a bench waiting for a bus and he made a remark on this that earned quite some laughter, but even with the sound of his friends laughing Jimin still felt somewhat despondent. It was a mixture of things but mostly it was Taehyung. Taehyung and his heavy secret that he was currently harboring. Just a few feet behind was Hoseok and despite having a headache he wasn’t lagging as much as usual and seemed a little more upbeat, head held up rather than staring at the concrete under their feet, saying something every now and again to break the silence that might fall on them. It was usually Taehyung’s job to do that but he didn’t seem in the mood today, though he kept up the witty comments as to not draw too much attention to himself. It wasn’t too obvious that there was something on his mind but Jimin couldn’t help but feel that it was glaringly so, mostly because of his own nerves and discomfort at the fact someone might notice.

He didn’t even have the opportunity to reflect on what Hoseok had said back in the hostel room this
morning, about the possible crush, because he was too preoccupied staring at the other boy and making sure that he was steady on his feet, that he didn’t collapse, and that his jeans stayed nice and clean of any blood.

He was certain that Hoseok was keeping something from him and yet he wasn’t going to jump in and involve himself in that too, he had quite a lot on his plate already between Yoongi and Taehyung, and therefore he was just going to have to watch the boy from a distance and ascertain what it was. He had a habit of always carrying his backpack into the bathroom with him when getting cleaned up and that was what stuck in his mind the most, hell he had done it just this morning right in front of his eyes.

Why?

Whilst they had all been sleeping on the freight train those nights back his two friends had been wide awake. Awake why? Because the rattling carriage had kept them both from falling asleep or something else entirely? Something to do with the secret that Hoseok seemed to have perhaps? Had they been talking in the hours they had all been resting, and if so what about? Had Taehyung initiated the conversation first and then eased into it before kissing him? He had no clue but he could imagine that it was the case; the boy waking up to see Hoseok already awake and taking the chance whilst it had been there. It was almost romantic in a weird way, a kiss shared on a freight train heading to nowhere on a grand adventure that was currently going so very wrong. It was almost like a novel, or even a movie, and Jimin thought it was sweet. But did Hoseok find it sweet? Or did he very much not like the other boy’s advances?

Well, he thought as he dropped his eyes to his boots for a moment, if he didn’t then he wouldn’t have gotten away with multiple kisses, would’ve he?

“God, my head hurts,” Hoseok complained, breaking the silence once more.

“Tell me about it…” Jimin muttered under his breath.

“Need any water?” Seokjin asked as he turned and shook a bottle at him, just over halfway full. The boy moaned enthusiastically before accepting it to take a deep swig. He thought that the contents looked rather warm but it was better than nothing and Hoseok didn’t seem to mind at all. “Tae, you OK?”

“Me? Never better,” Taehyung retorted as he shrugged his backpack up into his shoulders with a soft grunt, “I'm A-OK.”
“Jimin?”

“Hmm?” He looked up from his boots to see the young man looking at him as the boy handed him the bottle back and he went completely blank. “Uh, sorry what?”

“Are you OK?”

“Yeah, yeah,” he replied with a vigorous nod, upbeat tone terribly fake to his own ears. “I’m good, it’s just so fucking hot, right?”

“Goddamn,” Yoongi agreed without looking over his shoulder, “you said it.”

“Still no sign of that tan,” Namjoon remarked as he turned to look at their friend’s almost sickly pale countenance. “But we’ve got a few hours left on the road for it to develop.”

“I’m never gonna tan,” he said with a shrug, “I’m doomed to look like a corpse my entire life, which is fitting ’cos I feel like one most of the time.”

“Put you in some black clothes,” Jungkook called as he skipped along the ledge beside the walkway, “and smear on eyeliner and you could pass for a emo kid.”

“That’s more your style Kookie, I like my rock like I like my punk: dead.”

“Hey, punk’s not dead you fucker!” Taehyung shouted and this caused slight laughter.

“I wish it was…” Yoongi mumbled.

Jimin shifted his eyes from the back of his head to see that Seokjin was walking on a slight angle, so that he could look over his shoulder at him and the other boy. After a moment he held eye contact with him so he raised his eyebrows in a ‘what?’ gesture but their eldest friend just shook his head and went back to looking straight ahead, twisting the bottle cap back on securely. Did he sense something was up? He couldn’t think of anyone worse to know something was wrong because he
knew that his friend would find out no matter what. Seokjin had a wonderful habit of appearing out of nowhere and worming his way into a conversation only to spring questions out and trap people. It had happened the first time Taehyung had been arrested for a petty offence and he hadn’t told them, it had happened when Jungkook had failed an English exam just a year ago, and it could totally happen to him. Jimin wouldn’t be able to avoid the trap, he knew that he would fall right into it. It wasn’t like Namjoon and his brotherly way of trying to make himself seem trustworthy enough to talk to, it wasn’t like Yoongi and his bluntness that he had perfected into a near art form, no Seokjin had a fantastic habit of seeing something on a person’s face and planning a way to drag it up with as little effort as possible. Always privately of course, and always with a warm smile on his face to disarm even quicker.

Jimin was going to have to avoid being left alone with him just in case. He was thankful that he didn’t share hostel rooms with him or he would be completely fucked.

After several more minutes of walking he started to notice that Taehyung had slowed down and he matched his pace to stay level with him. The others widened a gap to a considerable few feet and Jungkook was even further ahead on the ledge, voice echoing along the narrow walkway so that he could hear he was finally singing. The boy didn’t say a word as he slowed down, no complaints or muttered noises, rather he just seemed to start to lose his energy to the point in which he was no longer walking, more trudging. So Jimin just copied him and edged closer and closer to him until he could speak in a low voice and not alert the others.

“Tae? Hey Tae?”

“…Yeah?”

“You don’t look too good right now.”

“Fuck you Park Jimin I look hot as... as the sun.” The boy dropped his head so that his hair hung over his eyes and he saw that it was clumped together with sweat. He could see the way his lips twisted in a rictus of pain before he forced them back up again.

“You shouldn't be walking.” His friend told him that he had no choice in a sarcastic tone that sounded close to a whine. “I know you don’t but-” Taehyung stopped walking and actually hunched forward to place his palms on his upper thighs. He was breathing rather heavily and Jimin didn’t like how wobbly his legs looked. He seemed seconds from keeling over and he knew that he wasn’t going to make it to the end of this walkway, never mind the next city. Before he could even think of what he was doing he moved to stand in front of him, getting down and gesturing at his back.
“Get on.”

“Your backpack,” Taehyung mumbled and Jimin shrugged it onto a single shoulder instead so that he would be able to climb on. “Dumbass, I’m not doing that OK so just-”

“Stop calling me dumbass and get on, you want everyone coming over to ask what’s wrong?” The others were still walking on ahead like they hadn’t realised they had stopped and they wouldn’t have long before one of them turned to look back and saw them standing there: his friend practically dead on his feet and refusing to get on his back.

“I’m too heavy, I’ve got my bag too and-”

“Tae, just trust me alright I’m not gonna drop you. You trusted me this far, why not a little further?” His words seemed to get through to the boy because a moment later Taehyung sighed heavily and then moved to get onto his back. He wrapped his arms around his neck tightly and Jimin slipped his hands under his thighs to make stirrups. He hadn’t lied, with both of their backpacks and his body it was a considerable weight to carry but he knew that he could do it. He had to do it because he couldn’t leave the boy staggering for miles and miles until he collapsed.

“Shit, I just love causing trouble, huh?” Taehyung asked, breath against his ear as he got upright again and started walking.

“We cause enough together,” he replied, “and like you always say: it’s not fun if it’s legal.”

“I’m thinking of retracting that statement,” he said before laughing. “Cos it’s not the smartest motto.”

“Since when have you been smart?” Jimin asked and even though he was carrying him Taehyung still pulled one arm free to ruffle his hair roughly. “Does everything feel…OK? You know, no bleeding?”

“I dunno, everything hurts I can’t tell.”

“Shit.”
“Yeah, took the words right outta my mouth Dumbass.”

Hoseok shifted in front of them to look back and when he caught sight of him piggybacking him he stopped and waited for them to catch up before asking Jimin if he needed help with his bag. He shrugged it off and the other boy accepted it before stepping onto the street once more and a moment later they were also free of the walkway. Large highway running for miles on end, billboards and signs here and there along the lengths and great telephone poles that towered like trees covered in thick cables and throngs of birds sitting in the middle so that they sagged from their weight. Jimin didn’t walk at a brisk pace to catch up to the gang but instead carried on the way they had been walking a few minutes ago, not exactly a leisurely stroll but close enough. Because of this Hoseok once again ended up widening the gap between them, own backpack swinging from one hand and his backpack shrugged up into his shoulders securely.

“Tae?” The boy made a noise to let him know he was listening. “Is Hoseok OK?” At this question Taehyung went silent and he almost felt him stiffening on his back in a somewhat defensive way. Jimin could only see the side of his face if he looked at him, the curve of his jaw and messy fall of dark hair, and so he just kept his eyes straight ahead instead. Then he asked him what he meant. “You know, with his headaches and all that?”

“Why would I know about that?”

“Cos you and Hoseok are pretty tight so I just assumed that you might.” He thought about what their friend had said in the hostel room this morning and decided he would venture for that in a moment, this was more important. “Best friends and all that. ‘Cos he’s really quiet a lot of the time and he used to be as loud and annoying as you and-”

“Why don’t you ask him?”

“Tae…”

“He might tell you if you ask.” Jimin told him that he was sounding like he had something to hide and he shifted on his back. “What’d I have to hide?”

“What happened on the freight train,” he said without missing a beat, “sounds like something that you might wanna hide.” Taehyung didn’t reply and he could almost hear his mind surging with thoughts as he tried to think of something to say. “I’m just saying, I wanna know if he’s alright. You don’t need to tell me anything else I just-”
“He has medication, that’s why he has the headaches.” He asked him for what and he didn’t say another word. Jimin sighed and then ran his eyes over the gang in front of them. All still walking, Yoongi and Namjoon seemingly talking to each other guessing from their gestures.

“Do you wanna talk about the freight train?” he asked in a low voice.

“Talk about what exactly?”

“About Hoseok, and about how you’re crushing on him.” More silence from the other boy, chin digging into the space between his neck and shoulder as he carried him. “If you are you should just tell him, you know? Be open about it, get it out there and-”

“Tell me about you and Yoongi,” Taehyung interrupted suddenly and for a moment he was caught off guard by the question and he couldn’t even process it.

“…Wait, what?”

“Why don’t you get it out in the open?”

“Get what out in the open?”

“One of you is crushing on the other, I’m not sure which but it’s one of you,” the boy said. “So tell me, which one is it?”

“I dunno what you’re talking about?” Jimin said, feeling his cheeks starting to heat up suddenly. Why were they doing that? He wasn’t embarrassed by the question and yet he could feel them burning and if Taehyung shifted and brushed his face against his he would feel it too. “Way to deflect my question though…”

“C’mon, I’m not the only one who sees it–” he interrupted to ask him what he meant, “that sees the flirting. It’s light but it’s there, so why are you refusing to talk about it when you’re telling me I should be open?” Jimin turned his head to look at him and Taehyung looked back, obstinate expression on his face. “You do know what flirting is, right Dumbass?”
“Very funny Tae…”

“Is that all it’s been? Flirting? Or has something else happened?”

“I’m not the one kissing boys whilst pretending to be drunk and making out on freight trains,” Jimin retorted and for a moment Taehyung didn’t reply. Then he felt the unmistakable sensation of him starting to laugh, shaking on his back as he carried him. He smirked to himself and added. “That’s you Tae.”

“Seriously, nothing between you two? Nothing at all?”

“I don’t think so…?”

“Meaning?”

“I dunno,” he would have shrugged had the boy not been weighing him down, “I didn’t even know that we were flirting until three seconds ago.” Taehyung snorted laughter down his ear. “What did you mean about not being the only one to notice? Have you guys been…talking about us?”

“Not like that I mean, Yoongi clearly likes you a lot Dumbass. He’s always asking about you, always making sure me and Kookie aren’t pushing you around too much and shit like that. You remember how he called out Kookie at the trainyard, right; just ‘cos you cut yourself a little? Well, it’s like that all of the time and I don’t think you even notice it. It’s just a normal thing for you. But we all notice it and I wonder if he does too or if it’s normal for him too…”

“Showing added interest in a friend doesn’t mean that a person has a crush,” Jimin remarked before adding, “and what’re you talking about? Yoongi’s totally more tight with Seokjin and Namjoon.”

“…See what I mean? You really don’t notice it.” He could do no more than furrow his brow in confusion at this statement. After a minute or two of silent walking, lagging behind by the same distance as before Taehyung sighed and finally broke it. “Did you know about it or did he tell you?”

“Hoseok told me, well, me and Kookie but only after we harassed him. I had a little idea I mean, you’re always messing around with him and playing it off as a joke but you say some pretty…lewd things to him and sometimes the flirting doesn’t seem that pretend on your half, you know? It’s kinda like you’re acting like it’s fake to gauge a reaction off him and everyone before risking something
real.” The boy made a soft noise as he thought this over. “So I’m not surprised to hear about the kisses.”

“I’m that predictable, huh?”

“I thought it was sweet.” Taehyung asked him what he meant and Jimin let out an embarrassed laugh. “Well, I thought that the freight train kiss was kinda sweet.” His friend didn’t say anything at this and after a considerable silence it seemed he was just about to break it when Yoongi turned around and cupped his hands around his mouth like a makeshift megaphone.

“Jimin, Tae, hurry your asses up!”

When they ended up at the next hostel the sky hadn’t even started to change yet, still a pastel blue that had a few clouds here and there and the sun on the horizon rather than setting. When he discovered the time on the small clock in their room he saw that it was just 6pm and that was why. There would be another hour or two of sunlight left before the first hints of orange started to appear. He wasn’t entirely certain if the reason why they ended up with rooms that early was because of Taehyung’s current state but he was willing to bet that it was. He had piggybacked him for several hours before Namjoon had offered to take over and though the boy had wanted to argue against it he had just resigned himself to his fate; playing a strange game of pass the human parcel. Jimin had stayed close though just to be sure that the young man didn’t ask too many questions, but the ones he did ask were nothing unusual or suspicious at all. He asked if he had stomach pains from eating instant food that wasn’t cooked right, if his feet were hurting from walking and if he had blisters, if he pulled a muscle or three messing around in the room trying to do a stupid gymnastic move to make them all laugh.

Nothing even close to the truth. They were safe for now at least.

Upon getting inside the room the first thing Taehyung did was stagger over to the bed closest to the door and throw himself on it. He didn’t even bother taking off his shoes and rather just lay still as if dead. After a moment Hoseok removed them for him and then the boy had slipped his legs up onto the covers with a groan. Whether it be in satisfaction or pain he had no way of telling. Jungkook had sat down for a grand total of three seconds before announcing that he was going on a walk and then leaving without another word. With just the three of them in the room Jimin expected the other boy to start asking questions but he didn’t, he just stayed seated on the edge of the bed beside him and
kept silent.

So Jimin had allowed himself to slip into the other room for a few minutes just to check what was going on. They hadn’t eaten all day except for leftovers from breakfast that had been cold and unappetising, and he wanted to check if anyone was needed to go to the store, perhaps to buy a few things. He would be more than happy to volunteer and he had just pushed the door open and when he realised he had sprung a trap of some sort. The three young men were all sitting around the room, Namjoon on the settee and Seokjin perched on one of the low armrests, Yoongi balanced on the window with a cigarette in his fingers like always. He went to open his mouth but was talked over instantly.

“What the fuck happened?”

“I, uh, I dunno what you’re talking about?” Jimin said as he looked at Yoongi, more than aware he was repeating himself from earlier and feeling a blush annoyingly start to appear on his cheeks, now of all moments.

“What happened to Tae last night? He was fine when we stopped at the hostel last night and when we wake up he’s a mumbling, staggering mess, what the fuck happened?” He tapped the end of the stick hard and ash fell onto the brown carpet. “Did he go out drinking and get into a fight?”

“Not enough bruises,” Namjoon remarked. “Tae’s good but he’d get at least more than one, right? So let’s rule out fighting.”

“Uh, guys I really dunno I woke up this morning and he wasn’t feeling well and—”

“You’re a terrible liar Jimin,” Yoongi said in a low voice, “which is good ‘cos it really speeds everything up.”

“I understand that you might not know everything,” Seokjin held his hands up in a supplicating manner. “But you, or one of the others, must know something yes? So we thought we would ask you seen as you were helping him out most of the day.”

“I just did that ‘cos he wasn’t well, I didn’t ask him about anything…”

“Then what were you talking about?” Jimin stared at his eldest friend for a moment and he felt his
mind so terribly blank. He had not expected this. He had entered the room hoping to go out and get food and avoid this happening and yet now he was ensnared in a trap and he couldn’t get out of it. “You were both talking amongst each other all morning. Didn’t he tell you anything then? Didn’t you ask what was wrong with him?”

“No, I asked about something else.”

“Like what?” Yoongi asked sharply.

“Like…Hoseok,” Jimin said in a quiet voice, barely above a whisper. “I asked him if he was crushing on Hoseok and that was it, that was the conversation.” The hostel room went deathly silent for a minute and he felt like he had made a mistake by blurt this out, yet at the same time he seemed to have caught them off guard and avoided the other pressing question. “I’m gonna go out for a little while. Jungkook went for a walk a few minutes ago, I’m gonna go get some food.” And with that he turned around and hastily twisted the handle to step outside. He heard one of them shifting and the Namjoon telling him to leave it and judging from the weary sigh he heard before closing the door again it was Yoongi. Of course it was, why Taehyung had told him this morning that his friend showed a great deal of interest in him…

He went back into the room to collect his boots and was in the process of knotting them up when Hoseok asked him what he was doing, so explained about getting some food. The boy thought this over before asking if he could tag along and Jimin heard the sound of Taehyung lightly snoring from the bed. His friend wanted to go out for a while and let him rest and so he said that he could, personally relieved of the company to stop him wandering too far and getting lost. Several minutes later they were leaving the hostel room and crossing the lot to get to the main road. No sign of Jungkook for the boy had long vanished, and so they walked in silence for quite some time. Jimin waited for him to unload questions on him too and yet Hoseok didn’t say a word and instead stared at his boots. Was he thinking of something? Or did he not want to say anything?

“You never explained the crush thing this morning,” he said just to try and liven up the still air between them, “you know?”

“I know, because I told you I don’t know and I’m confused so I can’t explain it.” Hoseok allowed his eyes to lift for a whole second to look at him before dropping them again. “Why are you asking about it now?”

“To make conversation…”

“You told Tae, didn’t you? This morning when you were piggybacking him you told him that I said
all of that.”

“…We got onto the topic,” Jimin explained, “and I did bring it up, yeah. Are you pissed with me?” But the boy just shook his head and said he wasn’t. “I think he really does have a crush on you. He tried to change topics on me but he reacted enough to make it pretty obvious. Are you still confused about it now?” Hoseok let out a soft laugh at this remark. “Hey, I know this sounds a little weird but…Tae said something to me and I wanna check with you.”

“Shoot,” his friend said as he waved his hand.

“Tae said that me and Yoongi…that we flirt with each other but I dunno what he means by that.”

“Hmm,” Hoseok thought about this and he paused, eyeing up a small convenience store just a few feet away as he did. He waited to see what he would say anxiously and after a minute he turned his head to look at him before grinning. “Now that you mention it…”

“What? What do you mean?” But the other boy didn’t reply and instead stepped inside, making him chase after him in confusion. Jimin pestered him in the hopes of getting an answer but Hoseok just ignored him with that same wide smirk on his face, grabbing a red basket from by the door and proceeding to walk down one of the aisles. They were narrow and cramped, shelves packed with so much food and drinks so that it was a miracle the wood managed to hold the weight and not collapse.

What was going on? Why were they both joking about something like this? He didn’t have a clue but it was enough to make him puff his cheeks out in annoyance, the sight making his friend snort laughter obnoxiously. He really didn’t know where they had both gotten the idea from and he was a little worried that the others might think it as well. Hell, was there a chance that Yoongi looked at him and thought that he was ‘flirting’ and he just politely put up with it to save him embarrassment? But Jimin couldn’t think of ever flirting with him and just trying to figure out what he might have done to give off that impression was another to make his head feel like spinning. That would mean going through years and years of interactions and he didn’t have the time nor memory for that.

Several minutes later they were standing outside the store, Hoseok slipping the plastic bag inside his backpack to save having to carry it. Jimin listened to him zipping the bag back up and finally came to the conclusion that he had just acted that way for a joke, to get back at him for telling Taehyung about the crush thing. It made perfect sense and he was relieved at the thought.

“I’ll have to be careful telling you shit from now on,” the boy said as he started walking down the street. “I didn’t know you were a gossip Jimin.”
“I’m not.”

“No, you’re just a flirt instead, right?”

“Stop saying that!” Jimin retorted, shrugging his backpack up onto his shoulders roughly. “Or I really will start gossiping.”

“It’s cute, you’re cute,” Hoseok continued, “copying him to try and look cool.” He said he didn’t copy him at all and the boy rolled his eyes at this. “You hold your cigarettes the exact same way, I’ve never seen anyone hold a cigarette like that before except Yoongi and you. You always agree with everything he says no matter what, you share his food and clothing all of the time. It’s like you really look up to him.”

“I do,” he explained, “I look up to him a lot.”

“How come?”

“’Cos he’s cool,” Jimin said as he glanced at the road in front of him, “and he doesn’t take shit from nobody. Not like me, I always take shit and get pushed around. Yoongi’s not tall or strong-looking, but he never backs down and stands up for other people when he doesn’t have to. I wanna be like that. I don’t wanna get pushed around and not be able to help people ‘cos I look small and weak, you know?” Hoseok made a soft noise in agreement but didn’t say anything and he just stared at the passing traffic. “If I was like Yoongi my dad wouldn’t treat me like shit. If I was like Yoongi Tae wouldn’t have started calling me Dumbass and pushing me around so much that even Kookie does it now too. If I were like Yoongi I’d—”

There was a thumping sound from behind him and for a few seconds Jimin just carried on walking, jolted out of his thoughts by the noise and mind going completely blank as a result. Then he stopped and furrowed his brow before twisting his head to look over his shoulder, and for a moment he could do nothing more than stare dumbly at the sight a few feet behind him. Then he realised what he was looking at and he felt his breath leave his lungs in a little surprised wheeze.

Hoseok was lying on the sidewalk in a heap, last and arms spread out slightly like a weak starfish, head turned so that his cheek was on the dusty paving flags. His hair was dancing from the light breeze and he could see his eyes were closed: unconscious.
The boy had just passed out on him and he couldn’t even seem to blink because he felt frozen in place. It was the distant blare of a truck horn that made him jump and then he darted over to his friend, dropping to his knees even when he felt the rough concrete skinning his knees through his jeans.

“Hey, hey Hoseok. Are you OK?” he asked stupidly as he grabbed his shoulder and shook him. “Hoseok? Shit…shit, oh shit, not good, not good.” Jimin glanced up at the street for a few panicked seconds, seeing no one in sight. That was good at least, for it meant no one would be calling an ambulance. “Hoseok, buddy?” His friend let out a sound that was trapped between a sigh and a groan and his eyelids flickered for a second before closing again. He had to get him back to the hostel right now, so Jimin struggled but managed to get his unconscious friend onto his back. It wasn’t like carrying Taehyung earlier, the boy was limp and unresponsive and that meant that he had to lean forward awkwardly to keep him on his back because he couldn’t wrap his arms around his neck to stay on securely. The building was just a block or two down and he knew that he could make it there so he just grabbed onto his thighs tightly and started running along the street.

His friend jostled from the movement but didn’t fall off, which he counted as a blessing, and he also didn’t come around in the scant few minutes it took from him to get back to the hostel; no more groaning, no words or movement, he was well and truly unconscious. When Jimin got to the lot he cut across it as fast as he could and went right to their friends’ room. He didn’t knock or even grab the handle but rather threw himself against the door and luckily for him it opened.

“What the-”

“Shit, oh shit Namjoon.” The young man was sitting cross-legged on the settee and at the sight of them bursting into the room his eyes nearly popped out of his skull in shock. “I dunno what happened but he just collapsed and I-I-I-” Jimin heard himself stuttering and forced himself to stop talking, mind racing with so many thoughts that his words were getting tangled up. There was a loud clattering noise from the bathroom and then Yoongi more or less dived into the room. “He was fine and then he was just…on the fucking ground and I-”

“Go get Jin,” the other man said and Namjoon got to his feet before hastily crossing the room to leave. “Get him on the bed.” So Jimin shifted and slowly lowered himself down until Hoseok was off his back and on the bed instead. Yoongi came over and turned his head to the side before pulling one of his lids up with his thumb. Pupil rolled up slightly but a hint of brown still visible. His friend leaned over his face and after a few seconds sighed heavily. “Breathing is even but a little labored. What the fuck happened?”

“I dunno,” Jimin replied, wondering his many times today he would hear that question, “I was out with him getting some snacks and he was fine, joking around and-” Yoongi moved away from him and he felt his arm brushing against his, making him pause for a second, “and he seemed fine, like no headache, no nothing. We had just left the store and he collapsed.” Before he could ask any more
pointless questions the two other men appeared in the open doorway.

“Shit,” Seokjin cursed under his breath, “is he breathing?”

“Yeah, yeah, he's breathing,” Yoongi confirmed with a nod. “But he’s out cold.”

“Another migraine?” Namjoon asked but Jimin shook his head and said that the one from earlier had went away hours ago.

“You know what I think? I think it’s the pills,” Yoongi said as he looked back at him.

“What pills? What’re you talking about?” Jimin stared at him blankly before looking at the two other men. “What pills?”

“Hoseok was taking…medication,” Seokjin explained.

“I know, I know that he had meds but why would they make him collapse?”

“Well, he might have taken one too many,” he continued, “because they can be a little addictive and-”

“Wait, he’s coming around!” Yoongi held a hand up to silence them and they all stared at the boy on the bed for a moment before he scrunched his eyes up tightly with a grimace. “Hoseok?”

“Nngh.”

“Oh god,” Namjoon sighed in relief, closing his own eyes, “I thought we were gonna need to call an ambulance-”

Jimin got to his feet and raced out of the room without a word, not even stopping to look back and see if his friend opened his eyes. Instead he went into the other room and stormed across it to get to the boy’s backpack. Taehyung shifted at the sound of him dumping it on the bed and lifted his head to stare at him with sleep-heavy eyes and he just opened it and rummaged through the compartment
before finding what he was looking for.

Jimin pulled the bottles of pills free and held them up to look at them. Little brown bottle with white coated tablets inside, matching cap and label stuck across the curve of the bottle. He turned it so he could read it and saw the words ‘Xanax’ and ‘one a day’. He wasn’t stupid, he knew exactly what Xanax was prescribed for because he had seen the bottle in the medical cabinet of the family bathroom for as long as he could remember, his own mother’s name printed on the label. She had liked to call them “mommy’s happy pills” when he had been a child and now rather just muttered about how much she needed them in a desperate and anxious tone.

Before he could stop himself or even register what he was doing he was twisting the cap off hard and going into the bathroom. He lifted his hand up and then bent his wrist so that all of the pills tumbled out and into the toilet bowl, the water causing them to start dissolving in a hissing foam almost instantly. Then he dropped the bottle and cap in and reached down to flush it. The toilet made a loud gurgling noise and the foamy water lapped at the porcelain sides before becoming a whirlpool and sucking it all away, bottle and all.

When he went back onto the bedroom area he saw that Taehyung was already asleep again and that no one had caught him in the act, so he zipped the bag up again once more and placed it back on the floor before going into their friends’ room. When he stepped inside he saw Hoseok was sitting upright, groggy and distant but responding to questions. He hovered in the open doorway and then he felt Yoongi’s eyes on him from a few feet away. He held his gaze and waited to see if he would say anything but after a moment he turned back to looking at the other boy without a single word. Jimin let out his pent-up breath in a sigh and thought that he might just have gotten away with it.

What he did was wrong and yet right now all he was thinking was that he had gotten rid of the pills and that meant that he wouldn’t overdose on them again; accidentally or on purpose.
Namjoon pushed the room door open and when he stepped inside he saw that Yoongi was nowhere in sight. Presumably he had went into the other room shortly after Jimin had brought Hoseok back, and it seemed that he was counting himself out on this one. He couldn’t blame him but that left the situation in his and Seokjin’s hands and he was just hoping that they would be able to do something, that they wouldn’t be awkward and bumbling and just make everything worse. They really needed to talk, needed to get the boy to open up to them, and that meant that they had to play this right. The plastic store bag in his hand wasn’t heavy at all, just containing a bottle of water and a small bag of candy. He had grabbed them on instinct, the fruit flavoured chews, because he thought that Hoseok’s blood sugars might be low, a reason for his collapse or maybe just partly the reason. If the boy didn’t want them he could always give them to the other kids but the sugar would at least help him feel a little less woozy.

He closed the door behind him without looking, hearing it click loudly as he let go of the handle and looked over the room. Hoseok was on one of the beds with Seokjin, just like they had both been when he had left a few minutes ago, except he was now sitting up rather than lying down. His legs were stretched out in front of him, under the wrinkled covers, and he was hunched forward slightly, one hand on his lap and the other up so that he could rub at his eyes, his forehead, and temples in turn. His hair was a messy tangle and he wasn’t even trying to flatten it, making it even more matted with his fingers. At the end, seated so that his legs were over the side, was Seokjin. His friend looked tired but he knew that the expression would change in a moment, back to a soft and comforting smile to make the boy feel at ease.

“Hey,” Namjoon said as he stood by the door. “Everything OK?”

“Yes yes,” Seokjin replied, that same expected smile appearing on his lips as he nodded. At his voice Hoseok opened his eyes and glanced over at him, slowly lowering his arm and placing his hand on top of the other. “Yoongi went to stay with the kids, to not crowd the room too much.”

“Not kids,” the boy said with a lazy smile. “Remember?” He wasn’t speaking in a slurred voice but he was talking slowly, as if he was still a little foggy. But the sight of a smile on his face, even if it wasn’t the most brightest, was a damn sight better than a pained grimace.

“And you remember what I said, right?” Seokjin retorted as he turned his head to look at him.
“Yes, I do.” Hoseok nodded before stopping himself with a groan, the movement enough to make a stab of pain flare through his head most likely. “But I still disagree…” Namjoon crossed the room to get to the bed and he lifted the bag up to slip the bottle free, handing it over to the boy. Hoseok accepted it and tried to unscrew the cap but after a few seconds he couldn’t seem to do so, his fingers not able to grip it properly. Seokjin held a hand out to offer the help and he passed it to him, the eldest managing to get it off with a simple twist of his wrist. “Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it,” he said softly as Hoseok accepted the bottle back and took a sip of water. “How is your head?”

“How’s Jimin?” the boy asked suddenly. Though it seemed like he might just be changing subjects to avoid talking about himself Namjoon could see that he genuinely wanted to know. His expression looked both concerned and also like he felt bad for what had happened, a kind of guiltiness because he had collapsed on the boy and scared him that way. “Is he OK?”

“I think so,” Namjoon said after a moment of thought.

“He was a little shook up of course,” Seokjin added. “But that’s to be expected. As soon as he saw that you were OK he calmed down.”

“I feel really bad,” Hoseok said quietly. “For scaring him like that. I shouldn’t have left the hostel room, it was stupid for me to do so.” He eyed the bottle of water and went silent for a few seconds. “I felt a little…uncomfortable, so I thought some fresh air would help but it didn’t. Instead I just collapsed and scared him.”

“You didn’t mean to faint,” Namjoon said as he sat down on the floor beside the bed, legs folded up in front of him so that he could place his arms on top. “Don’t feel bad about it, you couldn’t help it.” Hoseok made a soft noise under his breath and then took another sip of water. “Seriously, you’ll make yourself feel worse if you do. There’s no need to feel bad, we’re not mad at you, we’re not upset with you. Don’t stress yourself out thinking that way.” He studied the boy’s face and let this hang in the air before asking him about his head again, seen as he hadn’t answered the question earlier.

“Hurts.”

“Jimin said that your headache went away earlier,” Seokjin said, “and that you seemed fine for the rest of the day. Did it come back again? Do you think that’s why you collapsed? Another migraine?”
“…Kind of,” Hoseok said as he played with the plastic wrapper around the bottle, pulling on it between his thumb and forefinger as if he wanted to tear it free.

“Meaning?”

But the boy didn’t say anything in response to the question and the hostel room fell silent. Namjoon moved so that he could sit on the side of the bed and then he reached over to place his hands on either side of his head. Hoseok jumped slightly from his touch but when he figured out what he was doing he slowly lowered his shoulders. So he started massaging the sides of his head gently, around his temples and along his brow.

“I…” Hoseok paused and took a deep breath before letting it out in a sigh. “Do you promise to not get pissed off with me? If I tell you?”

“Tell us what?” Namjoon asked curiously, shifting so that he could look at the side of his face.

“About…the medication, about why I collapsed.”

“We won’t get mad at you,” Seokjin said and the boy nibbled on his lower lip for a second as he studied the bottle once more, avoiding their eyes. “Honestly Hoseok, we won’t. We just want to make sure that you’re OK, that’s all.”

“It’s the pills, that’s why I collapsed. I have…I have Xanax,” Hoseok said the word in a low voice, barely above a whisper, “and they make my head hurt. Like really bad. But I have to take the pills…or at least I was supposed to. I tried giving them up after a week because they made every day unbearable. That’s why I wouldn’t go out with you guys, because it hurt too much to go out in the sun, to walk around. But I couldn’t give them up. I mean I tried, I really tried. I didn’t even tell my parents that I stopped taking them that week. But then I caved and started popping them again.”

“Why couldn’t you give them up?” Namjoon asked even though he knew the answer, doing so because it might help him open up and talk to them both.

“Taking them gave me headaches but giving them up made me feel even worse. I felt nauseous and sleepy, I couldn’t eat or do anything because I felt so shit. But if I took one of them it would make me feel better, even if I risked getting a headache as a result. I don’t get them all of the time just…a lot of the time.”
“How many have you taken today?” Seokjin asked quietly.

“Three,” Hoseok said after a moment.

“How many are you supposed to take a day?”

“…One.”

Namjoon studied the back of his head silently but he didn’t stop massaging his temples. He thought that he should say something to him and yet he couldn’t think of what to say to break the silence. Though he had expected something to do with the pills he had thought that maybe he had collapsed as a result of a migraine, a really bad one. He had not really thought that it would be something like that, something like him taking too many pills. Why, it was practically an overdose but he knew that he hadn’t taken them for that purpose. No, he had taken that many because he was addicted to them clearly. They had discussed the possibility of it all of those days back and yet he had hoped that it wouldn’t be the case but here the boy was, admitting to taking three times the dosage amount and that meant one thing only.

“It’s stupid I know,” Hoseok said to dispel the awkward air, “I know I shouldn’t have taken them but I couldn’t help myself. At first it was just one and that was it but…but then I started off on this adventure and I needed more. It was the stress, it made me nervous and the pills make me calm most of the time. So it was two…then three. You want to know something funny?” He lifted his head slightly to look at their friend. “If I hadn’t collapsed I probably would’ve taken another tonight. Isn’t that hilarious?” He let out a soft laugh that was flat and devoid of amusement.

“That’s why you took them?” Namjoon asked. “Cos they made you feel better and…nothing else?”

“Yes,” he replied instantly, “that’s all. I didn’t try and-and-and overdose or anything like that. You didn’t think that I did it on purpose, do you?”

“No, not at all.”

“Because I really didn’t mean to. I feel…well I feel better than I did before this adventure, you know? Before it I felt alienated and…and I did feel like waking up every day was too much effort, but I don’t feel that bad right now. I’m not happy everyday of course, and I know that I don’t really show it but I do feel better when I’m with you all. Even if we get into stupid shit and it all goes bad you guys always fix it and…” he paused for a moment before quietly adding, “I felt like you might
just be able to fix me too.”

“You don’t need fixing,” Seokjin said as he placed his hand on top of his. “So don’t think things like that, OK?”

“It feels like I do, sometimes I feel so broken,” Hoseok said in a quiet voice.

“Everyone has problems,” Namjoon explained, “but that doesn’t make us broken, it makes us human. I’ve got problems, so does Jin, and Yoongi and Jimin and Kookie and Tae. We’ve all got something we want to hide, that we feel makes us broken or ugly, but that’s a part of life.”

“Tae knows about it, he knows about the pills and the…condition.”

“And what did he say, huh?”

“That I should talk about it, that it’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

“Kid spoke something other than shit for once.” At this jibe Hoseok snorted laughter and Seokjin offered him an amused smile so Namjoon continued. “But he’s right, you’ve got nothing to be ashamed of. You know you can tell us.”

“I know, but it’s such a burden.”

“If we couldn’t handle each other’s burdens we wouldn’t be friends,” their eldest friend said. “Because friends are supposed to support each other through everything, no matter what.”

The boy seemed to think this over and Namjoon stopped massaging his sore head to place his hands on his shoulders instead. He could feel the curve of bone under his thin tee and he realised just how thin he was, how very fragile just like Yoongi. Below the very ends of his jet black hair he could see a bump that signaled the beginning of his spine and the rest of his back likely looked that way too, little knobs visible and able to be felt through his skin like Braille on paper. He was getting too thin and it was really no surprise considering what he was currently going through.

“I will talk about it,” Hoseok said after a moment of silent contemplation. “But not right now…is that
OK?” He shifted so that he could look between them both, twisting his head to look over his shoulder to hold his eyes. “I need to think about it a little more, but you can tell the others about my medication if you want.”

“It’s fine,” Namjoon said with a nod. “Take your time and talk when you’re ready.”

It didn’t take long for the boy to fall asleep and he knew that it was because he was exhausted, that the day and the events had really drained him of whatever energy he had had left. He didn’t even get washed up or undressed but rather fell asleep curled up in the bed closest to the door, covers up high enough to hide his lower face, hair on the pillow messily. Namjoon didn’t even care that that meant he was sharing with the other man because all he cared about was that Hoseok felt comfortable and safe. Seokjin had given him some aspirin to combat the headache and he had reluctantly swallowed them. He wondered if he was thinking about his own pills as he did or whether he was a little conscious of the fact he was taking more after admitting that he had an addiction to his medication. Xanax. He hated it when Yoongi was right.

“Joonie?”

“Hmm?” Namjoon dragged his eyes away from Hoseok to glance at his other friend and that was when he realised that he was still sitting up. Seokjin was lying on his side so he settled down on his back and turned his head to maintain eye contact.

“When we tell the kids about all of this…about the collapse and the medication, should we…well should we maybe ask them if they have anything they want to talk about?”

“What, like a kinda group therapy thing?” His friend thought this over before shrugging slightly. “It’s a good idea, I mean we do need to all talk at some point but I dunno if it’s a good idea doing it right now. Not after talking about Hoseok. Maybe give it a few days to sink in and let them think about it and then try it.”

“They wouldn’t talk if we asked anyway, would they?” Seokjin asked with a soft smile and he laughed before agreeing that he was probably right. “I’m just scared that he’s not the only one that needs a little help. You know, back when were in the first hostel room, way back in Seoul, Yoongi said that he was worried about the kids; worried about them straying off the right path and getting into trouble and I thought that he might just be a little worried over nothing but now I’m not sure…”

“‘Cos of Hoseok?”
“Because of everything. Kookie’s getting into too much trouble these days. Jimin’s family situation is really bad right now. Tae is just…and shit I haven’t even mentioned Yoongi either. I’m worried about everyone now and it’s stupid, I feel that such a level of worry looks like I can’t trust you all to not do bad things.”

“I think it’s perfectly reasonable to worry,” Namjoon said quietly, “especially over a bunch of idiots like us.” He paused for a moment and thought his words over before asking. “Do you worry about me too, huh?”

“I do, I worry that you’ll get arrested in one of those dens. I worry that you’ll run out of luck even though that seems impossible.” He grinned at this remark and his friend continued. “But mostly I worry that you’ll feel responsible if something goes wrong because you always do, even when you’re not the oldest and you’re still a kid to me and—”

“Not this kid shit again.”

“Joonie, I think you forget the fact you’re younger than Hoseok sometimes. Just because you graduated before he did doesn’t make you any older; it just means you’re a smart kid, that’s it.” Seokjin smiled and he rolled his eyes. “I worry that you try and carry too much yourself without sharing. You act like a big brother to the kids in a way me and Yoongi can’t, so naturally you feel a duty to them.”

“I might be the big brother,” Namjoon said, “but Yoongi is the dad and you’re the mom. He’s the chain smoking dad prone to cursing and refusing to get out of the armchair, but he’s protective and he’s not afraid to be blunt about things for the sake of honesty. He’s respectable. You’re the affectionate mom that always calls at the exact same hour, that wants to make sure that everyone had been eating and studying, that everything is alright. You’re dependable.”

“And my cooking is clearly the best.”

“Oh yeah, clearly.”

“So you can talk too, you know? If you feel like you need to.”

“I will. When the time feels right and we all sit down and talk it over I’ll be sure to be open and transparent. You will too, yeah?” Seokjin made a soft noise in agreement at this as he ran his fingers along his pillow slowly. “Even moms need advice sometimes.”
“Please don’t call me that, Tae’s bad enough with the nicknames and—” he stopped talking for a moment before raising his eyebrows sharply, “ah, that’s what I forgot. Tae.”

“Tae’s a story for another day.” Namjoon said wearily as he turned his head to look up at the ceiling. “In fact it’d take a whole fucking day to talk about him.”

“I’m really worried about him, I mean I think I might be worried about him the most,” Seokjin said before sighing heavily. “I don’t even know what’s going on with him anymore, he’s drifted so far off that I feel like he’s a buoy at sea; unsinkable but so far away. If he does sink under then I can’t see him from the coast…” It was a rather poetic analogy but one that he found himself silently agreeing with. The boy had claimed that the point of this adventure was to stop them from drifting away, so that they could enjoy it all whilst they were still the same and unchanged, and yet it seemed that Taehyung wasn’t even aware of how different he was already.

“If Tae sinks we’ll know about it,” he said after a minute of silence, “cos he’s an anchor, not a buoy, and he’d drag us down with him.”

The fast food joint wasn’t empty but it wasn’t full either, rather just a small handful of people sitting in groups in random sections of the interior, mostly by the windows as it allowed a breeze to get in and keep them cool. He also thought that there was a chance it would attract many flies too, that they would come swarming at the scent of sugary drinks and fatty foods but no one seemed to care at all. Though they stuck to the corner booth away from the door he could sense eyes on them, watching them as if they were very interesting when they were doing nothing more than eating just like they were. It was probably their appearance, or the fact that they had all squeezed around a single table by stealing chairs from other ones. If the kids had been throwing fries and causing trouble then he would understand them looking but they weren’t. Instead they seemed too hungry to waste food like that. Namjoon stopped glancing around the room and looked down at the food in front of him, the slice of pizza sitting in front of him on a plate, the cheese and toppings almost glistening. Rather than eat it he instead lifted his soda and took a sip of it, cola freezing cold because nearly half of the container seemed to be ice cubes.

When he placed it back down he spared another glance across the joint and sure enough he saw a group of girls looking at them, maybe high schoolers, maybe old enough to be young ladies in college. They weren’t doing so in a rude way, not at all, but they were still staring. He managed to catch the eye of one of them, a girl with wavy black hair in a pink summer dress with a matching
Alice band, and she rapidly turned her attention back to the table in front of her, but a few seconds later he saw her shifting to say something to her friend, holding a hand up as if to block her lips from being read. Her friend’s eyes moved to look over at them, rolling behind her glasses as she looked from face to face and at the backs of his friend’s heads, and then she settled her eyes on Seokjin. After a moment he realised that they were looking at them and likely discussing how they looked and he thought that the answer was not good. They probably looked at them and saw worn clothing and tired faces, and yet he could see keen interest on their faces regardless. Maybe they looked at them and thought they were runaways that were rebelling against something, bad guys with interesting and shady backstories, and they would be right in at least a couple of their cases.

Namjoon looked back over at his friends but none of them had even noticed because they were preoccupied with their food. There were four girls and one of them even turned to look over her shoulder at them. The girl with the glasses definitely seemed to be interested in Seokjin. The wavy haired girl that had made eye contact with him seemed to be glancing at Taehyung the most and he thought that her friend on the other end, who had dyed blonde hair and many earrings dangling from her ears, also seemed to have taken a liking to him, both of them following him as he crossed the room to get some napkins like hawks before both laughing as they caught each other staring at him. The girl that had twisted around in her seat had a bob and it bounced with every slight movement of her head, and after a few seconds of keen study she seemed to settle on Jimin. The boy accidentally dribbled sauce and it ran down his chin and he was about to wipe it off with the back of his hand when Yoongi beat him to it and instead wiped at his face with a napkin. At this he heard the bobbed girl nearly squealing, loudly exclaiming about how cute they both were and not seeming to care when it attracted their attention.

“I can’t believe that we went the wrong way…” Jungkook muttered under his breath between mouthfuls of food, seemingly not caring about the girls because he had his back turned to them. “That we ended up fucking South Chungcheong.”

The boy was talking about the fact that they had somehow ended going the complete wrong way on the roads for the past few days, mostly a result of the wandering between cities with no signs to point them in the right direction. Since entering Yeongpyeong County they had followed the river across the city and had gone through Yeoju County, and then they had ended up passing straight through and into North Chungcheong before settling down in Eumseong County. Then Jincheon County and Cheonan, and right now they were deep down in Gongju. They had walked the entire length of the southern stretch of Gyeonggi and managed to get through two regions as a result of it, rather than heading up north to Seoul. In terms of mistakes they had made one that was easily reaching a good couple of hundred miles so far and it was going to require some maneuvering to get back on the right track. Two wasted days and now they were way over a week on the road. It would likely be two weeks before they even got close to Seoul because all of the backtracking was going to be hell.

“We shouldn’t have followed the river,” Seokjin said with a shrug. “But we didn’t know. Like Tae said back in Gangwon, it’s not like we have a map.”

“We should get one,” Jimin commented as he dipped a handful of fries into a puddle of ketchup.
“Where do you even get a map?” Yoongi asked in confusion as he watched him, most of his pizza slice still in front of him but missing a few mouthfuls at least.

“A bookstore?” the boy suggested, tone showing that he didn’t really have a clue. “Don’t they sell those national road map books in bookstores? Or a library.”

“Yeah, let’s go in and find a book of maps, rip all of the pages we need out and then leave, problem solved,” Taehyung said with a wide grin. This earned him a few laughs. “But if we aren’t supposed to go south then we just go in any other direction, right?”

“We need to try and go north,” Namjoon explained, “cos we’ve gotta be halfway through South Chungcheong now and if we don’t we’ll end up in North Jeolla. But it’s not like you can just go north. We need to follow roads, even if they take us a little off the mark. north-east would be our best bet I think, but it has to be north.”

“So we don’t need a map,” Hoseok said after a moment. “We need a compass.”

“What we need is cash.”

“Cash?” Taehyung asked sharply as he looked up from his food, fry sticking out of the corner of his mouth. “What’d we need cash for?”

“I’ve been thinking,” Namjoon said, “that we should try and get back to Seoul other than by foot. Maybe by coach if we could afford it.” At this he felt all of his friend’s eyes on him, all of them thinking his words over carefully. He had been worried about mentioning this for several days now but the right time appeared to have arrived. He couldn’t keep pondering on it without saying something, without at least trying. If he kept the idea to himself then they would never get back to Seoul at this rate so why not now; when they all seemed tired and in dire need of going back home? At best they would say yes, at worst they would just mull over it and not really give him a clear answer, so he really had nothing to lose.

“That would cost a lot of cash,” Yoongi broke the silence in a low voice, almost as if he didn’t want to do it. He nodded and said that he knew that, but he had been thinking it over for some time now despite this fact and he thought that they could do it. Taehyung shifted in his seat at the mention of money and he seemed to be a little uncomfortable with it but he wasn’t sure why. Was it because he didn’t want them to travel by coach and instead keep walking because it would make the adventure last longer, or was it something else entirely? At his fidgeting Jimin also seemed to start acting a little
off, eyes constantly going from him to his food and then quickly looking over the rest of them in turn. Any other time he would ask him if he was okay but it didn’t seem worth the effort right now. “You think we can make enough cash to get there?”

“In the time it took us to make it we could probably walk back,” Jungkook said as he wiped his greasy fingers on a napkin. “Cos it’ll take us a whole day of work to maybe get enough for the first tickets, and we’ve been getting through two cities a day these past few days ‘cos they’re only small. Wouldn’t it make more sense to just keep walking instead of stopping? We’d have to search for work too, that can be pretty fucking hard.”

“He’s right,” Hoseok agreed with a sigh. “Even though I don’t want to admit it, he is. We’ll need maybe three coaches to get to Seoul, one to get us across here and back into North Chungcheong most likely, and then one to get us into Gyeonggi, probably Yongin before getting to Seoul. That’s three sets of tickets. How much will the tickets be? And what if there’s no coaches that run here and we need to get to another city first before we can even start?”

Namjoon sighed heavily and took his soda straw between his fingers, fiddling with it in annoyance. He had made the suggestion in the hopes that they would maybe agree with him, or at least voice some interest, and yet it seemed that his idea had been shot down in flames. That meant going right back to the roads after finishing this meal, right back to hours and hours of walking and days to reach Seoul. Jungkook was likely correct about it and yet he was still holding out for the chance of something else. If they were lost somewhere in Gyeonggi then he wouldn’t complain because at least they were close to Seoul, but so far away down in South Chungcheong? That was going to take a good few days and it wasn’t like the coach idea was that bad in comparison to the alternative.

“We haven’t got that much cash left any way,” Namjoon said after a few minutes of silence, in which his friends carried on eating without a care. “So we’re gonna need to make it somehow. Why not try and aim for enough for coach tickets?”

“We’ll get cash somehow,” Taehyung said brusquely. “Don’t you worry about it.”

The sight in front of them was that of another abandoned building. Unlike the subway, which was a structure made of metal and glass that housed the broken escalator that went down into the system that was more of a shell than anything else, this was a lot more substantial. It was a long rectangular building made of concrete with windows set high into the very tops, flat roof rather than a peaked
one, and most of them were broken. The remains of glass was still stuck in the frames, jagged shards that looked like teeth, and he thought that the inside would be littered with great puddles of the rest of the glass. It looked like kids, or perhaps even adults, had tossed rocks at them and shattered them for no reason other than they could, because they were uncovered and therefore a nice easy target. And just to solidify this idea Jungkook bent down to grab a pebble and he also tossed it at one of the windows. It didn’t break any glass but rather sailed right through a gap that was already in place, the faint clattering sound of it landing inside a few seconds later. The boy dropped his eyes to scan for another one and a moment later he was wandering up and down the curb in hunt. Namjoon studied the building intently before taking a few steps forward and placing his hand on the exterior wall. Mostly smooth to the touch, the occasional pitting in the concrete from age and wear, he ran his fingers along with before wiping dust off on his jeans.

“What do you think it is?” Seokjin asked as he also looked at it, stood way back so that he wasn’t even on the sidewalk but rather standing in the gutter, hands shoved into his coat pockets.

“Area’s industrial,” he replied with a shrug, “could be an old factory I guess. Maybe a food packaging one, a shipping one…maybe even a textile one.”

“You think it’s still in use?”

“Well, it isn’t right now,” Yoongi remarked as he kicked a pebble in Jungkook’s direction. The boy picked it up and proceeded to hurl it at the window. It missed and bounced off the wall but he tracked its descent and then ran off to retrieve it. “And if it is then it’s a pretty shitty factory with those windows. I wouldn’t buy any food that got produced here.”

“Don’t lie, right now you’d eat anything,” Taehyung said as he fixed his backpack straps and then went over to the large metal shutter across the length of the building. “Cos I know that I would.” He examined it for a moment before hunkering down and lifting up the heavy padlock, feeling the weight in his hand and studying the keyhole. “Kookie, a little help?”

“What’d you need?” the boy asked as he tossed the pebble and finally succeeded in knocking a large sliver of glass free from one of the windows. Taehyung asked him for his lock pick and Jungkook shoved his hand into his jeans back pocket before pulling it free and tossing it at him. Namjoon turned his head to see what it was and it looked to be a piece of metal, twisted and turned into a pick of some kind; possibly copper judging from the colour of it.

“Thanks for breaking more of the windows,” Jimin complained. “First a freezing cold subway and now a factory that will let all of the wind in. Great. Another night of freezing my ass off.” Taehyung shifted to get a better view and proceeded to slip the end of the pick into the padlock and start fiddling with it. He finally started to move the tumblers inside, slowly opening the padlock and releasing the key. “This is gonna be fun…”
“Hey, you wanna go for a run and find something better?” the other boy asked with a grin as he carried on messing with the lock and after a few seconds there was a crisp sound and he declared. “Ah-fucking-ha!” Taehyung twisted the metal arm and then slipped it free from the hinge so that he could grab hold of the shutter and roll it up. The noise it made was deafeningly loud in the still air and Namjoon turned to look around them quickly, seeing that the area was still completely abandoned. “Let’s see what we got here…”

The interior of the building was a single room, wide with a high ceiling that seemed to go on for a mile. Along each wall there was a walkway, mesh metal flooring suspended from thick fixtures, and there was a staircase in the far corner to get up onto it that didn’t look very sturdy at all. The walls were bare of pretty much everything and though there were no tools inside there were the remains of several belts that ran the length of the left side of the room. Everything was concrete save for the broken windows and he could see the puddles of glass he had thought about just a few minutes ago, twinkling in the setting sunlight like precious gems: diamonds. Not far from the staircase there were pipes running on a wall and a medium sized box connected to them all, perhaps a water system.

“We got…nothing,” Jungkook announced, voice echoing off the walls and making them all snort laughter. “Literally nothing.”

“It’s abandoned, the fuck were you expecting? A penthouse suite?” Taehyung retorted. Namjoon tossed his holdall bag somewhere near the centre of the room and then went over to look at the system on the wall, intrigued by it enough to want to know what it was.

“I think this might have been a mechanics,” Seokjin said. “Can’t you smell that? Smells like oil…” Yoongi said that it could be from oiling machinery and the eldest thought this over before making a noise in agreement. “Maybe they made car parts here?”

“Maybe,” Namjoon mumbled as he stopped in front of the pipe system. He had just started looking at it when he felt a shadow fall over his shoulder and a quick glance behind him showed that Hoseok was also studying it. The boy reached over and tapped his finger on the painted white metal box. “Water system?”

“I thought it was electricity at first, but then I saw the pipes.” The boy pulled his hand away before gesturing up at the ceiling. “Not that it matters if it was electricity because the lights have all been taken out.” The ceiling was indeed bare of any fluorescent bulbs, metal fixtures still in place where they should have been. “So yes, I think it’s water.”

“Hang on a sec,” Jimin said as he hastily crossed the room to get to where they were standing, boot soles echoing off the concrete flooring. “Let me see, let me see.” So Namjoon moved out of the way
to let him look at the piping system and the boy automatically reached over to start touching it, running his hands along it until he reached a valve. “They shut it off obviously, ’cos this place is abandoned, but I’ll bet that I can get hack into this and get it flowing again.”

“Would it be safe to drink or clean with?” Hoseok asked as he watched the boy examining it all.

“All that happens when I switch it on is that the water gets diverted to this building. Clean water, water that would be travelling somewhere else ‘cos the pipe is closed off,” Jimin said as he hunkered down and stared at the system just above the floor, the big box with all of the buttons and pipes coming out of it. “It might take me awhile but I’ll bet that I can get it flowing.”

“I’m sure you will,” Yoongi called from across the warehouse. “But I’d still only use it for cleaning skin and clothes, I wouldn’t risk drinking it. We still have enough water to last us, no need to get sick.” The boy pulled on a section of the box and it opened up, swung outwards like a door to reveal more buttons and slots for which keys looked to be shoved into.

“I’m not washing the clothes,” Seokjin sighed heavily. “Someone else can do it for once.” Namjoon said that he would do it and his friend shot him a grateful look. “What I’m going to do is eat my portion of food and then clean up and sleep, that’s it. Finally some rest.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Hoseok agreed as he crossed the room to go back over to the others. Jimin was intently studying everything and Namjoon watched him for a minute before deciding it would be best to leave him to it and not disturb him. He didn’t like people breathing down his neck whenever he was in the gambling den and therefore he should give the boy some room like he would want.

It didn’t take Jimin long at all, in fact he had managed to get it working in the bare time it took Namjoon to finish eating his meager meal of leftover chips and plain rice cakes that he shared with Seokjin. He had fiddled with the pipe and buttons and he didn’t have a clue how he had managed to do it but he was not asking. Better to leave the boy to what he did best and fix this unlike the broken car that he had been unable to. When he twisted the valve and made the water start flowing out of a tap fixture across the room, spilling out all over the floor with a gushing sound, they had all cheered for him. Jimin had laughed sheepishly at this but he had looked both relieved and happy that he had managed to do it.

When the others were finished eating they all settled down to get comfortable, possibly to sleep because they were all so tired. Namjoon didn’t do so and instead he made sure to collect anything that needed cleaning. Though the warehouse was mostly empty he did find a small container after some searching, one that looked like it might have held tools in the past. It wasn’t deep but it held enough water to at least mean he could use it. So he sat down on the cold concrete floor in front of the water tap and attempted to get it finished so that he could sleep too. He filled the container and poured some of the detergent in before dumping the clothes in and then he settled back on his wrists.
to let them soak for a few minutes, instead looking across the warehouse. The sky outside was now a deep purple that showed him that it was evening, moonlight already starting to come in through the windows.

He had just finished rinsing a tee through when he saw something moving out of the corner of his eye and he didn’t turn to look and rather waited for whoever it was to come over to him. Except they didn’t and he heard the sound of the shutter being lifted up so that someone could slip under it. When he looked over at the sleeping bodies he saw that Yoongi was not present and that meant that he had left, perhaps to stand outside and smoke because there was no window that he could sit by as they were all up too high and out of reach. It seemed unusual, but he might just want a little fresh air too even if it seemed a little ironic that he would mix the fresh air with the toxic cigarette smoke. Namjoon just turned back to the clothes in front of him and he wrung the tee out before hanging it on one of the pipes, so that the clothes could dry hanging rather than lie on the dusty floor and get dirty once more. The water was freezing cold and his hands felt numb from submerging them in the container but he was nearly done now. Just a few socks and underwear and he was finished and could rest. So he turned his attention back to doing so and after a few minutes Yoongi reemerged back into the warehouse, lifting the shutter and letting it down slowly to stop it from making a loud noise and waking the others up.

“Can’t sleep?” Namjoon asked as he squeezed a pair of soaking wet socks between his hands and looked over at him. He could see him clear as day because of the moonlight coming in from the broken windows and illuminating the interior.

“Not really…” Yoongi said as he stopped by the others, seemingly contemplating settling back down or crossing the room to get to him. After a few seconds he decided to go with the latter and he moved over to hunker down beside him, arms folded on his knees. “It’s nothing new, right?”

“Right,” he replied as he added them to the pipe. “Still not adjusted to the break yet?”

“Nu-uh, my stupid brain won’t stop long enough to let me sleep. Too full of thoughts all of the time.”

“Thoughts you wanna talk about?” Namjoon asked, thinking about what Seokjin had said to him just that morning, about him worrying about the kids. But he had also mentioned the man’s name too…

“Not really,” Yoongi said a little brusquely. “‘Cos it’s mostly shit anyway. I don’t even know, I just can’t stop thinking. Feel like I’m going fucking nuts.”

“When have you been sane?” he joked and his friend offered him a glare before shifting to reach over and stick his hand in the container too. He winced at the cold and then grabbed hold of
something before pulling a pair of underpants out. He sighed heavily and looked at him as if to ask “why me?” “Hey, that’s the last pair of them, I had to wash six pairs and only one of those were mine. I feel bad for Jin now.”

“Don’t feel bad, it was his idea.”

“Yeah, but without it we’d either be naked right now or wearing filthy clothes. Clothes still dripping river water and covered in car oil and soil.” Yoongi started rubbing the material together so that the soapy water foamed against his fingers and then he dipped it in to wash this free and repeated the action. “I’d rather wash underwear then go through that.”

“If Tae told me that this was part of the adventure I’d have turned him down.”

“But you didn’t.”

“Nope, probably should’ve but then I’d be back in Seoul working eighteen fucking hours so maybe this is worth it.” Namjoon grinned at this and he balked. “Maybe, I said maybe.” He washed the clothing through before rinsing the suds off and copying him, wringing as much of the water out as he could and then reaching over to place the underpants on the spare gap of pipe. His arm brushed just a mere inch in front of his nose and that was when he noticed something on his skin.

Namjoon’s eyes latched onto it and when his friend shifted back to get something else out of the container of water, the last sock that was still floating inside, he turned his head to continue looking at it. At first he had caught sight of just a single hint of colour, something pink and nothing more, but as he studied it he saw that it wasn’t just a blemish, perhaps a bug bite or something like that from the annoying clouds of flies that occasionally swarmed them when they got close to fields.

No, it was a small cluster of marks that were most certainly not bites.

There were two of them in the crook of his elbow, nestled away in the fold in his skin and another one an inch or so higher on his upper arm. It took just a single glance to see that they were burns, for they were very recognisable to his eyes. Swollen and painful-looking little welts that came out of his skin, the area around them a horrible deep pink. The one on his upper arm was slightly red too, the welt not even fully formed yet because the skin was still raw and open. The marks were not big at all, perhaps less than a centimeter in width, but with the area around them being so pink it was impossible to miss them, especially against his pale skin. The perfect size for the head of the cigarette and nothing more, except maybe the coil of a car lighter. They didn’t have a car any more so that ruled it out of the question.
But Yoongi hadn’t even noticed him staring because he was too busy with the task in front of him, hastily washing the sock with his own eyes firmly on his hands as he scrubbed at the material. He had had his jacket on all day long, the sleeves rolled up a few inches at least to let his forearms out, and Namjoon had thought nothing of it for the weather hadn’t been too hot at all. But it was now pretty obvious why he had been wearing it, not because of the weather but so that he could hide these marks from everyone. And yet here he was staring at them and he briefly wondered if anyone else had noticed them too.

“Hoseok alright?” Yoongi asked as he dipped the foamy sock into the water.

“Uh yeah, he’s good. As good as can be anyway. He said that he’d talk to us all about everything soon but he’s not ready yet but he said enough to me and Jin. He didn’t try and hide it away, he was pretty open about it all. Stupid pills, that was it all.”

“The doc that gave him those stupid fucking things should be fired.”

“It’s the only things they can give people with…depression. Except maybe counselling. You think he’d agree to talk to a stranger when he couldn’t even speak to us about it, huh?” Yoongi made a noise under his breath. “Jimin?”

“Freaked out,” his friend replied as he continued scrubbing at the sock once more. “I mean really freaked out, he was jittery all night long. I wonder if he even got any sleep ‘cos he just kept tossing and turning.”

“He seems to be carrying a lot of things right now, don’t you think?”

“Things like what?”

“…I think Jimin’s carrying a couple of secrets that he’s not fessing up to, and I don’t just mean about himself. I think he’s knows a little something about a few of us and he’s keeping it a secret, just not that well.” Yoongi asked him who he thought he had secrets on as he rinsed the clothing out and wrung the water with several twists of his wrists. “I think he knows something about Tae at least, maybe just him and no one else. But if that’s the case he knows something big and that’s why he’s acting a little jittery these days. You saw how he was when we asked about Tae-”

“Looked like a rabbit caught in a snare,” the other man said as he stopped wringing the sock out and
looked right at him. “Yeah, he knows something alright and I’m gonna find out what. Just gimme a little time and I’ll sniff it out.”

“I think…” Namjoon shifted slightly as he thought his words out, not entirely sure if he should just say this or play it safe and not. But after a few seconds he decided to take the plunge. “I think he knows something about you too. Something you’re hiding.” At this Yoongi’s eyebrows raised up so that they were hidden under the mess of hair on his brow, and then he let out a soft laugh and leaned over to toss the last sock on the pipe.

“Like what?”

“Like this,” Namjoon as he grabbed hold of his friend’s wrist before he could move back, snagging hold of it so that his arm was held out in front of them both. He twisted his hand slightly and it revealed the markings. He didn’t glance at them but instead looked at the man’s face and he saw Yoongi’s eyes drop to stare at them, his lips pulling in in a thin line. “I gotta say, if you’re gonna burn yourself and try and hide it it’s probably a better idea to do it somewhere less noticeable…” His friend pulled his arm free hard and in the process he ended up falling back on his ass, balance knocked off because he had only been hunkering and not sitting. His teeth came together hard and luckily he didn’t bite his tongue but it still looked to be a jarring sensation nonetheless. “Or is that the point and you want someone to notice it?”

“I don’t want nothing,” Yoongi retorted petulantly as he moved to right himself.

“You want something, that much is certain.”

“Oh yeah? Like what?”

“Relief,” Namjoon said as he got his feet back underneath him again, ready to get upright and walk away from him. “A way to get all of those stressful thoughts out, a way to make it all go away for a little while. Am I right?” His friend paused for a moment at this, frozen between walking away and uncertainty. “You do it ‘cos it makes it feel better, yeah? But you shouldn’t.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah,” he said with a nod, “‘cos no matter what it makes you feel you’re hurting yourself, and that’s not worth a little relief.” Yoongi scoffed at this and got back upright and before he could stop himself he blurted out. “It’s like Hoseok and the pills.” He regretted saying it almost instantly, having
to resist the urge to clap his hand over his mouth as if to trap the words and not let them spill out into the air, but it was already too late for that. But it worked because Yoongi stopped dead and didn’t take a single step away from him. After several seconds of deathly silence he let his breath out in a sigh. “And Tae and the stealing and drinking, and Kookie and his fights. You’re doing just what they’re doing too. The same pattern of self-destructive behaviour, the exact same.”

“But it worked because Yoongi stopped dead and didn’t take a single step away from him. After several seconds of deathly silence he let his breath out in a sigh. “And Tae and the stealing and drinking, and Kookie and his fights. You’re doing just what they’re doing too. The same pattern of self-destructive behaviour, the exact same.”

“Then worry about the kids,” Yoongi said quietly, “and stop worrying about me.”

Namjoon wanted to argue against this but he knew that there was no point and it might just escalate into an argument, one that he most certainly didn’t want to get into with his friend. He had never even gotten close to such a thing with Yoongi and he planned on keeping it that way for there wasn’t a single thing they disagreed on…or at least until now. So instead he just held his tongue and let his friend cross the warehouse to lie back down with the others, feeling annoyance and anger radiating off him in waves. He had touched a nerve with him and he felt that he had gone too far but he hadn’t been able to stop himself. The sight of the marks on his arms had made a strange feeling course through him, a strong mixture of concern and panic that had caused him to grab his wrist like that. Yoongi could have argued against what he had said, he could have made up excuses for the burns but he didn’t. He didn’t bumble about dropping cigarettes or say that they were something else like bug bites, he had just stared at them and said nothing and that meant one thing to him: it meant that he was right about them being burns and self-inflicted ones at that.

He didn’t know if he would have preferred him to try and deny it or just be silent like that.

Namjoon watched Yoongi settling down on the floor and then looked back at the container in front of him, filled with slightly pink liquid rather than the purple that had been the old detergent, the scent coming off it lily and some other flower that suddenly made him feel a little nauseous because it was too sweet. He didn’t know when exactly Yoongi had started his little habit of burning himself with his cigarettes but he was going to keep an eye on him whether or not he wanted him to because he wanted to ensure that it ended soon.

After a minute or two he got to his own feet with a sigh and dusted his jeans off roughly before going over to the lazy formation across the warehouse, the semi circle of sleeping bodies. He sat down at the very end beside Seokjin but didn’t lie down just yet, instead folding his arms on his drawn-up knees so that he could balance his chin on his forearms. The interior of the warehouse was silent and even the drone of traffic didn’t bleed in through the broken windows like usual. He knew that Yoongi was still awake because he wouldn’t fall asleep for hours now and he felt that he should say something to him. Even if he didn’t reply and pretended that he was asleep, it was probably better that he say something.

“I’m sorry,” Namjoon said quietly, “for being so blunt about it. That was rude and insensitive.”
“Don’t say sorry,” Yoongi muttered. “I told you, just think about the kids instead. OK?”

“…OK.”

“Cos I don’t need anyone worrying about me too.”

Namjoon thought about this statement for quite some time before he felt himself drifting off, playing it over and over in his mind. He thought that it was quite obvious that his friend did need someone to worry about him because his behaviour was far from logical at this current moment. Yoongi admitted to being errant-minded and he had had several nightmares over the course of the journey that Namjoon was aware of. His friend had only woke up from one however so he was certain that Yoongi didn’t even know this fact, for he had heard him crying out things in his sleep on more than one occasion, things that seemed to have scared him greatly. But those things were all the results of stress of course, for he knew that he had been under a ridiculous amount of stress these past few months with work constantly on his mind. It was only natural but this sudden new habit was not. He didn’t have a clue if Jimin even knew about it, he had just used the boy as a means to broach the subject, and there was a very high chance that he was really the only one of them that did know but he doubted it. One thing he did know was that he was the only one that had spoken to him about it because his reaction had been very revealing. Eventually he lay down on the floor with a weary sigh and stared up at the high ceiling overhead instead, until his eyelids got too heavy to keep open.

Seokjin was right, he really was trying to be the big brother too much.
Taehyung opened his eyes and stared at the sight in front of him for a few seconds, the back of Jungkook’s head; messy black hair, a few strands sticking up like antennas and making him very much want to flatten it. So he reached over with a hand and proceeded to press down on it, having to do so a few times just to keep it in place. The boy mumbled in his sleep and shifted slightly but didn’t roll over or wake up from what he could see. Satisfied that no stray hairs were sticking up he rolled onto his back and turned his head to look at his other side. Hoseok was lying on his side facing him, one arm folded up in front of him and the other stretched out slightly in the space between them both. His hair wasn’t messy at all but rather just across his brow. He considered trying to brush it back but he didn’t want to disturb him right now. Instead he just rolled onto his side and studied him for a moment.

Hoseok looked very peaceful sleeping and he found it very hard to believe that it had been just over a day since he had collapsed. It was those stupid pills of course, he didn’t need to be told by his friends that it was the case. He had watched the boy taking quite a few of them over the past few days, more than the allocated one, but he hadn’t said anything to him because he had felt he was in the wrong for doing so. It would be rather hypocritical of him to talk about about addictions considering his own battling with alcohol of late, a problem he was aware of but didn’t particularly care about. But since the boy had collapsed he felt that he had made a big mistake by not mentioning it, or perhaps telling one of the others and getting them to do it so it didn’t seem so bad. Yet he hadn’t, he had pussied out and he felt partly responsible for what had happened. If he caught sight of him taking any more of them he would be sure to monitor him, but he hadn’t seen him anywhere near the bottle of pills. Maybe he would wait a few days first and then pop a few when they weren’t aware, but he was hoping that it wasn’t the case.

After a minute or two his friend stirred with a soft noise under his breath and then his eyelids flickered slightly. He peered at him through his hair and then sighed.

“I had the weirdest dream that I was being stared at…” Hoseok muttered and the jibe made Taehyung grin. “And look at that, talk about a premonition.” He moved his legs so that he could straighten them out. “How long have you been doing that for?”

“Just a minute,” he explained and this made the other boy laugh softly, no doubt pretending that he didn’t believe him. “Honestly just a minute, that’s all.”
“I thought you could stare at me all day?”

“I could but you’d punch me,” Taehyung replied and he gave him a wide smile so he reached over to brush his hair back off of his brow. It felt like silk against his fingertips and at least he could look at his face more fully, see his eyes and brows, his forehead which also looked soft to the touch. He got it in place and it took him great willpower to move his hand away again. “You OK?”

“Uh…” Hoseok sighed the word out. “I don’t know, that’s a tricky question.” He asked him if he had a headache and he shook his head, knocking a few locks of hair back over his brow. He was thankful for it because it allowed him to brush it back again. “No headache but I don’t feel great truly fully. I hope that I don’t have a bad day…”

“Bad day?” Taehyung asked, running his fingers through his hair instead of moving his hand back. His friend didn’t stop him and he took that as a good sign.

“A day without the pills is a bad day,” Hoseok said after a moment of silence. “And I don’t want that, travelling would be hell.”

“Then I’ll carry you,” Taehyung said with a smile and it made him scoff but his expression showed that he amused by the idea. “Piggyback you, whatever, doesn’t matter lover boy.”

“When will you stop calling me that?”

“When I stop calling Jimin ‘Dumbass’,” he replied without missing a beat, “and that’ll never happen.” The boy seemed to think this over for a few seconds and then he rolled his eyes up to look at his hand as he was still stroking his hair slowly. Then he asked him how he was feeling. “Me? I’m feeling the same as always really.”

“Drunk?” At this remark Taehyung snorted laughter and Hoseok reached up to grab his hand. He didn’t move it away but instead took his hand within his own, loosely entwining their fingers and placing them down on the concrete floor. “You know what I mean, just saying something like that doesn’t answer the question. Are you OK?”

“I’m still a little…well I’m getting better,” Taehyung said after a moment of thought. “Hopefully we’ll both avoid bad days, right?” He could see that he was thinking this over, possibly trying to figure out what he was talking about without having to ask. He doubted that he would get the right answer but he still needed to make sure that he didn’t slip up and say something that might give him
any ideas. “It’s nothing serious, don’t worry about me.”

“It’s hard to not worry when you haven’t talked about it…”

“Don’t need to talk about,” he replied a little too brusquely, “cos it’s not important.” Hoseok looked like he was going to argue against this but he decided not to and instead sat up, letting go of his hand and reaching up to cover a yawn. Taehyung studied his back and a moment later he got to his feet and walked across the warehouse.

After a few seconds he also sat up, having to do so slowly because there was still a horrible sensation in his lower back, like a pulled muscle that made him groan under his breath and reach down to press his hand against it. He could feel an aching in his inner thighs too and he wondered when his bruises would fade because he had to take great care to hide them from wandering eyes. Getting to his feet seemed like too much hard work and so he just reached over and fished for his boots so that he could slip into them, knotting the laces tightly. The shutter door sounded and he looked over just in time to see Hoseok disappearing under it, presumably going to find somewhere to use as a toilet because there wasn’t one inside, probably the gutter. To his right he could see that Seokjin and Jimin and Namjoon were awake, rubbing at eyes roughly and rolling shoulders to loosen the muscles.

“How’s your ass?” Taehyung asked as he looked at Jimin, grinning at him as he did.

“Still cold,” the boy replied, in the midst of stretching and touching his toes. “Freezing cold actually.”

“I’m sorry that your cute little butt had to suffer.”

“…top talking about butts,” Yoongi mumbled as he rolled onto his back with a groan, “this early in the…fucking morning.”

“When exactly is the best time to talk about butts?” Namjoon asked as he lowered his shoulders and looked at him.

“Not now,” the other man replied as he curled himself up in a ball, hugging his legs against his chest rather than sit up. “I don’t wanna be thinking about butts when I’m asleep.”

“Why not? That’s pretty much all of my dreams,” Taehyung said as he shifted to get onto his hands
and knees. As he got upright there was a dull ache and he managed to not grimace at this. The shutter sounded again and a few seconds later Hoseok reappeared into the warehouse.

“So…there’s been a change of plans,” Jimin said as the clattering sound of the shutter falling woke Jungkook up, the youngest boy sitting bolt upright and forcing his eyes open.

“What kinda change?” Jungkook asked with a yawn, his words slurred into nonsense.

“We’re thinking of the coaches.”

“Wait, I thought we weren’t doing the coach thing?” Taehyung asked in confusion, eyes flitting between them all in turn.

“Well,” Seokjin said after a moment, “I was thinking it over last night and Namjoon did raise a good point. We don’t want to risk getting lost and getting even further away from Seoul, and the coaches would really help cut down on the time.”

“It wasn’t that hard to make the money,” Jimin added, “and as soon as we have a good amount we can just jump on them. I mean, it could take less days, it could take the same or even more but what have we got to lose?”

“OK, but what’s happening exactly? What’s going on?” He didn’t want to shift about but he couldn’t help himself, moving from foot to foot. The thought of the cash in his boot was right at the front of his mind and he wondered what they would say if he were to pull it out right now and show them it.

“We’re gonna go into the next city,” Namjoon explained, “and we’re gonna settle down for a few days in a hostel. Pay for a day or two in advance and just go out and make money. Except for Hoseok, he’s resting.”

“I told you that I don’t need to,” the boy practically sighed.

“You need the rest, how long do you think you can work if you get another headache, huh? Or you collapse again?” Hoseok dropped his eyes to his boots and didn’t say a word at this. “That’s the plan, hopefully we can stick to it.” Taehyung asked about the jobs and he just shrugged. “We’ll just have
Taehyung was thankful that there wasn’t many miles between the warehouse and the next town that they arrived in because his muscles started protesting after just an hour of walking. It didn’t start around his ankles and shins unlike his friends’ loud complaints, but rather in his thighs and lower back. His stomach muscles still felt a little sore but they didn’t hurt when he walked, rather just when bending over and trying to get back upright after sitting or lying down. Tying his shoelaces was sheer agony and they kept coming undone just to vex him, so worn from use that they were starting to fray. After several pathetic attempts of trying to do them the others seemed to realise that he grunts were of pain and not annoyance, and then Yoongi surprised him by actually dropping to his knees and knotting them for him when they had been waiting at a set of traffic lights. The young man did so without saying a single word, or even looking at him, and he just watched him hastily loop and knot and then re-loop the laces to secure them better and then muttered his thanks.

It took perhaps two and a half hours of walking to finally get close to the heart of Yesan County and then some more searching to locate a hostel of some kind. But upon entering it to check out the rates Seokjin rapidly pulled Namjoon back out onto the curb to leave again, claiming that the rate was just too high for two rooms. However after checking out four such hostels it became apparent that they were going to have to share a double room for the time being because they couldn’t afford any better. That meant at least a few of them would need to sleep on the floor. A single bed could just hold a pair but nothing more, and no matter what positions they tried the settee in the hostel they settled for just wouldn’t fit more than one person on it. So Namjoon volunteered for the floor until they could get another room and Jimin said he slept on it most nights anyway, shooting Taehyung a look as he did that made everyone laugh. He was telling the truth and he didn’t think there was any point in trying to deny it.

There was a scramble for the bathroom because everyone wanted to get cleaned up from the previous day and Taehyung just waited for them to all get washed because he didn’t want to share the room with anyone that would see the bruises still on his body and ask about them; the bruises in the most awkward and obvious of places. So he just sat on the end of one of the beds and watched them all racing around the room. He must have drifted off into his thoughts because the next thing he knew he was being shaken by someone and he looked up sharply to see Seokjin leaning over him.

“Wuh…” Taehyung furrowed his brow and looked over the hostel room to see that they were the only ones in it, save for someone still in the bathroom: presumably Hoseok. “Where is everyone?”
“Out,” Seokjin explained as he let go of his shoulder. “Looking for work.”

“Why’re you here?” he asked as he reached up to rub at his eyes roughly. So his friend quietly explained that he was keeping an eye on their friend, doing so as he looked at the closed over bathroom door and making it pretty obvious that he didn’t want him to overhear. “You think he needs a babysitter?”

“I think that Hoseok can’t be left alone for a few days,” Seokjin said as he moved to sit on the other bed, “and I’m sure everyone else thinks it seen as they told me to stay here with him. Well, less told more demanded.” Taehyung made a noise in agreement as he dropped his hands on the bed and leaned back on his wrists. “Are you OK?” At the question he dragged his eyes away from the bathroom door to look at his friend. Unreadable expression on his face but he knew he was very much trying to get an answer out of him. He nodded at the question. “Because you've seemed a little…off these past few days and—”

“I’m fine, really,” Taehyung replied as he got to his feet and crossed the room, pushing the door open and stepping into the bathroom. Hoseok was standing in front of the sink in the process of patting his face dry with the towel around his shoulders, hair damp and brushed back off his face. At the sound of him entering he peered at him using the mirror over the sink; chipped and scratched with age.

“Ah yes, privacy,” the other boy said with a soft smile. “Something I miss almost as much as hot food.” Taehyung put the toilet seat down and sat down on it as if it was a chair, trying his hardest not to wince but knowing that he did so anyway. “All you need is a pipe and a newspaper and you’re all set.” Hoseok remarked as he looked over at him.

“I think you mean a shot of soju and a comic book.” He corrected with a smirk.

“Close enough,” his friend said with a soft shrug. Taehyung watched a bead of water run down the side of his face before soaking into the towel. “You’re avoiding Seokjin, aren’t you?”

“Nope, what gave you that idea, huh?”

“You’re hiding in the bathroom, using a toilet like an armchair, and Seokjin is in the other room: I deduced it.” Hoseok shifted to lean against the sink and he stared at him. “Am I right or am I right?”

“Maybe I just wanted to talk to you lover boy? In private?”
“Cut it with the lover boy shit. You’re trying to make me change the subject.” Taehyung sighed heavily at this and it made the other boy grin. He knew that he had him cornered. “Which just proves that I was right.”

“Maybe I am, you’d know about avoiding people and subjects.” Hoseok set his lips in a thin line and he refused to look away or back down even if his words had irritated his friend. “But right now I just wanna get cleaned up and go out.”

“To look for a job?” Taehyung confirmed this even though it wasn’t the truth and the other boy thought it over for a few seconds. “…OK, but you can’t avoid him forever, you know?”

“I know.”

“Or me either.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it lover boy,” Taehyung said with a wink, smiling at the expression on Hoseok’s face.

It wasn’t exactly a lie that he had told him, after all he had already done a job of his own just a few nights back and the cash was still inside his boot. Why, all he had to do was wander for a couple of hours and then come back to the room, slipping the rolled up cash out and showing them it. None of them would question it of course, they would happily accept it, so he just needed to stick to it and give them no reason to think otherwise. Taehyung got cleaned up quickly just to save either of his friends ‘accidentally’ stumbling inside the bathroom and when he was ready he left again, promising a score of cash just like always.

His broken watch told him that it was 11:25am and he thought that showing up back at the hostel around 6pm would be suitable enough so he set himself that as a goal and hastily crossed the lot to get to the street without looking back at the room. He was lucky that Hoseok that had ended up stuck with Seokjin and not Jimin because at least he wouldn’t have anything to blurt out should the eldest start asking questions, which he would obviously do. Taehyung had dodged a real bullet with that one and he sighed in relief as he started walking down the street. Yesan County wasn’t interesting at all and he quickly found himself bored of not only the dull sights but also his aching muscles. Maybe he could find somewhere to sit down for awhile, a subway line or park and-

He was so into his thoughts that when something slipped around his neck he let out a cry of surprise
and then there was familiar weight on his back.

“Jesus Kookie, thanks for the heart attack.”

“You’re welcome,” the boy said in a chipper tone as he wrapped his thighs up around his waist, locking himself in place so that he couldn’t shrug him off so easily.

“Aren’t you supposed to be working?” he asked as he reached up and pulled his arms off from around his throat. The boy’s boots hit the sidewalk with a loud *thump* and he turned to look back at him. The bruises had at least faded considerably from the fight and he silently wished that his would hurry up and go too. Jungkook fired the question back at him. “Already got some cash.”

“Damn…” His friend scuffed his boot on the curb for a moment before glancing across the street at a kids playground. “Been out for three hours so far and nothing. Talk about bad luck, huh?” Three hours? The boy must have gotten cleaned up and ran off first, and here he was, barely an hour after leaving the hostel with a boot filled with cash and lies. “I need a break.” Taehyung thought this over for a moment before snagging his wrist and pulling him across the road towards the playground. The boy let him drag him inside, through crowds of kids and past curious parents, right over to the swing set.

“You’ll find something soon.”

“I’m never gonna get a job,” Jungkook sighed as he settled into the swing seat, legs folded out in front of him so that his boots were on the wood chip pile that served as flooring. Considering the rate of accidents that likely happened here it would be more fitting to have the padding used in sanatoriums but he supposed that that was a little impractical. There wasn’t a free seat as a little girl was already on the other one, and she was looking at them both curiously, expression showing that she didn’t truly believe that they were young enough to use this playground, but his friend’s age wasn’t that far off.

“Wanna push?” Taehyung asked her jokingly and after a few seconds she nodded and smiled at him, lips revealing a missing front tooth and pigtails bouncing from the movement. “I’ll push you so high you can jump onto the moon and say hey to the aliens.”

“Aliens don’t live on the moon dummy,” she said in a matter of fact tone, “they live on Mars, duh.”

“Damn, you just got told by a kid,” Jungkook said with a wide grin as he twisted to look over at
“Keep making comments like that and you’ll get no pushes,” Taehyung intoned as he gave the little girl a soft push. “What’s your name, huh?”

“Daena,” she replied as the swing came back from its slight movement, back of her dress brushing against his hands as he pushed her again, this time a little harder.

“Well Princess Daena, you need to keep tight hold of the chains, ‘kay?” She said that she would and then requested he push her higher. “If you wanna get off then just stick your heels down on the floor a few times and you’ll slow down nice and easy, don’t jump off ‘cos even princesses can’t fly.”

“What about a bird princess? Or an angel princess?” Daena asked before letting out a giggle as he pushed her harder. The sound reminded him of Soobin and he felt a pang in his chest. He hoped that she was doing okay right now without him around to keep an eye on her.

“Good point, high enough yet?”

“Uh-huh!”

“Great, my arms are sore.” Taehyung moved to go back over to his friend, leaning against the metal structure of the swing set and shoving his hands into his hoodie pockets. “What’d you mean you’re not gonna get a job, huh?”

“Went into several bars,” the boy explained as he played with the swing chains, “and they turned me down. Too young, didn’t even give me a minute to perform like the owner back in Gyeonggi did.”

“…”Shit.”

“Yeah, took the words right outta my mouth.” Jungkook let go of the chains and instead dropped his hands to his lap. He was sitting hunched forward slightly and he knew a dejected stance when he saw one. “Spent the last couple of hours searching for stupid jobs and I don’t have any won to my name. Everyone else has done shit, not me.”
“Not Hoseok or Seokjin either…”

“Yeah but they haven’t left the hostel room, not a good comparison to make.” The boy sighed before looking up at him. “How much have you made so far?”

“…100,000 or so,” Taehyung said after a moment of thought, the lie slipping out with perfect ease. “It’s barely anything I know but-”

“No that’s a good amount, a real good amount,” Jungkook argued and he dropped his own gaze to his shoes and wondered if he would say that if he knew how he had obtained it. “That should be enough for a three tickets maybe, not sure. Could be your fare covered already.”

“Probably.”

“I mean I could look for shitty jobs but they don’t pay enough, not at all. I guess I’m being greedy by wanting it to be easy, right?” He laughed to himself wearily and then ran his eyes across the packed playground. “There’s a mom at four o’clock glaring at us, think she wants a fight.” Taehyung looked up to glance in the direction he had specified and sure enough he saw the woman standing quite a few feet away. She was playing with skip ropes with another mother, both of them turning them so that a group of boys and girls could happily jump up and down and race under it with happy giggles. She was only rather young, perhaps in her early thirties, but her severe frown aged her face somewhat; not flattering at all.

“Go fight her,” he joked and Jungkook snorted laughter. Only after he did did they both realise that it looked like they were laughing at her and they both stopped dumbly. “Let’s uh… go check out that thing.” Taehyung pointed at the roundabout and his friend got off the swing and hastily jogged over to it. It was currently empty and there were no kids in the nearby vicinity so they might just get away with playing with it for a little while.

“I wonder how fast these things can go?” Jungkook asked and Taehyung climbed onto it and told him they should try a little experiment. The boy grinned at him and he barely had enough time to sit down before he grabbed onto the metal handle and shoved against it. The push was hard and it started spinning at a decent speed and he began laughing as the view started to zoom past him. His friend waited for the handle and when it passed him he shoved on it again, making it speed up even more.

“Not fast enough!” Taehyung laughed and so the boy waited for the handle once more and when it got close he grabbed onto it and started running as fast as he could, pushing his weight against it as
he did. Suddenly the roundabout was going so fast that he felt his ass sliding along the metal surface and he had to grab onto a little fixture at the centre for the kids to use when climbing on it just so he didn’t roll right off.

“How about now!?” Jungkook shouted back. Taehyung could only laugh in response because the roundabout was going so fast that the air seemed to hit him in the face and make it hard to catch his breath, as if he had stuck his head out of the window of a moving car. After a few seconds of running the boy tripped up and let go of the handle but it didn’t matter because it couldn’t have possibly have went any faster.

“God, I’m gonna fucking puke!” Taehyung hollered and he heard Jungkook laughing breathlessly from the ground beside the playground ride. “Mayday! Mayday I’m-”

He didn’t have time to finish this sentence because the roundabout stopped so suddenly that his words were cut off as he jerked forward, teeth snapping together and luckily not trapping his tongue between them. He lost his grip on the fixture as he flew forward but he managed to throw his hands out and save himself before he smacked his face on the metallic flooring, the impact jarring all the way up to his shoulders. He looked at his friend dumbly before seeing that he was looking over his shoulder and so he twisted to look back and see a man standing a few feet away. Perhaps in his forties, hair starting to grey a little here and there and some light facial hair, he was looking at them both with a stern expression. Taehyung dropped his eyes to see that he had one loafed foot placed on the roundabout and then he slowly lowered it as he crossed his arms over his chest.

“I’m afraid that I need to ask you to leave,” the man said in a low voice. He was suddenly aware that everyone was looking at them, not just the few parents but even the stupid kids too.

“It’s a public playground,” Jungkook replied, shifting so that he was no longer sprawled out on the floor like a baby.

“It is, for children. You’re not children, you’re delinquents that would be skipping class if it wasn’t a break right now.” Taehyung made a noise in agreement at this but the man didn’t smile. “You’re intimidating the children, you’re loud and your language is upsetting them too. Please.”

“Technically my friend is a child,” he said as he sat down and dusted his hands off. “He’s tall for his age but he’s a kid. He’s actually eleven and .”

“Fuck you Kim Taehyung,” Jungkook declared with a grin and he heard one of the mothers across the playground gasping at this. “Eleven my ass.”
“If you don’t leave I will need to call the police,” the man said sternly and at the mention of cops Taehyung sighed and got to his feet.

“C’mon, this place sucked anyway, let’s go get drunk or something.” He jumped off the roundabout and leaned forward to offer his friend his hand and the boy accepted it and let him drag him to his feet. “Bye bye Princess Daena!”

“Bye bye dummy!” she called back, still happily swinging away. Taehyung led his friend across the playground and out the main gates without looking back once, not caring if they were getting stared at because he was already familiar with the sensation.

“You shouldn’t be spending your cash on booze,” Jungkook said as they stepped out onto the street.

“Who said anything about spending cash?” he retorted as he let go of his wrist and started walking down the sidewalk. After a few seconds he turned on his heel to look back at him with a wide grin and the boy returned it knowingly.

Several minutes later they were sitting in a nearly empty park which luckily contained no parents and kids but rather just a few people walking through and a couple looking to be sharing a picnic. No beer on show there but food that was probably a lot more appetising than the cheap street shit they had forked a couple of hundred won on. The beers however, like he had promised, were entirely free but they weren’t part of a six-pack like usual but rather just a few spare cans he had managed to grab from a little store before disappearing back out of it moments later. It wasn’t the best tasting but it was cold, and it was beer, so he didn’t particularly care.

“You know,” Jungkook said as he lowered his skewer of chicken. “I think we could’ve totally broken the sound barrier if that dick hadn’t stopped us.”

“More like broke my fucking neck ‘cos it was so fast.”

“Were you really gonna puke?” His friend asked him and he nodded with a fervent expression on his face. “Usually you only puke after two whole bottles of soju.”

“Seriously Kookie, that’s not right at all. You mean three.” The boy grinned at him before taking another bite of the fried chicken and Taehyung lifted his can to swallow a deep mouthful of beer.
“Imagine doing that with Dumbass, how fast before he started crying, huh?”

“Probably three seconds,” Jungkook said around his food and he smiled as he put the can back down on the grass and settled back on his wrists with a sigh. “Then Yoongi would show and stop us.”

“He’d fly to us just to stop it. I swear he’d grow fucking wings.” His friend snorted loudly and he ran his eyes along the park for a moment. “He’s too much sometimes…”

“Yeah, but so are you so it’s a fitting match.”

“No thanks, match me with someone else.”

“What, like with lover boy?” Jungkook raised an eyebrow at this, expression showing that he was in a playful teasing mood.

“Yeah, match me up with lover boy,” Taehyung replied as he glanced over at the couple across the park. “That’d be fucking awesome.”

“I’ll bet…”

“Who can I match you up with, hmmm?”

“No thanks, I go solo I don’t need any matches.” Jungkook shifted to fold his legs in front of him and carried on eating his skewer. Taehyung’s own one was already discarded on the grass beside his first empty can of beer. He turned his head to study his friend and his expression was hard to read and that was when a master plan hatched in his mind.

“Oh? But I’ve got such a great match in my head right now. Fantastic body, real cute face…” Jungkook looked at him curiously. “I’m talking ten outta ten, would bang y’know?” He paused for a moment before finishing. “I should totally set you up with Dumbass.”

The reaction was everything he had expected and more. For a second or two Jungkook just stared at him with that same confused expression and then it hit him and he saw his face changing. His brow
furrowed severely as his mouth dropped open, making his eyes narrow before they shot back up again in comic disbelief. His mouth opened and closed a few times and nothing but guttural noises came out before he managed to turn them into words.

“Jesus-fucking-Christ Tae I mean, seriously? You think that shit’s funny?”

“Keep denying, it just makes it more legit.” Taehyung replied with a wide smirk and the boy grabbed the other skewer before lightly stabbing his arm with it. He shifted to get away from him, letting out a cry of surprise, and the mostly empty can of beer toppled over. A slosh of liquid pooled out on the grass and he righted it to stop all of the remains soaking into the soil. The scent of it wafted up in a strong wave, familiar and somewhat calming. Across the park the couple started laughing at something and he glanced up to see the woman clapping a hand over her mouth, head back slightly so that her hair rippled with each giggle. They were having a good time clearly, and yet here he was sitting in a park trying to get wasted with his friend because he didn’t really know what else to do. What would the others think? The others were working hard or getting well-deserved rest but not him; he was just getting drunk like always.

“I told you I don’t need a match, I’m not desperate enough to even look at any of you guys, my bar’s a little higher, oh, and female.”

“You sure?”

“Pretty damn sure,” Jungkook tossed the skewer aside with a sigh and lifted his own can to drain what was left. The boy had had trouble getting work for looking too young and now he was likely going to get into a spot of trouble for stinking of booze too, ridding him of any other chances he might just have been able to secure. Well, he might just be able to scrub toilets but he doubted that the boy wanted to do that.

“Never say never…”

“How did you make that cash, huh?” His friend turned his head to look at him as he crushed the can between his hands and dropped it on the grass. Taehyung stared back at him blankly and tried to search his mind for something and yet he seemed to be completely blank, not even a shitty reply on the tip of his tongue.

“…What?” he managed to bumble after a few dumb seconds.
“How did you make the cash?” Jungkook repeated. “Stealing shit or actually working?” Taehyung dropped his eyes to look at the crushed can and he felt the most pressing urge to bite on his lip but he fought it, instead letting his fingers tug at the grass so that he pulled a chunk of blades free.

“Working.”

“Oh yeah? Where, think you can get a good word in for me?” He knew that the boy was joking and so he forced a laugh out even though his skin felt a little cold. If Jungkook had any clue whatsoever then he wouldn’t possibly say something like that.

“Not your field, stick to singing in bars Kookie.”

“I smell like a bar right now…” the other boy muttered under his breath.

They left the park together not long after they finished sharing the last can of beer, which had been slightly warm but still as enjoyable as the cold ones. He really did hope that Jungkook managed to get something somehow, even a shitty few hours of backbreaking work just so he could show his face at the hostel and not feel stupid for failing to raise a single won in all of the hours he had been gone. Undoubtedly the others would have found a job or two, he knew that Yoongi would be able to sniff even the most horrible one out if given enough reason though he didn’t think that he would go as low as he did for cash. He could be wrong but it wasn’t something he was going to imagine for fear of slipping up. Jimin already knew, he didn’t need the rest of the gang finding out too and he just hoped that his other friend wouldn’t decide to press any further about the mystery job he had lied about. He would just hang around the streets until the evening and then head back, bills in his boot a lie but still legit as far as his friends would know, and no need to worry about that anymore.

The street outside the park was long and there was a wide road between both sidewalks. Despite the size of it it was surprisingly devoid of vehicles, just the occasional few rolling down it every now and again, but the sidewalks had quite a few people on them. It was probably because there was a few cafés and a bookstore facing them, all of them seemingly popular. A young woman was standing just outside the bookstore and she was in the act of sorting her handbag out, trying to make room to place her small shopping bag inside. Taehyung didn’t really pay much attention to her as he turned to start walking down the street, seeing just another pedestrian like always because he was so used to seeing hundreds of strange and unrecognisable faces every day.

He was too preoccupied with his own musings that when a scream cut through the air he actually jumped in shock and whirled back around to look at his friend.
Jungkook stared back at him for perhaps a second before twisting his head to look across the street and he had only just copied this action when the boy made a surprised noise and then darted across the road. Taehyung’s mouth dropped open and he looked at the spot he had been occupying before turning to watch him. His friend raced across the road so fast that he cleared it in a moment and that was when he realised what he was doing.

Someone had snatched the woman’s purse whilst she had been sorting through her bag, grabbing it out of her hand and running off down the street, and Jungkook had taken it upon himself to chase him down.

Taehyung processed this all in the space of just a few seconds before also racing across the road. He heard a car horn blaring and felt something zooming past behind his back so closely that it felt a mere inch from hitting him. He got onto the sidewalk without tripping over the curb and chased after them both, yelling after his friend who was also yelling after the would-be thief. Taehyung briefly regretted the three beers as he felt his stomach sloshing with each step but it didn’t seem to affect the other boy in the slightest. He just carried on chasing the man and he actually got close but then the block ended and turned into a road. The man just darted across it and of course his friend did so too, and Taehyung barely had enough time to hear the horn before the car came into view. He let out a shout but it was too late. Jungkook didn’t see the vehicle because he was too busy with the thief and the blaring horn cut off with a loud bang.

Taehyung had never seen someone get hit by a car before. He had seen quite a few accidents with his friends but none of them had been stupid enough to get hit by a car, not even Jimin. No, in terms of injuries he had seen sprained ankles and wrists, bruised ribs and fractured noses and fingers, and the rare gash or two that required stitches.

But never a car.

He didn’t know what to expect but he didn’t think that it would be so…quick, over in the space of a blink. He had been a good distance away from the two of them and at the sight of the car he had dug his heels into the paving flags to stop himself but his friend hadn’t done that. Jungkook had raced off the curb right into its path even with the blaring horn to warn him. One moment the boy was in front of him and then the car crashed into him and he was gone. There was a horrible banging sound as the grille of the car slammed into his thighs but it didn’t knock him forward. Instead Jungkook rolled over the hood and onto the roof, legs flailing uselessly and elbows smacking into the metal body of the car hard enough to leave a few dents. As he rolled over the hood the car stopped with screeching brakes and he finished by landing in a crumpled heap right by the tailpipe. The driver was a woman, he saw that much, and she was sitting forward over the wheel with her hair hanging in her eyes.

For a few seconds Taehyung just stood there staring at the sight in front of him, frozen in place and unable to even breathe never mind move. Over the battered hood of the car he saw the thief still running down the street. The bastard hadn’t even stopped to see what had happened, hadn’t even
slowed down. Then a hysterical scream cut through the air and he finally managed to come back to reality.

“Fuck!” he cursed as he ran the last of the block to get to the vehicle. As he got closer the driver-seat door swung open and he saw the woman climbing out. Through her tangled hair he saw a gash on her hairline, from where she had smacked her head on the steering wheel as she had hit the brakes.

“Oh god, oh god, I didn’t... he ran out and I tried to stop but...” Taehyung raced around to the back of the car before dropping to his knees in front of his friend.

“Kookie?” He had landed on his stomach so he grabbed hold of his shoulder and shoved him onto his back. His chin and jaw must have hit the tarmac hard because the skin was grazed badly, great patches of skin torn up from the friction with the road. He could see no other visible head injuries but that wasn’t what he was worried about right now; he was worried about his ribs because he had seen them slamming right into the hood of the car.

“Nnnngh...” The boy made a noise and his eyelids flickered but didn’t stay fully open, instead half-lidded.

“Fuck fuck fuck,” Taehyung repeated the word under his breath as he glanced around them stupidly, trying to figure out what to do. He felt the urge to pull on his hair and he had just started doing it when he saw the driver of the car with a phone slapped against the side of her head. She was calling an ambulance and that meant one thing. The police would show and want to know about the robbery. Taehyung moaned at the thought of cops showing, cops interviewing two runaways that stunk of booze that would very much see the inside of a cell if his friend turned out to be okay. That was the thought that spurred him on and before he could even register what he was doing he grabbed hold of the boy and forced him to sit up. Jungkook let out a series of pained noises at this and he just hunkered down in front of him.

“Get on my back, we gotta blow. Now.”

“...hurts,” the boy whined in a voice that made his stomach turn, the taste of cheap beer coming back up into his throat. Taehyung had to drag him onto his back forcibly and when he got back upright he felt the boy’s head lolling against his, chin on his shoulder and arms dangling forward uselessly rather than locked around his neck.

“Wuh...what are you doing?” the driver asked as she stared at them both with wide eyes. “I just called an ambulance, you need to wait. You don’t need to carry him there, they’ll be here in a few-”
Taehyung ran past her without even listening and he heard her and several pedestrians exclaiming in surprise by this sudden event. If the accident had been the big entertainment then this was the twist that no one had seen coming. But he didn’t let their calls stop him or slow him down and he just ran down the street in the direction of the hostel because he needed to get off the streets as fast as he could.

“Can you hear me?” he asked as he tightened his grip on the boy’s thighs and leaned forward slightly to keep him on his back. Jungkook made a noise but didn’t say any word in particular, not even a yes. “I’m taking you to the hostel, OK? Back to Hoseok and Seokjin and-and-and everything’s gonna be alright.”

“…fucking car came outta…nowhere.”

“Uh-huh, fucking-A it did.”

“We’re gonna get in so much…trouble.” Taehyung pulled his lips back in an unconscious grimace at this because the boy was completely right, even considering everything that had happened. He knew exactly what was going to happen. One of them would smell beer on them and argue that they had been fucking around, that they had probably thought it was funny to play a game of chicken until the boy had rolled over the hood of a car and found out it wasn’t fun at all. Hell, maybe Yoongi would accuse him of pushing him for a joke, just like the Jimin bridge incident all over again. He told himself that he was being stupid for thinking it, that it was because he was so scared that he wasn’t thinking straight at all but he knew that it would happen, it was only a matter of time.

It took him several minutes of running to get back to the hostel, perhaps as few as ten or as many as twenty. In that time he saw people stopping and staring at them with wide eyes and concerned expressions. He also raced across quite a few roads without looking at traffic too, despite the accident that had just occurred. He was running on a terrified burst of adrenaline but it only lasted a short time before fizzing out on him and leaving him breathless and shaking, legs barely able to support his own weight never mind the barely conscious boy’s. But he didn’t let this stop him because Jungkook only had him right now and he wasn’t going to fuck up on him, not now, so he just dropped his head and forced himself to carry on until the sight of the familiar brick building came into view. Taehyung cut across the lot on a severe diagonal angle and scanned the doors before finding the right one and then he kicked the door hard with his foot. It didn’t open and he lowered his foot and tried again, struggling to lift his leg up once more. He didn’t even manage to cock his knee up when the door swung open and Seokjin’s head popped out of the gap.

“Tae, what are you-” his friend stopped and moved his eyes to look at his shoulder, and the sight of Jungkook’s dangling head. “Shit, what happened?”
“Jin?” He heard Hoseok’s voice calling out from the inside and that was when Taehyung shoved past their eldest friend to get inside the hostel room. He didn’t even stop and instead went over to the first bed before turning around and slowly lowering Jungkook onto the bed, the exact same one that the other boy was currently sitting on. Hoseok pulled his legs up in front of him and stared at their friend dumbly before looking up at him. His large eyes were so wide that his irises seemed to be floating in a sea of white and his mouth was also hanging open. The expression might have been cute if not for the absolute horror radiating from his eyes. “Holy shit Tae, what-”

“Car,” Taehyung said, voice hitching as he tried to catch his breath, “a fucking car.” He reached up to wipe sweat off his brow and he could feel his tee clinging to his skin: horrible cold terror sweat. “He got hit by a car.” Hoseok shifted on the bed to lean over him, instinctively checking his throat for a pulse and pulling his fingers away a few seconds later. Then he checked his face over thoroughly, scanning his hair for any possible gashes or bumps. Taehyung watched him do this as he took gasping breaths to calm himself down. He didn’t like the wobbly sensation in his legs or the way his hands just wouldn’t stop shaking.

“How did he get hit by a car?” Seokjin asked in a quiet voice, still standing by the open doorway because he seemed stuck in place like a statue.

“Chasing after some guy, a thief, tryna catch him or something I dunno I just…” Taehyung leaned forward to place his hands on his thighs because the room had started spinning. “Fuck, he got hit by a fucking car does it matter how the fuck it happened?”

“Why did you bring him back here?” Hoseok asked incredulously as he started bending the boy’s wrists and elbows, no doubt checking to see if anything was broken.

“We can’t…” He swallowed hard and closed his eyes, willing the spinning to just stop for a few seconds. “We can’t-”

“We can’t afford to go to a hospital,” Seokjin finished for him, not exactly what he had been thinking but a good enough excuse. “Not now, not when we’re fucking broke.”

“And what if he’s broke?” Hoseok gestured to Jungkook. “How the hell do we know he’s OK? What if he’s broken a couple of ribs or his hip or he gets concussion? What then? I’m not a fucking doctor, none of us are.”
“…hurts but not broken,” Jungkook mumbled, eyes fluttering under his lids as he did, “I don’t… think.”

“Don’t think what's not broken?”

“Me…I’m unbreakable motherfuckers.” The boy sounded as far from unbreakable as possible but at least he was conscious enough to talk to them.

“Not even a rib?” Seokjin asked as he moved from the door to get to the bed. Taehyung finally felt the horrible dizziness passing and he opened his eyes to stare at his boots for a few seconds, at the hideous carpet pile under them. The injured boy made a disgruntled noise as Seokjin started also checking him over, doing so gently to not disturb any possible injuries. “Tae, are you OK?”

“Huh, me?” He shifted to look at them and he saw concern on his friends’ faces. Didn’t they have something more important to worry about right now? “No, not fucking OK.”

“Sit down before you collapse,” Hoseok advised, climbing off the bed to come over to him. He felt the boy’s fingers wrap around his wrist and he pulled away from him, a little rougher than he intended. “Tae-”

“I need to go,” he muttered under his breath, “I need to…to leave and-”

“You’re not leaving in that state Tae, come on, sit down and-” he shrugged Hoseok’s hands off his shoulders and staggered across the room and the boy tried to grab onto him again, “Tae, stop fucking around and-”

“Let me go!” he shouted and he saw Hoseok jump in surprise, blinking rapidly as he dropped his hand away from his arm. Taehyung was just as shocked at the fact he had shouted and he stared at him dumbly for a few seconds, feeling a guilty sensation swirling in the pit of stomach. “I just…I need to go.” And with that he whirled on his heel and left the hostel room, hearing Seokjin saying something about beer even with him still in earshot. His friend had probably wanted him to hear it but it had no effect on him whatsoever because he felt a little numb to everything.

But not numb enough.
He needed more booze for that, preferably vodka.

Taehyung didn’t know how exactly he ended up in the subway tunnel but he supposed that it was via the escalators and not the stairs because he couldn’t have possibly gotten down them in his current state. Just walking seemed incredibly hard to do and he felt himself reeling a little to the side as he did, arms bouncing off the wall of the system so he didn’t fall over at least. If he did then he wouldn’t even try and get up and instead just lie there and hopefully pass out. That might be hard because the evening commuters would probably stand on him rather than go around him and he wouldn’t care that much. He doubted he would even feel it because everything seemed foggy. When he reached up to touch his face he found that he couldn’t seem to feel it against his fingertips. Nose or cheek? Forehead or chin? His face was numb and he wasn’t surprised. Three bottles of soju would make everything numb.

He knew that people were staring at him and yet just like the thoughts of being trampled he didn’t care about that either. Let them stare, let them whisper and laugh at the wrecked kid stumbling around like a baby deer, wobbly legs and passive expression. They didn’t know, they didn’t understand, they didn’t care. They probably had homes and normal lives to go home to but not him. They probably worked a retail shift all day long, or sat behind desk 9-5 with faux smiles on their faces. They hadn’t woken up in an abandoned factory with an empty stomach and walked a dozen miles in the sweltering heat.

They hadn’t seen their best friend get hit by a car today and they had no right to fucking stare but of course they would. Taehyung was used to it, used to being the walking zoo exhibition everywhere he went. At least now he was drunk enough to actually warrant the attention for once.

There was a bench in front of him and he could see an old man sitting on one end of it but the rest of it was free. It was metal and set against the wall and he thought that he could really sit down on it right now, maybe even lie down and pass out should the mood take him. *Slow and steady wins the race,* he thought as he dragged his feet over to the bench and slowly tried to lower himself onto it. It didn’t work and he instead landed on his ass rather hard, hard enough to make his bruises ache for a few seconds before going numb again. Then he practically slumped back against the wall with a groan.

“I think you’ve had too much to drink.” He turned his head slightly to look at the elderly man on the bench. Though his words seemed stern he saw a slight smile on his face.
“Y’think?” he asked back, voice so slurred that it was a miracle he could even understand him.

“I think, and I also think you shouldn’t be travelling in such a state. Might miss your stop.”

“I’m nuh travelling.”

“Good, but…this is a subway, you know son?” The man laughed softly at this and he cocked his head as he looked at him because he could rest his chin on his shoulder rather than have to hold it up.

“I mean, I’m kinda travelling just nuh on a… train. There wuh-was a train, and a car, and something else too I forget but uh…wuh...what am I talking about again?”

“Travelling,” the old man said without missing a beat.

“Ah, travelling…travelling…hmm,” Taehyung furrowed his brow and made several noises under his breath that attracted even more passing stares. “An adventure. I’m on an adventure. An adventure with friends but it…it’s gotten all fucked up.”

“An adventure?” The man shifted on the bench and straightened a crease out on the knee of his slacks. “I used to go on adventures too, back when I was a kid. Lots of them, but then I got married and settled down and I never got to go on another.” He studied the man silently and moved his tongue around his mouth, still tasting vodka on it. “There was fun, getting lost, getting into trouble, getting drunk.” The man looked back up at him and he still had that smile on his face. “I don’t think one can have an adventure without a little trouble son.”

“This isn’t little,” Taehyung muttered, “this is…everything. Everyone. All fucking trouble, all of us. We cause it, we’re made of it and-” Taehyung caught sight of a flash of a blue uniform shirt out of the corner of his eye and he knew it was subway security coming over to escort him off the premises, “and it keeps getting worst and there’s no end in sight, it’s just shit after shit and I dunno what to do.”

“So long as you have friends, you’ll figure something out son.” The man reached out to put a hand on his shoulder, squeezing it for a second before letting go.
“I’m… I’m scared I’m gonna lose ’em.”

“Sometimes we have to lose things only to replace them with something more important, more special.” The male worker was talking to a handful of people and looking right at him and Taehyung risked only a quick glance before dropping his gaze again.

“Ain’t nobody on this earth more special than my friends.”

“Then… you don’t need to worry about losing them.” He stared at his hands clasped in his lap and a few seconds later he felt a shadow fall over him.

“Excuse me, but I’m going to have to ask you to leave.” Taehyung didn’t look up at the voice because he knew it belonged to the security worker. Instead he just attempted to get off the bench but he suddenly found it a rather hard task. After a momentary struggle the worker reached down to lightly grab his upper arm and assist him.

“What if I’m the trouble?” Taehyung asked as he twisted his head to look back at the old man. “What if it’s all my fault, huh?”

“I.”

“Come on, stop harassing your elders,” the worker said as he started pulling him away from the bench, back in the direction of the exit.

“What?” he called back, twisting in his grip even when he found his feet getting all tangled up.

“Real friends will help you,” the old man replied and he didn’t have time to even process this before he was being escorted along the subway system by the worker. More stares at this, more pointing fingers and moving lips. He kept his eyes straight ahead and just waited for the sight of the exit to appear, riding the escalators with the man because there was no way he could get up the stairs. He had only just been dragged onto the street when he heard a familiar voice echoing on the air and he felt himself jumping in surprise.

“Hey, hey Tae what’s going on?” Namjoon called and he heard his footsteps approaching as he turned his head to look at him.
“You know this boy?” the worker asked as his friend jogged over and stopped right in front of him. He confirmed that he did and then the man let go of him. “Try and stop him from harassing people please, otherwise the police will get called next time.”

“Uh…yes sir,” Namjoon said with a slight bow as he watched him disappearing out of sight back down the escalator. Then he turned his attention back to him. “Tae, what the fuck?”

“I uh…I’m drunk,” Taehyung replied as he reached up to run at his eyes with a groan. “I’m so fucking drunk and I—”

“I can see that,” his friend retorted as he looked him up and down slowly.

“The hostel, I had to leave the hostel ‘cos—”

“Well, we’re going right back there,” Namjoon said as he reached over to take his arm just like the worker from a few moments ago. “The hell are you doing out here, huh? Do the others know?”

“No, yeah, no I mean kinda. Ju-Jin,” he hiccuped and let out another groan, “and lover boy and- oh shit Nammie, oh shit Kookie.” His friend asked him what was wrong and he reeled back so hard that he felt his legs buckling. Namjoon managed to stop him from collapsing but as a result they both ended up hunkering down rather than walking. Taehyung didn’t think his legs were stable enough for that and after a few seconds they wobbled and spilled him onto his ass. “There wuh-was an accident, shit, a big accident.”

“What accident? Did something happen to Kookie?” He had closed his eyes upon falling and though he couldn’t see his expression he could hear the panic in Namjoon’s voice.

“We were out, at a park or something. He couldn’t find work, we were having a break and…something happened and he ran across the road and- a thief! Some dick stole this woman’s purse and he chased after him but a car, a car came outta nowhere and bang!” Taehyung smashed a rolled up fist against his palm for effect. “Slammed right into him! Knocked him flying and I had to carry him back to the hostel.”

“Kookie got hit by a car?” Namjoon asked in a quiet voice, as if he wasn’t really sure of what he was hearing.
“Got fucking hit alright,” he muttered before reaching up to bury his face in his hands. It wasn’t numb anymore but rather aching and he didn’t like the sensation at all. “I had to leave, I couldn’t stay it was…was too much I-”

“I understand Tae, I understand,” his friend said as he put his hand on his shoulder. “But is he OK? Do you know if he’s OK?”

“I think so? I dunno I just…” Taehyung took a shuddering breath as he lowered his hands again. “What’s happening?” Namjoon studied his face for a second as if he was uncertain by what he meant by this question. “What’s going on with us? Why does shit keep happening?”

“…I dunno.”

“Are we cursed or something I swear it’s just…one fuck up after another and I dunno what’s gonna happen next but I’m scared.” Taehyung sniffed and felt his eyelids burning. “I’m scared that we’re falling apart at the fucking seams.”

“Hey, we’re not falling apart, alright? We’re not,” Namjoon said as he grabbed both his shoulders and twisted him so that he could look at his face fully. “We’re just…having a hard time right now. This has been hard on everyone, yeah?”

“Yuh…yeah,” Taehyung said as he blinked tears back.

“But it’s not gonna keep fucking us over ‘cos the bad will stop soon, right? Bad things always hit at the same time but then we get over them and the good happens again. Bad things come in groups of three or whatever that stupid fucking saying is, OK?” He nodded even though he didn’t really understand what he was talking about: he was way too drunk for philosophical thoughts. “So what we’re gonna do is go back to the hostel and check up on him, check up on Kookie and find out if he’s OK.”

“What if he’s not OK?” Taehyung asked as his friend dragged him back to his feet. Namjoon slung an arm around him to support him so he placed his own arm around his shoulders.

“We’re talking about Kookie Tae, that kid could jump out a plane without a parachute and land without a scratch. He’s gonna be OK.”
“The power of positive thinking,” he muttered and it made his friend smile.

“Wouldn’t think any other way Tae.”

“Nammie?” he asked as the young man more or less pulled him along the street, legs more steady now that he had the support. “Do you think this is all happening ‘cos of me?”

“The fuck did you get that idea from?” Namjoon asked, genuine confusion in his tone that didn’t sound forced at all. Taehyung didn’t reply and after a few seconds he continued talking. “What’s happening is happening. Nobody is causing it, except maybe God if you believe in that kinda thing. Bad shit happens, it doesn’t mean there’s a reason for it, or a cause.”

“You really think that?”

“I do,” Namjoon confirmed with a nod, “and I don’t think you’re responsible for it so don’t think shit like that.”

“Thank you,” Taehyung said after a moment of silence. His friend asked him what for and he added. “For being a friend, a real friend.”

“What other kinda friend is there?” Namjoon asked with a smile.
The sound of a door slamming echoed through the room and it was loud enough to make him open his eyes widely. For a few seconds he stared at the white ceiling overhead and then he felt them wanting to close again and it took him a great effort to stop this from happening. He felt a little strange, not exactly awake nor asleep but rather trapped between both and he knew if it wasn’t for his aching body he might just be able to fall unconscious and get a little peace but it wasn’t going to happen right now. Jungkook let his eyelids reach half-mast and then he forced them to stay that way, not closing a fraction more. Who had just left the hostel room? Taehyung? He didn’t know because he couldn’t lift his head right now to check, everything was too sore to even imagine being able to do so.

Jungkook knew that he was lying on a bed because he could feel it underneath him, the covers against his fingertips and the mattress under his head. He was in the hostel room because his friend had dragged him back here of course, because there had been an accident. Yet he struggled to remember anything more than the sight of a road in front of him and then the most horrible jarring sensation. The impact hadn’t hurt at first, rather it had just shocked him, but when he had come back down on the hood and slammed his ribs on the metal there had been a flare of pain as the air had escaped his lungs. Then the car had still been ploughing forward so the momentum had made him roll right over the roof until he had hit the tarmac, head bouncing off it so hard that his vision had went black for a few seconds. The pain had taken a moment to kick in, his brain in too much shock to register what had happened until Taehyung had rolled him over and started cursing hysterically.

He was pretty sure that he was missing quite a bit of skin on his face because there was a horrible stinging sensation on his chin and one of his cheeks; just like how scraped knees felt. If the grazes were bleeding he had no way of telling because he didn’t want to move and try and touch them to find out. He didn’t think he could lift his arm right now because his shoulders and ribs were hurting too much and he would just wait until someone else cleaned his face for him, like Jimin had after he had gotten into that fight of all of those nights back. He didn’t think anything was broken but he had no way of telling. It didn’t hurt when he breathed, which was good, but moving was enough to make his ribs throb in pain and that wasn’t the most reassuring sign. Broken, maybe not. One of them could be fractured but that was something he would rather not think about right now. Fractured ribs required treatment, treatment required money, and there was nothing more than a handful of coins in his jeans pockets.

Jungkook stared up at the ceiling, which was blurred from his eyelashes getting in the way and distorting the view, and then something moved suddenly and he felt fingers on his brow; soft warm fingertips.
“Kookie?” Seokjin asked in a quiet voice.

“Hmmm?” he managed to reply, moving his tongue in his mouth to press it against the roof and make the sound rather than say an actual word.

“Stupid question I know, but what’s hurting right now?” His friend’s fingers moved along his brow slowly and he stuck his tongue out to wet his lips before attempting to speak.

“Ribs most…ly, and my shoulder.” He asked him which one and he hesitated as he tried to figure out where the pain seemed to be radiating from. “Right shoulder.”

“Do you think you can sit up?”

“…Maybe but I don’t think I wanna.” At this remark he heard the softest laugh, possibly from Hoseok, and then hands grabbing hold of him. He was dragged up into a sitting position and the pain was so sudden that he couldn’t help a groan of pain coming out of his mouth. “Fuck, fuck, that hurts.”

“Does it hurt to breathe?” Hoseok asked as he shifted on the bed. Jungkook made a noise to deny this and the boy sighed in relief. “Then we don’t need to worry about punctured lungs at least, I think…”

“My head feels punctured right now…”

“Looks like you hit it pretty hard on the road,” Seokjin said as he leaned forward to examine his face, eyes moving along his hairline to likely look for any cuts. “Let’s play a game. How many fingers?” The man held his hand up in front of him and Jungkook squinted at it for a moment.

“Two fingers and a thumb, nice try tricking me.”

“Still as witty as always I see, not even a car can stop that.” Seokjin lightly grabbed his head between his hands and turned it from side to side slowly. “Does that hurt.”

“Nu-uh, my head hurts ’cos it bounced off the fucking road but I can see just fine, it’s not blurry or
“So far so good,” his friend said as he let go of his head. “Now comes the painful part. Definitely your right shoulder? Not both?” Jungkook thought this over for a moment before rolling his left shoulder, wincing slightly as he did.

“No, the left is OK. I can move it but my ribs hurt a little when I do. What’re gonna do? You’re not gonna pull on it are you?”

“No, I’m going to try rolling it and moving it. Just to make sure it’s not broken or dislocated, OK?”

“I didn’t know you were a doctor…” Jungkook muttered and his friend gave him a wry smile.

“No, but I did a first aid course in college so just let me try it,” he argued that it would hurt and he sighed. “I know that it will hurt but it would hurt even with a doctor or a cute nurse checking so just let me try it. You’ve got Doctor Jin and nurse Hoseok to check you over instead, I’m sure he’s much more cuter than the ones in the hospital.”

“Pft,” Hoseok snorted, “yeah let’s go with that.”

“Why does that sound like a line outta some kinda porno?” Jungkook asked as his friend got to his feet and leaned over to grab hold of his upper arm firmly but not roughly. “Honestly, I’m sure that it’s fine you don’t need to-ow!” Seokjin straightened his arm out, holding it level with his shoulder, and there was an eruption of pain in his shoulder as a result. “That fucking hurts!” The man ignored him and instead started folding his elbow and straightening it once more. He asked him if that hurt. “Not my elbow no, but my shoulder…I think I tore a muscle, I don’t think it’s broken.”

“Hmm, you might be correct. How bad is the pain?”

“Bad, but like a really bad torn muscle pain. Maybe…seven outta ten?” Seokjin moved his hands along to his shoulder and he slowly rotated it. Jungkook bit down on his tongue until he stopped this, willing himself to not whine too much for fear that they really would think he had broken something.

“I couldn’t do that if it was broken without you screaming, I think you have torn a muscle, maybe a ligament.”
“What about the ribs?” the other boy asked.

“Fuck you Jung Hoseok,” Jungkook groaned as he closed his eyes. The pain from Seokjin checking his shoulder had made him feel nauseous and the idea of him doing the same to his ribs was enough to make him feel a little lightheaded.

“Don’t swear at your nurse,” Hoseok retorted as he got to his feet and climbed off the bed to cross the room.

“I don’t really know how to check them,” Seokjin said after a moment, “and I don’t want to go prodding around and risk hurting him. What does it feel like to you Kookie? Does anything feel broken?”

“Dunno, I don’t think they’re broken ‘cos…when the car hit me I didn’t hear a crack or feel anything like that. It felt like getting punched really hard, winded me badly, but that’s it. I think I’m OK.”

“You’re one lucky kid if that’s the case.”

“Lucky’s my middle name,” Jungkook said as his friend finally let go of his shoulder and instead sat down on the edge of the bed beside him. He could feel his eyes on him but he just kept his own closed and listened to the sound of the other boy rooting around in a bag across the room. “Where’s Tae?”

“He left a few minutes ago,” Seokjin explained. “Didn’t say where to or why, just that he needed to go. I think he was upset and he needed to clear his head.”

“Don’t you mean get drunk?” Hoseok corrected as he came back over to them, the sound of his bare feet rustling against the carpet. Jungkook opened his eyes just in time to see him hunkering down in front of him, bottle of something very familiar in hand. “Because we all know that’s what’s going to happen.” He eyed the bottle of antiseptic and saw that there was quite a bit missing from the last time he had seen it clasped in Jimin’s hand. Where had it all gone? It was a considerable two inches perhaps, and it was very noticeable. He couldn’t recall anyone else using nor needing the antiseptic except him but he didn’t really have the time nor energy to ask the others about it.

“He was already drunk…kinda,” Jungkook said as he watched the boy unscrewing the cap. The scent wafted out of it and hit them all in the faces. “I mean we were both uh…we had a couple of
“At 1pm in the afternoon?” Hoseok asked as he dabbed a scrap of bandage roll into the solution, the material soaking through with the murky liquid. Though the question was supposed to be surprised he saw nothing akin to it on his face or in his voice.

“Yeah,” Jungkook said in a quiet voice, “fucking stupid I know but…but I couldn’t find any work and it pissed me off. I bumped into Tae and he already had some cash and that made me feel even worse so we took a break and—”

“When was this?” Seokjin asked suddenly and he paused, mouth hanging open and thoughts suddenly stuck in place. “What time was it when you bumped into Tae?”

“Uh…maybe 12pm, I think? No watch, I just know I’d been looking for like three hours when I bumped into him. Why?”

“How much did he have? Did he tell you?”

“He said ummm…100,000…I think. Can’t remember, my head hurts too much right now.” He let this hang in the air for a moment before once again asking them why they wanted to know but neither of them replied. Jungkook tried to figure out why but before he could even attempt to Hoseok dabbed at his chin with the antiseptic as he felt himself taking a sharp intake of air and jerking back away from his hand. It had just been a brief second of contact and yet his skin was burning from it, enough to make tears of pain start welling in the corners of his eyes.

“Just let me clean your face Kookie, I’ll be quick I promise.”

“How many times do I have to say that it hurts before you’ll both listen to me?” Jungkook practically whined as the boy shifted to once again dab at his scraped chin. He squeezed his eyes shut and gritted his teeth at the pain but didn’t move away this time. His fingers rolled up into fists but a few seconds later he felt something against the back of his right hand so he flipped it over and entwined his fingers tightly in Seokjin’s. He probably squeezed tight enough to hurt him but the man didn’t make a sound or try and loosen his grip. Hoseok quickly cleaned his chin and along the side of his jaw before moving to his left cheek and dabbing the soaked bandage against the grazes there too. It took a couple of seconds and then he announced that he was done. Even though that was the case he still felt a horrible stinging in the cuts that would take some time to stop hurting.
“See, not that bad at all, right?”

“Hoseok, if I could move right now I’d fucking kick you,” Jungkook groaned, lifting his left hand up to rub at his eyes roughly, feeling tears wiping off on his skin as he did.

“Well, when you feel better you get one free kick,” Hoseok said as he bundled the soiled bandage up and tossed it into the small trash can by the door. “How does that sound?” He agreed that that sounded good and the other boy smiled at him.

“Do I look wrecked?” Jungkook asked suddenly, thinking about his faded bruises that were still in place, the raw mark on his lip from the skin healing over that was stubborn and wouldn’t go away. Though he hadn’t caught sight of the grazes yet he was willing to bet that they were hideous and impossible to miss, certainly not slight cuts like the ones on his knuckles.

“Want me to sugarcoat it?” Seokjin asked with a soft smile. He shook his head and the man grimaced. “It’s looks pretty bad right now.” Jungkook sighed because he had expected this exact answer and he contemplated reaching up to try and feel the damage because he couldn’t get to his feet to check his face in the bathroom mirror right now, stopping himself only because he knew that Hoseok would nag at him for it. He would probably claim that he needed to clean the grazes again because his filthy fingers had touched them, and he would rather avoid having that shit near his face for a few hours if he could help it.

“It feels pretty bad.”

He felt both of his friends’ eyes on him and he waited to see if either of them would say something or whether it was up to him. He was still thinking about the way Seokjin had interrupted him in the middle of his account to ask about Taehyung, about how that had been enough to distract away from the important matter at hand. He hadn’t even finished talking about what had happened and neither of them had asked so he thought that he should wait until later, until they remembered or his other friends barged in and demanded to hear the full account. He didn’t want to have to tell it over and over, repeating what had happened once was enough to make him feel like curling up into a ball so the longer he could avoid it the better. What was it about Taehyung that had caused them to both want answers? When he had left the hostel this morning he could remember the boy sitting on the bed by the window in his own world, not moving and barely even blinking, seemingly waiting for the bathroom to empty out so that he could get cleaned up without tripping over cast-off clothes and towels. Had anything happened in the time that he had been gone to make them want to know his whereabouts or what he had been up to? Had his head and body not been aching so badly he might have considered trying to ask them further, to try and get an answer out of them, but right now he really didn’t want to start any trouble, especially if doing so would get his friend into trouble of some kind. Taehyung had told him that he had been working for the cash and he was going to believe him until given a reason to not believe, and if the cash had been gotten through stealing then he didn’t really care either. They weren’t really in the position to start complaining about where their funds
came from and if it meant Taehyung had lifted more shit to sell then he didn’t care. Jungkook had done his own fair share of stealing in the past, best to not throw stones in glass houses. Whatever Taehyung had done he had done with them all in mind and he thought that that was reason enough to leave it all alone and not press any further.

“I can’t believe I got hit by a fucking car…” Jungkook muttered to break the silence that had fallen over the hostel room for several minutes. For a few seconds this just hanged in the air and then he heard Hoseok starting to laugh, saw his shoulders shaking slightly as he tried not to do so out of the corner of his eye. But it was useless and he just ended up clapping a hand over his mouth to try and suppress the sound. Seokjin tried his hardest to keep his expression neutral but he saw the way he pulled his lips in and then Jungkook couldn’t stop himself from snorting laughter. It made his ribs protest with a sharp stab of pain. “Ah, don’t make me laugh, it hurts!” Yet he found himself laughing even more and it was so painful that he fell back against the bed. “It really fucking hurts!”

“Hoseok, I need you to do a massive favour for me,” their eldest friend said as he shifted to get off of the bed. The boy asked him what curiously as he looked at him, still grinning but managing to control his laughter. “I need to go get food and I need you to watch over Kookie. I know we have like the tiniest budget left but we also have no food… which is a massive problem right now.” Jungkook explained that he had already had something to eat so he didn’t need to worry about him and Seokjin practically sighed in relief. “OK, that makes it a little easier I guess. I’m afraid it can only be the cheap shit but you understand, right?”

“Don’t worry about it,” Hoseok said with a soft nod. “Don’t worry about the food or Kookie, I’ll see to it that he doesn’t run in front of another car.”

“Don’t you mean crawl?” Jungkook muttered and his friends laughed at the remark.

“I’ll only be a few minutes, I’m sure that you can handle him. Now if it was Tae I’d doubt it.”

“Oh I can handle Tae too, don’t worry about him.” So Seokjin collected his boots from the floor and proceeded to knot them tightly, checking his jeans pockets and pulling out just a few bills and a palmful of coins. The man sighed wearily at the sight and shoved them back before crossing the room and opening the door, calling out his goodbyes as he closed it behind him. They both said theirs and then Jungkook finally lay back down on the bed with a groan of pain.

“God, I’m so fucking glad he’s gone. I was scared he’d start poking my ribs or maybe play them like a fucking xylophone.”

“Don’t give me any ideas,” Hoseok said as he shifted to cross his legs up on the bed in front of him,
just a few inches of cover between them both. “I’ve always wanted to learn to play an instrument.”

“You’d have to knock me unconscious first, and the way I’m feeling right now…I’m not far from it.”

“Try to not pass out on me,” Hoseok said, “because if Seokjin comes back and sees you lying there he’ll think you died and blame me. I can picture it now.” And Jungkook could too, the mental image of their friend stepping inside and dropping a convenience store bag on the floor, hands on his hips as he loudly complained. Yes, it was fitting enough to make him laugh under his breath, wincing slightly at the pain. “Kookie?”

“Hmm?”

“How exactly did you end up getting hit by the car?”

“I told you, I was running after a thief and I didn’t see the stupid car and I ran right in front of it.” He turned his head slightly to look at his friend but the other boy wasn’t looking at him and rather at the bed covers as if they were more interesting. “Some dick grabbed a woman’s purse and I just…I couldn’t help myself and I ran after him. Fucking stupid I know but…”

“No, you were trying to do the right thing. It wasn’t stupid at all.”

“It feels pretty stupid right now.”

“And Tae?”

“Tae was…uh…I’m pretty sure he was chasing after me.” For some reason this made Hoseok laugh to himself and he wasn’t sure why exactly. “He was yelling at me to stop I think, and I’m pretty sure he yelled about the car too but it was too late for me to stop.” Jungkook paused for a moment and thought his words over in his head before deciding to say them out loud. “Tae did everything he could to help me, you know? He might’ve been drunk yeah, but he helped me. He thought he was doing the right thing and I think that he did. I dunno what I would’ve done if that happened to any of you, I don’t think I would’ve been able to carry any of you back here. I would’ve freaked out probably, and ended up letting the ambulance and police show up and get us into even more shit.”

“Why do you feel the need to defend Tae all of a sudden?” Hoseok asked quietly as he finally
looked at him.

“Dunno, ‘cos you and Seokjin seemed to…well earlier on you were asking questions like he was in trouble or something, like he did something wrong and I just thought—” the boy asked him what he meant by that and Jungkook paused before clarifying. “Seokjin asked a lot of questions about Tae and the money he had made.” Hoseok made a soft noise under his breath at this, as if he suddenly remembered this. “Why?”

“He was probably wondering how the hell Tae made 100,000₩ an hour.” This time it was Jungkook’s turn to be confused and he asked him what he was talking about. “Tae left the hostel around 11:30ish and you said you bumped into him around 1pm so that’s an hour and thirty minutes allowing room either way. That’s a lot of cash to make in that time, don’t you think? Maybe that’s why he wanted to know?”

“…I guess,” Jungkook said after a moment of thought. “Does it matter?”

“I don’t know,” Hoseok shrugged. “It’s too hard to get answers out of Tae these days he’s very…volatile.”

“I thought you said you could handle him?”

“I lied. I can barely even handle Jimin these days and he’s hardly a handful. Handling him used to be like handling a elementary school kid but I don’t know…maybe it’s not you that are all changing, maybe it’s just me.” The room went silent and he didn’t want to say something stupid to break it. Did Hoseok really think that they had changed that much? That he couldn’t control any of them? Jungkook didn’t feel that he had changed that much at all and yet it seemed that he was unable to see his own changes and developments. Now that Hoseok had put it that way he felt almost guilty for causing trouble these past couple of times, especially the fight from the other night. If the boy felt that he was getting too much to control he could only imagine what his older friends were thinking.

“I’m sorry,” Jungkook said eventually. “I’ll stop causing so much shit.”

“Trust me Kookie, everyone is worried about you but—”

“But it’s Tae,” he finished for him, “isn’t it? You all think he’s outta control.” Hoseok didn’t reply to this but he didn’t need him to, all he needed to see was the way that he dropped his eyes to study his hands in his lap instead; as obvious an answer as a shout.
Jungkook didn’t really register the fact that he had fallen asleep but he must have because when he next opened his eyes the hostel room was dark and someone was rapping on the door hard. The door was locked and there was only one set of keys so everyone else had to knock to be let into the room. Right now he had no way of telling but the knock was frantic and there was only a few seconds between each attempt before another series sounded; knuckles against the wood. He couldn’t even sit up never mind get up to answer it so he just waited to see if anyone would wake up and answer it on his behalf. After five such knocks he felt the bed shifting and then someone getting up to answer it. He must have been sharing the bed and that was also something he had only just registered. The sound of a lock scraping back, metal against metal, and the door swinging open.

“Oh hey Yoongi,” Seokjin said in a sleepy mumble. He could almost picture him reaching up to rub at his eyes, perhaps to fix his vest sleeve that he liked to sleep in or pull down on the wrinkled lengths. “I’m glad you’re back right now…shit.”

“Hey, you OK?” There was a slight pause before he started reeling off questions. “What happened? Is Hoseok alright?” Though Yoongi also sounded half-asleep there was something in his tone that sounded alert, likely because the thought of something bad happening was enough to send his pulse racing and wake him right back up again.

“Hoseok’s fine, it's Kookie.”

“What the fuck happened?” Jungkook heard the rustling sound of movement, undoubtedly his friend pushing his way inside the hostel room. He took a deep breath and attempted to sit up, even when it made his ribs ache just as badly as earlier. “Was he in another fight? Did he get the shit kicked outta him again?”

“No, he was in an accident. Tae brought him back here a few hours ago. He was hit by a car.”

“Fuck me,” the other man said in breathless disbelief.

“He seems OK though, I mean physically he’s busted up pretty bad but nothing broken that we could find. He’s going to be out of action for at least a week though.”
“Course he is, he got hit by a fucking car.” The incredulous tone in Yoongi’s voice was enough to make him grin and he managed to finally sit up. He dropped his head to stare at the covers because it felt too heavy to hold up, slumped over forward even though his ribs didn’t like the position at all. “Where’s Tae? And Jimin?”

“Still out, Joonie’s still out too,” Seokjin explained. “ Might still be working but I doubt it, I hope they’re all on their way back here.”

“Oh I don’t need to worry about him, he’ll be fine out there but it’s getting late now. I hope the kids aren’t working too.” Yoongi shifted to look across the dark hostel room, the only light coming in from the window across the room, and he seemed to notice that he was awake, squinting at him slightly. “Hey, you OK Kookie?”

“Not really,” Jungkook muttered and he heard his friend laughing under his breath before he moved across the room to get to the bed, sitting down in the edge beside him slowly as if to not disturb him in any way.

“You trying to fight cars now, huh?” Yoongi joked and he rolled his eyes in response. “I think they’re too big for you.”

“Well, Hot Wheels are too big for you,” his friend reached over to ruffle at his hair roughly and he grinned at him.

“Seriously, how are you? Anything hurting right now?” So Jungkook explained that his ribs were aching really bad and that he was pretty certain that he had torn a muscle in his shoulder too but he wasn’t sure at all. As he spoke he saw Yoongi’s eyes moving along his face to examine the grazes. He only just finished talking when Seokjin moved to sit down on the bed again with a loud yawn. “If anything gets too bad or you think you need medical attention then just say it,” the man said in a low voice, “and we’ll get you to a hospital no matter what, OK? Don’t lie about anything hurting, we’ll find the cash somehow right?” Seokjin made a noise in agreement.

“I won’t.”

“Christ Kookie, a car? How the fuck did you manage to get hit by a car?”

“I know, I wasn’t looking where I was going,” Jungkook said with a soft laugh. “Talk about fucking
“When Jin opened the door I thought for sure that it was someone else, y’know? That something had happened with Hoseok or probably Jimin ‘cos that kid’s always busting his ass somehow, but not you. I gotta say I’m fucking surprised.” Yoongi glanced across the room to study the other boy, Hoseok curled up in the other bed under the covers seemingly asleep. “Talk about dodging a bullet. Nothing broken, not even a finger?”

“Nu-uh,” Jungkook said with a head shake, “just some torn muscles and a real sore head but nothing broken at a-” before he could finish this however Yoongi moved forward suddenly and he felt his arms going around his neck, pulling him into an embrace that he had not expected at all from his friend. His jacket sleeves brushed around his neck, the polyester material smooth on his skin and then he felt his hair against his cheek. “Nothing broken,” he finished lamely. Jungkook could smell cigarette smoke coming from his clothes so strongly that he could taste the tobacco on his tongue. Then, just as quickly as he had hugged him, Yoongi broke the contact and sat back on the bed.

“Hoseok?” he asked, glancing over at Seokjin as he did. The other man explained that he was alright to his knowledge, that he hadn’t touched a single pill and had been headache-free all day long, eating a light lunch and resting for most of the time. “Good, good, at least he’s not looking for ‘em right now but he will soon enough. We might need to…confiscate ‘em before then. Remove the temptation.”

“I thought of that too but then I thought it was a bit…much. It’s like we don’t trust him. I think it might upset him to find out that we did that.”

“Hmm, good point.” Yoongi shifted on the bed slightly and Jungkook just looked at him, still a little taken aback by the sudden embrace. “We’ll just need to keep a constant eye on him if possible.” His friend started gnawing on his lower lip and Seokjin asked him how the day had went for him. “Nothing as shocking as getting hit by a car, I’m afraid my day’s fucking boring in comparison.”

“Work?”

“Don’t ask me how I did it but I managed to fucking bluff about being able to ride a moped,” Yoongi said, and to Jungkook this sounded like the complete opposite to a boring day already, “and so for today I worked as…a pizza delivery guy.”

“How the fuck did you even do that?” Jungkook asked in a mixture of awe and confusion. The man shrugged with a grin, the movement making even more cigarette scent waft to hit him in the face. “How did you deliver them? I don’t even know what city we’re in right now.”
“I followed the road signs,” he explained and for some reason this made Seokjin laugh as he lay back down in the bed, shifting to lie on his side and get comfortable. “It wasn’t that hard at all really, the hardest part was trying to not get caught by the police without a license but I managed not to. Dunno how, I was sitting like this the entire time.” Yoongi held both hands out in front of him, elbows cocked to mime riding a moped, and he sat bolt upright. His expression was so flighty that Jungkook couldn’t help but snort laughter, especially when he started sliding his eyes back and forth.

“Talk about lucky…”

“Look who’s talking,” his friend retorted. “After that I cleaned dishes like always, I’m a real expert at that.”

“It’s just like Seoul,” Jungkook said and a moment later he sighed in agreement. Yoongi looked physically drained, like he did most days and nights. He didn’t know how the man managed to keep going when he never seemed to be resting, never seemed to get more than a couple of hours of sleep a night and spent his waking hours slaving away or nervously pacing. He hadn’t even thought about how the days on the road had affected him because he always seemed to be running on empty even when they were back in Seoul, yet here he was wondering about just how well he was coping with it all: the hours on the road, the constant stress and troubles that they kept seeming to get into. Maybe he was wrong for assuming that his older friends were dealing with it a lot better than he and the other boys were? Maybe they were just better at hiding it then they were?

“Don’t remind me of Seoul,” Yoongi muttered as he reached into his jacket pocket and pulled a packet of cigarettes out. He was likely eyeing up his twentieth one of the day but he wouldn’t blame him for needing one after everything that had just happened. If he had found out one of them had gotten hurt then he likely would have needed to smoke too.

“You think we can get back there by coach?”

“Doubt it,” he replied without missing a beat, “I made 43,000₩ today and I worked like…eight solid hours or so. That’s just gonna cover the cost of this hostel room and food. That’s not gonna go on a single ticket. We’re saving up for the tickets but we gotta buy food and rent this room out too. Unless we have a fucking miracle I don’t think we’re gonna make a lot of cash here at all.” Jungkook asked him what would happen if they didn’t and he slipped one of the sticks into his mouth before searching for his lighter. “We’ll have to move on…which would’ve been alright but, well you’re not exactly fit for walking right now. Are you?”

“Dunno,” Jungkook replied with a shrug, really only raising his left shoulder as he did. “I haven’t tried even tried walking.” Yoongi lit the stick and breathed a lungful of smoke out with a sigh. “But
“Kookie, twisting an ankle fucking around is slowing the team down. Not being able to walk ‘cos you got hit by a fucking car is not,” his friend pulled the stick free and saw him eyeing it. He held his hand out and Jungkook was about to accept it when Seokjin’s voice sounded and made him jump.

“Don’t touch that,” the other man said groggily, not quite awake but not quite asleep either. “You busted your ribs up. I don’t think smoking will help them get better.” Yoongi grinned at this and pulled his hand away before he could even try and grab the cigarette, placing it back into his lips out of reach just to piss him off.

“He’s right, what you need is rest.” The man took a drag on it and breathed it out of his nose. “I’ll wait up for the others so get some sleep Kookie.”

When Jungkook opened his eyes he did so grudgingly because he didn’t want to be awake. Being awake meant being in pain and that was something he very much wanted to avoid but it was useless trying to pretend that he could. If he didn’t wake up on his own accord then something else would wake him up anyway: a slamming door, his friends talking as they got ready to leave the room, Seokjin turning in his sleep and making the bed shift. It was probably better to wake up now and save himself the trouble of missing anything, even if it meant pain and having hundreds of questions directed at him as a result. And so he opened his eyes and starred up at the ceiling for a few seconds, listening for any sounds and hearing nothing more than light snoring coming from across the room. He turned his head slightly to look at the sleeping man and sure enough Seokjin was still asleep, lying on his side with his face turned away from him so that he could only see the back of his head, his sleep-tousled hair. Good, his friend really needed the rest after the stress he had put him through yesterday. After studying his hair for a moment he turned his head to look in the other direction, at the door and window across the room. He did not expect to see Jimin lying just a few inches away from him.

The boy wasn’t lying on the bed because there was no room but he was sitting right at the side of it so that he could fold his arms up on the slight section of spare mattress. At some point in his sleep his head had cocked on a slight angle and when he woke up his muscles would likely ache just as much as his: stiff neck, sore arms and legs and back from sitting slumped forward like that. Why wasn’t he using the other bed? Or at least lying on the floor in a more comfortable position? The longer he looked at him the more he figured out why he was and he felt a smile on his lips. Jimin was sleeping right beside his bed like a relative on a hospital visit, not wanting to move from the side of the bed just so that they could keep an eye on whoever they were visiting. The boy had likely been told
about the car accident yesterday by Yoongi upon getting back to the hostel and he could easily imagine him running right over to him, eyes wide as he checked him over and the series of rapid questions he would have fired at their friend, voice squeaky like it always got when he was a little scared.

“God, you’re such a dumbass...” Jungkook muttered as he looked at the boy’s face. His mouth was open ever so slightly and he looked rather peaceful, but soon enough he would be awake and tired just like everyone else, even if he forced an expression on his face to make them think otherwise, to try and keep up the positivity shit that Namjoon liked to preach. Speaking of Namjoon...

Jungkook shifted on the bed slightly, flexing his muscles to try and ascertain just how bad they felt today. Just like yesterday there was a horrible ache around his chest and stomach and he knew that the act of sitting up would be incredibly painful so he took a deep breath and forced himself to do so. There was a horrible few seconds of agony and he gritted his teeth and managed to not make a sound with great effort, and then he was up right and didn’t need to worry about moving anymore. He shifted again so that he could rest his back against the wall because there was no headboard, and took a few quick breaths to calm his heart down. The pain had been enough to make it start beating a little too fast and his limbs felt strangely heavy as a result, as if he was exhausted. It was likely his brain’s way of trying to trick him into not moving.

He dragged his eyes away from Jimin and instead looked across the room to locate the others. He saw Yoongi lying on the settee, looking very uncomfortable because it was small, arms and chest hidden from view under his jacket blanket. He had his head propped on one of the arms and it looked to be stiff and unyielding. Jimin wasn’t the only one that was going to wake up with sore muscles, that was for sure. A few feet away from the settee he could see a pair of legs and he followed them to see Namjoon lying on the floor. There was a pillow under his head and he didn’t look that uncomfortable at all judging from the fact he was lying on his stomach. He could also only see the back of his head so he quickly looked away to check out the opposite bed. Hoseok was lying in it just like he had been last night, on his back so that he could at least see his profile. The covers were down by his hips and in his sleep his tee had rolled up to reveal his stomach, which he could see rising and falling slowly with each breath. Taehyung was not lying in it with him but rather at the very bottom of the bed. He studied this for a moment as he tried to figure out why. Taehyung was curled up so that his knees were up against his chest, bare skin clashing against the black of his band logo tee. He didn’t have his arms around them to keep them in place but rather one spread out along the bed and the other up by his face. He looked to have fallen asleep with his thumb in his mouth. He hadn’t seen him do that in many years now, perhaps as far back as elementary school and for some reason he found it both telling and also jarring. Dark hair messily over his face to cover most of it, he could tell that he was drunk, that he had stumbled in at some ridiculous hour completely wasted, and Jungkook wasn’t entirely certain if he was the reason why.

It seemed obvious enough to claim that his accident was the reason but he knew better than that. Taehyung didn’t need a reason to get wasted he just needed a little time and lots of cheap booze. If anything the accident had finally validated his drunkenness for once and he would be able to get away with it: a near perfect plan. Jungkook knew that he had been waiting for a chance to really get drunk for a few days now and he had finally gotten his wish. The other boy had went too long sober,
or only slightly intoxicated, and he liked to spend his days at least mildly intoxicated before ramping it up to eleven. A can of beer or perhaps a few sips of soju every now and again wasn’t enough and he wouldn’t really be that surprised if he found out that his friend had been sneaking out of a night to drink more freely; without their watching eyes and disapproval to slow him down. He felt bad for assuming that he would but he knew Taehyung too well and that meant he also knew all of the horrible little flaws. Taehyung had quite a few of them, no more than most people, but his were a lot deeper than most and they were the type to leave great scars in their wake.

Almost as if he felt his eyes on him Taehyung shifted in his sleep, making several sniffing noises as he moved his head. One of his eyes opened a crack before shutting again and he fell right back to sleep. Jungkook glanced back at Hoseok and studied him for a moment. Had Taehyung perhaps curled up on the bottom of the bed to save disturbing him, not wanting to climb into the bed beside him and risk waking him up? If he got back late and the boy was asleep it made sense but that required drunken Taehyung having enough sense to think of something like that. Had he maybe climbed into the bed after all only to get kicked out by Hoseok? Perhaps because of his terrible habit of drunken kisses? He didn’t know and he wasn’t going to ponder on it, that was between Taehyung and lover boy and no one else but if Hoseok were to talk he would listen. Possibly out of bored curiosity, possibly because it might give him a little more insight into Taehyung.

“Hmm…” Jungkook turned his head just in time to see Jimin shifting on the bed, scrunching his face up as he stretched his arms forward. His hands knocked against his thigh and the boy opened his eyes to look at him, sleepy brain slowing his reactions down considerably. “Oh…Oh Kookie you’re awake.” The boy declared before sighing in relief.

“Oh-huh, I’m awake alright, try to not wake everyone else u-”

“I could barely sleep last night,” Jimin continued over him, voice not loud at all but sounding so in the quiet room, “’cos I was so worried about you Kookie. Hit by a car, I mean shit…you know?” Jungkook made a noise in agreement in the hopes of him slowing down or perhaps making a little more sense. “So I sat here just in case you woke up ’cos I wanted to make sure you were OK but then I fell asleep I guess…”

“Good, you deserve the rest after yesterday,” he said and at this Jimin sat up fully, groaning as he tried to straighten his stiff back out. “You worked hard, you all did except me and-”

“It’s not like you could work after the accident,” the boy said, twisting and turning on the spot to loosen his back. “So don’t say shit like that Kookie, you needed to rest after it and you still need the rest now.”

“I don’t, I feel like I need to go for a walk.” Jimin laughed softly at this remark but he wasn’t joking.
He really did want to get out of bed and try moving around, trying to gauge just how bad he was and if he could move should they need to head out for some reason.

“What you need is for Tae to steal you a wheelchair.” Jungkook scoffed at this but a few seconds later felt a smile on his lips. It was rather funny joke and he couldn’t get mad at Jimin for automatically assuming that he was in a bad state, after all the boy had only just gotten to talk to him.

“How was work, huh? You find anything?”

“I did, helped working in a mechanics. Well actually I kinda just cleaned cars but I did help out with a few things.”

“Course you did, you can fix anything right Dumbass?”

“But the pay was pretty shitty, I’m gonna go work there again today and hopefully get a little more. This coach thing is gonna be hard but I think we can do it, you know?” There was the positivity that he had been thinking of, so completely different to Yoongi’s opinion on the matter last night that it was almost laughable. Had they finally disagreed on something? Taehyung would never believe it if he told him that. “I mean, I hope we can.”

“You wanna get back to Seoul?” Jungkook asked, shifting slightly to get more comfortable. Jimin shrugged at the question but his expression revealed that the answer was likely no; the boy was just talking about the coaches because everyone else was and he wanted to follow the trend.

“I do…” Yoongi muttered from across the room, shifting to sit upright with his legs folded up on the settee cushions. He didn’t even have his eyes open but he cocked his head in their direction. “So I can finally sleep in my own fucking bed.”

“I thought you didn’t sleep?” Jimin remarked with a grin and the man reluctantly climbed off the settee, opening his eyes to give him a glare as he crossed the room to get to the bed.

“Very funny,” Yoongi said as he roughly messed up the boy’s hair. Jimin made an annoyed noise but that smile still stayed on his face. “You OK?”

“Yeah I guess,” Jungkook said after a moment, “I feel the same as yesterday, no better and no worse.” The man hunkered down at the side of the bed so he could get closer to eye level with him,
folding his arms on the mattress just like Jimin had done last night in his sleep. “I don’t need the hospital, I just need rest.”

“Good, you can rest all you want kid,” Yoongi said as he studied his face, eyes lingering on his grazes. “Do they hurt?”

“Uh…not really, only when Hoseok douses my face with antiseptic like aftershave.” The mental images this conjured was enough for both his friends to wince and he laughed at them. “Do they look painful?”

“Really painful,” Jimin said with a nod.

“Hey, you’ll thank me when they don’t get infected,” Hoseok said as he rolled on the bed to look over at them with a sleepy expression on his face.

“Thank you nurse Hoseok,” Jungkook replied and the boy sat up slowly and reached up to rub at his eyes. “How’s the head?”

“No headache,” Hoseok replied in a groggy voice, “but that’s because I’ve taken no pills of course. But don’t worry about me Kookie, worry about yourself.”

“I can do both.” The boy suppressed a yawn and looked at the sleeping boy on his feet for a moment, no doubt wondering how he could move without disturbing him. “Actually I kinda need the bathroom and-” Yoongi shifted to get to his feet and he leaned over to try and help him get off the bed. Jungkook swung his legs over the side with only the slightest of twinges but standing upright was enough to make his ribs throb in pain. As soon as he was on his feet it didn’t hurt so bad, just when he contracted his muscles in the process of standing up. His friend instinctively swung an arm around his back but he didn’t really need it, he thought he could walk just fine on his own. So he let him walk him to the bathroom and he stopped to lean against the doorway.

“You OK?”

“Yeah, just a little uh…stiff.” Jungkook attempted to shrug his hoodie off but it was too hard to do with his busted shoulder so Yoongi reached over to help him, delicately pulling the material down so that the jacket landed on the floor. It revealed his arms and sure enough there were quite a few bruises starting to appear on them, especially around the elbow area.
“That’s not surprising…” Yoongi muttered and he reached down to grab the lengths of his tee because he couldn’t grab the neck right now. Lifting his arms to get the tee off was pure agony but when it was done it was done and he let his breath out in a ragged groan. “Shit Kookie.” Jungkook dropped the tee on the floor and then looked at his body. His ribs and stomach were covered in mottled bruises, so many that he couldn’t see his skin underneath them all; deep blue and purple mottled patches from where the car had slammed right into him. On certain ribs there was more than just bruises, he could see red specks over them that looked even more hideous. There was a scrape just below his ribs that stretched along to near his navel and he thought it was from the windshield wiper when he had rolled over it. “You look like-”

“Shit,” Jungkook finished with a soft laugh, “I look like shit.”

Taking a shower and getting cleaned up proved itself rather difficult but he did so without any help. He felt surprisingly better as a result which was likely because the heat of the water made his aching muscles relax, and though getting dressed again meant having to stretch and bend down at least he only had to do it once. It wasn’t like he was going out today, that was most certainly not allowed. His reflection in the bathroom mirror showed deep grazes along his left cheekbone and chin, not enough to bleed but rather just have the skin all torn up. It looked bad but it would heal up soon hopefully. He slipped into clean underwear and a tee before limping back into the other section of the room. Everyone else was awake and they all bombarded him with questions just like he had expected, so he answered them as well as he could. Yes, his ribs hurt but no he was okay, no, he didn’t need to go to the hospital he just needed rest, so on and so forth. After they were all finished getting dressed they left the hostel room as a small group, leaving him and Hoseok and Seokjin in the room once more. But not before he managed to sneak a few cigarettes off Yoongi whilst the eldest showered.

Jungkook had just lit the first one up when Seokjin walked into the room, towel around his shoulders, and he paused with the end of a match hovering in front of the stick. His friend took a moment to notice, instead crossing the room and humming under his breath to collect something from the coffee table. When he came over to him he seemed to detect the scent of smoke and his eyes shifted to latch onto the cigarette.

“…Seriously?” He sighed as he lifted his gaze to look at his eyes. Jungkook grinned around the stick when he caught sight of the bottle in his hand and he groaned: the antiseptic. Seokjin must have bought some cotton wool yesterday because he had a handful of balls in his other hand and he dropped them on his lap as he sat on the bed beside him.

“…What? I really wanted one.”

“Your poor ribs,” his friend said as he tipped the bottle onto one of the cotton balls and let it soak into it. Jungkook breathed his first lungful of smoke out with a soft cough, wincing slightly as he did and Seokjin gave him a knowing look. Then he lifted the wool ball and dabbed it on his chin lightly.
The contact stung just like he expected, possibly hurting more than his aching ribs. He let him clean the grazes thoroughly as he slipped the cigarette out and waited for him to finish so he could carry on smoking it. When he pulled the cotton wool away he looked at it to see that there was no blood because the grazes weren’t deep enough.

“You shouldn’t be doing that,” Hoseok said as he stepped inside from the bathroom and moved to sit on the settee. He rubbed at his damp hair roughly with his towel before tossing into onto the coffee table. Jungkook ignored him and instead took another drag on it. The other boy shook his head at him and looked at Seokjin and he could only shrug. “You’re as bad as Tae…”

“Hey, at least I’m not wasted right now. Pretty sure he was still drunk when he left earlier.”

“He came in with Namjoon,” Hoseok explained as he crossed his legs up on the settee cushion, legs bare because he was just wearing underwear rather than his jeans. “Pretty late I think, woke me up. Good thing Namjoon found him or he’d probably be passed out in the gutters somewhere.” Seokjin asked him if he was really drunk and the boy scoffed. “Is water wet? Yes he was drunk, on vodka I think.”

“Better than cheap beer for getting drunk fast, especially on an empty stomach,” Jungkook remarked as he took another drag on the cigarette.

“He climbed in bed with me rather than use the floor but I ended up pushing him away because he was…talking nonsense and he wouldn’t sleep.” The boy cocked an elbow on his thigh so that he could rest his chin in his palm. Their friend asked him what kind of nonsense and he sighed. “Something about real friends and subways, I don’t know, he was so fucking drunk I couldn’t understand what he was saying…”

“So that’s why he was sleeping on the bottom like a pet dog.” Hoseok shot him a look at this but Jungkook just held his gaze and didn’t look away. It looked like there was another reason but he didn’t want to say it.

“Does your head feel better today?” Seokjin asked him as he turned to look at him, squinting through the cigarette smoke.

“Yeah, doesn’t hurt at all.”

“Do you remember what happened?”
“I got hit by a fucking car, that’s all I really need to remember.” Yet Seokjin was looking at him like he was expecting something more and he knew that he had told him everything from yesterday so why was he pressing for more. “I got hit trying to get a woman her purse back from a thief, that’s what happened. I had like…two cans of beer but I wasn’t drunk just a little tipsy is all. That might’ve been why I was hit I dunno, all I know is that I got hit.”

“Why did you want to chase after the thief so badly Kookie?” Jungkook held his gaze as he asked the question before looking over at the other boy. Hoseok didn’t say a word and just raised an eyebrow slightly at him. “I mean, I understand why you did it but it’s just—”

“Do you want the truth?” For a few seconds the hostel room fell silent and neither of his friends seemed to know what to say to break it, but then Seokjin broke it by quietly saying that he did. “Then you need to listen to this story, the whole of it.” Jungkook took a deep breath and then let it out in a sigh before telling them about the wallet incident all the way back in Gyeonggi, about how he had stolen the cash in it because they had needed it and even though he had known that it was a bad thing he hadn’t been able to stop himself. He told them about how, when he had seen the man running off with the poor woman’s purse he had thought about that stupid wallet and had been unable to stop himself from chasing after him. It wasn’t him trying to do a good deed to make up for the bad, it was a stupid guilty impulse that had taken over. Both of them listened to this silently and didn’t interrupt once and he felt so very stupid admitting to it all. When he was finished he waited for one of them to break the silence and after a minute the eldest did.

“Thank you for being honest with us,” Seokjin said in a soft voice.

“Are you mad at me?” Jungkook asked, staring at the pitiful remains of cigarette stick between his fingers. He didn’t want to look at either of them and see anger or disgust on their faces.

“Not mad no, just worried about you.”

“You’ve been carrying that secret with you for…nearly a week,” Hoseok added. “Why didn’t you tell us about it?”

“Cos I thought you’d all be pissed off with me for…for stealing the cash like that. When I didn't need to.”

“There must have been a reason,” Seokjin remarked. “So what was the reason?”
“In the wallet there was…” Jungkook paused to think his words over before continuing. “There was a photograph in the wallet of two little kids, a boy and a girl. The wallet was a man’s, it was a photograph of his kids and I told myself that…that it was wrong to take the fucking cash but I took it anyway. I took it ‘cos we needed the cash after that hostel owner robbed us, and ‘cos I told myself that I had a family too and we needed the cash.” He raised the cigarette to take a drag on it before stubbing it out on the side table. “But my shitty excuse didn't work ‘cos I still feel guilty about it all, and my guilty subconscious made me run out in front of a fucking car.” He shifted on the bed to look over at Seokjin. “That’s what happened, OK?”

“OK,” their eldest friend said with a slow nod.

“Do you have a reason for the fight?” Hoseok asked suddenly and the question caught Jungkook off guard. For a moment he couldn’t seem to think of a reply as he searched his brain for one. Eventually, doing so only because the room had went awkwardly silent, he gave him an answer.

“I…uh I dunno,” he said with a sigh, “I dunno why I got into that fight.”

“You said the guy jumped you,” the boy said and he felt his gaze on him even though he didn’t look up to check, the weight of his eyes substantial.

“He probably did,” Jungkook muttered under his breath, “but I don’t really think that’s the truth. I think I probably started it, like I always do.”

He started gnawing on his lip as he thought it over, finding that he really couldn’t remember what had happened. It was because his anger had taken over, like always, and rendered everything else useless. Jungkook knew that he had a problem, a problem with his anger, but he didn’t really know what to do about it. He once again thought about how he wasn’t the only one with problems, about Taehyung and Yoongi, Hoseok and the others who he didn’t have a clue about. What was happening to them all? Had this been happening all along but they hadn’t even realised, blinded to it all because of their day to day lives and only able to see it clearly now that they had started this stupid adventure? Had it all been lying under the surface like a malignant tumour or had it only really started recently? He didn’t know but he felt that the latter was probably the case and that was even more worrying. What was going to happen once the stupid adventure stopped, if it ever would? Was everything going to go back to normal or was it going to be irrevocably different after everything that had happened?

For some reason he couldn’t seem to shake the idea that the worst was still yet to come despite everything that had happened already.
Hoseok shoved the folded tee into his backpack, pushing it in deep down to try and leave some room for the last few items. Across the room the rest of his friends were hastily preparing their bags for tomorrow, for when they set out to the next city more or less the moment the sun appeared on the horizon. Despite everything that had happened he could sense that Jungkook was almost ecstatic at the thought of finally getting to leave and walk about. He had spent the afternoon hours walking around the room, not exactly pacing but seemingly needing to burn his energy somehow. How the boy was able to do that after his accident with the car was near a miracle in his opinion and he remembered that Seokjin had joked about him being lucky. Well, wasn’t that the truth? Hoseok felt terrible because he hadn’t downed a palmful of pills and the youngest boy had been ploughed by a car and was practically doing somersaults. The irony was not lost on him and he felt a little pathetic.

“If you don’t think you can leave,” Yoongi said as he pulled his cigarette free, “then just tell us now Kookie. We won’t be pissed, I promise.” He was seated on his packed holdall, legs cocked in front of him as he slouched forward and tapped ash on the carpet.

“Hey, I can walk just fine,” Jungkook said with a grin as he zipped his backpack up. “I’ll probably end up carrying you.”

“Fine? Shit, you guys see his ribs, huh? Show ‘em.” And so the boy grabbed the bottom of his tee and lifted the material to flash his stomach and lower ribs. The sight it revealed was a mixture of mottled and hideous bruises all over his skin: purples and blues and even a little redness. Hoseok felt himself wincing as he shoved another tee into the backpack and he heard gasps and muttered noises from his other friends. “He’s got a bruise the shape of the European continent on his fucking ribs and he’s ‘fine’.” Yoongi smirked as he shoved the stick back into his mouth. “This kid, I swear.”

“Besides, I’ll be right back in a hostel room as soon as we enter the next city.” Jungkook said as he lifted his bag and dropped it on the floor beside the bed, grimacing only slightly as he worked his sore muscles. “At least I’m not stuck on my ass all day.”

“Wish I was,” Yoongi muttered under his breath, making them all laugh as he did.

“Do you think there’ll be a mechanics in the next city?” Jimin asked from his position on the floor, legs folded up in front of him and his elbows resting on them.
“Yeah Dumbass, I’m pretty sure they’ll be a mechanics,” Taehyung said with a smirk as he emerged from the bathroom, hair still damp from his shower earlier.

“You know what I mean,” the boy said with an eye roll. “One that’ll hire me.”

Hoseok hadn’t been out on the streets searching for work but by all accounts it was pretty damn hard to find in this city. Jungkook had failed on his first day but the others had not, yet today their options had dried up considerably. Yoongi had decided to not pursue the pizza delivery job for fear of getting arrested and had only managed to secure a single shift of washing dishes in the late evening after wandering all day. Namjoon’s day long shift in a gas station filling cars up and working the tills once or twice had brought in a paltry wage that was almost laughable considering the hours he had worked yesterday, and today he had already been beaten to the mark by another desperate worker, meaning that he had walked the streets and found nothing; coming back empty-handed and tired. Jimin had secured the car washing and mechanic job and it seemed that he might just have been able to keep it for quite some time, if not permanently, but he couldn’t raise all of the cash they needed on his own and therefore they needed to move somewhere with better opportunities.

And Taehyung…he didn’t even know what Taehyung was up to.

Hoseok still couldn’t believe what the boy had done last night. It wasn’t just the fact that he had gotten wasted on the streets of this strange city alone, staggering around drunk and vulnerable and confused, but also what had happened upon him returning to the hostel room with Namjoon in tow. Of course he had needed their friend to support him because he had barely been able to walk and he had climbed into the bed and had woken him up, the mattress shifting and creaking rather loudly. Hoseok had been disorientated for a few seconds but when he had detected the strong and unmistakable scent of vodka he had known that it was Taehyung climbing in beside him. He had lain there and had waited to see if the boy would have said anything but he hadn’t, he had just stayed silent…or at least until the others had fallen asleep. It had taken some time for Yoongi to finally settle down on the settee but the work hours had drained him enough to actually allow him to sleep for once. Then had came the drunken mumbling and touching.

He had purposely avoided sharing beds with Taehyung for this very purpose, instead sharing with Jungkook just to make sure that he didn’t roll into it drunk one night and yet he had been unable to avoid it of course. His friends were on the floor or squished onto settees and the other boy had just had to make sure that he had ended up with him. He still wasn’t sure if it was on purpose or a genuine accident.

At first it had been the snuggling up against his back, arm snaking over his side and chin digging into the hollow between his neck and shoulder so that he could feel his breath on his skin, irritatingly warm and stinking of vodka. Then he had started to mumble things, mostly nonsense things that he
hadn’t been able decipher at all: about subways and old men and something about real friends. Hoseok had put up with it only because he had been too tired to tell him to go asleep, convinced that he would talk himself into unconsciousness if left alone to rant. But then Taehyung had turned his head and brushed his lips along his throat, nuzzling at his skin, and he had not expected that. The contact had been soft at first, barely enough for him to really register it, but then he had kissed his neck and Hoseok had felt his breath catching in his throat. Taehyung had pressed his mouth against his throat, lips a little chapped but surprisingly soft, and though Hoseok had instinctively felt his shoulders going up at the contact he hadn’t pushed him away. His lips on his skin, moving along up to his jawline until he had opened them and darted his tongue out; tongue as warm as his breath but also wet. Hoseok had felt his fingers sinking into the bed sheets in surprise as the boy had sucked at his skin, the press of his teeth as he lightly nibbled. But when he had felt his hand moving from over his waist to run down his stomach, right towards the waistband of his underwear, Hoseok had finally shrugged him off and told him to go to sleep. But Taehyung had been drunk and he had burrowed his face against his neck again, muttering that he just wanted something to make him feel better, that he was cold and lonely and-

So Hoseok had rolled onto his back and forcibly moved his hand away, had told him that he needed to stop all the time hoping that his heated whispers wouldn’t wake anyone up. After more drunken fumbling Taehyung had given up and had moved to lie at the bottom of the bed, curling up on his feet like a dog and finally giving him a little peace. Hoseok had sat up and looked at him for a few minutes, observing the way he rolled up knees up and made himself as small as possible: a strange attempt at comfort. He had just lain back down when Taehyung had quietly apologised and he had fallen asleep playing those words over and over in his head.

Why did this have to happen to him? Wasn’t he in enough of a bad situation right now? He really didn’t need this added trouble on top but it wasn’t like he could control the other boy’s feelings. He just didn’t really know what Taehyung wanted because there was always a twist to it all; he was drunk and a little frisky and by the morning he ‘wouldn’t’ remember even when it was obvious that he did. Why did Taehyung act that way? If he didn’t care then he would be upfront about it, like he was about everything else, so why was he so confusing when it came to him? Was the boy ashamed by his feelings, trying to deny them whilst also trying to give into them in a way that could be used as a good excuse? He didn’t seem the type to give a shit but it was the only conclusion Hoseok could come to right now.

And whilst Taehyung was annoyingly keeping his secrets and acting so childish, Jungkook had finally opened up a little more than usual. Granted he and Seokjin hadn’t really gotten a proper answer out of him yesterday afternoon but what they had gotten was better than nothing. The boy had been acting a little off because he had stolen cash from a dropped wallet in a moment of stupidity and he had been letting it eat him up the entire time. If they had had any worries about Jungkook turning out like Taehyung then Hoseok didn’t think that they would have them for much longer, for the boy had shown a guilty conscious that the other had yet to. Taehyung had stolen so much over the years and whenever any of them asked him to stop, asked him if he felt bad about doing it, he would just shrug it off and claim that he didn’t care. Perhaps deep down Taehyung did feel guilty and he just hid it very well but he doubted it. Jungkook had stolen a couple of thousand won and felt like shit and Hoseok was actually relieved that he did because he thought that it would scare the boy off carrying on down that particular road at least. They still had a ways to go with the fighting and the temper but they were getting there and maybe soon they would be able to solve that little problem.
“We’ll find something,” Namjoon said as he finished his own packing and sat down with a weary sigh. “I’m sure we will.”

“You don’t sound very optimistic,” Hoseok said as he awkwardly tried to zip his backpack up, so full that it was hard to do so. He tried to shove his clothing down hard and quickly drag the zipper a few times but it still wouldn’t budge.

“Hard to be optimistic when you’re half-asleep,” his friend muttered as he lay down and used his holdall as a pillow, spreading out on the floor like a starfish, limbs akimbo. “Let me try again…we’re gonna find work, we’re gonna strike it rich and ride back to Seoul in a motherfucking limo. How’s that? Does that sound better?”

“A lot better,” Jungkook agreed with a wide grin.

Hoseok dragged the zip close with a sigh of relief and then also moved to place his backpack at the bottom of the bed, sitting down on the edge as he did. He had done nothing all day except talk and lounge around the hostel room, occasionally fall into naps for several minutes before waking back up to boredom. But despite all of this he felt drained and heavy and he knew that it was the pills; that he needed the stupid pills. But he hadn’t touched them in nearly three days now and he couldn’t give in, not after everything. Packing his bag had been hellish because he had eyed the interior compartment and had known that the bottle was in there, beckoning to him: little brown plastic bottle with the uncoated white pills that would dissolve on his tongue and leave a bitter taste. If he was going to judge Taehyung for getting wasted then he wasn’t going to swallow one of those pills.

“How big is the limo?” Yoongi asked and Namjoon actually opened one eye to stare up at the ceiling, expression showing that he couldn’t believe he was being asked this question. After a few seconds he said it would be big and the other man smirked. “No shit Sherlock.”

“Then stop asking stupid questions Watson.”

“Yeah yeah, go to sleep Mr. Holmes.”

“Gladly,” Namjoon muttered as he wriggled to get comfortable on the floor. Almost as if this was a sign the others went quiet and seemed to contemplate sleep, and so Hoseok got to his feet and offered the bed he had been using in favour of the settee. He saw Taehyung looking at him at this,
expression unreadable, but he didn’t really care. There was only room for one person on the settee. Yoongi argued that he should use the bed, not explicitly mentioning the whole collapsing incident but hinting at it so strongly he probably should have. Hoseok just said that he was fine and that someone else deserved to sleep in it seen as he had used it all day long, and so Jimin took him up on the offer.

“Namjoon,” he said, “there’s a spare space on the bed if you want it?” But the young man just mumbled about being comfortable, voice revealing that he was mere moments from falling asleep. Jungkook and Seokjin already had a bed, so that left the space for Yoongi or maybe Taehyung. Hoseok moved to sit on the settee and after a few seconds he decided to try and lie on it. It wasn’t comfortable at all and he could see why Yoongi had told him to use the bed instead, but at least he could rest in peace on the settee.

Or so he thought.

As luck would have it Taehyung didn’t take the space on the bed and rather just sat on the floor by the coffee table, a mere few feet away from him. Hoseok wanted to be annoyed at this but he knew that it was going to happen because he had seen the boy looking at him before. After some mumbling and smoking and complaining Yoongi finally decided to climb into the bed with the other boy and yet Hoseok could find no such rest. He couldn’t sleep because Taehyung was clearly going to speak to him and it was pointless trying to drift off to be woken again by his hand gently shaking his shoulder. So after the hostel room fell deathly silent save for the white noise of traffic out of the open window he took a deep breath and let out in a sigh.

“What?” At his voice the other boy shifted suddenly, chin no longer balanced on his drawn-up knees. Taehyung held his gaze and actually tried to look bewildered by his question. He would have laughed if he wasn’t so tired. “What do you want Tae?”

“Why’d you think I want something?”

“You’re hanging around me like a puppy, I thought it was pretty obvious that you wanted something…”

“Maybe I just wanted to check that you’re OK.” Hoseok lied about feeling perfectly fine and it was the other boy’s time to laugh. “Yeah yeah, sure you are.”

“I’d feel a lot more OK if you let me sleep you kno-”
“Hoseok,” Taehyung said his name so suddenly that he felt the word dying on his tongue, unable to even finish the final syllable. It felt like forever since he had last heard his friend call him by his actual name and not just that stupid nickname and that was when he realised that the boy really wanted to talk to him. This was a serious thing indeed. “What happened last night…”

“You were drunk right? Like always.”

“No, I mean yeah I was drunk but that wasn’t the reason. It wasn’t, hear me out.” Taehyung shifted to get onto his knees, scooting the last few feet so he was right in front of the settee. “I wanted to do that. It wasn’t ‘cos I was drunk or anything.” The boy folded his arms on the slight jut of cushion still available, just beside his stomach, and he studied his face as he spoke. “But it was pretty fucking stupid…”

“Why do you think it was stupid?” Hoseok asked in a quiet voice.

“‘Cos we’re sharing a room with everyone else. ‘Cos I didn’t even talk to you about it and just kinda…kissed you like that.”

“I don’t mind that you did that, I mean I don’t think that I mind,” he muttered, aware that he was making no sense but struggling to sort his words out properly in his head. He still didn’t really know what he felt about the kiss last night but he did know that the sensation of his lips on his throat had been rather pleasant. “But you’re right about the room thing and-”

“We should go out together,” Taehyung interrupted. “You and me. No one else to worry about and-”

“Tae, it’s nearly midnight.”

“Nobody needs to know, I won’t tell if you don’t.”

Hoseok felt the most compelling urge to bite down on his lower lip and he couldn’t stop himself from doing so. Right now the boy was asking him to leave the hostel room in the middle of the night, to leave the others and just go off with him without even telling him where. Why did he think that he would agree to do that, and why did the idea sound so strangely appealing right now? It would be a break from the monotonous hours cooped up in the room, but what exactly did Taehyung have in mind? To sneak off to a bar like usual? They didn’t have the cash to spare on booze so that didn’t seem very likely. To go find a park somewhere and just talk without needing to whisper? He didn’t think that that was the case at all. He didn’t think that Taehyung wanted to do much talking. Hoseok
noticed the boy staring at his mouth and so he stopped gnawing on his lip almost instantly.

“Go where?” he finally managed to ask.

“Go to…” Taehyung paused before shifting slightly, doing so because he seemed to be nervous about what he was going to say. He just waited without a word until he finished. “We could go to another hostel…”

There it was, out in the open. Hoseok didn’t know whether to cheer because the boy had finally stopped backtracking on himself and instead just took the plunge, or to rapidly start blustering about what he had just said to him. It was pretty obvious what he was hinting at and he didn’t feel as shocked by the suggestion as he had thought he would be. For some reason he felt a little nervous.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea…”

“What part? The part with me or the part with the hostel?”

“The running off part,” Hoseok clarified, “because there’s been enough trouble these past few days and I don’t want to make any more.” Taehyung went quiet and it seemed that he might be pondering on this, thinking his words over, and he let his eyes wander across the room as he did. Friends still asleep or at least seemingly asleep from what he could see. “Do you…do you really like me that much Tae?” The boy didn’t confirm nor deny this but he hadn’t really expected him to. That would have been too simple but he already knew what the answer was even if he wouldn’t admit to it.

“If it wasn’t for the trouble…would you have said yes?” Taehyung asked in a quiet voice, barely audible even in the silence of the room.

“…Yes,” Hoseok said after a few seconds of thought, “I would have said yes Tae.”

The bridge in front of them was broad and long, somewhat reminiscent of Mapo Bridge back in
Seoul. The centre was a medium grey tarmac and on either side there were two walkways to allow pedestrians to walk across it. The walkways were separated from the road by metal railings that reached the waist, and there were also identical ones along the length as a barricade to keep people from getting too close to the edge. But they weren’t high enough to deter people from possibly attempting to jump over them, rendering their use rather pointless in his opinion. There were metal support beams on the bridge and they were so wide that he needed to stretch his arms out to be as wide. The water that ran underneath it smelled strongly of brine and passing over it by car with the windows unrolled would probably be refreshing but standing on the bridge with the scent in his lungs he found it a little nauseating, mostly because the exhaust fumes mingled with it and made a terrible perfume that clung at the back of his throat. He already felt bad enough, he didn’t think that this was going to alleviate the nausea and it was going to take them some time to get across it.

They had already been walking for at least two hours but there didn’t seem to be much longer left until they reached the next city. The bridge seemed to be a sign that they were nearing civilisation, for it was rather like a freeway and that hinted that this road was very well used. That meant they must have been near a city at least and Yesan County was quite the distance behind them. By that logic he estimated perhaps another couple of minutes of walking would see them at the next city, Dangjin, judging from the signs that he had been eyeing as they had walked the streets. Those two hours seemed as long as twenty to him, for Hoseok was starting to feel a little jittery from the lack of pills. He wasn’t shaking or vomiting yet but he thought by the evening he might just be. He didn’t think that the upcoming lunch would stay down for too long, the lunch they would hopefully be eating before the others ran off to find work. Yet Jungkook seemed perfectly fine. He didn’t race off like usual and rather just walked at a nice steady pace but he didn’t drag his feet or complain. His expression actually looked rather chill and composed, whereas Hoseok felt like he might just be grimacing a little. The boy had even attempted and succeeded in climbing on a small grassy ledge to walk along it earlier, making them all eye him nervously for fear getting back down would be impossible with his bruised ribs. Jungkook almost seemed to be showing off but he knew that he wasn’t doing it to brag, rather he was trying to reassure them that he was perfectly okay and that they didn’t need to worry about his accident.

Hoseok stayed back to observe the sight of the bridge but his friends did not, instead carrying on walking along it without a care. They all milled on the right side walkway in a little huddle, not being able to walk spread out like usual because it was too narrow. Therefore they needed to walk in pairs or threes to fit on comfortably. He took a deep breath and let it out again, contemplating pulling his tee over the bottom of his face to block the scent of exhaust fumes but knowing that he would look stupid so he decided not to.

“Hey, what does that say?” Jimin asked suddenly slowing down so that he could stare at one of the support beams as they passed it, squinting as the sun hit him in the eyes before lifting his hand to make a visor.

“Think about your family,” Seokjin said as he also slowed down and looked at it. For a moment no one said anything and then he made a soft noise under his breath as it hit him. “Anti-suicide signs…”
“They have those?” Jungkook asked in a surprised voice, actually stopping to look at it, mouth open slightly. “Whoa… kinda cool.”

“How is it cool?” Hoseok caught up with the gang and he also stopped because he didn’t want to push past them.

“It’s cool that they put those up even if they don’t help people all of the time, they still put them up there just in case.” The boy had his hands shoved into his jacket pockets and he looked strangely naked without his holdall bag in hand. Namjoon had demanded he let him carry it just so he wouldn’t work his ribs too much with the weight of it. The boy had a point, it was a good idea because even if just one person saw the signs and changed their mind it was a life saved.

The signs were white metallic squares held onto the support beams with thick bolts. The weather hadn’t aged them and the red letters were bold and still in place for all to see. He looked along the length of the bridge and saw multiple ones in place, likely also mirrored on the opposite side to keep them secure. What did they all say? He was curious enough to want to check all of them: a strange form of sightseeing as if they were tourist attractions to take photographs of and not signs to stop to people from hurling themselves over the side of the bridge they were currently standing on.

“This place must be a popular suicide spot,” Namjoon said quietly and Taehyung continued walking ahead to get to another one of the signs, head turned so that he could locate it and pace almost a jog.

“Shit, how bad a state would you have to be to think about jumping from a place like this?” Yoongi asked before visibly shuddering, his own dislike of heights making him clearly uncomfortable. Jimin wandered over to the barricade to look down over the side, folding his arms on the metal railing so he could lean forward, and after a moment the man reached over to grab his arm and pull him away.

“Do Not Jump! Please Seek Help!” Taehyung declared. “Hey Dumbass, you’re not that good at following instructions you’d probably jump.” There was a wide grin on his face but Hoseok felt that he was playing it dangerously close and that the joke wasn’t that funny at all. Yoongi might just remark about him being a bully again, and he wouldn’t blame him if he did.

“Oh yeah?” Jimin asked as he fixed his backpack up onto his shoulders, Yoongi’s hand still on his arm. “What would you do if I just jumped, huh? Like right now?”

“We’d replace you with a puppy,” Taehyung retorted as he turned on his heel and carried on walking.
For a few seconds they all just stayed where they were, all looking at the back of the boy as he got a
good distance ahead of them, and then slowly his friends started walking again. Hoseok dragged his
eyes away from Taehyung and looked over at the other boy. He was standing just a few feet away,
Yoongi at his side beside the barricade. He could see the man looking at Jimin, expression silently
talking to him. Hoseok didn’t have a clue what he was saying, couldn’t read the slightest narrowing
of his eyes and the most delicate twitch of his eyebrows and lips. Yet it seemed Jimin could because
he just shrugged lightly, as if brushing Taehyung’s words and his concern off without a care. Hoseok
wished that he didn’t see the most briefest look of dejection on his expression before he did.

He knew that Taehyung hadn’t meant anything inherently cruel with his words, that it was just a
stupid attempt at humour. But there was no denying the fact that there was some cruelty in it,
intended or not. Jimin had to put up with the nicknames and ‘play’ wrestling all of the time, being the
proverbial piggy in the middle between Taehyung and Jungkook. Not that long ago it had been him
and Taehyung but Hoseok had rapidly gotten bored of it and had instead decided to stop treating the
other boy that way. Maybe now he had stepped away from it all he saw how unfair it was for Jimin,
and it was no surprise that Yoongi was constantly checking up on him and jumping in to break it up.
If the boy didn’t have him then he would have to put up with a lot more ‘puppy’ jokes, that was for
sure.

“Jimin,” Hoseok said, picking up speed to catch up with him. “He didn’t mean it like that.” At his
voice the other boy glanced over at him before looking back at the bridge in front of them. “Just
ignore him.”

“What did he mean it like?” Yoongi asked brusquely and he could only stare at him without
replying. “If Tae hasn’t got anything nice to say, he should really shut the fuck up.”

And Hoseok couldn’t even argue otherwise.

By the time they reached the end of the bridge he lost his interest in the signs. They were no longer
fascinating and worthy of his attention, rather they left an uncomfortable sensation in the pit of his
stomach. It was because of Taehyung of course, and his stupid joke. Was the boy pissed off because
of what had happened between them and he was acting out? He was hoping that that was not the
case and rather Taehyung was just disgruntled because he was sober, but he didn’t know. Perhaps
there wasn’t a reason at all and the boy had just made a stupid joke and he was looking into it too
much? That was probably the case and he was worrying over it all because it allowed him to stop
thinking about his tired limbs and unsettled stomach. He saw signs with helpline numbers on, he saw
attempts at positivity: “it gets better!” as if that would change a single thing. The signs varied from
nearly begging to almost aggressively ordering the readers about and he eventually looked away and
instead concentrated on the last stretch of bridge. After some minutes a boat horn sounded and he
eyed the horizon to see what looked like a leisure ferry slowly moving across the river. The idea of
being on a boat, the slightly shifting floor of the deck underfoot, was enough to make him look away
with a weary groan.
Like he had predicted it took them perhaps another ten minutes to step into Dangjin, the outskirts growing straight around the end of the bridge without even a slight distance. There were factories already in sight when they stepped off it and the view in front of them showed the typical sight of towering buildings. There were a lot of neon lights here and there that were currently not glowing in the afternoon sunlight, but as soon as darkness fell they would be blinding. Hoseok just did what he always did, followed after the rest of them in the hopes that at least one of them knew where they were going. He just wanted to sit down and not move, perhaps curl up into a ball and try and pretend that he wasn’t even awake. Luckily for him Namjoon managed to locate a small hostel building not that far from the bridge and after the usual bartering in the check-in office they ended up with two small rooms again. Hoseok wanted to be annoyed by this but he was too tired to think about Taehyung and so he just went into one of the rooms and dived onto the bed. His face sank into the covers and he closed his eyes.

He knew that he drifted off but he wasn’t sure how long for when he finally lifted his head to peer across the room he saw that it was practically empty save for Jungkook. His head wasn’t aching but the rest of his body seemed to be and he forced his eyes open with a weary sigh. At the sound the boy looked over at him before dropping his eyes back to a newspaper spread on the bed in front of him.

“Is that today’s paper?” Hoseok asked as he sat upright.

“Nope, it’s dated last week,” Jungkook replied. “So hopefully that wasn’t the last time this room was cleaned.”

“Don’t even joke about that…” he muttered as he grabbed a pillow and hugged it to his chest. “Where’s Seokjin?”

“Out.”

“Out where?” Jungkook shrugged at the question and folded the paper up before dropping it on the floor. Hoseok looked at the crumpled newspaper for a moment before shifting his gaze back up to him.

“He didn’t say, just said he was going out. He’s probably looking for a pay phone to call someone in college, his roommate or whatever. He’s way overdue for his essay now I think. He’s probably gonna get kicked out.”

“You think?”
“Maybe there’s a three strike rule or something, I dunno, but I wouldn’t wanna be in his shoes when he gets back to college that’s for sure.” The boy tried to lean back on his wrists but the movement was too much for his battered ribs so he just crossed his legs up on the bed instead. “Are you-”

“Please don’t ask if I’m OK,” Hoseok said with a weary smile, “because the answer is no and we both know it.” Jungkook studied his face silently before looking away at the hostel room wall instead. “Is Jimin OK?”

“Jimin?” At this the boy looked back at him, even raising an eyebrow in a curious expression. “Uh… I dunno, why?”

“Just thinking…”

“About the joke on the bridge?”

“I wouldn’t really call it a ‘joke’ Kookie.”

“You think it hurt his feelings?”

Hoseok thought it over for a few seconds. It only made sense that it would upset Jimin. Taehyung had not only poked fun at his intelligence but he had also more or less told him that he was not only replaceable, but that he was little more than a puppy to them. Of course it was just a ‘joke’ and that wasn’t what he had meant at all, but his words still carried weight and the weight of this particular jibe was very heavy. Was it possible that Jimin really didn’t care at all? Was he just being hypersensitive to it all after what had happened last time Taehyung had decided to joke around and it had backfired on him and caused even more trouble? But the more he thought about it the more he thought that it might just have hurt his feelings. It would have hurt his to be told that, even in a joking manner, so he finally decided that the boy might just have been upset about it after all.

“I think that it did,” he said quietly.

“I dunno, he is used to it. I don’t think Jimin really cares about it, after all it was Tae that said it. Everyone knows Tae talks shit.” But Hoseok thought about the look on Jimin’s face before he had pushed it away and pretended to not care, the dejected and almost hurt expression. That second or so of emotion showed that the youngest boy was likely very wrong about his assumption. “I wouldn’t worry about it.”
“It’s not like Tae will…” he muttered under his breath as he got to his feet. Despite resting he still felt drained and the room seemed to spin for a few seconds, making his steps something closer to a stagger as he went into the bathroom.

Hoseok closed the door over and leaned back against it because his legs didn’t feel very steady. The muscles in his thighs were almost shivering, making his knees shake terribly. He ran his hand along the wood, feeling the little chips in the paint, and located the lock before twisting it sharply. It clicked loudly and he felt himself wincing, wondering if the boy had heard it too. The sink was but a few feet away and yet it felt like miles to his eyes, the fabled oasis that would just keep getting further and further away until he collapsed. The temptation to crawl to it was great but he managed to not stoop that low and instead took a few stumbling steps until he felt his hips slamming into the porcelain rim and he dropped his hands to grab onto the sides tightly. After a few seconds he let go with one hand and reached over to twist the tap on. The water came out with a gushing sound and started gurgling down the pipe and he splashed a palmful of it against his face, feeling great relief from the cold liquid on his skin.

Hoseok blinked away the droplet of water and looked at his reflection in the mirror on the cabinet over the sink. He looked no more different than usual, a little tired but nothing more than that, and that made him feel even worst. If he looked really terrible then that wouldn’t be so bad, yet the fact he didn’t just helped alleviate the fact that it was all in his head. His body didn’t need the stupid pills but his brain did, and his brain wasn’t asking now, like it had been for the last few days; it was practically demanding.

“Pull yourself together,” Hoseok muttered under his breath, knowing that the running tap would stop his friend from hearing his low voice. “It’s pathetic, I’m fucking pathetic.” He took a deep breath and let it out, feeling his shoulders shuddering as he did.

Just a single one of those stupid pills and he would feel better. Just one, it was practically nothing. He was supposed to be taking them after all, did a single one matter that much? Well, it would start with one of course, and then turn into three or more. That’s why he wasn’t allowed the stupid pills but it was hard to listen to logic when his stomach felt like it was trapped at the back of his throat. He should get rid of them, he should get one of his friends to toss them down the toilet or perhaps over that nice big bridge and it would make it feel so much more easier. Less of a temptation for him to have to ignore. But he couldn’t, he couldn’t get rid of them when he needed them so much and-

Hoseok pressed the heel of his hand against his brow and he closed his eyes with a groan. He couldn’t do this, it was too much for him to handle right now. After a moment he lowered it and placed it back on the rim of the sink, opening his eyes again to look at the mirror. For a few seconds he just stared at his reflection and then his gaze shifted to look at the little plastic handle in the very corner.
The mirror was on the front of a cabinet of course, a medical cabinet.

Before he could stop himself he grabbed hold of the handle and pulled it open, doing so so hard that he was surprised that he didn’t pull the door off. It revealed a white plastic interior with two partitions separated by a shelf. He saw a couple of items inside and he grabbed each one in turn to check the labels. Cardboard container with what looked like a salve of some kind in it, the scent wafting from it because the cap wasn’t screwed on fully. A piece of plastic and foil with a contraceptive pill still inside: little blue tablet. He put that back and hoped someone hadn’t forgotten to take it, and then grabbed the only thing left inside of the cabinet. A little bottle that rattled when he shook it. He quickly turned it around to scan the label and see that it was just aspirin. Plain aspirin much like the ones that Seokjin had given him just a few days ago to help with his headache.

Hoseok unscrewed the lid and tipped the bottle so that the contents spilled out onto his opposite hand. There were quite a few pills inside and they landed on his palm and fingers, overflowing over the side and bouncing off each other to fall down and land in the sink. The water was still running and they didn’t last long, dissolving in mere seconds under the hard force of the stream and getting washed away down the drain with faint hissing sounds. He looked at the little mound of pills and saw that they looked just like his Xanax, practically the same shape and the same colour. They were even uncoated though the surface looked a little glossy rather than dry like the other medication. Hoseok wanted to tip his hand and let them all drop into the sink and yet he couldn’t seem to do it. It didn’t feel like he was holding a handful of pills but rather lead weights. Aspirin would do absolutely nothing for him. It wouldn’t be like the Xanax. He couldn’t self-induce a placebo effect no matter how hard he tried, so he should just dump them into the sink and go back into the room and forget about them.

Hoseok finally felt himself moving but it wasn’t to tip his hand and drop the pills, rather to bring them up to his mouth. He knew that he was being stupid but he couldn’t help himself and he shoved them all in; not just one, not even three but so many that he couldn’t even guess the amount. It took a little effort to get them inside and yet he couldn’t swallow. The pills stuck to his tongue and the sides of his cheek almost instantly, the dryness activated by his saliva and making them dissolve. They were stuck in place, he was unable to swallow them. The taste of them was foul enough to make him gag and he opened his mouth and started clawing at the pills, knocking them off his tongue so that he could just free himself of the taste. He could feel his gorge rising up and he just had enough time to drop to his knees in front of the toilet when he felt his stomach clenching and the first retch escaping his lips.

There was nothing really in his stomach beyond a few measly mouthfuls of food from yesterday evening and so it wasn’t as bad as he had been expecting. He ended up vomiting up mostly nothing more than bile which made his throat and the back of his nose burn, made his eyes well with tears as he hunched over the toilet bowl. The contractions hurt terribly and he let out pitiful moans between each one until he felt his stomach finally stop clenching. For a few seconds he just stayed frozen in place, head hanging forward and eyes squeezed shut, then he reached up to feebly flush the toilet. The water came up with in a fast and loud swirl and it washed the porcelain sides free of his vomit. When he opened his eyes and looked at the toilet the sight was clean sides and water, almost as if he hadn’t been sick in the first place.
Hoseok struggled back upright, having to grab onto the system and use it for support. The sink was still running and there were no signs of the aspirin. He had just laid eyes on the bottle when he heard a rapping noise on the other side of the door.

“Hoseok?” Jungkook called out. “Are you OK?” Hoseok turned his head to look at the door and sure enough he saw the handle shifting up and down as the boy tried to open the door.

“Uh…” He turned back to look at the sink and the bottle was still there, now empty and lidless. He stumbled to the sink and grabbed the bottle, rapidly screwing the lid on and shoving it back into the cabinet, closing the door as softly as possible to not alert the boy that he had been sniffing around in there. “I’m OK.”

“I thought…” Hoseok turned the tap off with a quick twist and the bathroom fell silent once more. “I thought I heard you vomiting.” The boy finished rather lamely. He went over to the door and unlocked it before opening it and Jungkook took a few rapid steps backwards so he wasn’t blocking him. The boy had been pressed right up against the door, no doubt trying to hear him under the noise the tap had been making.

“You did,” Hoseok said with a grim expression. “I’ve been feeling nauseous all day. That’s why I locked the door, I knew I was going to vomit and I didn’t think you’d want to watch me from across the room.”

“Shit, you’re sweating right now.” And before he could even reach up to touch his own forehead the boy beat him to it, pressing his hand against his brow. “You should lie down.” Hoseok made a soft noise at this and Jungkook gently put an arm around his waist. “Just for a little while.” He didn’t want to lie down but there was no point in arguing so he just let him help him across the room and sat down on the bed to satisfy the boy. After Jungkook had checked his brow again and asked if he felt alright and he confirmed that he did his friend crossed the room and also disappeared into the bathroom, closing the door over slightly but not locking it.

Hoseok watched him go and then dropped his eyes to the bag just by his feet. Before he could even stop himself he grabbed it and placed it on his lap, unzipping the backpack with shaking hands. He reached inside, pushing tees and balled up socks aside to get to the inner compartment and he ran his fingers along it to find the zip when he felt something…peculiar. The compartment felt to be empty, but it shouldn’t be empty because that was where his pills were. Yet after finding the zip and pulling it along to open the compartment he realised that his thought was correct.

The compartment was empty.
He reached inside and checked with his fingers even though it was stupid, waiting for them to brush against the smooth plastic of the bottle so he could pull it free and finally take one of those fucking pills. But his fingers just ran along smooth polyester and nothing more, not even lint.

His pills were gone.

Hoseok had never truly been mad at his friends before. There had been incidents in the past when there had been slight disagreements but never enough to past the initial bickering phase before one of them backed down to avoid causing too much trouble. As a result it kept the bonds rather clean and strong. It meant that everyone was willing to change stance for the sake of their friendships and as a result he had never been given a reason to doubt or question any of them. Yet he found himself getting more than mad by this sudden unraveling of events: he could feel himself getting pissed.

Hoseok knew that his situation was rather serious. Thanks to his Xanax addiction he had overdosed on his medication but luckily for him not enough to have any severe consequences. As a result that made the pills dangerous, made them something that needed to be kept out of his reach. It was obvious that whoever had done this had done so to stop him from slipping and taking any of them but he didn't feel like their actions were helping him. Hoseok felt a little like a child at the sight of the empty compartment in his backpack, at the lack of bottle that should have been there. In that moment he felt like none of them could trust him and so one of them had taken them away from him.

He was the naughty child that wouldn’t stop taking cookies out of the jar when he had been told to leave it alone.

Hoseok wanted to be relieved by the fact whoever had done it had saved him from swallowing one or three or a dozen of the stupid little pills, but he couldn’t help but feel betrayal. They didn’t trust him to have the willpower or strength to kick the Xanax away, they thought that he was pathetic and weak and would cave. They were right, he knew they were right because here he was searching for them the minute the other boy was out of the room like a cocaine addict looking for a hit. But he was still pissed even if they were right.

Who had done it? Had Seokjin and Namjoon paired up and decided that it was for the best, perhaps talking Yoongi into snatching them whilst he was asleep to keep their hands clean? Had Yoongi just
taken it upon himself to take them without either of their permission, as stubborn as always? Would Jungkook do something like that? He didn’t think so, and he knew there was no way that Jimin would. Jimin would never do something like that to him. But Taehyung… oh Taehyung was a prime suspect alright. The boy could have taken them out of his bag with little trouble. He could have tossed them or sold them. Heck the boy would have probably downed a few himself just to help him get wasted. He knew that he shouldn’t assume but it was hard not to.

Hoseok felt exhausted and yet the idea that one of his friends, or perhaps all of them together, didn’t trust him filled him with an anger that made him want to get up and do something. It was stupid but he couldn’t help it and so he threw the bag aside and got to his feet before crossing the room. As he opened the door he heard the toilet flushing and he slammed it shut before crossing the lot. He didn’t feel any better than he had a few minutes ago but his annoyance certainly gave him a little spurt of energy. He didn’t really know where he was going and he crossed the lot before stepping out onto the curb. He just needed to get out of the room for a moment, to clear his head. A quick glance both ways showed him nothing more than random buildings and the road in front of him was wide and packed with traffic. Hoseok stood there rather stupidly, barefoot and shaking, and he thought that he should just go back inside. He was mad and upset but this wasn’t helping him at all and-

A car slowed down so that it passed him and pulled up at the curb just a few feet to his right. He didn’t recognise the model at all but it looked expensive and as the passenger door swung outwards and he heard a guffawing sound; as recognisable to his ears as his mother's voice. Hoseok watched Taehyung struggling to get out of the car for a few seconds in dumb disbelief. The boy had one leg out the open doorway and he awkwardly tried to shove the other one out, all the while still talking to whoever was in the car. He managed to grab onto the sides of the doorway and drag himself out and then he shoved the door shut, the sound as loud as a gunshot.

“Tae?” Hoseok said and the boy whirled around to look at him, almost tripping over his own feet as he did. He was drunk. It was the early afternoon and he was so goddamn drunk that he could barely stand up. “Tae, what the fuck?”

“What’re you doing out here?” Taehyung asked stupidly as he looked across the lot at the hostel building. “You’re supposed to-”

“Tae, where’s my pills?”

“Where’s your what?” Hoseok walked right over to the boy so they were just a foot away and his friend looked at him with a puzzled expression. He could smell soju coming off him in waves and something else too, something that he couldn’t quite figure out.

“My pills Tae, my medication. Where is it?” But the other boy just said he didn’t know what he was talking about, holding his gaze steady even in his drunken state. He didn’t look away once and after
a few seconds he thought that it was highly possible that his friend really didn’t know what he was
talking about. Which meant one of the others did. “I checked my bag and the bottle is missing.”

“Shit, someone must’ve taken ‘em…” Taehyung muttered as he felt for the low railing around the
hostel lot and leaned against it. Hoseok asked him if he knew who had taken them and the boy
furrowed his brow and thought it over before shaking his head. “Nope, haven’t got a fucking clue
but then again I dunno my own name right now and-”

“Who was that? The guy in the car with you?” Taehyung waved the questions off with his wrist and
he felt himself getting even more annoyed. The boy didn’t have his pills, he didn’t know who did it
or anything helpful; he was drunk and he wasn’t answering his questions now too. His anger wasn’t
going anywhere, it was just being diverted towards someone else. “Tae.”

“It doesn’t matter,” his friend said, eyes flighty and refusing to settle, “but I got an idea. I can steal
you some pills.” Hoseok stared at him dumbly and his tongue suddenly felt too heavy in his mouth to
move. Did he just say what he thought he had? Had the boy really just offered to steal him some
medication considering everything that had happened these past days, considering the fact that he
wasn’t even supposed to be taking it at all right now? He didn’t know whether to be shocked,
disgusted or relieved by the boy’s eagerness to help him. “Xanax right? Shit, I could get that for you
no problem I-”

“No,” he said suddenly, “no I don’t want the fucking pills Tae. I just…I need to go back inside and-”
he heard Jungkook’s voice echoing across the lot behind him and he reached up to rub at his temples
with a heavy sigh. He could feel Taehyung’s eyes on him and he just closed his own and took
several deep breaths to try and calm himself down. His pulse was racing and to make everything
worse he was convinced he was getting a headache, even though he hadn’t swallowed a single pill.
After a few seconds something grabbed hold of his upper arm and he knew it was the youngest boy,
that he was wrapping his fingers around him tightly so that he couldn’t try and run off on him again.

“Hey Hoseok, come on let’s get back inside now. OK?”

Hoseok let him pull him off the street and back into the lot without a single word, filled with shame
and disgust that he had left the room in the first place and scared the boy like that. Jungkook led him
across it at a nice pace and then he helped him back into the hostel room. Only then did he let go of
his arm and Hoseok went over to the bed by the window, lying down and dragging the covers up
over his eyes so he could burrow underneath them and try and shut the world out.

He didn’t want to move right now. He just wanted to disappear for a little while so that his body
would stop aching and he could stop thinking about the stupid pills. At some point he felt the bed
shifting as someone sat down on it and he knew it was Taehyung because even through the covers
he could smell soju. The boy didn’t say a word to him and instead just reached over to gently run his
hands through his hair, through the few locks on the pillow not hidden under the covers. He wanted
to knock his hand away and yet he couldn’t, even after he had offered to get him the pills. He knew
that Taehyung hadn’t taken stolen them from him and that meant he could trust one of his friends at
least, regardless of the fact that said friend was wasted more often than sober these days and that he
had been his first suspect.

Hoseok felt himself wanting to cry and so he muffled his mouth with the covers and just willed the
sensation to go away. It didn’t and even with his eyes squeezed shut he felt tears escaping to run
down his face and pool on the bed sheets.

He almost wished he had swallowed all of the stupid aspirin.
The first thing that Yoongi noticed when he pulled the blinds up was that the sky was a strange shade of grey. For the past two weeks there had been barely more than a sparse scattering of clouds at any given time over the course of every day, barely enough to give any shade or relief from the heat and harsh sun, yet today was different. Today the sky was not a vivid blue like something from a tourist brochure, nor was it even a paler shade, it was slate grey; the colour of the concrete path right outside the door. He saw not one cloud, or as many as three, he saw an entire bank of them rolling low along the horizon. For some reason the sight of them him feel a strange uneasiness that he couldn’t seem to figure out. It was almost like the weather was a bad sign but he didn’t know how it could possibly be one. Considering everything that had happened over the past few days he thought that the bad sign had missed its window and was now terribly late.

“What’re you looking at?” Yoongi tried to not jump in surprise at the boy’s voice but he didn’t hide his surprise very well for when he glanced over his shoulder he saw Jimin’s lips lifting in a soft smirk.

“The weather,” he replied as he shifted and tried to not look embarrassed. He hadn’t thought that anyone would be awake at this hour and he had gotten ready without seeing a single one of his roommates stirring, yet whilst he had been distracted by the window Jimin had caught him by surprise. A quick glance across the room showed that Namjoon was still asleep in his single bed and he briefly wondered if Seokjin was too.

Yesterday had been eventful to say the least. When Yoongi had returned back from working just a few hours cleaning up a park in the city centre he had found out that Hoseok had had a little try at a rebellion, attempting to get out of the hostel room whilst Seokjin had been out and Jungkook had been left alone with him. The boy had clearly been angry or upset over something to react in such a way, very unlike his usual behaviour that it was pretty obvious to him why the boy had done it. Hoseok had wanted his pills and for whatever reason he hadn’t been able to get his hands on them. Though no one had told him that explicitly Yoongi knew that it was the case. He recalled suggesting that they take them out of his backpack just in case and though Seokjin had said that it was invasive and wrong to do so it seemed that someone had already beaten him to the punch and snatched them first. Whoever had done it, Yoongi wanted to kiss them and thank them over and over. Though the boy didn’t know it they were trying to help him. Fighting an addiction wasn’t going to be easy under normal circumstances, there was no way Hoseok could do it alone in these currently fucked up ones. Yet what had happened had been enough to make the poor boy curl up in bed all evening, not moving, not talking, not even responding to their questions. He just lay under the covers and let Taehyung sit on the edge of the bed beside him and he likely stayed that way all night to Yoongi’s current knowledge because he had left to go into the other room to try and get some sleep.
Seokjin hadn’t actually come up with the idea to stay in the other room during the night, rather it had been Jimin’s suggestion. In fact the boy had declared that it was a really good idea and had practically persuaded their eldest friend into switching rooms with him. For Hoseok’s sake of course. Yet Yoongi felt that there was something afoot about it all. Had Jimin not wanted to be around the boy whilst he had been in a bad state, already troubled with enough problems? Namjoon had said he thought the boy was carrying many secrets with him and he was starting to believe it too. Was he just trying to be helpful and came across as a little too eager? Did it have something to do with not wanting to be stuck with a drunken Taehyung after the cruel joke he had made about him yesterday morning? He could only imagine the kind of shit the boy said when wasted, for he had been around Taehyung to know that he was an angry drunk more often than a happy one. Their friend probably reminded him of his father and he wouldn’t blame the boy for wanting to steer clear of him, but he was still uncertain about it all.

Did Jimin have something to do with Hoseok’s missing medication? It seemed a possible reason for him to not want to be stuck in the room with the other boys, left to likely answer any questions on the matter, but Jimin? Of all people…Park Jimin? The idea had crossed his mind last night when the boy had crawled into the bed with him, waking him up from his light slumber confused and a little disgruntled, and yet after some contemplation he had found the idea laughable. In fact he had actually snorted laughter and felt the boy shifting in his sleep as a result of the sudden noise. Jimin wouldn’t possibly do something like that. The other boys liked to call him ‘dumbass’ and make fun of him for being clumsy and Yoongi had to admit - though he didn’t like doing so - that Jimin had a habit of managing to mess simple tasks up a lot of the time. It was a bad attention span coupled with the fear of failure that made him often break things or hurt himself when he was trying his hardest not to. Could the boy really be bold enough to not only attempt something like that, but to also pull it off successfully? No, it was likely Jungkook that had gotten rid of them when left alone with him in the hostel room, maybe Taehyung in the middle of the night when Hoseok had been sleeping.

Not Jimin, clumsy but sweet Jimin that couldn’t even say anything bad about Taehyung when he pushed him around.

“What’s so interesting about the weather?” Jimin asked as he stretched his arms up over his head. The act of doing so made his tee rise off and flash an inch of his stomach. Yoongi dragged his eyes away and instead reached over to grab the blind cord, pulling on it to make the material roll all the way up. It made a strange sound as it did, like shuffling cards, and Namjoon mumbled in his sleep before rolling over.

“It’s not very…summery,” he said as the boy glanced out of the window at the sky.

“Please don’t rain,” Jimin practically whimpered, bottom lip pouting out as he did. “I can’t clean cars in the rain…”
“Clean cars?” Yoongi moved from the window to sit on the end of the bed. “Oh, so you found another mechanics, huh?”

“Uh-huh, I didn’t have time to say anything yesterday ‘cos of the whole…Hoseok thing, you know? But I totally found another job. It pays a little more I think, I don’t really know. I haven’t counted any of my wage out yet, I was too tired last night.”

“Cleaning and fixing, right? They let you help with that don’t they?”

“Kinda, I helped fixed a broken windshield wiper for someone whilst they were getting their tailpipe fixed and they tipped me for it.” The boy looked rather proud of this achievement.

“I thought you couldn’t fix broken shit? You little liar.” Yoongi reached over to roughly mess with his hair and Jimin made a noise under his breath that was supposed to be annoyed but just sounded like a laugh to his ears. “Don’t worry about the cash right now, alright? We’ll sort all of that shit out together, just keep working hard.”

“What about you?” the boy asked as he reached up to fix his messy hair. “Working hard or hardly working?”

“…Both,” he replied after a moment, seeing Jimin smirking at the comment. “Dunno what today even has in store for me. I’m back to searching the streets I think. Getting a little desperate truthfully.” The boy said that he was always desperate and Yoongi shot him a mock look of shock. “How dare you. I mean, I’m not that desperate, right?”

“Only a little…”

“Jimin?” His friend paused in the act of fixing his hair and looked at him, waiting for him to continue talking. “Can I ask you something, right now, just me and you? No one else needs to know about it. It’ll be our little secret, yeah?” Yoongi held a finger in front of his lips with a soft nod and Jimin dropped his gaze to study this gesture rather intently.

“…Sure,” he said after a few seconds, hesitation not only in his voice but also on his face. He looked strangely nervous and he didn’t know why. It could have been the result of several things.

“I promise, just you and me.”
“Yoongi?” Yoongi lowered his finger from his mouth and asked him what and the boy shifted on the bed slightly, crossing his legs and dropping his hands to his lap. A quick glance showed him that they were nervously fumbling and he was trying to make it less obvious. “Why don’t you want anyone else knowing about it?”

“I haven’t even asked you yet.”

“I know, I know but-”

“Jimin, are you keeping any secrets right now?” Yoongi asked, cutting him off before he could bluster on and on and distract him. The boy was practically wriggling right now and he wouldn’t look at him and instead let his eyes move over to look at the bathroom. Before he could even tell him not to his friend muttered about needing the toilet and he jumped to his feet. Yoongi cursed under his breath and tried to grab his wrist but he broke his grip with a hard tug and he felt himself slipping off the edge of the bed. He let out a yelp and landed on the floor with a loud thump and then the bathroom door closed over. He scrabbled back to his feet and stormed over to the door. “Jimin. Open the door right now.”

No reply.

“If you don’t have any why’re you hiding from me, huh?” Yoongi pressed his ear against the door and sure enough he heard the boy also cursing under his breath at this; he had him cornered. “C’mon, I just wanna talk.” After a few seconds there was the crisp click of the lock twisting and then the boy pulled the door open and let him inside the bathroom. Jimin moved to stand by the sink and he looked so very small and trapped. Yoongi could see his reflection in the mirror behind him and he dragged his eyes away from it to look at him.

“I don’t have any secrets,” the boy blurted out before he could even open his mouth and Yoongi sighed and cocked his head at him with a ‘really?’ expression. Jimin stared at the linoleum floor rather than look at him.

“Jimin, you ever hear the saying: innocent people don’t run away?” The boy started gnawing on his lower lip. “Well…you just did the 100 meter sprint to get away from me so what does that look like, huh?”

“Running away…”
“Exactly.” He leaned against the door frame and let this hang in the air for a moment. “Jimin, I wasn’t talking about you, y’know?”

“I know.”

“You can tell me, y’know that right?” Jimin made a soft noise under his breath at this but still didn’t look up at him. “I won’t get pissed off with you, I won’t flip out on you, I just wanna talk and make sure everything’s OK. For you and the others. Is everything OK?”

“Uh, not really.”

“Why isn’t it OK, huh? Talk to me.” But Jimin stubbornly refused to give him anything, claiming that he already knew what was wrong because everyone did. “Yeah, everyone knows what’s wrong on the surface. I want more, I want what’s underneath.” Yoongi waited for a few seconds before deciding to be blunt. “Look, you still haven’t fessed up about Tae and it’s been a couple of days. I know y’know something so don’t act like I’m a fucking idiot Jimin. Now Hoseok. Again, y’know something so what is it?” His friend shifted from foot to foot but didn’t reply. “Do y’know about his pills?”

“Tae…”

“What about him?” he asked, suddenly sensing that he was on the cusp of something and that he might just get an answer out of the boy.

“He said…Tae said that-”

“What?” Yoongi asked, unconsciously leaning closer to the boy so that he could hear him should he decide to whisper.

“Taehyung said you have a crush on me!” the boy blurted out suddenly, making him jerk back in surprise.

Yoongi was aware of what he had said but his brain was still processing it, seemingly so confused that he didn’t really understand the implications of the boy’s words. He had been waiting for
something about Taehyung, or Hoseok, and yet the boy had completely disarmed him with his words. He hadn’t been expecting this at all and he felt like he had ran right into a brick wall.

“Do you?”

He felt his mouth moving and yet no sound would come out and he could only stare at the boy dumbly. He didn’t even try and stop him when he walked past him to get into the other section of the hostel room, staring at the spot he had occupied until he caught sight of himself in the mirror on the medical cabinet over the sink. He closed his gaping mouth and turned to look over his shoulder and sure enough Namjoon was now awake, rubbing at his eyes to try and force them to open. The boy glanced back at him and Yoongi silently cursed at the fact he had let him catch him out like that.

Jimin might have won round one, but there were still more to come and he wasn’t going to back down now.

“Min?” At his name he looked up from the sinkful of dishes in front of him, hands still wrist deep in the scorching hot soapy water and sponge held against a plate. He recognised the waitress by her hair but for a few seconds her name completely went out of his head because he had been so distracted with his own thoughts. She shoved her way through the push door and both of her hands were full with trays, each of them stacked up with more dishes: bowls and plates, glasses and cutlery, and that meant more work for him.

“Uh…yeah?” he asked, mentally kicking himself because he couldn’t remember her name. But she was too distracted carrying them over and placing the trays down on the counter beside him to notice. She did so very smoothly, revealing that she had clearly a lot of experience in this field because he knew if he had tried that he would have ended up dropping the stupid things and smashing the precious porcelain and glass all over the floor.

“Just another two tables or so and then we’re done,” the waitress said, reaching up and miming wiping sweat of her brow as she puffed her cheeks up and sighed. There wasn’t even a bead of sweat on her skin, a stray lock of hair free from her tight bun, but Yoongi didn’t feel so clean and presentable. Having been surrounded by flaming stoves for hours on end he felt like he had been in an oven himself. He wouldn’t be surprised if his tee was soaked with sweat and he could barely contain himself at the thought of a nice shower.
“I can hardly wait…” he muttered as he carried on scrubbing the plate in his hand and the woman quickly exited the kitchen. Only after the door shut did he remember her name was Jieun. Yoongi eyed the double tray mountain in front of him and groaned under his breath. This was going to take forever.

At least he had his thoughts to keep him company.

Yoongi placed the now clean plate aside and moved onto a bowl, trying his hardest to remove a stubborn film of soup that was stuck to the porcelain. He couldn’t stop thinking about Jimin and his stupid actions from this morning. He didn’t know whether the boy had blurted all of that out to distract him and it was just a lie, or whether there was some truth behind it. Had Taehyung really said that to him? The more he thought about it the more confused he got and he kept going back to the same thing.

Did he have a crush on him?

Yoongi really didn’t know. He hadn’t thought about it yet it seemed one of his friends, maybe even more, most certainly had. Had Jimin been thinking of this too and if so…what had he been thinking? What he did know was that he greatly cared for the boy just like all of his friends, yet he couldn’t deny that he did treat him a little differently to the rest. Did his babying seem like something else? He didn’t know and he was a little worried that the chances he might just have something like a ‘crush’ might affect his friendship with Jimin. Just the idea of talking about crushes with friends seemed ridiculous to him, something high schoolers did at sleepovers for fun and giggles. He hadn’t been in high school for nearly four years now and even when he had he had most certainly not talked about crushes. The boys might still be surrounded by such childish behaviour but he still found it highly unusual to know that they had been talking about those things.

Was it because of Taehyung; because of the situation between him and Hoseok that he had overhead all those nights back on that freight train? He didn’t know if anything had happened between the two boys but it did invite a chance for the kids to all discuss such things. Yoongi just wished they hadn’t decided to drop him into their little game.

“A game…? Games are supposed to be fun,” he muttered as he rinsed the bowl and started on another one, this one with rice stubbornly stuck to the porcelain. Yoongi didn’t do crushes, as a matter of fact he could barely stand the idea of relationships. Too intimate, too…dangerous. No, he much preferred the knowledge that his bonds with his friends wouldn’t hurt him in such a way, and he was content with that knowledge.

Or at least he had been.
Now he wasn’t so sure thanks to Jimin…

When he finally finished cleaning the dishes and tidied up the kitchen area an hour seemed to pass. In reality it had been barely thirty minutes but at the sight of the owner of the restaurant coming into the kitchen he could have sighed in relief. The man handed him his wages, shoving notes that were wrapped around coins into his hands, which were wrinkled from scrubbing all of the dishes, and thanked him for his service. He just nodded respectfully and quickly made his way out to get onto the curb outside, unknotting his jacket from his waist as he did and slipping it on.

Yoongi counted the notes in his hand, coins in the palm of the other with his fingers wrapped around them to stop them spilling out all over the curb. 25,800₩ over the several hours he had worked today. It wasn’t great but considering the fact he had earned just 10,600₩ the day before from a single pitiful dish-washing job it was pretty decent. The most he had earned had been the first day of course, a grand 41,300 because of the pizza delivery tips, but that had been a stupid risk and he didn’t want to take another like it just in case. The cash might be needed but he couldn’t earn a single won if he was locked in a police station cell, so he was back to tip-less slave labour once more. But even with the cash in hand he had still needed to help pay for food and accommodation. He was looking at perhaps half of today’s wage being squirreled away for coach tickets and the rest kept just in case. He hoped his other friends, the ones that could make cash, were faring a lot better than he was because it was going to take him forever to earn enough for those that couldn’t like Jungkook and Hoseok.

The weather looked mere minutes away from rain, from the sky overhead bursting open and pelting him with freezing cold droplets and though it sounded refreshing he didn’t want to get caught out in it just in case it turned into a storm. Known their luck of late he would end up getting struck by lightning just to ruin the day. So instead he just started walking a little faster, pulling his jacket close and folding his arms over his chest to keep it in place because the zipper had been broken for months now. The hostel wasn’t that far away and it would likely take twenty minutes and he just kept his eyes in front of him to ensure he didn’t wander onto a wrong street. Now that it was dark the city looked a lot different than it had this morning. When he got back he would dive right into the shower without a second thought, then perhaps some food. Maybe there would be somewhere with hot options available? He supposed that he could afford to spend a little extra for just this one night. He felt exhausted and his day had been hellish, from his incessant worrying over his friends to the dreadful heat of the kitchen. If buying food made his friends happy and made them smile it might just make him feel a little better.

Yoongi caught sight of the familiar building and he raced along the street to get to the lot, hearing the ominous rumble that signaled rain. He got to the door and knocked several times with his knuckles and the door swung inwards a few seconds later, just as the first light droplets of rain started falling. Namjoon looked at him blankly for a moment and he heard the most strangest sound coming from behind him. It sounded like raised voices.
“Hey, everything alright?” he asked, hanging back for a few seconds. The young man gave him a look that told him it most certainly was not and so he stepped inside the hostel room to see the boys standing in the centre of the room.

“…that one of you doesn’t know something and- oh, here he is now,” Hoseok said suddenly, catching him by surprise.

Yoongi studied them each in turn as he lowered his arms from in front of his chest. Jungkook was seated on the leather settee in the corner and he was watching everything keenly but didn’t seem to be taking part in the ongoing debate. Seokjin was seated on the bed by the window and judging from the imprint on the covers beside him Namjoon had been sitting there before he had gotten up to let him into the room. Hoseok and Taehyung were standing to the left of the centre of the room, not quite huddled together but close, and Jimin was standing in front of them. It was clear upon first glance that the boy was being grilled and he knew what was going on, yet he still asked anyway to save himself time to think of a way of defusing whatever was going on.

“Did you take Hoseok’s medication?” Seokjin asked in a weary voice as he reached up to rub at his brow with a sigh. “Because this debate had been going on for an hour now and we’re all tired of hearing about it.”

“No,” Yoongi replied without missing a beat, looking right at Hoseok as he did. “I don’t have a fucking clue where the pills are. Does it matter?”

“Yes it matters,” Hoseok said in an annoyed tone. “It matters because someone went into my bag and took the pills because they don’t trust me.”

“…OK,” he said after a moment of thought, “did you ever think that maybe the person that did it was trying to help you?” But the boy just scoffed at this. Yoongi dragged his eyes away from him to look at Jimin. “What’s going on?”

“Everyone thinks you took the pills,” Jimin said in a quiet voice as he dropped his gaze to his boots, “and I told them that you didn’t but they don’t believe me and-”

“C’mon Dumbass, everyone knows you’d cover for him, that’s why we don’t believe you,” Taehyung muttered.

“Well you’re wrong ‘cos he’s covering for no one. If I took those stupid pills I wouldn’t be scared
nor ashamed to admit it, in fact I wanted to take ‘em the minute you collapsed but everyone told me not to.” Yoongi looked back at Hoseok and shrugged. “Sorry, I’d love to play a detective game with you but I’m too tired and-

“If it wasn’t you then it must’ve been Dumbass,” Taehyung said and Yoongi thought this over for a moment before it slowly dawned on him and he tried not to look at the other boy. He had had nothing to do with the pills so if they had narrowed it down to him and Jimin then that meant that the boy really had done it. Suddenly his actions this morning didn’t seem stupid at all now. For a few seconds he couldn’t react to this as he tried to figure out a way to control the situation. He could lie about taking the medication to cover the boy’s ass…or he could be honest and just try and fix it as best as he could.

“OK, I-

“I did it!” Jimin said suddenly, not shouting but voice raised slightly just so they would all stop bickering and hear him. The boy shut his eyes upon this declaration and he seemed to have almost tensed up, shoulders raised slightly and lips pulled in, as if he was expecting to be screamed at or perhaps hit. Yoongi had enough time to briefly wonder if that was what he looked like every time he had a mistake in front of his father, before the man walloped him over the back of his head, and then he realized that the hostel room had went deathly quiet.

“…What?” Hoseok asked, practically breathing the word out.

“I did it, OK? I took the fucking pills and I got rid of them. The night you collapsed I got them outta your bag and I flushed them down the toilet,” Jimin explained in a rapid voice, eyes still squeezed shut as he did.

“Jimin what the…what the fuck?”

“I was trying to help you,” the boy said, “cos I was scared of you overdosing on them again and I just-

“How is that helping me?” Hoseok asked in disbelief. “Treating me like I’m a fucking five year old? Do you not even trust me?”

“I do trust you, I do, but I don’t trust the pills. I hate those stupid fucking pills and I did help you,” Jimin argued. “You went looking for them even though you said that you wouldn’t.”
“He’s right,” Yoongi said. He suddenly felt the need to jump in because he didn’t like how Jimin was trapped in the middle of it all like always. “He did the right thing ‘cos if he hadn’t you’d have started taking ’em again.”

“Hey Dumbass why don’t you tell us all about Yoongi?” Taehyung interrupted as he shifted to look at him. Yoongi furrowed his brow and asked him the fuck he was talking about and the boy slid his eyes over to Jimin. “Sharing’s caring, you wanna do the right thing, so let’s talk about Yoongi and his mystery burns.” At this Yoongi felt his skin go cold and he stared at the boy in a mixture of horror and confusion. How did he know about that? How had he possibly found out about that?

“Hey Tae, leave that shit outta this,” Namjoon said suddenly but it was too late; Yoongi could sense his friends staring at him. Jungkook and Hoseok looked bewildered by his words and Seokjin seemed both confused and hurt by the fact he wasn’t aware of any of this.

“Tell us about how you knew he was burning himself but you didn’t tell anyone.”

“I…I don’t-”

“I saw the marks on his arm a few days ago and when I asked you you played dumb but it was all over your face Dumbass: you knew.”

“Yeah, I knew too,” Namjoon announced, “but I thought it was better to try and talk privately than fucking shout about it!” The young man looked annoyed and Yoongi felt strangely detached from the entire situation. What was going on? Why were they all staring at him and yelling about his burns? They had been talking about Hoseok. Why were they all staring at him now, wide eyed and confused?

“So you’ll throw Hoseok’s pills away to help him but leave Yoongi? Why not throw his cigarettes away, or his lighter? That would really help him.”

“Tae shut the fuck up,” Yoongi finally managed to say. “This ain’t about you.”

“Hoseok’s problems ain’t about all of you but you’re all happy to get involved,” Taehyung countered.
“Hoseok needed help, he still needs help.”

“What the fuck is going on?” Jungkook asked stupidly from his position on the settee. He looked them over with wide eyes and yet no one tried to explain because they were too busy trying to sort out the unfolding argument.

“Jimin was trying to fucking help him, can’t you see that or are you too drunk?” Yoongi spat and at this Taehyung’s lips turned down severely at the corners. Oh, he had touched a nerve with that remark all right.

“What he did was fuck up, like always.”

“Fu...fuck up?” Jimin asked, huffing the word out as he stared at the other boy. “I fucked up?” There was something on his face that Yoongi had never seen before but he didn’t have enough time to figure it out before the boy unloaded on Taehyung. “Jesus fucking Christ Tae I try and help people and you say that shit?! I didn’t fuck up I helped him and I think you forget that I helped you too! Oh, why don’t we talk about that? Why don’t we talk about you fucking up for once?”

“Dumbass, don’t you dare—”

“My name’s not Dumbass it’s Jimin, Park Jimin!” the boy shouted and everyone stared at him in complete shock. Jimin was shouting. Jimin had raised his voice in anger and he was shouting at Taehyung. “This Dumbass covered up for your ass! This Dumbass lied and lied just to keep you outta trouble and you call me a fuck up?”

“Jimin,” Seokjin said in a soothing tone, “maybe we should stop shouting and—”

“Yes, I knew about Yoongi and I didn’t say anything! Yes, I got rid of Hoseok’s pills without telling anyone, but I was helping!” Jimin shouted over him, features contorted not from anger but rather because he seemed to be struggling to stop himself from crying. “And you know what? I knew what happened to Tae that night and I lied about that too!” Taehyung moved suddenly and Yoongi threw an arm up to stop him, pushing him back from the other boy. He looked ready to dive on him and he was glad to see Hoseok grabbing hold of his arm to stop him too.

“Don’t you fucking dare!”
“Tae sneaked out the room one night when we needed cash and-”

“I swear I’ll-”

“and he prostituted himself!”

The room went so silent that Yoongi fancied he heard the sound of Taehyung’s knees unhinging before he spilled forward and landed on the floor, arms holding him up wobbling terribly. He could only look down at the boy in numb confusion and Jimin wasn’t even finished yet. The boy started babbling about how he had helped him and cleaned him up and how he had lied because he wanted to keep him safe but Taehyung had made him tell everyone; Taehyung had fucked up by attacking him like that. No one seemed able to say a word to get him to stop but he wished someone would make him stop talking.

“Tae…” Namjoon finally said when Jimin managed to get himself under control. “What the fuck is he talking about?”

“He’s talking shit, he-”

“I’m helping you Tae ‘cos you need it! I’m scared about you and-”

“you couldn’t help anyone!” Taehyung shouted, his hoarse voice making the other boy jump in shock. “You can’t do anything right! You’re a fuck up, you’re fucking useless!”

Jimin held his gaze for a moment and Yoongi saw his composure starting to crumple. The boy had been trying so hard to not cry and stand up for himself but their friend’s word had pierced right through his shield and struck him hard. It was his lips that started to quiver first, nothing more than a slight twitch before they started shaking, then his hands. Jimin tried to blink the tears away but it didn’t work and they welled up anyway. Then the boy raced across the room and before any of them could call after him the door swung open and slammed shut loudly as he ran out of the room.

“Tae what the fuck?!” Jungkook asked as he jumped to his feet. “The fuck did you do that for?!” But Taehyung didn’t reply because he had buried his face against the carpet so he didn’t have to look at them all.

“He was trying to help Hoseok you stupid asshole,” Yoongi growled at him. “You called him a fuck
“Yoongi,” Namjoon said with a head shake, silently telling him to not go there right now. But he couldn’t just leave it alone after the boy had shouted at Jimin like that, after he had hurt the boy badly because he was so fucking selfish.

“I trusted him…” Taehyung said in a low voice which was muffled by the carpet. “I trusted him and he...shit.”

Seokjin got to his feet suddenly and crossed the room to take hold of his arm and Yoongi looked at him in confusion as he pulled him into the bathroom.

“Go get Jimin,” he said as he leaned close, words practically a whisper. “Just in case.”

“In case what?”

“In case he does something…” Seokjin let go of his arm and seemed a loss of how to finish this sentence. He didn’t need his friend to explain what he meant and Yoongi felt a little moan escaping his lips as he pushed past him to get to the door, pulling on the handle several times before he managed to get it to open.

He stepped outside and felt the rain pelting him already, hitting his hair and making it hang down over his eyes and freezing his skin even through his jacket. Yoongi took a few steps across the lot before realising that the road in front of him stretched both ways and he stopped dumbly to stare at this sight. There was no sign of Jimin at all and he could have picked either direction, could have even ran around the front of the building and darted off wherever those roads led to, leaving not a single trace in his wake that he could follow. He wandered to the very edge of the lot so that he could stand on the curb and a moment later came the loud blaring of a truck horn from his right. He twisted sharply to look and a few seconds a large juggernaut zoomed past and splashed puddles up from the gutters to hit his jeans. In his current panic he didn’t even care. Why had the driver hit the horn? Had someone ran across the road perhaps, a quick flash of body in the headlights that caused the presumably male driver to slam his hand down on it? He thought about how the boy had a habit of darting across roads just like the two other boys, copying their bad habits to perfection, and that was what made him start running in the direction it had come from. He had no clue of knowing if his assumption was even correct but there was nothing else he could do, he couldn’t stand on the curb all night yelling after the boy.

There was a horrible feeling in the pit of his stomach that told him that he needed to find Jimin before something bad happened, before he had an accident stumbling around in the bad weather, or
something even worst…

His boots came down hard on the paving flags and each step made a splash of water fly up and land on his jeans, soaking the lengths through even more than the rain was. The sound he made was much like the rumble of thunder and he wondered if there was going to be any, if a massive storm was going to roll in and clear the dreadful heat away for a few days. The way the air seemed almost electric hinted that it might, a static crackle that seemed to cling to his skin. It was as if the impending storm was a harbinger of sorts, a dreadful foreboding that made the sensation in his stomach intensify. He could sense a nausea that made his legs feel a little weak and there was a sour taste at the back of his throat that he thought might just be fear.

“Jimin!?” Yoongi shouted, not even bothering to cup his hands around his mouth to amplify his voice. The rain was so loud that it wouldn’t have even helped and at least pistoning his arms at his sides meant he could run a little faster. “Jimin, where the fuck are you!?” No reply, not that he expected one. His hair was hanging in his eyes so he brushed it back roughly, so wet that it actually stayed slicked back in place, and he blinked rainwater out of his eyes for a few seconds before hearing a loud blare. He managed to dive back onto the curb just as a car zoomed past, wheels less than an inch away from the toes of his boots, and then he darted across the road. He was pretty sure that the driver was hollering at him and yet he didn’t hear a single word. Between the sound of the rain and his own pulse racing in his ears he couldn’t even seem to think right now.

Yoongi carried on down the block even though he was pretty damn certain that he was not going to find the boy. The area just had too many roads to disappear down and there was no way he could find him on his own. But where the fuck would Jimin have ran off to? It made no sense that the boy would just run off without a place in mind, it just wasn’t in his nature. Jungkook or Taehyung were another matter entirely, had they have ran off then he really wouldn’t be able to find them, but he knew Jimin, and that meant a location. Yoongi forced himself to stop running for a moment just to sort out his thoughts. They were racing so fast that he couldn’t seem to snag onto a single one before it flew off and was replaced by ten more; panicked and crazy thoughts.

He couldn’t seem to catch his breath and he could only pull a small amount into his lungs before letting it out in a wheeze that sounded a little like a moan of horror to his ears. Seokjin was right, he really did need to cut down on the cigarettes and-

“Stop thinking shit like that!” Yoongi reached up to smack his rolled up hand rather hard on his forehead, as if able to dislodge the thoughts from his head. Why was he thinking about his own stupid problems when Jimin had ran off in a hysterical state and he didn’t know where he was? When Jimin could be in a very dangerous situation right now and none of them were there to stop him from doing something stupid? Why him? Why did the boy have to end up with him chasing after him: Min Yoongi the wreck that couldn’t even think straight most of the time? Min Yoongi, the idiot that burnt himself for a hobby and wished he was dead most mornings when waking up?
If Jimin was the fuck up then he had learnt his ways from him for sure.

Yoongi closed his eyes and felt his lips pulling back in a sneer, one that wasn’t entirely steady because the corners of his lips were twitching. Where was the boy? That was all that he had to figure out, everything else could wait he just needed to find the boy and it would be fine. Where would he go if he was feeling a little bit unstable in this city? Why, there were countless apartments blocks and subway lines to think of, must have been hundreds and yet he felt a brief image flashing through his mind at this thought. It was there for just a second and then gone again but he felt himself grabbing hold before it could truly disappear.

The scent of water, briny and detectable even under that of exhaust fumes. Metal railings and a concrete walkway that stretched for miles on a bridge. The sight of metal signs tacked to the towering suspension towers that were beside them and separating them from traffic. Taehyung had pointed right at one of them and had made a joke, a joke about what was stamped across it in bold red letters.

Do Not Jump! Please Seek Help!

Yoongi’s eyes opened wide suddenly and he stared across the road in front of him without really seeing anything. Yes, that was it, that was what it had said. There were more, some with numbers on them for helplines, others were borderline threats like: Think About Your Family! And what had Taehyung said just those two days ago.

“Hey Dumbass, you’re not that good at following instructions,” that same playful grin on his face that showed he was just ‘joking’ around and that he wasn’t at all bullying him, “you’d probably jump.” And Jimin had looked right back at him and asked what he would do if he did and the boy had said: “we’d replace you with a puppy.”

Just a playful joke indeed, one that the boy hadn’t laughed at at all.

Before he could even think about what he was doing Yoongi darted across the road beside him, cutting the wide stretch in half by running on a diagonal angle. He was pretty damn sure that this was the way to get to the bridge and he just prayed that his assumptions were correct because he didn’t have time to lose. He had already wasted enough time and he wouldn’t be surprised if he was too late. Jimin wasn’t going to be anywhere else, he knew that for certain. Jimin was going to go to that stupid fucking bridge and actually follow Taehyung’s instructions to a ‘T’, but he wouldn’t be around to witness if they really did replace him with a puppy. Not from that drop. Yoongi ran faster than he had ever ran before, so fast that he barely felt his boot soles touch the ground and rather he felt almost as if he was flying along the streets. The few people he raced past dived out of his way and stared after him in confusion and he didn’t stop even when the stitch in his side turned to white hot lightning and made every inhale burn just like his cigarettes did on his skin.
Just the bridge. He had to get to the bridge. He could drop dead as soon as he did but so long as he got to the bridge then he would die knowing he had tried.

“No one’s gonna fucking die!” he declared to himself as he caught sight of the metal suspension towers and raced towards them. “So stop thinking that!” But his thoughts weren’t entirely listening to him. In his head he pictured getting there just in time to see the boy step right off the side of the walkway, dropping so fast that he was out of sight before he could even dart forward and grab onto him; see something floating in the waters down below that looked the size of a child’s doll, one with starfish arms and legs spread out as it ebbed in the flow of the water. The harder he tried to push it all away the more the images seemed to cling and he could feel his sanity slowly starting to unravel.

When Yoongi finally got to the bridge he very nearly ran right down the road because he was so into his terrified thoughts that he didn’t register it, but after a few seconds he managed to figure it out and he quickly darted to get on the walkways built onto the side for pedestrians to walk on. His heart was thumping so hard in his chest that it hurt and seemed to burn even when he was shivering from the freezing cold rain. No amount of deep breaths seemed to slow it down and he continued along the walkway at a jog, eyes scanning in front of him and to the opposite one every second or so.

“Jimin!?” he called again, hearing his voice cracking as he did. Cracking with fear of course, for now the initial burst of adrenaline had disappeared and left him shaking and weak-legged once more. Why, he wouldn’t be surprised if he collapsed right now and-

He had been in the act of cupping his hands around his mouth when he caught sight of something on the other walkway and he whirled around, hands held out in front of him stupidly. A familiar flash of white. He ran his eyes along again and then he saw him standing there and his heart finally did more than slow down: it stopped in his chest.

“Jimin, stay right there!” he shouted as he hastily starting climbing over the barricade, palms scratching on the fence enough to bleed and yet not even feeling it because he was too numb from the cold. “Don’t you move, don’t you dare fucking move!” No word from the boy, he was as still as a statue. He scrabbled over and caught his jeans, tearing a lovely hole right in the knee as he dropped over the side messily. He felt his hands hit the tarmac hard and a jolt of pain reverberate through his body as he got back upright and darted across the bridge. No honking horns this time, there was actually an empty stretch for the current moment.

He got to the other barricade and threw himself against it and it made a terribly loud clattering noise and yet the boy didn’t jump or even look back at him as he nearly vaulted over it. He just stood on the walkway and stared off into space, eyes across the horizon rather than looking down at the water below them.
“Jimin…” Yoongi said in his best attempt at an even and calm voice, “Jimin it’s me, Yoongi. OK? I’m gonna come over to you, so don’t move, OK, just don’t mo-”

“Yoongi…”

“Uh-huh buddy, it’s me. I’m right here.”

“I fucked up again Yoongi.”

“No, no you didn’t, you didn’t do anything like that,” he said as he edged closer to him, soles of his boot practically sliding across the concrete rather than take steps. “Nothing like that at all. You didn’t fuck up.”

“I fucked up so badly,” Jimin said in a voice that sounded thick from crying, “stop talking shit.”

“I don’t talk shit, that’s Tae you’re thinking about. Stupid fucking Tae and his big mouth, yeah? Not me, I don’t talk shit, ‘specially not to you. OK?”

“They all hate me,” the boy said, “they all hate me ‘cos I can’t do anything fucking right. I can’t keep secrets, I can’t help anyone, I can’t even fix a stupid fucking car.”

“That’s not Jimin talking right now,” Yoongi retorted, “that’s your father talking. And if there was ever a man that talked shit it’s him.”

“But he’s right, they’re all right, I’m just a fucking dumbass; I can’t do anything. Just replace me with a puppy at least it would do tricks.” He was close enough to the boy now to see that his tee was soaked through with rain and clinging to his skin, skin that was goose pimpled from the cold. He was shivering ever so slightly and yet he had his arms by his side instead of wrapped over his chest. As Yoongi took another step closer he caught sight of his hair covering his face, streaming down over his eyes so that he couldn’t see if they were open or closed. “I can’t even…” he took a shuddering breath and finished, “I can’t even kill myself.”

“Jimin, please step away from there,” he said as he held a hand out to him. “Look, here’s my hand. Just take hold of it. We can go back to the hostel together and no one has to know, OK? I promise that I won’t tell a fucking soul.”
“I promised too and look what happened…”

“Forget about the others right now, just think about me and you and what’s happening right now.” He reached forward and felt his fingertips brushing against the back of his arm. He didn’t try and move away so that was good, but he also didn’t respond to him. “Let’s go back, please?” He waited to see if he would get a reply but he didn’t and so he took a deep breath and decide to go for it.

Yoongi moved forward and grabbed his shoulders roughly before pulling him away from the edge of the walkway, from the low fence that was just in front of him. If the boy tried to fight free then he could easily just dive over the thing and that was it: bye bye Jimin. But the boy didn’t and instead he let him drag him all the way back to the barricade along the length of the bridge. Yoongi didn’t even think and he shoved him against it hard, hearing his back collide against the fence with a loud clanging noise.

“Don’t you ever do shit like that again!” he nearly shouted at him, knowing that he shouldn’t but unable to stop himself. He couldn’t see his eyes so he reached over and roughly brushed his hair back off his face, revealing Jimin’s eyes staring at him rather blankly. “Don’t you ever!” Yoongi grabbed his shoulders again and felt the material squelching between his fingers. “You’re not a fucking dumbass! You’re not useless! We don’t want a fucking puppy, we want Park Jimin!” He prodded his chest with his finger hard and let this hang in the air for a moment but Jimin just stared back at him with that same empty expression. “Shit, you can’t just…” He took a deep breath and let go of his tee to grab his face instead, grazed palms against his freezing cold, rain soaked skin. “You can’t do shit like that, OK?”

No reply.

Yoongi stared at him for a moment before leaning forward and kissing his forehead. He didn’t know why he did it but he just felt the most compelling urge to do so. Then he let go of him and shrugged his jacket off. Jimin was soaked through already but it didn’t matter. He held it out to him but the boy didn’t move so he helped him into it, rain still pelting down to soak his tee in just seconds.

“We’re going back now,” he said before grabbing hold of his wrist and nearly dragging him down the walkway towards the main street at the end. Jimin didn’t argue against this or try and free himself so he just pulled him down the streets in the dark back in the direction of the hostel. He didn’t know when the boy was going to open his mouth and speak again but that didn’t matter right now. There was plenty of time for talking, he just wanted him off the streets and somewhere safe.

When they got to the building he didn’t bother going into the kids’ room and instead went to the other, twisting the handle and finding it unlocked. He pushed the door open and just stood in the
doorway for a moment to see the two other young men in the room. Namjoon was on the end of one of the beds with his face buried in hands, shoulders sagged and showing that he was beyond weary and rather close to exhausted. Seokjin had been in the act of pacing up and down and he stopped to stare at them both. His expression seemed to exclaim in relief and yet he looked between them silently rather than say a word. He just have sensed something and he went over to shake Namjoon's shoulder hard.

“Huh? Oh.” His friend turned to look at him, eyes running along his soaked clothing and hair, before going to Jimin. Then he looked at Seokjin for a second before getting to his feet. “We’re gonna stay with the kids for the night, you know? Keep an…eye on them.” Yoongi silently thanked them both and then moved out of the way to let them exit the room. As soon as they were out he closed the door and fumbled the lock on with shaking hands. They had taken one look at the boy and knew that now was not the time to talk to him. Jimin needed to be left to his thoughts and monitored carefully, and it seemed that the task had been given to him.

He heard the chain scraping in place and then he turned to look back at the boy. Jimin was just standing there beside him, shivering a little more visibly now that they were inside, the pair of them dripping puddles all over the deep blue carpet. When he checked his face he saw the same distant expression, lips pulled back slightly to show his chattering teeth and lips that were tinged slightly blue from the cold. He needed to get him out of his clothes before he got hypothermia and so he dragged him across to the bathroom by his wrist once more.

“It’s OK,” he said as he turned the shower head on hot enough for the water to nearly burn. “You’re OK now Jimin.” But the boy didn’t do more than blink and he realised that he had gone deep inside his own thoughts for the time being; a form of dealing with what had just happened back on the bridge that he was going to have to leave him to go through. So Yoongi decided that he was going to talk about everything he was doing even if he wouldn’t respond.

“We’re gonna get a shower right now, ‘cos we’re both freezing cold and the water will warm us up, OK?” Nothing. He helped him out of his clothes and then fumbled out of his own and then more or less forced him to climb into the tub. “And once we’re nice and warm we’re gonna lie down in the soft beds,” he said as he started cleaning his hair through, making sure to tip his head back so that the shampoo didn’t run down his face and into his staring eyes. “And we’re gonna sleep all night long. That’s what’s gonna happen.” He didn’t move as he hastily cleaned his skin but when Yoongi started cleaning himself Jimin decided to hunker down in the tub, knees drawn up so that he could place his chin on them. Yoongi studied this position before getting out of the tub and grabbing towels. After some struggling he managed to get him out and he just sat down on the floor of the bathroom. He saw that he was still shivering even though the water had left his skin a little pink from the heat and he knew that it wasn’t because he was cold.

He went into the bedroom section and grabbed some clothing before going back to the boy. He patted his skin dry and helped him into underwear and one of Seokjin’s vests that hung on him because it was too large for his slight shoulders, and he even added the pullover that he had packed all those days back that felt almost like a year right now. The boy just let him force the oatmeal
woolen pullover on and then sat there as he rubbed his damp hair to stop it dripping all over his clothing. Then he slipped into his own sleeping wear and once again bent down to grab his wrist and lead him over to the bed by the window.

Yoongi pushed down on his shoulders to get him to sit first, and then again to make him lie down. Then he climbed in beside him and messed with the covers before getting them up to his waist. Jimin lay on his back and stared at the ceiling and after a few minutes of observing this he decided to roll him over so that he could look at him instead. Jimin just blinked at him and didn’t say a word.

“Jimin,” Yoongi said in a voice barely above a whisper, “I dunno if you can even hear me right now but I want you to know it’s OK.” He paused and studied his blank expression before adding. “I’m not mad at you. The others…they’re not mad either. You’re not in trouble. You’re OK.” He reached out to brush a damp lock of hair back off his brow again and felt his fingers trailing down his cheek. “You’re not a fuck up. You’re just…you. Park Jimin, who can’t be replaced by a puppy ever. Who can’t be replaced by anyone.” The boy’s glazed over eyes shifted ever so slightly so that they weren’t looking past him but rather at him. “Yeah, that’s right. You can’t be replaced no matter what. I said it before and I’ll say it again. We don’t want no fucking puppy, we want you. OK?”

“…OK,” Jimin said, voice a harsh croak and lips barely moving as he said the word. It was as if he had just breathed it out rather than spoke, but it was the first thing he had done since nearly thirty minutes of catatonic staring and it was enough for him.

“What’s a puppy got that you ain’t, huh? Do tricks? Fuck that, you got all kinds of tricks. Be cute? Pft, nah. I’d rather not have a puppy,” Yoongi said with a soft smile and he saw the boy’s gaze flicker down to look at his lips before going back up to his eyes. “I’d rather just have you.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I don’t wanna hear that word right now,” he said as he shook his head, damp hair against the pillow as he did, “no apologies. Nu-uh.”

“But I really am sorry. For everything, for-for-for being a dumbass and-” Yoongi shifted to put an arm around his shoulder and pull him forward in a semi-embrace, the boy’s head going against his chest so that his chin stuck into his hair. “And for always fucking up and making trouble, I don’t wanna but I can’t help it and-”

“Shush,” he said in a soft voice, “no more of that shit. Go to sleep.” Jimin took a deep breath and when he let it out again it shuddered. Yoongi moved his face to press it against his hair, hair that was damp but no longer smelled like rainwater. “It’s gonna be OK.”
He wished that he could believe this too.
Taehyung didn’t want to get off the floor even though he had been lying there for hours now, hadn’t moved to do anything beyond breathing or blinking. He felt safe on the floor, lying on his stomach with his face turned ever so slightly to the side so that he could breathe without choking on the filth trapped in the carpet pile. He couldn’t see his friends looking at him even when he could feel their gazes on his back. Once or twice Seokjin had hunkered down at his side in the hopes of getting him to look at him, leaning forward enough so that his own head grazed against the floor, and Taehyung just closed his eyes and refused to open them again until he heard him move away. Namjoon didn’t attempt to make eye contact and the few words he had said to him had sounded weary, as if he was about to give up at any moment and just sleep instead. Jungkook had tried to get answers out of him by sitting beside him and prodding him, harassing him in the hopes that his stabbing finger would annoy him enough to get a reaction, but it didn’t work. He was too numb to the world to even feel the sensation of him poking him in the ribs, too very distant to it all. Hoseok didn’t even say a word, never mind try and look at him, and that just made him feel even worse. What was going through the other boy’s mind right now? Had been coursing through it since Jimin had blurted all of that shit out and then ran off to cry like a baby?

He wanted to be mad at the boy but he found that he couldn’t, because he should have expected such an outcome the minute Jimin found out what had happened to him that night. He should have threatened him some more and scared him off, should have maybe hit him a few times just to get him to leave the bathroom, but he had stupidly told him everything and back in the bathroom he had thought that it would come back to haunt him but he had been hoping that it wouldn’t; that perhaps the boy would manage to keep his secret like he had sworn. But of course that didn’t happen. What had happened was Jimin had caved in from the pressure of carrying so much stupid shit around and he had blurted it out. Hoseok’s pills, Yoongi’s burns, they were all nothing in comparison to the secret that the boy had been carrying for him and he should have just kept his mouth shut but he had been stupid and had insulted him. And now Taehyung was currently paying the price for fucking up and pinning the blame on someone else just like he always did; Jimin was such an easy fall guy. If he had just left the Yoongi situation alone and not made those comments then this wouldn’t have happened, but he had felt the need to open his big mouth and shoot himself right in the face.

They all knew about what had happened that night. They all knew that he had let some random stranger fuck him for such a pitiful amount of cash and there was nothing he could to try and deny it or hide it any more. It should have been easier now that it was out in the open but right now he just wanted to lie there and not move. He wished that he didn’t have to breathe too but sadly that option was unavoidable.

Where was Jimin right now? If the boy did something stupid then he was to blame and for once he wasn’t going to try and bullshit his way out of it, he was more than willing to take the full
responsibility. What a wonderful time to start acting like an adult, at the cost of his friend hurting himself or worst. Taehyung closed his eyes and he felt a little moan escaping his lips, nauseous sensation in the pit of his stomach. At the noise he heard someone shifting across the room and he waited for a question but no one said anything to him.

Taehyung could smell tobacco on the carpet and he saw a cast-off butt not too far from his position, one that had likely been in Yoongi’s hands just that morning when he had walked into the room to talk to them. It was crumpled from being stubbed out on something but it wasn’t his skin for once at least. Why did he have to mention those stupid burns? When the man got back he was pretty sure that he was going to kick his teeth in for causing all of this shit and once again, he knew that he totally deserved it. Hell, if his friend didn’t kick the shit out of him then he would probably beg him to do so, on hands and knees if needed because he felt like he needed to hurt just that little more to make it even. Yoongi had had nothing to do with Hoseok’s pills and he had known it the minute that his friend had asked Jimin about it. He had seen that very same expression on his face like when he had asked him about the marks on the Yoongi’s arm, the one that showed that Jimin was telling the truth. But none of the others had picked up on it of course, they had all thought that the boy was sticking up for him but not Taehyung; Taehyung had known and he had purposely baited Jimin in the hopes that he would just quietly admit to it so they could just move on from the incident. But by baiting him out he had caused even more trouble. Wasn’t that what he was best at? Causing so much trouble that it was almost unbelievable, and right now because of him their friendship circle was in great danger of breaking apart.

Was Yoongi with the boy now, where ever the boy might be? Was he safe? Were they both safe? He didn’t know and the longer he went without knowing the more nauseous he seemed to get. This was so much more worse than he had been expecting. Jimin was right, he had fucked up.

“Tae,” Seokjin said at last, breaking the horrible silence in a voice just above a whisper. “Why don’t you lie on one of the beds, huh? It’s more comfortable than the floor, isn’t it?” He didn’t respond to this and he could feel the man getting just as tired of his bullshit as Namjoon had. A shifting sound as he got upright and once again moved to lie on the floor beside him. Taehyung kept his eyes closed but he could feel him moving to touch his hair, to brush it back off his brow. “I know that you’re upset right now but you can’t just-”

The sound of the door across the room opening and then closing over. Had someone left or had someone just entered? He opened his eyes to look and saw Seokjin glancing back over his own shoulder. After a second he shifted back to look at him, holding his gaze and waiting to see if he would close his eyes again.

“This isn’t going to help you, help anyone. Just get up on one of the beds and have a nice rest, OK? We all need one right now and-”

“Jimin?” Taehyung asked in a soft voice, barely above a croak.
“I don’t know,” the man replied honestly. “Still out but Yoongi is going to find him and bring him back. Don’t worry about that. Just get some rest OK? I’ll be with Namjoon next door if you need either of us.” And with that Seokjin moved to get onto his hands and knees and a moment later he was also leaving the room. He just stared at where he had been lying without moving a muscle.

“Tae,” Jungkook said with a heavy sigh, “we know that you didn’t mean that shit, you were upset and you just shouted it without thinking, OK? So please get up off the floor.”

Taehyung didn’t count how long it was before the hostel room door opened again and his two friends stepped inside. For a second or two he had been hoping to see Yoongi and Jimin stepping in behind them, the pair of them soaking wet from the rain that had been pelting the windows hard, but they didn’t. It was just Seokjin and Namjoon but there was a sense of relief coming from them regardless. He didn’t ask any questions but rather waited for one of the others to do so and for the first time in what felt like forever he heard Hoseok’s voice, asking all of the questions that were racing through his mind. So Namjoon just explained that the pair of them had returned and that they had left them in the other room because Jimin had looked very upset and it seemed like a good idea to leave the boy alone right now. Taehyung felt like someone had punched him in the throat at these words but at least he knew that they were both okay. Maybe not mentally right now, but at least physically, and that was enough for him to let his pent-up breath out in a soft sigh. He felt so exhausted from worrying that he didn’t think that he could keep his eyes open much longer and before he knew it he was drifting off into sweet oblivion.

When he opened his eyes he saw something black just an inch or so from the tip of his nose and he stared at it in groggy confusion before he realised that it was hair and he lifted his head slowly to see that Hoseok was lying in front of him on the carpet. He shifted to move his arm and his elbow hit against something and it felt like another body so Taehyung twisted awkwardly to look over his shoulder to see Jungkook also lying on the floor beside him. The boy was using a pillow unlike his other friend but it still didn’t look very comfortable. For a few seconds he could only look between them both stupidly and then he felt a strange sensation in the pit of his stomach, something akin to a pang. He had spent all of last night lying on the floor in a fugue, refusing to talk to or even look at his friends and yet two of them had taken it upon themselves to share the floor with him for the night even though there was a perfectly good bed across the room. Why were they doing that? Well, he could only think that they were doing so to somehow let him know that he wasn’t in this alone, that they were sharing his pain too; perhaps not literally but rather in a figurative way.

“You guys are so fucking stupid…” he muttered under his breath and at this he heard the youngest boy stirring from behind him, making a soft noise as he woke up.

“Look who’s talking,” Jungkook muttered in return before shifting to burrow his face against his back, not exactly hugging him but close to it. The physical contact made that panging sensation even stronger and for a few seconds he was almost convinced that he might just cry but he managed to not
“Hmmm…we’re all pretty stupid,” Hoseok said after a few seconds, also moving so that he was a little closer to him. No pillow under his head and just his own folded up arm and his elbow brushed against his shoulder. “Sleeping on the floor like kids at nap time.”

“Kookie still has a nap time,” Taehyung said and this made the boy reach up and tug on the back of his hair hard, not enough to hurt but enough to make him let out a surprised noise. “Only kindergartners pull hair!”

“Oh yeah? Well, I’ve bumped into some pretty tall kindergartners…” Jungkook mumbled sleepily, “and some of them had facial hair.” The remark made Taehyung snort laughter and he wondered if the two other young men were awake and listening to them talk or whether they were still asleep. And what about Jimin and Yoongi? Where were they exactly? He wanted to ask but at the same time he was scared to do so for fear that he might remind them of how he had acted last night and piss them both off.

“Seriously, you two really are idiots…sleeping on the floor like this.”

“It’s not so bad once you get past the fact that the carpet is filthy,” Hoseok said as he lifted his head to look at him, opening his eyes a little wider than a squint. “But then so are we most of the time, so it’s nothing new, right?”

“What time is it?” he asked, not wanting to sit up or even move because he felt perfectly alright where he was right now. Why, he could probably lie here all day if the two other boys stayed with him.

“Morning I think?” Hoseok said, eyes shifting to look across the room presumably at the window. Taehyung could see that the room was lit with a faint light but it wasn’t bright enough for him to think that it was any later than 4am. “I want to go back to sleep but I don’t think I can, I’m wide awake now thanks to you two.”

“Tae elbowed me first,” Jungkook said, voice muffled because the boy had his face pressed up against his back. After a few seconds he added his arm over his waist in an unconscious way to get comfortable. “Blame him.”

“Let’s not blame anyone,” the other boy said wearily, “after what happened yesterday…”
“Do we have to talk about yesterday?” Taehyung asked, not liking the way his voice sounded a little whiny to his own ears. His friend just nodded and confirmed that they had to and he closed his eyes and sighed heavily. “Fuck…I don’t wanna talk about it. I’m…well, I’m scared of talking about it.”

“Sometimes you gotta face your fears,” the youngest boy mumbled, “even when you’re scared. It’s the only way to…fix shit.”

“Thanks for the great insight Lao Tzu,” he replied with an eye roll, glad that the other boy couldn’t see it.

“He’s right Tae,” Hoseok agreed with a soft nod. “We’ve got to talk about it. All of us, not just you.”

Taehyung eventually moved to get off the floor only because he desperately needed to use the bathroom and his movement made the two other boys also decide to get up and start doing things. Jungkook left the room to presumably go into the other one and Hoseok just followed him into the bathroom. He didn’t need to worry about his friend seeing his bruises after what had happened yesterday evening and so he got cleaned up without a care, even after he felt his eyes lingering on the backs of his thighs as he stepped into the shower. But the boy didn’t ask about them for despite him claiming that they needed to talk about yesterday’s events it seemed that Hoseok lacked the words to do so when left alone with him. Taehyung just stayed under the stream for a few minutes enjoying the heat of the water and wishing that it would wash not just any dirt away but also all of his problems too, and when he stepped back into the other room he saw his two other friends inside and he froze stupidly in the doorway.

Jimin was standing beside the bed that Namjoon and Seokjin had shared, the pair of them likely thinking that the two boys would use the other rather than spend the night on the floor with him. The pair of them were talking to him in low voices and he couldn’t hear their words. The boy was listening to them but not looking at them, rather at the covers instead, and he was worrying at the sleeve of a pullover he was wearing. Taehyung hadn’t seen it before and he didn’t know where it had come from but it came in handy for it allowed Jimin to pull on the sleeves rather than gnaw on his lips like he usually did when he was nervous. But if he kept up worrying at them then the fabric might just start to unravel; leaving him standing in a puddle of oatmeal fabric. Yoongi was standing right beside him and he noted that the man was holding onto Jimin’s other wrist. Had he had to drag the boy into the room with him? Or was he just doing it to reassure him? His grip looked firm but not tight and for some reason Taehyung couldn’t seem to take his eyes off the sight of his hand on his wrist.

He felt sick standing there like an idiot. He felt like this picture would look a hell of a lot better if he wasn’t in it and he wished that he could cut himself out of it; just slink out of the room without anyone noticing so that he wouldn’t end up ruining another day too. But before he could even think
of trying to hide back in the bathroom or sneak over to the front door Jimin’s eyes shifted and he caught sight of him standing in the doorway. He waited for the look of disgust or pain to flash across his face but the boy just held his gaze for a moment before offering him the most slightest attempt at a smile, the corners twitching ever so slightly.

Taehyung let his pent-up breath out in a wheeze and he knew that despite everything that had happened the boy wasn’t pissed off with him. He didn’t deserve the chance but Jimin seemed to have given him one and he wasn’t going to fuck up and make him regret it. Yoongi was another matter entirely for when his friend looked at him his expression hardened slightly but he kept his sharp tongue to himself rather than cause more trouble.

When Jungkook declared that he was going to run to the convenience store across the road for some food Taehyung asked to tag along and the boy let him follow along after him. His friend wanted to stretch his legs just like always but he wanted to get out just because he felt a horrible pressure on him and he couldn’t seem to shake the thought that they were all going to turn to look at him and demand he talk about what had happened. He knew that it was going to happen and there was very little ways to stop it. But he could delay it and that seemed like the best idea right now. So he followed the boy to the store and let him fill a small basket up with random packets of food and bottles of water and when he wasn’t looking he snatched a beer can just like always and shoved it into his back pocket. They could complain but at this point he didn’t care, if he was going to have to tell them everything then he sure as hell wanted to be drunk rather than sober to make it that much easier.

He didn’t touch the breakfast because he wanted to get as drunk as possible from a single can of beer, which was going to be a difficult feat since it took a whole six-pack to usually achieve such a state, but on an empty stomach it might just make him a little fuzzy. He just sat on the floor where he had lain last night and drank the beer even with his friends looking at him. No one said anything, though they all seemed to want to, and there was a horrible silence in the room that seemed to last forever until their eldest friend broke it.

“I think it’s time for that talk now,” Seokjin said in a quiet voice as he glanced over at Namjoon. “Don’t you?” The other young man seemed to think this over for a moment before gently nodding.

“Talk?” Taehyung asked as he shifted on the floor, sitting upright rather than slouching forward, the crushed can just in front of him and the untouched food beside it. “What talk? What’re you talking about?”

“We’re all going to sit down and talk about our problems,” Seokjin friend said, lifting his legs up so he could cross them up on the settee cushion in front of him. “Because it’s way overdue and it’s not healthy to carry all of our problems and negativity around with us. As you have all probably figured out by now, by not talking about things and hiding them away you… you deny yourself the chance of being able to fix it, to understand it. So we’re going to do a little… bonding session, yes that’s
what we should call it: a bonding session to exorcise the demons, let the skeletons out of the closet, etcetera etcetera.” Seokjin waved his wrist at this and then he smiled softly as if to reassure them. “OK, I’ll go first to make it less awkward.”

“I don’t really wanna do this,” Taehyung said but he was ignored by everyone because the Seokjin loudly cleared his throat over him; on purpose rather than by accident.

“I’m scared of my future,” Seokjin declared in an oddly calm voice, letting this hang in the air for a few seconds before continuing, “I’m scared that I’ve made the wrong choices in life and that I don’t want to follow through with them. I thought that my past decisions were right, but I followed my brain rather than my heart and I’ve had a dawning realisation on this adventure that I’m going towards a future that I don’t want for myself.” If there was a single one of them in the room that didn’t silently agree with the man’s words then Taehyung would eat the room carpet. His words had struck a chord in all of them judging from their expressions. “I know that I can correct it but I don’t know if I should. It would take time, it would require starting again and I also fear losing what I’ve already gained. What we all need to ask ourselves is... do we follow our hearts, or do we follow our brains?”

Taehyung felt his eyes shifting over to Hoseok at this but the boy was too busy looking at their friend to notice. A tricky question indeed, for he wasn’t very good at listening to either of them. His brain often got him into trouble, luckily however it helped get him back out again, but his heart seemed incapable of that feat. That just liked to cause pain and nothing more.

“Follow your heart,” Namjoon said a few seconds later. “Always follow your heart man, even if it’s gonna be hard and you’re gonna lose it all. Better to lose something superficial and gain something more meaningful than hold onto it when you feel unfulfilled, right?” Their friends murmured in agreement and the room fell silent for a moment before Namjoon decided to break it.

“I got a problem. It starts with gambling and it ends with gambling. At first I know that I started that shit to help me and Yoongi out, ‘cos I’ve always had a bit of a lucky streak in me, but now I know that it’s getting outta control. I get my hands on a little bit of cash from working that shitty job at the gas station and the first thing I think of is...I can make a killing on this.” Namjoon stopped as he thought his words over. “I can’t keep thinking like that. I can’t let that shit take over my mind ‘cos I’ll turn into one of those people I see in the dens: addicted, wasting everything they have on a single fucking bet.”

“It’s easy to try and tell yourself you can kick an addiction,” Hoseok muttered. “But then you put yourself through it and find that it’s not.”

“I know, I know it’s not easy but I’ve gotta try. I need to find something better than that shitty job, I
need to start thinking about my future too.”

“We both do,” Yoongi agreed.

“Maybe my dreams are wrong after all, maybe I gave into a childish dream but it’s in my heart and I don’t wanna let go of that. I wanna achieve it, and right now I can’t do that.” Namjoon sighed heavily. “So I’ve gotta start trying properly, before I waste all of my chances.”

“You’ll achieve your dreams,” Jimin said quietly, “and you too Seokjin.”

“My turn,” Jungkook said as he shifted on the settee beside their eldest friend, not exactly wriggling but something close to it. Taehyung realised that everything was moving very fast and soon enough he would be the only one left to share; the thought alone enough to make a cold sweat start to break out on his skin. “I have… I have a problem with my attitude.”

“Tell us something we don’t know,” Taehyung retorted and the boy smirked at him.

“No seriously, I have a problem and I’m gonna admit to it. It’s not just about the fighting, it’s about how I treat others. I’m always arguing with my parents about everything, I’m never in the house ‘cos they’re always nagging me to death but I’ve never actually thought about their reasons, you know? It was always like they were picking on me so I got defensive and before I knew it I was arguing without even knowing why. Drinking, smoking, fighting, grade drops, I ignored all of the reasons ‘cos I didn’t want to see them. I didn’t want to have to really look at what I did wrong and accept it. So I argued instead but that didn't make me feel better, it made me feel trapped. I needed a release, an escape…”

“Fighting was your release,” Seokjin said and the boy nodded fervently.

“It was, going out and causing trouble, fighting, bad behaviour, it was all a way to distract myself.” Jungkook dropped his eyes to the carpet. “‘Cos in those moments I could forget about all of the bad shit and just… My life became nothing more than punches and kicks and pain. It became something…raw; a fight or flight situation. It made my brain stop thinking about everything that was happening and just focus on those few seconds, and when it was all over the bruises, the split lips, it was all just the price to pay for that release.”

“Speaking of release…” Namjoon said as he looked at Yoongi.
“Oh c’mon,” the other man groaned as he held his hands up, but they all just looked at him expectantly and so he got to his feet with a series of angry mutters. “Hello, I'm Min Yoongi,” he declared as he held his hand over his heart, “I’m twenty-one years of age and I self-harm.” Yoongi sat down on the end of the bed beside Jimin and the silence that fell on the room was so thick it was almost a fog. For nearly a minute the man remained silent, obstinate about not having to talk about it all but then he shrugged his jacket off with a sigh and held his arm out for all to see.

“Christ…” Hoseok said under his breath, eyes latching onto the sight that it revealed.

“He didn’t do this, I did.” The joke wasn’t very funny considering the situation but Taehyung heard a few forced laughs for effect. “This is what I do when I can’t sleep,” Yoongi explained before pointing at a welt on his inner elbow. “My first one, way back in Yeoju.” He moved his finger along to another a little higher up, circling it as he did. “Baby number two, Eumseong County. Number three hurt like a bitch,” he prodded at one just a little to the side of the first and hissed, “I don’t really remember when I did that. This one was in Gongju, the latest one but not necessarily the last.” Yoongi stopped this impromptu show and tell and looked up to glance over them all. “That’s my fucking problem, I hurt myself for fun. Good enough?” He looked at Namjoon and the young man asked him why. “Dunno why.”

“You must have a reason,” Seokjin countered. “So what’s the reason?”

“…A release, just like Kookie,” Yoongi said as his fingers went up his arm to start scratching at the welts. Jimin moved to gently take his hand and stop him and the man let him hold it. “I needed relief and it just…seemed like a good thing to do at 3am in the morning. It still does seem like a good thing but I know I shouldn’t do it.”

“You shouldn’t,” Jungkook agreed. “We’re both hurting ourselves for nothing more than a moment. It’s not worth it.”

Taehyung started chewing on his lower lip and averted his own gaze to his jeans rather than look at any of them. The things they didn’t know he would do for a little relief were most certainly much worse than fighting and stubbing cigarettes out on his skin.

“Hoseok?” Seokjin asked softly as he turned to look at the boy. “Do you feel like it’s the right time now?”
“Uh…” The boy shifted his position on the floor and took a deep breath before letting it out in a sigh. “I guess, I mean everyone knows about my pills so…” Hoseok darted his tongue out to wet his lips before continuing. “I have depression.” Just like Yoongi’s declaration about his self-harming the room fell silent and it made his friend look uncomfortable even though he tried to hide it. “I’ve had it for about…half a year now but the pills are new. I’ve tried everything, I didn’t want the stupid fucking pills but my mom asked for a course and then…then I got addicted to them. They didn’t make me feel that much better. They made me feel foggy and I hated it, I hated the headaches but I couldn’t help but take them.”

“Why didn’t you tell us earlier?” Jimin asked in a quiet voice, still looking a little nervous about the topic after the incident from yesterday. Yoongi seemed to notice this as Taehyung saw him tightening his grip on his hand in response.

“I was embarrassed,” Hoseok said with a harsh laugh, tears welling up in his eyes that revealed just how forced it was. “I was embarrassed and disgusted and…I felt fucked up.”

“You’re not fucked up,” Taehyung said as he reached over and put a hand on his shoulder, squeezing tightly as he did. At the contact Hoseok let out his first sob and wiped at his eyes roughly. “Don’t ever say that shit, you’re perfect the way you are. Fuck everyone else.”

“I feel like I’m suh-so fucked up and I duh-don’t know why.” The boy choked a sob down and his lips turned down at the corners in a harsh grimace as he took a quick intake of air. “It juh-just happened and wuh-want it to go ah-away but it wuh-wuh-won’t.”

“Depression is an illness,” Seokjin said in a soft voice, trying his hardest to hold his gaze even though the sight of their friend crying seemed to upset him greatly. “It’s a horrible illness because it makes people feel that way: fucked up or broken or diseased, but you’re not any of those things Hoseok. You’re human, just like us. You have good days and bad days, just your bad days are a lot harder and sometimes they can last for a long time.”

“I cuh-can’t remember my last good day.”

“C’mon,” Namjoon said, “let’s try and think of a good day huh?” Hoseok swallowed another sob and made a hiccupsing noise and Taehyung could feel his temperature rising through his thin tee-shirt. His face would probably be baking hot to the touch.

“I…I’ll try,” the boy said before pausing and trying to get himself under control. After a moment of silence he made a noise. “The trainyard.”
“Why was that a good day?” Namjoon asked.

“Becucause we were all together after a long tuh-time and it felt good even wuh-when I had a bad huh-headache.” Hoseok rubbed at his nose roughly. “And Venus.”

“Venus was pretty,” Jungkook agreed in a soft voice.

“Another good day?”

“I…uh, the day with the train tuh-tracks and the singing was nuh-nice too.” His breathing was starting to get more regular now, less hitches between each inhale and exhale, but Taehyung kept his hand in place regardless. “Even when Tae talked shit.”

“That’s what he does best,” Yoongi remarked with a straight expression.

“See, you do have good days,” Seokjin said. “It’s just hard to think about them when the bad feels so strong, but you’re thinking about them now, right?” He nodded before letting out a soft laugh under his breath, no doubt remembering the blue lines from Taehyung’s cadence and how they had all burst out laughing at every line.

“Jimin,” Hoseok said suddenly, dropping his hand from his eyes to look at him. The other boy looked back and tried to look calm and collected. “I’m sorry about yesterday. I acted like a total dick because of the pills and I shouldn’t have treated you like that. I’m sorry.”

“I understand,” Jimin said in a soft voice. “You don’t need to apologise.”

“I’m done with with the pills,” Hoseok declared. “No matter what I’m done with them and I’m not going back. I promise.” At this Taehyung started clapping and the sound made Hoseok jump in surprise. The boy had just enough time to look at him before the others took it up, giving their friend an impromptu applause for not only admitting his problem but having the courage and strength to try and fix it. Hoseok looked torn between embarrassment and crying but he managed to control both emotions this time. As the applause faded off Taehyung caught sight of Yoongi whispering something to Jimin, seeing the boy shake his head at whatever he said, and a moment later the young man stood up.
“Jimin doesn’t want to talk so I’m gonna do so on his behalf.” Yoongi reached down to place a hand on his shoulder, just like he had done with Hoseok moments ago, and he glanced over them all slowly. “Jimin has struggled with a lot of problems these past few weeks, long before we started this adventure and continuously throughout. As a result he had thought some dark thoughts and…last night Jimin contemplated suicide.” The boy was staring at the carpet with a terribly blank expression on his face. “Jimin requires support and assistance, but most importantly he requires love in this time in need, something I think we all need.”

“I love you Jimin,” Jungkook said suddenly, shifting to look at him. There was no smirk or embarrassment on his face; he was being entirely genuine.

“I love you Jimin,” Seokjin echoed, “and I love all of you too.”

“Jimin, you know I love you right? But I’ll tell you again anyway,” Namjoon said with a soft smile and Jimin made a noise but didn’t look up. He was going to cry too and Taehyung didn’t know how much of this he could take.

“I love you Jiminie,” Hoseok said, using a nickname they all hadn’t heard in a long time.

“I…” Taehyung wet his lips and swallowed a lump in his throat. “I love you Jimin.” Yoongi looked down at the boy before quietly voicing his own affections and then he looked up again.

“Suicide’s not the answer. Suicide’s a permanent solution to a temporary problem that can’t be undone. Jimin knows that now, but he still had to go through a lot of shit to find that out. Now we all know.”

“I love you guys,” Jimin managed to say in a voice barely above a whisper and then Yoongi sat down again, slinging an arm around his shoulders so that the boy could lean against him, which he did as he closed his eyes.

“Tae…” Seokjin said after a minute of silence, dragging his eyes away from the pair to look at him.

“What?”
“You should really talk to us too.”

“Talk? About what?” Taehyung asked with a raised eyebrow. “I don’t have anything to talk about.”

“The drinking?” Namjoon remarked, eyes shifting to look at the beer can just beside him as he did.

“I can quit any time I want,” he retorted and he heard someone scoffing from across the room and when he looked over he saw that it was Jungkook. The boy looked annoyed with him for trying to avoid talking and he just held his gaze without blinking.

“And the stealing, you can quit that too?” Namjoon asked and when he loudly declared that he could the room filled with a mixture of weary sighs and muttered voices. “Tae, look we all talked about our problems so you should too. It’s only fair. The kids had to go from admitting some pretty heavy, painful things, Yoongi too, so just think about that. We’re not gonna-”

“I said that I didn’t wanna do this, when Seokjin mentioned we were doing this shit I said I didn’t wanna, why should I have to join in, huh?”

“Cos you have a lot of problems and you need to talk about them,” Jungkook said in a stern voice and Taehyung snorted laughter.

“I don’t need to talk about shit, I’m not drunk enough for all of this shi-”

“I thought you could give up the drinking any time you want Tae?” Seokjin interrupted. “But you’re talking about it already and you’ve downed a can of beer before 7am and if that’s not a sign that you need help then I don’t know what is.”

“Yeah, you’re right I do need help. In the form of some vodka.” Taehyung shifted to get to his feet and he felt them all staring at him in dumb disbelief as he started crossing the room. Yoongi called out for him to sit back down, voice not exactly an angry shout but getting there, and he just ignored him and opened the door to step outside. He slammed the door shut without looking back once.
When Taehyung finally came back to reality he found that he was on his knees in an alley somewhere and though he didn’t know how he had gotten there he was certain of one thing: there was a cock in his mouth. This wouldn’t be the first time he had blacked out in the middle of an early morning drinking session, which usually extended all of the way into the evening if he could manage to do so without being violently ill, but it was the first time he had came back around to find himself not lying on the floor of someone’s apartment instead, or in the gutter, sometimes slumped in the back of a car with his pants still down by his ankles. Instinct made him pull his head back in surprise but it didn’t really help his situation for a second later he felt fingers snagging into his hair and whoever he was on his knees for once again thrust into his mouth. Taehyung made a noise at the back of his throat and forced his eyes to open fully and the first thing he registered was that it was dark. Very dark. Then he saw the ends of a tee and he reached up with a hand to grab onto them almost as if the material was an anchor of some kind. There was a weird taste in his mouth and it took him a moment to realise that it was the taste of rubber: a non-flavoured condom. Even in his drunken state he felt a wave of relief course through him.

He didn’t know how long that this had been going on for but he prayed that it was nearly over because he felt like he was going to puke, a hard feat to achieve with his mouth currently full. As luck would have it it didn’t seem like there was much longer left for the faceless stranger had started thrusting deep enough to make him gag and he reached up to grab onto his hips tightly. A moment later he was pulling out of his mouth and Taehyung reached up to rub at his eyes roughly. Why was it dark? Was it night already? Where the hell had he been? Why was he in this alley with this guy and had there been any cash involved? But before he could even try and figure this out he was being pulled to his feet by said man and he felt hands patting the top of his head to fix his messy hair. Taehyung squinted at the stranger and for a moment he felt confusion reach a whole new level because he was almost certain that he was looking at Hoseok, but after a few seconds of study he realised that he wasn’t; he was just looking at a young man that vaguely resembled him and nothing more. That probably explained why he had a raging boner right now but he wanted it to go away because it was making it hard to think.

“Hey, are you OK?” the stranger asked him, voice actually sounding concerned and a little breathless.

“Uh…no I’m…I feel like I’m gonna puke…”

“Ten shots of soju will do that to you.” When the man smiled he had to drag his eyes away because he looked even more like Hoseok when he did, maybe enough to pass for a brother.

“I…I dunno where I…what time is it?”
“3:30 amish…?”

“Shit.”

“Shit?”

“I’ve been drinking since 6am!” Taehyung declared loudly and the man laughed at this remark, probably thinking it was a joke but he hadn’t really been joking around.

“Drinks are on me,” the man said but Taehyung just staggered so that he was leaning against the wall of the alley, the brick wall cold against his hoodie sleeve. “What do you say, huh? Maybe for round two you might just get a little treat too.”

“Can’t…” he managed to say, tongue heavy in his mouth and still tasting like that disgusting rubber that was on the floor by his feet. “Gotta get back to my…friends.”

“Then at least let me walk you back there. Where do they live, huh?” But Taehyung knew that if he let this stranger escort him they would just end up in another bar and then an alley and he didn’t want that. He really did want to get back to the hostel because he didn’t feel too good and he was convinced that he was going to do something stupid if he didn’t. Well, more stupid than what he had done so far anyway. So he just told him that he could get back fine even though it was a lie and after a moment of contemplation the man actually asked him for his number.

“Trust me, you don’t want it,” Taehyung muttered as he stumbled out of the alley and started walking down the street. “I just cause trouble.”

He didn’t know how he ended up back at the hostel in one piece but he didn’t want to think about it too much, for thinking was hard to do when his head felt like it was floating ten inches above his body. At some point in his wandering he had found that he had a bottle of soju shoved into his back pocket, one he had likely stolen or perhaps the nameless stranger had bought for him, and despite everything he swallowed a few more mouthfuls of it just to get the taste of the condom off his tongue. He was pretty sure that he fell over a few times because he could feel a strange stinging on his palms and knees that seemed to hint that he had skinned them on the concrete paving flags, but he still managed to get to the building without being struck by a car or passing out and choking on his vomit, so he counted that as a blessing as he leaned against the door and tried to open it. The handle budged up and down but nothing happened and he tried checking his pockets for keys but all he found was the empty bottle of soju. He stared at it dumbly and briefly wondered if he had ended up at the wrong door when it swung inwards and he nearly stumbled right through the open gap. He felt
hands seizing onto his hoodie tightly and then he was being wrenched inside.

“Tae you stupid…” Yoongi shoved him hard and he tripped over his own useless legs to land on the floor, slamming his chin hard on the carpet. The bottle in his hand didn’t smash but rather stayed intact for his elbow took all of the force, the joint flaring with pain as he let out a cry of surprise.

“Where the fuck have you been, huh?!”

“Out…”

“Yoongi don’t.” he heard someone shifting and then the sound of rustling clothes and when he managed to get himself up into the seating position he saw Namjoon holding the other man back by his upper arm. Had Yoongi attempted to grab him again? He might just get that ass-kicking he had wanted all of those hours ago.

“Still gonna claim you’ve got no problems to talk about?” Jungkook asked as he got to his feet, no longer sitting on the settee but rather moving to stand right in front of him. Taehyung eyed the room to see that all of his friends were present and accounted for…and they all looked pissed.

“What’re you talking about?” he asked in a drunken mumble, squinting because the room light was making his head hurt. “I dunno…what’s going on?”

“What’s going on is that you’re fucking drunk,” Jungkook spat as he managed to struggle back up to his feet, “and you’re gonna deny that you have fucking problems when all of us can see that you do. Instead you’ll just shout and throw shit and you’ll blame all of us. And when it’s all over you’ll call us fucked up when you should really take a good hard look at yourself. You’re a fucking mess Tae.”

He felt his fingers tightening around the bottle of soju, so much so that it was a miracle the thin glass didn’t snap from the pressure he was applying on it. How dare he say something like that to him? After everything that happened, after everything that they had all been through together, how could the boy look right him in the eyes and say those words to him? And Jungkook was still talking, still ranting at him with that angry expression on his face. Talking to him like he was a fucking child, like he was a puppy that had pissed all over the sitting area floor, finger pointed out at him.

“It’s all one big fucking game for you Tae but you don’t even realise. You don’t even realise how big this is!” The boy threw his arms out wide for emphasis. “You think that this little delusion is gonna last forever. You’ll be seventeen for eternity and nothing bad’s ever gonna to happen to you but it already has!”
“Shut up,” he muttered under his breath, “shut the fuck up.”

“No, no I’m not gonna shut up I’m gonna keep talking ’cos someone has to. Someone has to finally make you listen.”

“What if I don’t wanna, huh? What then?”

“Tae, just let him talk,” Seokjin said from his position across the room. “He’s right, you need to hear this.”

“You’ve been drinking constantly ever since we started this fucking ‘adventure’ and you haven’t been sober for more than a night or so before getting wasted again! You don’t bring the bottles or cans back but you stink of booze!” The boy was pacing up and down in front of him like a pendulum and he watched him. “You’ve been stealing shit every single day even when we didn’t need it! You can’t seem to stop stealing!” Taehyung set his jaw at this and bit down on his lip. “And that’s not even the worst part!”

“Don’t talk about that. I mean it Kookie, don’t you fucking dare.”

“Why? What’re you gonna do?” Jungkook stopped before moving to stand right in front of him. He leaned close and held his gaze without blinking and Taehyung finally saw what all of those drunkards did on the streets: the ones that picked fights with him all of the time. The boy wasn’t scared in the slightest. He looked at him on an equal level, practically the same height, and his expression was steely. But his eyes were burning with an anger that was just lurking beneath the surface, waiting to spring forth like a wild animal released from a cage.

“You’ll regret it.”

“Hey, back up,” Namjoon shifted from the corner and grabbed the boy’s arm just like he had with Yoongi. “This isn’t a boxing ring. This is an intervention and that means no fighting.”

“What this is is a fucking witch hunt,” Taehyung said with a scoff. “All of you ganging up on me ‘cos you’re all pissed off about something and you wanna blame it all on me.”
“Pissed off about you doing all kinds of shit and drinking yourself into an early grave?” Yoongi asked. “About you stealing and getting yourself into shit, huh? That’s what we're all pissed off about.”

“So what?!” Taehyung declared. “Why the fuck do you care about what I do?!”

“Because you’re our friend,” Hoseok said in a quiet voice. He was standing by the door and he would have to look over his shoulder to hold his gaze so instead he just stared at the hostel room carpet. “Because you’re gonna get in trouble Tae, or maybe even die but you don’t seem to give a fuck.”

“Oh, so you all have your own problems and it’s fine but I’m the one that needs to be made an example of?”

“We’re trying to fix our own problems,” Jimin said as he pulled at the sleeve of the pullover he was still wearing. “But you need help and-”

“Look who’s talking.”

“Don’t,” Yoongi intoned as he held a hand up to him, “don’t you fucking dare Tae.”

“Where’s the cigarettes, huh? Did someone take ‘em off you ‘cos you’ve been such a naughty boy? Self-harming, yikes, that’s pretty fucked up.” The young man’s face didn’t even shift at this because he could see that he didn’t care if he attacked him but if he went after the boy then he would. Namjoon would have to drag him away again. “Let’s face it, we’re all fucked up.”

“None so much as you,” Jungkook retorted over Namjoon’s shoulder, “and you know it Tae. That’s the worst part. You know you’re fucked up and you just carry on doing it. What is it? Are you scared of finally slowing down and looking at it all properly, seeing exactly where you went wrong? Is it ‘cos you don’t wanna have to accept it all?” The boy looked ready to jump back into action and he held his eyes again and didn’t say a word. “Or is it that you’re so terrified of the future that you keep blindly fumbling in the now so you don’t need to think about it?”

“I’m not scared of anything.”
“You are, you’re fucking terrified of the future,” Jungkook said before laughing. “But you’re too stubborn to admit it. Too selfish, too stupid and too stubborn.”

“Says the spoilt brat runaway.”

“Yeah, I’m spoilt and I’m not scared to admit it. Yeah I take a lot of shit for granted and I know it. So why don’t you admit it too? Admit that you’re a fucking train wreck and that you need help.”

“No.”

“No you don’t need help? Or no you won’t admit it?” Hoseok asked and this time he did glance over his shoulder to look at him. His friend had his arms folded over his chest, leaned back against the wall, and he looked weary with it all: with him. Taehyung swallowed hard and didn’t reply and he just cocked his head at him and waited to see if he would.

“There’s nothing wrong with needing help,” Seokjin said.

“Let’s see. Get help? OK I’m totally gonna get help from,” Taehyung turned to point at them all in turn, “a spoilt brat, a gambling addict, a soon to-be college dropout, a self-harming chain smoker, a suicidal fuck up and,” he span on his heel and looked right at Hoseok, “a manic depressive with an addiction to Xanax.” The boy narrowed his eyes but didn’t look away. “You guys are gonna be so helpful. Why, you might just cure me.”

“You’re a drunk,” Jungkook said in a low voice, “and you didn’t even finish high school. You’re a runaway, a kleptomaniac.” He stepped around Namjoon and the young man didn’t pull back on him this time. “You’ve been arrested more times than you can count on both hands and you’re gonna end up in jail if it happens again.” The boy was once again right in front of him and he had his head on a soft angle as he studied him. “You’re a fucking wreck and you let guys fuck you-

“Jungkook.”

“for a couple of thousand won,” he finished over Seokjin. “You need help and don’t fucking look me in the eyes and tell me you don’t.”

Taehyung glared at him and he could feel his hands shaking terribly at his sides. The hostel room
went silent for a few seconds and there seemed to be a weight to the silence. It felt like all of the air was being pulled out and he suddenly found it hard to breathe because they were all staring at him: the Judas of the gang right in the centre of the room.

“Fuck you Jeon Jungkook.”

“Do I have to pay you for that?”

The boy’s words were like a slap across the face and he actually heard a gasp of surprise from across the room. His own mouth fell open and Taehyung felt it opening and closing uselessly for a moment, unable to even move his tongue. This wasn’t an exchange of heated words anymore, this was personal and he felt a wave of anger taking over him. Before he could stop himself he grabbed the boy by the neck of his tee, the fabric scrunching up tightly in his fist, and he wrenched hard. Jungkook staggered forward but his hands were already on his and breaking his grip.

“You little fucker!”

“Tae, calm down OK just-” but Seokjin’s words just flew right past him and had no effect. Calm down? Calm down after what he had just said to him? He had went through hell just for their sake and the boy’s taunt had been like a verbal punch right in the throat. The anger started to become more of a tidal wave, a strong rush coursing through him and he heard his friends shouting at him, heard them all jumping to their feet in an attempt to get involved before it really got out of hand, before it got physical. Namjoon darted forward to grab at Jungkook’s shoulder but the boy shifted to grab hold of his upper arm instead.

“This is your fucking ‘adventure’! This is your idea of fun and games and it’s gonna fucking destroy you!” Taehyung wrenched himself free but the boy still managed to swing his fist out and land a blow right on his jaw. The impact made his head rock back hard and he staggered but didn’t trip over his feet. He felt hands grabbing at him too but he shrugged them off roughly. “Do you wanna die that badly, huh?! Do you wanna die so much that you wanna drag is all down with you?!”

“I don’t wanna die, I wanna feel alive! I wanna fucking live!”

“You’re a fucking train wreck!” Jungkook shouted back, shoving and twisting to stop Namjoon and Yoongi from grabbing his arms. “A car crash! You’re the fucking Titanic!”

“I wished that fucking car had killed you!” Taehyung shouted back, lifting the bottle of soju up and
pointing the bottom of it at him. The slight remains poured out and down his arm and splashed onto
the carpet.

“Seriously guys! Stop it!” Namjoon shouted as he snagged at the back of the boy’s tee. Jungkook
jerked forward and there was a crisp tearing sound as the cotton ripped in his grip.

“Well it didn’t!”

“Good! That means I can kill you instead!” Hoseok actually grabbed a handful of his hair to try and
pull him away and Taehyung just tore himself free, barely even feeling the stinging in his scalp as he
did.

“Just try it! You’re turning into your fucking father!” Jungkook spat at him, struggling to break out of
Yoongi’s hold, arms around his ribs so that he could shove him back every time he tried to push him
away. Before Seokjin could get a good grip on his arm Taehyung knocked him aside and stormed
forward and that was when he felt the weight of the bottle in his hand: the press of the glass in his
palm. Before he could even register what he was doing he cocked his arm back and then swung the
bottle downwards.

Except the blow he had been aiming to hit the other boy with did not land its mark; did not land
because Jimin had jumped right between them both at that exact second.

His friend had been shouting something too but his words had gotten lost under the cacophony of
other voices and he had just seen his lips moving rather than hear what he was saying. Arms held up
and out to try and create a barricade to separate them both, Jimin had dived in front of him and that
was when his arm came down and the bottle finished its sweeping descent to hit him. The impact
was so hard that he felt it jarring all the way down his arm to his shoulder joint and the glass
shattered to fly everywhere. The blow he had been aiming for the side of Jungkook’s head instead
landed to strike the other boy right on his jaw.

For a moment time seemed to stop and Taehyung could only stare at him in dumb confusion, and
then Jimin’s knees unhinged and he dropped to hit the floor with a loud thump. He looked at the
shattered remains of bottle clasped in his palm, the neck and the jagged edges like teeth and then he
dropped it as if the contact burnt his fingers. He didn’t mean to hit him. He didn’t mean to do it but
he had and now…now the boy was lying on the floor and he wasn’t moving.

Seokjin nearly knocked him over to get to him and he dropped to his knees before grabbing his head
in his hands. Taehyung could see that there was blood coming from a wound on his jaw, a series of
slashes from where the bottle had hit him and exploded from the blow. Their friend said that he was unconscious but breathing and then he turned his face to try and get a better look and that was when he saw it: the shard.

There was a shard from the bottle sticking through the boy’s throat; a piece of glass pierced right into his skin on the side of his neck.

In the overhead room light it glinted at him and Taehyung felt a moan of horror escaping his lips.

“Hoseok, go to the desk and call an ambulance right now,” Seokjin said in a scarily calm tone. “Tell the operator it’s an emergency, tell them-”

“Emergency? The fuck do you mean ‘emergency’?” Yoongi asked as the sound of the door flying open sounded from across the room. “What’re you-” The young man shifted to let go of Jungkook and his eyes dropped to Jimin and he stopped talking, seemed to go dumb. His eyes latched onto the shard of glass and then they lifted to look right at him and before any of them could even think to react Yoongi dived at him.

“No!” Namjoon shouted as he grabbed his upper arms and pulled him back. “No more fighting! You all wanna kill each other that badly?!”

“Tae, I swear to fucking god,” Yoongi threatened as he let him pull him away, “if anything happens to him you’re fucking dead!”

And he knew that this wasn’t just one of his usual attempts at scaring people, he was being entirely serious and right now Taehyung would have happily let him kill him. He couldn’t take his eyes off that stupid chunk of glass wedged in Jimin’s throat and he felt himself getting dizzy, felt everything getting numb and distant. Taehyung’s knees unhinged and unlike the other boy he didn’t collapse on the floor because someone managed to catch him before he did.

The last thing he saw before passing out was Jungkook’s face leaning over him and then everything mercifully faded to black.
Wake Up

When he shoved the check-in area door open he didn’t realise how hard he had pushed it because when it hit the opposite wall with a loud *thud* he jumped in surprise and he saw the woman that was behind the desk did so too. She actually let out a little squeak and took a step back and Hoseok stopped stupidly a few feet away from the desk before his panicked mind remembered what he was doing and he darted over to it to lean on the polished wooden counter. The woman flinched and looked at his hands, one of her own hands reaching up to her breast to seize a handful of her white blouse.

“I need to call an ambulance,” he said, trying his hardest to keep his voice calm and not at a shout because he could see that the woman was frightened and he didn’t want to scare her any more than he already had. “It’s an emergency I have to call an-”

“Hang on,” she said as she lifted the receiver up from the cradle, “do you want to call it or do you want me to?” Hoseok went dumb for a moment before finally managing to stutter out that she should call them. Right now he knew that the minute he heard the operator’s voice on the line he would just start blabbering nonsense and he couldn’t afford to waste any time because this really was an emergency. “OK, OK, I’m dialing the number. What do I need to report?”

“An…an accident. My friend got hit with a glass…a glass bottle and he’s…shit there’s a shard stuck in his throat and-” the woman’s face seemed to pale and her mouth went slack at this as she pressed the receiver against her ear. “He needs an ambulance,” Hoseok managed to finish lamely. He had his weight balanced on his wrists but they didn’t feel that steady and he thought that they might just give in so he shifted and folded his elbows on it instead. That made him feel a little more stable, for his legs weren’t going to hold him up much longer either. They might just need to take him to the hospital too at this rate because he was pretty sure that his heart was going to explode if he didn’t find a way to calm himself down.

“What room number are you?” she asked as she waited for the operator to answer her call and he managed to mumble the room number was six and she went silent for a moment. “Hello, yes I need an ambulance.” He heard a voice on the other end, a static burst that was indecipherable to his ears and was just a noise. So she quickly gave the address of the hostel and proceeded to give the details that she had, that there had been an accident and a person had been injured by a piece of glass, a throat injury that required emergency treatment.
Hoseok closed his eyes and listened to her voice, taking deep breaths in through his nose and letting them back out again through his mouth. She was talking in a low voice and though she sounded frightened she was trying very hard to keep calm and give the details to the operator. His heart was pounding in his chest and he could feel twin pulses in his throat and his head, just like how his headaches used to feel. When he reached up to rub at his brow he wasn’t surprised to feel that it was clammy against the back of his hand.

“OK…OK thank you.” The receiver went back into the cradle with a clunking sound and he opened his eyes to see the woman on the desk shifting to grab something. Before he could see what it was he felt her hand against his brow and she started dabbing at his skin with a tissue, the little pink floral box on the counter in front of him. “Take deep breaths, OK? It’s going to be OK. Your friend is going to be fine, the ambulance will be here in a few minutes so just take deep breaths and try to calm down.”

“…OK.”

“You look like you’re going to faint,” the woman said in a cautious tone, the tissue lightly moving along his brow. “Do you need to sit down? I can get you a chair if you need one?” Hoseok couldn’t seem to answer her for a moment because he was so distracted by his own terrified thoughts, eyes glued to the red telephone. But then he managed to say that he was fine, that he didn’t need a chair. It wasn’t exactly the truth, because he probably should sit down but right now he wasn’t important. “I know that you’re scared and that you might not be thinking straight but…do I need to call the police?”

Hoseok dragged his eyes away from the phone to look at her and the first thing that hit him was that she didn’t look that old at all. She looked like she might just be a college freshman and he wondered if she was maybe related to the owner or working this job for some easy cash just like they had been those few days ago that felt like an eternity to him; those days before Jungkook had been hit by a car and he had collapsed on the street, before Jimin had tried to commit suicide and Yoongi had taken to hurting himself for some cheap kicks…before Taehyung had started letting life fuck him over literally and figuratively. The young woman was nibbling on her lower lip anxiously and he could see that she didn’t want to ask the question but she knew that she had to, teeth likely scraping off her medium pink lipstick as she did. She lowered her hand from his face and put the tissue down on the counter before once again grabbing a handful of her blouse to fiddle with one of the buttons.

“I…” He let his voice hang in the air for a few seconds before it hit him that she was actually asking a very good question. What had just happened likely classified as assault of some kind, maybe something like grievous bodily harm, and yet he knew that he couldn’t possibly ask her to call the police because that would mean that Taehyung would be arrested. That was something that could most certainly not happen and yet he didn’t really seem to be able to tell her not to.

“Is was definitely an accident?” she asked in a quiet voice as she studied him and Hoseok reached up
to bury his face in his hands for a moment before he lowered them again.

“Yes, it was an accident. You don’t need to call the police.”

“Because if you need me to I can-”

“Please don’t call the cops,” Hoseok nearly pleaded, voice a whine as he glanced between her and the phone, “please.” The woman held his gaze for a moment before quietly saying that she wouldn’t call them and he let out a sigh of relief, feeling his shoulders shaking as he did. “Thank you, thank you so much.”

Taehyung’s head was on his lap and the weight currently served as a useful anchor because Jungkook felt like he wasn’t entirely there. He wasn’t faint but there was a strange sensation over him that made him feel like he was floating and he couldn’t seem to shake it off. It was as if he wasn’t in his body at all but rather observing everything in a hazy daze, a spectator with no attachment to what was happening; emotionally, mentally and physically. But the other boy’s head kept him anchored in place, like a rock holding down a piece of paper, a child’s fingers snagged around the string of a balloon…an anchor for a ship. But even with the weight he still felt horribly distant to it all and he knew that it was shock. He was shocked so much by what had just happened that he couldn’t feel anything or take in what was happening around him; something he was almost thankful for.

He felt numb and he contemplated slapping himself across the face but he couldn’t seem to lift his arm to do so. One hand was on the carpet, the pile itchy against his palm, and the other was on the unconscious boy’s shoulder. Jungkook dropped his gaze to study his friend. He wasn’t entirely certain how he had managed to catch him but he was thankful that he had, even with the knowledge that he was supposed to be the one on the floor right now, was supposed to be on the receiving end of the bottle instead of Jimin. He supposed that he should be mad about that fact but it was currently the last thing on his mind. That could wait until later if it needed to be addressed.

His anger could wait for later, for it had been one of the reasons this had happened in the first place.

Just this morning Jungkook had promised to get himself together just like his other friends, had
sworn to help sort out his aggressive tendencies and his need to always start fights, and yet a few hours later he had done it again. He knew that he would try and justify his reaction by claiming his worry over Taehyung coupled with his frustration over his behaviour were the reasons why he had done that: why he had exploded and started yelling all of those disgusting things at his friend. But those reasons meant very little when it was Jimin that had been hurt as a result rather than him. If he been smacked upside the head with a bottle and was currently lying on the floor with his face pouring blood then the excuse would be perfectly fine. All of his reasons would be acceptable because he could take responsibility for them and know that his pain had been his own fault but...

No reason he could ever bullshit could possibly justify the fact that Jimin was hurt.

Jungkook managed to move his hand to touch Taehyung’s hair and the feel of it between his fingers helped keep him grounded. He was here, in this hostel room with his friends, he was awake and he wasn’t floating away. But he didn’t feel that happy with that knowledge because it meant that this really was reality. This wasn’t something that he could brush off as a strange and terrible nightmare, it was reality and he currently living it whether or not he felt like he was.

“Where’s Hoseok?” Yoongi asked suddenly, not shifting from his position beside Seokjin at all as he did, not even looking up. He was right beside the other man, chin digging into his arm as he leaned around him to stare at Jimin. It wasn’t like Seokjin was trying to stop him from getting too close but he looked moments away from maybe putting an arm up just to make him stay away, from crowding the unconscious and injured boy. “What’s taking him so fucking long?”

“Don’t worry, the ambulance will be on its way here,” Namjoon said in his best attempt at a reassuring tone. It was hard for him to sound reassuring however considering the fact that he was slumped on the settee across the room and looked like he was going to keel over too. His tanned skin looked a few considerable shades paler and Jungkook thought that he might be edging close to Yoongi’s ghostly countenance. “They dispatch the crews to the address the minute you call. Hoseok’s probably just giving details to the operator so they can inform the crew of what they’re dealing with. Don’t worry.”

“They’re dealing with a fucking emergency,” Yoongi practically spat, “that’s all the details that they need.”

“Yoongi,” Seokjin said in a quiet voice as he reached over to grab his upper arm. The other man didn’t shrug him off but rather seemed to sag somewhat from his touch. “Calm down OK? You’re going to scare the kids and-”

“Forget about the kids,” Yoongi murmured as he lowered his head. “I’m already terrifying myself.” And from across the room Jungkook could hear his ragged breathing, accentuated by all of the
ghosts of his past cigarettes. He wasn’t exactly rasping but he was getting close and it sounded like he was going to suffer an asthma attack or possibly start hyperventilating. He reached up to bury his face in his hands and for a moment he was convinced that he was going to cry but then Hoseok came racing back into the room and the sound he made as he slammed into the door frame made him jolt back upright again.

“Ambulance is coming,” Hoseok said breathlessly. “It’s gonna be OK.”

“How do you know that?” Yoongi asked in a voice that sounded that like a whine. Jungkook hated hearing it coming out of his mouth for his friend only ever used that tone jokingly, but hearing him actually whining like that suddenly made him start to come back to reality. “How do you know he’s gonna be OK, huh?”

“For once in your life Yoongi, try a little fucking optimism,” Hoseok said as he sagged against the hostel room wall and slowly slid down it to land on his ass. When he hit the floor a stray lock of hair fell forward over his brow and he brushed it back hastily.

Jungkook couldn’t open his mouth to speak because his tongue felt stuck, weighed down just like his lap was from Taehyung’s head. He didn’t think that he had the right to speak right now after everything that had happened so instead he just thought his words over in his head as he looked at Jimin. He couldn’t see his face fully and rather just a hint of his jaw because Seokjin had gently moved it to ensure that the shard couldn’t possibly slip any further into his throat, that no pressure could finish the job that Taehyung had started. As a result he could really only look at the chunk of glass and so he did, all the while talking to himself in his head.

*It’s gonna be OK.*

*You’re gonna be OK Jimin.*

*We didn’t mean for this to happen, who would possibly wanna hurt you?*

*I’m sorry Jimin.*

*I’m so fucking sorry.*
Yoongi had never been inside an ambulance before. He had stood on the curb of a great many streets and watched his friends getting escorted into the back, usually climbing in themselves with the help of one of the workers rather than needing to be wheeled inside: that time Taehyung had fractured his wrist in a rather aggressive game of basketball that had seen him diving for the ball and bending his hand far enough back for his knuckles to graze his forearm, the time that Jungkook had given himself concussion after a skateboarding accident. The one time he had ever seen someone getting taken inside on a stretcher was the evening that his old family neighbour had had a heart attack, and he hadn’t seen her after that point for she had passed away whilst being transported to the hospital.

Yet here he was, sitting in the back of one with Jimin strapped to a stretcher in front of him and if that wasn’t a bad omen then he didn’t know what was.

He wasn’t supposed to be in the back, it was technically against regulation, but he had caused enough of a scene in the hostel parking lot to get the workers to relent and let him ride. He hadn’t cared who had come out of their rooms to watch, for there had been a rather sizable crowd of people all across the lot watching it all. Why, he was pretty certain he had seen people with phones out like it was something entertaining; the sight of a high school kid being wheeled out of a hostel room covered in blood and possibly dying. Way better entertainment than the internet or TV sets could offer for sure. Yoongi didn’t know where his friends were right now, whether they were back at the hostel or in the act of rushing to the hospital but he found that he didn’t care about that at this moment. The only thing he cared about right now was the boy lying in front of him.

Jimin was unconscious but he could see that he was breathing because the mask the worker had clamped over his low face was covered in the lightest fog of his breath. She had put it in place shortly after getting him onto the stretcher and then she had done something he had not been expecting. She had removed the shard of glass and then hastily bundled his neck up with a wad of bandages before adding a neck brace-like contraption. Yoongi wasn’t a doctor but he understood why she had put it on. The pressure helped stem blood flow and it meant that he wouldn’t bleed out in the time it took for the ambulance to reach the hospital. But he was scared that the boy had been bleeding internally whilst they had waited for it to arrive, hemorrhaging from a deep slice in his throat that they had not been able to see. He told himself that he was being stupid for imagining it but he couldn’t help himself.

When he had seen that shard of glass he had felt his heart actually stop beating in his chest and he was almost convinced that it hadn’t started up yet; that it wouldn’t start beating again until he knew that he was safe. It had been so much like that pesky little chunk that had been in his arm all those days back in the trainyard, that Namjoon had fixed with a bandanna knotted tightly around his elbow. But a bandanna could most certainly not fix this problem. It hadn’t looked like a sliver to his
eyes, it had looked like the blade of a dagger sunk right into his flesh; that glint of light playing off
the deep green like a precious gem: a deadly emerald that clashed with the blood all over his jaw.

He was going to see that shard in his nightmares for the rest of his life, he knew that he was. If he
ever managed to sleep after this night, which he greatly doubted he ever would again.

Yoongi reached over to brush a lock of hair back off his face and his sudden movement caught the
attention of the female paramedic sitting just opposite him, by the bottom of the stretcher. He felt her
eyes on him but he didn’t look away from Jimin. The boy looked like he was sleeping rather than
unconscious and that was a somewhat jarring sensation. It made him think of last night, of spending
hours just staring at him and making sure that he stayed asleep and didn’t wander off again; that he
didn’t go running off to find more bridges or simply just remove the curtains off the windows and
knot them into a noose. He was good with shit like that, why all of those bed sheet ropes that he had
tied would come in real handy for making a noose. Last night seemed an eternity ago and now he
wasn’t worrying about the boy killing himself, rather that he was going to die at the hands of a dear
friend instead.

Taehyung…

Back in the hostel room he had sworn that if anything happened to Jimin then he would kill him with
his bare hands. Right now he still felt like he could do that, that he would do that if needed, but he
knew that he couldn’t possibly do it. It was just his shock and fear causing him to shout those
horrible words out to the boy. Yoongi wouldn’t ever want to hurt his friends, even if they hurt him.
He would much rather hurt himself than resort to such things, like the marks on his arm proved; the
disgusting burns that were partly responsible for what had happened. He wanted to take those words
back but he couldn’t right now. Taehyung was all the way back in the hostel room, getting further
and further away with every passing second.

If Jimin made it through to tomorrow then he would tell Taehyung that he was sorry and take it back,
would beg forgiveness off the boy even after what had happened. If Jimin didn’t then he didn’t know
what he would do. Yoongi barely felt like he himself was capable of making it through the night and
he didn’t think that he could handle such a thing. He would probably just drop dead and not have to
worry about killing the other boy.

“He’s going to be alright you know?” the young woman said, voice filling the silence that had
occasionally only been broken by a static burst from the radio feed at the front of the vehicle rather
than by voices. Yoongi didn’t reply to this. “Trust me when I say I’ve seen much worst than that.”

“How do I know you’re not just saying that?” he croaked. “How do I know it’s not a load of shit?”
Jimin didn’t look alright right now, neck brace wrapped around his throat to stop him bleeding to death, plastic oxygen mask strapped over his lower face that didn’t hide the massive gashes in his flesh from the exploding glass bottle. Yoongi eyed this and thought that it looked like a spider web, crisscrossing lines that went from his jawline up to his cheek and then along to his ear. It might just scar and there was a chance that the kids might find it cool but Yoongi didn't think it would; he thought that a scar would ruin the boy’s face.

“You don’t know, but it’s the truth.”

“It wasn’t…” Yoongi stopped himself and closed his eyes, fingers still lingering on his hairline as he did. Silken soft. “It was an accident he wasn’t…he jumped in.”

“You don’t need to explain it all to me,” she said quietly, “but the doctor will likely want to know. In case a report needs to be filed with the police.”

“He’s such a…a dumbass,” he finished after a moment, knowing that he couldn’t hear him right now.

When Taehyung opened his eyes he saw that the room was spinning and it took him a few seconds to realise that he was being moved. All he could see was white, perhaps a ceiling? He had no way of telling but it must have been, for he knew that he wasn’t looking at clouds. White blurred into strange patterns that should have been flowers but looked like blobs of yellow paint splatters all over a sheet of paper to his unfocused gaze; outdated ugly floral wallpaper, and then the sight of brown. No way of figuring out what that was no matter how hard he tried. He felt his chin rubbing against something, something soft that might have been cotton but felt strangely warm. His head sagged forward and he felt a groan escaping his mouth, which he found was slack and hanging open. What was going on? Why did he feel like he was floating all of a sudden? Why did everything sound all muddled and distorted, as if he was standing at one end of a long tunnel trying to hear what was happening on the other side? He almost felt like he was in a tunnel but he didn’t want to move towards the light.

He was scared of the light.
“…on my back properly?” There was a voice right beside his ear that sounded oddly familiar, even with the distortion.

“Hang on, let me get his legs,” another voice sounded, husky and warm but also frightened; frightened just like how Taehyung felt right now. He wanted to ask questions but he couldn’t do it, he could do no more than make strange mewling noises under his breath. “He’s on now, nice and secure.”

“…the hospital is?” a new voice said, this one distant as if the speaker was a few feet away. “Cos I don’t have a fucking clue and-”

“Ask the check-in lady,” the voice beside his ear said and that was when he figured out that it was Seokjin. Was he leaning on his friend? Was he on his…back? But why would he be up there? “She should give us directions.”

“Good idea,” the husky voice from behind him said and that just had to be Namjoon.

Taehyung felt like he was starting to black out again and he would be more than happy to do so because he felt so disorientated and scared that he didn’t want to be conscious right now. His head was lolling over Seokjin’s shoulder and he could feel his friend shifting to keep him on his back securely, hands on his thighs and back hunched forward slightly and it was so much like the way he had carried Jungkook all of those days ago and-

Jungkook.

He tried opening his eyes again and after some effort he managed to keep them open even though his eyelids felt like lead weights. His vision still blurry, it just added to the effect that his head was packed with cotton wool rather than his brain. Well, it wasn’t like he had had a good brain to begin with. He could see that same blobby wallpaper that he knew deep down were flowers and yet he couldn’t seem to make his vision clear enough to see them better. They remained yellow blobs without centers or petals, no stems or leaves but rather snaking lines that seemed to wriggle everywhere. Why did the thought of Jungkook make his heart suddenly jump in his chest, like it had been jolted with a nice electrical current? He couldn’t seem to figure that out either because he hadn’t came around enough yet. He was currently only working on his first layer of hazy and panicked thoughts, it would take a few minutes to be able to delve down into his emotions and memories. A part of him, a niggling voice at the back of his mind, whispered that he might just not want to delve down into them at all.
That would require light, and he still didn’t want the light. It was much easier to hide in the cold dark shadows instead, even if it meant feeling the way he did right now: confused and sick and scared.

“Got directions!” a voice called out and he knew that this was Jungkook alright. Even in his current state there was no mistaking his friend’s voice. “Come on, we gotta blow this place!”

“Hoseok lock the door, don’t forget the keys,” Namjoon said.

“I won’t, I won’t I got them right here.” There was a melodic jingling sound from his left: keys being waved from fingers. “Kookie’s right we’ve got to hurry.”

Taehyung felt Seokjin shifting one last time to secure him on his back and then he started walking at a fast pace, not a run because they weren’t out if the hostel room yet. After a second or two he heard a door slamming and then the boy declared that they were in his jeans pocket. Then Jungkook started loudly yelling and that was when things kicked into action. His vision started to clear enough for him to make out glowing streetlights like fireflies and though he knew they weren’t he almost wished that they were stars so that he could wish on them; so he could wish that everything was alright even though he was yet to remember what exactly had gone wrong in the first place.

The only thing he most certainly knew was that he had caused it somehow. Maybe he was just a part of it, but he had a feeling that he was completely responsible this time.

“God Kookie, you’re too fast slow the fuck down!” Namjoon shouted breathlessly from somewhere roughly to his right.

“No! Speed the fuck up!” Jungkook hollered back, voice echoing not just off the empty streets but also in his head, over and over until he let out another pathetic whimpering noise. He must had made it right down Seokjin’s ear because he felt his escort’s shoulders jerk up for a moment before going back down again.

“Tae?”

“Mmmm…”
“I don’t know if you’re even with us right now,” his friend rapidly explained, voice hitching as he raced after the youngest boy, “but we’re going to the hospital right now, OK?”

“Hos…ital?”

“Yes the hospital.”

“Juh…Juh,” Taehyung groaned before forcing his mouth to work, for his tongue to finally move rather than stay flat at the bottom of his mouth. “Jimin?”

“In an ambulance right now, hopefully already at the hospital,” Seokjin explained and he must have jumped up onto a curb because he felt himself jostling up and down on his back for a few seconds before he settled back down.

“Guh…gonna be uh…OK?”

“Yeah, he’s gonna be OK,” Namjoon said hastily. “He’s gonna be fine Tae.”

“There’s that positivity!” Hoseok called, voice echoing and making it hard to discern where he was; ahead or behind.

“It ain’t going anywhere!” their friend declared and Taehyung shifted to try and hold his head up. He felt like he was starting to wake up now, to come around from his unconsciousness. He saw paving flags that glowed slightly from the orange streetlamps and then the sight of his friend’s boots coming down with each step: left, right, left right. After a few more seconds he managed to look up fully and he caught sight of someone darting around a corner. Hoseok, he recognised his white pullover instantly. Seokjin flew around the corner gracelessly, running off the curb and into the gutter before jumping back onto the pavement because he didn’t slow down fast enough to curve it smoothly like the boy just had. Someone was even further ahead of them and he knew it was Jungkook.

The boy ran as if he was running for his very life but that wasn’t exactly the case. He was running for someone else’s life instead: Jimin’s.
The entrance area was rather empty at this hour and their arrival caused quite a commotion. Namjoon was the last one to run up the rubberised ramp that led inside, automatic glass doors sliding open to allow access, and when he did he saw his friends all standing around in dumb confusion, not at all sure what to do. There were several nurses in the area and they all stared at them with wide eyes and shocked expressions: blue scrubs and little masks hanging around their necks rather than covering their faces. There were a few women behind the desk and the one that was right in front of them looked to be middle-aged. Her short hair was pulled back into a messy ponytail and she looked seconds away from picking up the phone and calling someone. Hopefully not someone to come and drag their asses back outside after everything they had gone through to get here.

Namjoon felt like they had been running for an eternity but he knew in reality it had been just twenty minutes from the hostel to the hospital. For nearly fifteen of those minutes he had had a burning stitch in his side and yet he hadn’t stopped or slowed down once because he couldn’t do that. He had to get to the hospital and he had to see that Jimin was safe with his own eyes. Even if that meant collapsing just like Taehyung had the moment he did, he was more than willing to do so. Jungkook had ran at the front without stopping once, not faltering from the scrawled directions on the piece of wrinkled paper the check-in lady had given him and instead flying down the streets. Namjoon made a mental note to buy the young woman flowers when this was all over, a thank you for helping them even after they had caused so much trouble. Seokjin had carried Taehyung all the way there without complaint, even when carrying the unconscious boy must have been hard for him. The kids liked to make fun of his age all of the time and he wasn’t surprised that he had been a little shocked that he had lifted Taehyung as if he was no more than a child and piggybacked him halfway across the city effortlessly. It might have been his fear fueling him but he felt that it wasn't the case at all.

“Hello, uh,” Namjoon staggered over to the desk, trying to catch his breath as he did. “Excuse me but did a boy get brought in yet?”

“Are you here to check on a patient?” the woman asked, shoulders going down and expression softening as she looked at him.

“Yeah, yeah an emergency patient uh…a boy. Came in with a throat injury and-”

“And a young man, yes I remember. Took three nurses to drag him away from the stretcher.” The woman moved her eyes over to his friends and he spared a glance back over his shoulder at them. Hoseok had hunkered down to catch his breath, head hanging forward so that his hair fell over his eyes and obscured his face. Jungkook was standing beside a potted plant, worrying at the paper directions as he scanned all of the walls for signs of any kind. Seokjin was just looking right back at him as he waited to hear what happened next, eyes attentive like a hawk.
“You can put me down now…” Taehyung mumbled and so their eldest friend lowered him down and let him off his back. The boy lurched sideways and Jungkook grabbed his upper arm instinctively without even looking, gaze still flirting around without rest.

“He’s in surgery right now I think, let me just check son.”

“OK, thank you,” Namjoon said as he reached up to wipe at his brow with the back of his hand. Beaded with sweat just like he had imagined. The woman turned around to go to a machine, a computer that was covered in a database-like program. She hit a few keys and moved the mouse around before making several noises under her breath.

“Yes, the boy is in surgery right now. The man he was with should be in the waiting wing unless he managed to fight his way into the surgery room.” Her tone was wry and the remark made Namjoon laugh under his breath. It sounded like something Yoongi would do. “Wing B.”

“I can escort you,” a young nurse said from across the room. “I’m going through Wing B. If you’ll just follow me.” She gestured over to a set of doors situated to the right of the desk and so they all quickly followed after her. She pushed on the doors and they swung open, long black ponytail swishing from the movement. “Your friend is very lucky to have friends like you.” She said as she looked back at them. “Running all the way here to see if he’s OK.” Taehyung muttered something under his breath that seemed to disagree with this.

“I know it’s not your job ma’am,” Hoseok said in a quiet voice. “But do you know anything about him?”

“About your friend? An accident with a throat injury yes? A bottle shard lodged in his throat?” Namjoon rapidly agreed to this as they followed her down a thin corridor. “I don’t really have any information on him but you would be surprised how often we deal with cases like that. Every few weekends we have a bar brawl incident and someone is wheeled in with shards in their throat, or stomach or eyes. I can assure you that he is in very capable hands in this hospital.”

“Thank you,” Seokjin said. “I’m sure that he is.”

“I was exiting this wing when he was wheeled in, I saw the commotion with your other friend. I think that he will be fine. The shard had already been removed in transit, he’ll just be getting minor surgery to the wound most likely. If it was anything serious then the paramedics on scene would
have left the shard in place,” the nurse explained as she pushed on another set of doors. “So try not to worry too much, OK? He’ll be walking and talking in a few hours no problem.”

Though it sounded like she might just have been saying this to calm them down Namjoon decided that he was going to trust what she said. The nurse had no need to talk to them, she could have denied any knowledge and just escorted them to the wing, yet she had claimed to have seen Jimin and she knew about the fact he had had a shard of glass in his throat, something he hadn’t specified to the woman on the desk.

“OK, you should take some seats in here,” she said as she gestured across a wide room, “and I’ll be sure to get a nurse to update you as soon as possible.” Namjoon glanced over it to see no sign of Yoongi but his friend could be absolutely anywhere: out smoking on the curb to calm himself down, inside the surgery room like the reception woman had joked. The others moved to sit down on a long stretch of benches and he hung back for a moment to scan the room.

There were three other people inside and one of them was a little girl sitting on the floor messing with toy blocks that had been left in a box. There was an elderly man in the corner with a newspaper and a cane and he hadn’t even looked up at their arrival, and a man that night have been the girl’s father in the opposite corner. U-shaped formation of padded benches and random tables here and there, posters all over the walls. After a moment of study he crossed the room, boot soles squeaking on the linoleum, and he sat down on the end of the bench beside Hoseok.

“Guys…I know this is pretty fucking stupid but…” Taehyung paused as he shifted on the bench and looked at them all slowly. Yet after a few seconds he didn’t seem capable of finishing his train of thought and he just sat back against the bench.


“I wanted to…well…”

“Tae, just spit it out,” Namjoon said wearily.

“We should pray,” Taehyung finished. For a minute they were all silent and no one seemed to know what to say to break the silence. “I mean…I know none of us believe in that shit but…I’m getting pretty desperate here, y’know?” He let out a laugh that sounded uneven and forced and that was when Jungkook grabbed hold of his hand. The boy jumped at the contact and the youngest tightened his grip before holding his own hand out to Seokjin. The eldest took it and then turned to Hoseok and a moment later the boy was offering him his hand too. Namjoon eyed his palm before reaching
over and entwining his fingers within his.

“If Yoongi was here he’d call us all pussies,” Hoseok said with a soft smile. “Praying for good things to happen like this. He used to say—”

“Pray for sunshine but buy a fucking umbrella,” Namjoon interrupted as he closed his eyes.

Seokjin thought himself a rather patient person. He had to be patient to be able to put up with his friends and yet he suddenly found all sense of composure slipping right out of his hands. He didn’t like the jittery sensation that he was currently plagued with, the bouncing knee that he couldn’t seem to stop from going up and down, the need to bite at his nails even though he had broken that irritating habit all the way back in high school. It was enough to make him feel a little dizzy and he knew that he needed to calm down but it was rather hard to do so considering everything that had happened over the past hour. Getting worried to the point of passing out wasn’t a smart idea but it seemed too hard to control himself without attracting his friends’ attentions.

Right now, more than anything else he needed to stay calm for them all.

They didn’t have Yoongi, levelheaded Yoongi who was very good in bad situations like this, because he had raced off with the ambulance crew and left them all behind. But not before he had gotten near hysterical in the hostel parking lot in front of them all, shouting himself nearly hoarse in a panicked state he had never seen his friend in. That was what had caused Seokjin to start to feel a little scared, for his composure to start slipping. Yoongi wasn’t supposed to be the one hyperventilating and shaking like a leaf, he was supposed to be the rock and yet it seemed that that responsibility was now his alone to carry. He wasn’t surprised that the other man had broken down after the events of the last few days, but by breaking down Yoongi had caused him to start to notice the cracks in his own armour and he wasn’t quite sure how long it would hold.

Seokjin was so busy wondering about where the hell his friend was, biting down on his thumbnail as he did, that he didn’t notice Hoseok moving until he felt the weight of his hand on his knee. The boy didn’t exactly push down on his leg to make him stop bobbing it up and down but he knew that he wanted him to stop and so he forced himself to stop. He studied the back of his hand for a second before looking up at him but Hoseok was staring off across the waiting area and he didn’t meet his gaze. He looked a little distant and he didn’t want to disturb him whilst he was deep in his thoughts.
He just hoped that they were positive ones instead of the horrible ones he couldn’t seem to push away.

Seokjin shifted to look over at Namjoon and he saw his friend was sitting forward to rest his elbows on his knees, head held between both hands as he studied the linoleum. He wasn’t distant but he looked wrecked and he felt a pang in his chest at the sight of him. Just a few nights ago he had told him that he was the big brother, the one with a bad habit of feeling responsible for everything, and the young man had laughed at this but he had been telling the truth. Right now Namjoon looked like he was already figuring out where he had to take the blame from, likely going to come to the conclusion that they shouldn’t have started that discussion in the first place and that it was his fault for agreeing to it.

But how could they have possibly foresaw something like that happening? At worst Seokjin had expected some heated exchange of words and tears, of which there had been plenty. But it had started off so well, they had finally started to address all of the horrors that had been haunting them and had been attempting to exorcise them when it had all went wrong. Hell, he had even learnt everything about Yoongi self-harming himself when he had had no clue and Hoseok had finally lifted that dreadful weight off his shoulders but then...then they had cornered Taehyung and it had all went so horribly wrong so ridiculously fast.

He dragged his eyes off Namjoon and instead turned his head to look at Jungkook. The boy had his head slumped forward on his chest, either sleeping or passed out. He thought it was the former but it could have easily been the latter. But his rest wasn’t exactly enjoyable and rather fitful. He could see his expression twitching every few seconds, his brow and lips going down and then back up again. He wasn’t mumbling yet but he thought that Jungkook might just start soon enough.

Seokjin didn’t have to shift to see Taehyung because the boy was lying on the floor a few feet away. He hadn’t decided to sulk like he had just last night, refusing to move off the floor and use the bed, but rather he was attempting to play with the little girl. Her presumed father looked a little weary of the strange boy sprawled out on the floor by his daughter, the one that stunk of cheap booze and was slurring his words like an old drunk, but the man didn’t tell her to move away or ask Taehyung to leave her alone. The boy’s hands were fumbling as he tried to make something to impress her, having to try several times to get the snap-together pieces to click in place even though they were designed for preschoolers.

What were they supposed to do about Taehyung?

Seokjin knew that what had happened wasn’t over yet. Their intervention had been interrupted by the argument and subsequent bottling, but that didn’t mean that it was finished. They still needed to get the boy to admit his problems and seek help, and after what had happened perhaps Taehyung would finally wake up and realise that he was in trouble; serious trouble. He should have been in the back of a police car right now and yet they had saved his ass once more, but Seokjin didn’t know
how much more of this they could all take.

Taehyung needed saving but so far he had refused to grab the ropes they had tossed to him. The boy seemed rather set on drowning and there was very little they could do to stop him.

“What is it?” the little girl asked in a lisping voice as she looked at the creation in the boy’s hand.

“It’s a unicorn,” Taehyung replied as he held it out to her. It didn’t really look like a unicorn but a child’s imagination might just see it if they tried hard enough. Her eyes scanned it and then she accepted it from him before moving it along the floor: clip clop just like a unicorn would prance.

“It’s pretty.”

“Just like you Princess Soo…bin.” The little girl didn’t look up at this and the boy reached up to rub at his forehead with the heel of his hand. He muttered something under his breath as he watched her playing with the creation. “Just like you.” Taehyung shifted to pat her head, fingers moving through her hair for a few seconds before her father cleared his throat loudly.

“Eunji, let’s go get some snacks, hmm?” the man said as he got to his feet and the little girl put the ‘unicorn’ down before jumping up and racing over to grab hold of his hand. Her father shot Taehyung a look before escorting her across the room and Seokjin watched them both go in annoyance.

“Tae,” he said quietly, “if they come back don’t play with her.”

“Huh, why not?” The boy shifted to look back at him and Seokjin just told him not to. He didn’t have the energy to explain that he was drunk and that his affections seemed to greatly piss the girl’s father off. Taehyung might have meant no harm but it was just best to avoid causing even more trouble.

“You’re too old for toys anyway,” Hoseok said after a moment, dropping his eyes down to his lap rather than stare across the room.

“You’re never too old for toys,” Taehyung countered. “You just switch Barbies and Kens for…cock rings and handcuffs.”
“You had Barbies and Kens?” Hoseok asked, eyebrows lifting in mock surprise.

“Yeah, maybe I did. Maybe I liked dressing ‘em up and putting ‘em in funny sex positions, why’d you care, huh?” Seokjin caught sight of movement out of the corner of his eye and he turned his head just in time to see a nurse coming over to them. She had a clipboard tucked into the crook of one elbow and she came right over to them.

“You came in with the boy from earlier yes? The boy with the throat injury?”

“We followed the ambulance,” Seokjin said as he sat upright. “Is everything OK?”

“Yes yes, everything is fine. The boy-”

“Jimin,” Jungkook interrupted as he rubbed at his eyes, “Park Jimin.”

“Jimin suffered a horrible accident but thanks to your quick actions you helped ensure that his accident didn’t result in a much worse scenario. A lot of times people panic and remove foreign objects from injuries, inadvertently causing more damage in the process. You did not, which was a very smart thing to do for had any of you pulled it out too quickly, too nervously, you could have severed his jugular and caused massive hemorrhaging.” They all listened to her talking in silence, hardly blinking and seemingly not even breathing. “As luck would have it the shard missed his artery and instead got lodged in muscle, causing some minor damage but nothing dangerous. A few inches to the left and it would likely have killed him. A little deeper and to the right and it could have severed his spinal column, so yes, Park Jimin is a very lucky boy.”

“So…he’s OK?” Namjoon asked.

“He’s currently still under anesthesia as a result of his surgery and should be coming around in a couple of hours. The surgery was minor, he should be able to be discharged this afternoon, a few hours from now…” She flicked through her clipboard. “He had stitches, dissolvable, but he did not require a transfusion of any kind because he did not lose much blood, again thanks to none of you removing the foreign object.”

“He’s OK…” Taehyung breathed out before closing his eyes.
“There’s just one issue,” the nurse said as she stopped flicking through the clipboard. They all stared at her and waited for her to speak, the air going so silent that Seokjin could hear wheels squeaking on the linoleum flooring outside of the waiting wing.

“Payment.”

He could hear the sound of voices and yet he couldn’t see anything at all. Loud, angry voices that seemed to echo around his skull over and over until he couldn’t even think and could only listen to the chorus. It was so tangled that he wasn’t able to differentiate the words or voices but rather just hear them all together. It was like standing out in the street and listening to all of the conversations of passing people, or sitting on a packed subway, and part of him didn’t even want to understand what he was hearing. He could let the noise drift off into silence and not care at all.

Right now he felt very calm, very still and peaceful, and he thought that he would happily stay that way for a while.

It was almost as if he was detached, floating above everything like a strange balloon, and though the sensation was unusual and a little frightening he did not seem to mind it. It wasn’t like sleeping but at the same time he felt like he was. It wasn’t unconsciousness because he was aware of himself; he could hear and almost feel. It wasn’t just blackness, empty blackness without feeling or sound, but rather a form of conscious paralysis that seemed to be like a deep grey fog instead. But despite the fact that he could hear and feel he was still pretty certain that he was unconscious though he couldn’t figure out why.

What had happened to him? Where was he exactly? Was he still in the hostel room? Were his friends still fighting each other and getting very close to physical brawling? Was that why he could hear voices?

He couldn’t feel his limbs because they felt weighed down but he was aware of them, could feel them beside him on something that felt like a bed. Why was he on a bed? Or was it a floor? But if it was a floor then it was the softest carpet he had ever felt, most certainly not the stuff that had been in the hostel room they had been staying in because that was always so dirty and itchy. But a bed…a bed just didn’t make any sense.
Suddenly the voices seemed to be fading, seemed to get rather distant and turn into echoes. He could hear one voice more louder than the rest and it was Taehyung’s of course: Taehyung because they had all been talking to him, had been having an ‘intervention’. But it hadn't ended well at all, for it had started a massive argument earlier in the day, one that had escalated and turned into a full scale fight by the evening. That was why the voices were shouting of course, at least he had an explanation for that even if he didn’t have one for the rest of it all.

If the voices were fading away then they were not in the room with him. That meant that he was hearing them in his head rather than his ears, and that just solidified the idea that he was unconscious. Was he coming around now? Was that why he was starting to feel heavier once more, starting to feel like he was back in his body rather than floating above it?

Grey fog in front of his eyes getting lighter and lighter, limbs no longer useless and dead. Why right now he could feel his fingers moving slightly across the sheets, sheets that were soft and very different to the starched ones back in the hostel that stunk of bleach. He tried opening his eyes and he couldn’t just yet, but he could move his tongue around his mouth. As he did he detected a scent in the air: strong antiseptic that seemed to cling to everything like a pungent perfume. Eyes still refusing to open but wrist managing to move rather than just his fingers. More bed sheets against his palm, rustling softly. He inched his hand along inch by inch until his fingertips brushed against something else, something that felt soft just like the sheets. But it was warm and somewhat strange. He moved his fingers along the bumps before figuring out that he was touching a hand, that he was running them along knuckles. Not as soft as the back of the hand but rather grazed. For a moment he thought that it was Taehyung, with his skinless and bruised knuckles like always, but then his fingers carried their exploration and he felt the sharpest jut of bone under skin, the curved knob of a wrist bone. There was only one friend with wrists as slight as that.

Yoongi.

He established that he was not alone and yet he didn’t know where he was. Why couldn’t his stupid eyes open? He wished that he had the energy to reach up and force them open but he couldn’t possibly do that, just moving his arm over the bed seemed to drain him enough for him to feel like he was floating again, getting distant and more faint.

“…wanna die, I wanna feel alive! I wanna fucking live!” Taehyung’s voice shouted at him, hoarse from a mixture of yelling and trying to not cry; a horrible sound that made a shiver run all over his skin.

“You’re a fucking train wreck! A car crash! You’re the fucking Titanic!” More shouting voices mixed into a load of nonsense, words lost and gone into oblivion, unable to discern a single thing.
“Seriously guys! Stop it!”

He could feel his limbs getting heavier now, a weight on his chest seeming to lift. He was waking up, he was starting to come around and-

“...kill you instead!”

Jimin opened his eyes.
Jimin opened his eyes slowly because it took him some effort to manage the feat. Though he was starting to come around he still felt a little heavy all over and something at the back of his mind seemed to hint that it might be the result of anaesthesia. Why he had been put under was something that he had yet to figure out whilst floating around in that horrible fogginess, but he was more than certain that he was in a hospital because the scent of antiseptic was too great to possibly mean he was anywhere else. It was strong enough for him to nearly taste it and he wondered if they cleaned everything with the substance including the beds. His eyelids flickered open and then closed again but after a second he got them to stay open and he stared up at the ceiling to see that it was in perfect condition, not like the hostel they had been staying in. Usually the ceilings in the hostels were stained from age and tobacco, yellowed in the corners with cracks in the plaster that made them seem hundreds of years of old rather than a decade or two. The one he was looking at currently was clean and crack-free, neat little tiles that ran in rows and reminded him of teeth for some reason: perfect little teeth that might have been straightened by braces so not a single one of them was kinked in anyway. Speaking of teeth he strangely couldn’t feel his own and he couldn’t help himself from prodding the tip of his tongue forward so that it poked against the backs of his front teeth. If he couldn’t feel his teeth then he was mostly certain stoned on something, and the most obvious answer was indeed anaesthetic. After prodding his teeth a few times to make sure that they were still there he tried moving his tongue somewhere else but it was too dry and he didn’t like the sensation at all. It felt like his tongue was made from carpet just like the hostel rooms, dusty and itchy carpet.

He felt along the bed with his other hand, the one that wasn’t resting on top of his friend’s, and felt the sheets rustling against his fingertips. Definitely lying in a bed. He felt like his upper half was elevated somewhat and he tried to ascertain if it was the result of pillows or if the bed was possibly raised, yet when he tried to wriggle and find out he felt too exhausted to do so. His eyelids might have opened and he might be able to move his fingers and wrists but he was most certainly out of action right now. No walking for him, that was a little out of his current abilities. What had happened to him? Jungkook had been hit by a car just a few days ago and-

Jungkook.

The thought of the boy was enough to cause a strange sensation in the pit of his stomach, a sudden clenching. Where was Jungkook right now? Why had he heard him shouting in his head just a few minutes ago? He knew that something had happened and yet whatever drugs had been pumped into his system was making it hard for him to figure it out. He had been shouting something...something about wrecks and car crashes, the Titanic... Who had he been shouting that at? Not him, he was certain of that much and he had a feeling that it was Taehyung. The boy had entered the room drunk just before the shouting...hadn’t he? Just trying to figure it all out was making his head hurt and he would have let out a groan if he could move his stupid tongue. All he knew was that the clenching
sensation had felt a little like fear and that meant one thing to him: he was scared by the thought of Jungkook. Why? He would probably have to ask Yoongi that particular question.

After staring at the ceiling for several minutes Jimin decided to attempt to turn his head. He managed a slight change of position but then he couldn’t seem to move it anymore because there was something around his neck. Something thick and unyielding. Bandages? He couldn’t reach up to feel them but that was what he thought it was. It was the only thing that made sense to him. But even with the slight change in position he could still see more than he had a moment ago, could make out the left side of the room that he was in. More white walls just like the ceiling, little windows that looked to be observation ones along the length of wall and an open doorway. He could see people moving down the corridor just outside, a flash of blue and white but nothing more discernible than that as they moved too quickly past the small gap. If the ceiling tiles were teeth then the doorway was like an eye, a rolling iris that wouldn’t stop moving. Just past his friend he could see a few empty beds and he wondered if he was alone in this current room or if there was anyone to his right in another bed. The bed covers were a soft blue, the pillows and sheets white, and the curtains that could be pulled around matched the covers. Currently they were pulled all the way up at the top of the bed, bunched together to keep them in place and show that the beds were free. There was a considerable stack of pillows on each bed and he figured out that he was likely lying on a mountain of them too, so many that he didn’t sink into their softness. They propped him up rather well however, so that was a bonus because he couldn’t have possibly sat up the way he was feeling right now. He couldn’t even move his tongue or lift an arm, sitting up would have been too hard and he would have been left lying and staring up at the ceiling tiles instead.

Jimin stopped scanning the plain walls and empty beds and instead turned his attention to his friend instead because at least he was interesting to look at. Yoongi was slumped forward and though he might have been sitting in the chair to the side of the bed he wasn’t doing so now, rather he was mostly lying on the bed beside him. Face down, one arm sprawled out to the side so that he wasn’t even using his folded up forearm as a pillow and instead just had his face pressed against the covers. He hoped that they didn’t smell like the ones back in the hostel, bleached and rough to the touch. He didn’t have his jacket on, it was likely still all the way back in said room right now along with his cigarettes, and he could see the marks on his arm perfectly clear now; now he was no longer consciously trying to hide them away. He briefly wondered what a nurse would think if they saw the burns before he pulled his gaze away from the welts and instead looked at the back of his head. Hair fanned out on the covers messily, the red starting to turn black at the roots. Would his friend keep dyeing it, or would he go back to his natural shade? It had been quite some time since he had seen it and he suddenly felt the greatest urge to reach over and touch his hair but he couldn’t; that required moving. So instead he just looked at the slightest hint of his face and then moved his eyes to look at his hand instead. He wasn’t sure if the man had been holding his hand at some point and he had let go of him unconsciously in his sleep but he managed to move his own hand over and place it back on top again. Even in his current condition there was a noticeable difference in skin tone. He could trace his veins with his eyes because the colour stood out against his pale skin so much that it looked like tattoos.

Jimin moved his thumb ever so softly on the back of his hand and Yoongi didn’t respond to it, didn’t shift in his sleep or even make a sound. He was too deeply asleep for that and he was glad because his friend needed the rest. He didn’t want to wake him up and so he stopped moving his thumb and instead just looked down at their hands.
How had Yoongi ended up in the hospital with him, and where were the others? Had he maybe volunteered to come on his own so that the others could stay back at the hostel and sort out whatever had happened? Or had...had Yoongi been the only one that wanted to come to the hospital? He knew that the thought was stupid but he still thought it regardless. Of course Yoongi wasn’t the only friend in the hospital, the others were probably here somewhere but they weren’t all allowed in the room. Too many visitors. Maybe the man wasn’t even supposed to be here right now but he thought it was highly likely that he had argued enough to be allowed, much to the chagrin of the staff. It was enough to make him smile, even when his lips felt a little rubbery and numb.

There was a soft rustling sound and when he glanced back he saw Yoongi shifting on the bed, moving only slightly enough for his cheek to brush against the cover. He made a sound that sounded trapped between a whimper and a groan and from what he could see he was still asleep so he didn’t say a word and waited to see if he would wake up.

Jimin turned his head to the other side and he once again felt the resistance from whatever was around his throat but at least he could scan the rest of the room. A single bed beside him that was also currently empty, it seemed that the hospital in this city was only small and not packed full like the ones back in Seoul. That was probably a good thing for he didn’t want anyone being disturbed should his friends suddenly burst into the room and start shouting and jumping around like always. It would piss quite a few nurses off and he didn’t want them getting kicked out because they would undoubtedly do it. Why, he could almost imagine Jungkook diving onto the bed and jumping up and down on it, possibly smacking him with one of the pillows from the empty beds as soon as he established that he was alright and capable of being smacked across the head with one. The way he felt right now he wouldn’t even feel it unless he filled the case with rocks. On the far wall there was a long window and the view outside of it revealed the sky, tinged with violet as the sun was already rising. What time was it? No watch on his wrist, or on Yoongi’s, that he could check. Was there a clock on the wall? He couldn’t seem to locate one but he thought that it might have been early morning hours, perhaps 6am or maybe even a little earlier. Jimin sighed and turned back to look at his own lap and then there was another sound from beside him, a drawn-out mumble that wasn’t yet words but something close.

“Look who’s...awake,” Jimin said and at his voice the man started violently, looking up so sharply that it was a miracle that he didn’t crick his stiff neck. Yoongi peered at him from under one sleepy heavy eyelid and for a few seconds he just stared, seemingly unable to move or speak. Then he heard his breath leave his mouth in a little wheeze.

“Oh thank god, thank fuck,” Yoongi muttered as he grabbed hold of his hand. Jimin dropped his gaze and his friend lifted his hand up to hold it between both of his, closing his eyes as he brought his hand up to his mouth. “Christ Jimin, I was so scared.” His lips brushed against his fingers and Jimin felt the contact against his skin like frisson, a little jolt that ran up his arm.

“You don’t need to be scared now,” he replied, talking a little slow because it seemed a too hard to
“I know I know but I just…” His friend sighed and his breath was warm against his skin. “I was so scared and I felt like I was going crazy.”

“You’ve always been a little crazy,” Jimin said and he laughed. “Yoongi?” His friend made a soft noise but didn’t look at him. “I’m OK, really.” His eyes opened ever so slightly, his lashes fluttering, but he just looked at his hand rather than meet his gaze. He felt his fingers lightly moving along his skin and then Yoongi did something he had not expected at all: he kissed the back of his hand. Jimin felt a surprised gasp escaping his lips as he moved his lips along his fingers and then to his palm, planting the most softest of kisses as he did. For a few seconds he couldn’t think of something to say to break the silence of the room, not even punctuated by a ticking wall clock but rather than the faintest sound of people passing in the corridor outside. “…How long have you been lying there?”

“Dunno,” Yoongi said with a head shake, “I dunno, a few hours I think? Do you know where you are?” Jimin quietly said the hospital and he nodded. “Uh-huh, the hospital. Do you remember why you’re here, huh?”

“…No, I’m a little foggy right now.”

“Of course you’re foggy,” he ran his fingers along the back of his hand. “After what happened. Jimin you were in an…an accident. A bad accident.”

“Like a car crash?”

“No, not a crash. Nothing like that. Jimin you…there was an argument in the hostel room. Do you remember that part?” After a few seconds of thought he nodded as well as he could and confirmed that he recalled something like an argument. “It was ‘cos of Tae. He came back drunk after running off yesterday morning and he upset us. Kookie got really pissed off and he unloaded on him, just started shouting. So Tae started shouting back and it got outta hand so fast. Everyone was angry, everyone jumped in and tried to calm it down but it was just too heated and we couldn’t.”

“Why was Tae drunk?” Jimin asked.

“Cos he was upset, and angry and…scared. He didn’t wanna talk to us, he didn’t wanna face his problems so he ran away and tried to escape it all but he couldn’t.”
“Like what I did.”

“…Yeah,” Yoongi agreed after a moment, “like what you did Jimin.”

“So what happened?”

“Tae and Kookie got physical. They had had enough of shouting at each other and decided to start brawling. Me and Joonie grabbed Kookie, Jin and Hoseok tried to stop Tae, but they were so pissed that we couldn’t hold ‘em back. They were kicking and screaming and trying to beat the shit outta each other and every time we nearly stopped ‘em something would happen and they would be grappling again. So you…you jumped between ‘em to try and break ‘em up but Tae…” Yoongi stopped and took a deep breath before letting out again in an uneven sigh. “Tae had a soju bottle, one he had been drinking from. He tried to hit Kookie with it but that was when you jumped between ‘em and he hit you instead.”

Jimin didn’t take his eyes off his friend and he just stared at him silently, waiting for it to all click in his mind. Yet after several seconds it didn’t seem to do that. He was just as confused and distant to it all as he had been before his friend had started explaining it to him. He felt like the man was explaining a complicated movie plot to him and he just couldn’t wrap his head around it. He had been hit by a bottle? Tae had smashed a bottle over his head? When had that happened, and why couldn’t he remember it? He couldn’t even recall stepping between the two boys, recall them fighting to the point of blows. All he could remember was shouting voices, distraught pained voices and words that hurt his heart. But Yoongi was telling him that that was what had happened and though he couldn’t seem to remember he was willing to accept it because he knew that his friend would never lie to him.

“The bottle…it hit you on the face Jimin. Right here.” Yoongi lifted his hand and moved it so that he could press it against his face. Jimin’s fingertips felt skin and then the most strangest thing: a thick wad of dressings held to his lower cheek by medical tape. He furrowed his brow at this and then his friend was lowering his hand. “And a shard flew and got stuck here, right here.” His fingers now against the side of his throat, right where the unyielding rolls of bandage where, the ones that stopped him from turning his head properly. “There was a shard of glass stuck in your throat Jimin.”

“…Oh shit.” Yoongi laughed at this remark, the sound both relieved and also still a little nervous. “I don’t remember any of that.”

“You’ve had surgery, that’s probably why.” Jimin felt along his throat, along the bandages. He couldn’t feel anything under them, a bump or a gash to alert of him of the damage. “That’s why I was so scared Jimin. I was terrified that you were really in danger, that you might have…” Yoongi
swallowed hard and didn’t finish this sentence. “I started hollering in the hostel parking lot.” He looked at him but didn’t lower his hand. “They wouldn’t let anyone in the ambulance. They were gonna take you away from us so I started screaming.” His friend’s lips lifted at the corners for a moment. “I mean really screaming, I think I freaked everyone out but it worked, they let me ride in the back with you. But when we got here they had to wheel you away again and I caused a lot of trouble then too… think the nurses are pissed off with me. I refused to even wait in the waiting area, instead I sat in the hallway outside the operating wing. I thought they were gonna call the police on me but they didn’t, they just left me alone. Every time the door swung open I was like… “is it Jimin?” and I would sit up but it kept turning out to be other people. For a little while I was…”

“What?”

“I was scared that you weren’t gonna come out again even though it was so fucking stupid. It’s just… you went through the doors and wouldn’t come back out. I felt like a dog waiting for their owner to come back from work, y’know? Just sitting there… waiting.” Yoongi dropped his eyes to the bed covers. “Every time they swung open I was just hoping that it would be you. Shit, I nearly started praying ‘cos I was that desperate. When the nurse finally wheeled you back out it seemed like forever. I jumped up and grabbed onto your hand and she kept looking at me like I should let go as she pushed you into this wing and then I must’ve fallen asleep or something.”

Jimin studied his face to see that he still looked exhausted, even with a little rest. He was shaking slightly as if cold and he wished that there was a blanket on the bed that he could give him, that he could wrap around his shoulders just to stop that shivering. The thought that someone had actually worried over him that much was… shocking. He doubted his father would even give a shit and though he had no way of knowing he greatly assumed that he wouldn’t even visit the hospital. He would refuse to come and see him, the useless kid that had gotten a shard of glass stuck in his throat because he had jumped into a fight like an idiot; messing up just like always. His friend still had his hand within his own and he reached up to touch the bandages again with his free hand.

“I might be clumsy,” he said quietly, “but I’m lucky, huh?”

“Real fucking lucky,” Yoongi agreed as he also reached up to touch the side of his throat. Even through the thick layer of bandages he felt the contact, the warmth of his fingertips caressing his skin. He kept his hand in place for a moment before moving it away, shifting in the chair as he did. “I think I should let the others come and see you now, right?” Jimin said that that sounded like a good idea and so his friend got to his feet and let out a groan as he reached down and rubbed at his lower back. He tried not to smirk at this as he scrunched his face up. “I’ll be right back, OK?”

“Sure thing.” Jimin watched him cross the wing and disappear through the open doorway and then he took a deep breath and let it out again in a heavy sigh. He felt drained right now and he hoped that the others might be able to inject a little energy into him or else he was likely going to fall asleep. He shifted slightly and managed to sit up a little more, back brushing against the stack of pillows so that
he could feel the metal headrest against his neck, cold and hard. The covers had slipped down during this and he reached up to fix them when he looked at his hand and paused, fingers sinking into the material. Yoongi had kissed his hand. Not once, not twice, but multiple times that had been hard to count because he had done so quickly and softly. He had done that because he was relieved of course, relieved that he was safe and stable after the accident last night and yet…

Jimin quickly fixed the cover over his ribs as he let his eyes drift over to the empty chair. Yoongi had been there for possibly hours, worried and uncomfortable and even scared just like he had told him. Had he done that because his relief had been so great that he had been unable to stop himself? Yet Jimin recalled not kissing Jungkook’s hands after his car crash, or Hoseok after his collapse on the streets. Would the rest of his friends race in and plant kisses all over his hands and cheeks, or would they ruffle his hair and embrace him like usual? And why did he have the most strangest idea that it was not the first time that Yoongi had done something like that; memories of standing on that bridge in the torrential rain as his friend had shouted at him and grabbed hold of his face. But before he could possibly try and figure out his thoughts he heard a sound down the corridor and he lifted his gaze just in time to see Jungkook come flying into the wing.

“Hey, are you-” the boy raced across the room and threw himself at him, knees hitting the bed mattress and arms wrapping around his neck so suddenly that Jimin let out a squeaky noise in surprise.

“Jimin, oh god Jimin,” Jungkook said, voice so fast that he could barely understand what he was saying. “you’re OK, you’re OK, thank god, thank god-”

“Kookie,” Jimin said, straining slightly because he was squeezing pretty tightly. “Slow…down…”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean any of that shit that I said and I didn’t mean for you to get hurt. I didn’t, I swear I didn’t and-”

“I know, I know you didn’t,” he said with a soft laugh, chin digging into his shoulder. The others quickly stepped through the doorway and he felt Jungkook’s fingers reaching up to touch his hair. “You don’t need to say…sorry you just need to…let me breathe!” His friend let go of him with an embarrassed laugh and then he rubbed at his eyes. He saw that his cheeks were wet and this shocked him enough that he felt his mouth hanging open.

“Park Jimin,” Namjoon breathed out, “you lucky son of a…” Jimin dragged his eyes away from the youngest boy to grin at him and then the young man crossed the room too, arms already out in front of him. “Come here right now.”
“You come here, I can’t move right now,” he joked and Namjoon leaned over Jungkook’s legs to pull him into an embrace. No hair ruffling but rather a few solid thumps on his back before he released him and stepped back to let the others come over.

“Jiminie~” Hoseok practically sang as he darted over to the bed, a smile on his face that looked so happy and bright that it made him think of what he used to be like; the old optimistic Hoseok that never had a bad day ever.

“Hoseokie~” He copied with a laugh as the boy quickly embraced him. When he let him go he started patting at his head and cheeks affectionately.

“Is anything hurting right now?” He shook his head and said that he still felt pretty numb, gesturing up at the taped bandages on his cheek as he did. “We’ll have to steal you some anesthetic,” Hoseok joked as he moved along to the bottom of the bed beside Jungkook.

“Yes please,” he replied as he glanced over at his three other friends. Seokjin looked torn between sighing in relief and crying as he bent down and slipped his arms around his shoulders. He didn’t embrace him too tightly, as if he was scared of hurting him in anyway, so Jimin made sure to reach up and pull him closer. When his friend shifted to let go of him he saw that his eyes looked wet too as he blinked tears back.

“God, everyone is so mushy today!” he declared, making his friends laugh as he did. “Don’t cry, OK? You’ll make me cry and I dunno why I’m supposed to be crying.”

“Because you’re alright,” Seokjin said as he sniffed, “and we don’t need to worry any more.”

Yoongi moved to sit back in the chair beside the bed, sinking back against it with a weary sigh.

“You were worried?” Jimin asked with an eyebrow raise. “You worry when I get hurt? Shit, that happens every day, you shouldn’t worry about it.” He started laughing and though his friends joined in they did so halfheartedly. He looked over them slowly for a moment before noticing that Taehyung was still standing in the doorway. He had his hands shoved into his hoodie pockets, the hood pulled up so that he could just see a mess of dark hair hanging over his eyes. He looked like he wanted to step outside perhaps, that he didn’t want to be close to them, and so he gestured at him to come over. But Taehyung just dropped his eyes to stare at his worn boots instead. “Tae?”

“I…uh…” The boy muttered something under his breath that he didn’t catch and he scuffed his boot on the linoleum tile. For a few seconds the wing went deathly silent and then he cleared his throat. “Can I talk to Jimin alone…please?”
“…Of course,” Seokjin said as he shifted to look over them all. “Of course you can Tae. We’ll just step outside for a moment, right?” Hoseok and Jungkook got off the bottom of the bed, the youngest boy still wiping at his cheeks with the heel of his hand, and Namjoon followed along after them. But Yoongi stayed in the chair as he looked over at the boy, seemingly not wanting to move until their eldest friend reached down to grab his upper arm. Yoongi let him drag him to his feet begrudgingly and then they also left the room.

Taehyung stayed in the doorway for a few more seconds and Jimin wondered if he was ever going to move or whether they would talk across the distance instead. But then he let his breath out in a wheezy sigh and took enough steps to stand at the bottom of his bed. The boy studied the sight of his legs under the covers instead of looking at him and Jimin wished that there was something he could say to break the silence and yet he seemed incapable of doing so. His mouth felt dry and he let his gaze move over to a pitcher of water left on a side table beside the bed.

“Tae, could you pour me a glass of water? I wouldn’t ask but right now I can’t move and-” Taehyung moved before he even finished speaking, grabbing the pitcher and the glass just beside it. He poured with a hand that wasn’t at all steady and he was scared that he might just drop it but he didn’t, placing it back down so that the bottom made a soft thumping sound on the wood. He held it out for him and Jimin accepted it. When their fingers brushed together Taehyung pulled his hand back as if the contact burnt him.

“Jimin…” he said in a low voice, “what happened was-”

“An accident,” he finished as he held the glass up to his lips. Taehyung dragged his eyes up from his boots to stare at him, mouth open in dumb shock. “I…well I don’t remember all of the details but Yoongi told me. It was in an accident, that was what happened right?”

“…Yeah, I mean no, I mean…” The boy scrunched his face up and took a deep inhale of breath. “I didn’t mean to hit you. I swear I didn’t.”

“I know you didn’t,” Jimin said before taking a slight sip of water. It was cold on his tongue and it felt like a sponge in his mouth, absorbing it all instantly so he didn’t even swallow. “Why did you wanna talk to me alone?”

“‘Cos…” Taehyung paused, “‘cos I wanted to apologise to you for everything.”

“You don’t have to apologise for an accident Tae.”
“But I do,” his friend said as he shook his head, hood slipping down slightly from the movement. “I do have to apologise Jimin for every fucking thing. For the stupid nicknames and the pushing around, for talking to you disrespectfully all of the fucking time, for being a... being a bully.”

“I don’t think you bully me,” Jimin said after a few more quick sips, relishing the water going down his dry throat this time. “I think that you’re just messing around and you take it a little too far sometimes but you don’t mean to.”

“I do, I do take it far ‘cos I get carried away and I don’t think. I just carry on fucking around ‘cos I just wanna make everyone laugh and I didn’t even stop to think about you Jimin. You always took my shit and a part of me...a part of me kinda felt like that meant we were close. Like real close. You’re like a brother to me ‘cos you put up with me at my worst and you never put me in my fucking place like you should, y’know?” Jimin nodded slowly at this. “So I feel that I can trust you.”

“But I fucked up that night.”

“No, no you didn’t.”

“I did, you trusted me and I blurted it out and-”

“No, I fucked up Jimin. It was me, it’s always me. You didn’t fuck up by telling everyone, I fucked up for making the mistake in the first place, OK? You didn’t fuck up.” Taehyung reached up to pull his hood down so that he could tug at his hair roughly. “I didn’t mean that shit, I was drunk and scared and I said some disgusting shit to you...to everyone.”

“I understand,” Jimin said, “you were upset. People do things like that when they’re upset.”

“You shouldn’t understand, not after everything. Not when you keep getting hurt ‘cos of me. Not when I treat you like shit. I need to apologise.”

“Tae, you don’t need to-”

But Taehyung shifted to get on his knees anyway, ignoring him even when he asked him not to. He placed his palms on the linoleum and Jimin tried to brush this off but he wasn’t listening. When he
lowered his head to the floor he was nearly begging him to not do this but Taehyung just pressed his forehead onto the linoleum and he apologised in a voice that sounded seconds away from tears. Jimin stared at the back of his head, at his shaking shoulders, and he had to swallow a lump in his throat.

“Tae, get up please.”

“I’m so sorry Jimin, I’m so fucking sorry and-” Jimin shifted as far forward as he could and grabbed hold of the back of his hoodie, trying to pull him upright. After a momentary struggle Taehyung jerked upright and latched onto him, hugging him just as tightly and fervently as Jungkook had.

“Tae, it’s OK.”

“It’s not OK, it’s nuh-not,” Taehyung sobbed against his neck, face pressed against his bandages. “I nearly kuh-killed you. I nearly killed you ‘cos I was wuh-wasted and I.” Jimin reached up to place a hand on the back of his head. “Guh-god Jimin, I’m such a fuh-fuck up. Kookie’s right I’m a fuh-fucking train wreck.”

“No, nu-uh,” he said softly as he turned his own face, cheek brushing against his hair, “you’re not Tae. You need help, just like the rest of us, yeah?”

“Yuh-yeah.”

“Friends help each other,” Jimin said as he looked over at the open doorway to see Seokjin and Namjoon both peering inside, likely because they had heard the boy’s loud sobbing. “We’re gonna help you Tae, like you’re gonna help us too.”

“I couldn’t huh-help anyone.”

“Oh yeah? Well, I didn’t think I could help or do things right but I did.”

“‘Cos you’re not a duh-dumbass, you’re suh-smart and usefuh-ful,” Taehyung said, hiccupsing as he did.

“I’m only smart and useful when I’ve got you guys. Without you I’m hopeless. I can’t do anything.”
Jimin gestured for the others to come back into the room as he continued gently playing with the other boy’s hair. “Remember what you said all those days back, huh? About us being a family?”

“Uh-huh,” Taehyung said as he pulled away from him, rubbing at his eyes roughly, “cos we are.” Jimin knocked his hand aside and wiped at his cheeks with his thumb instead.

“Damn right we’re a family,” he said with a soft smile, “and a real family is unbreakable.”

The plate in front of him was piled with food and though he still felt a little woozy he felt like he could easily devour this and more. Jimin picked up his chopsticks, struggling for a moment as he tried to hold them between his fingers, and he caught Yoongi staring at him as he did. If he wasn’t quick then his friend would likely start feeding him. After fiddling with them he felt his grip get nice and secure and he picked up a chunk of kalbi before taking a large bite out of it. As he did he scanned the cafeteria to see that there was just a few women sitting together at a table a few feet away, not including the nurse across the room standing behind the counter like a school lunch lady. The tables were all blue plastic and the benches were connected to them rather than separate, screwed in place with thick bolts like park picnic benches.

His friends were all sitting huddled together even though they could have easily fitted along the length roomily. Opposite him was Namjoon, Seokjin and Hoseok. Yoongi was on his left and Jungkook his right, Taehyung sitting beside the boy. There were a dozen or so plates on the table between them all and he had a niggling feeling that they weren’t supposed to be eating all of the food meant for patients but the nurse hadn’t stopped them. Perhaps it was pity, or perhaps visitors were entitled to food too, he had no clue. But even if it was pity he didn’t care; that pity filled their stomachs for free.

“How’s the throat?” Namjoon asked as he lowered his spoon back into his soup bowl, filled with vegetables and maybe tofu from what he could see.

“Itches a little,” Jimin replied as he swallowed the kalbi. “Do I have stitches or something?”

“Yup,” Jungkook said around a mouthful of bread, “got stitches like a teddy bear.”
“But I’m cuter than a teddy bear, right?” he asked jokingly, hearing his friends scoffing at the remark.

“Yeah, way cuter,” Jungkook agreed as he reached up to wipe at the corner of his mouth for him, thumb wiping away a blob of sauce that had gotten stuck to his skin.

“I’ve never had stitches before…” Jimin muttered as he took another bite of meat. More hot food for them to enjoy, even if the price to get it had been rather high. “Will there be a scar?”

“Possibly,” Seokjin said as he spooned a mouthful of rice from the mound in the bowl in front of him. “If there is one it’ll only be small and faint. Nothing big.”

“A scar…that’s kinda cool.”

“Park Jimin the badass,” Taehyung said quietly, prodding at a bowl of noodles, “that’s got a ring to it.”

“Badass? Better than ‘dumbass’ any day,” Jimin remarked and his friends made noises in agreement around their food. He finished the last mouthful of kalbi and as he did he glanced along the table to see Yoongi picking at a bowl of bibimbap. His expression was hard to read and he found himself studying him intently. After a moment he gently nudged his ribs with his elbow and the man looked up at him, raising his eyebrows as he did. He silently asked him if he was okay with a look and his friend took a moment to respond.

“You really think that scars are cool?” Yoongi asked in a soft voice, looking at the bowl as he did rather than look at him.

“Yeah,” Jimin replied with a nod, feeling the bandage rubbing slightly and making it itch again. He would have to resist picking at them even if it was hard because he didn’t want to risk pulling them out or infecting them. He briefly thought about the collars they put on dogs and cats after surgery and he had to resist the urge to laugh at the mental images of his friends snapping one on him. “I think they’re cool.”

“Why?”

“Cos…scars are your way of saying “hey world, you tried to beat me down but I’m still here,” you
know? They’re kinda like a…defiance.”

“I agree,” Namjoon said with a nod. “The body can be scarred for many reasons, but regardless of the scars we can keep going. Scars are a sign that you won.”

“What if you feel like you lost?” Yoongi asked, unconsciously reaching up to touch at the welts on his inner arm. Jimin dropped his gaze to look at them before glancing over at the others to see that they were all staring at his burns too.

“If you lost you wouldn’t be here right now, would you?” Seokjin asked quietly, spoon playing with his rice rather than lift it to his mouth.

“Not all scars are life and death situations,” Yoongi countered.

“No, you’re right,” Namjoon agreed, “but the situation doesn’t really matter, does it? What matters is that the scar remains, to show that either you won, or that you’re still trying to win. Sometimes winning isn’t the important part, it’s how you get to that point that is.”

“You think we can win?” the other man asked.

“We’re going to win,” Hoseok said as he tapped his chopsticks on his bowl absentmindedly. “We will, if we work together we can win.”

“…You guys are all stupid,” Yoongi said with a smirk. For a moment the table went silent and then Jungkook snorted and seconds later they were all laughing. “You’re talking like Miss World contestants!”

“I was trying to be deep man,” Namjoon complained, “let me have my moment, yeah?”

“You’re never not talking deep shit!”

“Hey, I can’t help being so smart.”
“Yeah, yeah, you say you’re smart,” Taehyung declared as he pointed a spoon at him, “but really you talk as much shit as I do ‘cos y’know we’re too fucking stupid to figure it out!”

“Damn,” the young man said in disbelief, “my plan’s been foiled.”

Jimin turned his attentions back to the food in front of him because he felt like there was a hollow hole under his ribs that needed filling. The itchiness on his throat didn’t even bother him that much because he was too distracted with the kalbi and noodles, picking at the side dishes before Jungkook could once again annihilate the kimchi. He kept thinking about the possibility of a scar and how strange it would be to look in the mirror and see it right there, a constant reminder of a night that he couldn’t even recall right now. It would likely match the slight pink mark still on his elbow and though Yoongi seemed uncertain about it he really didn’t mind the thought of it at all. Like Namjoon had said, a scar was a sign of overcoming great adversity and he might just be left with one that would stay with him for life, would ensure that he never forgot about this particular adventure: better than a photograph because he would be able to touch it, run his fingers along the mark as if tracing lines on a map.

“Hey guys,” Jimin said suddenly, chasing the few remains of noodles around his bowl. At his voice he felt his friends all looking at him, waiting for him to continue. “Stitches…they cost money don’t they?” The question seemed to catch them off guard and they all stared at him. Yet none of them opened their mouth and gave him an explanation, one he greatly felt that he needed.

“(They do,” Seokjin said after what felt like a several minute long silence. Jimin thought this over before asking how much and their eldest friend shifted in his seat and looked down at his plate. “That’s not important.”

“Guys?”

“Jimin,” Hoseok said with a wave of his wrist. “Let’s just eat and not wo-”

“Guys seriously, how much?”

“All of our cash,” Namjoon said softly and Jimin felt his skin going so very cold as he stared at him dumbly. What did his friend just say? All of their cash? All of the money that they had been slaving away for coach tickets to get back home with? It was gone? No, surely he had heard that wrong… “You only needed stitches and a mild anesthetic so that’s good, ‘cos there’s no way we could’ve afforded transfusions and an extended stay.”
“…Shit.”

“Look, don’t worry about that shit right now,” Yoongi said with something close to cautious optimism. “We don’t need to worry about the fucking cash. You’re safe, that’s all that matters, yeah?”

“Yeah but…” Jimin paused as he tried to sort his thoughts out. “But how are we gonna get back to Seoul?”

“Leave that shit to me,” Taehyung said as he lifted his glass of water up. “I’ll figure out how to get back home with trains, so don’t worry OK?”

“…OK,” he agreed through numb lips.

“Right, plans,” Seokjin got to his feet and started collecting their dishes together. “Jimin, your clothing should be in your room. Get changed up and we’ll talk to the nurse and check everything is alright, get any advice about the stitches. Then if it’s alright we can leave, so we need to get back to the hostel and get our stuff. Hoseok, the keys? Kookie, the directions?”

“Still got them,” Hoseok announced as he pulled the keys free and shook them in the air.

“Directions are in my jeans pocket,” the youngest boy added, “just gotta reverse them and we’ll get back no problem.”

“Good, that helps cut down on chances of trouble,” Seokjin said in a relieved voice as he created a near mountain of dishes. “We’ll have to-”

“Excuse me?” a female voice sounded from a few feet away and they all shifted to look over at whoever had spoken. It was the nurse from the counter across the room. “This might sound a little personal but…” She paused before quietly finishing. “Are you boys in a little…financial problem right now?” None of them replied to her but a quick glance at their faces likely have her the answer she needed. “Well you see, this hospital isn’t that busy and I work in the cafeteria mostly, cleaning up and preparing food and…what I’m trying to say is that there’s always a lot of leftover food that needs to be thrown away. Some mornings I toss out entire tables full of food that patients don’t eat and it seems such a waste.”
Jimin let his eyes wander away from her to look over his friends, seeing that they were all as confused and rapt as he was.

“I could... give you some food for the road if you needed it?”

“How do you know we’re going back on the road?” Jungkook asked.

“Your clothing mostly,” the nurse said with the softest hints of a smile. “You look a long way from home truthfully.”

“Won’t you get in trouble for that?” Hoseok asked, a very good question indeed.

“Trouble? Oh no, no one pays attention to the cafeteria. If they did do you think you would have gotten all of that food for free?” They all stared at her dumbly and she laughed. “I’m kidding, the food is free for patients.”

“Thank god,” Namjoon nearly wheezed.

“I won’t get into trouble for it, I told you so much of it is thrown away. Some days shelters come in the evening to collect stuff but mostly it’s thrown away. I mean, I understand if you don’t want to. It was pretty... forward of me to ask and assume but if you need to take some I can help.”

Her words hanged in the air for a moment and Jimin shifted to see what his friends were thinking. Were they glad for the help or were they embarrassed that she had taken one look at them and had known that they were drifters with barely a hundred won to their names? Right now all he was thinking was that they really could do with the help. It saved Taehyung lifting food from convenience stores, especially considering that he was supposed to be fixing his ways now.

“Honestly, neither of us will get in trouble,” the nurse said, “and I can also see that you want to avoid that right now.”
When he lifted up his clothing the first thing that hit him was the fact that they were clean. No stains on them, blood or the dreadful oil smears on his jeans that never seemed to wash out no matter how much Seokjin had scrubbed at them all those days back in the hostel. They had the scent of detergent still on them, something like lily from what he could detect. One of the nurses must have cleaned them through because they must have been a mess after the accident. So Jimin slipped into his jeans and then grabbed his tee to shrug it on over his head. The movement made the stitches itch again, something annoyingly close to a burn that would start to irritate him soon enough. The material felt soft against his skin and he went to reach for his boots when he caught sight of the folded up bundle of wool on the chair and he stared at it for a moment.

The bundle was oatmeal and he lifted it to see what it was. As he held his arms up it unraveled and he saw that it was a pullover. For a few seconds he couldn’t seem to recall what it was and then he remembered it was Yoongi’s. Of course it was Yoongi’s, his friend had given him it to wear at some point and he just have still had it on when the accident had happened. It looked to have also been cleaned too, the scent of detergent on it rather than the usual faded hints of his aftershave that was buried under that of cigarettes. Before he could stop himself Jimin lifted the pullover up and held it in front of his face. Still nothing more than the detergent. He took a deep inhale as the wool rubbed against skin.

“What’re you doing?” Jungkook asked suddenly and Jimin jumped as if the boy had pricked him with a needle. He whirled around to see his friend sitting on the end of the bed he had been using, legs dangling over the high side so that his boots brushed against the linoleum. Hoseok was seated just behind him and Taehyung was sitting on the floor with his back against the side table, legs cocked up so that he could rest his elbows on his knees.

“Nuh… nothing,” he said as he lowered it from his face. “What’re you doing?”

“Watching you make out with a pullover,” Taehyung retorted without missing a beat, the other two cracking up with laughter at the remark.

“I was sniffing it,” Jimin corrected, “to check if it was clean.”

“Oh yeah?” the youngest boy asked. “Is it?” He nodded vigorously and the boy grinned. “So it’s got nothing to do with the fact it’s Yoongi’s, huh?”

“Nope, nothing to do with that,” he said as he knotted it around his waist. After the bad storm a few nights back the weather was right back to scorching hot again.
“Pft, you think we believe that?”

“Don’t believe it but it’s the truth.” Jimin dropped to his knees to get his boots on, slipping them both on before going back to knot them. “Was there a lot of blood?”

“Stop changing the topic!” Hoseok complained and he just looped the laces up and watched his fingers working rather than look at them.

“There must have been a lot of blood for them to clean my clothes…” he just continued, even when he heard the other boys scoffing at him.

“Yoongi probably cleaned them,” Jungkook said, “cos he went a little nuts, you know? He probably did your stitches too.” At this joke Jimin couldn’t help but laugh. “Oh god Jimin, you should’ve seen him in the parking lot…”

“He said that he started yelling at the crew to let him in the back of the ambulance. Did he?” The boy nodded vigorously at this. “Why?”

“Because he was worried,” Hoseok said before the other two could attempt a wisecrack of any kind, “Yoongi was really worried about you and he acted a little…crazy but it’s understandable.”

“Did you all start shouting?” he asked, knowing that the answer was no but asking it anyway.

“Start shouting about what?” Yoongi asked as he stepped through the doorway behind him, the two others entering behind him. There was a bag in Namjoon’s hand and he could see a few plastic containers inside of it.

“Nothing,” Jimin replied a little too brusquely as he finished knotting his boots and got back upright. His friend narrowed his eyes at him before rolling them over to look at the others and the three boys just grinned at him.

“You little assholes talking about me, huh?”

“Talking about how nuts you are,” Jungkook agreed as he beamed at him.
“Must be nuts to be friends with you. You ready?” Yoongi looked at him and so he nodded and confirmed that he was so his friend reached over and grabbed his wrist, grip light but firm. “C’mon, let’s blow this joint before they ask for more cash.” Jimin let him pull him out of the room, sparing a glance over his shoulder as he did to see the boys getting off the bed, noting from the expressions on their faces that they would continue this ribbing next time they were alone.

“What did the nurse say?” Hoseok asked as they walked down the corridor of the B Wing and in the direction of the waiting area.

“She said that the stitches would dissolve in a few days,” Seokjin explained. “Jimin should change the bandages once a day and allow a few hours between changing to let his skin breathe, but he shouldn’t wear them whilst sleeping. Instead he should wear a light dressing like the one on his cheek to stop him from disturbing the stitches in his sleep. If the area becomes irritated then we should take him to a hospital,” he pushed a set of doors open and continued, “but only if the skin is sore and weeping. A little itching and pinkness is to be expected. As for the injury on his cheek, we should just clean them like regular cuts.”

“I packed a roll of bandage in my bag,” Jungkook said. “We could clean the ones he’s got on and reuse them, right? Instead of buying new ones?” Their eldest friend said that it seemed like their best option. “Still got antiseptic but dressings…?”

“I’d offer to steal some but…” Taehyung smirked back at them over his shoulder as they crossed the waiting area.

“Let’s not steal just yet,” Namjoon agreed.

After a minute or two of following the signs they ended up in the entrance area and Jimin made sure to thank everyone they passed, including the nurses on the desk because it was respectful. His friends even managed to mumble thanks too. When they stepped outside he was certain that Yoongi would let go of his wrist, having led him through the unfamiliar hospital to stop him possibly wandering away, but his friend didn’t do so. They all stopped on the curb outside and the youngest boy pulled out a sheet of torn and wrinkled paper before scanning it and glancing up and down the street. Then he started walking and they all just followed after him without question. It seemed Jungkook had taken over Taehyung’s role for the day. He had never seen these streets before and he glanced at them with great interest, and judging from his friends’ reactions they couldn’t really recall walking on them either. In the middle of the night, racing down them in a panic, he wasn’t surprised they hadn’t paid much attention.

Across from the hospital and wide stretch of road there was a variety of buildings and he couldn’t see
what they were, rather just study the exteriors and the dancing flags built into the sides, scrawling characters announcing building names. He was pretty certain that one of them was a newspaper office. Directly beside the hospital there was a massive lot packed full with ambulances waiting for dispatch. At some point last night one of those large vehicles had gotten an alert about him, had come rumbling out of the lot to zoom down the streets of the city with blaring sirens. He studied them for a moment, seeing a handful of crew moving around and talking as they no doubt waited for a radio call, and then he looked at the view in front of them. Thin sidewalks that were neat, gutters surprisingly clean, and brick buildings that were more or less free of graffiti. Every now and again there was bus stop markers and the occasional bench for people to sit on, a small tree planted to break up the rows of streetlights. Pretty city that he hadn’t seen that much of at all.

It took quite some time to get back to the hostel building, at least near an hour of walking following Jungkook’s guidance. He wondered how long it had taken them to get to the hospital last night and when he asked the answer Hoseok gave him was seconds, the boy laughing as he spoke. Yet Jimin didn’t mind at all how long it took for the sun was out and the breeze nice and cooling on his skin. If it wasn’t for his pesky stitches itching then he would have skipped down the street. The few people that they passed glanced at him rather openly, no doubt unable to stop themselves at the sight of the bandages on his throat, the dressing stuck on the lower half of his face. It didn’t bother him at all that they did, even if they all made assumptions in their heads about how he had gotten hurt; eyeing the worn clothing and exhausted expressions on all of their faces, but he had a feeling that it irritated Yoongi quite a bit. Every time someone looked, heads swiveling and eyes wide, he felt his fingers tightening around his wrist in response. Was his friend wondering about their assumptions too?

When they got back to the building the first thing that happened was Seokjin went off to talk to whoever was on the check-in desk, leaving them to go into the rooms and hastily pack up. Jimin wanted to pack his own bag but the boys refused to let him, instead allowing him to brush his teeth in the bathroom first whilst they raced around picking up cast-off clothes. He studied his face in the mirror over the sink to see that the dressing on his cheek had a slight stain on it, likely because the cuts had bled through the soft material. He didn’t know what his skin looked like underneath and he was a little scared that it might look a lot worse than the wound in his throat. After cleaning up he went into the other section to see that his backpack was ready, so he shoved his toiletries inside and then shrugged it onto his shoulder. Then he wandered out of the room to check on his other friends.

“Is everything OK?” he asked as he pushed the door open and glanced inside. He saw Namjoon finishing up packing his holdall and Seokjin tidying up mess from the floor. Yoongi was presumably in the bathroom.

“Yes,” their eldest friend said, “everything is fine.”

“No problems with the rooms?” Seokjin shook his head as he zipped up the bag and glanced at him. “That’s good.”
“Are you OK?” his other friend asked and Jimin confirmed that he was with a nod. “Then that’s good too.”

“Back on the fucking road,” Yoongi muttered wearily as he stepped back into the room, rubbing at his eyelids roughly. “Just our luck, huh?”

“You got me,” he said with a grin, “and I’m real lucky, right?”

“Yeah, that’s true.” His friend moved over to grab his own holdall, shrugging it up into his shoulder. His jacket was knotted around his waist just like the pullover was around his. “What’d we do without you Badass?”

“Badass? So it’s legit now? That’s my-”

“Um, excuse me?” Jimin tuned to look over his shoulder at the unfamiliar female voice to see a young woman standing in the open doorway. It took him a moment to recall that she was the lady from the check-in and then she was looking over them all in turn. “I was just checking to see that everything is alright.”

“Thank you,” Namjoon said with a smile, “everything’s alright now. Had a little trouble but it’s been resolved.” The woman’s eyes shifted to look at him and Jimin saw her looking at the dressing and bandages in turn. He dropped his eyes and saw something in her hand, a little white rectangle that looked like an envelope.

“I prayed all night that it would all turn out good,” she said with a soft smile, “and I see that it has. I…well, I visited my church this morning like I always do on Saturdays.” Jimin furrowed his brow at this before realising that it was indeed a Saturday. “And I spoke to my fellow churchgoers about what happened and…we all prayed together. Our pastor came up with an idea about a donation pool and-”

“Donation pool?” Yoongi asked in confusion.

“Yes, a donation pool,” she said before holding her hand out at Jimin, envelope between her fingers.

“Oh we couldn’t…” Seokjin paused before letting out a nervous laugh. “We couldn’t accept that ma’am it wouldn’t be right.”
“Please,” she said as she lightly shook the envelope. “You’re just kids, kids in a troubled situation and you need to get back home.”

“But we caused so much trouble,” Namjoon said in a quiet voice. “For you, for the hostel. We don’t deserve it and-”

The woman stepped forward and reached down to take Jimin’s hands, placing the envelope in them as she did. He could only stare at her dumbly.

“Just get back home safe, OK?” she said before leaving the room. For a moment they all looked at the space she had been occupying and then Namjoon scoffed.

“Hey Yoongi, remember when you said strangers don’t help kids out?” Jimin looked at the envelope before turning it over his hands.

“Fuck you Kim Namjoon.”
I Got Soul

Seokjin slipped his holdall bag up onto his shoulder, fixing the thick straps in place to keep it secure. Not that long ago he had found the weight annoying, had noted how it started to get heavier and heavier with each hour that passed when he carried it, but now he was strangely used to it. His shoulder felt somewhat naked without its weight. His hands didn’t feel right shoved into his jeans pockets when they should have been carrying a bag instead. It had been just two weeks approximately since leaving Seoul yet it felt double that, almost as if they had been away from home for a month instead. The furthest they had reached had been Gangwon and yet he felt like they had been to foreign lands instead, walked along foreign shores and sampled the air thousands and thousands of miles away from Seoul. But now…now they were going home and the weight of his holdall bag was practically nonexistent on his shoulder.

“What’s that?” Jungkook asked in his usual curious tone as he stepped outside the other room, eyes round as he looked at the envelope in Jimin’s hands. The boy lifted it up to study it, as if he didn’t know what it was too.

“A gift,” Namjoon said as he pulled their door close and locked it with the keys. There was a metallic sound as he pulled them free of the keyhole.

“What kinda gift?” The boy didn’t take his eyes off the envelope as Taehyung strolled out of the room and proceeded to start stretching with a series of groans.

“The check-in lady gave us a gift,” Seokjin explained, watching Hoseok also locking the other door up. “She and her church prayed for Jimin and they also made a donation pool this morning, which she just gave to us.”

“A donation pool?” Taehyung’s interest piqued and if possible his ears would have twitched. He lowered his arms and stared at him with a wide open mouth. “What, like cash?” He nodded as he held his hand out for the keys, both of his friends placing them in his palm. “We got cash off a bunch of strangers? What the fuck?”

“Hey Yoongi,” Hoseok said with a grin, “remember when you said-”
“Yeah yeah,” Yoongi waved his wrist at this with a disgruntled expression on his face. “I was talking shit, is anyone surprised?” They all shook their heads even when he glared at them.

“I’m surprised,” Jimin said in a quiet voice. “I didn’t think anyone would do something like that after what happened…” He turned the envelope over in his hands and then glanced up at them all in turn. “I kinda feel bad.”

“Don’t feel bad,” Yoongi replied brusquely. “What happened was an accident, nothing more. If she and her church buddies wanna throw their cash away on charity cases, let ‘em. I ain’t complaining.”

“Such a cynic…” Seokjin muttered under his breath.

“Still, I wanted to give her flowers, as a thank you for the directions,” Namjoon explained. “But I don’t have a clue where we’d find a florists in this city…”

“Flowers?” Taehyung grinned widely at him. “Nammie’s got a crush~”

“It’s the respectful thing to do,” the young man said as he tried to ignore him, “like Jimin said we caused some shit but she helped us out.”

“She called the ambulance for me,” Hoseok said with a nod, “and she gave us directions, and now this too.”

“We might not be able to thank her with flowers but I made her a promise,” Seokjin said as he started walking across the lot, turning to look back at them as he did. “To get you kids back home, and I don’t break my promises.” He wrapped his fingers around the double set of keys as he walked the length of the tarmac lot in the direction of the entrance building. The road just beside the building was relatively free of traffic, just a few cars rolling down the wide stretch every few seconds. No trucks, it seemed that Dangjin was not a very industrial city for he couldn’t recall seeing many trucks passing through at all; mostly just cars and people on motorbikes instead. He heard his friends all talking lowly amongst each other and he stepped up the little concrete step to get to the door, pushing it open and entering the small building.

When he glanced over the room he saw that the young woman was behind the light wood desk, jotting something down in a ledger book with the red telephone receiver balanced in the crook between her shoulder and neck. He let the door close over softly as to not make too much noise and she looked up quickly to see who had entered before turning back to the book. Seokjin stayed by the
door whilst she finished the call, wanting to be polite and not appear to be eavesdropping, and after a few more seconds and quick responses she said goodbye and then placed the receiver back in the cradle.

“Yes?” she asked as she moved the ledger aside and placed her hands down on the counter. “Can I help you?”

“I’m here to return the keys for rooms five and six,” Seokjin explained as he crossed the room and put the sets down, sliding them across the counter so that she could accept them. She picked them up and turned to slip them back onto the key holder on the wall beside the phone, hanging them from the small holes drilled into the fobs so that they could hang from little curved hooks. Seokjin watched her do this for a moment before realising that he should probably leave again and yet he felt the need to say something to her.

“I…uh, I know that the kids didn’t really express their thanks,” he said as he reached up to mess with his hair for a moment, eyes on the ledger. “I think that they were so shocked by everything that had happened, you see? We’ve been on the road for quite some time and we haven’t exactly been shown kindness by the people we’ve crossed paths with. Most of the time we were threatened and robbed of cash, kicked out onto the streets and treated like trash.” He paused and then glanced up at her quickly. The woman was just looking at him intently and he wished that there was a name-tag pinned onto the breast of her dusky pink blouse but there wasn’t and so he didn’t even have a name. “So I just wanted to say thank you, on their behalf too, because we really needed help and someone actually helped us.”

“We all need help sometimes,” she said with a smile, “and there’s nothing wrong with wanting it or needing it. The world can be a cruel place but if we all work together, we can make it better, can’t we?” Seokjin nodded and said that he could agree with that and she reached up to fiddle with a lock of her hair. “And if our help can finally get you back to where you need to be then it was worth it. Where exactly are you all supposed to be right now?”

“Seoul, if you can believe it.”

“Seoul? You’re far away from Seoul down here. How did you make it all the way here in once piece?” she asked jokingly and he could only shrug with a confused expression, making her laugh as he did. “Life can be very mysterious sometimes but…I don’t think that you are bad kids. I think that you’re all stuck in a bad place right now and you’re trying to break away from that all by…running away, but sometimes you can’t run away from things and you have to face them. Stand up against them.”

“That’s what we’re trying to do right now,” he said quietly.
“Then I’ll carry on praying for you to find the right path once more. Maybe it isn’t back up in Seoul, maybe it’s far away, that’s something you’ll have to find out yourself really.”

“…Thank you,” Seokjin said again as he looked up from the ledger, “for helping us out and for not assuming. It would be nice to get a name for our guardian angel.”

“Hyeri,” she said with a noticeable blush on her cheeks from the nickname, “my name is Hyeri.”

“Beautiful name for a beautiful soul,” he said as he turned on his heel and crossed the check-in area to leave the building. He scanned the lot quickly to see that his friends weren’t standing by the rooms and that they had likely went around to the front to stand on the road so he quickly crossed the lot and hooked around the side of the block to catch sight of them. Hoseok was leaning against a lamppost with his arms over his chest, backpack swinging in the crook of his elbow as he prodded Taehyung annoyingly with the toes of his boot, the boy sitting just in front of him on the paving flags. Yoongi was on the curb with his back to him, hunched forward and smoking a cigarette because he could see the smoke floating around his head like his own little rain cloud. Namjoon was standing just a little further down the street eyeing the traffic with his hands shoved into his jeans pockets and Jimin was just beside him, holding onto his backpack straps. He could see that the frayed one was just a hard tug away from finally tearing free in a pitiful series of stitches. Jungkook was hunkered down just beside Taehyung and he had a little chunk of stone in his hand which he was scratching against the sidewalk and trying to draw with.

“Check this shit out!” Taehyung declared as he held the envelope up to him. “C’mon, guess how much is in this?”

“I don’t know, 40,000₩?” Seokjin asked with a shrug as he looked over them all. “Something like that?”

“120,000₩!” The boy burst out laughing as he stared at him. “How many people are in that fucking church, huh?!”

“You’re kidding me?” He actually bent down to accept the envelope from him, opening it and quickly flicking through the notes to check. When he saw that he was telling the truth he could only laugh himself as he shook his head. “That much money…with that amount we don’t need to worry about food or water for like…over a week if we stick to the trains and don’t sleep in hostels.”

“My fucking thoughts exactly!” the boy said with a grin. When Seokjin went to hand it back to him...
he shook his head. “Nope, you carry the cash. We trust you the most with it.” After a moment of thought he folded the envelope over so that he could slip it inside his jeans pocket.

“We got food from the hospital,” Jungkook said as he stopped on scribbling on the paving flags, “so all we’ve gotta do is stock up on some drinks and we’re all set, we can head off to the trainyard.”

“BTS…what does that stand for?” Seokjin asked as he looked at the characters on the stone he had made.

“Not sure…” Jungkook muttered as he tossed the chunk away, dusting his hands on his jeans as he did. “Just seemed like cool thing to write.”

“You need to brush up on your grammar,” Namjoon remarked with a grin and the boy rolled his eyes as he got upright.

“BTS huh?” Yoongi twisted to look over his shoulder at them, eyes shifting to look at the paving flags. “I got something.”

“What could you possibly get outta that?” Taehyung asked with a laugh but their friend’s expression was completely serious.

“BTS: boys that survived.” For a moment they all just thought this over silently and then Yoongi got to his feet with a grumble, bending down to try and touch his toes and loosen his back muscles. “Or maybe something like…boys talking shit, that one’s probably better.” He dropped his cigarette into the gutter and twisted down on it with his heel.

There was a store not too far from the hostel building, a wide 24/7 convenience store nearly the size of a warehouse that seemed to be rather busy no matter what the hour it was. Despite being the early morning hours there were people inside and Seokjin wasn’t that surprised at all. It seemed no one slept in this country, always busy with something whether it be school or work, college or running away from life, and so he quickly eyed the overhead signs as he stepped inside, Jungkook following after him rather than waiting outside the store like the others. A lot of people that were inside looked to have been out all night: mostly women in sparkly dresses or daringly short skirts and shorts, carrying heels between fingers rather than wearing them, all of them in small groups buying light snacks and hangover remedies to help their likely aching heads from getting any worse. Those drinks were a favourite of Taehyung, for the boy always seemed to carry one or two of those little glass bottles on him at all times. Seokjin had tried one once to see what it tasted like and he had not liked it at all, wondering how the boy put up with the taste but knowing that it was a better alternative than a throbbing head and nauseous stomach. The only men he laid eyes on was one behind the till across
the store and an elderly man slowly making his way up and down the aisles with a green basket he filled up with random things.

It became apparent why the boy had followed after him when they finally located the fridges with the drinks, for it seemed that Jungkook wanted milk. The boy argued that he still had a few years to grow and that he should drink milk as much as he could, so he could maybe one day get taller than Namjoon. Seokjin didn’t think that he needed any more height, the boy was already tall enough, but he decided to not get into a debate about milk with the boy, for it was too early for such trivial things. Besides, there wasn’t that much a difference in price anyway, for the milk was just a couple of hundred won more expensive. So he relented and sure enough Jungkook dropped the carton of strawberry milk into the basket before helping him add a dozen or so bottles of water. That would be enough for today and possibly the morning of the next until they could restock, and so after throwing some dressings for Jimin inside the basket too they went to the till and paid, Seokjin slipping the envelope out like an unconventional wallet.

“So, does anyone remember where the tracks are again?” Hoseok as they stepped outside, Jungkook already sipping at his milk happily.

“I seem to recall tracks right around…” Namjoon paused for a moment, furrowing his brow as he narrowed his eyes in concentration. “Outside the city, right? Over the bridge?”

“Yeah, I remember seeing ‘em there,” Taehyung agreed. “Outside the city is our best chance of hitching a ride too, we can just wait until something comes along and jump it.” Seokjin handed his friends a bottle of water each, to go into their bags or for them to carry should they prefer to. There were a few left and so he dropped to his knee to open his holdall and shove them inside, not caring that it made his bag bulky and weigh that much more than earlier.

“We’re on the outskirts right?” Jungkook asked as he glanced up and down the street. “Shouldn’t take us too long to get outta this place.”

So they started walking off across the city in the direction that they had entered just a few days ago. Though it hadn’t been that long it seemed strangely unrecognisable to his eyes, and Seokjin followed his friends purely because he trusted they knew where they were going as he himself didn’t have a clue. But Jungkook was correct, for they were just several minutes of walking away from the very outskirts of the city. More streets devoid of a lot of traffic, not a single soul on them except for groups of men collecting trash in the early morning; reflective yellow jackets catching the light and glowing like streetlamps. As a result everything was rather silent and yet none of them started a conversation to break the silence, rather just making their way out of the city as quickly and smoothly as they could.

As they started to get closer to the bridge he felt a sensation in the air that could only be described as
uncomfortable. Mostly he felt it coming off Jimin and Yoongi and though neither of them had really spoken about what had happened the night the boy had ran off he suddenly felt that it had something to do with this bridge. Namjoon had pointed out its popularity as a suicide spot, they had all looked at those eerie signs and pondered on it all, and it seemed that it had left a lasting impression on Jimin. Seokjin stayed back and walked close to them just to make sure that they were okay and at some point he noticed that the boy wasn’t really walking, more being pulled along the walkway by their friend. Yoongi was unflinching and he didn’t take his eyes off the end of the bridge once, hand on his upper arm rather than his wrist for once. Seokjin had seen him holding onto his wrist this morning, doing so in a manner that seemed an attempt at comfort for the both of them: Yoongi letting Jimin know that he was there, and Jimin letting Yoongi know that he wasn’t going anywhere. He almost wished that they didn’t need to take the stupid bridge but it was the only way out of the city and so instead he just impatiently wished for it to hurry up and end so that they could get off it.

When they finally got off the bridge and back onto the road on the other side, real earth beneath their feet and not just inches of metal and concrete above water, Taehyung actually turned back and held both hands up, middle fingers flashing at the sight of the city behind them.

“So fucking long Dangjin!” he declared with a wide grin. “I thought we’d never get the fuck outta you!”

“All of the bad shit…” Namjoon said as he glanced back over his shoulder. “That gets left behind, right? Nothing but goodness and healing from now on.”

“Agreed,” Seokjin said with a nod. “We’re on a new road now; the right one for once.”

“Bye bye Dangjin,” Jimin said in a quiet voice, not looking back at all so he didn’t need to look at the accursed bridge ever again.

It seemed like a freight train was never going to pass them by because that would have made everything easy for them, started the day off in the positive light they had all been praying for. It took several minutes of walking to find the tracks that Namjoon and Taehyung had recalled seeing those days back. The view that surrounded Dangjin wasn’t the most aesthetically pleasing, for there seemed to be no real greenery in sight. The road that continued from the bridge was wide and the sides were dusty and plain-like, yellowing brittle plants occasionally growing but nothing more, beds of flint and pebbles rather than grass. Trash from passing traffic was left here and there, crushed
bottles and packets that had been out so long in the weather that the printed images had faded away to nothing. Yet Seokjin didn’t let this affect his spirit at all; he held his head high even when it meant staring at the pylons on the horizon like skeletal trees. Seoul wasn’t the greenest of places either and he never let that irritate him. The capital was a concrete and glass jungle, pedestrians darting around like colourful little creatures without rest. At least out here on the roads they had some peace, so he would appreciate the peace over the dead soil and trash because that was the positive thing to do.

What they did see was a single train making its way back into Dangjin, a more modern make than the one they had used back in Gyeonggi. It had had both covered freight carriages and open-bed ones filled with what was either quarry goods or maybe coal. They couldn’t see what it was from their distance across the wide road, the train travelling along the hill at a steady speed so that it was gone in just a few seconds; a flash of silver and black like a gigantic bird. Yet the tracks they walked along were empty of any leaving trains. It seemed Dangjin imported more than it exported, and that meant waiting for quite some time.

For once the kids didn’t dance along the train tracks because they were most certainly in use, even if there were no warning signs about live currents. Jungkook had joked about trying it out but upon seeing his expression the boy had decided not to, taking a few steps away from the line just to create a distance and put his heart at ease. The last thing they needed after the hell these past few days would be for Jungkook to jokingly skip along the tracks and get a shock from an electrical voltage that went all the way up into sextuple digits.

“When we get this train,” Hoseok said, breaking the silence that had fallen over them. “Are we going to ride it wherever it goes, or do we get off it at some point?”

“We ride it to North Chungcheong first, if it ends up there. If it heads in the direction of Gyeonggi then we get off there,” Taehyung said, piece of straggly grass stuck in the corner of his mouth so that it bobbed as he spoke. He looked like a child playing cowboy, a raggedy boy in his open denim shirt and scuffed jeans. All he was missing was a hat and he was all set. “It won’t take us all the way to Seoul, no fucking way will we get that lucky. So we’ll have to switch over a few times probably.”

“What if it doesn’t take us there at all?” the other boy asked quietly.

“Well, we came this way in the hopes of getting to Gyeonggi,” Seokjin said, “so logic says that the trains will at least go the way we came too. Except they have an actual route in mind, unlike us.”

“Less of the pessimism lover boy,” Taehyung slung an arm around Hoseok’s neck, dragging him close as he did. “These trains will take us where we wanna go, we just gotta believe.”
“Of all the shit you’ve ever spoken, that’s probably the funniest I’ve heard so far.”

“Yeah yeah lover boy,” Taehyung kicked at a soda bottle and it skittered into the road to get crushed once more under a passing car. “I talk more shit when I’m sober, that’s why.”

“We’ll be hearing a lot of shit then,” Jungkook said with a smirk as he looked back over his shoulder at him, “cos you- wait.” The boy stopped and held a hand up suddenly and they all instinctively stopped walking. “I think I can- shit, a train!” His expression changed into a wide grin. “There’s a train coming!”

Seokjin turned to look back behind them and sure enough he saw a rapidly approaching train, face visible rounded and bullet-like unlike the one they had seen earlier. It was a deep red in colour and it was making a whistling sound as it sped down the tracks. It was travelling a little faster than the last one they had jumped and that meant there might just be a chase on their hands. He was not looking forward to chasing after it and the idea that they might miss it was enough to make him feel a little nervous. This might be the only one they see for hours and that meant they had to catch it right now.

“Train!” Taehyung shouted at the top of his lungs with a wide grin, racing down the track towards it with the other boy on his heel. After they ran past Jimin the boy turned to watch them go and then he pulled his wrist free of Yoongi’s grip to chase them, laughing and shouting for them to slow down.

“Kids…” Yoongi sighed wearily but then Hoseok went racing past them with a grin on his face and they watched him go in amusement.

Taehyung reached it first, eyeing the length before selecting the right carriage, quickly grabbing onto something and shifting; opening the door so they could get inside. But rather than jump in first he grabbed Jimin and helped him inside, boosting him up because it was rather high. The boy wriggled into the carriage and then Jungkook dived in, quickly followed by Taehyung. A few seconds later Hoseok reached them and someone’s arm shot out to help him inside. By that point the train was getting pretty close to them and Namjoon jogged a few feet back so he could jump it first. When he got inside Seokjin edged closer to the tracks and accepted Jimin’s outstretched hand, climbing inside and shifting to not block the entrance for their friend.

“Y’know what?” Yoongi said as he started jogging alongside the carriage. “I might just walk back to Seoul, get a little peace of mind and-”

“Get inside!” Namjoon called with a laugh.
“and not have to listen to you all talking shit,” Yoongi finished.

“If you don’t hurry you’ll fall behind and you will have to walk!” Jungkook declared.

“Think about all of those cigarettes!” Hoseok shouted and then they all started laughing.

“Shit, that’s a good point,” the man muttered, “I’m not really in good enough shape to race a train and-” Seokjin grabbed hold of his tee and pulled him close to the tracks before more or less dragging him into the carriage. Yoongi’s legs kicked as he pulled him inside and he shifted to look at him. “Thanks.”

“You looked three seconds away from a coughing fit,” he joked. Yoongi’s cheeks were a little red and though he had been running for only a short while he was breathing rather heavily.

“Gonna cut down?” Namjoon asked and their friend leaned back on his wrists, legs dangling over the side.

“…Nah.” They all rolled their eyes and Yoongi actually slipped his cigarette packet free from his jeans. But he didn’t even get to flick it open because Jimin snatched it out of his hand so fast that it took him a moment to realise what had happened. “Hey!”

“You can have one later,” the boy said as he held the packet out of his reach. “We’ll help you cut down, right guys?”

“Seriously, just one and I’ll-”

“You had one like ten minutes ago, nope.” Jimin shoved the packet into the breast pocket of his polo shirt and Yoongi’s gaze dropped to stare at the slight bump in the fabric.

“Jin, remember what I said back in Gyeonggi when we were broke?”

“Back when…” Seokjin furrowed his brow as he tried to recall this but he couldn’t really remember. It felt an eternity ago to him. “No, I don’t.”
“I said that I’d suck dick for cigarettes,” Yoongi said, tone and expression completely serious as he did, “so which one of you’ll be the lucky guy to sneak me one, huh?”

“Yoongi!” Jimin said in a shocked tone, eyes wide with shock, and then they all burst out laughing. What Yoongi had said had been amusing enough on its own but the boy’s shocked reaction made it even more so.

“I’m not proud of it but…” Their friend grinned before looking over them in turn. “I wonder which one of you would?”

“Count me out,” Namjoon said with a head shake, grin on his face.

“Oh yeah?” Yoongi narrowed his eyes in mock annoyance. “That’s ‘cos you’d rather suck mine, be honest.”

“Well duh,” the young man said as he rolled his eyes.

“Hmm…Kookie’s out whether he wants to be or not.”


“You’re eleven and wow, way too eager,” Yoongi retorted and the boy balked and tried to argue against this but their friend talked over him. “Who’s next, huh?”

“Look,” Taehyung said as he held his hands up, “I’ve sucked dick a few times in the past too, I’ll admit to that shit, but nu-uh, not that desperate.” Yoongi snorted laughter and then held a finger up against his throat, drawing it across menacingly. “But lover boy, I dunno he might just-” Hoseok elbowed him hard in the ribs and Taehyung stopped talking with a grunt of pain.

“C’mon, I’m that bad?”

“I don’t think anyone would admit something like that,” Seokjin said with a grin. “So of course
“They’ll all say no to you. Get them later, corner them alone and see what happens.”

“Good idea,” Yoongi said as he reached over to pat his shoulder.

“Don’t encourage him,” Hoseok said with a weary expression.

“Hey,” Jungkook said suddenly, wide grin on his face. “You didn’t ask Badass.”

“Kookie,” Jimin hissed as he also ribbed him hard but the boy didn’t even flinch, that same smirk on his face as he looked over at Yoongi. Jimin’s expression was no longer shocked but rather flustered, cheek that wasn’t hidden underneath the dressing an alarming bright pink. The carriage fell awkwardly silent for a few seconds and it seemed no one knew what to say to break it but then Yoongi shifted slightly as he looked at Jimin.

“Can I have that cigarette now?”

He had all of the items ready in front of him: the bottle of antiseptic and small plastic bag of cotton batten pads, the roll of bandage and the little box of dressings, and yet Seokjin didn’t feel ready to do this. He felt nervous and yet he knew that he had to do it for the boy. Jimin couldn’t change the bandages on his own and most of the others were already asleep. Hoseok and Taehyung had drifted off in the corner roughly around the time that the sun had started to dip on the horizon and Namjoon seemed to be getting close too. He didn’t want to burden Jungkook with such an awkward task and Yoongi had already worried over the boy enough. He thought that if the other man had to wipe at the gaping cuts in his skin and hear the boy whining in pain that he would refuse to finish the deed, leaving it to him anyway. And that was why Seokjin decided to do it, volunteered before anyone else could argue otherwise.

“What’s wrong?” Jimin asked quietly as he shifted in front of him, knees folded under him and hands on his thighs so that he wouldn’t fiddle with anything.

“Nothing,” Seokjin said with a reassuring smile as he reached up to the bandage around his neck, thinking it would be best to check that out first. He saw his hands shaking slightly and he was glad
that the boy couldn’t see them. “I was just thinking is all…”

“About what?” Jungkook asked, lounged back against the wall of the carriage, knees cocked in front of him so he could rest his elbows on them. There was a bottle of water dangling from his hand and it was half-empty.

“Everything really,” Seokjin replied as he located the safety pin and quickly removed it, slowly unraveling the lengths of roll as he did. Jimin dropped his gaze to try and watch what he was doing. “Just thinking without any reason.” The bandage started to hang down so he wrapped it around his hand to stop it getting tangled or touching the dirty carriage floor and within a few seconds it was free of Jimin’s neck. He heard Yoongi shifting from behind him to try and get a better look at it.

The mark on his neck was rather small, a lot smaller and cleaner than he had been imagining. It was currently a little pucker on his throat from where the stitches had pulled the skin together, perhaps less than an inch in length and very thin in width. The area around the black stitches was slightly pink but nothing more deeper than his blushing cheeks from earlier; a good sign. It was hard to picture the shard of glass having been pierced through his flesh for it had looked so much larger that night, a dagger of green glass rather than a slight sliver, and it was clear that their fear had made it all look so much more worst than it had really been.

“It looks good to me,” he said as he grabbed the packet of dressings and opened it to pull one out. “It’s only very small Jimin. You might just not get a scar after all.”

“Then I can’t be a badass,” the boy said with a relieved smile as he peeled the backing off one of them and lightly pressed it against the side of his throat. It was a lot bigger than needed but it covered the stitches and that was all that mattered.

“You’ll be a badass no matter what,” Jungkook said with a grin as Seokjin bundled the bandage up. They would need to clean it tomorrow, perhaps in a public bathroom of sorts so that he could at least dry it under the hand dryer machines. The thought was enough to make him grimace, so very unsanitary, and he decided that he would put a dressing under the bandages just to be hygienic. After all he would need to remove them for a few hours tomorrow so there was enough time to figure something out.

“Does it hurt at all?” Seokjin asked as he eyed the dressing on his cheek.

“Not really,” Jimin said with a shrug, reaching up to touch the dressing. “Kinda burns but that’s it. Maybe it itches too but it’s not painful, just annoying.”
“Good…but here comes the painful part.” He reached up to grab the boy’s face gently in his hands, moving it so that he could get a hold of medical tape in the top corner by his nose. He slowly pulled this away and then started on the other corner, peeling the dressing free as he did.

“Mmm…” Jimin made a pained noise under his breath because the material had gotten stuck to his skin and so he quickly removed it, the tape coming free with a soft rustling noise. The sight it revealed was enough to make Seokjin visibly wince.

The bottle had exploded upon hitting the boy’s jaw and though a shard had gotten lodged in his throat that had not been the most damaging part of his injury, rather his jaw and lower cheek looked a lot worst. He could see the area of impact clearly, the ball of his jaw just below his ear, and from that point there were several deep slices in his skin. They spread out like lines on a map, or perhaps a spiders web, and they were of varying lengths. A few of them were just little shallow nicks from the shrapnel-like shards, but one or two looked deep and painful; inches long. The worst one moved up his cheek to near his cheekbone and Seokjin stared at it and mentally retracted his comment about scars from a moment ago.

“Is it bad? Do I look ugly?” the boy asked in a nervous voice, not wanting to try and touch his face but also unable to physically see the damage.

“No, no you look perfect Jimin,” Yoongi said in the most genuine tone possible. At this the boy calmed down considerably, taking a few slow breaths and looking down at the soiled dressing. “You could never be ugly.”

“How bad will this hurt?”

“I’m not going to lie to you,” Seokjin said as he grabbed the antiseptic and poured a little onto a cotton pad. “It will hurt a lot but I need you to let me clean the cuts, OK?”

“I…I’ll be brave,” Jimin said, barely above a whisper.

“Course you’ll be brave,” Jungkook said. “You’re Park Jimin, biggest badass in Seoul.” The boy laughed at this remark but he sounded scared and nervous, something he could completely relate too. He gave the youngest boy a thankful look before lifting his hand up, the pad hovering just an inch from his cheek. Right now Jimin was going to need a little encouragement. The worst part might have already been resolved but the healing process was going to be a lot more painful.
“I’ll be quick,” Seokjin said before dabbing at the side of his jaw.

Jimin took a sharp intake of air like a gasp and instinctively scrunched his face up and so Yoongi reached over to grab his hand. Within seconds the boy’s eyes were streaming tears of pain even with them squeezed shut. He just cleaned them as quickly as he could, noting how the antiseptic ran down his cheek was slightly tinged red. When he was finished he dropped the pad before getting a dressing and Jimin managed to relax his face enough for him to stick it in place, hiding the horrible gashes once more from view.

“Suh…shit,” Jimin wheezed as he secured it in place. Before he could attempt to wipe his own cheek dry Yoongi did so for him, using his thumb and the curve of the side of his hand to delicately wipe the tears away. The boy let him do it and he sniffed several times. “That did hurt a lot.”

“When we get back to Seoul,” Jungkook declared. “I’ll busk for some cash, yeah? And I’ll buy you the biggest fucking sundae I can afford.”

“You’re talking to me like I’m a baby,” the boy said with a laugh, touching the pad for a second to reassure himself that it was nice and secure. “Like how they get lollipops for going to visit the doctor or dentist…”

“Which defeats the purpose of going to the dentist in the first place,” Seokjin joked as he collected the dirty dressing and pad up and moved to toss them out of the open carriage doorway.

“Sugar-free?” Yoongi said with an eyebrow raise, sticking his own stick between his lips that was most certainly more dangerous than sugary candy. “They got that shit now right?”

“You think kids will touch that shit?” Jimin asked. “Imagine a bunch of angry kids with cavities starting a rebellion over lollipops…”

“Are you still stoned from the anesthetic?” the man asked with a grin.

“No, I’m tired.”

“You’ve been unconscious for hours!” Jungkook laughed.
“Still tired,” Jimin muttered, visibly suppressing a yawn as he did. “I feel really heavy right now… like I’m weighed down.”

“You know, this has been weighing me down for quite some time now,” Seokjin said as he shifted to grab his holdall bag, unzipping it and reaching inside to search through his things. After a moment his fingers brushed against the spine of his book and he slipped it free to hold it up.

“Shit, no wonder that’s been weighing you down,” Yoongi remarked as he pulled his cigarette free and pointed at it, “it’s a fucking anchor! How big is that book, huh?”

“Seven-hundred or so pages,” he replied as he grabbed it between his hands and studied the cover. Plain and boring deep blue with just the title in white font, not even an image on it to catch the eye. He placed his thumb on the side and quickly flicked through it, hearing the pages brushing together as he did. Every now and again he would catch sight of a pink sticky note or a bright yellow line underneath a sentence: the marks of his studying. “Half a year’s worth of work in this book already and you want to know something funny? I can barely even remember any of it. I just remember writing everything in chunks of information without actually looking at these chunks, dissecting and understanding them. I just copied and pasted all of the work into my brain, nothing more.”

“You must’ve understood most of it to have been kept on the course,” Jungkook said as he took a sip of water, “or else you’d have been kicked off it, right?”

“Oh I understand it,” Seokjin explained, “but at the same time I don’t. Does that make sense?”

“…I guess?” Jimin said quietly.

“I mean, philosophy has always been a great interest of mine. I’ve always loved the idea of being able to discuss and debate over things, to see the world in a completely new light and constantly be challenging my own preconceived notions of things and—”

“You’re starting to sound like Joonie,” Yoongi remarked with a smirk and he paused to try and sort his words out, lowering the heavy book so that it was on his lap.

“I want to understand the world and everything in it. That’s why I decided to study philosophy and for a long time I loved it, I felt like I was starting to get somewhere with it but then… then something changed and I felt like it wasn’t right.” Seokjin sighed heavily. “It wasn’t fun, like the things you
love are supposed to be, but it became a chore. I started to enter the auditorium with this strange feeling in the pit of my stomach, a mixture of anxiety and restless boredom that I couldn’t shake off. Sometimes I left a lecture with absolutely no idea what I had even listened to because I had drifted off and hadn’t even realised.”

“Sounds like me and maths class,” Jungkook joked with a laugh.

“I kept thinking…well, maybe this is supposed to happen, you know? Maybe life will start to get like this now. It can’t all be fun and games, maybe I’m just really starting to turn into an adult and I have to accept this…but I didn’t want to. I want the enjoyment, I want to be able to open this book or sit down in the auditorium and feel something like excitement. Is that stupid, am I being stupid?”

“No,” Namjoon said in a soft voice as he rolled over across the carriage, shifting his head on his holdall so that he could look at him from under his sleepy eyelids. “It’s not stupid. You know what they say right? Do what you love, love what you do. If you aren’t loving it then it’s not right for you.”

“Does everyone get to enjoy what they do?” Seokjin asked rhetorically.

“Maybe not,” the young man said with a lazy shrug, “but that doesn’t mean that you should resign yourself to not trying. You should at least try and find that thing that makes you happy and try and achieve it. Maybe then, after trying and trying, you can give up and settle on something else but never settle first without trying.”

“That’s good advice,” Yoongi agreed with a nod, slipping his cigarettes back into his mouth. “Advice we could all take.”

“I’m starting to feel that I don’t want to do that, the philosophy. My interest in it hasn’t waned at all, but the idea of pursuing it for my future has.” He dropped his eyes to look at the book. It felt like an anchor on his lap just like his friend had joked. “I don’t want to understand the world for myself any more…I want to teach it to others instead.”

“You wanna teach?” Jungkook asked in surprise and he nodded fervently. “Kim Seokjin…the teacher. Hey, that actually has a good ring to it, doesn’t it?”

“It does,” Jimin agreed with a wide smile, “you could totally do that. Kids would love you I mean, you’re smart, you’re caring and you always encourage us no matter what. I’d love to have a teacher
“Why? I’d end up giving you, Kookie and Tae detentions every lesson!” Seokjin declared and the train carriage filled with his friends’ laughter.

“Nu-uh, I would totally behave in your class,” the boy said with a vigorous head shake.

“A teacher?” Namjoon shifted once more so that he was lying on his back and staring up at the ceiling. He let this hang in the air for a moment before continuing. “That’s a big career change, huh?”

“It is, but a variety of degrees can really help get into it. The problem is…do I carry on with this course and then move into it in a few years, or do I try and pursue something else instead? Something that makes me feel better and helps me get myself in the right direction again?”

“Something that makes you feel better,” Yoongi said without missing a beat, “yeah, something that makes your heart really start racing.”

“I agree,” Jimin said with a nod. “Don’t force yourself to do something to try and fulfill expectations. Do something that feels right to you.”

“Doesn’t matter what you do,” Jungkook announced. “‘Cos you’ll perfect it like always, so go for it dude.”

“I already said my piece,” Namjoon said. “You know we’ll support you no matter what, but you gotta make that choice on your own Jin. It’s your life, you know?”

“It is my life, but I’m sharing it with all of you, right?” Seokjin leaned back on his wrists and let out a weary sigh as he thought it all over.

His friends were completely correct and they had managed to put all of his thoughts in place for him, to explain what he had been thinking but unable to truly vocalise. He really did feel that something like teaching was for him, after all his interest in philosophy had been nothing more than a keen hobby at best. Much like how Jungkook and Hoseok often liked to create art when they were bored he liked to read about things and debate over it all, but that wasn’t exactly a future or at least not one that he could imagine himself in. But teaching… being able to help others develop and find out what
they want to do with their lives, that sounded perfect to him. Did he have the commitment to go through with it all? To ditch his current course and start afresh after everything that he had already done, to go all the way back to the beginning with a fresh clean slate? A little while ago the thought of doing something like that would have terrified him but right now he felt that it was something he could very much do. He could start again, he could change his future with this simple act and he could be happy too. All it required was having the bravery to decide and make the call. Seokjin had never really thought himself a brave person at all but these last few weeks had made him start to think differently. He had faced things a lot worse than dropping a college course, had managed to help keep all of the boys together even when it seemed impossible. There had been accidents, life and death situations, and yet they were all here standing and he was too. So why couldn’t he just pluck up that little bit of courage and start again?

“I’m going to do it,” he said after several minutes of contemplation, “I’m going to drop the course when we get back to Seoul and enroll on another one. I’ll find part-time work, I keep myself going until enrollment starts.”

“You ever need a place to crash my apartment’s free,” Namjoon remarked, eyelids fluttering as he did. “I mean it’s small but it’s…free.”

“I can’t keep forcing myself to do something when my soul isn’t in it and-” Seokjin paused for a moment and then he felt the most pressing need to start laughing, a bubbling sensation in the pit of his stomach that just took over him and he couldn’t stop himself.

“What?” Jimin asked with a laugh, expression showing that he was slightly confused.

“Nothing, it’s nothing,” he said as he waved this off. “I can’t keep forcing myself to do this shit when I don’t want to. I can start again. I’m young, I have my entire life still left in front of me and that’s plenty of time to get to where I want to be. I don’t need to rush myself into anything. I can burn all of my old bridges down and build new ones, sturdy ones this time; ones that I can walk along and not worry about collapsing underneath me.”

“Burn huh?” Yoongi asked as he cocked his head slightly. “You just gave me a real good idea…” He held his hand out to him and for a moment Seokjin just stared at his open palm before he realised that he wanted him to hand him his book. So he picked it up off his lap and placed it in his hand and his friend also flicked through it quickly, eyes scanning over everything with a great interest. “You sure you wanna ditch this shit?”

“I’ve never been so sure about something in my life before,” Seokjin confirmed.
“...The philosopher Plato was the contemporary of Socrates,” Yoongi read out in his best attempt at a scholarly voice, nose snooted up so that he was looking down it at the page. This made the others snort laughter. “Why do these guys all have fucking weird names, huh? Anyway...” He turned the page and cleared his throat. “Everything we know about Socrates and his teachings we can actually attribute to Plato, for Socrates himself never wrote a single word. Instead Plato created scenarios, likely imaginary but possibly true that we-” his friend stopped talking and grabbed the edge of the page between his fingers, jerking his wrist hard as he did. There was a loud tearing sound as the paper ripped itself out of the book and then he scrunched it between his fist and tossed it onto the carriage floor. He held the book out to Jimin and after a moment the boy took it too. He opened right in the middle and scanned before starting.

“Ethics, often referred to as moral philosophy derives from the Greek word...” I can’t pronounce that, uh, something something ah, “defining good and evil, right and wrong, virtue and vice, justice and crime and-” the boy groaned, “how can you read this shit?” Then he tore the page out and passed the book along to the youngest boy, scrunching the ball up and tossing it at the floor. “You’re too smart, I couldn’t understand half of that shit.”

“Confucius,” not our Confucius of course,” Jungkook said as he reached over to pat Namjoon’s drawn-up knee, causing them all to laugh once more, “taught a series of ethics that are often referred to as the virtue ethics; for he placed great value on self-cultivation, the emulation of- nope, too many big words.” He tore the page out and threw the ball at the pile that was forming on the carriage floor. He offered the book to Namjoon but he just waved it off and so Jungkook shifted to hand it back to him. Seokjin accepted it and quickly checked for his sticky note bookmark before opening it to the right page.

“Aristotle did not believe that the soul could be in separate existence with the physical being, for the actualisation of living things requires a soul and-” you know what you’re right, this is shit.” He tore the page out and added it to the pile, shifting to get onto his knees. Then he shuffled over to the open doorway of the train carriage and before anyone could possibly stop him he threw the actual book right out. It took to the air with flapping pages and then disappeared out of sight as the train carried on moving forward. He didn’t even hear it landing on the side of the tracks. At this his friends cheered and he felt a grin on his lips at the sound.

“What were you laughing at?” Jungkook asked him as he sat back down and folded his legs up in front of him.

“My essay, the one that I was supposed to submit last week...it was about the soul. What is a soul? How do we define it? What are the popular opinions on the matter and the critique that comes with it? Well, I spent hours in the college library just searching and searching for anything. I didn’t know what a soul was, I needed to copy and paste someone else’s opinion of course, and I couldn’t find one but now...now I know what a soul is. I can define what it is now.” Seokjin smiled to himself as he looked out at the open carriage.
“Oh yeah?” Yoongi asked as he slipped his lighter free and proceeded to set the pages on the floor on fire, the little flame licking against the paper and eating it up in just seconds.

“A person’s soul is their friends.”
Yoongi slipped the cigarette free of the packet with a sigh as he folded his legs in front of him, trying to get comfortable even though the idea seemed completely impossible to him. The platform underneath him was hard and warm from the sun and they weren’t the only ones on it, for many people passed them by to get to the other station platforms, the ones trains actually stopped at. They were hanging around the outside of building that sold the tickets, that had a little café and seats inside for people to enjoy whilst they waited, and everyone that passed them made sure to stare. He didn’t have his jacket on because it was too warm but he didn’t really care if any strangers saw the welts on his arm. His friends had seen them and accepted his problems, had let him know that they understood and that they were going to help him. They were the only people that he cared about, the rest meant nothing to him. They could stare, even take a photograph if they wanted, and he wouldn’t give a shit.

He lit the cigarette and took a quick drag to help it smoulder, exhaling it out of his nose and rolling the stick to the corner of his mouth as he did. He shoved the hostel room lighter back into his jeans along with the packet and squinted through the smoke to look at his inner arm. The welts weren’t as angry-looking as they had been because he had left them alone, hadn’t prodded at them or added to the collection, but they were still noticeable from a distance. Most of his inner elbow was still pink as a result of them, one or two raw patches that hadn’t started scabbing over or swelling into blisters. The oldest one was a scab, ugly and itchy, and he reached over to poke at it. No pain, but the blisters and wounds still stung from shower water or if his jacket sleeve rubbed against them.

“Anything yet?” Seokjin asked suddenly, seated right beside him on the platform. He was leaning back on his wrists so that he could looked at their friends, back to the lines as if they held no interest to him.

“Uh…” Hoseok looked over the top of the wrinkled route map at him before going back to it. He was seated on a bench just a few feet away. “Not yet, give me a few more minutes.”

They had gotten off the train at Gongju, doing so only because they had been a little scared that the train would have carried on down south and end up going in the wrong direction; taking them into North Jeolla instead of North Chungcheong. Though the train had traveled at a decent speed it didn’t seem to have covered as much ground as they had been hoping and that had meant sleeping just a bare few hours before having to leave to jump another one. Yoongi had tried sleeping in those hours and he had managed at least three that he was aware of, not falling deeply enough to feel rested but rather as if he had taken just a brief nap. But that nap had been better than nothing and he wasn’t going to complain seen as Seokjin had decided to not sleep at all and had instead kept an eye on everything. When he had drifted off his friend had been seated against the wall of the carriage, turned
so that he could look out of the open doorway and watch everything with a keen interest, eyes
scanning not only the scenery but also the signs that were placed here and there. Therefore Seokjin
had taken the initiative to ensure that they didn’t end up having another ‘Gangwon incident’ and
though it was irritating they just had hold their heads up and deal with it no matter what.

“I’m kinda hungry,” Jimin said after a moment of silence, shifting on the bench.

“We’re all hungry,” Jungkook sighed in agreement.

“Can’t afford to buy food in the station café, too expensive,” Namjoon said as he sat down in the free
space on the bench. “We’ll have to wait for later.”

“Are we going to eat at all today?” the boy asked.

“We will,” Seokjin said reassuringly. “We’ll jump off in a city in the evening and get food, rest at a
hostel for the night.”

“Can we afford that?” Yoongi asked as he slipped his cigarette back between his lips, still staring at
the welts on his inner arm.

“If we get lucky and end up in North Chungcheong like I hope, yes.”

“I hope we’re lucky…” Jimin said under his breath.

There was currently no stains on the dressing on boy’s cheek as of yet, but they had only been in
place for a few hours. By this evening they would probably be dirty once more, the cotton padding
stuck to his skin with dried blood just like it had been last night when Seokjin had tried to remove the
dressing to clean them. They looked sore but clean enough, likely taking a few days to start to heal
up. They might leave a scar in their wake, they might not; only time would tell. The wound on his
neck had been nothing in comparison, a little pucker and nothing more. If it wasn’t for the stitches
that would have probably healed scar-free, but he had a feeling a faint mark would remain, a pale
little slash on his tanned skin that would only be noticeable from close distance.

A battle scar.
Yoongi had found it torturous to watch Seokjin cleaning the cuts last night for it had looked as painful as the bruises that still hadn’t faded on Jungkook’s ribs. A raw pain that would make even the most toughest person scream in agony, but not Jimin. The boy had just squeezed his eyes shut and held onto his hand tight enough to make his bones almost grind together. He supposed that pain and Jimin were well acquainted, all of his minor accidents and scrapes making him used to it all. Hell, Jimin seemed to deal with physical pain better than anyone he knew, it was emotional pain that the boy seemed to be unable to handle very well. And when it was all over, the new dressing and bandages in place, Seokjin’s book defaced and left miles and miles behind on the side of the tracks, Jimin had fallen asleep with very little effort. But Yoongi had struggled to do so, lying on the carriage floor right beside him and staring at his sleeping face for what had felt like an eternity. He had still been struck with the thought that the boy shouldn’t have been there after everything that had happened, mind unable to rest.

But mostly it was what Jungkook had said to him last night that he couldn’t seem to get off his mind even now. How the boy had made sure to drag Jimin’s name into the joke discussion in such a way, a knowing smirk on his face that confused him to restlessness. Why had the boy looked like he knew something that he shouldn’t, a dirty little secret that he wanted him to know he knew. Had the boy been messing around with Jimin like always and made him blurt something out? Had the boys been talking about crushes like high school girls and Taehyung had made a joke, just like Jimin had told him the night of the first fight over Hoseok’s pills? He had no way of telling and that did more than make him restless, it also irritated him. He once again felt like he was part of a discussion he was unaware of and unable to defend or argue in.

Why hadn’t he joked about Jimin? Well, he hadn’t joked around with Seokjin either but the boy had went for the other boy like a dog after a bone, and when he had Yoongi had found himself truly speechless for the first time in a long time. No biting retorts or gags to be made, no he had went dumb and made the situation seem even more strange. But why? It was something he couldn’t quite figure out yet, and he had seen Jungkook shooting Taehyung a look when he had finally gotten the cigarette he had wanted; that same smugness that made him want to kick him hard on the ass.

“See this here? Right here?” Hoseok lifted the piece of paper up, the wrinkled sheet rustling as he did. The noise was enough to drag him out of his musing and Yoongi turned so that he could look at his friends. “I think I know what route we need to take.”

“Oh yeah? Let me see…” Namjoon shifted on the bench that they were both sitting on to have a look at the piece of paper. Hoseok was in the middle of it, the young man to his right and Jimin seated to the left. Jungkook was perched on the metal armrest on the side of the bench and the position didn’t look at all comfortable. “Which one, huh? All I can see is about seven hundred little squiggles.”

“Look at that little blue one.”
“That’s a river.”

“No it isn’t, it’s a route for passenger trains. See, there are several stations along the length of it. That means stops for people to get off. It’s not a river.” Yoongi didn’t have a clue what they were talking about and so he just remained seated on the floor in front of the bench, legs cocked up so that he could rest his chin on his knees. Though Namjoon could be right about the river joke it seemed that Hoseok was pretty adamant on it being a train route. The boy had been studying the torn and wrinkled sheet of paper for a few minutes now, turning it this way and that and squinting at it to try and read the faded names of stations. Therefore he was willing to bet that the boy was right, at least to some extent, and that meant trusting him.

“OK, so there’s a chance that it’s a passenger train route, or maybe a river. That’s good, but do any freight trains travel along it?” Seokjin asked, playing the Devil’s advocate.

“No, they don’t tell the routes for freight trains but if we find the correct line, we can find out if freights use that route, right?” Hoseok had a good point and it sounded like their best option. Yoongi didn’t want to jump another train and end up going all the way back to the coast where they had just come from. They needed to push through and break into North Chungcheong today at least, or else this was going to take them forever. They could play a game of blind luck and hope to get the right one, or they could actually use their brains and figure out a better alternative. There might not be a lot of brains going around in their little gang but combined they could work out a plan of some kind, even if it meant working on the one that Hoseok had presented and making it just a little better. “I mean, if people are travelling that way it means there’s cities that way. Where else are the freight trains going to go if not to another city?”

“A quarry?” Jungkook suggested. “Somewhere to collect goods from?”

“…Good point.”

“I still think Hoseok’s got a good idea,” Yoongi said as he shifted to point at him. “He’s right, trains go where people go, yeah? So we follow ‘em too. I think it’s the best idea we got right now and I wanna hurry up and be on the move before it gets late.”

“I think so too,” Jimin said with a nod, trying his hardest to not pick at his bandages and dropping his hand back to his lap to fiddle with a tear in his jeans instead. “We’re taking a lot of chances with these trains, so we might as well try and take a chance that makes sense rather than blindly pick one and see where it takes us.”
“I believe in blind luck,” Taehyung said from position just down the station. He had been silently eyeing a timetable of sorts, a plastic square held onto a post with thick screws, and it was surprisingly graffiti-free. Back in Seoul that would have been defaced and replaced countless times over the years, ridding evidence of bored kids trying to amuse themselves for some quick laughs. “Well, most of the time I do any way.”

“How can you believe in blind luck when all we’ve gotten so far is shit luck, huh?” Yoongi asked as he studied the boy. His friend had his hands shoved into his jeans pockets, denim shirt sleeves rolled up to near his elbows.

“’Cos we’re all still breathing right now,” Taehyung pointed out, “and I call that pretty fucking lucky, don’t you?” He shifted to look back over at them before glancing back at the timetable with a heavy sigh. “Blind luck or not, I’m gonna go with you guys on this one.”

“What happened to our Lieutenant?” Hoseok asked with a smirk.

“He grew up,” the other boy retorted. His words hanged in the air for a minute, silent save for the sound of people at other station platforms and the hiss and rumble of passenger trains currently present along the lines.

Yoongi twisted to study these, having to lean back on his wrist to be able to look over his shoulder. The models didn’t look as modern or cool as the ones back in the capital, a little outdated but working perfectly fine, and they were completely different than the freight carriages. The lead car was bullet shaped and it looked like one long snake; shiny silver with yellow or blue details along the body, neat little windows and single automatic doors placed systematically across the length. Not bulky and dark like the ones they used, carriages linked by way of little platforms and large connecting joints of metal, not corrugated sheets with dust and dirt trapped inside. Wouldn’t it be nice to just jump into one of them like normal people and just relax? To not have to think about getting caught sneaking onto carriages illegally, using holdalls and backpacks in lieu of actual cushions? The idea of them doing anything normal was enough to make him snort laughter.

“Fuck it,” Taehyung announced, stomping one boot down on the platform, “c’mon, let’s find that stupid line and see where that takes us, yeah?”

“I don’t know…” Hoseok said as he looked at the route map again. “What if I’m wrong?”

“You’re never wrong lover boy, that’s me remember?” And the boy jumped down off the platform, shooting a grin back at them as he did, and he hastily crossed over the lines even though he risked
getting hit by a train in the process.

“Kookie, don’t-” but Seokjin’s words fell on deaf ears for Jungkook was off the platform and darting after him before the eldest could even finish. The boy leapt over the first line as if it was nothing more than a few mere inches in width, boots stomping down on the soil as he did, and then he jumped over the next to race after Taehyung who was already halfway across. It was a strange game of hurdles, where the hurdle wasn’t high at all but rather low, and falling on it might just risk electrocution. Jimin actually got to his feet and seemed ready to chase after them like always, and so Yoongi grabbed hold of his wrist before he could.

“Nu-uh, you ain’t going anywhere,” he said as he got to his feet.

Namjoon and Hoseok were already making their way down and off the platform to walk alongside the lines, not darting across them because they were smart unlike the other two. The path that they were going to have to take before jumping a freight train looked similar to the one back in Seoul with some differences; the one that stretched from the dead trainyard. Except this area was packed full of people and moving vehicles and there were no sloping hills on either side or even a bridge to pass under. It was bustling with life and not dead like their trainyard, but even so he much preferred the old one because they got to haunt it like ghosts; got to walk the lines that were no longer live and climb all over the skeletal remains of the old junk trains. Yoongi felt a twinge of nostalgia just thinking about it.

“What?” Jimin asked incredulously, eyebrows raising to graze near his hairline. “You think I’m gonna get hurt, don’t you?”

“That’s exactly what we think,” Seokjin said as he got to his feet and wiped dust off his jeans absentmindedly. He grinned at the boy but Jimin looked rather annoyed by this babying, lips pouted out childishly.

“I’m not gonna.”

“C’mon, you’ve got enough scars from the road.” Yoongi pulled on his wrist as he started walking. “Let’s not add any more, yeah?” The boy stuck his heels in for a moment before relenting and letting him pull him along the platform in the direction of the tracks. A quick glance to their right showed the two youngest walking in the middle of a pair of lines, on a slight gap of gravelly soil between them. If either of them held their arms out they would risk being struck by a passing train for it was so slight. “Those kids still got death wishes, but you’re smart Jimin. You don’t need to do dumb shit like that.”
“Smart huh? Then why am I failing most of my classes?” Jimin asked, and Yoongi looked back over his shoulder at him.

“Because of those two,” Seokjin argued, waving his wrist in their general direction. “You’re always messing around and trying to make them laugh, trying to make yourself seem cool but you don’t need to. You’re cool no matter what, you don’t need to constantly do stupid shit to make us think that.” The boy studied the back of his head intently whilst he spoke. “That’s why you’re failing. Not because you’re dumb, but because you try too hard on the unimportant things.”

“You think I can graduate? Like you two, and Namjoon and Hoseok? Do you really think I can?”

“We know you can buddy,” Yoongi replied without missing a beat, “you’re gonna graduate and there’ll be this big fucking celebration and we’ll all get drunk.”

“Except Tae.”

“…Yes, except Tae,” Seokjin agreed before picking up speed to catch up with their other two friends. Now that they were off the platform they were walking on dirt that lined either side of the vast lines, heading right off onto the outskirts that finally lead out of Gongju and to the great beyond.

“It sounds fun,” Jimin said after a moment of thought, “like real fun, but I dunno.”

“Dunno about what, huh? Talk to me.”

“I don’t think I can do it,” the boy said with a weary sigh as he kicked at a crushed soda bottle. “I think I’m gonna flunk again, get kept back a year and then flunk that too. Then I’m out, just like Tae.” He asked him why he was going to flunk and Jimin laughed. “I told you, I’m fucking dumb man. No way I’ll graduate.”

“Hey,” Yoongi said in a serious voice. “Don’t say shit like that, alright? Don’t tell yourself you can’t do shit ’cos then you get to the point where you don’t wanna do shit. You talk yourself outta it, yeah? Like Tae did, like Joonie and I did by skipping college. You tell yourself you can’t do shit and you won’t, you won’t ever, but if you say “I’m gonna do it, I’m gonna ace this” and you actually try…you’ll find out that you just might.”
“You sound like Namjoon right now,” the boy said with a grin. “But…I dunno, I wanna tell myself I can do it but I just don’t wanna get my hopes up, you know? I don’t wanna try and reach something outta my reach.”

“Why not? What’s stopping you?”

“…Me, I’m stopping me. Park Jimin actually making something of his life, can you imagine that? Would you believe it if someone told you that?” Jimin turned away to look across the station building rather than hold his gaze and he could see that his eyes looked a little misty.

“I would, I would believe it and hey- hey look at me. Look at-” Yoongi reached over to grab his chin, turning his head back so that he could look right at him again. “Ain’t nothing in this world that can stop you, that can stop any of us.” Jimin’s eyes held his for a moment before dropping to his lips and then shifting to look past him. For some reason his one visible cheek seemed to go a little red, almost an embarrassed blush. “Not me, not you, none of us. School can’t, college can’t, family can’t.” The boy told him that he made it sound easy. “No, I know that shit ain’t easy. But we gotta try, right? Remember that night, the night you had the accident? We all said that we were gonna try.”

“I’m trying, but it’s hard.”

“You’re not doing it alone, you’ve got us.”

“I do, I’ve got you right?” Jimin asked in a soft voice, eyes finally shifting to look back at him. Yoongi realised that he was still holding onto his chin and there was no need to but letting go seemed a little too hard to do at that moment.

“…Yeah,” he said with a gentle nod, “you got me.”

“Welcome to Cheongwon County…” Yoongi said as he shifted his holdall bag from his hand up onto his shoulder, leaning to the side slightly from the weight of it. “Cheongwon County…that’s in North Chungcheong right? In the middle?” He looked over his friends for a moment to see that they
were thinking this over, trying to recall the name from memories of elementary school geography and not succeeding very well at all. But he was almost certain that it was for he could recall passing through the city before on a school trip of some kind, though what trip that was exactly was currently unknown to him. Maybe he was mistaking the city name with another place, somewhere similar, but he was sure that he wasn’t.

The city outskirts were practically dead at this hour and the rest of it looked to not be that big at all, a rather small place in comparison to where they had been on this journey. That was probably a blessing for it meant less chances of any possible trouble, and it also meant getting through it would be easier than a large metropolis. The tracks that they were on ran a little while longer into a depot of sorts but they had jumped out before it had stopped to make sure that they wouldn’t get caught by any workers, and the train they had jumped was disappearing from view with each passing second.

The setting sun threw rays across the metal body and made it almost glow, the sky the colour of flames and filled with thick banks of clouds. Taehyung had lifted his wrist and checked the watch to read out the time: 7:15pm. They had been on the train since the early morning hours, Seokjin finally taking the nap that he deserved and the rest of them bored to the point of restlessness just waiting for it to stop so that they could do something: go for a walk that wasn’t just doing laps around the 25x15ft carriage interior, finally eat something since they had finished the hospital food last night and they were all starved, not feel the vibrating carriage floor underneath them to the point in which their asses had went numb from the sensation.

“Yeah, I think you’re right,” Namjoon said after a moment of silence. “Which is a relief. Finally in North Chungcheong after everything. Hell, we just need to head north and we’ll be in Gyeonggi tomorrow no sweat if we’re lucky. Might take another day but then we’re so close to Seoul that it’s crazy. Who thought we’d get back, huh?”

“Not me,” Hoseok said with a soft laugh, “I thought we were doomed to be stuck in South Chungcheong forever.”

“Why does that sound like actual hell?” Jungkook asked as he bent down to secure one of his boots, the laces having come undone at some point. “Minus the little demons and flaming pits, but still hell.”

“My kinda hell is being trapped in a room with Tae for longer than five minutes,” Yoongi remarked, cracking his friends up.

“Right back at you,” Taehyung retorted with his typical boxy grin. “My kinda heaven though…right now it involves food. Lots of it.”

“What? No nudity?”
“It involves that too lover boy, but the food’s more important.” The boy slung his arm around Hoseok’s shoulders and he started sauntering down the path that led into the city, more or less pulling him along with him.

Yoongi didn’t really want to have to walk a mile or so to find somewhere to get food and rest but he had no choice. The quicker they got it over with the quicker he could rest, but it was easier thinking that then it was getting his stiff legs to work and follow his brain. He felt more tired than hungry right now, a drained sensation that he was hoping would pass soon. So he just dropped his head and studied his own boots as he walked rather than look at the horizon in front of them. The ground changed under him from soil to gravel to solid concrete and tarmac, but he still kept his gaze downwards and ignored his protesting back. He zoned out to the point in which he barely even registered the fact that his friends were talking because he was so into his own thoughts, knowing that it was probably a load of shit anyway so it didn’t matter, but after quite some time of mindless wandering he felt something brushing against the back of his hand and when he glanced over he saw that it was another hand; a very familiar hand. Yoongi watched Jimin’s fingers fumble over the back of his hand before going to his wrist, almost as if he was thinking about taking hold of it just like he had done yesterday afternoon when they had been walking, and so he turned his hand around to offer him his palm. It took a few seconds but then the boy slipped his fingers between his and actually took hold of his hand.

Yoongi looked up to scan the area in front of them to see that they were still walking with the gang. He had thought that maybe he had been wandering off a little and the boy had grabbed hold of him to steer him back before he drifted down the wrong road and got lost, yet that was not the case. Jimin had simply wanted to hold his hand it would seem. The act itself was not at all unusual and yet it confused Yoongi somewhat because it seemed sudden. Should he ask the boy if he was okay, or was it better to just leave it alone? After everything they had talked about earlier it seemed that maybe the boy did need to talk about something, but about what exactly?

“I can smell something tasty!” Taehyung declared suddenly in a dramatic tone, voice booming off the high rise buildings loud enough to create its own echo. And the boy was right, for just a minute or two more of walking they stumbled onto a rather busy little street that was packed with stalls that sold not only food but also random goods. Banners and paper lanterns hanged from the sides of buildings and made it all look so very colourful and interesting, and quite a lot of people were flitting from stall to stall. Yoongi saw plastic bags, cameras, little books in hands that revealed some tourists in their midst.

“Not market food,” Seokjin said, raising his voice to be heard clearly. “Let’s find somewhere we can sit down and check prices over more easily.”

So they walked down the centre of the packed street and tried their very hardest to ignore the temptation that was the market stall foods, which was considerably hard because the scent of it all
cooking clung to the air and the hissing of frying and bubbling stocks was even more attractive. Jungkook spotted a fast food joint nestled on the street corner just a little further up from the stalls and so they hastily made their way over and entered, finding it actually rather empty from once. Yoongi wasn’t looking forward to the idea of fried food again, fries and burgers and other greasy foods that would make his stomach feel filled with rocks, but luckily for him the joint sold quite the variety and he ended up buying kimbap instead. That was filling enough on its own, though the kids went straight for the junk food as expected. Why, they were so happy to get food for the first time in hours that they actually behaved and ate it rather than throw most of it over the table at each other.

When the meal was finished, tables left covered in mounds of containers and trays, they all left and headed over across the city to find a hostel of sorts to sleep in. It didn’t take long for them to find one, a handful of minutes at most, and by that time the sky had darkened enough to start changing colour, the orange going a bruised purple at the very edges of the horizon. When they reached it he expected Seokjin to go inside the check-in area like always, sometimes with Namjoon in tow so that they could sort the rooms out together, but he didn’t.

“Hey, can I talk to you for a second?” his friend asked and Yoongi furrowed his brow at the question, reaching up to pull his cigarette free as he did. Talk to him? About what exactly? Yet the eldest just gestured at him with his hand, asking him to step aside, and so he decided to follow after him and see what was up. His friend went around the side of the building and he walked after him, more curious than ever.

“I…well I thought it would be best to ask so…here I am.”” Yoongi asked as he leaned back against the brick wall, sticking the stick back in his mouth and folding his arms over his chest as he did. “Everything alright?”

“I…well I thought it would be best to ask so…here I am.”” he thought but didn’t ask. Why was the other man acting so shifty all of a sudden? It was enough to make him feel a little on edge too. After a few seconds of silence he quietly asked him what the fuck was going on. “The rooms. I thought I’d ask you about the rooms.”

“What? You wanna know if we’re getting ripped off or something?” Yoongi breathed a lungful of smoke out and squinted at him through the cloud. “Don’t think so, I mean I’d need to know the prices first but.”

“No, no that,” Seokjin said as he reached up to fiddle with the back of his tee collar. “I wanted to ask about…Jimin.”” Jimin…? Was he asking if the boy was stable enough to share rooms with the other boys once more; with Taehyung after what had happened? Was that why he was acting so unusual, or was it something else?

“Jin, I’m gonna need you to stop acting so skittish and tell me what the fuck you’re talking about.”
“Do you want to share rooms with Jimin?” Seokjin asked so suddenly that it took him a moment to realise that he had spoken. “Alone?”

“Alone? Why would…” Yoongi stopped talking and he noted how his friend looked away from him, glanced across the lot back in the direction of their friends as if embarrassed.

“I mean, I was thinking about the privacy-”

“Privacy for what?”

“For…talking, if that’s what you need to do,” Seokjin said, scuffing his boot on the concrete. “Or whatever…” Yoongi knew exactly what he was trying to hint at and he felt the most pressing urge to balk at this, to start muttering shit and steer the conversation away, yet he didn’t know why. Was he embarrassed too, was that why he suddenly wanted to not think about such things?

“For talking…” he managed to say after a minute, reaching up to remove his cigarette and dab ash off the end.

“We’re nearly back in Seoul,” Seokjin said, “and I was thinking that this might be the last night we get to stay in a place like this. We might be back to sleeping in freights again for the next couple of days. The last night spent somewhere clean and comfortable…hot water, a bed-” Yoongi took a sharp inhale, forgetting that the stick was between his lips and he started choking on the smoke. “I’m just saying.”

“Shit Jin!” He coughed, reaching up to grab at his throat instinctively because it was burning.

“A single room and a double, it’s cheaper than two doubles. We can fit inside no problem, we would save some money on it.” His friend reached over to pat him hard on the back several times and he managed to catch his breath and not wheeze. “It’s on offer.”

“Jin, don’t you think that’s a bit much?” He asked him what he meant and Yoongi cleared his throat. “A single room, the two of us? The kids-”
“The kids don’t mean anything in this situation. I’m just talking about you and Jimin, that’s all.”

“What you’re talking about is not talking!” he retorted with a laugh. “We both know what you’re talking about.”

“OK, then what am I talking about?” Seokjin leaned back against the wall of the building in imitation of him and he felt himself starting to get trapped.

“We don’t need to talk about it-”

“Why not? We’ve talked about some pretty crazy shit these past few days, this is nothing.”

“No, it’s not nothing, it’s everything.”

“So it’s important to you then?”

“What’s important?” Yoongi asked suddenly, defensively.

“Sex.” At this he tried to argue back, to say a single word and yet all he did was open and close his mouth dumbly. “That’s why you’re embarrassed and you’re playing dumb with me right now, but you don’t have to. We’re adults here Yoongi, we’re not kids. You shouldn’t be embarrassed to talk to me about things like this and-”

“I’m not embarrassed.” Seokjin asked him why he was acting so silly then and he pouted his lower lip out in annoyance.

“Do you love Jimin?”

“I love all you fucking idiots.”

“You know what I mean.”
“Let’s not talk about love, OK? That shit complicated everything.” His friend studied his expression for a moment and then he shifted so that he wasn’t leaning against the brick wall.

“The offer is there Yoongi, you just need to say yes or no.”

“It’s…” Yoongi eyed his cigarette to see that it was nothing more than an inch of ash and so he dropped it on the floor and ground it under his heel. “You make shit like that seem so fucking easy, y’know?”

“Hey, I’m not the blunt one here. That’s you.” Seokjin smiled at him before glancing across the lot again. “Yes or no? A single word, a single syllable. Which one is it?”

When he stepped out of the bathroom, rubbing his damp hair with the lengths of the towel, he saw Jimin was seated cross-legged on the bed with a variety of things spread across the covers. He eyed the roll of bandages that had been cleaned just this morning in the public restroom of the station, Seokjin having doused them in antiseptic just to be certain that they were cleaned thoroughly, a handful of cotton batten pads and the box of dressings, and the bottle of pungent liquid placed at the very end. The boy was looking over these as he no doubt mentally steeled himself for the task of cleaning the horrible slashes on his cheek. Jimin had gotten cleaned up before he had, currently dressed in underwear with his pullover on. The room was neither hot nor cold but his friend had it on anyway and he was playing with the sleeves unconsciously. After a moment he reached up to grab hold of the edge of the dressing and start peeling it free, the tape around the pad making a soft noise as it came off his skin. He pulled on slowly at first but then decided to get it over with and did it as fast as he could. He dropped the used dressing on the covers and then started running his fingers along the bandage on his neck to try and locate the safety pin.

“Need any help?” Yoongi asked and Jimin looked up at him sharply, as if his voice had startled him. His fingers continued fumbling for a moment before he smiled and said that it would be nice, so he tossed the towel back into the bathroom and saw it land on the edge of the bathtub, and then crossed the room to sit down on the bed beside him.

“Does it look any better?” Jimin gestured at his cheek and he studied it for a moment. The wounds were certainly healing up for they weren’t bleeding right now. They were still deep and his skin was
red around them, but they were healing. In a few days they would probably be closing up and there would be no need to worry about an infection or anything like that.

“A lot better,” Yoongi said as he popped the safety pin open and slipped it out of the thick roll of bandage. He fastened it close and placed it down beside the bottle of antiseptic before starting to unroll the material. The stitches looked fine to his eyes, the skin not even pink like it had been last night. “Anything hurting, huh?”

“Not really, only when the cuts are cleaned do they hurt. Mostly they just itch like the stitches.” And as he said this he reached up to go to touch the injury on his neck so Yoongi moved his hand away with a soft laugh.

“No touching.” He grabbed one of the pads and applied some of the antiseptic to it before hovering his hand above his cheek. “Sorry about this.”

“It’s…OK,” Jimin said with a wince as he dabbed at the slices in his cheek. Yoongi worked quickly as to not cause him too much pain, wiping at the cuts and inspecting the pad to see that it was clean and there was no blood. He really was healing up well. When he went to get a dressing however the boy grabbed his wrist and stopped him. “I have to leave them off for a little while, remember what Seokjin said. I’ve had them on all day, my skin needs to breathe.”

“OK, but you need to cover them before going to sleep,” Yoongi explained as he got to his feet, picking up the used pad and dressing up so that he could dump them in the small trash can by the door. Jimin lay down on the bed with a heavy sigh and he looked over his shoulder at him. The boy hadn’t said a single thing about the fact they were sharing a room alone but he had seen the other boys reacting at it, ribbing each other and smirking.

“Not sleepy…”

“Oh yeah? You’ll be asleep in a few minutes,” Yoongi said as he sat back down on the bed, shifting to lie down too, “I know you will.”

“I’m not sleeping until you are,” Jimin retorted as he rolled his eyes to look at him, mischievous hints of a smile playing at the corner of his lips.

“That’s funny, ‘cos I’m not sleeping ’til you do,” he replied without missing a beat. “Why aren’t you sleeping, huh?” He asked and Jimin shifted so that he wasn’t lying on his back but rather his side,
looking at him as he slipped one arm underneath the pillow to get comfortable. Then the boy asked him why he wasn’t sleeping too, clearly deflecting the topic away from himself. “I’m not sleeping ‘cos I wanna keep an eye on you of course.”

“How come?”

“To make sure that you don’t do anything,” he paused before finishing, “stupid.”

“Like what?” Jimin asked quietly.

“Like going into the bathroom and using that extension cord over there,” he said as he gestured across the room with a wave of his wrist, “so that you can drop it in the bathtub with you.” The other boy’s eyes followed his gesture before settling on his face once more. “Or wrapping a plastic bag around your head ‘til you’re unconscious and you pass out and drown. Something like that.”

“That’s all pretty…horrible,” Jimin said with a feigned shudder. “Why would you think things like that? I didn’t even think things like that.”

“Cos I need to think about these things now. I need to make sure that nothing like that ever crosses your mind even if it’s crazy and you wouldn’t think it. Just to be sure.” Jimin let this statement hang in the air for a moment, the room silent except for the softest sound of voices in the other room through the thin walls. “I don’t want you doing anything stupid.”

“I won’t,” the boy said. “I promise I won’t, OK?”

“Just ‘cos you promise and say “OK”,” Yoongi remarked in an impression of him that made him laugh under his breath, “all cutesy like that, doesn’t mean that you won’t do it.”

“You think I’d break a promise?”

“I’ve broken enough,” he said before sighing heavily. “What about you, huh? Why aren’t you sleeping?”
“You know,” Jimin shifted slightly so that he could press his face against the pillow, so that he was peeking out at him from the pastel yellow material, “so you don’t do something stupid too.”

“Stupid? When have I been smart?” he retorted as the boy grinned at him. “What, what kinda stupid thing would I do?”

“You’d hurt yourself again.” Yoongi held his gaze for a moment before letting his eyes move to look over his shoulder, at the gauzy curtains that were dancing in the breeze from the open partition. “So I need to keep an eye on you too.”

“Why did you do that?” Yoongi asked quietly. “Why did you think of doing something like that?”

“I kept fucking up, you know?” Jimin said as he ran his fingers along the bed sheets between them. “And all of this time I thought that I could do something good. I thought I could carry all of that shit and help everyone out, that I wouldn’t mess up but of course I did. ‘Cos I always mess up. I thought that I could change but I can’t, I’m just the same old me that left home a few weeks ago: the screw up, the dumbass, the stupid kid with two left feet. And I thought about how I keep ruining everything and it seemed like a good idea.” Jimin shrugged softly and a stray lock of hair fell across his brow so Yoongi reached over to brush it back, feeling that it was nearly dry against his fingertips. “I just wanted to do something right, and I thought that killing myself would be the right thing in the end.”

“But you were wrong.”

“Hmm,” he made a noise in what sounded like agreement. “But even then I fucked up. I got there and I couldn’t jump. I froze up and kept thinking, but what if? What if this goes onto my list of fuck ups, what if I’m forever know as “Park Jimin the dumbass that couldn’t handle it?” Or what if I fucked up and didn’t die? What if I became “Park Jimin the dumbass that couldn’t even kill himself”? The boy took a deep intake of breath and it sounded uneven as he did, quivering as he let it out again in a heavy sigh. “But then you stopped me.”

“I did,” Yoongi said softly as he carried on brushing his hair back off his brow, fingertips against his skin. “I did something good too. I’m a bad influence, but that’s the best thing I’ve done in my life.”

“Even now I think about it and…I just don’t really know why I did that, why I ran off and got on that bridge. It was impulsive and stupid, kinda like me, and now I’m lying here thinking…why?” He laughed softly. “I feel like I’m talking about someone else’s life and mistakes and not my own. Like it’s a movie or a book and not mine, you know?” He nodded and the boy carried on fiddling with the sheets. “I feel so stupid like always.”
“You’re not stupid, so I don’t say shit like that. You’re clumsy sometimes, things get broken by accident, but you’re not stupid.”

“Tell that to my dad.”

“I will, I’ll tell him that you’re a fucking amazing kid and he should be proud of you and stop treating you like shit.” He let this hang in the air for a few seconds and then moved his hand away from his hair. “I won’t do anything stupid either, alright?”

“Just ‘cos you say “alright”,” Jimin retorted in imitation of him from earlier, “and act all tough doesn’t mean you won’t.” Yoongi rolled his eyes at this but the impression brought a smile to his face. “Why did you do all of that?”

“What? The…the messing around with the lighter and cigarettes?” The boy nodded and his cheek brushed against the pillow, moving slightly to get more comfortable. “Shit… I don’t really know either I mean…I know the reason but I dunno why I gave into it.”

“What did it make you feel?”

“Y’know, after a while with lack of sleep, things start to get fucking crazy. Things start to get numb and distant.” Yoongi also shifted so that he could reach up and run his fingers along his mouth, wishing for the sensation of a cigarette between his lips again. “I started to not sleep at all, between all of the shifts and the shit I was going through, I started to drift off for periods of time and lose hours. Night and day were the same thing, I didn’t notice a change after a while. I was just too numb to everything. But then I started fiddling around with the lighter one night and I felt something…I felt something again.”

“The pain.”

“The pain made me feel something. The little flame warmed my skin and I didn’t feel so numb and cold. The end of the cigarette stick gave me a rush that I couldn’t feel anymore.” Jimin was studying his face intently and he felt like he should say something else, mumble the rest of it and get it over with. “It was a little hit, a rush, a high. It made me feel alive, y’know? I wasn’t numb or cold anymore.”
“You felt…dead.”

“I did, I felt dead and those few seconds of pain made me feel alive again. It’s that little jump you get when something scares you and your heart starts pounding. That’s what I felt every time I stubbed a cigarette out on my skin.” Yoongi dropped his hand to the bed with a weary sigh and a few seconds later he felt the boy’s fingers close to his, almost nudging along the sheets so that he could lightly brush his hand against his. “I knew what I was doing was stupid, that I was hurting myself, but I couldn’t stop. ‘Cos that little rush kept making me want to do it again and again.” His friend’s thumb moved onto the back of his hand, on his knuckles.

“We’re both stupid, right?”

“I’m sorry.”

“What for?”

“For doing shit like that, for making you carry it all ‘til you felt the need to explode like that.” Jimin just shook his head and told him that he didn’t need to apologise at all.

“You’re carrying all of my shit too, and mine is a lot heavier than yours.”

“I won’t do it again, OK? That’s a promise, one that I really won’t break.” Yoongi held his eyes steadily and the boy managed to hold his too for a few seconds before shifting on the bed slightly, burrowing his face against the pillow so that he could almost seem to hide most of it from him. He studied him to a moment and wondered why he would do that exactly. “You OK? Feeling sleepy?”

“Nope, I told you I’m not sleeping yet.”

“You look like you're ready to fall asleep,” he remarked. Jimin’s hair had fallen across his brow messily and so he reached over to brush it back again, revealing one eye peeping out at him from the curve of pillow and the other still hidden. “Y’know you won’t win against me, right? I’ve went three entire days without sleep, you look like you can’t even go three more minutes.”

“Yoongi…” Jimin said in a quiet voice, words a little muffled from the pillow. He made a noise to let him know he was listening and the boy shifted again. “What I said that day…in the hostel room back
in Dangjin…I wasn’t lying, you know? About what Tae said.” Yoongi didn’t move his hand away and instead softly rubbed his thumb against his fingers, feeling the boy’s hair between his fingers like silk. “Tae said…well, he didn’t say that you had a crush on me but he said that one of us did…or maybe both.”

“And what did you say to him?”

“Dunno,” Jimin replied, “I can’t remember but I remember being confused about it.” He asked him what he meant by confused. “Confused that he might be right and you did have a crush, or that maybe I did and I didn’t even know if that’s even possible.”

“Do you?”

“Do you?” The boy reflected the question right back at him and Yoongi sighed heavily.

“I’ve never had a crush before,” he explained, “so I really dunno know either. What’s a crush supposed to feel like? Do I have one now, or have I already long passed that stage and I dunno why I’m so confused about it?” Yoongi paused before sorting his words out. “I like you Jimin. I dunno the full extent of that feeling but I know that I like you, I like you a lot, in ways that I don’t think I care about other people. I love all of my friends, our friends, and yet you’re a little different. We’re not best friends but you feel almost closer than that to me somehow. I don’t lie awake at night thinking about you, but I do think about you. Often, when I’m awake and when I’m dreaming. Maybe it’s ‘cos I’m such a fucking pessimist and you’re not. You’re always so upbeat and smiling and just being around you alleviates some of the badness. You can make my day go from hell to bearable Jimin, honestly, just by telling me it’ll all be alright. And…” He stopped himself suddenly because he realised how very ridiculous this all sounded, but Jimin told him to carry on, wanting to hear everything that he had to say. Yet he couldn’t seem to think of another word.

Before he could stop himself he leaned forward and kissed the side of the boy’s throat. He felt the little puckered patch of skin against his lips and heard Jimin gasping in surprise.

“Why did you…do that?”

“I wanna kiss all of you,” Yoongi said, mouth still against his stitches as he spoke the words he had been thinking all along, “not just your cheek or your brow or even your lips. I wanna kiss every little inch, the parts you love and the parts that you hate.”
“It’s ugly,” Jimin said in a quiet voice. “The scar will be ugly and-”

“You’re not ugly, there’s not one ugly thing about you Jimin.” Yoongi shifted to pull his face away from his throat, so that he could look into his eyes. “Inside and out, you’re beautiful.”

“So are you.”

“No, no I’m ugly,” he said with an adamant head shake. “I’m a bitter, pessimistic fuck on the inside, a ugly broken shell on the outside. I’m not beautiful.”

But before he could finish this Jimin moved his head forward and he felt his lips colliding against his. The contact made his heart skip in his chest hard, almost enough to hurt. Yoongi didn’t really know what to do for he was too surprised to even react, but when he felt the boy’s mouth opening and his tongue touching his lower lip he felt the most pressing urge to open his lips too. So he did, and he let the boy slip his tongue inside and explore his mouth, let it brush against his own and make him moan under his breath at the contact.

“Sometimes I really think that…that there’s no point in living,” Yoongi said breathlessly as he let the boy tug on his tee, pulling it off over his head and messing up his hair. “‘Cos I’m so sick and-” another kiss that stole the breath from his lungs and left him gasping for air, “and tired of everything but then I see you and…and suddenly that shit doesn’t matter.” Jimin’s lips trailing down the side of his jaw, his fingers on his skin. “I like being around you ‘cos you just make me…happy and I dunno why but it’s just you.”

“I told Hoseok that…that I think you’re cool,” Jimin said with a laugh as he shifted on the bed, chest against his and one arm on the mattress to support him. Yoongi felt the pullover rubbing against his skin and he found the friction annoying and wanted to be rid of it. “And that I look up to you, and I do but…”

“But?” he asked as he reached down and grabbed hold of the ends of the pullover, awkwardly pulling it up and off him.

“I didn’t really think about the crush thing until he and Tae started joking about it and then, well, then I started thinking that it didn’t seem that…bad. Like I didn’t find the idea gross or anything like that I found it-” Yoongi ran his hands down his chest and to his stomach and the contact seemed to catch him by surprise for the boy stopped talking for a moment. “I thought about a lot of things but I thought that you wouldn’t…I mean, someone like me? Why would you think about someone like me like that, you know? But then you stopped me that night on the bridge. It was you that ran after me
Yoongi shifted so that he could kiss him again, cutting his words off expertly with his lips. He wanted to hear what the boy had to say but right now he wanted something else instead. Jimin kissed him back, a lot more deeply than the first kiss, and he moved his hands down to his hips to grab hold of the waistband of his underwear. He thought the boy might stop him, might move his hands away because it was all happening very fast, but he didn’t and instead let him help him out of them. He had only just gotten them down to his thighs when Jimin roughly pulled them down and awkwardly got out of them, throwing them aside without a care. Then his friend was pulling on his underwear too and Yoongi kissed him just so that he didn’t have to watch him do so, a little nervous that he would see him in such an intimate situation. But Jimin had to break the kiss to complete the task of removing them and so he just closed his eyes and moved his head away. A few seconds later he felt the boy shifting again and this time he was on top of him and when he moved to kiss him again he felt his hips grinding against his. The contact was enough to make him feel a little throb in the pit of his stomach and he felt himself starting to harden from this, from the gentle movement of his hips. Yoongi opened his thighs a little and then the boy was reaching down to take him in his hand. He took a sharp intake of breath at the sensation of his fingers wrapping around him and when he lightly tugged Yoongi couldn’t help a moan escaping. He felt the most pressing urge to say something to him and yet he thought that it would ruin the moment, would make him stop, so instead he just bit down on his lip to stop any stupid words from escaping. He let the boy pump his wrist a few times and then he grabbed his hand to pull it up to his mouth, opening his lips so that he could slip his index and middle fingers inside. He ran his tongue along his fingers, coating them with saliva, and he heard Jimin gasping from the sudden contact.

Yoongi released his fingers and then he pushed Jimin off him so that he could roll over onto his stomach, lifting his hips off the bed for him. After a moment the boy got back into position and then he felt him slipping his fingers inside him. The saliva wasn’t exactly ideal but it was better than nothing and he tried to not clench as he closed his eyes. He had never done anything like this before, neither had Jimin, and he felt a little nervous and stupid. Jimin did this a few times, slipping his fingers in and out of him in an effort to make him open up a little, and then he spat on his fingers again and Yoongi felt him adding another, stretching him as well as he could. He wasn’t rushing but he almost wanted him to hurry up and so after a few minutes of this he reached back and felt his fingers against the boy’s stomach. Yoongi ran them down to seize hold of his erection, stroking him even as the boy carried on scissoring his fingers. Then the boy was knocking his hand aside and moving his hips forward and he felt him entering him. Yoongi pressed his lips together to mute the noise he made at this.

“Does it hurt?” Jimin asked, voice hitching slightly as he took a few quick breaths.

“No more than…the cigarettes do,” Yoongi groaned as he shifted underneath him. Truthfully it did hurt him but he didn’t care about that right now, the pain was there and he felt something alright; felt something much stronger than the burning ends of his cigarettes. The boy seemed to think this over and then he rocked his hips forward slightly, still slow and tentative. He felt him slipping in a little deeper and he willed himself to not clench, biting down on his lip and sinking his fingers into the
sheets instead.

“If it hurts I’ll stop,” Jimin said as he was glad the boy could only see the back of his head because he rolled his eyes at this. Talk about ruining a moment. If he could handle the pain of burning himself over and over he could handle this. He wanted to handle this because there would be something better at the end of it then the relief the cigarettes gave him.

“I don’t care about the pain,” he said as he felt Jimin’s fingers on his skin, one hand moving to hold onto his hip. Yoongi closed his eyes and just forced himself to not clench too much, to make it hurt more than it did. He had his weight balanced on his knees and elbows, chin on the pillow, and Jimin’s hips rocked into him and he felt himself moving at the end of each one, rocking unconsciously with him.

“You mightn’t, but I do…” Jimin muttered breathlessly and for some reason he felt himself smiling at this. He could feel himself getting used to the sensation of the boy entering him because he wasn’t going very deep, and after a few minutes he felt something strange against his inner thigh: a wetness. He was pretty certain that it wasn’t blood, but whatever it was it certainly helped the boy thrust into him, lubricated him enough so that the friction wasn’t as rough. Jimin slipped a little further inside of him and he felt his breath catching in his throat as a result. That had felt rather pleasant, had made a burning sensation start to spread up from the pit of his stomach.

“Ji...Jimin,” he moaned as the boy rocked into him. Yoongi could hear the noises coming out of his mouth but he didn't register the fact he was making them. They just seemed to spill out of his lips with every thrust of the boy’s hips and he felt Jimin pushing down on him, holding him down against the bed so he could slip inside him fully. He wasn’t grabbing at the sheets now, wrinkling handfuls of the material between his fingers as he tried to relax, but rather clawing at them. He felt the boy’s hips brushing against his buttocks, his stomach lightly touching his lower back. He was in so deep and yet he wanted him even further if possible and so he opened his thighs wider and practically begged him to thrust deeper. Yoongi’s erection rubbed against the sheets with every thrust because he was rocking underneath him, moving his own hips at the end of each little throb that had started in the pit of his stomach. When Jimin entered him there was a burning sensation inside of him, a maddening friction that made him start to feel breathless, made his cock almost ache.

“Jimin go…go faster.” Yoongi begged and a moment later the boy shifted to get a better angle. He felt his hands brushing against the backs of his, fingers instinctively entwining and stopping him from destroying the sheets, and then his chin against his shoulder. When Jimin thrust forward he did more than gasp at the sensation, he let out a moan of pleasure. The new position was so much better, he couldn’t believe how good that had felt and- Another thrust, and another, the boy picking up speed like he had told him to. Yoongi turned his head and he felt his lips brushing against the side of Jimin’s neck, along his stitches, and he couldn’t stop himself from kissing him, from nuzzling against him and sucking on his skin.
“Yoongi that feels nice…” the boy moaned and his hips rocked forward a little quicker. The result made Yoongi grunt against his throat and he could feel that throbbing getting stronger now, in his stomach, the base of his cock; his pulse racing too fast.

“Jimin,” he said breathlessly as he moved his face away, “hurry up and… and cum. I want you to cum inside of me.” Jimin made a series of noises down his ear at this, breath hot against his skin, and then the boy started thrusting deeper, harder than he had done so far. “Oh my…god.” Yoongi felt the mattress shifting under him, heard the headboard smacking against the wall, and he briefly wondered if the others could hear this before Jimin went in as deep as he could and he felt himself giving in to the pleasure. It was too intense for him, his heart was pounding and he could feel it in his head too, feel an incoming explosion that he had never felt before. The boy rocked into him so fast and hard that his hips started bouncing off the bed, hands pinned in place by his weight so he couldn’t even move. “Jimin…Jimin...Ji-min!” Yoongi cried out his name, wanting to dig his nails into him, bite and scratch and kiss, but he couldn’t. He could only twist his head and look at the side of his face, and when Jimin looked back at him, looked down at him because he was on top of him, inside of him, he felt his nerve endings burning.

Yoongi gasped for breath and when his orgasm hit him he felt it escaping once more in a shout of pleasure. He was on fire! He skin was on fire, his blood was nitroglycerin coursing through him and-each rock of Jimin’s hips, little cries coming out of his lips as he shuddered in delight and felt his muscles quivering. No it wasn’t a fire at all, it was a current of electricity making his thighs loosen and shake uselessly. He ejaculated all over the bed sheets, all over himself because Jimin was still thrusting into him and making him smear it all over his stomach. After a few more quick thrusts and Jimin also orgasmed, pressing his mouth against the hollow between his shoulder and neck so that he moaned against his skin, so he felt the press of his teeth behind his lips. For a few seconds the boy just stayed inside of him but then he pulled out with a grunt and rolled back onto the bed beside him. Yoongi couldn’t catch his breath because his body was still thrumming with pleasure and he dropped his face so that he could place it against the pillow, sweat soaking into the material as he did.

The room fell silent save for the sound of their breathing, uneven and quick. He couldn’t even hear the traffic through the open window, or voices coming from the other room, because his pulse was racing enough to block out everything else. After a moment he turned his head to look at the boy and Jimin looked back at him with a mischievous expression.

“Can the cigarettes make you feel that?”
Hoseok opened his eyes and for a moment he was confused, mind still foggy from sleep to register what he was seeing. But then he remembered where they were and it suddenly hit him that he wasn’t lying on a freight train right now but rather in a bed, a hostel bed. He was sharing a hostel bed with Taehyung and he couldn’t see him but he could feel him alright. The boy was lying in front of him, head not on the pillow but rather on the mattress so that he could bury his face against his chest. Even through his tee he could feel the warmth of his breath. There was a slight dent in the pillow to show him that he had been using it at some point before he decided to use him as a one instead. He stared at the light blue fabric before moving his head ever so slightly, and then he felt the boy’s hair against his chin, the crown of his head. Moving to get out of bed was going to prove a trifle difficult seen as the boy was almost glued to him and after a few seconds he realised that he could feel something else too. A weight on his lower legs that most certainly felt like a body.

Hoseok lifted his head so that he could look down, trying to not knock Taehyung and disturb him in his sleep. The sight that the new angle revealed was one that confused him greatly. Jungkook was lying on the bottom of the bed, curled up so that he was on both of their legs. The position didn’t look comfortable and yet the boy was fast asleep, legs tucked up tightly against his chest hugging one of the pillows Namjoon had given him last night. The boy had volunteered to sleep on the battered settee across the room even though he was a little too tall to fit onto it, and yet at some point the boy had moved onto their bed instead. Had he possibly had trouble sleeping and it had given him a strange comfort to share the bed, even if it was just a little space at the bottom? It reminded him of how he had kicked Taehyung to the bottom of the bed just those couple of days ago, before everything had went crazy, and yet the boy was now sharing with him no problem.

Because he’s not drunk, he thought, having to suppress a laugh just in case the movement woke Taehyung up. That was partly the reason but mostly it was because the other boy had at least confessed his feelings to him and gotten it out in the open. Hoseok felt that he could trust him more now that he knew, now that Taehyung was willing to talk to him at least rather than play dumb and then try and kiss and touch him at the most inconvenient of times. The awkward hurdle that the boy had put up over the past few months had finally been cleared and he felt a sense of relief at this, for he had struggled immensely with trying to talk about anything with him; one of the reasons he had been so set upon keeping his Xanax treatment to himself. If he couldn’t tell Taehyung something then he really didn’t know who he could tell, but now he didn’t need to worry about that at all. Not only had he already blurted everything out but he had also managed to get the boy to talk to him; a two birds with one stone situation.

“…na go back to sleep.” There was a sleepy mumble from behind him and then a laugh that knew belonged to Seokjin. Their eldest friend was laughing at Namjoon because he had undoubtedly woken up and tried to make the other young man do so too, and Namjoon most certainly did not
want to.

“Fine, a few more minutes.” The sound of bed springs creaking softly and then his friend walking across the room to go into the bathroom. Hoseok contemplated trying to disengage himself from Taehyung’s arms and sit up when the other boy made a noise in his sleep and then shifted. His face brushed against his chest and then he tried to roll onto his back, struggling to do so because his legs were pinned underneath the other boy’s weight.

“…The fuck?” Taehyung lifted his head to study the sight too. He squinted at Jungkook before putting his head back down on the pillow, reaching up to place the back of his arm over his eyes like an eye mask.

“You look wrecked,” Hoseok said with a grin and the other boy’s lips twitched at the corners. From the bathroom came the soft sound of humming and then water running, hitting the porcelain tub like rain on windowpanes. “Did you sleep OK?”

“Nope, how could I, huh?”

“I slept perfectly fine,” he said in confusion, furrowing his brows softly as he did, “and you seemed pretty comfortable hugging me to death.”

“So you didn’t hear…” Taehyung moved his arm so that he could look at him, turning his head slightly. He studied his puzzled expression and then snorted laughter. “Jesus fucking Christ, talk about lucky.” Hoseok asked him what he was talking about, not liking the fact that the boy knew something that he didn’t and that he was going to tease him all day if possible. “Hmm…let me just say that the walls are really thin in this place.” Then his friend sat up with a groan. “Kookie, get the fuck off me, what’re you a dog?” Says Koala Boy…he thought with a grin as Taehyung reached down and rudely shoved the boy. Jungkook made a surprised noise as he tried to not roll off the bed. But he failed and there was a horrible thud as he hit the floor.

“Kim Taehyung!” he whined, making them both laugh at the sound. “My fucking ribs dude!”

“Oh shit, I forgot you got hit by a car!” Taehyung declared before laughing even harder, getting onto his hands and knees to crawl to the bottom of the bed. “Need any help?” Hoseok watched him go, ass wriggling from side to side as he did, and when he saw the boy hold a hand out to the other he felt an idea hit him and before he could stop himself he lifted one of his legs and kicked him hard. His foot connected right on his upper thigh and Taehyung yelped in shock before also slipping forward over the edge of the bed. He threw his arms out and kicked quite a bit, nearly hitting him in
the head in the process, but he still ended up falling off the bed. There wasn’t a loud thud this time but he heard Jungkook grunting as the boy landed on top of him, the sudden weight and impact likely wounding him. Hoseok had wanted to give Taehyung a taste of revenge for pushing the other boy and he hadn’t meant for him to land on him, and though he should have felt bad about this he found himself laughing.

“Tae, I’m gonna kill you,” the youngest boy practically rasped. Hoseok moved so that he could look down at the pair of them and sure enough he saw Jungkook lying sprawled out on the floor, the pillow cast off a few feet away, and Taehyung was lying over his middle. He hadn’t fell on his bruised ribs at least, but he had landed on his lower stomach area and that wasn’t in much better condition.

“If you don’t let me sleep,” Namjoon mumbled. “I’ll kill you both.” The young man had his back to them, covers wrenched up to near his chin so that only his hair was visible, and he looked very comfortable. Clearly he hadn’t had Seokjin trying to squeeze him to death in his sleep, or sleeping on his legs and making them stiff and sore.

“I’ll help,” Hoseok offered and the sound of the shower water cut off suddenly. Seokjin must be in a rush and that meant that they were going to have to hurry too. Yet he didn’t really want to get off the bed, he was pretty comfortable right now too.

“So,” Taehyung said as his head popped up over the edge of the bed like a gopher emerging from its den. There were a few wisps of hair sticking up annoyingly and Hoseok wanted to flatten them with his hand so he shifted to get to reach over and do so. The boy’s shoulders went up slightly at his touch and he looked at him for a second before glancing over the others. When Hoseok looked down he saw that he was still sitting on top of Jungkook and the boy looked torn between pushing him off and considering turning it into a wrestling match. “Did you all sleep well last night, huh?”

“Don’t,” Seokjin said as he appeared in the doorway of the bathroom. He wasn’t wearing his vest but rather just a clean pair of underwear, the other item of clothing slung around his neck like a temporary towel. He slipped his toothbrush out, speaking around a mouthful of foam, and he pointed the stick at him. The expression on his face showed that he wasn’t in the mood for the boy’s jokes and antics, yet that just made Taehyung’s boxy little grin widen even more.

“The settee was itchy so I didn’t wanna sleep on it,” the youngest boy said as he reached up to brush his hair back off his brow. “It was also hard.”

“That wasn’t the only hard thing…” Taehyung said with a snort. Seokjin rolled his eyes as he disappeared back into the bathroom, the sound of water running for a few seconds. Then he leaned around the doorway to look at the boy.
“Seriously Tae, be mature for once in your life, please?” he said wearily. Hoseok looked between them both and he felt that same annoyance that he had a few minutes ago. He didn’t like being left out of the loop and he finally knew what the others felt like when they hadn’t known about his medication problem.

“C’mon, you think I’d really say something, huh?”

“Tae, you’re a motormouth and you totally would,” Namjoon said as he also moved to sit up, rubbing at his eyes roughly with a yawn.

“Yeah, but I’m not fucking stupi- wait, I mean I’m not…” Taehyung paused for a moment, mouth open as he rolled his eyes up and tried to think of something to say, and the expression made Jungkook start laughing. He reached down and grabbed the boy’s cheeks with one hand, squeezing them until the youngest boy started wriggling and shoved his hand away. “Wait, what was I talking about again?”

“Nothing,” Namjoon said as he shifted to swing his legs over the side of the bed. After a moment he got to his feet and crossed the room to go into the bathroom, squeezing past Seokjin because he was still standing in the open doorway. Their eldest friend stayed there for a few seconds before moving over to the other bed and reaching down to collect his holdall. Then he bent back down again and grabbed something else and judging from the rustling sound he was getting into his jeans. A second later he got back upright and he saw it was so, Seokjin hastily fixing his zipper and popping the button through the fastener.

“Don’t you think it’s awkward if we don’t talk about it?” Taehyung asked, expertly knocking Jungkook’s hands aside as he tried to grab onto his shoulders and roll him off. “Cos I do and-”

“Are we going to talk about everything that happened on the road?” Seokjin asked suddenly, sorting through his holdall to get something else to wear. He settled on a grey tee, slipping it over his head and pulling down on the ends roughly. He reached up to fix his damp hair and looked over at the boy, raising an eyebrow as he did. “Are we going to talk about all of the things that you did?”

“Uh…” Taehyung thought this over for a moment before dropping his gaze to the boy he was half-sitting on, half-lying on, and then he shook his head. Hoseok could only marvel at the fact that their friend had managed to get the boy to leave something alone by just mentioning the mistakes of the past. He was so amazed that he didn’t even care that he didn’t know what they were talking about.
“Just leave it alone, please?” Seokjin asked before going to the door and unlocking it. He stepped inside and closed the door over and after a few seconds Jungkook asked him what the hell was going on.

“I dunno, I shouldn’t say anything in case mom gets pissed with me,” Taehyung said out of the corner of his mouth.

“Like you even give a shit,” Jungkook said with a smirk and the other boy thought this over before rapidly agreeing with him. “Come on, just tell us. We won’t say anything, right Hoseok?” Hoseok nodded in agreement and the boy shifted but he was still sitting on Jungkook.

“I uh…well…maybe it’s better if I don’t tell you and instead do this.” The boy let his words hang in the air for a moment, and then he moved so suddenly that neither of them even expected it. Taehyung started enthusiastically bouncing up and down on the boy’s stomach and Jungkook let out a shocked laugh as he reached up to try and knock him free but he couldn’t budge him. “Jimin,” he said in a breathy voice as he squeezed his face up, not shouting because he didn’t want Namjoon to hear him in the other room, “oh Jimin, fuck me harder Jimin!”

“No!” Hoseok cried out in shock, clapping his hand over his mouth before bursting out into shocked laughter.

“Swear to god,” Taehyung said, stopping his impromptu bouncing to look right at him. “How did you not hear it?” He said that he was asleep, that he was clearly a deep sleeper. “Fuck, I’ve never heard Yoongi make so much noise before and—”

“Tae,” Jungkook said as he tried to shove him off him.

“and I’ve seen him get pretty pissed, y’know? Like really yelling but it was nothing like last night. I mean—”

“Tae, my stomach hurts please get off me—”

“he must’ve died and went to heaven or something,” Taehyung carried on talking over the boy just to annoy him and he saw Jungkook setting his jaw in annoyance. “Who’d have thought Badass is that good huh, I’m—” the youngest boy reached up and roughly pushed him off and the boy landed on the floor with a loud thump. Then Jungkook sat up and held a hand against his poor bruised stomach with a wince. “I’m surprised.” Taehyung finished as he shifted to cock his elbow and rest his head
“Don’t mention it Tae,” Jungkook said as he lifted his tee to look at his bruises for a moment. Hoseok saw that they were no longer purple but mostly a deep brown, but one or two were still a little blue. “Seriously Seokjin’s right, don’t be the guy that ruins something with a stupid joke. Not after everything, you know?”

“Wait, does little Kookie think this is cute?” the boy asked with a smirk and Jungkook sighed heavily and shot him a weary look.

“I think that Jimin has had a fucking terrible time since we started this stupid adventure and if something good happened for him you shouldn’t ruin it. Yes it’s shocking, yes it’s pretty funny to think about, but that’s just it: think about it.” He leaned forward and poked his forehead with his forefinger. “Don’t talk about it.”

“I think it’s…well not cute, but I guess it’s nice,” Hoseok said as he reached up and played with the collar of his tee. “Kookie’s right, Jimin has really had a hard time. He’s probably had the worst of all of us. So if he finally managed to…enjoy himself or whatever then we should leave him alone.”

“Plus,” Jungkook said as he got to his feet and went over to the bathroom, “Yoongi would kick your fucking ass if you did say anything.”

“Yeah yeah,” Taehyung rolled his eyes at this and waited until he disappeared into the other section of the room, “I’ve been trying to enjoy myself for quite some time too…” Hoseok held his gaze and refused to back down or show embarrassment at this. “Maybe we should demand the single room next time?”

“There won’t be a next time,” he replied with a grin, “because we’re nearly in Seoul. We’ll be sleeping in freight carriages tonight. I know we will.” The door across the room swung open again and Seokjin stepped back inside before closing it shut. The lock clicked loudly and Seokjin lifted a hand to suppress a yawn behind it. He asked where Jungkook was and the sound of the toilet flushing answered him, making him laugh under his breath.

“What time is it?” Seokjin asked as he crossed over to sit down on the bed, wiping his bare feet on the carpet as he did to remove any dust from the concrete walkway outside. As he hunkered down and grabbed his boots Taehyung checked his watch and announced that it was 8:12am. “Huh, that’s early than I thought it was, I thought it was at least 10am. Pretty much two more hours than I was hoping to have to work with.”
“What’s the plan?” Namjoon asked as he emerged from the bathroom, roughly drying his hair with a towel as he did.

“Let’s head back to the depot where the train we jumped last night ended up in. We can watch it all and find the right train we need before jumping it,” their eldest friend explained, “and hopefully we’ll be in Gyeonggi by the time we wake up tomorrow. The depot isn’t that far right? Maybe…twenty minutes of walking if we don’t drag our feet. We could be tucked away in a carriage before 9am if we hurry up and leave.”

“Yoongi and Jimin?” Namjoon asked as he also collected his holdall and unzipped it to start sorting through his belongings.

“Getting ready as we speak, in fact Jimin was already in the shower when I went to wake them up.”

“He’s gonna need one after last night…” Taehyung said under his breath as he looked at him and Hoseok managed to keep a straight face and not smirk and give anything away.

“Did you see his injuries?” Hoseok asked instead, deflecting the topic so that the boy couldn’t make any more jokes and get in trouble. Seokjin confirmed that he had with a nod. “Are they healing OK?”

“Looks to be the case, they looked a lot better than they did the first night. I think they’ll heal up nice and cleanly, probably won’t scar apart from the little mark on his neck. Jimin’s tough, he can handle all of that no problem.” Hoseok made a noise in agreement as he listened to the sound of the shower from the bathroom, Jungkook’s singing not at all muted by it.

“Good,” Namjoon said as he pulled a tee free and looked over them all. “We can all learn from him. Be strong and we’ll all persevere.”
The depot looked so much like the one back in Seoul that Hoseok found it rather unsettling. Though their hangout spot was empty most of the time unless there were work crews present in the early morning hours, he was still reminded of it because they weren’t actually fully inside the depot. Instead they were all sitting on a low bridge so that they could eye everything that was going on down below them; watch the work crews also moving around like busy ants from train to train, the cranes moving logs and containers the size of buses from line to line. He hadn’t seen the Seoul trainyard anywhere near as busy as this depot but the aesthetics was the same in the most strangest way possible and he wondered if his friends felt it too. There were no abandoned trains parts in the distance like tombstones, no tree roots bursting out of the platforms and the lines were certainly live, but he couldn’t shrug the sensation off. There was a freeway just to the right of the depot just like their trainyard but there wasn’t a sloping hill to roll down and rather just a towering wall of concrete. Barely any graffiti on it, certainly none of it as impressive as their red bullet tag that couldn’t be aged by time nor weather.

“God,” Jungkook said after a minute of silence, “this is gonna take forever.”

Hoseok was seated right in the middle of the gang and he had to turn his head to look over at the boy. To his left was Taehyung, then Jungkook, then Seokjin. To his right was Jimin, then Yoongi and finally Namjoon. The bridge was also made out of concrete but the sides were just railings and nothing more, not even ornate ones but boring straight ones, no sharp tops on which people could get impaled but rather smooth ones like metallic rulers. They weren’t very close together and Yoongi had managed to fit his legs through them, feet hanging over the drop whilst he leaned back on his wrists. Hoseok coped his position and found that his own slim legs barely managed to fit, revealing just how thin the young man had gotten these past few months. He folded his knees and felt his boot soles lightly hitting the side of the bridge.

“Most of these don’t even have carriages,” Jimin pointed out, both hands holding onto the bars in front of him as if he was trapped behind a prison cell. He was right, for most of the trains down below them had open-beds instead in which great towers of logs and mountains of coal were stored in. They couldn’t use any of those trains and that meant waiting for one with actual carriages to pull in and unload, or alternatively reload, and then traveling down the line and jumping it as it pulled out and had already passed inspection.

“Give it a few minutes, be patient,” Namjoon remarked, making all of them bar Seokjin roll his eyes.

“Seriously, you’re patient right now?” Yoongi asked, turning to look at him. For once there wasn’t a cigarette between his pursed lips and he looked strangely naked without it. The other man nodded and he narrowed his eyes. “You could totally sit here for ten hours and wait for a fucking train?”

“I didn’t say ten hours,” Namjoon replied pedantically, “but yeah it make take an hour or so. That’s to be expected. An hour is nothing, it’s a blessing if we only have to wait that long.”
“If I have to wait an hour I’m gonna go nuts,” Taehyung groaned, leaning forward so that his forehead smacked against the railings with a comically loud banging noise.

“I’m gonna go for a walk,” Hoseok said as he slipped his legs back through the railings. “Just for a few minutes down by the tracks. Holler if you guys see anything.”

“Sure thing,” Seokjin said as he shifted to look over at him. It wasn’t like he needed the man’s permission to do so but he knew that he was doing it to let him know that he trusted he wouldn’t wander off. He fixed his backpack straps and started walking along the bridge until he got to the stone steps that led down and into the depot. He practically skipped down them and then turned to walk under the bridge.

There were stacks of shipping containers in front of them and they seemed to stretch for miles but there was no need to worry about any workers shouting at him for they were all way down the lines and busy with other matters. None of the cranes even came close to where he was for they were too busy moving containers closer to the actual lines, so that meant he could just walk amongst the impromptu lanes for a few minutes before one of them called his name and let him know they needed to blow the place and race back to the tracks in preparation. Truthfully speaking Hoseok thought they could be here for thirty minutes or thirty hours, he wasn’t holding out too much hope that they would end up finding the right vehicle nice and easy. That would be lucky, and though their luck was most certainly on the rise it wasn’t at that level just yet.

“A little hope wouldn’t hurt anyone,” he said to himself, smiling as he did. It was true, but he had hoped for so much since starting this little adventure that he had gotten to the point of not wanting to hope in case it jinxed them all. He felt a little bit like Yoongi right now, always thinking of the bad rather than the good and he longed to get back to the old positivity that he used to always carry around. Why, he had rivaled Namjoon’s positivity at some point but he was still too far away to be able to start preaching about sunshine and rainbows. Maybe soon… maybe when he got back to Seoul and he realised that he had managed to survive all of this; had kicked his horrid addiction to Xanax and gained a semblance of his old life then he might just be able to think that way again. *My old life? Why do I know we’re all never going to go back to that? We’ve all just come too far…*

Hoseok reached out to run one of his hands along the shipping crate beside him. The corrugated sheet wall was warm from the morning sun and mostly smooth, occasionally pitted here and there against his fingertips from cracks in the paint or dents in the metal. He didn’t really look at where he was going but rather just down at his boots, watching each step with rapt attention. More gravel underfoot, crunching as he walked. It took a moment to realise that his own boots weren’t the only thing crunching on the gravel, that there was another set of footsteps sounding out of his sync with his own. He slowed his pace down and then stopped completely, but whoever was following after him didn’t stop and carried on walking. Hoseok cocked his head and he didn’t need to look back to know who it was.
“What do you want Tae?” He asked, turning his head so that he could look over his shoulder at his friend. As he had predicted it was Taehyung following after him, for it couldn’t have really been anyone else. The boy had his hands shoved into his hoodie pockets rather than his jeans because his denim shirt was currently shoved away in his backpack, and after a second or two he stopped so that he was a few feet away.

“I was bored too,” he said with a soft shrug. His shoulders rose and fell with such an unconscious grace, a physical sigh.

“I hate to break it to you, but this place isn’t exactly going to help your boredom.”

“No, but you can.” Taehyung grinned at him, eyes just visible under the fall of his hood, and though he scoffed Hoseok felt a smile playing at the corner of his lips.

“Oh yes? Well I just came down here to stretch my legs, nothing more. I’m afraid I don’t have any games to play with you right now.” He started walking again, hand still running along the carriage as he did. Sure enough the boy followed after him and he eyed the endless stretch of freights in front of them. “If you want games Kookie’s better at that than me, Jimin too. You should-”

But before he could finish this sentence he felt something colliding with his shoulder hard and he nearly stumbled over his feet. He managed to not fall and looked up to catch the other boy racing past him and he called out in confusion, asking him why the hell he had just pushed him. Taehyung whirled around but didn’t stop running, beaming at him as he cupped his hands around his mouth.

“Tag, you’re it lover boy!” he shouted and Hoseok stared at him in dumb confusion before realising what had happened. Then he was running after him as fast as he could. Taehyung yelped in surprise and turned around so that he could run properly and not trip over and he darted around the end of a shipping container and disappeared out of sight. Hoseok whirled around the corner, feeling the gravel sliding underfoot as he did and then he carried on down the new path between the crates.

Clearly his friend didn’t really understand the game of tag for he laughed loud enough for him to track his every move, zigzagging down the gaps between lanes as if he could lose him. But the boy got a little cocky and he tried to climb a ladder built into the side of one. Hoseok jumped and grabbed hold of his thigh tightly for a moment.

“No I’m not!” he called as he let go of him and raced down the lane. He heard Taehyung cursing under his breath as he tried to get down the ladder quickly, ending up jumping to try and save time. The sound of his boots was like a clap of thunder and he spared a glance back over his shoulder just in time to see the boy dropping his head and start chasing after him. He had to hand it to him,
Taehyung was scarily fast when he wanted to be and he didn’t think that a few seconds would help him stay ahead for very long. Hoseok tried rapidly moving between lanes in the hopes that he could add a few more seconds and then lose him by cutting back the way they had came but before he could he felt the boy grabbing hold of him and he tried to shrug his hand off him. So Taehyung played dirty and hooked his leg forward to trip him up. Hoseok let out a cry of surprise as he stumbled and hit the gravel, skinning his knees and palms of his hands on the rough stone.

“Come get me lover boy!” Taehyung hollered as he raced off and he couldn’t even get to his feet before he flew around the end of the carriages and vanished out of sight. Hoseok got upright and wiped his hands on his jeans, catching his breath for a few seconds. His backpack was weighing him down considerably and making him get tired more quickly than usual. But he couldn’t let the other boy beat him at something like this or he would never let it go and so he just ignored his stinging knees and started running after him again. He rounded the end of the row of containers and saw that Taehyung was nowhere in sight, he couldn’t even hear him laughing or the sound of his boots pounding on the gravel. That meant that the boy was trying to hide from him between the crates most likely and so he slowed down and instead started scanning left and right as keen as a hawk.

“We’re playing tag, not hide and seek!” he called with a laugh, hoping that he would get the other boy to react. But for once Taehyung kept his retorts exclusively to himself. “Come out come out wherever you are! I won’t trip you up, I’ll play nice, I promis-“

An arm shot out of a gap in front of him and Hoseok didn’t even have enough time to register it before fingers seized hold of his tee and he was being pulled through and into an open shipping container.

“What if I don’t want you to play nice?” Taehyung asked as he pushed him against the steel wall of the container. He didn’t slam his head on it but the impact was still jarring enough. The boy let go of his tee and instead placed both hands on his shoulders and he leaned forward, so close that his lips were nearly brushing against his own. “What if I like…dirty?” Hoseok moved his arms and yet he didn’t do it to push him away like usual. Instead he just placed his hands on his hips and he waited to see what his friend would do. It seemed that Taehyung hadn’t been expecting this at all, that he had likely thought that he would push him away or turn him down, and for a moment the boy just looked back at him. Hoseok held his gaze unflinchingly, not even blinking, and he was aware of the fact that he had held his breath at some point.

“Since when did I play by your rules?” he managed to ask, feeling his lips gently brushing against his.

“Gimme your rules and I’ll happily play along,” Taehyung said, moving one hand from his shoulder so that he could cup his cheek instead. His palm felt cool against his skin and he knew it was probably because he was blushing, but in the dim lighting of the interior of the crate he probably didn’t even notice this. Hoseok alluded to the idea that he might not have any rules at all and the
other boy’s gaze dropped to his lips to watch him speak. He knew that it was just a matter of seconds until the other boy kissed him and he was aware of the fact that this was the first time he had done so and not been incredibly drunk during it.

Taehyung moved his thumb over so that he could caress his lower lip and then he leaned forward and pressed his lips against the back of his thumb. Hoseok felt the slightest sensation of his mouth and then he reached up to knock his hand away so that he would kiss him fully. His lips brushed against his and the boy held them in place for a moment before he opened his mouth. His tongue poked at the corner of his mouth and then moved along his lower lip and Hoseok felt his pent-up breath hitching at the contact. Taehyung wasn’t just doing this to make him open the kiss up and allow him inside, he knew that he was also tasting him; savouring him on his tongue like a shot of soju, and for once he couldn’t taste the booze on his breath. He couldn’t even taste cigarettes and he had enough time to think about how strange this was before Taehyung’s tongue slipped inside his mouth. This wasn’t like the stupid drunken kisses that he had showered on him in the past, always sloppy and forceful, hands grabbing at him needily like he was a float that could keep him adrift in the waves. No, Taehyung kissed him with surprisingly gentleness and his hand stayed on his cheek, thumb lightly stroking along his cheekbone. Hoseok closed his eyes and a moment later the boy broke the kiss. He had enough time to take a quick intake of breath and then he was kissing him again. He lifted his hands from his hips and instead ran them up to grab handfuls of his hoodie between his fingers.

“I’ve wanted to do this for…so long,” Taehyung said breathlessly between kisses. “It was driving me crazy and I shouldn’t have…have done it when I was drunk but I was scared and-”

“Scared?” Hoseok asked as he turned his face away and broke the contact. “Scared of what?”

“That you’d say no or that you’d…that you’d get angry and hit me,” the other boy said, lips pressed against his cheek and eyelashes fluttering against his skin. “So I got drunk ‘cos I thought that I’d be braver but I just made it all worst.”

“I didn’t…” he paused for a moment as he caught his breath, “I didn’t want you to do something like that and regret it.”

“…What?” Taehyung shifted so that he could look at him and Hoseok saw that his lips were slightly red from their kisses.

“I didn’t want you to kiss me or…or do anything with me and wake up the next morning and regret it. That’s why I turned you down all of those times I was… I was scared that I would turn into a drunken mistake.”
“Oh lover boy,” his friend said with a soft laugh. “I’ve made some bad drunken mistakes but you’d
never be one of those. Kissing you and…and fucking you would be a miracle.”

Hoseok noted how he drew that word out, fucking, and he felt his face getting a lot hotter than it had
been. There was a twin warmth starting to spread in his stomach too and he wondered if the other
boy had any idea and then Taehyung kissed him again, harder than before. His tongue brushed
against his and then the boy was nibbling on his lower lip, teasing it between his teeth and making
him gasp in surprise. He felt his fingers seizing even more tightly onto his hoodie and then
Taehyung’s hand moved from his shoulder to his hip instead. He squeezed him tightly, thumb
moving along the slight jut of his hipbone through the denim and then he moved it down to his inner
thigh. He pressed his palm against him and then start stroking him through the fabric and Hoseok
made a series of noises under his breath.

“Tae, the train—”

“You heard Namjoon, we’ve got all the time we need.” His palm ran along his thigh and back up
again, repeating the motion until he could feel himself getting aroused from the warmth of his touch.

“I don’t know,” he said breathless, “maybe we should wait.” Yet he made no attempt at moving the
boy’s hand away. Taehyung moved his other hand to his zipper and he started fumbling with it. The
boy had just managed to work it and he dropped to his knees when a voice echoed across the depot.

“...seok! Tae!” the shouting voice was hoarse and most certainly Yoongi’s. “Hurry your asses up we
gotta blow! Now!”

Hoseok didn’t even think and he grabbed the other boy’s hood roughly, dragging him to his feet
even when Taehyung whined that he was pulling his hair. Then he snatch hold of his wrist and
dragged him out of the container, darting back the way they had came as fast as he could. It was a lot
harder to remember thanks to the boy’s impromptu game of tag and so he had to stare up at the
bridge and just run in the direction it was. He couldn’t see any of their friends up there and when he
got closer he saw a train starting to pick up speed on track close to them. He dragged his friend
through the maze of shipping crates and when they emerged he raced under the bridge. Their friends
were already miles ahead of them down the line, having ran down the steps and along the track in
preparation. He caught sight of Jungkook slipping inside of one and willed himself to run that little
faster. That was when Taehyung decided to take the lead, pulling his wrist free to seize hold of his
hand instead.

“So much for a fucking hour!” the boy shouted and even from their distance he heard their friends
“Shit, we’re never gonna catch them,” Hoseok said, watching the train starting to pick up speed with each passing second.

“I got a plan,” Taehyung announced as he pulled him along the tracks and closer to the train. The boy scanned the carriages before seeing one with a door on their side and so he slipped it open. “Jump in!” He didn’t have a clue what to expect, what his plan even was, but he jumped into the carriage as told and a moment later Taehyung did too. His friend helped him to his feet before letting out a breathless sigh of relief. The end of the carriage had a door, much like a passenger train, and he wondered if it had possibly been refurbished over the years. The interior was packed with boxes and so he pulled him through and to the door before opening it.

“Follow me,” Taehyung instructed before jumping over the slight gap between the carriages. He slipped onto the other platform and pulled the door open so Hoseok closed the one behind him and accepted his outstretched hand as he crossed over to the other carriage. They had to do this three times before they got to the right one, weaving through boxes of stock that smelled fragrant and like food produce to his nose. There was no need to worry about falling for the gaps between each carriage were nothing. He could practically step over if he stretched far enough. When Taehyung finally pulled him inside the carriage their friends all cheered in a mixture of sarcasm and relief.

“Thanks for the heads up,” Hoseok said as he hunkered down.

“Hey, that thing came outta nowhere,” Namjoon argued, “we nearly missed it too.”

“How the fuck did you miss it?” Taehyung asked as he sat down on the floor with a groan, stretching his legs out in front of him. “It’s a fucking train, it’s not like it’s small or anything!”

“I didn’t stop at all,” Seokjin explained, “it was just passing through the depot and luckily for us Kookie turned around and saw it on the horizon.” He reached over and placed a hand on the youngest boy’s shoulder. “Talk about lucky, huh?”

“Ummm…Hoseok?” Jungkook asked suddenly.

“Yes?”
“Why is your fly open?” Hoseok followed his eyes downwards and he saw that he had indeed left his zipper open, a flash of his underwear visible through the wide gap. Taehyung had fumbled it down just a few moments ago but not fastened it back up. He fixed it as fast as he could but not before all of them stared.

“You guys wanted to blow this place,” Taehyung said after a moment of silence, wide smirk on his face. “But I had a different idea…”

For the last few days it had been rather easy to ignore the horrible sensation in the pit of his stomach. He had been so distracted by everything else: the revelations of his friends’ problems and mistakes, the hostel room arguments that had ended up in fights, and Jimin in hospital, that his mind had been thoroughly occupied. That had been a blessing, for it had meant that he had been able to tune out the incessant little whine at the back of his mind begging him for his pills. It wasn’t always his own voice that he heard, mostly it depended on the thoughts that were racing through his mind at the time. Sometimes he would hear the cool and clinical sound of his doctor’s voice telling him that he just had to take the pills, demanding it more than suggesting it. Other times it was his mother, sweet and gentle like an audible embrace, and she would try and reason with him, tell him that if he took the pills he would feel so much better and he would be able to enjoy things a lot more; push the stormy clouds away for clear blue skies. He much preferred these two voices, for even though they tried to tempt him the most they were better than his own voice. When Hoseok heard his own voice in his head it was never pleasant or reasoning, it was only ever to put himself down.

That little voice in the back of his head would tell him that he was worthless and stupid and that he should take the pills and stop acting like a child. It would call him pathetic, as if its own patheticness was irrelevant to the situation. It would try and beat him down and make him give up and it was so much harder to block out than the two other voices.

Could a person possibly lose an argument with themselves? He didn’t think that it was possible.

Right now, lying on his side and staring out of the open carriage door at the blurred scenery that went past, he wished more than anything that he could sleep but he couldn’t. It was beyond him even when his body was aching and he felt drained. There was no headache present, which was a good thing, but everywhere else seemed to be prone to random moments of pain mostly in the form of his muscles aching. It would start at one part of his body and then spread to the next before going away for awhile, only to return with a vengeance once more. He felt cold even when the breeze coming in through the open door was rather warm and tinged with the scent of sweet grass. He knew that if he
lifted his arm and placed his wrist against his brow he would feel clammy skin and beads of sweat.

This is what recovery felt like.

He told himself that Jungkook and Jimin had it a lot worse than he did. Both of them had injuries that required healing, physical injuries. Jungkook’s bruises might be starting to fade but the tenderness of his ribs and stomach was still present, making him spend more time sitting down and being still than usual to the point in which he couldn’t help but notice it. The youngest boy was always moving around doing something, but now he was mostly reduced to spending his hours stationary and rather just observing everything keenly with his eyes when he would have used his fingers and feet not that long ago. Jimin was still very much in the healing process rather than mostly past it like Jungkook. He still had grievous wounds on his skin that weren’t closed over yet, but also terrible marks on his soul too. His situation was nothing like theirs and yet he knew if he declared this his friends would argue otherwise. They would tell him that his problem was just as valid and important, but he couldn’t help but feel it was not the case. His problem had been caused by his own hands unlike theirs. If anything, he was in the same position as Yoongi right now, possibly Taehyung. He had an addiction, his addiction was bad for him and it was hurting him more than helping him.

Hoseok almost wished that he just had physical wounds to heal. They might hurt and leave a scar in their wake but they were nothing like mental wounds; spiritual wounds. Those always seemed to leave a scar and sometimes...just sometimes they didn’t heal at all.

He studied the rolling view of the fields outside for a few more seconds before deciding that that was making him feel more nauseous, a strange sense of vertigo playing with his mind and unsettling his stomach. So he rolled over onto his back instead and stared up at the ceiling. That wasn’t moving at least, though he could feel the carriage floor vibrating all the way through his skin and down to his bones.

“What’s on your mind lover boy?” Hoseok turned his head ever so slightly to locate his friend, seeing that Taehyung was but a few feet away from him like always.

“Pills,” he replied honestly, feeling no need to lie to him now after everything. “The pills are on my mind just like fucking always.”

“Man that sucks,” his friend muttered under his breath, the sentiment making him smile for some reason. Trust Taehyung to be so blunt but also so correct at the same time; no need to be poetic, it really did just suck.
“What’s on your mind?”

“Can’t seem to sleep without booze anymore,” Taehyung said with a weary sigh. “When I was drunk I was numb and that made it so much more easier to sleep, but now I’m sober I can hear and see and feel and think everything with a clarity and I don’t really want that.” The boy shifted so that he was lying on his stomach, arms folded up so that he could rest his chin on them. He arched his back ever so slightly as he tried to get comfortable and Hoseok found his eyes drawn to his hips, to the soft swell of his behind. The movement was so fluid and cat-like but that was not the animal that came to mind when he thought of his friend. He was more of a wolf most days. Possibly a rabid dog. “I’d do anything for a single fucking shot of soju, I swear. I’m talking a single shot, not even a bottle.”

“You don’t need that shit Tae,” Hoseok said quietly. “You don’t, and I don’t need the pills either. We just think that we do.”

“Our brains are playing tricks on us,” Taehyung said and he could only nod in agreement. “Hey Hoseok?”

“Yes?”

“This carriage is a little cramped, we should go into one of the other ones,” Hoseok turned so that he could roll onto his side and look at him fully, cocking one arm up under his head so that he could rest his head on the palm of his hand. Taehyung held his gaze without looking away once and after a moment his lips lifted in a cocky grin. “We could finish off what we started earlier…” He let this hang in the air and Hoseok wished that his words didn’t make his cheeks suddenly feel a lot warmer than they had seconds ago. He didn’t say anything and instead watched the boy, waiting until he was practically squirming in front of him, and only then did he get to his feet and move to cross the carriage. He heard Taehyung making an excited noise at the back of his throat as he slipped the door open.

Hoseok eyed the slight gap between the carriages and then turned his head to study the skyline. It was so dark that he couldn’t make anything out at all beyond the glow of distant cities like fireflies, most of the clouds blocking out the stars. Then he jumped over to the other slight platform, grabbing hold of the metal railing as he did and he slipped the other door open. He stopped in the doorway and looked back to see his friend on his knees in the other carriage, rooting through his backpack like a mole digging through soil. He didn’t know what he was doing but he saw him shoving something into his hoodie pocket and then he was upright and hastily crossing the carriage to exit and follow after him.

“Tae,” he said as his friend stepped over the gap, moving back so that he could get past him. The
boy grabbed his wrist eagerly. “Tae I don’t want to promise anything, you know? I might not feel comfortable and-” Taehyung leaned forward and kissed him ever so gently, letting go of his wrist to grab both of his cheeks instead.

“Lover boy,” he said, breath soft against his skin, “we can stop when you wanna stop. I’m in your hands.”

“It’s just…I’ve never done anything like this before and I feel pretty…well, stupid,” Hoseok said, wishing that his voice didn’t sound as uneven and nervous to his ears as it did. “And I-” he stopped talking when he saw the boy slipping something out of his pocket, eyes latching onto the bottle. “Tae, where the fuck did you get that?”

“What?” Taehyung’s eyebrows raised comically up under the messy fall of hair on his brow and then he laughed. “Oh this? I stole it.”

“You’ve been carrying around stolen lube this entire time? What the fuck?”

“I stole it back in…Gyeonggi I think, don’t really remember I wasn’t sober.” He asked him why and the boy grinned. “Why’d you think? I stole it ‘cos I was planning on…grand things.” Hoseok swallowed a lump in his throat and suddenly lost the ability to speak. “But I was hoping to be halfway through it at least…maybe even empty by now.”

“Tae, you’re too much…” Hoseok managed to stutter as the boy slipped his hoodie off and dropped it on the floor. They were both already barefoot, boots left in the other carriage hours ago, so there was no need to awkwardly unknot laces at least. The boy wrenched his tee off over his head and he seemed to notice that he hadn’t moved yet so he dropped it aside and went to grab his tee when he stopped him. “I don’t want to be… be naked.”

“Since when have you been shy?” Taehyung asked with a grin as he moved his hands to his jeans instead.

“Not sure, it’s a good thing you’re not, huh?” The boy smirked in agreement and he let him help his out of his jeans because he felt unable to do so himself, fingers a little too useless for that. “What if the others hear us?” Hoseok asked as he pulled down on the waistband of his underwear, eyes staring off across the empty train carriage.

“Don’t make too much noise then. Don’t do a Yoongi, I won’t.” The joke made him laugh even
when he was so nervous that he could feel himself trembling. He reached down without looking and and fumbled his fingers along the other boy’s jeans waistband. Taehyung had to help him work the annoying zipper and he had only just dropped his jeans down when he realised that the other boy wasn’t wearing any underwear and then Taehyung moved his hips forward against his. Hoseok felt his breath catch in his throat as the boy gently ground against him, hand grabbing onto his hips tightly before moving along to his buttocks. He could sense an urgency about him as he nuzzled the side of his throat and continued those soft, almost circular movements. The sensation of his hips, his breath on his neck, was enough for him to feel himself stiffening. There was a warmth in the pit of his stomach that was so intense that he couldn’t stop himself from forcing him down against the floor of the carriage, hearing Taehyung laughing as he did.

“What…what do I do?” Hoseok asked, mentally chastising himself for sounding so stupid.

“I just want you inside of me, now, right now,” Taehyung said, so fast that it was almost as if he had spoken a single word. He grabbed the bottle of lube and squeezed it hard, so much coming out onto his hand that it leaked down his wrist and his forearm, but the boy didn’t care and instead reached over to take him in his hand. Hoseok couldn’t stop a surprised noise from escaping even when he bit down on his lip and he applied the lube to his erection before tugging on him. Everything was moving so fast that his head was spinning but all he knew was that he wanted to do this, no matter if the others found out or heard them. So he shifted to balance his weight on his wrists and let Taehyung guide him forward by hand, opening his thighs wide and angling himself so that he could get into the perfect position. The boy nudged him against his entrance a few times and then Hoseok gave in and thrust forward slightly, feeling himself slipping inside the boy. Taehyung made series noises under his breath that could have been pained but it was hard to tell with him breathing so unevenly. But the sensation…it was something so intense and oh god, wasn’t he so hot and tight around his cock in a way that he had never even imagined possible?

“Oh lover boy,” he groaned under his breath, lifting his hips up slightly, “you have no idea how long I’ve…waited for this.”

“I think I do,” Hoseok replied. “You never shut the fuck up about it.”

“…Fuck,” Taehyung groaned and the noise coming out of his mouth was enough to make his erection throb. “I want all of you inside of me.”

“Tae, stop talking.” He said as he shifted to balance his weight on his elbows instead of his wrists, slipping in a little deeper as he did. The boy’s laugh turned into a moan and he buried his face against the side of his neck. He felt his tee hanging down and annoyingly getting in the way and so he let the boy help him out of it, casting it aside on the dirty carriage floor as if it was nothing more than trash. He didn’t seem to care about his nakedness any more. That was much better and he looked down at Taehyung as his hands moved up to grab hold of his biceps. The boy held his eyes without the slightest hint of embarrassment, lips parted slightly so that he could let his breath out of them in little
moans or whimpers. He rocked his hips forward more steadily, going a little deeper and Taehyung shifted with each thrust, his bare back making rustling noise against his cast-off hoodie, his own hips moving in response to him. The boy was urging him to go deeper and he could barely pace himself, feeling the need to slip all of the way in and feel that tightness around his cock.

“Lover boy,” he breathed against his neck, “you-

“Don’t call me that, call me Hoseok.”

“Hoseok,” Taehyung corrected, moaning his name in a way that he would very much like to hear over and over. “You love me, right?”

“Yes Tae,” he said breathlessly.

“Even when I’m a fuck up and I get into trouble and-”

“Yes, even then Tae.”

“and I cause everyone pain and-” Hoseok moved to block his mumbles off with his lips, kissing him even as he tried to carry on talking, his lips moving until he realised and kissed him back. He broke the contact and felt the boy’s eyelashes brushing against his as soft as the beat of a bird’s wings.

Taehyung reached down to grab his own erection and Hoseok saw that there was no need for any lube. The boy was so excited that he had actually leaked and there was a little puddle of cum already pooling on his lower stomach. He knocked his hand aside and took him in his own hand instead, balancing his weight on one elbow. Taehyung gasped at the contact and when he thrust into him again he pumped his wrist in rhythm with his hips.

“Hoseok, Hoseok this feels…” the boy whimpered again and his eyes rolled under his eyelids, “I didn’t know it could feel like this.” He knew what Taehyung was trying to say, what he was hinting at. He was telling him that all of the times in the past when this had happened, when he had let strangers fuck him for cash, it had never been like this; had been intimate and enjoyable. “I didn’t-” Hoseok kissed him again and cut him off before he could start babbling. He wouldn’t be able to listen to him talking like that much longer or he was going to finish too quickly and he wanted to enjoy this for as long as he could. The boy allowed him to take control of the kiss, to explore his mouth and down along the side of his throat to discover the rest of his body too. He particularly liked planting little kisses along his collarbones and feeling his pulse skipping under his skin. Hoseok
stopped jerking him off so that he could balance his weight out again and go even deeper, a little faster than he had been. When he thrust forward he felt his hips brushing against his, sharp little jut of bone under his soft and thin skin. The boy shifted underneath him and when he slipped in as far as he could go he let out of a cry of pleasure before moving his hands to his biceps again.

“Up, up, sit-” Taehyung pushed on him and so he moved like he told him too, getting up onto his knees and feeling the boy’s thighs wrapping around his waist to secure him in place, arms going around his neck tightly. Hoseok moved his hips forward and slightly upwards now and the boy rocked with each one. Taehyung was breathing heavily and he was pretty sure that he was close to climax, hoping that it was so because he wasn’t going to last much longer. He increased his rhythm just that little more and then the boy was doing more than whimpering, he was moaning. Sometimes it was just noise, sometimes it was his name. The throbbing in the pit of his stomach was so strong now that he could feel it coursing through the rest of his body, limbs starting to shake and skin starting to tingle.

“Tae, I think I’m-”

“Hoseok, Hoseok say my nuh-name.”

“Tae-Taehyung,” he said and with that his friend started rocking on him fast and hard, grinding as if he was the one in control. His fingers scratched down his back hard enough to hurt and Hoseok could only grab onto his hips tightly, the pleasure getting too much for him to handle.

“Oh my god!” He was faintly aware of the fact that the boy had said he wasn’t going to ‘do a Yoongi’ and yet he didn’t seem able to stop himself from crying out. Hoseok could barely control the noises coming of his own mouth too. Up and down Taehyung rocked, buttocks brushing against his thighs and nails sticking into his skin and then he threw his head back hard. He saw the tendons under his skin and his Adam’s Apple moving and he had just moved forward to press his lips against it when Taehyung let out a deep moan and his movements became frantic, almost bucking his hips on him. Hoseok shifted to force him back down on the carriage floor and that was when the boy cried out and arched his back. He felt his chest brushing against his, his entire body seeming to tense up and harden, and then the boy orgasmed with a shout of pleasure; more nail tracks going down his spine from his shoulder blades, Taehyung moaning and shuddering and looking up at him with the most ecstatic expression on his face. That was what made him finally give in to the pleasure and with one final deep thrust he climaxed and felt the breath leaving his lungs in a groan. It felt like an explosion had went off behind his eyelids, a rush of colour and little starbursts like fireworks. He remembered them playing with fireworks all those years back when Yoongi had been set to graduate, the colours and the brightness and yet none of them came close to what he saw being inside of Taehyung. His body quivered with such force that he couldn’t even hold himself up and instead just collapsed on top of him. After a moment of silence his friend moved his head and he felt his chin digging into the crown of his hair.
“Are you still thinking about…the pills,” he asked in a breathless whisper, as if he didn’t want to be overheard; ironic considering what had just occurred.

“…No,” Hoseok replied slowly, “I’m…I’m not thinking about the pills. Are you thinking about the booze?”

“Nope,” Taehyung said before laughing. He felt the sensation of it bubbling up into his chest and he wanted to press his ear against it and listen to the sound even before it escaped his mouth. “No, I’m just thinking about how much I fucking love you.”
The view outside the open carriage doorway was a rather wonderful one to see and he contemplated waking the others up so that they could see it too. Namjoon knew that they would grumble and complain, would kick out at him and call him an idiot for waking them up at this hour, but he felt that he really should let them see it too. It wasn’t like he had a camera with which to document it with, didn’t even have his phone anymore so he could take a few shots and show them all later. No, he only had his own eyes and words and they would never come close to explaining what he was looking at. After some thought he decided to try it and see what happened. He reasoned that they would either wake up together or maybe just one or two, maybe none at all, but it was better than keeping this to himself. So he got on his hands and knees and crawled over to the others, who were huddled around the interior of the carriage messily. Closest to him was Jungkook, the boy nestled under the eldest’s coat just like always so that he could only see his forehead and a fall of dark brown hair on his holdall bag. It took a few hard shoves to get a reaction after his voice and gentle proddings didn’t work, but the boy did open his eyes and ask him ‘what?’ and that was at least a reaction. Namjoon explained why he had woken him up and Jungkook took a moment to process this before sitting up fully, coat falling off him and puddling on his lap. The boy stretched his arms with a mumble and he moved onto the next. Seokjin didn’t require shaking at all and rather he moved at the sound of his name being spoken, rolling over and squinting at him. He didn’t even need an explanation before he shifted to get up, rubbing at his eyes as he did. Two awake, four more to go. Namjoon crawled across the carriage to where Yoongi and Jimin were lying; the former burrowed against the latter’s back so that he could only see his red hair and none of his face, arms so tight around his waist that he thought it was a miracle the boy could even breathe. It took a few shakes of his shoulder to get Jimin to react and when he jerked awake it disturbed the young man.

“…table like that,” Yoongi mumbled in his sleep, “‘cos…warm and…soft.”

“Hey, wake up man,” Namjoon said with a grin as he grabbed hold his upper arm and shook him too.

“Don’t wanna…” Yoongi whined but he managed to pull him up into the sitting position. Jimin was still lying on the floor but he was at least awake and looking at them both. “Shit Joonie I just fell asleep!”

“Yeah yeah, you’ve been asleep for hours now stop talking shit.” Namjoon got to his feet and crossed the carriage to get to the open doorway at the very end. He had noticed the two other boys’
absence upon waking and had known that they had sneaked into the other one at some point last 
night. He could only assume why. When he glanced across the gap he could see a large metal 
contraption down between both of the carriages and a slight platform on each with a little railing to 
hold onto.

“Hey Tae!” he called, leaning against the open doorway and looking at the two sleeping boys in the 
other carriage. At his call the boy sat upright suddenly, hair messily corkscrewed up in places.

“What the fuck man?!”

“Come see this!”

“See what?!” Taehyung shouted back, tone tired and a little like a petulant whine. He didn’t want to 
be awake right now, that much was clear.

“Just come and see!”

“What’s so fucking important that I gotta see it, huh?!” Hoseok shifted at his hollering and he saw 
the boy reaching up to cover his ears. “Is Yoongi stripping or something?!”

“No, but I’ll tell him that you really wanna see that!”

“I’d pay!” The boy tried to flatten his hair for a moment before looking down at Hoseok and saying 
something to him. He didn’t hear what, could only see his lips moving from across the gap in the 
carriages, but a few seconds later the other boy sat up and struggled to get up to his feet. He helped 
Taehyung up, or more likely dragged him upright, and then they both moved to get to the open 
doorway so he moved to go back across the carriage. A moment later he heard their feet clomping on 
the metal flooring, signaling that they were inside with the rest of them.

“What’s going on…again?” Jungkook asked, not looking at him with both eyes but rather squinting 
through just one.

“What’s going on is you’re all gonna come and see this.” Namjoon pulled the carriage entrance door 
open as far as it would go, making the narrow gap a good few feet wider, and then he sat down on 
the floor and gestured for them to join him. After a moment he heard them all moving to get across 
the carriage and their clothing rustling as they all sat or hunkered down. “Take a look at that.”
“…You woke us up for a fucking sunrise?” Yoongi asked in an incredulous tone, unlit cigarette hovering in front of his lips because he had paused in the act of putting it in his mouth.

“Not just any sunrise,” he explained. “It’s the first we’ve seen together since that night back in the trainyard.”

The view in front of them was quite possibly the most beautiful thing that Namjoon had ever seen before in his life. He would even go as far as to describe it as breathtaking. At some point the train tracks that they were currently traveling along had ran onto a bridge and right now they were drifting along over a river of some kind. The sun hadn’t even started rising into the sky and yet there was an amalgamation of colours already across it. Right at the very edge of the horizon there was the most vivid orange that turned into a dusky pink, the blotches of clouds so perfect like rose petals and bleeding up into lavenders that were so soft that the hue was barely even visible. But that wasn’t the most beautiful part of it at all, for that was only half of the view. It was the river below that made it a sight worth seeing. It reflected the sky so perfectly like a mirror. That little flash or orange became almost a miniature sun when reflected across the river; a ball of colour almost as bright as the real thing. The surface of the water was mostly still and without any breaks but there were a handful of little black silhouettes visible that revealed them to be yachts of some kind. Namjoon wondered what it would feel like to be standing on one of those boats right now, floating on a river that looked like the sky itself; liquid and ethereal and so very perfect. There was no Venus in sight this time around, which seemed to make the sunrise less interesting upon first glance, but the longer one looked the more beautiful the sight became and he knew that his friends would see it too… eventually.

“I could hit up Naver on my fucking phone and see pics like this Joonie,” Yoongi complained as he finally lit the end of his cigarette. He retorted that he didn’t have a phone anymore and the man thought this over and he took a drag on the end. “…Fine, you win this round.”

“You know, if we had a camera we could get some fantastic shots,” Jungkook said after a moment of thought. “A shot like this…you could win an award with it, right?”

“Exactly!” Namjoon agreed as he leaned over to sling his arm around the boy’s shoulders. “See that, Kookie’s smart. He’s know what I’m talking about.” Jungkook was too busy staring at the sight to front of him to shrug him off or show childish annoyance like usual. He wasn’t even squinting from under his sleepy eyelids but actually looking properly and attentively. “Seriously guys, we all found Venus pretty fucking cool when Tae showed us it that night. I know you all did but you played dumb to look cool, but we don’t need to look cool anymore.”

“Yeah, now I know you’re all fucking nerds,” Taehyung said with his boxy grin.
“Just admit it: say “Kim Namjoon, you’re right this is pretty fucking awesome. Thanks for waking me up ‘cos I really wanted to see this.””

“Kim Namjoon, you’re right this is pretty fucking awesome. Thanks for waking me up ‘cos I really wanted to see this,” Seokjin repeated in a monotonous tone, making the others crack up and Yoongi reached over to thump him hard on the back. “Was that right?”

“I was expecting more enthusiasm…”

“OK, I’ll do it,” Jimin said as he shifted to cross his legs in front of him, eyes glued to the horizon. “I’ll say something nice, just let me take a moment to think.”

“We’ll be here ‘til sunset if we let you think!” Taehyung joked and the boy grinned at this for a second before his expression became serious again. Namjoon just waited to hear what he had to say because he seemed to be thinking very hard.

“It looks like a dream,” Jimin said in a soft voice as he lifted an arm up and pointed at the horizon. “The colours…they don’t seem to be possibly real and yet they are. It looks like something a person would paint, a person trying to create something more beautiful than nature. You know, you see those paintings of skies and clouds and they don’t ever seem to look real, they seem to look like dreams more than anything else. Right now I feel like I’m looking at one of those and I’m reaching out waiting for my fingers to touch canvas but they won’t; ‘cos it’s real.” The boy curled his fingers up against his palm and kept his arm in place for a moment. “I can’t touch this dream.” Then he lowered it and stopped talking.

For nearly a minute no one said a word as they thought his words over, eyes either on his face or across the horizon to look at the sunrise and imagine it like he had described. Yoongi even reached up with his own arm and held it out, copying his gesture before dropping it again with a slight smile.

“Goddamn,” Hoseok said after a moment of silence. “I totally see it now.” At this both Jungkook and Taehyung snorted laughter but he protested. “No seriously, I see what Jiminnie means! I couldn’t figure it out on my own but now he’s pointed it out I understand. The colours really do look like something you would see in a dream, not reality. The sunrises in the trainyard didn’t look like this. They were always so…dull.”

“Blame pollution,” Namjoon muttered under his breath.
“It made me think of something,” Seokjin said. “The dream part, it reminded me of something that I read in my college textbook.”

“You mean the one all the way back in South Chungcheong?” Yoongi asked with a wide grin and he nodded.

“Hope is a waking dream.”

“Oh yeah, who said that?”

“Aristotle.”

“One of the weird named guys?”

“Yes, one of those.”

“You’re all being so goddamn poetic, you’re making me feel stupid,” Yoongi said as he took a drag on his cigarette and pulled it out between his fingers. “So lemme think of something good, huh? I won’t take too long.”

“Kookie, you should sing something. Help give him some inspiration,” Jimin said as he shifted to look over at the boy.

“Don’t think any lyrics could come close to this,” Jungkook replied. “Not any pretty lyrics any way.” He paused to search his mind for something before clearing his throat and starting to sing a few lines under his breath, bobbing his knee up and down in rhythm as he did. “It’s been a long day living with this. It’s been a long time since I felt so sick. I took a long walk straight back home. I could’ve walked back to San Francisco.*

“Hey, we’re not walking all the way there!” Hoseok joked and they all laughed at the remark.

“But it’s fitting enough,” Namjoon said as he glanced back over at the sight in front of them. The lyrics struck a bigger chord in him than he had expected, even more so than when the boy had started singing all of those weeks back in the car. Back then it had been the sound of his voice, light and
pure and somewhat innocent when he had sang those lines to them all. Now it was the actual words that affected him. Jungkook sang about feeling sick, with living with something that was pulling down on him and it was all something that they could relate to on an emotional and physical level. The boy sang about going home and that was exactly where they were headed.

“Goddamn it,” Yoongi muttered eventually, “you guys know I don’t do any of that happy sappy crappy shit. What am I supposed to say, huh?”

“Stop thinking,” Seokjin suggested, “and just say what comes to mind.” So their friend shifted and looked back across the river, furrowing his brow slightly as the cigarette continued smouldering between his fingers.

“Emptiness,” Yoongi said as he took a drag and breathed it out. “Cold. Stillness. Silence.”

“Wow, you’re such a pleasure to be around,” Taehyung remarked. Namjoon asked him why he thought those words, why they had came to mind instead of more obvious ones like tranquility and warmth, beauty and solidarity, and he thought it over for a moment before explaining.

“You’re only looking at the colours, you’re blinded by the colours. It’s not warm at all. If you were to dive down into that water you’d freeze to death, I’m talking a cold that cuts to the bone. I look at that sunrise and I see that summer’s nearly over with already.” Yoongi breathed more smoke out of his nose and then dabbed ash carelessly on the floor. “I’m not touched by it. I don’t get warm fuzzy feelings looking at it. I feel cold and small and insignificant. I don’t need some stupid sunrise to feel warm and safe and to see real beauty. I already got you guys, that’s all I need.”

“Min Yoongi you fucking liar!” Hoseok said as he twisted to look at him. “Doesn’t do happy and sappy crap? Did you even hear what you just said, huh?”

“Sounded like a weird slam poem,” Namjoon said and the other man reached over to punch his bicep hard. “Emptiness, like a can of soda after I drink it. Cold, like…a can of soda straight outta the fridge. Stillness like a can of soda when you leave it open too long and the fizz dies out. Silence like…I can’t think of a soda joke for that one, but you get what I mean.”

“I thought it was nice,” Jimin commented and they all rolled their eyes and groaned. “What?”

“We get it, your boyfriend said something deep and profound,” Taehyung ribbed, their friend making a squeaky noise and going bright red as he tried to change the subject topic.
“I mean it really did sound like a poem from class and I just thought that-”

“My turn!” the other boy declared with a wide grin, leaving Jimin to flounder as he did. They all looked at him expectantly and he took a moment to collect his thoughts. “I didn’t think that we’d all see another sunrise together, y’know? At some point I thought that it would all just fall apart and we’d just.. break up, float apart, leave each other behind and just set off back to Seoul alone before we all killed each other. I didn’t think I’d be seeing another sunrise in the company of friends, of family. But here we all are. And Yoongi’s right, that sunrise ain’t got shit on us! People would pay to see a photograph of that stupid river, would get given awards for clicking a button and photographing it but it’s nothing! It’s a single moment that is gone before you know it, but not us. We’re not just a couple of seconds of brilliance that disappears, never to be seen again. We’re more beautiful than that, even with our scars and our fucking baggage. ’Cos we can dream and if that shit ain’t the most beautiful thing then I dunno what is.”

“You said it,” Namjoon said in awe as he looked at the other boy.

“So I got one thing to say to the sunrise right now.” Taehyung got to his feet and cupped his hands around his mouth. “*Fuck you!*” They all started laughing at this, the boy shouting curses at the sky as if it could hear him, could answer him back. Perhaps the shouts were aimed at god, perhaps not. “We’re living! We’re beautiful! People might not pay to look at us but we *are!* *Fuck you!*”

“And you guys said I was the poet…” Yoongi grinned around his cigarette stick as the kids also started jumping up and down and hollering curses out of the carriage. Namjoon had expected them to observe it for a few seconds and complain and curl back up and sleep. He had not expected this reaction at all but he knew one thing: he was glad that he had woken them up.

When they jumped out of the carriage it had already traveled through Anseong, the most southern city in the whole of Gyeonggi. They had been hoping that the train would carry on north and cut up towards Seoul but it had taken a different route and luckily for them it was just a little off into western Gyeonggi instead of going in the direction of North Chungcheong once more. Though they hadn’t actually been through Anseong on this journey he had been through the city in the past and he had recognised the sight of the skyline faintly before the signs had revealed them to be in the city, and then they had all patiently waited for it to take them north into Yongin. Yet it hadn’t and they had been forced to jump out in Pyeongtaek instead, a city that none of them had been to in the past. The freight train had taken them quite the distance but they still needed to jump another to get closer
to Seoul because it could get them there by the early morning hours if they were lucky, whereas travel by foot could take three days. They were too tired for that, too sick of everything like Jungkook had sang not that long ago, and the vehicle would just save them so much trouble. So they had waited for the train to draw close to a depot of some kind and then they had all dived out of it, racing off before they could possibly be sighted by any wandering workers.

Despite having never visited Pyeongtaek in the past Namjoon found that the city was rather easy to traverse, likely because of all the experience that they had had wandering over these past couple of weeks. He didn’t like the narrowness of the streets because it meant that they had to travel in pairs, possibly in a trio if someone risked walking in the gutter on the side of the road, just to ensure that they didn’t block up sidewalks and get in other pedestrians’ ways. That made talking rather difficult because twisting to look back at each other was just awkward and as a result all conversation was just light remarks rather than anything meaningful. He found that he strangely disliked the silence between such comments intensely for he had gotten so used to the sounds of his friends talking about the most trivial of things on the hours spent walking or crashing in freight carriages.

The silence almost seemed like a sign that they were nearly home.

Occasionally they passed places of interest in the city, from market stalls and shopping areas to little plazas and parks that contained quite a lot of people. Maybe all of them were from Pyeongtaek, maybe some were tourists, they had no way of telling. It was still the break for any kids stuck in school and as a result they saw a handful of elementary school kids with parents or older siblings, out enjoying the weather, splashing around in the public fountains and rolling around the park grass just because they wanted to defy the “no walking on the grass!” signs that were stuck here and there like hazardous material warnings. Sometimes there were little gangs of middle schoolers that didn’t look much older than those kids, all of them so short they made Jungkook with his scant years over them look strangely older. They were trying to look cool and independent and failing miserably. And then there were the high school kids just like Jungkook, Jimin, Taehyung and Hoseok. They were often only in pairs or trios, not trying to look cool at all but rather spending the little time they had been exams and college to relax and live a little. Yet just like how the middle schoolers made their youngest friend look older, Namjoon found that the high school kids did too. The difference was subtle but still there. The girls and boys that were too young to be women and men looked that way, looked youthful and untainted. When he looked at his friends he found that they did not. The four boys looked changed and not in a necessarily bad way. He was reminded of the conversation that they had had back in the hospital, the one about scars. What was it that Jimin had said that day?

“…hey world, you tried to beat me down but I’m still here.”

Looking at the four boys he saw that that was indeed the case, Jimin had spoken the truth without truly seeing it for himself. The boys looked worn down but in a way that seemed to be more than just their spirits, a strange physically fraying at the edges that should have made them look haggard and used up, but he found it all beautiful. They looked like they were alive and not just empty, that they had seen and experienced things that had made them see life in a whole new light.
Jungkook had struggled with the turbulent stages of leaving childhood behind, adapting to a new stage that meant he couldn’t play around like a kid anymore. He had to start thinking about the future now, and as a result he turned it all into another big game, the game of runaway: an urban hide and seek. But he had been unable to hide well enough and had relented in the end. Jimin had been beaten down himself too many times, had been treated like shit and had put up with it for much too long. The boy had contemplated death intimately and had nearly faced it in the end through a sheer accident and yet he was alive right now. He was coming into himself slowly but surely and soon enough his awkward bumbling would be replaced with confidence instead. Taehyung had battled with his inability to grow up too, just like the youngest, except his refusal had not been a game and had rather been a harrowing downward spiral into his own fictitious ideals. He had wanted to stay seventeen forever, no matter the price. Even if it meant drinking himself to death before he could age another year. It had been four days now and the boy hadn’t touched a drop of alcohol when he was clearly still needing it, shaking and nervous though he tried to hide it, and he was starting to finally cool down. He wouldn’t hold up any hopes of the boy trying to get back into high school but that was a topic for another adventure. Hoseok had battled addiction too, had opened up to them and allowed them to try and help him and though it wasn’t going to be easy it was better than nothing. They couldn’t magically cure him of his depression, it was something that he was going to have to carry his entire life but it didn’t mean that they couldn’t ease the burden for him when it got too much.

Namjoon didn’t think that any of them were exempt from that change that he saw on the boys. Yoongi certainly wasn’t. The man had been a walking wreck back when they had started the journey, something close to shell of the boy that he remembered befriending all those years back. He still had that spunkiness about him but he had been distant and used up to the point in which he had been a little like a ghost. Truthfully he had been just as worried about him as he had Taehyung but he hadn’t admitted it back then to Seokjin. He was still grumpy and stressed out but he was finally talking again, letting those emotions out in a way that didn’t end up with him hurting himself. The cigarettes might be just as bad as the alcohol and pills but he was secretly hoping that Jimin might find a way of sorting that out. The boy might have shared his cigarettes in the past but he seemed to very much sharing his bed now too, both those found in hostels and likely the one back in Seoul. Despite everything Seokjin didn’t seem to show a hint that anything was wrong, hadn’t really shown it from the start. Namjoon might have had a sneaking suspicion that he was unhappy with college but he hadn’t thought that it had been to the extent that he had finally told them about. Much like how Yoongi would have to start again when they got back to Seoul, finding work once more, Seokjin was going to have to sort out all of the trouble with his college. His friend was going to suffer a little more hardship in the future but at least there would be some peace for him at the end, the peace of finally figuring out what he wanted to do with his life. Underneath his weariness the man seemed to be carrying something that was keeping him going and he didn’t need Seokjin to tell him that it was them. It might be that happy sappy crap as Yoongi had so aptly described it, but it was true.

Did he look that way too? When people looked at him would they see signs of change on him too? Or did they just see worn clothes and a weariness that seemed to be deep set in his bones? Would they know that the only reason he was still stable and able to keep going right now was because of the boys around him?
“You know,” Seokjin said as he suddenly stopped walking, holding a hand out as if to make them stop too. Namjoon didn’t stop but he did slow down and turn slightly to look back at him, seeing his friends all stationary on the sidewalk. Luckily for them there were no people on their side for they were blocking most of it up and there was just a tiny space to squeeze through between them and the storefronts. “I was thinking… We’re practically in Seoul now, right? We’ve got another day on a train if that and we’re there, yes?”

“I’m pretty sure we’ll get there yeah,” Namjoon agreed with a curt nod. “In fact we’ll probably get there by tonight if we’re lucky. We’re already through a couple of cities in Gyeonggi, can’t take us that long.” He let this hang in the air for a few seconds before finally stopping, shoving his hands into his hoodie pockets. “Why?”

“This could be the last day of the adventure,” their eldest friend said after a moment of contemplation. He was very much right with this statement and none of them seemed to be able to think of something to say in reply to it.

It was almost as if a sudden melancholy had fallen over them, a sadness that they were nearing the finish now after everything. Had any of them really thought that they would make it to this point? For quite a long time it had seemed that they wouldn’t, that not all of them were going to come back home just like Taehyung had claimed. It was a rather dreadful thought, one that Namjoon himself wouldn’t have even imagined possible just those few weeks back, but he had seen how close they had all come to falling apart, from destroying each other and themselves. The adventure had been near apocalyptic for them and yet here they were right now, still standing and so close to Seoul that they could practically see Namsan Tower on the skyline with its glowing lights like a beacon at the end of a long runway.

“You’re making it sound like we’re not gonna see each other again,” Jungkook eventually said to break the silence in a quiet voice.

“No, it’s not like that,” Seokjin corrected, “I just meant we’ll be home soon and well…” Their friend paused as if trying to sort his words out, and after a few seconds he just sighed. “Never mind, it’s not important.”

“What were you thinking?” Jimin asked as he looked between the pair of them, confusion clearly visible on his face.

“I thought that we should spend the last day together as enjoyable as possible, you know? Not
running around like crazy to jump on a train, shoving terrible food down our throats and sleeping away the entire day because we’ve got nothing else to do. We should go to a restaurant,” Seokjin declared as he glanced over them all. Yoongi, as sharp as ever, made sure to ask about the cash first. “We’ve got about 80,000 left. The rooms were cheaper like I said, we didn’t have to pay for two doubles so we saved quite a bit of money, and the cheap fast food junk we’ve been eating helped too. What do you say, huh? One final treat before jumping the last train to Seoul?”

“Fuck yeah!” Taehyung shouted as he pump his fist up in the air. “Let’s go stuff our faces with real food!”

And with that the boy started racing off down the street, but not before he grabbed hold of Hoseok’s wrist and dragged him along with him. Jungkook grinned, his fears from earlier clearly dissipated at the mention of food, and then he chased after them as fast as always. Namjoon marveled at where they got the energy from before seeing a rather shocking sight. For once Yoongi didn’t pull Jimin back and tell him to not run after them, always concerned that the boy would accidentally race out in front of a car, nor did he loudly tell him not to. No, his friend had no time to do either of those things for Jimin grabbed hold of his hand and he took a few steps forward, shooting an encouraging expression at him. Then Yoongi was letting him pull him down the road too, at a light jog at first before the boy picked up speed and actually made him run. The man looked back over his shoulder at them, pulling a tortured expression to make them laugh. It was both a joke and reality for he knew that it would be just a few streets before Yoongi’s cigarette ruined lungs gave up on him and made him have a terrible coughing fit.

“They’re gonna order one of everything,” Namjoon said as he started walking down the street behind his running friends, Seokjin just a few feet ahead of him.

“Are you complaining?” the older man asked as he grinned at him.

“No, I think I’d be more than happy to eat absolutely everything. Sign me up.”

It took Taehyung maybe a minute of frantic searching to find the right restaurant for them. The boy passed quite a few and he shoved his face up against the windows, cupping a hand around the side of his face as he did to cut the glare on the glass so he could see inside better and leaving little foggy clouds of breath in his wake, but it seemed that he was looking for something in particular. Perhaps a certain style, perhaps checking out the interior to see how many people were inside. Yet when Namjoon passed by the ones he had ignored he couldn’t seem to figure out what it was that he was searching for, or at least until the boy found the right one and dragged Hoseok inside, Jungkook so close to them that he didn’t even have to hold the door and they entered in a trio. Jimin and Yoongi entered right after them and Seokjin pulled the door open and waited for him but he stayed back on the curb for a moment to study the building.
Dark lacquered wood exterior with a single large glass window that ran most of the wall, the restaurant was only small and had a low roof that made it look like a hanok. He had expected traditional slide glass doors and yet they were more western pull and push ones instead, but the difference wasn’t jarring or aesthetically displeasing but it rather balanced with the large window instead. There was a sign hanging on the door that revealed it to be open but no menus or advertisements stuck to the glass which made the building look immaculate. The paving flags inside had also seemed to have been brushed clean of trash and any stray leaves, also creating the image that the restaurant was clean and pleasant. Seokjin just stayed in the doorway, holding the door and waiting for him and so Namjoon stopped this study to accept the door from him and step inside, reaching up to pull his hood down as he did.

The first thing he noticed was that the floor was bamboo rather than linoleum or wood and he glanced at his boots before seeing that none of his friends had taken them off, too distracted with their hunger to even care about being respectful. He contemplated removing his own boots before deciding not to. Set across the bamboo flooring there were a dozen or so low tables that were the same dark wood as the exterior and in the center of most of them there was a briquette on which pots would be placed and heated up, or meat grilled instead. Floor cushions around each table that were a lovely cream that matched the walls and went so very well with the slightly green tinged bamboo. Their friends had already seized the table right in the middle of the room and Taehyung had grabbed another one and dragged it across the floor to add to theirs and expand it. He had no idea if they were even allowed to do that but it hadn’t stopped the boy; he wasn’t good at following instructions or rules. There was no one standing behind the counter across the restaurant or at any of the other tables and he briefly wondered if it was closed before recalling that the sign in the window had said open. Seokjin moved to go over to the table and after a few seconds he did so too. When he sat down on the low cushion he glanced over them all: Jungkook to his left beside Jimin, Yoongi on the adjacent side, then Taehyung and Hoseok and Seokjin facing them, the adjacent side to his right free and not in use. At the sound of the kids incessant babbling, or perhaps the noise Taehyung had made dragging the table over, there was a quick flash of movement across the interior and then a woman popped her head through the open doorway.

“Oh,” she said before letting out a soft laugh. “We usually don’t get anyone this early in the afternoon.” Her hair was mostly grey and pulled back neatly, braided to the side so that the length dangled down to near her ribs. She hadn’t dyed it to try and hide the colour and for some reason Namjoon found this incredibly beautiful in a way he couldn’t seem to put his finger on. She looked perhaps in her sixties and yet she ducked underneath the counter and moved with a grace that seemed to ignore age. “Especially not a bunch of young men.”

“Men? You hear that Kookie, you’re officially a man!” Taehyung announced as he leaned over to clap his hand on the boy’s shoulder. Jungkook let out an embarrassed laugh as he lifted up the menu and looked at it.

“You don’t seem to be from…around here,” she said as she looked over them all. “Are you from Seoul?”
“Yes, but we’ve been pretty much all over the country,” Seokjin said with a laugh.

“But now you’re going home, yes?” He made a noise in agreement and the woman sighed softly. “I’ve never been outside of Gyeonggi in my lifetime, is that not funny?”

“Never ever?” Jimin asked as he studied her, curious look on his face and his mouth slightly open.

“I never needed to move, but sometimes customers enter here from other regions, from foreign countries, and I feel like I can see a little bit of what it’s like outside of Gyeonggi by looking at them; at their faces and clothing, listening to the little inflections in their accents and- oh dear, I’m rambling right now. I should ask you what you want to order.”

“We don’t mind the rambling,” Namjoon said with a smile as she slipped a little notepad out of her skirt pocket, the material grazing the floor and covered in soft floral patterns. “We’ve barely even looked at the menus, it might take us a few minutes to order, you can ramble away.”

“Where’s the most furthest tourist ever came from?” Jungkook asked as he looked up from the menu at her. “Like China? Or somewhere further than that?”

“Oh, we’ve had families and students from China, Japan, Indonesia, Australia, France and one time, one time we even had a student from Africa. Kenya I think, she was an assistant teacher in a local elementary school, teaching English to the children. She used to come here everyday and sometimes we would talk like this. She had many interesting stories.”

“We’re not interesting at all,” Hoseok said with a laugh, scanning the menu as he did. “We’re just a bunch of kids from Seoul.”

“Perhaps, but you have the dust of the road on you now; miles and miles of road from what I can tell. You probably have some wonderful stories to tell in the future.”

“Let’s hope,” Yoongi said in a quiet voice.

After a minute of discussion they managed to settle on ordering and it didn’t take very long until the woman was bringing in trays with their orders on; first the side dishes that were placed all along the length of the table: kimchi, namul and pancakes filled with herbs and vegetables, and then individual or shared main meals. Namjoon stirred his own order of kalguksu whilst Yoongi fiddled with the
briquette and turned it on so that the bulgogi and vegetables could be grilled. The young man
diligently made sure that it was cooked through, turning the strips of beef over with a pair of tongs
and occasionally pulling a little piece free for them to sample when the kids stared at him long
enough and made him relent. Seokjin and Hoseok shared an order of japchae because the boy had
once again wanted to order it, his love of it so strong that it was rather amusing that he would happily
eat it over meat unlike the others that had instantly demanded as much meat as possible. Jungkook
had wanted kimchi jigae like always whilst Jimin settled for some naengmyeon, and Taehyung just
made sure to sample a little of everything.

“Any more deep things to say to us today?” Jungkook asked as he sipped at his stew, eyeing Seokjin
as he did. The eldest looked at him for a moment before asking him to clarify. “It seems since you
decided to ditch that philosophy course you’ve been saying some pretty heavy and deep shit.”

“Ditch what?” Taehyung asked as he shoved about three pancakes in his mouth, voice so muffled
that it was a miracle any of them could understand what he was talking about. “What’re you talking
about, ditching philosophy? Since when?”

“Didn’t you hear?” Namjoon said, chewing a mouthful of noodle and sweet potato as he looked up
at the two boys. “Seokjin’s gonna ditch his college course and start again, gonna become a teacher.”

“What, no I didn’t hear this?” Hoseok’s expression was completely puzzled and he looked like he
had just been told that the earth was in fact flat. “When did this happen?”

“You were both asleep,” Jimin said, leaning over the table to offer Taehyung a chopstick-full of
noodles after he had given him puppy dog eyes for the last minute or so. The boy eagerly accepted
them and made several noises of appreciation. “It was the night we jumped the freight train outta
Dangjin and you were both asleep when he mentioned it.”

“You all talked about it?” the boy asked as he looked over them all. “What did you say, huh?”

“Well, what do you think about it?” Seokjin asked as he prodded at his own bowl of japchae. “Good
idea, bad idea?”

“I think…” Hoseok shifted on the low floor cushion and made a soft noise under his breath as he
thought it over. “I think it’s a good idea.” He let this hang in the air for a few seconds before adding.
“I mean, you clearly weren’t enjoying it. You shouldn’t force yourself to do something like that. I
think that…a lot of kids and young adults these days, their problems are because they want to please
other people instead of themselves. They want to impress family and friends more than anything else,
to the point in which they abandon their own wants and needs for the sake of it. You want to be a
“What kinda teacher, huh?” Taehyung asked, eyeing up Jungkook’s bowl as he did.

“I don’t know just yet, but I’m thinking middle school or high school. Truthfully, a lot of people want to teach elementary kids because they think it’s easy. Kids that age love their teachers and they behave, it’s not a challenge or anything like that. But I want to be able to help kids that are starting to misbehave, to question things and make mistakes. I want to be able to guide them and educate them too.”

“You guided us pretty fucking well,” the boy said as Jungkook relented and offered him a sip from the bowl. He took a rather deep drag on it and handed it back with a grin before going back for more pancakes. “We’re no better than middle schoolers most of the time.”

“Your highest level of education is fucking middle school!” Yoongi complained as he finished grilling most of the meat and shifted to place it on plates for everyone. “So don’t you call high school graduates and college dropouts middle schoolers.”

“Good point,” Taehyung agreed, “I literally have the education of an eleven year old…”

“I’ll remember that next time you call me eleven,” Jungkook retorted.

“Yeah yeah but you’re still eleven to me, big man.” The boy snorted laughter and slapped his hand on the table. “I still can’t believe the owner lady thought he was a man. God.” The youngest sighed wearily and decided that his food was more important than an argument with their friend. “That’s probably the funniest thing that I’ve heard in a long time, I swear to fucking god.” He let his laughter fade out into a sigh and then also moved to look at Seokjin, having to lean forward over the table to make eye contact with him around Hoseok. “It’s a good idea. I know I don’t have many of those and my advice is pretty fucking useless but it is.”

“It’s not useless,” Seokjin said in a quiet voice, “I value all of your opinions no matter what.”

“What if you need to teach the kids sex ed?” Taehyung asked, neutral expression lasting of all of three seconds before he grinned at him. “What then?”
“Then I won’t ask you for advice on that particular matter,” their eldest friend retorted and they all burst out laughing, the boy trying to look offended but failing.

“Ah, train alert!” Jungkook called from his perch just a little further down the line from them. The boy was seated on the remains of a brick wall that was mostly gone now, nothing more than a few chunks that were so aged and pitted that there wasn’t even a single piece of graffiti on them. He had volunteered to hang back and keep an eye out and because he seemed to have the most keenest vision of them all they had agreed, and as luck would have it the boy had sighted the train with nothing more than the slightest hints of smoke on the hilly horizon. Namjoon squinted and yet he could barely see the spurt of light grey smoke for it looked just like a cloud to his eyes. “Let’s wait and see if it’s actually usable before celebrating, huh?!” At his words Taehyung hunkered back down again with a sigh, already in the act of getting ready to jump it. Jungkook was right, it could be another passenger train and there was no need to get their hopes up only for them to be crushed again like the last four trains that had passed them so far.

“We should pray for one to come,” Hoseok said with a smile.

“Pray?” Yoongi scoffed around his cigarette. “Might as well do a tribal dance and summon a fucking train, for all the good it’ll do you.”

“You’re such a cynic.”

“Realist, I much prefer realist.”

“We prayed a few days ago,” Seokjin explained as he turned to look back at them, kicking a stray pebble off across the line as he did. “Did you know that? When Jimin was in hospital we prayed that he would come out of it OK and he did. I don’t really believe in miracles or prayer either, it was Tae’s idea-”

“What?” the other man asked in sheer disbelief, shooting a look at Taehyung as he did. “Shut the fuck up.”
“It was Tae’s idea to pray and so we did. I like to think of it as a comforting thing rather than a miraculous thing. It did comfort us after all.”

“I dunno whether to laugh or cry,” Yoongi remarked as he took a drag on his cigarette. “Kim Taehyung praying like a little choirboy. That’s not really your thing, you should stick to being a little pissant instead.”

“Hey, even choirboys can be bad,” Taehyung said. “And maybe this choirboy fucked a priest or two?”

“Jesus fucking Christ Tae.” The boy beamed at him before once again turning his attention back to the line, in the direction that Jungkook was waiting. He was sitting on his backpack, hunched forward with his arms folded over his knees and he looked ready to bolt at the slightest chances of a train showing up.

“Not a freight train!” Jungkook hollered and they all groaned in annoyance.

“Seriously, you guys really prayed huh?” Namjoon confirmed that it was so and Yoongi thought this over for a moment before letting out a soft laugh and putting the cigarette back in his mouth. “Fucking babies.” Seokjin asked him if he had prayed and he shook his head. “Nu-uh, I don’t do shit like that.”

“Not even once?” Hoseok asked. “Not even a little thing like “please god, don’t let this happen,” nothing like that?”

“…OK, maybe a little thing but-” Yoongi tried to carry on talking but they all started laughing and calling him a fucking baby too and he gave up with a disgruntled expression. The train that the other boy had seen hurtled down the tracks in front of them with a series of rumbles and the hiss of steam escaping and it was once again out of sight a mere moment later.

“Wait, you guys all seriously prayed for me?” Jimin asked. The boy was sitting a few feet down the line, cross-legged on the gravelly soil with his backpack hugged against his chest. He had decided to not wear the dressing on his cheeks today and Namjoon thought that the cuts were healing up pretty damn good, but he kept the bandage in place just to sate them and reduce the chances of him picking at the stitches that hadn’t dissolved yet. “Are you messing around with me or telling the truth?”

“It’s the truth,” Taehyung said with a nod. “We prayed for you together, we even held hands like a
bunch of kids but we did it. And I know I said about a million other prayers in my head after that. Don’t get me wrong, I mean I wasn’t really praying to god or anything like that I just…it’s like Seokjin said, it was a comfort. Maybe someone up there heard us, some magical being that granted us our wish, maybe it was just the work of the doctors and nothing more. But I still fucking prayed and I ain’t ashamed to admit that.”

“What did you all say, huh?” Jimin asked with a wide grin.

“I can’t remember,” Hoseok said as he tossed a pebble from hand to hand, “I just remember being so scared that I couldn’t even think in words but mostly images. I’ve never been so fucking scared in my life, I probably cursed a couple of times during my prayer.”

“A couple of times? Pretty sure mine and Kookie’s prayers were entirely curses,” Taehyung joked. “Nah, I don’t remember it that much either but I know I said pretty please at some point. What’d you think about that Yoongi?” The man breathed out a lungful of smoke and kept any biting retorts to himself.

“I just kept saying, “let him be OK” over and over I think,” Namjoon said as he shifted and hugged his own knees to his chest. “That weird mantra just over and over, as if it would come true if I wished it hard enough. And it did, so I should probably start chanting “get money” over and over and see what happens.” His friends laughed at this and he placed his chin down on his worn jeans with a sigh. “But let’s not talk about that, huh? Let’s talk about good things and not about being scared.”

“I agree,” Seokjin said as he shoved his hands into his coat pockets and looked at the field across the line, at the grass that was dancing softly in the breeze.

“Hey! Another train!” Jungkook declared, tone a little more hopeful than it had last time he had announced the sight of one. “Let me just…hey, I think it might be a freight train! I’ll run ahead and check! Hang on!” At the boy’s calls they all shifted suddenly, jumping to their feet and grabbing backpacks and holdalls in preparation just in case. Namjoon brushed soil of the back of his jeans absentmindedly as he squinted to try and see what was coming up over the hill but it was just another spurt of smoke and the sound of it approaching and nothing more. “Fucking jackpot!” Jungkook hollered with a laugh and this time there was no annoyed groans, they all sighed in relief.

Taehyung moved to run along the line in the direction of the other boy to jump the train and Hoseok ran along after him. Clearly they didn’t want to nearly miss it like they had last time. Namjoon did the opposite and instead moved back a little so that he could jump it last, after it had breasted the annoying hill and was on more even ground instead. After a minute or so he could feel the ground trembling from the train rather than just hear the engine roaring away, and then he caught sight of it getting closer: a black metal dragon flying down the tracks. The three boys were already inside and
Jungkook and Taehyung were leaning out to look at them, arms waving as they held out hands to help them inside. The youngest grabbed hold of Jimin’s hand and pulled him into the carriage in a quick and clean backwards motion, and the other boy seized onto Yoongi’s upper arm and waist, dragging him in a little more messily because of his heavy and awkward holdall bag. Seokjin tossed his own bag in and then quickly moved so that he could climb inside and Namjoon waited until it got close to him and then grabbed onto the side of the door like always, using the momentum so that he could swing himself up and into the carriage with little effort.

“That went better than last time,” he joked as he sat down on the floor and shoved his bag away behind the wall.

“Yeah, good thing Kookie actually saw the train this time,” Taehyung remarked, getting a hard punch in the arm as a result from the younger boy.

“Finally, no more walking,” Yoongi said as he crawled along the carriage and lay down in the centre with a groan, legs and arms spread out like a starfish. “Don’t make me move until we’re in Seoul please.” Namjoon could relate to that sentiment as he leaned back on his wrists and let his legs dangle out of the open carriage. He looked just about ready to get comfortable when Jimin decided that he was going to crawl across the carriage too, lying back and using his stomach as a pillow. “What the-” Yoongi jerked and lifted his head up to look at him before settling back down again.

“Hey, no sleeping remember?” Seokjin said. “This our last day so we have to spend it doing something.”

“What exactly can we do stuck in a fucking freight carriage all day long?” the other man asked. He had a point, it wasn’t like there was much for them to do at all.

“Let’s play a game; I spy with my little eye something beginning with ‘F’,” Taehyung declared.

“Flowers?” Hoseok asked and he shook his head. “Flies?”

“This game sucks,” Jungkook muttered before looking across the horizon. “Tae, there’s nothing here that begins with with the letter ‘F’.”

“Sure there is, it’s so obvious! How haven’t you figured it out yet?” the boy retorted and it actually worked, as they all - excluding Yoongi and Jimin - turned their attentions to the sight outside as they tried to figure it out.
“F…F…F…” Seokjin said under his breath before laughing. “I’ve got nothing, honestly.” But Taehyung remained silent as he waited for them to get the right answer. After a whole minute of silence he announced that he had given up.

“Freight carriage.” Yoongi said from behind them.

“Nope.”

“Friends?” Namjoon asked, looking over them all as he did.

“Ha! No, try again.”

Eventually they all caved and asked him what it was, more annoyed at that point than curious, and so Taehyung lifted an arm and pointed out of the open door.

“Fucking trees.” For a moment they all went silent and then Jungkook let out a heavy sigh. That was almost a signal and then they all started complaining about how he had cheated, just making Taehyung’s grin get even bigger as they did. “Never play clean, always play dirty. That’s rule number…seventeen.”

“Fine, my turn,” Hoseok said. “I spy with my little eye something beginning with ‘A’.”

“That’s too easy,” Taehyung replied, sticking his thumb out and poking at his chest, “an asshole, am I right?”

“Well done, got it on your first guess.”

“Not the first time I was right about something,” the boy said as he crossed his legs in front of him. “I’m right about a lot of things.”

“Oh yes, like what?” Seokjin asked with a confused expression. Taehyung thought this over for a moment and then he smirked. “Please share with the rest of class.”
“I was right about…Hoseok and Yoongi and- ah!” Before he could even finish talking Hoseok managed to snag an arm around his neck and pull him into a tight headlock, and though the other boy cried out in surprise that same grin was still on his face. “I don’t know but I will say!” He choked out, hands going up to try and pull himself free. “Yoongi and Hoseok are ga- shit lover boy, I didn’t know you liked this kinda stuff.”

“Get his legs!” Yoongi shouted as he shifted to crawl along the carriage, moving so fast that Namjoon couldn’t help but laugh at him. He had said that he wasn’t going to move and yet here he was, as quick as a flash. Hoseok dragged him away from the open carriage doorway, the boy’s legs flailing and kicking him and Jungkook on the thighs hard as he did. Yoongi managed to switch places with Hoseok rather smoothly, arm locking around his head tightly as he grabbed a handful of his hair with his other hand, the boy shoving Taehyung’s legs together and then sitting on his boots so that he couldn’t wriggle or kick free.

“Choke-play and a threesome, I think I died and went to heaven!” Taehyung said, somehow laughing even though he was currently being choked within an inch of his life.

“I got a nice little rhyme for you: I don’t know but it’s been said, Kim Taehyung is fucking dead!” Yoongi said as he roughly ground his knuckles on the top of the boy’s head, messing his hair up as he did. Despite this threat there was a grin on his face and Namjoon took that as a sign that he wasn’t going to actually kill the boy…or at least not yet.

“Why do you gotta…deny the love?” the boy grunted. “Embrace it, admit the…love.”

“I think he’s gonna pass out,” Jimin remarked with a laugh.

“Why don’t you admit it, huh?” Yoongi asked and he muttered that he would if he could fucking breathe so he loosened his grip somewhat. The boy took a quick gasp of air and then coughed.

“I love you guys,” Taehyung said, “and I love guys too, there I admitted it. Your turn.”

“I love you fucking idiots,” Yoongi said as he let go of him.

“Nu-uh, do the whole thing.” Their friend said as he reached up and rubbed at his throat, where a red friction mark from the young man’s jacket had been left against his skin.
“I don’t wanna talk about love it’s…weird.”

“I love everyone,” Hoseok said as he held his hands out. “Is that good enough?”

“But you love me the most right?” Taehyung joked with a wink.

“…Maybe.”

“I love you guys too, though sometimes you make me wanna retract that statement.” Namjoon said as he glanced back over his shoulder at them.

“Kookie, you wanted a deep quote didn’t you?” Seokjin asked with a smile. “Well I’ve got a fitting one right now. “Love is a serious mental disease.”” The youngest snorted laughter and asked him who had said that. “Plato if you can believe it?”

“Well, if love’s a mental disease then I must be fucking nuts,” Jungkook retorted, “cos I love you guys.”

“Definitely nuts,” Taehyung agreed with a curt nod.

“Seriously guys, I’m not messing around right now; I really do love you all. You know?” Jimin said in a quiet voice, fiddling with his bandage as he did. After a few seconds Yoongi moved to take his hand in his before he ended up undoing it.

“We know,” Namjoon said with a smile as he studied him. Then he turned back to look at the sight in front of them. Freeways and bridges instead of fields now, a sign that they were travelling through a packed industrial area. When he looked to the right he knew that they were getting closer and closer to Seoul with every passing second even when they couldn’t see it on the skyline.
Chapter End Notes

*Lyrics taken from Alkaline Trio "Mercy Me"
Writer(s): Derek Grant, Matt Skiba, Daniel Andriano
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Boys That Survived

Seokjin took a deep breath and let it out slowly, leaning out of the carriage so that he could wait for the perfect moment. He had tight hold of the door frame so that he wouldn’t fall out for the metallic floor vibrated underfoot terribly, sometimes enough so that it felt like they were travelling over tiny little speed bumps. From the rest of the carriage he could hear his friends talking amongst themselves, nothing important at all but rather just doing so to stop a silence falling. He was glad for it for he didn’t want the air to feel cold and distant right now; alien to them after everything that they had been through together. But the sight of Seoul was so clear on the skyline now that it would be only a few more minutes until they ended up on the outskirts and then it was time to blow the train and make their way into the city by foot.

He didn’t know the exact time. He could ask either Namjoon or Taehyung for it because they both had watches - a miracle that the boy’s one was still working after everything - and yet he didn’t want to. He could judge it from looking out at the sky instead and he was currently estimating it to be around 7pm. Earlier on they had observed the sunrise as a group, eyed the myriad of pastel colours that Jimin had described as looking like ‘a dream’ and now he was looking at the complete opposite. On the horizon there was still a burnt orange that glowed with such an intensity it seemed to pulse like a living thing. The low clouds that floated just above the setting sun were tinged slightly with the colour but mostly they were a deep purplish colour that resembled a bruise, clashing against the darkening blue that was the rest of the sky. Some people might find the sight somewhat dreamy but to him it didn’t contain the same emotions that the sunrise had made them all feel. The sunset made him feel what Yoongi had said; a coldness and a loneliness that seemed to permeate down into his bones. He didn’t know why he was feeling this, or even thinking it, for it was nothing more than a simple sunset, but over the course of the past few weeks he had learnt to find both enjoyment and misery out of the most simplest of things.

Seokjin had always thought himself as already an adult, mature and developed to the point in which he wouldn’t grow any further. He had reached that intangible point in his life where nothing would could make him feel such raw emotions like a child and be unable to control them, and yet he had found that to not be the case at all. The ‘adventure’ had revealed to him that he still had ways to go and for some reason this made him feel a sense of relief. Adult in age but not yet nature…he couldn’t imagine a better stage to be at right now.

From across the carriage there was a sudden outburst of laughter and he turned his head to look at his friends. It seemed that Taehyung was in the midst of explaining a story of some kind, one that Jungkook had gotten himself mixed up in too for the boy occasionally added words or gestures here
“...and I mean I nearly puked honestly,” Taehyung said as he leaned back on his wrists. “So I’ve decided I’m gonna try and break the sound barrier, and I need Kookie to help me.”

“I don’t think that’s even possible,” Namjoon remarked with a furrowed brow. “Not on a roundabout, nu-uh, you need jet planes to break the sound barrier.”

“You’re underestimating my abilities,” Jungkook said with a wide grin and the young man scoffed and said it was pretty obvious why he was. “Hey, if you try and dream hard enough anything can happen, yeah?”

“That’s a good attitude to have,” Seokjin agreed as he turned back to look out of the carriage doorway. Namsan Tower was a glowing beacon now, blues and reds and whites all up the length like the signs at the end of an aeroplane walkway. Didn’t it feel like they were getting ready to land soon enough; coming down from a high that had lasted a very long time and was now over? There had been turbulence along the way but they hadn’t crashed yet and now...now they were getting ready to touch ground once more. “Time to move kids,” He bent down and grabbed his own holdall bag, slipping it up onto his shoulder for convenience. From behind him he heard the others shifting to collect their own, to get to their feet and come over to where he was standing.

“It’s funny,” Hoseok said as he peered around the doorway, sticking his head out so that the wind ruffled his hair. “We’ve been walking under the stars and now we’re back home I can’t see a single fucking one up there.” He followed the boy’s gaze up and sure enough he was right. There was a hazy cloud around the capital that was most certainly the result of light pollution, blocking out all stars for miles and miles in length. They could barely even see the moon because the white sliver was hidden behind a bank of clouds.

“We’ve all got stars inside of us, we don’t need to see any of ‘em,” Taehyung said as he shrugged his backpack up roughly onto his shoulders. It was a little amateur but poetic enough and Seokjin could imagine seeing it in his old philosophy textbook. The train seemed to be slowing down now, drawing close to a depot that wasn’t their old trainyard but rather another one outside the city. That meant that they had to jump now and so the boy did so. The sound of his boots stomping down on the ground echoed and one by one they all jumped down out of the carriage.

“I’m never gonna ride on another train,” Jimin announced, “freight or passenger.” He stretched his legs and then bent down to touch his toes with a grunt. “Too uncomfortable.” As the boy straightened back up again the train went down the tracks at a moderate speed and they all watched it go.
“Would you rather ride a train or walk?”

“…Good point Kookie.”

“Wait, I know where we are,” Yoongi said as he quickly glanced around them. “We’re right by the freeway that crosses over Han River. There’s the coach station just a few blocks down from here.”

“Then lead on,” Namjoon said and the other man started walking along the train tracks before making his way around the depot. They all followed after him because it seemed like the best idea and it wasn’t like they could really get lost on their way into Seoul. They weren’t in a rush either, and he found himself almost hoping that it would take them a little while longer to get into the city. It took them just a few minutes of walking however until signs of life started to appear, mostly in the form of cars rolling down the road beside them and the flashing neon signs that revealed 24/7 stores and clubs.

When the coach station came into sight Seokjin found his eyes drawn to the glowing glass and metal building and for some reason he couldn’t seem to take his eyes off it; so much so that he actually ended up stopping on the sidewalk in front of it. It took his friends a moment to realise that he had stopped and then they all did too, staring back at him in confusion and interest. After a few seconds Hoseok quietly asked him what was up and he didn’t even look over at him.

“You know…I haven’t seen my parents in months,” Seokjin said, blinking languidly as he watched the people inside the building moving around; going from the ticket counters to the benches inside, and then to the doors that led out onto the lot where the vehicles were parked. “I’m such a bad son.”

“Months? Try years,” Taehyung said with a laugh.

“I was thinking that…that I want to see them again,” he said as he finally dragged his eyes away from the glass walls of the station. “My parents, I want to talk to them about everything: college, life, my troubles, what I want to do with my life. They should know, they deserve to know.”

“They’re down in Anyang right?” Jimin asked. “Man, we didn’t even go through there on the stupid train. You could have jumped off and-”

“Take the cash,” Taehyung interrupted suddenly. “The leftover cash from that lady. Take it and get a
ticket and go see them.”

“Take the…oh I couldn’t, I mean-” yet his words were cut off as the boy reached over to grab his upper arm and steer him in the direction of the steps that led inside, “it’s not my money, I couldn’t take it. It’s not mine to use and-”

“We want you to use it, right guys?” Taehyung asked and they all echoed agreements as he shoved his way inside the station. “Consider it a thank you for you putting up with us and not smacking our heads together.” Seokjin said that he could still do that and his friends laughed and carried on forcing him over to the counter. He tried scanning for the timetable but Namjoon beat him too it, reading out the last coach that would run to Anyang out loud and making them all panic.

“Ah, it’s leaving in like two minutes! Hurry, hurry, hurry!” The youngest boy shoved him right in front of the counter and for a moment Seokjin was too confused to even be able to speak, staring at the woman rather dumbly. Then he managed to ask for the ticket to Anyang and she asked him if it was return or one-way. He told her one-way as someone’s fingers fumbled into his jeans pocket and pulled the envelope of cash out.

“That will be…26,000₩,” she said as the machine on the counter started whirring, little ticket stub coming out of a slot. Taehyung slid the cash across the counter and she accepted it before pulling the ticket out and getting change. Then she held it out for him to accept. “Enjoy your trip, but please hurry before you miss the coach.”

“I will, I uh-” hands seized hold of him and practically dragged him across the building. Seokjin felt eyes on him but he didn’t see anyone looking at them disdainfully. Rather he saw amused expressions, everyone clearly seeing how much of a rush that they were in and taking great amusement in the way the kids kept chanting “hurry!” as if that would make things go any faster. Yoongi actually jogged over to pull the door open that led to the lot and then he was being forced across it in the direction of the vehicle.

“Ticket?” a man asked, standing in front of the door with a little box hanging around his neck on a lanyard. He managed to hold it out to him and he took it from him before tearing a little stub off the end. “You made it just in time son.” He said with a laugh as he gave him it back and then he moved out of the way to let him board.

“Get a window seat!” Jungkook hollered as hands pushed his back hard and nearly propelled him up the steps to get inside. Seokjin stumbled and then glanced down the length of the coach before seeing one near the back that was free. He quickly walked along the centre aisle and sure enough he saw his friends darting past too, following him to his seat. When he got to it he shoved his holdall up on the overhead luggage shelf and then dived into his seat. After some fiddling he got the window open a
“Talk about lucky!” Namjoon said with a laugh as they all crowded around the window. He was tall enough to not need to stand on tiptoe to look at him but Yoongi and Jimin were not. The eldest tried shifting around and settled on moving back a few feet to be visible but the youngest just jumped up and down like a puppy trying to reach a letterbox.

“Say hi to your parents for us!” Hoseok called and he confirmed that he would.

“The adventure’s finally over now, huh?!” Jimin asked.

“No,” Seokjin said with a head shake, “this chapter in our lives is finished now, but there’s always more to come! Does a story really end, huh? We’ve still got so many more left and I can’t wait to see what it’s going to be like!”

“There’s the deep shit,” Jungkook said with a wide grin and down the coach he heard the doors closing over with a pneumatic hiss.

“The trainyard! Meet me at the trainyard!” Seokjin called as the engine started rumbling loud, feeling it vibrating the seat he was sitting in.

“I’ll send you a note!” Taehyung shouted and then the coach was starting to pull out of the lot.

He shifted in his seat and saw that his friends had started running alongside it, but they couldn’t keep up with it for very long. The youngest boy managed to race beside it until it was pulling out of the lot, hand pressed up against the window so that when he finally had to stop he let a hand print smeared on the glass.

Seokjin studied this as the sound of them all yelling their goodbyes echoed on the air and came in through the open window.
He stopped running and dropped his holdall so that he could hunker forward and place his hands on his thighs, trying to catch his breath as he did. He didn’t drop his head however because he wanted to watch the coach until it was completely out of sight. It took a few seconds to do so and he didn’t blink once, staring at the back of the blue and white coach until it rounded a corner and carried onto another main road; one that they had been walking along just a minute or two ago. Jungkook took several deep breaths in through his nose and let them out of his mouth and his racing heart finally started to slow down. That sudden burst of energy had came out of nowhere and he would soon regret it now that he felt a little dizzy and his knees seemed to be wobbling; the result of exhaustion and lack of food for most of the day.

“Woah Kookie, slow down man slow down!” Namjoon called, possibly from the back of the gang if Yoongi had decided to not run like always. He heard their boots pounding on the tarmac lot and then felt something slinging around his shoulders and dragging him back upright. Taehyung unconsciously leaned against him as he also tried to catch his breath and they both stared at the road in front of them. It was now filled with random vehicles instead of the coach: cars, trucks, buses and motorbikes, and their friend was nowhere in sight. Seokjin had officially left the adventure first in order to pursue his own and that meant one thing; they were all going to start splitting up now.

“Shit, I’m too old for this…” Yoongi mumbled breathlessly and he could just picture him sitting down on the curb with a grimace, slipping his cigarettes out a moment later in the most beautifully ironic way.

“He’s probably the only one that wants to see his parents right now,” Hoseok said as he wandered forward a few feet and then stopped, scuffing his boot on the curb as he shoved his hands into his coat pockets.

“Uh…don’t remind me,” Jimin said in a quiet voice. “I’m trying to ignore that part.”

“He deserves to see ‘em again,” Taehyung tightened his grip around his shoulders. “They better be proud of him too or I’ll jump a train to Anyang and cause shit, I swear I will. He deserves something good and he’s gonna come back and start college again and he’s gonna make it. I know he is.”

“We’re all gonna make it,” Namjoon said after a moment of thought.

“I’ve gotta get back home,” Jungkook said as he bent down and retrieved his bag, “but I don’t wanna go right now, you know? Not yet. I wanna stay with you guys a little longer. Even a few
“You kids have all gotta get back home,” Yoongi said and when he looked back he saw sure enough that he was getting his packet of cigarettes out. “Start thinking of good excuses now, yeah?” He stuck the stick between his lips and flicked his lighter on, setting the tip alight and shoving it back into his pocket. “Try and avoid saying anything that might sound a little illegal.” Jimin sat down beside him and he offered him the stick so the boy accepted it and took a quick drag. “Kookie, don’t go hang around a park alright? Go home and stay there.”

“Sure thing dad,” he replied with a grin.

“Come on Kookie, I’ll walk with you,” Namjoon said, holding his arm out at him. After a moment of thought Jungkook moved over to him and his friend slung his arm around his shoulders just like Taehyung had, so he placed his own one around his waist and let his holdall bag swing from his free hand. He could hear their friends still talking as they started walking down the street but he didn’t really pay attention to what they were saying. Instead he just looked at the paving flags under their boots, listening to their steps in perfect sync: left, right, left, right. They reached the end of the street and carried on walking across an empty road, walking in the direction of the night market stalls. From there they would take several blocks to reach his house and there was no parks or clubs at all for him to have to pass.

“Hey, you OK?” his friend asked him, patting his shoulder with his hand as he did.

“Yeah, I’m OK I guess,” Jungkook replied as he looked up and scanned the market that was getting close to them. The stalls were on both sidewalks and they were packed with people, all kinds of goods on display. He saw food stalls with great bubbling pans and hissing briquettes on which meat and vegetables were being braised; that sold jewelry that was dangling from holders and dancing in the soft breeze; that sold little tourist shit that would appeal to non-Seoulites and foreign tourists. He thought about the fact that they had been to countless cities and yet they had no tourist goods to their names, no snow globes and key chains, pens with their names on or little teddies with flags stitched to their tummies. No, they all had scars instead. At least they wouldn’t break if dropped on the floor.

“You guess?”

“Yeah I mean,” he paused for a moment so he could think his thoughts out, both of them smoothly steering around the first stalls and walking in the gutters instead. “I guess it’s ‘cos I’m scared of what my parents are gonna say to me.”
“For being out for so long without letting them know where you were?”

“Yeah, for acting like a little asshole,” Jungkook agreed with a nod. “I didn’t even leave them a note, I just ran off. They probably think I’m dead right now after all of that time. I always ended up going back home after a week or so, it’s been nearly a month now Namjoon. I’m scared that they just might kill me.” He laughed to himself and turned his head to look at his friend. “What am I supposed to say to them?”

“...Not sure Kookie, really not sure,” Namjoon said in a soft voice. “All you can do is apologise. Tell them that you made some stupid mistakes and that you’re sorry for causing any pain. You were in a bad place Kookie, we all were. We all did stupid things to go on this adventure and now we’ve all started to move forward again and realise that we need to change.”

“Saying sorry though, will it even mean anything to them?”

“Sometimes words don’t do shit, but sometimes all you can do is say them,” his friend said as he scanned the road for any approaching cars. “They mightn’t seem like they mean anything at first, but they will sink in and have meaning, you know?” Jungkook made a noise under his breath in agreement. “But the best way to make sure your words mean something is to follow through with them. No more running away, no more nights spent fighting drunks and making them worry about you, yeah? No more arguing.”

“I don’t wanna argue,” he explained, “but I’m scared that they might just start yelling at me and then I won’t be able to stop myself. That’s what always happens.”

“Think about what happened last time you got in an argument.”

“It was…it was the night when Tae came back and…shit, it was the night of Jimin’s accident, wasn’t it?” Namjoon confirmed that it was as he pulled him up onto the sidewalk because a car had drifted down the road and it was safer than walking in the gutters. Jungkook felt his skin go freezing cold at the thought and there seemed to be something stuck in his throat making it hard for him to swallow. “I started that stupid argument when I promised that I’d start afresh. I punched Tae in the fucking mouth man…”

“Truthfully speaking Tae needed something to sober him up. Maybe not a punch, but he needed something. I’m not mad at you for punching him, but we all know what happened ‘cos of that punch.”
“Yeah, Jimin nearly died ‘cos of my actions, ‘cos I got mad and lashed out like always. I…” Jungkook managed to swallow hard and when he inhaled he didn’t like the way his breath seemed to whistle in his throat. “I didn’t know that I was that bad. When I get mad I tend to blackout, I don’t really see what I’m doing and I never have to think about it ‘cos it’s always a stranger that I’m fighting with. It was never a friend.”

“But now you know, you finally understand why we didn’t want you fighting.”

“I do, I finally get it now. I don’t wanna argue with my parents. I don’t wanna risk losing control like that and doing something stupid, like hurting them I mean, shit Namjoon what’s a person to do if they hurt their own mom?” Namjoon told him that he wasn’t going to do anything like that but Jungkook stopped walking and persisted. “I don’t wanna hurt people but I do. I do ‘cos I start yelling and I lose control. That could happen tonight. It could. What if I punch my own mom in the fucking mouth too, huh?” He knew that he was talking a little too loudly and that pedestrians were looking at them but he couldn’t help himself.

“Hey, listen to me,” Namjoon said in a stern voice. “You’re not gonna do anything like that. You’re not. You’re just scared and you’re telling yourself that you will but you won’t. You’re a smart kid Kookie, real fucking smart.”

“I feel like a fucking kid right now,” Jungkook muttered under his breath, hating the way he lower lip quivered and he felt tears forming under his eyelids.

“You’re not gonna fight with them, you’re not gonna hurt your mom, OK? Listen to me.” His friend started walking again and he had to drag him along with him. “You’re gonna go into your house and the first thing you do is you apologise. They might start yelling, they might not, but just apologise. If they start yelling then just block it all out, yeah? Think about something else, think about us instead. Don’t go against your apology no matter what. Even if they say some pretty mean shit, don’t do it. Go to your room, lock yourself in, push the bed in front of the fucking door if you’ve gotta do it. Give them time to cool down and then go back to it. What do you do?”

“A-apologise.”

“Then what?”

“Think about the good things, don’t get mad.”
“If things get crazy?”

“Go into my room and-and-and luh-lock the door,” Jungkook said as he felt the first tear rolling down his cheek.

“Your room is your sanctuary, yeah? Like Hoseok’s room used to be his. Not the streets, the streets are dangerous.” Namjoon reached over and brushed the tear off his cheek before he could even try and do it. “No more running away from our problems, yeah? Just facing them now, like an adult.”

“I won’t run away.” Jungkook nodded in agreement as he took a shuddering breath and closed his eyes. “Not after everything.” He let his friend guide him through the market and down the streets without another word or glance in his direction. He mostly kept his eyes glued to his own feet but when he felt that they were drawing close to his house he decided to look up instead, following the traffic as it flowed down the street beside them. Namjoon remained silent too in the time that it took them to reach the house, not even offering a little bit of advice here or there like usual, or to talk about his own situation either. When his friend finally stopped walking he saw that they were right at the front path of his house and he studied it intently. It seemed like forever since he had seen those neat paving flags that led up to the porch, the little patch of grass to the right trimmed and free of even the slightest piece of trash.

“I feel like…like I just returned home from war,” Jungkook said after a moment of contemplation. “It’s weird, like a kinda emptiness. I’ve fought my battles and now I’m done.”

“You might be done but you’re not alone, OK. Remember that.”

“I know, I know. Thanks.” Jungkook crossed the path and stopped on the porch and held his friend’s eyes for a moment. “Where are you going now, huh?”

“Me?” Namjoon sighed heavily and looked up and down the street as he shoved his hands into his jeans pocket. “I think that I’m…I’m gonna go back to my shitty little apartment room and get cleaned up. Make some food. Finally call my parents after everything and see what’s going on. Maybe I might be able to fix that up a little, maybe not. I gotta try yeah?”

“Yeah, hey Joonie?”
“Yeah Kookie?”

“You should go to college too,” he said. “I mean, you can still try and follow your dream with Yoongi, nothing’s gonna get in the way of that I know, but you could still study whilst doing it. I know that you regret not enrolling, doesn’t now seem like a good time to start?”

“…You’re right, I’ll look into that. It’s not gonna be easy but I might just manage to ace the entrance exams.”

“Come on, we both know you’ll ace them without trying.” Jungkook laughed and his friend shrugged with a smile. “Don’t go into any of those stupid gambling dens.”

“I won’t, technically I can’t ‘cos I got no cash.” Namjoon started walking down the street, turned so that he could still look at him as he did. “Remember what I said, yeah?”

“I will,” he replied as he turned to look at the door, “bye man.” He waved his friend off and then reached up to hold his hand in front of him. He curled his fingers up against his palm and took a deep breath before rapping his knuckles on the wood. Then he lowered his hand and tried to not squirm as he waited to see if someone would answer it. He didn’t want to count in his head but he seemed powerless to stop it and so he just closed his eyes and waited. When he reached ten he heard something on the other side, the unmistakable sound of a lock being drawn back and then he opened his eyes again, breath leaving his lungs in a wheeze.

“…you, oh god Jungkook is that you?” He heard his mother’s voice as she struggled to pull the lock back in her worry and haste and the door had only just swung inwards when he pushed his way inside. Before he could even stop himself he dropped his bag and wrapped his arms around her in an embrace so tight he heard her breath escaping in a surprised noise, and then her sobs. Jungkook had never really noticed the fact that he was so much taller than her already and that her face buried against his chest because she couldn’t even place it on his shoulder. “Jungkook! I was so scared, so scared and-”

“I’m sorry,” he said, speaking so fast that he wasn’t even sure that she would understand him, “I’m so sorry, I won’t do anything like that again. I won’t, I promise I won’t. I’m so sorry, oh my god.” Jungkook didn’t release her but he shifted so that he could hold onto her arms instead. “I’m so sorry for everything and I-” He caught movement from the corner of his eye and that was when his father stepped out into the hallway from the sitting area.

“Jungkook.”
“Please forgive me.” Jungkook dropped to his knees on the floor and leaned forward to press his head against the wooden flooring. For a moment the house fell silent and he just stayed in place and waited, waited to see if there would be angry yelling or not. But then he heard something he had not expected.

The sound of his father taking an unsteady breath.

“Son, come here.” Jungkook lifted his head to look up at him, seeing his father reaching up to remove his glasses so that he could pinch at the bridge of his nose. The man was trying to stop his own tears and he slowly got to his feet as he stared at him. His father gestured for him to step forward so he did and then he felt his arms going around his shoulders, like Namjoon had done so just a few minutes ago. A second later his mother also joined the embrace and Jungkook felt those annoying tears from earlier starting to roll down his cheeks again. “Welcome home son.”

“I’m home,” Jungkook sobbed against his shoulder, “I’m finally home.”

The view in front of him seemed strangely unlike the Seoul that he remembered. Perhaps it was because Hoseok had very rarely left his house in the late evening hours, perhaps it was because he had a new perspective on life now? That seemed a little silly to him, a little bit dramatic and poetic but right now he felt that that might just be the case. After all he now looked at the streets and roads and found his eyes always drawn to the windows of buildings to try and locate ‘help wanted’ fliers when he had never done that in the past, found himself scanning for hostels and street signs when he no longer had any need to. They weren’t going to be crashing in some cheap buildings with broken shower fixtures and filthy carpet pile tonight. Tonight they were back in Seoul and that meant going back to actual homes where their own beds and mostly family awaited them.

It meant going back to his bedroom again; his own little private world that he had locked himself up in not that long ago.

It seemed like an eternity ago that he had spent his entire days in that room, hardly moving at all and just lying on his bed with one of those hideous aches pounding away in his head. In reality it hadn’t even been a month but it felt so much longer. The thought of once again locking himself away from the world wasn’t even at the back of his mind, he was not even picturing it at all. No more headaches
to worry about, stopping him from even looking at his phone - which he no longer possessed of course - because the glare from the screen hurt his eyes too much; that stopped him from studying as he couldn’t really see the words on the page because they were blurred to the point of indecipherable. He still felt that terrible withdrawal from his Xanax that made him feel nervous and uncomfortable but he was going to kick it. The sensation in the pit of his stomach was horrid but it was more bearable than the headaches at least, even when it made his mouth feel too dry and his hands shake to the point where he thought it was a miracle that he hadn’t dropped anything. He had vomited for the first two or so days so much that he had felt he was going to die but now that seemed to be passing. He would get the contractions and the unsettled stomach but at least wouldn’t bring up the food that he had eaten and waste it. He wasn’t energy-less and drowsy all of the time and that meant he was starting to recover. Just like Taehyung and his shakes from the lack of alcohol, he was going to kick it and he was going to find something better.

Hoseok shoved his hands into his coat pockets and he sighed as he eyed the road in front of them. Wide and filled with traffic coming from several different directions, they were right in front of an intersection of some kind. To the right would lead back out of Seoul and onto the freeways of Gyeonggi, to the left went further into the city. He could see various buildings and yet it the late evening he couldn’t really make out what they were. Only if they had neon signs in the windows or hanging from the sides could he tell, but most of them looked to be large warehouses. Of course the industrial side of Seoul was so far out from the centre, where the loud factory machines couldn’t possibly disturb the thriving tourism and the stink of smoke and gasoline wouldn’t be an underlying scent that mingled with the parks.

“Tae,” Yoongi said suddenly, “don’t go to clubs or bars. His voice caught him by surprise and he turned to look back at the last little grouping of his friends. The young man was sitting on the edge of the curb with Jimin right beside him, both of them sharing a cigarette, and Taehyung was standing just a few feet down the sidewalk. It seemed to have gotten the other boy’s attention too for he dragged his eyes away from the road to look down at him.

“In fact don’t go just yet. Stay here until I think of something. You’re not gonna roll into some fucking bar now, after everything and get drunk,” Yoongi said as he breathed smoke out his nose roughly. “You’ve come too fucking far and I don’t want you ruining it.”

“I won’t go anywhere,” Taehyung said as he held both hands up, palms outwards towards them. “Trust me man, I’m not gonna fuck up.”

“Where the hell can you go though?” Jimin asked, breathing smoke out of the corner of his mouth. “Back to that hostel you crash in? I don’t think that’s a good idea…”

“Yeah? Me neither…”
“Not the hostel,” Yoongi said as he took the stick back and tapped ash off the end, tongue sticking out to wet his lips slightly before he stuck it in his mouth. “That place is bad news. You’ll get trapped in a cycle again if you go back there, returning to your own haunts. It’s like—”

“Picking at a scab until it bleeds,” Hoseok muttered, “and opening up an old wound again.” The man nodded in vigorous agreement. “They’re right, the hostel isn’t the right place to go. The temptation to lax back to drinking and stealing is too much. This is meant to be a new start, not a return to the old.”

“Ain’t got much choice lover boy,” Taehyung retorted with a shrug. “That hostel is my home.”

“You’ve got parents,” Yoongi said quietly.

“I do, but that’s opening up old wounds too. I can’t see ‘em right now. I’d need to down three bottles of vodka after that experience, I’m not ready for that.”

“Then stay the night at my house,” Hoseok offered. For a few seconds the other boy just stared at him blankly as he processed this, head cocked ever so slightly. When Taehyung didn’t respond he added. “Just the night. We can sort something out tomorrow, figure out a way to help you from lapsing back onto the booze. You can’t go back to the hostel, you can’t sleep on the streets. Come home with me.”

“Your parents—”

“My parents should thank you, should thank all of you, for helping me,” he explained as he waved the boy’s words off. “You’re not gonna cause shit Tae, it’s just a night. I’m so tired I’ll probably pass out the minute I step inside the house. There’s no alcohol in my house for you to worry about.”

“Is there any pills?” Jimin asked quietly, cigarette back between his fingers just like Yoongi held his. Hoseok explained that he had nothing in his room at all, that he had only had that single bottle, and the boy let out a relieved sigh.

“What do you say?”

“...OK, I mean if there’s a problem or anything I can leave, I totally—” he reached over and snagged hold of the boy’s wrist. He had briefly realised that it was the first time he had done so, for it was
usually Taehyung that grabbed him and wouldn’t let go, and Taehyung seemed to realise this too for he looked down at his fingers in confusion.

“See you guys soon, right?” Hoseok looked at the other pair and they both nodded in agreement. “Let’s not wait too long though. Let’s start meeting again more often.”

“Definitely.” Jimin said with a slight smile.

“Don’t get into trouble without us,” he joked.

“Wouldn’t dream of it kid,” Yoongi said as he lifted his hand and waved his fingers at them. “Catch you later.”

Hoseok started walking down the street in the direction that they had been heading before Seokjin had distracted them with the coach station. He was still a little confused as to where they were, scanning the streets to try and locate how far away from his house he was, but after a few minutes Taehyung took the lead. The boy scoffed that he was lost and that he was pretty clueless when it came to the streets, making sure to brag that he knew exactly where they were. He told him that he didn’t believe him and this resulted in his friend grinning at him and pulling his wrist free to sling an arm around his neck. Yet it appeared that the boy was telling the truth for he didn’t stop once as he guided him down the narrow side streets that seemed to cover the capital. How he could possibly know the streets this personally was still something that Hoseok couldn’t wrap his head around but it came naturally to the boy; after all he had lived on them for quite some time now. He wouldn’t have lasted very long without using his brain.

As they started to get into areas that he recognised he did start to think of what his parents were going to do when he knocked on the door. Would they be mad at him? He had told them that he was staying with a friend for a little while, but he knew that he had overstayed that excuse by nearly two weeks. A single week would have been pushing the boundaries and to make it even worst he hadn’t even been able to be contacted after his phone had been stolen on him. How would they react when they saw that he had brought a friend back with him, a friend that he was a little too intimately acquainted with to really call a ‘friend’ at this point? Hoseok glanced over at the other boy and yet Taehyung seemed to be too busy navigating to feel the weight of his gaze on him. To put it simply they were in a rather difficult situation right now but it could all be solved another day. All he wanted right now was to see his parents again, apologise and rest, everything else was irrelevant at this current point.

“You sure this is a good idea?” Taehyung finally asked when they were just on the block that his house belonged to. He had noticed that the boy had slowed down considerably for the past minute or so and that he seemed to be dragging his feet.
“I only have good ideas,” he retorted without missing a beat, making his friend laugh at the remark. “Tae, you’ve got nowhere else to go. If my parents don’t want you in the house then…well then I’ll go too. We’ll find somewhere to stay for the night together. I don’t want you being alone right now.”

“Maybe we should find somewhere instead?” The boy stopped walking suddenly, eyes glued on the familiar sight of his house just down the street in front of them. “Just you and me, we don’t need to worry about—”

“I need to go back,” Hoseok interrupted as he started walking again, dragging him forward as he did. “My parents need to know that I’m still alive. That’s a last resort Tae, and right now we haven’t even tried the first option.”

“They won’t want me in the house,” Taehyung said in an uneven voice and he realised that the boy was scared. Taehyung didn’t want to go into the house because he was no doubt thinking of his own family home across the capital, the one that he hadn’t been near in so long now that he wondered if the boy even remembered what it looked like. The rickety and rotted away windowsills, the boarded up attic window that had been broken for so long Hoseok had never seen it in any other state, and the unpainted fence that ran around the porch that they had all painted on as teens until the boy’s father had caught them in the act and had whooped Taehyung’s ass hard enough that he had been unable to sit down for days.

“Tae.”

“No, listen to me. I’m that fucking unwanted dick that shows up one night outta nowhere and no one wants ‘em in their life ‘cos they just ruin everything and they’ll see that when they look at me.” The boy was seconds away from digging his heels into the paving flags and he really wouldn’t be that surprised if he started whining at the back of his throat like a whipped dog. “They’ll see that and I—”

“Tae, my parents aren’t like that OK? They’re not going to act like that so just calm down.” Hoseok stopped just in front of the fence and he could see that the sitting room light was on, the window open to let a breeze inside. “We’re going to go inside and you don’t have to talk if you’re scared. I’ll talk for you and—”

Hoseok heard the sound bleeding out through the window before he caught sight of movement and when he turned his head he saw his mother leaning out of the open gap.
“Honey!” she practically shouted. “Is that you Hoseok?!”

“Oh shit…” Taehyung muttered under his breath and a moment later the front door flew inwards and Hoseok saw his father stepping out onto the porch.

“Come here,” the man said as he lifted an arm up and gestured at him, so he snagged hold of the other boy’s hand before he could run off and dragged him through the front gate towards the man. His father grabbed his upper arms tightly and then made a noise deep in his throat that was trapped between a groan and a sigh. “Where have you been Hoseok?”

“That’s a long story…”

“We called the police and everything!” He let go of his arms and instead cupped his face between his hands and he just looked at his father and waited to see what he would say. “You look…have you been living on the streets?”

“No, I mean…not really.” Hoseok shifted his gaze over to see his mother slumped against the doorway, one hand clutched to her breast as if she was trying to keep her heart from slipping out and landing on the porch step. “I went on a…a trip with friends, well it was more of an adventure and uh…I’m sorry.”

“We tried calling you but you didn’t pick up or reply to any of our messages.”

“My phone was- I lost my phone, I’m such an idiot I know but-”

“Hoseok dear, have you been taking your medication?”

“No,” he replied with a head shake, knocking his father’s hands off his cheeks as he did. “I can explain everything inside, but I don’t want to take the pills any more. I want to try something else instead.” Hoseok looked between them both and he realised that they very much didn’t understand what he was saying. “I feel much better without the pills honestly, I’ll explain everything inside, I promise I will and-”

“Hoseok,” Taehyung said in a voice barely above a whisper, “maybe I should just-”
“Mom, dad, this is Taehyung,” Hoseok said as he lifted their enjoined hands up. “He’s a…a friend. He needs somewhere to stay for the night and I kind of promised he could stay with me. Is that OK?” For a moment neither of his parents replied and he felt the most pressing urge to hold his breath but then his mother shifted and reached up to fix her hair.

“Of course dear, come inside and we can talk about everything. I’ll make dinner, you must both be starving.”

Jimin watched the two boys walking down the street for a moment and then he turned back to the sight of the gutter just under his boots. He had his knees drawn up against his chest and his arms folded up on them and he moved to place his chin on top too, hugging himself because the breeze was a little cold right now. From beside him he heard his friend shifting and the rustling of his jacket and a moment later the man placed it over his shoulders. It was warm from his body and he could smell that familiar scent of cigarette smoke trapped in the material. Yoongi ran his hand down his back for a second or two before stopping and reaching up to pull the nearly used up cigarette stick out of his mouth. The air between them had went silent since the two other boys had departed and he tried to think of something to say to break it and yet he couldn’t seem to do so, instead just listening to the noise of the traffic on the roads around them: the rolling tires and rumbling engines, blaring radios and horns occasionally sounding like screams.

“You don’t wanna go back home, do you?” Yoongi asked after several minutes of quiet. At his voice Jimin turned his head slightly to look at him. The cigarette was gone, the remains lying crushed on the curb beside him with a little black smear of ash. He hadn’t stubbed it out on his skin and looking at those smears on the concrete made him think of how they would have been on his arm not that long ago. Eventually he managed to make a noise in agreement and his friend sighed and leaned back on his wrists, sticking his legs out in front of him regardless of the fact that any passing cars might get close enough to run them over.

“My dad’s home right now,” Jimin said in a quiet voice. “He’s not working and he’ll be drunk, like always.”

“No way to sneak in and avoid him?”
“No, he’ll hear me and he’ll come in and do more than smack me on the back of the head.” He turned his head to look back at the gutter. “He’ll beat the shit outta me and kick me out the house again. I know he will. I’m not exaggerating, this isn’t my fear talking like Namjoon would say. It’s what always happens. Every time I go out with you guys I get a smack for every hour I wasn’t helping him fix up shit. If I’m gone for a day or two then it’s a punch. Why do you think I never used to go on school trips, huh? ‘Cos I’d get the shit kicked outta me when I got back, that’s why.”

“Shit Jimin…”

“Yeah, I’m stuck just like Tae. I go back home and I’m gonna get kicked out again, just like he told me would happen if I ran away in the first place. So I can’t go back, I’m…trapped.”

“No, you’re not trapped,” Yoongi said as he reached over and placed a hand on his shoulder. “We’ll sort this out, yeah? You and me, we’ll sort it out no matter what.”

“I wish I went to one of those crazy schools that students live in, you know? That way I wouldn’t need to go home. I’d have somewhere to stay, so I can be far away from him.” Jimin laughed under his breath. “Like I’d even get into one of those places.”

“C’mon, get up.”

“I don’t wanna go back there Yoongi,” he replied a little too brusquely, “I’d rather stay out here all night and-”

“You’re not going back there, c’mon.”

“Promise?” he asked as his friend slipped a hand under his arm and pulled him upright off the curb.

“I promise,” Yoongi confirmed as he took hold of his hand tightly. “You’re not going back there tonight, we’ll go somewhere else. Let’s talk about something else too, huh? Not your father or any of that shit.” His friend cocked his head down the street and so Jimin glanced up and down it before agreeing that he would walk with him.

“What else can we talk about?”
“Talk about school, what’s going on with school?”

“Nothing much, I skipped three days for this adventure so when the break’s over I’m totally gonna get a detention. My grades were probably sent home in a letter and that’s something else my dad’s gonna kick my ass over. I bet I got Ds in everything like always.”

Down a street that he didn’t really recognise because it was so far out on the outskirts of the city, the darkness that had fallen over the last few minutes making the streetlights all come on and glow like miniature suns. Jimin let Yoongi take him wherever the hell he had in mind because anywhere was better than home, he knew that all too well. The others might tell him that he needed to go back, that his parents needed to know that he was safe, but Yoongi knew just as well as he did that that was not an option. If he went back home he would probably end up in hospital again and that was something inevitable. This wasn’t like Hoseok and his overprotective parents, Jungkook and his arguments that ended in tears and slammed doors, Jimin knew that his situation was something that couldn’t be fixed just like Taehyung’s. He wasn’t going to run away like the other boy, or at least he hadn’t planned on it just yet. He wouldn’t last a single week on the streets and he knew it, he was just asking to get arrested or murdered, but he didn’t have many other options at hand. His life was technically at risk if he knocked on the door to his own home.

Yoongi didn’t say anything in response to this and he could sense that he was thinking. The man had a habit of going off into his own world and thoughts and he knew to just leave him uninterrupted because he likely wouldn’t hear him even if he did say something. Jimin wondered what it was like inside of his head sometimes, always filled with thoughts that never seemed to leave him in peace. It must have been sheer hell being unable to tune it all out and it was no wonder that Yoongi was the way that he was; nervous and prone to smoking to try and calm himself down, always jumping in to try and sort things out because he couldn’t stop himself,

always looking out for him as if he was just as important as his own self.

“Don’t assume,” he eventually said, “‘cos you don’t know. Be optimistic, yeah?”

“I thought you were a realist?”

“Jimin, I’m gonna tell you something right now, OK?” Yoongi said as he glanced back over his shoulder at him. “You’re gonna graduate like I told you all of those days back, you are so just listen to me. You’re gonna make it through high school and then, when it’s done, you can do whatever the fuck you want, alright?”
“So…I could go to college?”

“Yeah, why the fuck not? Study and go there if you wanna.”

“I could fix stuff up?”

“You do it better than anyone else.”

“I could…” Jimin paused and let out an embarrassed laugh before continuing, “I could move in with you?”

“…Fuck it Jimin, you could move in whenever you want,” Yoongi replied as he turned to look back at the street in front of them. Empty block, nothing more than a couple of cars rolling down the road every minute or so. They were in an abandoned area, that much was obvious, and he had a very strong feeling that they were drawing close to his friend’s house. “But you gotta make it through high school, yeah? That’s my ultimatum for you. You know what that means, right?”

“A demand that must be fulfilled or everything is…terminated.”

“See, you’re smart,” Yoongi said with a grin as he looked over his shoulder at him. “That’s my ultimatum. You gotta finish high school ‘cos you need to. It’s good for you, it can help you in the future even if right now it feels like it can’t. If I made it through without killing my maths teacher so can you.”

“Don’t do a Tae.”

“Exactly, but one day I’m gonna get that kid back in school too.”

“Sounds like a challenge.”

“I’ll drag him back kicking and screaming if I have to. He’s gonna need that achievement if he’s not
living on the streets anymore, he’s gonna need at least a high school graduation to his name to find part-time work.”

“…I’ll do it,” Jimin said after a moment of thought. “I mean I’ll try and hope that- no, I don’t need to hope. I’ll do it, I’ll finish high school.”

“Damn right you’ll fucking do it,” Yoongi agreed with a nod. “You’ll graduate and you’ll find a part-time job and then you can start looking at colleges, and you can prove your father wrong. You’re not useless, you’re not a fuck up, you’re better than he’ll ever be. That’s what’s gonna happen. We’ll help you if you need it. You’re not gonna get Ds, you’ll get Cs and Bs and As and-”

“As?” Jimin burst out laughing because he couldn’t help himself. “Seriously Yoongi, that’s not gonna happen.”

“and you’ll prove once or all that you’re not a ‘dumbass’ yeah?” Yoongi held his eyes without blinking and he realised that the man was being completely serious with him. It wasn’t a good-natured joke, he really did think that he was going to be able to achieve things like that. The idea of an A was so absurd that he had laughed at it and yet Jimin saw that Yoongi didn’t think that it was that absurd at all. He seemed to well and truly believe that he could get such grades. It was enough to make him stop laughing and stare at him dumbly.

“I’m…I’m not gonna get an A, you know that right? I’ll be lucky to get Cs.”

“Cs are good enough for graduation, Ds are too but you’re not gonna get Ds. We both know you’re better than that Jimin.”

“You really think I can do that, don’t you?” Jimin asked quietly as he looked down at their hands, fingers entwined tightly. “You actually believe in me.”

“I’ve always believed in you,” he said without missing a beat, “it’s myself that I have trouble believing in. But you, shit Jimin I believe you can do it. You work hard, you’re a good kid and-” Yoongi lifted his hand up so that he could bring his fingers to his mouth, kissing them just like he had that day in the hospital. The same electric sensation of his lips brushing against his skin, so soft and warm, the corners turning up into a smile as he looked at him. “I believe in you with all of my heart.”
Namjoon stopped on the end of the street and looked back to see the boy was still standing on the porch. He wondered if Jungkook had even knocked and waited to see what would happen and a moment later the door shifted and the boy practically tackled his way inside of the house. This made him smile to himself as he thought about what was going to happen, the apologies and the tears. He just hoped that Jungkook wouldn’t give into his fears and argue with his parents even though he knew that he wouldn’t. Jimin’s accident had wrecked him that night and he knew that he wouldn’t possibly repeat it. He hadn’t been lying to the boy when he had told him that he was a smart kid, though he currently felt like he was going to have to drop the kid title soon. Jungkook was really starting to grow up and he wouldn’t be a boy forever, even if that made everything so much more easier. He was turning into a young man now, one that was wise beyond his years and hopefully only going to get wiser.

He pulled his eyes away from the house after a minute and decided it was time he got back to his apartment too. He was tired and hungry and standing on a curb contemplating life wasn’t going to fix either of those problems. There was plenty enough time for thinking on the go and he had a good couple of blocks to clear before he reached his apartment block. Namjoon hefted his holdall bag once more so that it was up on his shoulder and he started walking down the street.

What were the others doing right now? Seokjin was probably asleep on the coach, comfortable and safe within his dreams as he drifted off back down to Ansan where his parents were going to get a rather wonderful surprise. Jungkook was already with his, so what about the others? Still at the coach station, sitting on the curb smoking and trying to figure out what happens next or all on their own ways back home; or wherever home is was for them? Namjoon wasn’t entirely certain what would happen next for him either but he was looking forward to seeing what came his way.

What had made Jungkook think about college and him in the same train of thought? He wasn’t really sure and yet he would be lying if he said that the boy hadn’t made him start thinking about it, even if it was a little crazy. The boy had said that he knew that he had regretted not going to college and though that wasn’t entirely right there was some truth to it. Namjoon hadn’t regretted upsetting his parents back then, when they had argued over it, because he hadn’t been ready at all. What he currently regretted was a mixture of things, mostly the fact that he had never really gotten to challenge himself by not enrolling. Had he have picked a course and decided to drop out like Seokjin and pursue another that would have been better, for at least he had tried something and he felt like that was the biggest mistake he had made in regards to his past decision. Right now he felt a little more ready, felt like he might just be able to start studying if he set himself a goal. The boy was right, there was nothing stopping him from trying and if he managed to get a better part-time job then it would really help him out. He knew that his father would pay for his tuition as soon as he finally settled down and agreed on a course because the man had set up a fund for him back when he had been in middle school, and all he needed to do was call his parents up and say: “I’m finally gonna do it, I’m gonna go to college.”
So why not go ahead and do it?

Namjoon kicked a crushed soda bottle out of his way and listened to it rolling until it landed in the gutter with a clattering noise. What would Yoongi think if he told him what he was thinking? Would his friend support him? Would he think his own possibilities over too? Namjoon knew if he called Seokjin’s family number then his friend would practically yell at him down the line to do it, hell he would probably run all the way back to Seoul and force him down into a chair as he loaded up prospectuses and made him pick one. His friend had been honest with him last year when he had told him that he had been risking a lot on deciding to not enroll and at the time he had just nodded along and hadn’t really listened but now he could see that he had been telling him the truth all along.

Now Namjoon really did feel like he could do it because he finally felt ready.

He was so into his thoughts that it took him a few seconds to see the man standing under the awning of the building in front of him. Middle-aged with facial hair and an open-necked shirt that seemed to be the unofficial uniform of all den bouncers, the man eyed him with interest and he felt his legs slowing down as he got closer to the building.

“Hey, what’re you doing wandering at this time of night huh?” the man asked with a smile. It was a genuine one but he could also sense that it could turn predatory when he needed it to.

“Nothing important,” Namjoon replied with a soft head shake, “just making my way home.”

“Been working all day?”

“…Kinda.”

“You should take a nice break, yeah?” the man suggested as he shifted, cocking an arm up and jabbing his thumb back over his shoulder. “Step inside and blow off a little steam, maybe make some easy cash whilst you do. How old are you?”

“Old enough to know that’s a bad idea man,” he said with a soft laugh, “I’ve been down and out in dens in the past.”
“Gotta build up experience.”

“I’ve experienced a lot of shit these past few weeks,” Namjoon said as he stopped on the sidewalk just a few feet away from the man. He eyed the building and saw that it was just like the one that he had been in back when he had won the car; same brick exterior and porch with an awning that would shelter any bouncers from rain whilst they tried to pick up customers on the streets. He knew that when he stepped inside he would have to take stairs to get to a basement level, breathing in the scent of cigarette smoke and maybe alcohol as he stepped into the actual den. There would be tables everywhere, cards and chips piled like mountains. TV screens blaring images and sound mounted on the walls and stacks of papers placed here and there just waiting to be circled by his hands.

“Tonight could change all of that. You could make a killing.”

“Yeah,” he said, “I probably could.” Namjoon bit down on his lower lip and studied the building for another moment before looking at the man. “Shame I got no cash right now.”

“You get your hands on any and you wanna try and strike it rich you know where to come. If I ain’t here just tell whoever is “Lim recommended you” and they’ll let you in no problem.”

“Sure thing man,” Namjoon nodded as he carried on walking, already knowing that by tomorrow morning he wouldn’t even remember the man’s name and feeling a little burst of pride at this fact.

It took him nearly twenty minutes of walking but eventually he got to his apartment building and he could have sighed in relief at the sight of it in front of him. He went inside and shoved his hands into his jeans pockets to find his keys. He was counting himself lucky that he hadn’t lost them after everything that had happened, that they hadn’t been stolen on him along with his cash and phone. He rode the elevator up because he couldn’t have possibly have braved six floors worth of stairs and he was walking down the corridor when a door popped open at the end.

“Oh hey,” his neighbour Minah said as she pulled the door shut behind her and locked it, “where the hell have you been? Haven’t seen you these past few weeks and I got a little worried, you know?”

“That’s a long story,” Namjoon replied and she smiled slightly as she shoved her keys into her red leather handbag. She was all ready for work, black tube dress visible under her light coat and shoes so high she would be nearly as tall as him if she was to stand beside him. “I’ll tell you another time, yeah?”
“Good idea, if I’m late again my boss will kill me and- oh yes, I just remembered. A position working the bar opened up last night. Want me to put a word in for you and try and snag you it?”

“Please, that would really come in handy seen as I’m pretty much fired from that stupid gas station one. Disappearing for a month with a job wasn’t my smartest idea, right?”

“Right,” she agreed with a curt nod, “I’m just glad to see that you’re OK. A little… worn down but OK, but yes I’ve got to blow now so I’ll catch you later, yes? We can have coffee over the road at Chorong’s little café and you can tell me everything.”

“Sure thing, have fun at work.” Namjoon watched her go before turning back to his door and slipping the keys in. He unlocked it with a quick twist of the wrist and then locked it once more after stepping inside. He dropped his holdall bag on the floor without a single care and went straight into the small bathroom area to finally clean up.

With the streaming shower water he could feel all of the dirt of the road coming free; not just the physical but the mental too. They were here now, in Seoul, they had made it back in one piece. This was his tiny apartment room with the tiny bathroom and kitchenette, with the creaky floorboard just by the end of his bed, and he was inside it. It wasn’t a dream, it was reality and he was finally going to rest his head on his own pillows and not worry about where the next bit of food was coming from, or whether he would be robbed again.

When Namjoon finally got out of the shower and hastily got changed into something comfortable, switching his jeans for a pair of flannel pajama pants and his worn hoodie and tees for a loose vest, he seriously contemplated the idea of curling up in bed and sleeping. But he couldn’t do that just yet. There was a gaping maw under his ribs that demanded food and he still had a promise to Jungkook to fulfill. So he wandered into the kitchen and after realising that he had nothing edible beside a few tubs of instant ramen he filled a kettle up and also collected a mug from the cupboard over the sink to add a herbal tea bag to. That would really soothe his mind, he should probably recommend Taehyung drink herbal tea instead of soju. Then he crossed his room and decided to go for it.

He opened his laptop up and tried turning it on before remembering that the battery was dead and then he got to his feet and awkwardly located the charger wire before plugging it into the wall. This time when he hit the power button it actually came on with a soft whirring noise as the hard drive kicked in. He typed his password with one hand as he reached over to pull his landline phone closer to him. The device was black, a cordless model that sat upright in the port like an antenna, and he stared at it as he let his laptop load. To call or not to call, wasn’t that the most hardest question? He was just about to pick it up when there was a clicking noise from behind him and he shifted to look back across the room. The little kettle was finished heating up, a plume of smoke coming out the top just like the freight trains they had jumped on.
Namjoon got to his feet and went over to it, lifting the kettle and pouring water in the instant ramen pot and then in the mug. The tea bag starting infusing almost instantly, turning the water a light green that would slowly turn to a murky brown by the time it was done. Then he put the kettle back and unplugged it before carrying both items over to his desk by the window. He sat down with a weary sigh and moved his finger along the mouse pad to click on the little internet symbol in the top corner of his screen. White window popping up with a little spinning circle on the tab. He shifted to fold one elbow on the desk and rest his chin in the palm of his hand. But after a few seconds of staring at the screen he felt his eyes moving over to look at the phone once more.

What could he possibly say right now? Would either if his parents even want to listen to him, his mother or his father? He didn’t know but he had told his friends that they should pursue their own wants, had told Jungkook not to let his fear ruin him. Right now his own fear was taking over and Namjoon wasn’t going to fall prey to it. He was going to keep his promise to the boy. Namjoon picked the phone up, scrolling through the electronic address book even as he typed a university name into the Naver search portal. As he clicked on the link he let it load and turned his full attention to the phone. After locating the number he held the device up against his ear and turned back to his laptop.

One dial tone. Two dial tones.

He eyed the webpage to locate what he was looking for.

Three dial tones. Four dial tones.

He had just lifted his hand and had his fingers hovering over the mouse pad when there was a static burst down the line and he heard a voice, as familiar to his ears as his own.

“Hello?”

“Uh, hey mom. It’s me Namjoon.”

“Nam...Namjoonie?” she practically sighed his nickname out and he heard something in the background, something that sounded like another voice asking her what was going on. “Is everything OK? Why are you calling right now?”

“I know, I know I never call and I’m sorry for it. I’m really sorry for what happened this past year but I’ve got good news. I changed my mind. I’m gonna go to college.”
“Yes dear,” his mother’s voice, muted slightly as she no doubt spoke to his father. “He is. He just told me.” A second later there was another burst of static.

“Speak to me son,” his father said, words sounding authoritative but tone really revealing that he was just relieved. Namjoon finally located the course link and he moved his finger over to click on it.

“I hope you’re not busy,” he said as he rapidly scrolled down and eyed the multitude of courses, ‘cos this could take some time…” His father told him that they could talk all night if needed and Namjoon sat back in his chair and felt a smile at the corners of his lips.

“I would like that.”

Just like he had expected the door wouldn’t open easily, even when he twisted the keys and pressed his weight against it. It shuddered in the hinges and the wood groaned loudly but it didn’t budge until he gave in and threw himself against it. Then it did the usual and opened with a suddenness that would have spilled him onto the floor if Jimin hadn’t grabbed the back of his tee and pulled back, saving him from a rather painful fall. The door swung open and stopped as it hit something and he knew that it was his bike, still shoved in the hallway awkwardly. The back wheel spun round and round like a windmill until he reached down and grabbed it, shoving it out of the way so that they could enter the house. Yoongi was briefly aware of how messy the hallway was and he felt something akin to a flush of embarrassment at the sight of all of the trash and yet the boy didn’t even blink at it. After some struggling he managed to get the bike in a better position and he closed the door behind him, sliding the lock in place with a weary sigh. He muttered about the mess under his breath, reaching up to mess with his hair as he did and Jimin laughed.

“You haven’t seen what my room looks right now,” he said with a smirk, dropping his backpack at the bottom of the stairs.

“Yeah, you haven’t seen mine either and-” Yoongi stopped fiddling with his hair as he dragged his eyes away from the floor to look at the boy. “Uh…are you hungry? Lemme go make something to eat.” He hastily crossed the hallway and managed to not trip over anything, which was a miracle in itself, and then went into the open-plan area to get to the small kitchen. Jimin stayed in the doorway for a moment as he watched him pottering about.
Yoongi dumped his holdall and went from cupboard to cupboard, into the fridge and freezer, and he found that he was running low on pretty much everything. A month away from home would do that and the remains of most of the food was going to need to be trashed. Well, there was always rice and kimchi he supposed, and that was better than nothing. So he set about washing rice to go into the cooker and that was when Jimin finally wandered inside the wide room and decided to sit down at the counter on the single stool. He made sure to clean the rice thoroughly, watching the water in the pan start to go a milky white, before rinsing it through and dumping it inside the cooker. After setting a time he hastily dried his hands on the end of his tee and sighed heavily.

“Home sweet home…”

“I’d take this over another hostel room any day,” the boy said with a soft smile as he ran his fingers along the worn counter.

“It’s no different than one really, when you think about it. I’m paying to sleep in it.”

“…Huh, I never thought about it that way.”

The kitchen fell silent for a few minutes and Yoongi wanted to break it but he didn’t seem capable of doing so. He didn’t have to break it, it was perfectly fine the way that it was. But after some thought he decided that it was best to talk about something important.

“First thing tomorrow I’m gonna go to your house,” he said as he folded his arms over his chest and leaned back against the stove. “I’m gonna knock and I’m gonna tell whoever answers that I’m there to pick up your shit. I’ll bring my holdall bag. I’ll fill it with all of your things, clothes, school uniform, books and shit. If I need to do multiple trips I will, I don’t care, and I’m gonna bring it back here. Yeah?” Jimin just looked at him without saying a single thing. “If anyone tries to stop me then…well I’ll make sure that they don’t. Not your mom, I’m sure she won’t give a fuck but if your father’s there then there might be some trouble. But I don’t care, I’m not making you go back there. I’ll tell ‘em that you’re OK, that you’re still in school and that you’re safe, but I’m not letting ‘em see you no matter what. Not until you wanna see ‘em again, OK?”

“…OK.”

“You don’t need to worry about any of that shit, I’ll sort it out for you. You just need to rest and enjoy the last of the break before you go back to school, yeah?”
“So…I really am moving in with you?” Jimin asked. After some thought he nodded and the boy’s lips lifted in a wide grin. “Then I’ll never need to go back home.” The rice cooker started hissing from across the kitchen so he went over to open it, scooping the steaming rice into a bowl and placing it down in front of him, adding a small plate of kimchi and a glass of water a moment later.

“Well, enjoy it whilst it lasts,” Yoongi said as he dragged himself up onto the counter to sit on it, legs dangling over the side. “I’m totally gonna get kicked outta here in a week anyway. No jobs, can’t pay the rent for this shithole much longer unless I break into my savings. Oh shit, I need to call the bank about my fucking card…” He thought this over before sighing. “I’ll do that tomorrow, fuck it I’m too tired for an argument.”

“You can get another job,” Jimin said as he spooned rice into his mouth. “I’m sure that you can. You’ve got a lot of experience.”

“Yeah, I’m gonna have to,” he said with a soft smile.

“I could get a job too,” the boy said as he dropped his eyes to the food in front of him, moving the spoon into his left hand so that he could pick up his chopsticks. “I could work part-time in a mechanics or something between school.” He studied him as he lifted a piece of kimchi off the small plate beside his bowl. “Just like the adventure except this time it’s…our adventure.”

“Our adventure, huh?” Yoongi felt a strange little sensation in the pit of his stomach that he had only started feeling for the past couple of days; a giddiness that seemed to make a fluttering spread up into his chest. Was this what ‘butterflies’ felt like? It was like nerves and happiness all bundled up into one emotion and he didn’t know if he loved it or hated it because it made him feel a little weak.

“There’s a couple of weeks left of the break, I could totally get a part-time job and hopefully keep it,” Jimin continued around the mouthful of food, seemingly unaware of the current swirl of emotions that he was currently floating in. There was a slight blob of sauce in the corner of his mouth and so he reached over to wipe it free for him. “You won’t get kicked out then, we won’t get kicked out.”

As soon as Jimin was finished eating he told him that he would wash the dishes and that he should clean up before resting, so the boy disappeared upstairs to go into the bathroom. Yoongi filled the sink up with hot water and liquid soap and he washed the bowl and glass and plate through thoroughly, hearing the pipes in the bathroom clunking loudly as he did. Not that long ago he had been doing this every day of the week more or less, slaving away over a sink filled with other people’s dishes for the most pitiful amount of cash but not any longer. When he was finished he put them all away again and he was about to leave the room when his eyes fell on the remains of the
Yoongi eyed the shattered plastic box and he wondered if the boy had seen it earlier, and if he had, what had he thought of it? He had actually forgotten about smashing it to shit and yet here it was in front of him, an annoying reminder. He didn’t seem to be able to drag his eyes away from the phone but when the sound of the shower cut off suddenly he found himself coming back to reality. He moved over to the device and bent down to pick it up before crossing the room and dumping it in the trash can. Then he went back over to where it had been and hunkered down, collecting the broken receiver and shards of plastic up in his hand so that he could dispose of those too. He was going to need to replace it at some point just so that he could keep in contact with Seokjin and Namjoon, but right now emails could suffice. When there was no trace of the phone except for the gaping hole in the wall where it had been plugged in he finally crossed the room to go out into the hallway and he was about to climb the stairs when he noticed something.

Jimin’s open backpack and shoes left at the very bottom: frayed and scuffed to hell and back, the laces barely even left from all of the knotting and unknotting they had been through.

He stopped and stared at them before bending down and undoing his own boots, placing them down beside the bottom step. He looked at them for a moment, thinking about how long it had been since he had seen more than his own shoes in that spot; since he had seen his with his parents back in the family home. Then he went up the stairs and peered into the bathroom to see that it was empty. The boy’s clothes were visible sticking out of the small laundry basket but there was no sign of Jimin beyond the droplets of water still clinging to the side of the bathtub. He was probably in the single bedroom down the thin hall so he went inside and turned the shower on so that he could get cleaned up too. He turned the water up high in the hopes that it wouldn’t go cold and it didn’t. Instead it was hot enough to nearly burn his skin but he didn’t mind at all, spending nearly fifteen minutes just letting the stream of water flow down, running through his hair and down his face in rivulets. When he was finished he went along into the bedroom, roughly drying his hair with the towel, and as he stepped inside he saw that Jimin was sitting on the end of his bed. The boy was wearing a pair of underwear that he had grabbed from his own backpack and he saw one of his shirts on him, the one that he had had to wear when he had managed to secure a job as a waiter a few months back before he had been fired for messing up orders too much. It didn’t hang on him as loosely as it had on him and actually looked rather fitted, the sleeves rolled up to his elbows and the buttons undone for comfort.

“Comfortable?” Yoongi asked sarcastically and the boy looked away from the small compact mirror that he had been using to check the cuts on his cheek with.

“Very.”

“I finally get to sleep in my own bed again,” he said as he went over to the drawer that Jimin had left wide open and closed it, slipping another one open to get a pair of clean underwear out. He felt the
boy’s eyes on him as he put them on and then he turned back to look at him, still drying at his damp hair with the towel. “It’s funny, you look like…like you actually belong there. That you should always be there, sitting on the end of my bed…lying in it.”

“Lying? Well, I’m not very sleepy.”

“Yeah? Too bad, I am. I’m falling asleep right now.” Yoongi left the towel on top of the dresser and he went over to sit on the bed, suppressing a yawn as he did. “You’ll have to lie awake and stare at my ugly face.”

“Not ugly,” Jimin retorted as he lay down beside him, head sinking into the pillows. He thought that it was a little crazy that his bed now felt heavenly to him when he had used to hate it, used to find it lumpy and annoying. “I’ll probably see it in my dreams anyway…”

“Sounds like a nightmare to me.” Yoongi sighed as he closed his eyes, feeling the boy’s fingers softly moving along his ribs and down to his stomach, tracing little concentric circles on his skin.

“No, a dream,” the boy said in a soft voice. “One that I’m currently living.”

Yoongi felt himself starting to drifting, eyelids too heavy to keep open for longer than a second and the last thing that he was aware of before he fell asleep was the sensation of Jimin’s fingers on his stomach, of his breath and lips on his shoulder as he whispered “I love you” against his skin.

Taehyung knew that he should probably look up from the table in front of him at some point but it felt too hard. The wood was nice and smooth and he couldn’t see a single mark or gouge in it. His friend’s mother must have taken good care of it because it looked brand new but he could faintly recall sitting at this exact table several years back; when he had been not even a teenager yet and had been a sweet faced child that had never touched a drop of alcohol or even cursed unless it was a whisper behind his hand so no one could see his lips moving. Yet here he was now, several days sober and a shaking mess that couldn’t even look at the other boy’s father for fear that the man would see everything that he had ever done. Every little fuck up, every little fuck, and so it was just so much easier to just look at the table. He had his hands on his lap and they were tangled together to stop him from fiddling nervously, legs crossed up on the floor cushion awkwardly. He was a little
too tall to fit his legs under and he saw that Hoseok was now too. It finally hit him how very… adult
they were and he found the thought disgusting and wished that it would go away.

He didn’t want to be an adult. Adults were all fuck ups too, they just like to pretend that they
weren’t. Just like his dad and his mom, just like every other one he had ever known. All fuck ups.

“So, this isn’t the boy you were staying with, is it?” the man asked suddenly, shifting on the other
seat to look between them both. “You said Min. Something…min I think. Not Taehyung.”

“Uh, no. This is a different friend. Don’t you remember him?” Hoseok asked with a slight smile as
he looked over at his father.

“I remember him,” his mother called from the open kitchen doorway. “He’s the boy that broke into
the house once and ate most of the cookies that I had baked for the church bake sale.”

“Ah yes,” the man said. “I remember him now.”

Taehyung started gnawing on his lower lip as he inwardly winced. Hadn’t he told the other boy that
this was a bad idea? How could they possibly want him in the house after their only memory of him
was him breaking in and stealing food? And yet he heard the softest sound of the man laughing a
few seconds later and he glanced up quickly to look at him.

“The very same bake sale I got food poisoning from.”

“Yes,” Hoseok agreed, “it was that one.”

“Where exactly did you boys go on this…adventure as you called it? Down to Yongin to go visit all
of those amusement parks? Along to the coast to see the beach?”

“We…we kind of went everywhere,” his friend explained quietly. “It wasn’t exactly the plan but we
got lost. That’s why I took so long to come home. We got lost all the way over in Gangwon and we
ran out of money and had to make our ways back home.”
“Gangwon? You two got all of the way to Gangwon?” Hoseok explained that there were more friends than just the two of them and his father made a noise under his breath. “Hear that dear, Hoseok went all of the way to Gangwon and all of that time we thought he was a few blocks down with a friend.”

“Gangwon?” His mother came in through the open doorway carrying a tray and she started placing small plates of side dishes down along the length. “That’s a long way from home honey, how did you get all of the way there?”

“Trains,” Taehyung said after a moment of thought, “we jumped on a train and ended up…getting lost.”

“Oh I’d say,” she agreed with a soft smile as she looked at him. Taehyung held her gaze and saw that she wasn’t looking at him like he had expected, judging him in any way. She was looking at him as if he was a dear friend of their son’s and nothing more than that. “The rest of the meal is nearly finished, should only be a few more minutes. Don’t eat all of the side dishes whilst you wait, please?” And with that she placed the last glass of iced tea down and then turned to go back into the kitchen. The table fell silent and he realized that the boy’s father was waiting for her to come back into the room so that they could speak properly. Taehyung tried to not squirm too much on the cushion and after a moment he felt Hoseok’s hand moving over to go onto his knee. The boy squeezed it tightly and when he spared another glance at the man he saw him eyeing this gesture behind his glasses before he picked up his glass and took a sip of the tea.

“Dinner is served,” his mother announced in a sing-songy voice as she reemerged with the tray and it was obvious that she was too happy about her son finally being home to be angry at him. That might come later, it might not come at all but he doubted that his friend would be that lucky. She moved from seat to seat, placing down deep black porcelain bowls in front of them all. “I bet this is better than what you’ve both been eating on the road, right?”

“Yeah,” Taehyung said as he eyed the bowl of ramyun, brown broth in which thick noodles were coiled up; vegetables and slices of meat floating on the surface. “It is, thank you.” How long had it been since he had eaten a ‘home cooked meal’? He found that he really couldn’t remember, he didn’t count Seokjin’s cooking as that though it would likely be the closest thing to it. His mother hadn’t really cooked. He saw the woman smiling softly at this, at his humble thanks.

“Hoseok dear, about the pills.” She lifted her spoon up and eyed her own bowl. “Why did you stop taking them exactly?”

“They were making me…sick,” the boy said after a moment of thought. “The headaches were so bad that I couldn’t do anything. The pills caused me a lot of pain and I…I had to give them up.”
“But the doctor prescribed-”

“The doctor was wrong,” he said a little brusquely. “I mean…Mom, dad, I’ve got something crazy to tell you right now and I know you’ll be shocked, mortified even, but you need to let me explain, OK?”

“OK…” His father said in a low voice.

“I got…I got addicted to the pills.” Hoseok said in a quiet voice, barely above a whisper. The kitchen went silent, not even the slightest sound of cutlery against bowls or that of breathing. Taehyung glanced between the man and woman to try and gauge their reactions but he saw nothing more than passive expressions. “I couldn’t stop taking them. I accidentally overdosed-”

“Overdosed?” his mother asked in a breathy voice.

“I didn’t mean to I-”

“It was an accident,” Taehyung spoke over him, feeling his fingers tightening around his own spoon. “Hoseok collapsed and a friend, a friend tossed the pills ‘cos he was scared he’d take ‘em again. He was trying to help, it caused a lot of shi-trouble, but he did help.”

“He did,” Hoseok nodded vigorously. “I don’t have the headaches anymore. I feel ill a lot of the time, because my body still wants the pills, but I don’t want to get addicted to them again. I’ll try something new, something better.”

“Better? Like what?” his father asked.

“I…I don’t know, counselling? The doctor mentioned that but I didn’t want it at the time. I was ashamed, of the depression you know?” At the mention of his condition Taehyung saw both of his parents shifting on their seats. “So I didn’t want to…to sit around and talk about feelings. I wanted to hide them away instead but now, now I know that something like that can help me.”

“Because of your friends?” his mother asked quietly.
“Because of my friends, yes. Because they listened and they understood and accepted. I can…” Hoseok paused as he thought his words through. “The pills can’t cure me. It’s not an illness like other illnesses. I’ll have it my entire life and need something healthier for me. For all of us.” He looked between both of his parents and then quietly asked. “Are you mad at me?”

“Mad?” His father reached up to fix his glasses and then he shook his head. “You know what I say? Good riddance to those disgusting pills!” The man’s tone was fervent. “They did nothing but cause trouble! They turned you into a shell of the bright young man you used to be, so damn them!”

His mother got to her feet and came over to kneel beside both of them, slipping one arm around his shoulder in a half embrace. Then her other arm went around his shoulders too and Taehyung felt his mouth dropping open in shock, his heart leaping up into his throat. He could smell her perfume, sweet and dusky, and the feeling of her soft cardigan sleeve on his skin.

“You want to try counselling? We’ll try counselling, all of us together as a family,” the man said in that same tone. “If you want to be gone with the pills, be gone with them. I don’t like them either.”

“Thank you,” his friend’s mother said in a voice that sounded moments away from tears. “Thank all of you.”

“Wuh...what for?” he managed to stutter.

“For helping him, for helping Hoseok.”

Taehyung felt something akin to jealousy over the course of the meal. It was the fact that he knew that this was what a family was supposed to be like, what parents were meant to be like. But at the same time he felt that Hoseok deserved this; much like how his other friends deserved good things too, good families, good jobs, a good education. Maybe he deserved it too, even after everything that he had done, he didn’t know, but he did know that the boy hadn’t lied about his parents. They welcomed him with strangely open arms. They didn’t seem to care about his past, about the shit that he had caused all of the other boys on the road. They were just too happy that their son had come home again, that Hoseok was once again a little like how he used to be. That brightness he had told him about on the freight train all of those weeks ago was starting reemerge, to come out of the shell he had went into like his father had described.

When the meal was finished the boy’s mother suggested that they both go clean up and rest, that they
should get some well deserved sleep after everything they had been through. He could agree with the sentiment, and so he followed the boy up the stairs and into his bedroom. Boots cast off, bags left on the floor out of the way, Taehyung probably should have waited for him to use the shower first but he didn’t want to. He followed after him and pushed his way inside the bathroom before he could lock the door, reaching back to do it himself with fumbling fingers. His friend laughed at him and told him that he should have waited in the bathroom and then he watched him getting undressed, eyes glued to the slightest movement of his fingers, before starting to slip out of his own clothes. Hoseok told him that this was a bad idea and yet he didn’t stop him in any way when he pushed him inside the cubicle on the wall. No tubs in this house, instead a modern cubicle with a glass partition.

Hoseok said that his parents would hear them, lips against his and breath almost a hot as the shower water. He quickly figured out how to muffle himself under the sound of the shower, mouth pressed up against the back of his own hand or upper arm, or even burrowed against his chest. Taehyung also quickly figured out that the cubicle wasn’t very large at all, elbows slamming into the glass partition annoyingly, but that really didn’t matter. He found that he liked planting little kisses all over him. Down his spine where the bones either stuck out in little knobs against his lips, or dimpled down into a little curve on his lower back. On the backs of his knees and thighs, the delicate little creases of his inner elbows, but mostly on the sharp juts of his hipbones; the curved bones like beautiful wings. He liked how Hoseok’s fingers moved along his skin and tangled in his hair, and how he whispered little things down his ear that made his chest almost ache. Taehyung had no idea how long they were in the shower but he didn’t particularly care. He just took his time and enjoyed every precious second until Hoseok was dragging him out and pushing a towel into his hands, skin a little flushed and not only from the heat of the water. Then it was back into the bedroom, sharing the bed just like he had wanted from the very start.

From the slight gap in the window Taehyung could hear the annoying buzz and hum of cicadas and so he placed his head on the other boy’s chest so that his heartbeat would block out the noise. He was pretty certain that he could fall asleep listening to that sound and he closed his eyes and matched his breathing to his, the slow inhale and exhale that made his chest rise and fall.

“Didn’t I tell you that it would be OK?” Hoseok said in a quiet voice, shifting so that he could run his fingers through his slightly damp hair. “That it would turn out good?”

“You did,” Taehyung replied in a sleepy mumble. “But I didn’t believe you ’cos… nothing good ever happens to me. ‘Cept...you guys.” The other boy laughed under his breath and he felt it against his cheek, heard it through his ribs. “The adventure isn’t really… over. It’s only just started… right?”

“Right Tae, go to sleep.”

“Tomorrow’s a new adventure so let’s…run towards it together. All of us…” Taehyung breathed the last word out in a soft sigh as his eyelids finally flickered shut. As he sank into blackness the last thing he saw was the most briefest memory in his mind.
The trainyard, the sky lit up with Venus’ soft blue rays and the sound of his friends laughing.

Chapter End Notes

We did it. We finally reached the end of this adventure and here we are, twenty six chapters, hundreds of thousands of words, and a lot of emotion in between. I would like to thank every single person that read this story and helped support me on the adventure. Seriously, you are all amazing and I would hug every single one of you.

Upon several requests I will post the soundtrack to this story, as I like to call it, both here and in the first chapter so that everyone that reads this story will see it. So here it is here, the 8tracks playlist: X

To quote my own character: “This chapter in our lives is finished now, but there’s always more to come! Does a story really end, huh? We’ve still got so many more left and I can’t wait to see what it’s going to be like!”

Once again, thank you so much!

Maria Anne xxx

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