To Sleep, Perchance to Dream
by AwkwardBeansidhe

Summary

"Hyung, have you ever dreamt you were in someone else's body?" Taehyung asked, eyes tracing patterns into the ceiling of the car.
"You mean dreamed I was someone else? Yeah, sure," Seokjin answered. His eyes were closed, head resting against the window, and he patted at Taehyung's knee absently.
"No, I mean actually dreamt that you were in someone else's body. Not that you were them, but that you were seeing through their eyes, but couldn't control where you looked or anything."
"Um... no? Not really. Can't say that I have."

Notes

This is a work of fiction, inspired by real people and real events, but still just fiction. My version of Taehyung (and all of Bangtan, really) here is not meant to be the real Taehyung. I've tried to stick as close as possible to the actual time line of things, but this is just fiction. I don't think I know what the real Taehyung is like. I hope all the characters feel real and believable, but I'm not at all implying that this is what the real people are like.
Come talk to me on tumblr. See the end for more notes. (And thank you)

See the end of the work for more notes.
Dreams and Nightmares

Taehyung knew it was a dream, but that didn’t stop him from believing it. Everything was bright and loud. Strobe lights flashing, and music pounding in his ears. He thought he was maybe in a club, but he was looking down at his feet and saw high heels and gravel, bits of grass, a piece of gummy glass. Outside a club then. He tried to lift his foot to examine the strappy shoes, intrigued, but his body wouldn’t respond.

The lights flashed red and blue and red and blue and there was music pouring in through headphones while he sat on a curb, hunched against the cold. Cold? It was wet. Raining. He wanted to look up, but his eyes wouldn’t move. His head wouldn’t move. He tried to move his arms, his legs, anything, but he was stuck. His hands were shaking though. The lights weren’t in time to the music at all and it was jarring. He kicked at the bit of glass, watching the skin stretch and pull across his foot as he flexed, feeling the strap tighten around his ankle. He was soaking wet, but he could barely feel each new raindrop that fell. His skin must be numb.

He heard muffled voices, distant and discordant. He couldn’t make out what they were saying, but he knew he didn’t really want to hear it anyway. He wanted to drown them all out, lose them in the thrum and crash of the music, the familiar words and relentless rhythm. His shaking hands grasped his phone tightly, turning up the volume, but why was he wearing purple nail polish?

He woke with a start. Another weird dream. Nothing weird about that. But the details clung to him as he tried to shake sleep off. The cold drops of rain sliding along his arms, the pinch of the shoes against his pinky toes. He shivered. He wasn’t cold, but he felt the chill like a memory. He stretched his feet, rolling his ankles as though he expected to still feel the straps of those shoes restricting his movements, but of course his foot rolled just like it always had. He half expected his hair to be wet, but when he raked his fingers along his scalp, his hair was dry and cool.

He knew he should get moving. They had a busy schedule today and this little nap break had been a nice, if rare, thing. Their new song released yesterday and there was so much promoting ahead of him. He was warm and content, full of excitement and dread. He loved stage time, and there would be plenty of that coming up. He didn’t love all the other stuff. The hurry-up-and-wait of music shows and fansigns. Traveling all around only to see the inside of venues and what little he could sneak a peek at through the van’s windows. He flopped about a bit in his covers, trying to work up the energy to actually be functional.

“Tae, stop thrashing and just get up,” came a muffled voice from next him. He sighed, but complied, rolling out of bed and into the bathroom. His eyes widened in shock. They’d refreshed the dye yesterday and his hair was blindingly orange and sticking up at several decidedly odd angles. He stared at his hands as the water ran over them, brain still spinning with flashes of images from the dream. They hadn’t been his hands, he realized. In the dream. The hands, they hadn’t been his. That’s why he couldn’t move them. He had dreamed he was in someone else’s body. Neat!

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Samantha couldn’t sleep. At least, not in a normal way. Twenty minute unintentional naps and running on caffeine and valium she’d borrowed from her mother. Hardly healthy, but then, nothing was normal anyway, so what the fuck did it matter?

It had been three days and everyone was pushing her to sleep. To eat. To take care of herself, but what was the point? Everything was wrong now. Everything was broken and nothing would ever
be right ever again. Not since the day in the rain. Not since he’d looked at her with such fear and determination in his face as he turned the wheel sharply.

She’d screamed then. Her throat still felt raw with it, but she couldn’t remember hearing it, her voice lost in the sound of glass shattering, metal bending and the sickening crunch of it all. It was all she heard, so she kept music playing all the time. The house was never silent, the radio she’d never gotten around to getting rid of always on. If she had to leave the house, she put earbuds in, a constant background litany of mindless songs.

Tomorrow she would put on her new black dress, the one her mother had brought when she flew in. It was modest and warm enough for the short graveside service. She’d have to wear her boots. There were still two inches of snow on the ground here. She wanted to be back in San Francisco, laughing in the rain that had seemed so balmy and spring-like after Chicago’s bitter winters, but now she was back here. Back home in the dingy grey city where winter would stick around for another month at least.

Tomorrow she would wrap his scarf around her neck and tell herself that this was really happening, that this wasn’t just a horrible joke, a nightmare. She never wanted to set foot in San Francisco again, maybe just avoid the whole state of California for the rest of her life.

She closed her eyes and saw the pulse of the ambulance lights, how they danced on the slick pavement, reflected in a puddle and the patent leather straps of her heels. So she kept her eyes open until her body collapsed.

She pushed herself to do things to keep her hands from shaking. She threw away all the food they’d sent home with her, forcing herself to cook meals she probably wouldn't eat. She cleaned everything. Baseboards and ceiling fans. She pulled out all her clothes from every drawer, off every hanger, and sorted and refolded and rehung and reorganized. She played games on her phone. She sat on the floor of the kitchen, back pressed to the refrigerator and she stared at the tiny tiles on the floor, making patterns and tracing paths that all led nowhere.

And then she was dancing, heart pounding, sweat dripping down the back of her neck, too many lights shining, and yet in all that light, she could hardly see. A few feet in front of her was clear, then blackness and noise. So much noise. The music was loud and she moved without thinking, pushing her body past what seemed reasonable, singing loudly with a voice that wasn’t hers and smiling.

She was smiling.

That’s how she knew it was just a dream. She could feel the heat, the sweat, the burn in her muscles as she moved in ways she never could when awake. Nerves and energy made her skin crawl. She stared at the floor in front of her, patterns of light so different from the floor of her kitchen, but fascinating just the same. She moved with a grace and strength that left her breathless. She wasn’t alone, moving in tandem with other bodies, aware of the space they occupied without even looking. She felt free and alive.

She woke up, slumped over on the kitchen floor, sobbing. The elation still thrummed in her veins. She couldn’t remember ever feeling that alive before. It was just a dream. She was happy, but that was just the dream. With her forehead pressed to the floor, eyes scrunched tight but unable to stop the tears from falling, she tried to shake off the feeling of being consumed with satisfaction and purpose. She had neither anymore. She wasn’t sure she’d have them ever again, and dreaming it was just a slap in the face.

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"Hyung, have you ever dreamt you were in someone else's body?" Taehyung asked, eyes tracing patterns into the ceiling of the car.

"You mean dreamed I was someone else? Yeah, sure," Seokjin answered. His eyes were closed, head resting against the window, and he patted at Taehyung's knee absently.

"No, I mean actually dreamt that you were in someone else's body. Not that you were them, but that you were seeing through their eyes, but couldn't control where you looked or anything."

"Um... no? Not really. Can't say that I have."

"Oh. Ok. Thanks, hyung. Get some sleep." Seokjin murmured his assent with his face smushed against the glass. Taehyung took a deep breath and tried to sleep too.

It wasn't a recurring dream, though he'd had those a few times. The one with the acorn jelly in particular. But this wasn't the same dream over and over again. It was just... the same kind of dream. He was riding around like a tourist inside someone's head. A girl someone. Doing mundane tasks, like cleaning or folding laundry, always with music playing in the background. Sometimes songs he recognized and sometimes things he wasn't sure were even really music, but all the details were bizarrely realistic. He woke up still smelling bleach, or feeling the texture of her shirts. It wasn't every night, or even every time he slept which was a very different, erratic, moving target, but he'd sort of started to look forward to them, these strange dreams of nothing special. He closed his eyes and let the motion of the car lull him to sleep.

He was pacing, phone pressed tightly to his ear. Her ear, really, whoever she was. Some strange concoction of his subconscious to help him process stress and stimuli by imagining very mundane things. Like talking on the phone. The voice on the other end was soothing and calm, but it irritated him. There was no hint of sarcasm or condescension, but he felt belittled and mocked. Which was strange, since he couldn't make out a single word that was being said. He strained to understand. The voice was clear, no distortion, but the words... were in English. He was pretty sure it was English. None of the phrases that he knew, but English nonetheless.

And then it happened. He sighed and felt his mouth open, and out came words. In her voice. English words. Weird. Some of the words tickled his memory, like he should know what they meant, but understanding floated just beyond his reach. How was he supposed to relax and release tension in dreams that left him agitated and confused? Why dream a tense and frustrating conversation in a language he could barely order food in? But the conversation was definitely heavy with the weight of subtext, his voice strained and his words sharp. He could feel it in the way he gripped the phone, the pacing, tapping his fingers on every surface and picking at the label on the bottle of beer on the counter. He wanted a drink. Badly. He wanted to upend the bottle and drink until he was gasping for breath. But he didn’t like beer. And yet, he was craving it, spitting out words with increasing speed, trying to hurry up and get off the phone so he could slide down to the floor and just finish his damn beer already.

“Mom!” he shouted. Or she shouted? He still wasn’t sure how he felt about being sort of a prisoner in some dream-person’s head. But he knew that word, and could hardly believe the tone in which he’d said it. And then there was silence. A thick, oppressive silence. The voice, the mother voice, said something softly and then he was putting the phone down, grabbing the bottle, wet with condensation and lifting it to his lips.

It smelled good. It tasted better. Taehyung didn’t like beer, but this was amazing, sliding across his tongue, tickling his mouth with bubbles, bitter and sweet and delicious. He didn’t want to stop, but he couldn’t keep swallowing so fast without taking a breath. He slammed the bottle down, half afraid it would shatter. Half hoping it would. Cleaning up the mess would keep him from dwelling
on the gnawing guilt from having yelled at his mother. Her mother? He’d never spoken to his mother in that tone.

He ran his hands through his hair. Long hair that draped over his shoulders and brushed against the insides of his elbows. He finished the beer and tossed the bottle in the trash can, taking slow steps. He wanted another one. And one more after that. And then a whiskey. Instead, he kept walking, taking purposeful steps out of the kitchen and away from temptation.

He stepped into a bathroom and pulled the handle of the shower without bothering to turn on the light. He just wanted to stand in the water, in the dark, letting the ambient light from the bedroom highlight enough of the sharp corners that he wasn’t in any real danger. He peeled his clothes off, taking a moment to be briefly fascinated and perplexed by the cotton panties. Wait. Panties. Girl voice. Girl hands. Girl body. He was dreaming himself into a girl body, who was about to get into the shower. Yes. Sweet. If only he could control the eyeballs that were looking at nothing but tile and the shapes of bottles in a hanger over the showerhead. Why was his brain against him seeing naked girls in his dreams?

He stepped into the shower and gasped at the heat. He couldn’t do more than just stand there, being slowly boiled alive as the water ran down his back, through his hair, soaking and drowning him, so much steam curling around in the half dark.

His heart was heavy and his throat felt tight, but he didn’t want to cry. He was tired of crying, hated the ache it left behind his eyes and beneath his ribs. He’d cried so much, and knew he wasn’t anywhere close to done with crying, but he hated it. He hated crying, and so he cried as he slid down the tile to crouch at the back of the shower, letting the water splash and tickle. And he cried. Because he was tired of crying and the only thing to do was weep for the futility of tears.

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“How long have you been practicing?”

“Dunno, couple of hours?”

“Sam, you look wrecked. Take a break.”

“I took a break and now I need to practice.”

“You need to sleep. Possibly eat a real meal.”

“I’m fine, Jess. I just want to get back to normal.”

“This isn’t normal. This is insane. It’s been less than a week!”

“And we’re supposed to perform in three days!”

“I’m not letting you on my stage like this, Sam. You need to take some time off.”

“I don’t want time! I want to just get on with my life!”

“Ok. Fine. I understand that, but I’m in charge of this dance team, and I’m telling you that I don’t think you’re fit to perform right now.”

“I’m fine! Watch me, I’ve got this.”

“Yeah, the moves are great. Always have been. But can you even see your face right now?”
“Jess, I need this. I need to keep dancing.”

“You’re welcome in the studio any time Sam, but I’m telling you to take a break. We’ll perform without you. Just come back when things settle down a bit.”

“What does that even mean? ‘Settle down’? This is it, Jess. This is my life now. This is all I have. Work and dance. That’s it. This is all I have left.”

“Oh, Sam, honey, that’s not true. Oh, it’s okay, come here. We’ll figure this out, alright? You’re still a part of this team and we need you, but we need you to take care of yourself. It’s okay, just wipe your face on my sleeve. I don’t mind. We’ll figure this out.”

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“Bereavement Leave sounds so stuffy and awful. Like something for old people to deal with,” Samantha said, sighing at the stack of paperwork in front of her.

“Well they can’t call it Too Sad To Function Like a Proper Human Leave. It wouldn’t fit in the designated space in the form letter.”

“You are obnoxiously pragmatic.” Samantha tapped her pen on the desk.

“Delightfully charming is the phrase you’re looking for. I’m delightfully charming.”

“Kayla, you are many things. But what I need right now is an adult.” Kayla rolled her eyes and Samantha threw a paper clip at her head.

“Technically, I’m an adult and so are you. At the ripe old age of 21 you can legally do all the things there are to do in this country, except become president and withdraw Social Security.”

“I’m not adult enough to handle this. I want someone to come do the adulting for me. I want an adultier adult. I want…” her voice trailed off.

“Your mom?” Kayla asked softly.

“Yeah.”

“Where is she, anyway?”

“Back in Germany.”

“Already?”

“It’s been a week since the funeral. What was she supposed to do, sit around and watch me be sad? I sent her home.”

“Sam, it’s only been a week. That’s really not a long time.” Kayla stretched out her hand, reaching for Samantha’s shoulder, but she twisted in her chair, gesturing to the towering folders covering half her desk.

“And yet here we are. My dad’s supposed to get his reassignment in a few days and they might be coming back to the States. Life goes on, the world turns, and I have to turn in paperwork with several different kinds of documentation proving that I wasn’t off taking some fantastic vacation the whole time and really was crying my eyes out and dealing with too many people trying to be helpful and instead just getting in the way.” Samantha shoved the papers across her desk, rolling her shoulders as she leaned back in her chair.
She was back at work even though she felt like she was held together with lipstick and willpower. But being the most junior member meant not a lot of privileges and leeway. She had used her precious two vacation days on the special Valentine’s Day trip that had turned into a nightmare and had to scrape together the rest of her time off with red tape, floating holidays and calling in every favor she could manage. Time waits for no man, or woman as she learned, returning to piles of unfinished work, deadlines looming and the ability to give a shit stretched very thin.

“Yeah, well. Cut yourself some slack, ok?” Kayla raised her eyebrows and tilted her head dramatically as she stepped backwards out of the tiny cubicle. “And holler if you need anything. I’ve got permits up through the first of the month for zones 1 and 2, but if you need a hand, you call me, ok?”

“Yeah, thanks Kayla. I will. It’ll be good to be busy.” Samantha gave her friend a tight smile and turned back to the mountain of work in front of her.

It was good to be busy. Busy meant less thinking. Busy meant less time to remember. Busy meant making a visible difference, an impact, a measurable change in the world from having existed for this short period of time. She needed that. Measuring herself in tangible ways was the only thing getting her through these days. She needed to know that it mattered that she was still here.

Trust me, he’d said as they got in the rental car. The whole trip was full of surprises, just like he was. She didn’t know the destination until he’d handed her a boarding pass at the airport. She’d packed her bag with the vague guidelines of a 10 degree temperature range, and a chance of rain.

She didn’t want to think about the rain. It was still far below freezing in Chicago and since it hadn’t snowed in weeks, everything was covered in dingy, drab, grey leftover snow, more oppressive than festive, the holiday cheer long gone. The cold was numbing, which is exactly what she wanted.

Her eyes burned as she stared at the file in front of her. She needed to sleep. She couldn’t seem to fall asleep during normal sleeping hours. Exhausted and dragging all day, the minute she climbed into bed her eyes were wide open and her brain started racing, but here at her desk, she could barely keep her head up. Just a few minutes. She’d just close her eyes for a few minutes.

She was sprawled on the floor, drumming her heels with laughter, desperately trying to catch her breath. Her voice echoed across the space, but it wasn’t her voice at all. This deep rumble that rose into high pitched giggles, that wasn’t her. She hadn’t laughed in almost two weeks, and even when she did, she certainly didn’t sound like this.

“Jiminnie, you’re an idiot.” The words were tumbling from her mouth. She could feel them reverberating in her chest, the laughter and the joy, but the voice was all wrong. Not hers.

“Ow, my ear! My nose!” came a voice from beside her, lighter and softer, but still masculine. Weird.

She felt the body next to her, arms tangled with hers, shaking with laughter too. She was exhausted, every part of her body aching, but was it even her body? She tried to lift her head, to turn and look at Jiminnie but she couldn’t. She was stuck. Her breathing slowed though she was getting increasingly nervous. Without her permission, without her will, her arms stretched out above her head, fingers pressing against something cool and smooth. She was desperate to see it, but she couldn’t move her head the way she wanted. Her chin stretched to the ceiling and her eyes rolled closed. Why couldn’t she open her eyes?

“Samantha!” She started awake, hands slipping off her desk as her head shot up.
“Yes? Yes, I’m awake,” she said, wiping at her face clumsily.

“What was that?” Kayla asked, nose wrinkled.

“What? What’s wrong?” Samantha turned her chair around, then froze, finally hearing herself. “Oh, sorry. I was dreaming.”

“In Chinese?”

“Korean, actually.” Samantha looked around for the file she’d been reviewing. She hadn’t dreamed in Korean since she’d been back in the states. Why now? It had been uncommon enough back when they’d been stationed there. It seemed even more out of place here.

“Oh right. I forgot you lived there. Anyway, wake up. We’ve got a status meeting in five minutes.”

"Yeah. Thanks Kayla. I’ll be right there.” Samantha rolled her shoulders, stretching her hands above her head just like in her dream. Jiminie. Jimin. It made sense, it was a Korean name, but she hadn't had any friends named that when she was at Osan. And she hadn't really spoken Korean in almost a year, so why now? Three years at home and her brain was dragging up flashbacks to high school? She shook her head to clear the lingering traces of the dream, a smile still tugging at her mouth though she had no idea what has been so funny.

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“What’s with the pouty face?”

“I’m not pouting. I’m thinking. There’s a difference.”

“You’re right. Only one of those things terrifies me.”

“Hyung!”

“What are you thinking about, TaeTae?”

“It sounds stupid if I say it out loud.”

“Lots of things do, but that rarely stops you. Oh, don’t give me that face, you know I always listen no matter how weird it gets, but just, you know, spit it out.”

“I was thinking about boobs.”

“And that’s enough information, thanks.”

“Aw, Yoongi-hyung, don’t go. It’s not like that, I swear.”

“I’m going to regret this, but what is it like, Taehyung?”

“I was just thinking, I mean… how do they walk?”

“Boobs? They don’t. They just sort of sit there, on girls, and bounce occasionally.”

“No, ok, yes, but I mean the girls. How do they walk?”

“The same way you do?”

“But don’t they get in the way? I mean, where do they put their arms? They’re always just… there!
Sort of touching them.”

“Girls don’t sit around touching their boobs all day, TaeTae. That’s not how it works.”

“No, no, no, the boobs! The boobs are touching the girls, all the time. Like, just sitting there, and bam! Boob touching your arm. Isn’t that distracting?”

“Is your dick distracting?”

“Yes! Frequently!”

“Okay, bad example. You know what, forget I asked. You just go back to thinking your deep thoughts there and I’m going back to the studio.”
"Is it any good?" Taehyung asked, reaching over with his chopsticks to pluck a piece of meat off the plate and popping it in his mouth without waiting for an answer.

"You tell me," Yoongi said over the sounds of Taehyung's obvious enjoyment, his eyebrows raised dangerously.

"Thanks, hyung," Taehyung mumbled with his mouth full, turning and humming to himself as he danced in a little circle. His mind was racing, songs cycling through as his eyes danced around the room, making connections and associations that seemed so clear and reasonable. He knew the blank stares and confused looks he'd get if he tried to explain them, so he just danced and hummed, tucking earbuds in and letting his nervous energy carry him through. He moved through some of the choreography. He didn’t really need the practice, except for the shoulder shimmy that always tripped him up. Hundreds of times he’d done the move, but his instincts still led him to simplify, laziness taking over. It looked better the way it was choreographed. Cripser. Sharper. More powerful. He wanted that. This song was a different kind of powerful and he liked it.

There wasn't much to do now but wait. His hair and makeup were done. He was in his stage clothes. He had his mic pack. He'd eaten all his food, plus several bites from the more indulgent members. He’d already said hello to everyone, touched base and waved, smiling and patting the friends he only ever saw at these music shows. He’d been to the bathroom. There wasn't enough time for a nap.

Taehyung wished he could sleep, because sleeping meant dreaming, and he was always curious if he was going to dream of her. The mysterious dream person his brain had created. The strange series of dreams, watching through a stranger's eyes, had continued for over a month. He was getting used to the restrictions—not being able to look where he wanted, or have any control over his body at all, but it really was so different from his body that it almost made more sense to just be along for the ride. It was always a girl, and he thought the same girl, who spoke English but listened to BigBang and EXO.

He still wasn't sure why he was dreaming life as some random made up girl, but it was fun. He briefly wondered if he should be worried that he was imagining he was a girl in his subconscious. He wasn’t worried, but maybe he should be. The neat tricks in the dreams, like enjoying tastes and smells that he didn't while awake, were fascinating enough to keep him hoping for more. It was kind of nice to enjoy a dream beer. It was strange to eat beans though. Even in a dream, that felt wrong.

Once he'd dreamed he was driving, hands gripping the wheel tightly, music blasting on the radio as he slowly wound his way through a neighborhood full of snowy lawns and a few leftover holiday decorations. It made him want his own license that much more, to roll down the windows and scream into the night the lyrics to all his favorite songs. He found the dreams where he sat brushing his hair to be the most soothing; the long slow strokes scratched his scalp and pulled as he let rich red strands slide through his fingers, softer than his own hair. Sometimes it was wet, clinging to his back and shoulders in a way that made him want to squirm and twist away, but he never could.

But the hairbrushing dreams were good. He woke from those feeling smoothed out and content. Like the soothing way he fell asleep when the noonas were doing his makeup and he woke up looking like a better version of himself, like magic. He had dreamed he was doing the dishes, a pair of purple paisley dish gloves pulled up to his elbows, Fantastic Baby blaring on a nearby radio, his
mouth moving to the words, hips moving in ways he wasn’t sure he could replicate in real life, with his real hips.

He’d briefly tried after waking, until the memory of the motion caused him to blush and he’d given up. He dreamed he was painting his toes a vibrant shade of blue, flexing and blowing on them, the cool sensation of the polish vivid and delightful. He dreamed he was on a train, watching an unfamiliar landscape slide by. He dreamed conversations in English that he felt like he should understand but could only decipher a word or two. He dreamed texts in Korean that were full of jokes he didn’t understand but made his heart ache with tenderness and longing. He dreamed he was singing along to "Haru Haru" with such bitterness that he was relieved to escape the intense feelings when he woke up.

He hadn't dreamed himself back in the shower, which was both a disappointment and a relief, his darker nature wanting to see at war with the fear of having to feel. He'd woken from that dream with an ache in his chest that took hours, and two calls to his grandma, to loosen. He couldn't remember ever feeling that sad and helpless while awake and didn't relish the thought of feeling that way again, even in the bizarre imaginary world of dreams. Why would he dream such vivid sorrow? He wanted more driving dreams instead.

Just a few more hours and he would load up in the van to head back to the studio. They had dance practice tonight, then sleep. Just a few more hours. He was exhausted but energized. He loved the stage, loved the energy from the crowd, and this song let him claim more of the spotlight than ever before. He was relishing every second of it. He felt powerful and alive. And tired. Tired in his bones and in every breath. Six weeks of promoting didn’t seem like a big deal until the end, when he was numb to the beat and his body just did everything for him, muscle memory and practice taking over while his brain checked out a little.

This was their final performance promoting the first single from this mini album. He tugged at the tie that dangled in his lap, curling his toes in his sneakers. He'd just gotten rid of his actual school uniform, but here he was, pretending to be a schoolboy again. At least this uniform got washed more than his real one ever had. Then again, he'd never sweat all the way through his blazer on a school day before.

He turned the corner and saw Jungkook coming out of the bathroom, drying his hands on his pants like an actual five year old.

"Nervous?" he asked, reaching out to squeeze his shoulder. Jungkook just smiled his little scrunch-nosed smile and adjusted his own tie and blazer before heading down the hall to the greenroom. Taehyung turned and followed him.

Not to keep an eye on the youngest member, the only one younger than him, the only one who called him hyung and let him get away with being bossy, the only one who still curled up in his arms, homesick and lonely. No, not at all. He wasn’t checking up on him, because that would be silly. He was just following him to be ready when they were called to the stage. That’s all. Jungkook was capable of making it back to the greenroom alone.

Maybe.

Probably.

But Taehyung followed him anyway.
Drumming her fingers on the kitchen counter, Samantha watched the coffee cup filling slowly. Too slowly. She wanted to suck down the entire cup and brew another before she left the house, but if she wanted to make it on time, she should have left three minutes ago. So, one cup of coffee and she’d be fashionably late if nothing went wrong. Not that anyone gave you points for being fashionably late to “mandatory training hours” on a Saturday.

Still.

She would be fine. It really only took 22 minutes to get to the convention center. The clock on the microwave, which was purposely set 2 minutes fast, showed that it was 7:08. She had plenty of time. To drive there. Slowly. Calmly. Safely. Without a panic attack.

And she’d left herself 30 extra minutes just in case. It would be fine. She’d been driving around her neighborhood for days, just a few blocks at a time, easing herself back into the world of driving. She'd made it to the grocery store and back without incident. She could do this.

It had been a month since the accident. Well, 37 days, but the technicality of remembering the exact days scared people. She had gotten good at reading the cues of when she was making people uncomfortable, and toning things down. Putting it all behind the polite smile and thoughtful nod. Everyone wanted to comfort her, so long as they didn’t have to actually, you know, acknowledge the realness of grief. They all patted her gently, told her they were sorry, offered to do “whatever she needed” except that what she needed was just too raw and ugly. They meant cooking food, or taking her shopping to distract her.

She didn’t want to be distracted. She wanted to be better. But no one could give her that. So she’d accepted as many casseroles as her freezer would fit and let people drive her to the store a few times, learned the bus route to the metro station for work, put on her best smile and said “thank you” more than ever before. She wound up comforting them instead, apologizing for having feelings that weren't acceptable in polite company.

She was fine driving on the side streets. The rhythm of stop lights and stop signs kept her grounded and the lower speed limits were less intimidating. She’d found ways to get everywhere she needed without going on the highway. Except today. She wouldn’t have to get on for very long. Just one exit, where the feeder road didn’t connect. It would be fine. She had 28 extra minutes, and this cup of coffee. Her phone chirped and she looked down to see a message from Hyemi.

Fighting!

Thank you. Why are you still awake?

Because today is a big day for you

It's not that big a deal. It's just driving.

Also, your shift starts in 6 hours. Go to sleep.

Yeah yeah, fine. But text me later, K?

I want all the details.

Of residential fracking regulations?

XP
Samantha smiled at her phone. Hyemi was the best. It was a shame she was halfway across the world. At least twice a day, she wished she could just go sit on Hyemi’s couch and have nothing to worry about except trying to decide what drama to watch. She was too young to feel so stupidly nostalgic, especially about high school, which everyone except the old and the delusional agreed were actually the worst years in life.

But that’s when she’d been happy. The last time she’d been happy without him. All her happiness since then was tied up and tangled in memories too painful to deal with right now. Hyemi was like a beacon, reminding her that happiness was possible, even if she couldn’t feel it. Steady, faithful Hyemi. Patient, even after almost a year of missed calls and infrequent texts, Hyemi had picked up right where they’d left off. After waking up with Korean words spilling out of her mouth, she’d reached out, touching base, and Hyemi had jumped in with both feet, teasing her at how rusty her Korean had gotten.

Samantha had never been good at keeping in touch, too many years of moving around, leaving a trail of “best friends” behind, but Hyemi was forgiving to a fault. She was maybe the only real best friend Samantha had ever had. Military brats tended to cope with constant reassignment in two ways; make friends with everyone, everywhere or become stubborn loners. Hyemi was the first, coping with being half-Korean and sort of perpetually half out of place by smiling twice as much and laughing twice as loud. Hyemi’s dad had tried to serve as many tours in Korea as he could to keep Hyemi and her mom connected to the family there. Maybe that's where she got it from.

Samantha was definitely the second, trying to keep everyone at arm's length, ready to pack up and leave nothing behind. Still, they were a good team, or had been back when they were in the same time zone.

It was time to get on the road. It was past time. She had to do this. It was a short trip, less than a full mile on the highway. She would be fine. She blew across the top of her coffee, letting the steam billow up into her face before snapping the cap on her travel mug. She would be fine. Everything would be fine. She had 21 extra minutes. Her coffee would be a perfectly drinkable temperature by the time she arrived. She would be fine. She just had to keep herself focused on the road. But not too focused. She needed driving music.

Climbing in the car, after setting her mug snugly in the cup holder, she flipped through her cd case until she found what she was looking for. She shook her head a little at the silly name, O!RUL82?, but the songs were excellent, so she tolerated the playful misspellings.

Hyemi has sent her the video for the single and it struck a chord, so Samantha had bought the mini-album. As the music filled the car, she gripped the steering wheel tightly. She let the words wash over her. This was the song that convinced her to quit college, stop wasting time grinding through a program she hated just to meet everyone’s expectations. It gave her courage then, to change the course of her life and start fresh.

Never be late to do what you wanna do right now.
She’d let go of those expectations and settled into a life that made so much more sense to her, working to pay the bills and fund her hobbies, fueling her passions, not just the cookie cutter path so many of her friends seemed happy to be walking. Leaving school had been so freeing and it was the best decision she’d ever made for herself, even if it terrified her. Except now she was working a boring job that was starting to suck up all the free time she’d had for real living. Saturday training. Early morning meetings, late night “company dinners.” All for what? To pay the bills. On an apartment that was a painful reminder of the life she wasn’t living anymore, because he was gone.

She scrubbed her cheeks with the back of her hand and put the car into reverse. No time for crying this morning. She only had 17 extra minutes left. She had to get on the road and get this day over with.

She’d treat herself with a nap when it was all done. Maybe she’d have one of those weird dreams again. The ones where she laughed with someone else’s voice, where she was happy and dancing, even if it wasn’t in her body.

She’d begun to look forward to those dreams, the strange quality of watching life through someone’s eyes. A boy. The same boy every time, she thought. The voice was always the same, deep and rumbling strangely through a chest that wasn’t hers, a voice that was singing more often than not, and laughing more than anyone she had ever met in the real world, except maybe Hyemi. It wasn’t surprising to her that she’d seek an escape from the oppressive sadness of her life in the levity of dreams.

She drove slowly. Reasonably. She kept her breathing measured and even. She paused at each stop sign to make sure the way was clear. She focused on the road, aware of the other cars, but not too focused on them. She couldn’t control them, only herself. She was being as safe as she could be. The music was a lifeline, keeping just enough of her attention away from the panic resting a heartbeat away. She hadn’t listened to these songs in a while. They held memories of other drives, other nights when she’d talked with him for hours about the infinite directions their lives might take. Their life. The one they were going to share. Forever.

Hands on the wheel, she stared at the road, glancing at her speed and her mirrors. Just 9 extra minutes now. Still plenty of time. She was making progress, even if it was taking longer than Google had estimated. At the last stoplight, she turned the music up, skipping ahead to the next song. Her speakers and hearing were in danger of permanent damage, but she needed to drown out the memories, get lost in the noise and the familiarity of these words that she somehow still knew by heart.

And then she heard it. The voice. From her dreams. And she laughed. Because of course. Of course her brain would find comfort in music, spinning dreams and happiness out of the shattered bits of her reality. Of course she would dream herself into the world of an idol, dancing and singing and laughing, performing and soaking up the adoration of an approving crowd. Of course she would. It made so much more sense than creating from scratch. Her brain just filled in the gaps with convenient details from memory. Why this group, why this voice, she wasn’t sure, but it was a good song.

She laughed and heard it breaking through the bass line and the harmonies. She laughed the first real laugh in over a month. In 37 days. She laughed and it wasn’t until the car behind her honked that she noticed the green light. She waved politely over her shoulder as she pulled forward, accelerating and merging onto the highway. It was less than a mile to her exit.

With the voice from her dreams blasting on the radio and her laughter filling all the empty spaces, it was over before she had a chance to worry.
She pulled into the parking lot and checked the clock. Seven extra minutes left. Plenty of time. She peeled her hands away from the wheel, ignoring how they shook as she reached into the glove box for the spare napkins that always lived in there. She wiped at her eyes and cheeks.

Happy tears should look different than sad tears, but they were the same. Just clear and ephemeral. She had seven extra minutes. She wouldn’t be late. She put her head down on the wheel and let the tears come. Just a little. Just for these few minutes. She laughed and cried. She would be sad again for just a few minutes, then she would go inside and learn something for this job that gave her a reason to get out of bed. She grabbed her coffee, laughing as the song with the same name started to play. She had these extra minutes, and she would take care of herself, then everything else.

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“Hyung, wake up.”

“So noisy.”

“Taehyungie-hyung, you, ah, might want to take a cold shower this morning.”

“What? Oh, oh yeah.”

“Don’t just roll over, you have to get up.”

“I don’t wanna.”

“And you think I want to be awake at this hour? No. Come on, get up.”

“Kookie, I’m confused.”

“It’s morning. You shower. We go. Very simple.”

“No, I was dreaming.”

“Yeah, I saw that. Good job.”

“But I don’t understand.”

“Sometimes, when a young man has a very good dream…”

“Shut up, Kookie. I was dreaming I was dancing.”

“Possibly because we’ve been dancing for like a million hours a day for weeks now.”

“No, I was dancing, like… dancing dancing. Like someone should have been shoving cash in my pants dancing, though there wasn’t a crowd that I could see. It was kinda dark.”

“Good for you, I don’t want to know. Let’s go.”

“To G Dragon.”

“Yeah, good choice, hyung. Wait, what song were you stripping to in your twisted dreams? Please tell me it was ‘MichiGo’, because that’s so very you.”

“Shake the World’, you brat.”

“Ok, well. Good job, now come on before Jin-hyung comes in here.”
“Yeah, yeah, I’m coming. But it was really weird.”

“You’re really weird.”

“The song was making me feel all…”

“Yeah! I know! I saw! Why are we even talking about this?”

“Because I don’t usually get all… you know… for guys. Though I guess if it had to be any guy, GD is the one man on the planet…”

“I know, right?”

“What was that?”

“What was what? I said let’s go. Why, what did you hear?”
“Isn’t it like, three in the morning?” Samantha said blearily, rubbing her face.

“Three twenty four, to be precise. Which means it’s just after one in the afternoon, so why do you sound like you just woke up.”

“One of us should be sleeping, Hyemi. I’m taking one for the team.”

“True. Good plan. Anyway, I just finished my shift and I wanted to chat on my way home. It’s not a long walk, but you know…”

“Shouldn’t you be paying attention to your surroundings and thus avoiding being attacked?”

“It’s Seoul, not Chicago, Sam.”

“Yeah, right. So, how was work?” Samantha said as she stretched.

“Pretty slow. Two head wounds and four drunks. I’m glad you’re taking naps again.”

“Gotta sleep sometime. Learn any fun facts from the drunks?”

“Don’t try to juggle after five bottles of soju. It leads to head wounds. Also, don’t juggle bottles of soju.”

“A very fine point.”

“It’s a good life lesson, I feel. Hey, if you’re sleeping better, have you been to the studio recently? Dancing is a good outlet,” Hyemi said in her best imitation of a gently nagging mother.

“A little. I don’t really have any pieces choreographed at the moment though. I was working on a little something to a GD song, but I can’t bring myself to do it in front of the mirrors yet. I pulled the curtains and dimmed the lights.”

“Oh, a naughty kind of dance. That’s sort of new for you, yeah?”

“Well, I don’t want to dance any of my old stuff. I wanted something that wouldn’t remind me of anything.” Samantha stared at the ceiling, trying not to feel residual embarrassment from her attempts at what was essentially a strip tease.

“So, you have any more of those dreams?” Hyemi asked, voice rising to a child-like drone.

“Um…” Samantha rolled over onto her belly, trying to remember what she’d been dreaming about. “Maybe? I think I was dreaming that I was trying to learn Japanese. In Korean. So, yeah, I guess. Weird.”

“You suck at Japanese.”

“Hey, it was one semester fueled by a misplaced but intense love of anime and you were right there with me, so shut it,” Samantha groaned.

“Yeah, well you should at least practice your Korean more. What am I even here for?”

"Maybe when I'm more awake."
“Yeah, ok. Have you heard the new single? It’s adorable.” Samantha could hear Hyemi clapping with glee all the way across the planet.

“No, I’m still waiting for the album to get here, so I’ve just heard the one song so far.”

“Oh, whatever. Get on YouTube or iTunes like the rest of the world, you crazy purist. But isn’t it good?” Hyemi squealed

“Yes, Hyemi, it’s very good.” Samantha said, failing to keep her eyes from rolling.

“You’re hooked, admit it. You’re dreaming of them.”

“Not on purpose! Seriously, I can’t control my brain. If I could, why would I be dreaming my way into the head of the orange-haired weird one?”

“Oh come on! Taehyung is adorable and you know it.”

“Whatsoever. I’m just saying, if I had my choice, I’d be dreaming of Suga in the shower instead.”

“You dreamed he was in the shower?!?” Hyemi shrieked and Samantha had to pull her phone away from her face to avoid hearing loss.

“Calm down, people are going to hear you!”

"And if any of them understand English, they'll get a fun story to tell, but I think we're safe. But back to this shower dream. You saw him naked?"

"Sort of?"

“You have to tell me everything!” Hyemi’s voice was fast approaching a level only squirrels could hear.

“There’s nothing to tell. It was just like dreaming that I was taking a shower. I didn’t see anything except shampoo bottles.” Samantha said quickly, trying to control the heat in her face as she remembered the feel of wet, slick skin, not her skin, warm and smooth. How much did you ever actually see of yourself in the shower anyway? But the feelings, the contentment and bliss of warm water, the slide of long fingers that weren’t hers against a smooth chest that definitely wasn’t hers, sliding down to scrub a soft, lean belly that led to her waking up confused and uncomfortable and a little ashamed. Why her subconscious was out to play cruel tricks on her, she wasn’t sure, but she didn’t like it. She didn’t like feeling things she wasn’t really feeling while imagining life through some distant idol’s life.

“Well that is supremely disappointing. Your brain is dumb.” Hyemi pouted.

“Your face is dumb.”

“Your mom is dumb.”

“Yeah she is.” Samantha said with a sigh. “They’re going to Ft. Sam Houston. In Texas. So, we’ll be in the same time zone again.”

“That’s good right?”

“Yeah. It’ll be good to have them a little closer.”

“Can you drive to Texas?”
“Technically, but it takes like 18 hours, so not really a weekend trip.”

“Ah, you know my grasp of geography is kind of…”

“A mess?” Samantha said helpfully.

“Yes. That.”

“Well, we all have our faults. I, for example, am tragically clumsy.”

“How is that even possible for a dancer?”

“I use up all my grace on the dance floor so there’s none left for the rest of my life,” Samantha explained. “You get used to it.”

“No, late nights at a 24 hour clinic you get used to,” Hyemi said around a yawn. “Bumping into tables and tripping over air doesn’t sound like something I’d get used to. Anyway, I’m home now. I’m going to crash a bit before class. Love you.”

“Love you, too, Hyemi.” Samantha put her phone down and rubbed her eyes again, taking a minute to say thanks again to whatever powers above gave her such a perfect best friend. It was Saturday. She thought about going to the grocery store. Or doing the dishes. Or maybe folding some of the laundry threatening to take over her tiny studio apartment. Instead, she rolled over, cocooning herself in the blankets and thinking of the dream Hyemi’s call had shuffled her out of. She had been struggling with Japanese, tapping a pencil distractedly, chewing on her bottom lip. She ran her fingers over her lip, marvelling at how different it felt when awake. She was impressed at the creativity of her brain, stretching the facts that she knew to create something that seemed so real, so vibrant and different from the world she experienced daily. She worried that she wasn’t really coping, wasn’t dealing with her grief well as her subconscious just escaped to the fantasy world in her mind.

Two months wasn’t so long that anyone really expected her to be normal yet, but it also felt like an eternity. She still wore the ring. She couldn’t bring herself to take it off. It wasn’t really anything anymore, but it was hers. An engagement ring was a promise. A promise that had broken the minute he’d decided to choose her life over his, when he’d assessed the situation in a fraction of a heartbeat, shouting "Trust me" as he’d steered into the swerve, taking the full impact of the crash on his side, taking his life and throwing it away so she would live. The EMTs had all said it. Called her lucky. Told her he’d saved her life. They’d both have died if he hadn’t turned. They’d have died. Together. It was supposed to make her feel better. It didn’t. It made her angry. It made her bitter. Why did he choose to spare her? Why did he force her to go on without him? Why?

During the day she kept her anger tamped down, went through the motions of pleasantries and kept living. She did paperwork and housework and worked and sometimes danced and kept busy and tried to sleep at normal hours with little to no success, unless she was medicated, but she hated the haze that it left her with. She’d rather have the sharp pain, the reminder that it was real, that it happened, that he had lived and loved her and now he was gone. It was better than the cottony fog of not caring that he had even existed, that he didn’t any more, and there was nothing she could do about it. The pain was better than the apathy, so she kept poking at the wound, keeping it fresh and just raw enough to feel. And when she slept, she floated in a world of happiness and laughter and exhaustion that seeped into every pore. It was a nice escape. She wasn’t sure it was healthy, but it was what she had.

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“That can’t possibly be healthy.”

“But it’s delicious.”

“It’s like one in the morning.” Jimin whined.

“And I was hungry. Want a bite?” Taehyung said, cheeks embarrassingly full, like a deranged and carnivorous chipmunk.

“Yes, desperately, but I don’t have the metabolism of a hyperactive bunny, and I have to lift my shirt in front of a very large number of people in two days, so…”

“So you’re going to just glare at me while I eat?”

“Yes. That. And try to restrain myself from licking the salt off your fingers. Seriously, a cheeseburger and fries? You can’t have normal, healthy midnight snacks?”

“It’s past midnight. And cheeseburgers help me sleep.” Taehyung shrugged, taking another bite. It wasn’t his fault he had insomnia. It wasn’t his fault that he craved burgers. And it certainly wasn’t his fault that Jimin was the one flashing his belly button around.

“Yeah, about that.” Jimin said, still eyeing the quickly diminishing pile of fries. "How is that sleeping thing going?" Taehyung shrugged, shoving a french fry in his still too-full-to-be-polite mouth. He knew he should say something, but there wasn't much to say. He was tired, but he couldn't sleep. He tried brain exercises to relax, breathing techniques, classical music, Valerian root, lavender extract and three different kinds of pillows. Nothing worked, so he slept when he could backstage, in cars and on planes. Some nights he tossed and turned, eyes burning and body aching for sleep. Other nights he just lay there, eyes closed, drifting in a weird space that was less than fully conscious but not fully asleep.

When he dreamed, he mostly dreamed of her. His dream girl, he'd taken to calling her. After months of dreaming bits of her daily life, it was hard not to think of her as someone else, someone separate than himself, like an imaginary friend his brain has created for him. Some days he wished she were real and he could talk to her. He wanted to know the whole story. Why was she so sad? What happened that left her crying more often than not? Although she'd been crying less. Maybe whatever unconscious sadness his brain had been working through was lifting.

He didn't feel sad. Not really. Not here, with Jimin eyeing his food lasciviously. The crushing homesickness had lifted a little after debut, and since the new year they'd all been so busy that phone calls home were all they could manage. But they had each other. Puppy pile snuggles and late night talks, like this.

"I dunno, Jiminnie. Some nights I sleep. Most nights I don't."

"Yeah. Ok. You should come to the gym with me in the morning. Maybe that would help.” Jimin ran his hands through his hair distractedly, not bothering to stifle the yawn that split his face.

“Maybe.” Taehyung licked his fingers before Jimin could contemplate it. “Let’s go climb into bed.”

“Are you even tired?” Jimin mumbled through another yawn.

“Yeah, I’m always tired. I just can’t sleep.”

“But you nap, right? You’re not like some sort of zombie, functioning in a crazy daze, barely aware
of reality because of sleep deprivation?”

“Nah. I think you have to go like seventeen nights in a row before you start gaining zombie powers. I am pretty sure it was last week that I got a couple of hours of sleep before everyone woke up.”

“I don’t think that’s enough, TaeTae.” Jimin linked his fingers with Taehyung’s, tugging him towards the room all the members crammed into to sleep. “Just… try, ok?”

“Of course I will. I always do.” Taehyung’s smile was tense and brittle and Jimin saw right through it, but shook his head anyway, slithering into the bottom bunk as Taehyung climbed the ladder to his own bed. “G’night Jiminnie,” he whispered loudly.

“G’night TaeTae,” Jimin replied, already half asleep.

The room was far from quiet. The assorted and arrhythmic sounds of six people sleeping settled around him. It was a familiar noise, but still noise. He pulled out his earbuds from under his pillow and crammed them in his ears, thumbing through his phone to find his sleeping playlist, then reaching for the sleep mask that dangled from the top post of the bunk beds. He slipped it down onto his forehead, still not ready to give in and close his eyes, despite the fatigue that seemed to ooze from his pores. They were flying to Japan in the morning. Well, later this morning, technically.

They had a fan meeting at the Tokyo Dome City Hall, which while not the Tokyo Dome itself was geographically very close. It was delightfully impressive and equally intimidating. Three thousand Japanese fans were coming to see them, and they were going to perform songs in Japanese which was pressure enough to make Taehyung lose sleep. He was nervous. Performing songs that he’d pounded into his brain so hard he was certain he couldn’t get them wrong, only now there were endless opportunities to get them wrong because the words were all wrong. He’d also learned when they made the Japanese version of "No More Dream" that so much of the choreography was built in his head around the words, or at least the sounds, and when those sounds were wrong it was easy for his feet to go astray. Now they’d done the same with "Boy in Luv" and his brain and feet both ached at the thought. It was enough to make anyone nervous, and he didn’t have endless stores of confidence to draw on that made him immune to such concerns.

But that wasn’t why he was losing sleep. He didn’t know why he couldn’t sleep. If he knew, he could fix it, or talk it out with the hyungs, or something. He wanted to sleep. He wanted to dream, but even without the dreams that he looked forward to, maybe even depended on, he wanted to just be free from his brain for a few hours. Four. Four hours would be good. That sounded lovely. Just four hours without thinking. His eyes were heavy and he haphazardly tugged the sleep mask down, letting the soft strains of Debussy slip over him. He imagined all of his limbs floating in water. He imagined each muscle in his body releasing all of the tension, one by one. He imagined a brush pulling long red hair and the smoothness of it against his hands. He imagined driving on snowy streets in the afternoon. He imagined.

Debussy faded into Bach, into Schubert, into Vivaldi, Grieg, Tchaikovsky, Gershwin, Mozart, Wagner, and still Taehyung lay awake. He tried to lay as still as possible, but what was possible was far from the stillness that was desirable. He tangled and untangled his legs with the sheets, curling himself around his stuffed lion then stretching out and gripping the blankets tightly between his toes. He shoved the sleep mask back up his forehead, probably causing some crazy cockatiel dinosaur thing to happen with his hair but that was a problem for tomorrow. Later today, as it was probably much closer to dawn than midnight at this point. He dragged his fingers down his face, pinkies catching in corners of his mouth as he sighed.
He was flopping backwards on a bed covered in pillows, pulling his socks off with his toes and rolling to bury his face in a pillow that smelled of... well, of girl. He sighed contentedly in the voice that was familiar, but not his. His arms twisted behind him, unhooking a bra with nimble and practiced fingers that he envied. He pushed himself up to sitting, pulling shirt and bra off together and tossing them towards the corner of the room he thought the hamper lived in. Then he was shimmying out of tight but soft pants. Leggings? This was going to be one of those dreams. Where he caught glimpses of things in his peripheral vision that he would have liked to stare at instead. Where he got lost in sensations that should be totally normal if he were, you know, actually a girl instead of just dreaming he was one--the feel of soft, warm skin brushing the inside of his bicep, hips that rolled in a way that made zero sense but sent his brain spinning, long hair brushing against his bare back.

He pulled back the sheets and blankets, climbing in and stopping to pull all that hair into some sort of haphazard ponytail or bun concoction that probably looked ridiculous, but he’d never know because apparently dream girl had no mirrors or reflective surfaces nearby. He pulled the covers up and tucked them under his chin with one hand while snaking the other underneath a pillow and his head. “Now, go to sleep,” he said in her voice. In Korean. To whom, he wasn’t sure. He didn’t hear anyone else in the room, couldn’t look to confirm that the room was empty. So now he was dreaming a girl who talked to herself when tired. How comforting. He wasn’t the only one.

She spoke Korean. It wasn’t really a surprise, because he’d dreamed her texting in Korean, but it was still a shock to hear her voice wrapped around his language. Was his brain trying to break down the barriers, make dream girl more accessible? Was there really any logic, rhyme or reason to be applied to anything in these dreams anymore. He snuggled into the pillow, taking deep, full breaths and wiggling his toes. He felt tired. Not in the way that he always felt tired these days. Not a bone-level exhaustion from constant physical exertion, the post-adrenaline crash after a performance. This was just weariness, as though just the act of being awake and upright were too great a task. He felt tired of being. Just being. He bit his lip and nuzzled into the pillow, trying to get comfortable. Trying to sleep. If he’d had any control over this body he would have laughed. He was dreaming insomnia. Someone else’s insomnia. This was maybe the worst.

The room was quiet. Oppressively quiet. He could hear himself breathing and the rhythm of it was wrong. It was too fast, though it didn’t feel rushed. He’d paid way too much attention to the little things while he was not sleeping, and he knew the cadence of his breath and heartbeat in an obscenely specific way. He was sometimes certain he could pick out the other members just by the sound of their breath, but that was probably delusional, wishful thinking or something akin to super powers. But this breathing, this wasn’t his. Because this body wasn’t his, he supposed, but how did his brain know to put in so many tiny details like this? His foot was shaking. His foot was being shaken.

His foot was being shaken and his eyes were peeling open, then scrunching back closed in protest.

“You know that sleep masks work a hell of a lot better if you actually put them over your eyes, Taehyung?” Jin’s voice was blessedly soft and gentle, his fingers wrapped around his ankle. “Come on, throw yourself through the shower and grab breakfast. We’ve got a plane to catch.” Taehyung nodded in response. At least, he thought he did. He tried to, but his body wasn’t responding correctly and for once it wasn’t because he was trapped in the head of a fantastic figment of his imagination in dreamland. He was just so fucking tired. He rolled and slithered down out of the bunk, hoping gravity would be kind and his legs would be strong enough to hold him when he hit the ground. Maybe he’d sleep better in Japan.

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It was disorienting to dream about waking up. It was even more disorienting to dream about waking up in someone else’s body, even if that body had become strangely familiar after months of dreaming it in a variety of situations. But now there was mumbling, and grunting, and opening her eyes just the tiniest bit, the absolute minimum to be able to navigate a tiny room full of bunk beds to a tiny bathroom with a cramped shower. Oh no. Another shower dream. Samantha wasn’t sure she was ready for this, but instead she headed to the sink. Was she starting to have some sort of control over these strange dreams? Was she lucid dreaming? She tried to look in the mirror, to confirm what she already knew from months of these dreams, that she was imagining herself as Kim Taehyung, kpop idol, as ridiculous as that was, but her eyes stayed resolutely fixed on the faucet as she turned the water on and flinched at the temperature when she stuck her hands in. She splashed some on her face, well, his face, but she felt it just as though it had been her own, and she felt more awake though no less tired. She scrubbed her face, his face, whatever, the face that she was wearing at that moment, and it was a bit disorienting. Eyes closed, she thought too much about the feel of the slippery foam, the stubble on her chin and if she could have laughed she would. Since when did these baby faced idols have stubble? Wet hair clung to her forehead as she toweled off.

“Hurry up, Taehyungie,” said a low, rough voice behind her, and she nodded in response. Behind her. In the shower. That voice, that was Min Yoongi. In the shower. Maybe she really was getting better at directing these dreams. Now, if only she could turn around. Her own face would probably be blushing at the thought, but this face was unaffected by sharing a bathroom with her favorite rapper. Well second favorite, she quickly amended to herself. Forgive me Kwon Jiyong. Her hands reached for the hem of her shirt and quickly pulled it over her head. Just turn around. Please? Her pleading was having no effect, but she was slipping out of her pants and she heard the clatter of the shower curtain being pulled back and suddenly she was very glad she had no conscious control over these dreams. Plausible deniability right? This was just the crazy product of her subconscious, working through issues in a really bizarre and strangely realistic way. She turned, stepping into the shower and her eyes never really left the floor. So there she was, naked, though someone else’s naked, passing by a potentially equally naked Min Yoongi. And her stupid brain thought it more important to notice the pattern of water drops on the rug? Lame.

She did love this part though, water running from the top of her head down to her toes, eye closed, mouth open, just breathing in the steam and the heat, letting everything wash away until she felt warm and clean. She wanted to just stand and soak it all up, but her hands were in a rush, scrubbing shampoo into her scalp and rinsing it immediately. Pouring on conditioner and then stepping back to scrub down. It was hurried and unsatisfying, stepping out of the shower all too soon, nodding to the maknae on the way out of the bathroom and back to bedroom where she scrambled into clothes.

“Everyone grab your passports!” someone called from another room and she fumbled through the pile of things on the shelves, swearing under her breath as things toppled off, clattering on the floor and onto her toes.

“Shit!” she said, sitting up in bed, instinctively grabbing at her uninjured feet. She took a few deep breaths and then fell back into her pillows. These dreams felt too real sometimes. She glanced at her clock. 3:30. She should get up and try to be productive. It was Thursday afternoon. She’d left work early, too tired to keep her eyes open anymore after days and days of fitful sleep. The short nap was a good start, but she hadn’t folded anymore after days and years of fittful sleep. The short nap was a good start, but she hadn’t folded laundry in so long her entire closet was now in baskets on her floor. The dishes in the sink weren’t going to wash themselves. Tomorrow was end of month and that meant so much coding to be done before the end of the day, and she hadn’t been back to the dance studio in weeks, so she really had to find some steam to keep going. She had to keep going. It was the only option. She looked at the laundry piles looming. She rolled over and pulled a pillow over her head. Whatever. She would sleep when she could and if she wound up awake at one am like usual, she’d fold laundry then.
“It was a nightmare,” Taehyung said emphatically.

“I believe you.” Namjoon replied, his voice smooth and calm, like trying to talk to a spooked horse.

“I’m not crazy!” Taehyung shouted. “It was awful. I’ve never felt anything like that in my entire life.”

“Because you don’t have a uterus.” Namjoon was pinching the bridge of his nose, which was never a good sign, but Taehyung wouldn’t let this go. He had to make Namjoon understand the severity of the situation.

“Well, yes, obviously, but I mean...hyung, no post-dance practice muscle cramp could compare to this. I wanted to cry, but I couldn’t cry because it wasn’t even my body! And she was curled up around this hot sack of, like, dry rice or something, watching Secret Garden and eating ice cream.”

“Honestly, Tae, it’s not very original, as far as dreams go. You’ve just described every drama’s version of PMS, which is obviously what your brain was recreating, for who-the-fuck-knows what reason.”

“Namjoon-hyung, please. You can’t imagine how much it hurt.”

“But it was a dream! It wasn’t real! You are not currently, actually experiencing menstrual cramps, so no, you cannot sit out today’s practice. This choreography is kicking everyone’s asses and you need to be there.”

“Ok, fine, but... can we just take a minute to appreciate the living hell women go through every month? Because I certainly have a whole new level of respect. It was like a horror movie in my underpants.” Taehyung shuddered at the memory, rubbing his belly as though he could still feel those horrible cramps.

“Alright, first, gross. Too much information. Secondly, yes. Noted. Women are amazing warriors who persevere in the face of unimaginable pain for the sake of the continuation of the species. Now, leave me alone and stop hobbling around like an invalid.”

“Ok fine. But honestly. It was horrendous.” Taehyung shuffled out of the studio back into the practice room. Namjoon was right. The new choreography was harder than the last thing they’d learned, but they were also learning so many things at once. Taehyung always thought whatever new dance they were learning was the hardest, because it was new, and he didn’t have the passion for dance that oozed out of Jimin and Hoseok, or the sheer determination of Jungkook to get everything right because that was what was expected of him. He just... danced, and he was good at it, but not without a hell of a lot of work. So he stretched. Which always felt somewhat useless. He couldn’t touch his toes no matter how hard he tried, and yet here he was, arms dangling, fingertips still centimeters from his toes, breathing slowly, trying to forget the searing pain of the dream.
You weren’t supposed to be able to feel pain in dreams, right? Just like you couldn’t dream yourself actually dying, but the pain had felt so real. A tightness and burn that wrapped around his back and settled between his hips. He had cried eventually, though more from the tragic love story he’d been watching than the pain. He’d actually felt somewhat resigned to the pain while he was dreaming but had woken feeling shocked and betrayed by his own brain. He’d never wanted to actually be a girl and any lingering curiosity as to which of the sexes had it better was now irrevocably cured. He rolled up to standing slowly, feeling his back settle into place.

Being in the practice room alone was always a bit surreal. This wasn’t his domain and even though he’d sweat gallons into this floor, he still felt a bit like a guest. The other members would be filing in soon, bringing the noise and focus that made this room feel alive. For now, he would stretch and get ready so he could jump in at full speed when everyone arrived. He hated letting them down, holding them back. It was almost a year since their debut and still there was a lingering feeling that he could be cut from the group at any time, culled like the weak link he felt he was. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, reminding himself of the cheers of their fans, the gifts cluttering their office and dorms, all the excitement the last album had gotten, the warm reception to their Japanese singles. It was all there, so many reasons for him to be thankful, to feel secure here in this group, to know he was valued and loved and necessary, but the shadows in the studio and in the mirror haunted him.

He stared at his reflection as he rolled his shoulders, face blank and intent. He tried to put on his stage smile, watching his face stretch and morph into the face everyone loved. V. It was a fun role to play. He loved his life in front of the cameras, but the weight of carrying the mood of the group on his shoulders wasn’t always a pleasant one. Hoseok felt it, too. How many nights had they sat together, watching the members closely, in tune to so many shifts in demeanor, studying, learning how to fill the gaps and be what they needed? On camera, on stage, back stage, at home, at practice. They knew they needed to keep things moving smoothly, and often that meant a joke, a laugh, even at their own expense. Bring out the clowns and break the tension. It wasn’t a burden. It was so natural to do. He loved to make people laugh, and loved laughing. And when he was out of smiles, he had Hoseok. And when Hoseok was out of smiles, they sat in dark corners, silent, hands clasped together, and just breathed slowly until the laughter came back.

He sometimes wondered if that’s why his brain had given him his dream girl. Someone else’s sad story, loss, suffering, to work through while he slept, as a way to exorcise the darkness from his own heart and leave room for him to bring more light to his brothers. It was a rough way to do it, he felt, but maybe there was more darkness in his heart than he realized. Maybe he carried more worries than even he knew. Maybe it wasn’t just his family, his responsibilities as the eldest son, his grandma growing ever older, his siblings growing up without him, his members learning faster and always excelling while he lagged behind, his responsibilities to them and to their fans, to the company. Maybe there was more, but he felt that those were burdens enough for his tender age. He was still half a kid, and wished he had the freedom to just be a kid some days. Then he remembered the thrill of the stage, the burn of a good day spent dancing and singing and having fans scream his name. He didn’t want any other life. He wanted this one, darkness and all.

The door to the practice room crashed open and Jungkook came bounding in, shouting over his shoulder at Jimin, who was protesting loudly his innocence, and just like that, the mood shifted. His smile became genuine and he was laughing with the maknae tucked under his arm and everything was right with the word. For this moment.

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“Hyemi!”
“Wha...what?”

“It’s amazing.”

“What’s amazing? What time is it?”

“I dunno, around three?”

“In the morning?!”

“Oh. No. Afternoon, my time, so… yeah, five. In the morning. Sorry.”

“What’s so amazing that you called me at the ass-crack of dawn?”

“This album, Hyemi. It’s incredible. I just… Tomorrow, and that Cypher, shit they are just so… and Jump! What even is going on there with that break down when it goes all… ugh.”

“Are you going to finish any of those sentences?”

“No. Probably not. I haven’t stopped listening to it since it got here. It’s really good. I might have to go back and get their first one too.”

“I’ve been saying that for ages, seriously. You should listen to me. I’m not as full of shit as I seem to be.”

“This is true.”

“Alright, now that I have more than two functioning synapses, let me ask the most important question.”

“Suga is still the best, there is no change in his status as my bias, so stop asking.”

“What? No. I knew that, although go listen to Spine Breaker again and tell me if you still feel that way, but no. Tell me what photo card you got!”

“Oh. J-Hope.”

“Oh! Please trade me!”

“Maybe? Who did you get?”

“Jungkook.”

“Um, no. He’s a baby.”

“Meanie.”

“Hey! I’ll send you J-Hope. Keep Kookie, too.”

“You’re the best!”

“Least I could do for waking you up.”

“That’s right.”

---
Samantha’s hands were shaking as she carried her box of personal belongings to her car. Sweat ran down her back but she felt chilled. This day was turning out to be much stranger than she realized when she woke up from an oddly normal dream of being naked at the grocery store. She missed her dreams of idol life, but was in a way relieved. Those dreams had gotten increasingly tense and she often woke feeling more tired than when she’d fallen asleep.

She fumbled with her keys, unlocking and relocking the door in her nervousness. When she finally managed to open it, she shoved the box into the passenger seat and climbed in, shutting the door very carefully before letting out a scream that left her own ears ringing. She wasn’t even sure why she was screaming. She was scared, elated, on the brink of laughing until she cried. She’d held it together on the long train ride, kept her eyes fixed on the landscape sliding by. She’d been calm and pleasant when collecting her things. She had run out of calm now.

When her boss had told the team about impending layoffs, it was as though something dangerous inside her had twisted loose of the safe place where it was tethered and floated up to the surface of her mind and out of her mouth. She quit. Nothing so noble as offering herself as a sacrificial lamb. More like seeing an easy out, an escape route, a guilt-free way to do what she’d been thinking of doing for weeks. No one looked surprised, or even terribly sad. Even Kayla had just looked at her with mild surprise and a tight smile. Her boss honestly looked relieved.

She quit, and now she was here, in her car, with a box full of paperweights, brightly colored office supplies, picture frames, and a plant. But no job. Some paperwork that promised her insurance benefits for 30 days, her 12 hours of accumulated PTO, and 40 hours of regular wages. But no job. She told herself that she was doing something good. She was saving someone with a family, a plan, a life, from having to deal with this. She was going to be fine. It was just her, and her plant, and she would figure things out. She had some time before she ran into real money problems.

Or she would, as soon as she cashed that check from the life insurance company. She’d been avoiding it, while telling herself that she wasn’t avoiding it, just hadn’t gotten around to it, but more than anything she really didn’t want that money. She wanted Matthew back, alive and well and teasing her about going overboard planning their wedding. She didn’t even know that he had life insurance. She almost couldn’t believe he’d listed her as the beneficiary. And who had a will at 24? Aspiring lawyers apparently. He’d moved fast, or made the changes before he even proposed, but now, after seemingly endless rounds of faxed paperwork and signatures, she had the liquidated value of his estate. A puffed up way of saying that she had the proceeds from selling off everything of value he owned. Which was a car, a bike, some very nice speakers, two couches and a futon. Everything else his parents had boxed up and put in storage for a day when they all had stronger stomachs.

Samantha still couldn’t believe they didn’t hate her, or at least resent her openly. His mom had cried on her shoulder, telling her to stay in touch, not become a stranger, that she was all they had left of their son. It was both a comfort and a huge burden. She hadn’t been able to handle much contact, except by text and a few phone calls. She’d put it off, claiming she was too busy, but she had nothing but time now. Maybe she could handle a visit.

It had been just over four months. Summer had arrived with all the punishing humidity and blistering asphalt that she’d come to expect. She rolled her windows down, plugging her phone in and pressing play on whatever playlist had been playing on the drive to the train station. She closed her eyes and let the AC blast the residual hot air out of the car while the familiar music settled around her. This album, though still possessing unnecessary misspellings, was even better than the last one. She stretched her hand out and tapped the radio display gently, as though booping a nose. “Min Yoongi, you’re the best,” she said quietly, slipping into Korean almost without thinking. “Jobless twenty-somethings are afraid of tomorrow.” She chuckled to herself. “Well, I am now.”
She turned the music up and put the car into reverse. She’d head home and pretend that she’d just taken the day off. She would worry tomorrow.

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“I’m just saying, your legs are amazing and would look even better in heels.”

“Thanks, Taehyung, but I’m not wearing heels. I dance just fine in these shoes.”

“It’s not about the dancing, Hobi-hyung, it’s about the aesthetics. Just think about it. You love doing girl group dances. This is just an added level of authenticity!”

“I don’t need added authenticity. I look good enough already. Now stop bothering me and let me dance.”

“Red ones.”

“No. Besides, who wants to see my hairy legs in heels anyway?”

“Well, I assumed you’d shave your legs first, obviously.”

“Taehyung, no. Just no.”

“Or wax them, I suppose, but I remember shaving them in the dream.”

“Still no.”

“Oh come on!”

“No. I don’t need heels to make my legs look good, so just drop it.”

“Fine. But I still think we’d all look amazing in heels. It was just so neat to see the change. Nice legs, add heels, amazing legs. I just… think about it.”

“When I think about legs and high heels, I promise you I’m not thinking about wearing them.”

“It was just a dream, hyung.”

“You have weird dreams, TaeTae.”

“Yeah, I really do.”
He wanted to feel guilty, tucked into the couch, playing video games while the other members practiced, but he didn’t. And he wasn’t actually playing. Just waiting for Yoongi and Jungkook to finish this round so he could play the winner. They would practice again in a little bit. It was pretty easy choreography and they would refresh and refine it once more before they went to bed for the night. Taehyung was actually surprised Yoongi was taking the time to play, even just one round, before going back to his laptop. This wasn’t exactly a vacation. Yes, they were in L.A., drenched in sunshine and so close to the beach it was painful, but it wasn’t a vacation. It was work. The constant cameras made that very clear. They had to get the album done, all the way done, 100% done soon, and it was keeping Yoongi up at night.

He was warm and comfy, scrunched between the other boys and soon his head was lolling and he was dancing, long hair swaying in counterpoint to his hips, moving sinuously against...someone. He was touching and being touched, a stranger’s hands sliding along his thighs, his tight leather pants making him feel powerful and confident. He couldn’t focus on any faces because his head was heavy and fuzzy. Everything felt just a bit too slow, like the whole night was about to slip through his fingers, loose and lazy though he was dancing desperately. Sweat was dripping down his back and between his breasts. Her breasts. His dream girl. He felt giddy. He felt wild. He felt a little frantic and out of control. He felt… drunk.

The music shifted, picking up the beat, driving it home with an overpowering force he felt in his stomach. He was jumping now, hands in the air, throwing his head back and laughing. The speed of the music kept his heart racing and he pressed up against the bodies around him with glee. He wanted to feel, to touch, to taste. He wanted another drink even though his head was still spinning. As the song ended, he wound up with his arms wrapped around the neck of the nearest stranger, a not-so-tall man with a toothy grin and shaggy brown hair. They stood eye to eye for a moment, breathing heavily, then he was grabbing the stranger’s hand and dragging him off the floor, pushing him into a couch and climbing up in his lap.

Taehyung would have stared in disbelief if he’d had any control over this body or this face, but he didn’t, so he just tried to sort through the onslaught of sensations. A thrill of excitement and pride as this strange man’s gaze traveled slowly up his body, her body really. This guy probably wouldn’t be grinning like that if he had a lanky boy in his lap instead, though maybe he would, it was always hard to tell in dreams. The press of their bodies wasn’t as exciting as he thought it should be as he rolled his hips, taking in the man’s appreciative gasp. This should feel better right? It felt good, sort of, to be in control, to be watched, desired, but shouldn’t he want this more? Shouldn’t this body be responding too? Was it because he’d had too much to drink or not enough? It was a performance but not as satisfying as actually being on stage. That felt wrong, but it was also hard to sort out his thoughts with the loud music reverberating in his chest and unfamiliar hands curling around his ribs. Her ribs. His ribs didn’t move like this. Her ribs didn’t move like this. He didn’t move like this, but here he was, giving some guy a lap dance. A perfunctory lap dance, though if this guy noticed the lack of enthusiasm, he certainly wasn’t complaining. It was just dancing, just movement to the rhythm and beat, with purpose but without intensity. It was strange to be so disconnected from something that appeared so intimate. He wasn’t sure he even wanted to be doing it, but he was doing it with some sort of sick determination, like he was challenging himself, trying to overcome a sense of emptiness and disgust.

And then he was leaning forward, hair falling softly around them, and he felt his gut clench nervously as he tilted his head. Oh shit. He was going to kiss this guy. The dance wasn’t enough. It wasn’t making him feel any better and he wanted to feel better, to feel good, to feel. The moment
stretched and his mouth was so close to this guy’s mouth, and they weren’t getting any closer, just hovering as the music crashed around them and his heart thudded and his skin tingled, but not at all in a pleasant way.

Then there were firm hands on his ass, her ass--his ass certainly wasn’t that soft and round--pulling him closer and he was kissing. A guy. Possibly a drunk guy. Probably while drunk. In a club, on the lap of this strange guy, he was kissing him. Kissing him and it was strange. Not unpleasant or repulsive, but also not really remarkable either. It was just… skin. Just lips and tongue and teeth and breath with the lingering taste of alcohol, hands on his ass. It didn't feel good but it was better than nothing. It was something to focus on, something to do, a goal. And the guy seemed to be enjoying himself, so that was at least satisfying. He was good at this even if he didn't feel good about it. His crotch, his strangely-not-his-crotch because this crotch had girl parts, was pressing down into the crotch of a stranger, a strangely-not-girl-crotch. It was all wrong. It didn’t feel wrong, but it didn’t feel right either. It didn’t feel fun or exciting or any of the things he hoped he would feel if he decided to drunkenly make out with a stranger in a club. It was just… nothing.

And then it was over. He was leaning back, putting on a fake smile and climbing off, ignoring the clinging hands and pleading voice, walking back to the dance floor, where at least he’d felt happy and alive. Dancing again, he tried to forget everything, forget the feel of hands on his skin, of lips on his, but he couldn’t and it was making him itch and he just wanted to be free of it all, so he walked to the bar and ordered a shot, slamming it down without thought and headed back to the dance floor. But he didn’t stop, just wove his way through the sea of people until he was stumbling straight to the sink, turning the tap and letting the cold water run down his hands, off his fingers and stared at it as it swirled down the drain. His skin was crawling. His stomach was churning. His head was spinning.

“Get it together, Sam.” he said, voice strained. He brought his damp hands up to pat his face, surprised it wasn’t warmer to the touch. He felt flushed and cold at the same time. He lifted his head to stare at his reflection in the mirror and he could feel the resignation and disgust welling up inside him. He felt the urge to punch the glass, to lash out and let the hurt in his chest blossom on his fists. He shook his head a little, eyes locked on his reflection and he could feel the laughter bubbling up, but it wasn’t funny. It was not a good laugh. It wasn’t good. He bit his lip to keep it in, bit hard and then let go, face finally calm, and for a long moment he just stared at his face that wasn’t his face.

This was the first time he had really seen her face in something other than fogged over bathroom mirrors after a shower or blurry reflections in the windows of the train. He was a bit taken aback, because she didn’t look anything like he’d imagined. He didn’t know what he imagined, but not this. The long red hair was pushed back behind her ears, tangled in silver earrings, bangs clinging to her sweaty forehead. It was hard to tell behind all the black eyeliner and red lipstick, but she wasn’t… she wasn’t pretty. She was striking, and he wanted to look closer, to keep looking at her, like art, like a painting, or a sculpture. She was so familiar but he didn't really know her at all. She was captivating, but she wasn’t pretty in the way he thought. Her nose was too long or her mouth was too wide. He couldn’t quite figure it out. He wasn’t sure why he assumed she would be pretty, but she… felt pretty? She sounded cute and that translated to pretty in his head. It didn’t make sense, but maybe because he was pretty and cute, and he was used to the reflection he saw being pretty, he’d just assumed that his dream girl would be pretty too. He raised his hand and watched her do the same in the mirror, dread and determination mixing as that hand came closer to the glass, but instead of a fist, it was just a flat palm, sliding to cover the face in the mirror.

His eyes popped open and he blinked a few times before he registered Yoongi poking him with an elbow. “You were whimpering.” Yoongi says, scrunching his face up in something halfway
between disgust and concern.

“Sorry, hyung. Weird dream.” Taehyung ran a hand over his face, still trying to shake the unsettling feeling of staring at a reflection that wasn’t his own, looking out of what felt like his eyes into her face.

“I won, but you can play Jungkookie next. I’m going to bed.” Yoongi said as he unfolded himself from the couch.

“That’s not the same thing as going to sleep.” Taehyung gave him the sternest look he could manage while still half asleep and disoriented.

“Yeah, I know, but I want to tinker with a few things. It’s still early, barely midnight. Call me in an hour or so and we’ll run through the choreography once more before you two crash, okay?” Jungkook nodded, somewhere off to the right, and Taehyung shook his head.

“I’m going to go...find Jimin. Raincheck, ok?” Taehyung was already trying to stand up, his body unresponsive after the short nap.

“Taehyungie-hyung, no! One more round, please?” Jungkook looked up at him with those distractingly large eyes and his best bunny smile. The kid was so cute and any other day he would have stayed, but it was the middle of the night and his brain was racing and he just really needed to ask some questions from someone who might give him a straight answer.

“Not tonight, sorry. Tomorrow, ok? Call me when you start dancing.” Taehyung was halfway across the room now, glancing around to see where the other members had hidden themselves to prepare for tomorrow’s dance competition. When he found Namjoon and Jimin, trying to twerk, as they were instructed, he just stared for a minute. It was just as surreal as when Jennie had shown them the moves in the dance studio.

Jimin saw him lurking and waved his arms, shouting, “No cheating! Get out, enemy infiltrator!” Despite himself, Taehyung smiled.

“I haven’t come to steal your secrets. Besides, we’re totally going to win. We’ve got the Golden Maknae on our team.”

“You just keep telling yourself that, all the way until we kick your asses, Golden Maknae too,” Namjoon said with a smirk.

“Nah, I just came to talk to Jiminie. You got a minute?” Jimin looked at him, biting his lips together then glanced at Namjoon.

“Yeah, we can take a break, I think. That cool, hyung?” Namjoon nodded and slumped down on the floor gratefully, raising his arm and giving a weak thumbs up before closing his eyes and let his arm flop down with a painful sounding thud.

Jimin grabbed a bottle of water and nodded towards the door. Taehyung followed him closely, trying to think about how to even start this conversation. They sat on the curb and Jimin offered him a sip of water. Taehyung took it gratefully, almost as if he were washing the taste of stale beer off his tongue.

“So, what’s up TaeTae? You’ve got that face on.”

“What face? This is just my face,” Taehyung smirked. That was in fact part of the problem. This was his face but he kept dreaming someone else’s.
“Yeah, ok, whatever. That’s just your face. But you’re the one who wanted to talk, so let’s do that.”

“Right, yeah. So, hey have you ever, you know, dreamed, about kissing, a… a guy?” Taehyung carefully examined a bit of gravel by his feet, not looking at Jimin at all, letting the silence stretch. And Jimin was silent. Which was nice. He wasn’t shouting denials or freaking out about why Taehyung would even think to ask such a thing.

Jimin spoke slowly, as though choosing his words very carefully. “Dreamed as in imagined, or dreamed as in actually dreamed while asleep?”

Taehyung cocked his head to the side. It was not at all the response he was expecting. “Uh, dreamed as in actually asleep. If I’m awake and thinking about kissing guys, I think that’s called fantasizing.”

“Good point. Ok, then no.”

Taehyung raised his eyebrows at the quick response. “What about fantasizing?”

“Still no.”

“Then why did you ask the question?!” Taehyung shouted.

“Because those are two different conversations, ok? There’s stuff you want to do when you’re awake, and yeah sure ok, kiss dudes, other dudes, not me, but whatever. And then there’s the crazy shit your brain does while you’re asleep. No one should be held accountable for what happens in their dreams. No one, okay? They’re just dreams, right? Everyone has dreams and it doesn’t mean anything about what they would or wouldn’t do in real life.” Jimin finished with a huff.

“Seriously, Jiminie,” Taehyung said, scrunching his nose and staring hard. "What have you been dreaming about?”

“That is not what you came here to talk about.”

“No, but now I’m really curious.”

“I’ll tell you later. Let’s talk about your guy-kissing issues so I can go to sleep.”

“And have more dreams that you will then tell me about?”

“Yes.”


“So you dreamed you were kissing a guy,” Jimin prompted, helpfully.

“Yeah.”

“And?”

“And what?”

“And what the fuck has that got to do with me, Taehyung?”

“I don’t know! I just woke up feeling all weird and wanted to talk to someone.”
“Well yeah you felt weird! You’re not exactly getting a lot of action in your real life, so, you know, good for dream you!”

“It wasn’t dream me. It was, you know, her.”

“Her? The dream girl? Again?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh. Well that’s totally different.”

“What? Why?”

“You dreamed you were a girl kissing a guy, not you as a guy kissing a guy. It’s different.” Jimin shrugged as though everything suddenly made sense.

“But it felt all wrong.”

“Sure. How many dudes have you kissed in real life?”

“None while giving them a lap dance.”

“Now lap dance is a dream I could get into.”

“Jiminie!” Taehyung whined. “You are not helping at all.”

“Sorry, got distracted thinking about lap dances, and don’t even try to tell me you wouldn’t have done the same, but I’m sorry. I’m here for you. What’s the problem?”

“What do you mean, what’s the problem? I’m totally freaked out because I dreamed I was kissing a guy!” Taehyung’s voice rang out in the mostly empty night and for not the first time he was really glad they were in America, because the chances of being overheard and understood were so tiny he didn’t have to be embarrassed about shouting that sentence into the night.

“But you dreamed you were a girl, like you’ve been doing for a stupidly long time now. That’s the part I’d be freaked out about if I were you. Dreaming that a girl kissed a guy isn’t a big deal. It’s just not. I’m sorry it felt wrong. Dreams should feel good, but if you have no actual experience making out with guys in real life...” Jimin paused, tilting his head down to look at Taehyung through his eyelashes. Taehyung shook his head and rolled his eyes. “Then your brain doesn’t have anything to pull on, so just uses whatever it thinks it might be like and boom. Brains explained by Park Jimin! Now, let’s go get a snack and go to sleep.”

“It didn’t feel wrong because it was a guy, it felt like it wasn’t the right guy. I don’t even know what I mean by that, but I know that it’s right. I was sad that I was kissing that guy instead of another guy. Possibly a dead guy.”

“You wanted to be kissing a dead guy?!”

“Not like a corpse, you idiot! I think Dream Girl is always sad because the guy she loves is gone. Maybe dead. Dream girl has been through some shit, ok?”

“Dream you has been through some dream shit.” Jimin clarified.

“Fine. Dream girl, dream me, whatever. Someone she loves a lot isn’t there and it makes her cry. A lot. And now it’s making her make really bad choices.”
“Making dream you make really bad dream choices.”

“Yes. That.” Taehyung tipped his head back to look at the sky. There were no stars to be seen. A thin layer of clouds had rolled in off the ocean and the street lights were glowing dimly against the backdrop. “I just don’t know why these dreams always feel so real.” His voice was softer now, the sounds of Daegu slipping in. “It actually hurts, Jiminie. These dreams kinda hurt me.” Jimin wrapped his arm around Taehyung’s shoulders, resting his forehead on Taehyung’s cheek.

“I’m sorry TaeTae.”

“Yeah.” They sat in silence like that, just being near each other a comfort, listening to the strange sounds in the night, so far away from home. “I saw her face though,” Taehyung finally said.

“Yeah? Is she hot?” Jimin laughed, pulling back to look at the smile creeping back onto Taehyung’s face.

“I don’t know,” Taehyung said, shaking his head.

“How can you not know? This isn’t a hard question. You saw her face. You’ve been dreaming about her body for months. Is she, or isn’t she, hot?”

“Yeah, I guess. She just was really sad, you know? It’s hard to tell if someone is hot when they’re sad.”

“Oh, TaeTae, this is why you are a much better soul than I.” Jimin reached up to ruffle his hair and Taehyung laughed, elbowing him in the ribs.

“Of course I am.”

“You better now?”

“Yeah, thanks.”

“Great. I’m going to go shower and then pass the fuck out. See you in the morning. Don’t stay up too late, ok? You have to give yourself time to kiss more dream guys!” Jimin was scrambling away from the curb, trying to get out of reach but he wasn’t quite fast enough and Taehyung shoved him with both hands, sending him stumbling back towards their temporary home. Jimin turned and made smooching sounds at him as he opened the door and retreated inside. What an idiot.

Taehyung stared at the clouds and the street lights and tried to take Jimin’s words to heart. He was right and anyway it wasn’t just the kissing that had Taehyung so shaken. It was seeing her face, seeing her blank and broken expression that he recognized. He knew the look in her eye because that was his face, too. That’s what he looked like when he was wrecked inside and couldn’t find the extra energy to let his face match his racing brain. She wasn’t him. He dreamed her but she wasn’t him. He wasn’t her and yet he saw himself in her face, in the emptiness that hid the turmoil, the desperation and fear he felt while inside her head. He saw himself in a face that was very not his own, inside his own head.

And that’s when he started to think maybe he was going crazy, because normal brains don’t process like this, right? Normal people don’t invent whole other lives to work through their issues, right? But apparently he did. Was he really going crazy? He’d never believed it when the other members joked and teased him, but now he was worried. This wasn’t just being eccentric. This was disturbing. He just hoped it was a manageable level of crazy. Functional crazy, that was a thing right? People struggled with all sorts of things and still led healthy, productive lives and he could too? Maybe. But maybe he’d have to go see a doctor first, to tell someone professional about
the girl in his dreams. Sam. She’d looked in the mirror and called herself Sam. He’d named his dream girl. He was in deep.

There were many variations on the “walk of shame” and Samantha was learning those nuances at an alarming pace. Today, she was doing the version that had her visiting her ailing grandmother in her nursing home wearing last night’s makeup because she’d stayed out so late that even catching the early morning train home didn’t leave much time before she’d agreed to be at the nursing home. So she prioritized decent pants and a shirt that covered her belly button over a thorough face-washing and hoped her lack of full shower wasn’t blatant.

She hated this place, hated the peach walls and the cheap watercolor prints that tried to seem cheerful, Fourth of July decorations dripping from each counter and window. Nothing covered the fact that this was the place lonely old people came to die. Samantha hated the tired nurses and the squeaky, over-cleaned floors. She never wanted to come here, but she was the only relative in several hundred miles and her grandmother deserved better than these forced monthly visits, but they were better than nothing. At least that’s what she told herself. It was better for her to suffer through the awkward visits than leave Nana all alone.

She knocked softly on the door, easing it open and speaking softly. “Hello Nana, how are you today?” Inside the room, her once robust grandmother sat by the window, holding a skein of yarn in her hands.

“Oh, Angela! Darling, good to see you.” Her smile was full and her eyes appeared focused but Samantha knew she was decades away, living another life before age had robbed her of her memories and her dignity. Samantha sighed, taking a minute to put her purse on the bed and put on her best, most patient smile.

“No Nana, it’s Samantha. Angela’s daughter.” She pulled up the spare chair, sitting close, but not close enough to touch. She didn’t want to be close enough that she would feel bad not reaching for her grandmother’s hand. “What is the yarn for, Nana?”

“Oh, just a bit of knitting. I’m going to make a blanket for your baby girl.” Samantha swallowed the lump in her throat. It was going to be one of those visits, where they had a seemingly logical conversation so long as Samantha stopped trying to enforce the rules of reality. Besides, Nana wasn’t allowed knitting needles in here.

“Well Nana, I’m Samantha. I’m Angela’s little girl. I do love blankets though. You once knit me one that was rows and rows of flowers in all different colors. Do you remember that, Nana? I loved that blanket.”

“Oh, yes. Flowers would be darling. She’s going to be a dreamer, you know? I know you never had them, bless your heart, and I’m glad, but she’s going to be a dreamer.” Samantha’s eyebrows wrinkled at the mention of dreams. She was over sensitive to the topic after all the times she’d dreamed herself as someone else. A certain someone else. A certain famous someone else. She knew better than to really trust anything Nana said when she got like this. She stitched together bits and pieces of different parts of her life into something that resembled nothing so much as a soap opera. Even knowing that, letting Nana spin her stories was more appealing than trying to dredge up small talk.

“What dreams, Nana?”

“I still remember the first time I dreamed of your father. It was during the war, of course. I was still
in school and thought I was just having nightmares because of the newsreels. I’d snuck out to see a picture that week. I thought it was punishment.” Nana chuckled, turning the yarn over and over in her hands while she talked. “That was the week Little John…” Her gaze drifted out the window, lost for a moment in the memories she didn’t want to give words to. Samantha looked intently at her lap, trying not to think about the pain her grandmother must have felt. It was a family story she knew too well. Her brave great uncle, dying just days before the German surrender in 1945. Her own grief was still too potent to be able to really sympathize with the death of a distant relative a decade and a half before her own mother was born, but she saw the struggle on Nana’s face and it was just too familiar.

“What movie did you see, Nana?” Maybe a change of subject would spare her another ugly cry, spare her being comforted by a woman who didn’t remember her name.

“Oh, just some old movie. Judy Garland, I think. It wasn’t very good, darling. But that’s not what’s important. That is when I started dreaming of your father. It was years and years before I met him, poor thing. He must have been so bored dreaming of me. All I did was go to school and sneak out to see bad movies.”

“Oh, you were his dream girl too? Gramps was a dreamer too, huh?”

“Oh, not a Dreamer, darling. Not like we are, but of course, the men never are. They just get swept up by it. The whole thing is sort of unprecedentedly unfair. I know you never had them, the dreams, but I am so grateful for that. I never wanted to see your heart broken after all. I’m so sorry about this girl though.”

“Why sorry, Nana? What’s wrong?” Samantha was leaning forward. This time, Nana’s dramatic retellings were more eerie than amusing. “What’s a Dreamer?” She heard the emphasis, the implied capital, and even knowing that there was more Alzheimer’s than answers here, she had to ask.

“She’ll be a Dreamer and that means heartache, poor thing, but she’ll be stronger for it. Don’t you worry, Angela darling, she’s gonna be a fighter for sure. You can see it in her eyes already.” It was strange to be talked to about herself, in the third person. Not quite as strange as dreaming herself into someone else’s life, but still surreal.

“What’s a Dreamer, Nana?” Samantha pressed. How could Nana possibly know about her dreams? What strange dreams had Nana had so many years ago? “Why did you dream of Gramps?”

“I dreamed of him for years and years. Almost ten years before I found him. So many dreams. The war was the worst, but that was over quickly, you know. Still, even just a couple of weeks of that was more than enough for a lifetime. Gave us the same nightmares for the rest of our lives. That’s a bonding experience for you, darling. Sharing nightmares because you’ve both lived it. I’m glad you never had to do that with Wayne. He’s a good boy, you know.”

“I know, Nana.” The moment seemed to have passed, the moment of unsettling coincidence gone. “He’s really great.” They sat in silence for a while, both staring out the window at the gulls on the roof next door. Probably both thinking about the men they had loved and lost. It was ridiculous and Samantha wanted to leave, to escape the maudlin reminiscing and go take a shower. She didn’t want to sit here and think, sit and feel. She didn’t want to empathize or get sympathy like the first time she’d visited after. It was almost worse when Nana was semi-lucid, as Samantha had explained over and over that Matthew was gone, there was no wedding, there was never going to be a wedding, it was all over and everything was ruined now. At least she didn’t have to do that again. She thumbed at the scar on her palm. It was still pink and a little raised. Just a tiny pucker of skin right across her heart line. It was comical if she would only let herself laugh about it. The only
lasting mark from the accident that flipped her life inside out.

It was time to get out of here, before she lost what little control she’d scraped together. As Samantha stood, her grandmother reached out to grab her hand, startling her. Nana looked at the scar intently, then up at Samantha’s frown.

“Oh little bird. It’s already started then.” Nana’s eyes were clear now, the haze of memories lifted, the same mottled brown and green as her own. The intensity made Samantha afraid to blink, afraid to miss this moment that she also desperately wanted to run away from. "Little bird" had always been Nana’s pet name for her, from the mouthful of a middle name Branwen, Nana’s name, meaning beautiful raven, only Samantha had never gotten Nana’s beautiful black hair. "Little bird" was what Nana called her when Sam was hurt or sad. It was comfort and reassurance. It was ominous now.

She was surprised her voice didn’t tremble as she said, “What’s started Nana?”

“I always knew you would be a dreamer, little bird. I’m so sorry.” Nana slid her hand into Samantha’s palm, pointing with a gnarled finger to her own palm. Samantha looked down, trying to decipher what it was she was supposed to be looking at. “I’m sorry, little one, but you’re strong. Be strong. It’s a good gift, I promise.” Nana tapped her finger as she spoke. Samantha squinted at the web of lines, Nana’s palms smoother and more deeply grooved than her own, but then she saw it and forgot how to breathe for a moment. A scar. Just a little pucker, white and smooth, barely noticeable unless you were looking right at it. A scar, right across her heart line.

“What’s this, Nana?” Samantha’s voice shook now. How weird to have matching scars. What a strange coincidence.

“Fell on a nail. I was running out of the house after hearing about Little John. He was my favorite, you know. You’re not supposed to have favorites, but he was always sweet to me, best big brother a girl could ask for.” Nana’s hands were shaking now and Samantha held them tight despite herself. “I just tripped on my way out of the house and caught myself on a nail. Mother was so angry, having to patch me up when she couldn’t do anything about Little John and should have been tending to bigger things than my hand, but… well, some things heal and leave a scar, is all.” There were tears in her eyes and she met Nana’s own watery gaze reluctantly. This isn’t what she wanted. She wanted to run and dance and drink and forget.

“I have to go now, Nana. I’ll be back soon. Love you, Nana, ok?” Samantha pulled her hands away and backed up, purse dangling from her shoulder.

“Alright, little bird,” Nana said with a smile. “He made the right choice. You were always meant to be here.” She turned then, facing the window again, twisting and tugging at the yarn in her lap absently. Samantha backed out the door and tried to keep from running to the car.

She walked slowly, taking measured breaths, until she was back behind the wheel, purse tucked on the passenger seat. She started the car and pushed her hair back as hot air pumped out of the vents. She welcomed the heat, hoping it would chase the chill out of her gut. She was grasping at straws. She was trying to make sense out of nothing, the ramblings of a senile old woman she only saw once a month. She was just interpreting a bunch of random nonsense in a way that made her feel better. Nana couldn’t know about her dreams. It was just coincidence that Nana had a scar on her hand. It was a funny coincidence that Nana had dreamed of Gramps years before they met. Her dreams were just dreams, not some weird premonition of actually meeting Kim Taehyung. They were just dreams, a way for her to escape reality for a while. Like the club was. It was just an escape. It wasn’t real.
But Nana’s words were still ringing in her ears and she didn’t have the strength to think about it any more. She didn’t have the strength to feel the guilt and the hurt she felt at her grandmother’s loneliness and gentle reassurance that being alive was the right thing for her. She didn’t have it in her, so she turned the radio up and drove home to get that shower she so desperately needed.
Europe was strange. And fascinating. So many new food choices, all of them exciting, not all of them in a good way, but some things he would definitely miss when they were finally back home. He was ready to go home though. He missed japchae and jajangmyeon. He missed rice. He never thought he would miss rice. How could you miss rice? It was like missing water. It was just always there. Until it wasn’t. He missed his bed that smelled right, and his pillows that were the right level of fluffy, and the sound of everyone sleeping in the same room. Constant travel was hell on his ability to sleep, which was tenuous to begin with. He lay on the hotel bed, already dressed, just waiting for it to be time to wake up and get moving.

Everyone was tense. Namjoon and Yoongi were walking around like zombies, fingers always twitching to write lyrics, jotting down notes about changes to make once they got back to the studio, constantly attached to their laptops, jumpy and thin-skinned. The new album was a real change of direction for them. They both pushed to have more input, more influence, more control, but with that came more responsibility and they already shouldered so much of the burden in keeping Bangtan moving forward. Hoseok’s smile was stretched out and starting to fade at the edges. His natural tendency to nag everyone into behaving was usually put aside when cameras were rolling, but they’d been on camera almost constantly for the past month. Jin and Jimin were working out in the hotel rooms at every available opportunity, complaining about carbs and butter, refined sugar and not enough tea, all while shoving everything into their faces and promising each other they’d go for a longer run in the morning. Jungkook was trying hard to keep his chin up, but Taehyung could see in the way his fingers lingered over his phone that he was homesick and the novelty and newness of travel had long since worn off.

He was tired. It was an annoyingly constant refrain. He wasn’t sleeping any better than he had at home, or in L.A., only now, he hardly ever dreamed of his dream girl. Of Sam. He avoided even thinking her name because it still weirded him out that he’d named his own delusions. His dreams were full of meaningless things that didn’t stick around after he opened his eyes now. Once, while they were in Sweden, after wiping off the fake freckles and sliding into the van to head back to the hotel, he’d fallen asleep only long enough to dream of her putting on lipstick. In the backseat of a taxi. The smell of the lipstick had been so familiar. He was sure it was one of the brands the coordi noonas used. He’d been distracted all the next day, trying to figure out a plan to discreetly sniff his way through their makeup cases. Unfortunately, though maybe a saving grace, he hadn’t been able to pull off any of his outlandish ideas. Despite all outward appearances, he wasn’t quite weird enough to get away with just sniffing without a good cover story. But if he could just identify that the smell from the dream was a real memory from a real thing that had really happened to him, he would feel a little better.

The dreams had stopped for the most part though he couldn’t figure out why. He wanted to know why, what he’d done differently? Was it the constant travelling and ever-changing time zones, as though she couldn’t keep up, couldn’t find him anymore? Was it because he hadn’t slept in anything other than a moving vehicle in almost two weeks? There had to be a reason but he didn’t
know what it was. He was relieved that she was gone though. He was relieved and now, he missed her. And that bothered him too. More than a little. He missed a figment of his imagination that had scared him into visiting a doctor in a foreign country, though when he was finally sitting in the office, with the watchful eyes of the staff translating, and the constant company of the cameras, he couldn’t bring himself to say anything about the dreams. He’d talked about insomnia and the near constant fatigue in his throat from too much singing, but nothing more. And sometime after that, she was gone. And he missed her. Not since he was a little kid had he missed an imaginary friend, but he’d become strangely attached to her. He had no way of interacting with her, but he cared about her, cared about the story his brain was telling. It worried him, but the dreams had mostly stopped, so it was alright, right? It was ok to miss the good parts of the dreams so long as they had stopped.

He had so many other, more pressing, things to worry about, he just shoved it down, put it aside with all the other things he didn’t have time or energy to think about. Like real girls. Or what he was going to do when he was too old to be an idol. Or what would happen to his family if anything were to happen to his grandma. So he just went along, missing her a little bit, missing sleep more, and hoping that they got a break soon.

It was fun though. Exhausting, sure, but fun. How many of his friends back home had opportunities like this. He was learning to say “hello” and “thank you” in more languages than he had fingers. These were the memories he would hold onto and tell his kids about someday. This was an amazing time in his life, performing for people all around the world who screamed at his every move. He loved photoshoots, all the drama and pretense of transforming to fit the concept, and then the power of knowing that he had full control, captivated the camera, every eye on him. His skin didn’t love the constant makeup touch ups and then scrubbing off, bloating from travel, the air of so many different cities, and the changes in altitude, humidity, allergens. He was forever grateful to Seokjin for his impressive knowledge of skincare and fanatic practices that kept them all in face masks.

A knock on the door and Sejin’s voice reminding him of their imminent departure shook him out of his rambling thoughts. He sat up and looked towards his suitcase. It was full of things he’d packed and never worn. So much of this trip had been controlled. Not scripted, but managed, styled and produced. When would they would be home, back in their blissfully camera-less dorm, so he could finally relax a little bit?

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It wasn’t as dark as she wanted it to be. The lights revealed more than they hid in flashing colors. The crowd wasn’t big enough to get lost in, just too many vaguely familiar faces dancing just a little too close. The music wasn’t loud enough and also too fast. Nothing was working. Samantha strode off to the bar, ordering another beer and mindlessly peeling the label while glowering at, well, everything. She’d spent too many nights out, wasting time and money at an alarming rate, ignoring everything that wasn’t the instant gratification of running away from the growing pile of problems in her life. Nearly two months of unemployment meant nearly two months that she didn’t have to worry about waking up hungover, or waking up at all, until it was late enough in the day that she could just shower, grab some more food, put on her fancy makeup and clothes and take the train into the city to start the process all over again.

It was Wednesday night. Not exactly prime time for clubs, and yet she had hoped that the summer rush would mean all the college kids would be out in force in the way that had always annoyed her before. These 18+ clubs were just too crowded sometimes, and all their loud cheers about being free from tests when she’d started this seemingly endless string of nights out had prickled her nerves and sent her into a defensive slouch. Not everyone in the world was made for the university
life. She was happy with her choice to walk away halfway through, but it still made her feel like a quitter when everyone her age was worried about tests and grades. Her worries seemed much too large.

But tonight she’d come here looking for that press of adrenaline and bodies. She wanted to disappear in it, forget the disaster of her life and just feel good. She loved dancing though she’d been avoiding going back to the studio. She had more time now, with no job to get in the way, but she didn’t want to have to tell the dance team that. She had just extended her leave of absence and hoped they would still have a place for her if she decided to go back. Now, tonight, she wanted to feel good. She knew she looked good. These leather pants had always been the best idea when the plan was free drinks and skipping the last train home to catch breakfast before the commuter trains started running again. They hung a little lower on her hips now, not quite as snug as she remembered but she hadn’t really been eating normally, so that kinda made sense. Her tank top kept sliding off her shoulders, but she told herself it looked purposefully casual, relaxed and enticing. Her favorite red lipstick, Lady Danger, always fit just right, and it looked really good staining the edge of the green glass bottle in her hands, just as it had on all the bottles before too.

“You’d be prettier if you smiled.” Samantha turned to look at the man a few feet away, leaning on the bar in a desperate attempt to look casual and comfortable, but the smirk plastered on his face was too practiced, too needy to believe the charade. She felt the fire in her chest, latent anger just itching for an excuse to lash out, punish someone else, shift the blame to anyone but herself. She indulged him, letting a smile stretch her mouth wide, teeth bared before she bit her lip and tilted her head to the side.

“Really?” she asked with a slight scrunch of her nose. “I think you’d look prettier with a bag over your head.” She raised her beer bottle and eyebrows in salute before turning and walking back to the dance floor, ignoring the profanity he shouted at her retreating back. Maybe the too empty dance floor and not quite decent music was preferable to the bar after all. She tipped her head back, taking long gulps, trying to finish her drink before taking to the floor, and smiled as she set the empty bottle down on the railing that separated those who liked to watch from those who liked to be watched. She raised her arms up, threading her fingers together above her head as she walked, stretching and feeling the beat. It was better now. Better than before. Still not great, but almost good. Good enough to work with. She didn’t stop until she was in the center of the floor, carefully stepping into the open space between groups of friends giggling and mouthing the words. She didn’t come here to lip sync. She didn’t come to flirt or to laugh. She came to dance in a way she couldn’t in the studio. She came to escape and escaping meant forgetting everything but the beat and the feel of air as it hummed around her.

She knew people were watching. Everyone always stopped to stare at someone dancing alone. It was human nature to eye the loner warily, looking for the secret or the wound that made them stand out. She wasn’t here for them. Let them watch, if that’s what they wanted, but she was dancing for herself. The song changed to something she knew but still not one she liked. Familiar and crappy was better than unfamiliar and crappy though. Now she could anticipate, build each move into the next and she knew just when the beat would drop. She hoped the DJ wouldn’t fuck that up at least. Her head spun as she twirled around, writhing and twisting, shoulders and hips sharp while her spine was loose as liquid. She felt more than saw, her eyes half-closed, focused on distant spots on the wall rather than the crowd gathering around her, but they slowly closed in, drawn like sharks to the scent of blood. They were all around her, watching, nodding, a few began to clap to the beat and the sharp sound was like a shot, racing down her back to her toes in her cutest mary jane heels. She pulled herself taller, extending her arms in invitation, in challenge, turning and finally letting her eyes rest on each person brave enough to stand closest. Few met her eyes, but those that did were a mix of eager spectators and judging competitors. She took a step back, though stepping away from some only brought her closer to others, so she turned again,
looking for someone brave enough to join her, test her, challenge her.

No one did, and then the song changed. She shook her head, long hair falling in her face as she slid between a pair of starstruck looking girls to head back to the bar. She felt a hand grab at her elbow and a harsh snarl near her ear, “Still just a stuck up bitch.” She twisted her arm away and glared at the man from the bar earlier. She knew she should keep her mouth shut. She was all alone in the city, but she felt like picking a fight. No one had come to dance with her and she was still itchy with energy, longing for a confrontation.

“Still just a sorry loser,” she spat back, lifting her chin taking a step backwards, out of arm's reach. She was six feet tall in these heels but he was still staring down at her, crossing chiseled arms across his chest. She didn’t want a fist fight. She wasn’t a total idiot, but she was feeling just stupid enough, fueled by beer and adrenaline and not an insubstantial amount of self-loathing, to keep poking this bear with a stick. His hand moved quicker than her eyes could track and he lunged forward, pulling her in close, wrapping an arm around her waist and leaning in. It must have looked normal from the outside, flirtatious even, but his grip was meant to hurt, and her arms moved too slowly, pushing against him futilely.

“Who’s walking you home, huh princess? Think you’ll be all high and mighty out in the dark?” He stank of stale cigarette smoke and too much beer, but the words brought her spinning head to a halt. He was painfully serious. She didn’t have anyone looking out for her, no one who would notice or care if she didn’t show up tomorrow. How many missed texts from Hyemi before anyone even got worried? She’d pushed everyone else away, ignored calls from former friends from the job she didn’t have anymore, avoided making plans, not going to the studio, sinking further and further into herself. She glanced towards the bar, trying to catch the eye of the bartender, or a helpful bystander, anything. No one was looking now. She was alone, just another girl at a bar.

“Let me go,” she grit out between her teeth, trying to keep the shake out of her voice. She was furious. With him for daring to threaten her. With herself for being in this situation in the first place. She swallowed hard against the bile rising in her throat. This was supposed to be fun. She was here to have fun and forget about how shitty the world was.

“Say please, little girl.” She pushed again, leaning back and trying to twist out of his grip, but even at almost six feet tall, with heels, she didn’t have the strength or weight to budge him. She didn’t want to say anything, let alone give in to his petty request, but she couldn’t muscle her way out of this, couldn’t bluff or bully.

“Please,” she said quietly, staring at him, hoping he could see every bit of disgust and anger in her eyes.

“Say pretty please,” he laughed, pressing his face closer to hers. She’d tried playing his game and even that hadn’t worked. She looked desperately towards the bar again, but even an unbusy club on a Wednesday night still was occupied enough to keep anyone from noticing her distress. She didn’t want the hassle that this was going to bring. She might get kicked out of the club, banned even, if things got out of hand, but she was out of options, at least out of options she could distinguish from the buzz of alcohol and fear in her head. Glancing up at the smug face of the asshat again, she shook her head and blew a breath out up through her bangs.

“Alright then,” she said, bringing her knee up swiftly. It wasn’t a direct hit, not solidly in the crotch like she’d hoped. He was pressed close enough that she’d had to twist a little to the left, but it was effective enough. His arms dropped as he grunted as much in surprise as in pain and she backed away clumsily, unwilling to trade the speed of seeing where she was going for the risk of taking her eyes off of him until she was far enough away that he couldn’t grab her ankle or something.
Then she turned and crossed to the bar, shouting for the bartender. “Hey, I need you to call the cops!” It wasn’t strictly true. She actually wanted to avoid the police. A lot. But it worked to get the bartender’s attention in a hurry. She pointed over her shoulder to the space where Mr. Can’t-Take-No-For-An-Answer Asshat had just been, trying to explain things calmly and asking for them to call her a cab. The bartender nodded and stepped away, hopefully to find a phone and Samantha scanned the crowd, looking for the face that she was sure was going to haunt her dreams for a bit, but he was gone. She ordered another drink, sipping it quietly while texting Hyemi and waiting for the cab. At least now someone would know to check on her. A little too late for comfort. Shit. She had to get things together. Fear was changing to relief that covered disgust. She’d gotten away without any of the worst case scenarios in her head, but it wasn't something she wanted to repeat.

Finally in the cab, she gave her address and then let the shakes she’d been holding at bay come out. She was safe now. She was safe for now. She would go home and it would all be ok. She’d avoided filing a police report. Just the thought of Matthew’s mother seeing that come across the police blotter made her stomach turn. Or maybe that was the alcohol. Either way, it wasn’t good. His parents had been so unfailingly kind and supportive. She didn't want them to find out that the respectable, law-enforcing parents of a future lawyer had fallen for someone who was busy throwing everything away for cheap thrills. She stared out the window, shivering in the air conditioning. She was making a mess of everything. She’d missed her visit to Nana this month. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d eaten a real meal, or gone to the grocery store.

It was barely after midnight. She hadn’t been home this early in more days than she could count. Maybe she would actually sleep normal hours, fall asleep more sober than not. It had been more than a month since she’d fallen asleep without getting at least a little buzzed first. Maybe she would have good dreams again. Maybe she could escape this mess and pretend for a few hours of unconsciousness to be the lighthearted and beautiful Taehyung. Maybe she could forget the tension and ache she felt behind his smile and lose herself in cheering crowds and bright lights of her dreams. Maybe she could forget.

Because if Matthew were here… She let out a breath she felt she’d been holding for months. It was the sentence she never let herself finish. Because if Matthew were here, she sure as hell wouldn’t be. It all came back to that. She wouldn’t be in this cab. She’d be home, probably poring over a bridal magazine and making a spreadsheet. She wouldn’t have gotten hassled at the club because Matthew would have been there, dancing awkwardly while holding her drink. The taxi was turning into her apartment complex and she hastily paid, distracting herself enough to get inside before this train of thoughts derailed her completely.

She thought she was doing better. She thought she was past the nights of crying herself to sleep. She thought this was a linear process where every day had to be better than the one before, because that lie was the only one keeping her moving forward, but sitting on the edge of her bed, peeling off leather pants with shaking hands, she realized how far she’d slipped backwards. This was the life he’d given her. This was what she was choosing to do with the life he’d given her. Floating on the residual buzz from too much alcohol all the shame and guilt she’d been trying to drown came crashing back into her. She pulled the blankets around herself and let herself cry again. She wasn’t okay. She wasn’t doing well and she didn’t know how to get back to being normal again, but she knew this wasn’t it. This summer was a blur of excess and regrets and she wanted to stop. But she wasn’t sure she was strong enough to face the weight of all the things she’d been avoiding. She heard Nana’s voice in her head, telling her to be strong, little bird and she cried harder. Nana had so much faith in her. Could she live up to that?

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“Hyemi, I love you.”
“Are you still drunk?”

“No, shut up. I’m completely sober. I didn’t even go out tonight.”

“Well look at you! Finally decided that imitating G Dragon wasn’t the right lifestyle choice for you?”

“I’m being serious. You’re my best friend.”

“I know. I know, and thank you.”

“Also, I cut my hair.”

“Ok.”

“A lot.”

“Um, you took pictures right?”

“Yes. But I’m not sharing them yet.”

“Because you love it so much you want to capture all the angles?”

“Because I hate it and I’m considering buying wigs to wear for the next two years while it grows back.”

“Whoa, Samantha, how much cutting are we talking here?”

“It’s above my shoulders.”

“Shit Sam, it practically touched your butt!”

“It did touch my butt, and I wanted it to stop touching my butt, so I went to get it trimmed, a couple inches cut off, like six or so.”

“Hold on six inches… that’s like 15 centimeters. That’s hardly a trim. That’s a major change.”

“Not when your hair is all the way down your back, it’s really nothing. So I decided I needed a change, something new to be excited about. So I told them to cut it to my shoulders and I’d donate it all. 13 inches of hair. But, of course, you know hairdressers…”

“At your shoulders became practically a bob.”

“I mean, I can tuck it behind my ears, and it is technically below my chin, but not by much.”

“I’m sure you look adorable. You always look adorable, Sam. It’s kind of annoying.”

“Yeah, it’s not a bad cut, but Hyemi…”

“He loved your long hair.”

“He really did. He always commented on it, and now it’s gone.”

“...And so is he, unnie. So is he, and you are here and have to live for you, okay? It’s gonna be okay.”
Everyone was drained. They’d left it all on the stage tonight. This performance, the heartfelt thanks to their fans, and the scores of other people there for other bands had been amazing and humbling. Performing in front of such a huge crowd, very different from their tiny show in L.A. a few weeks ago, this KCon concert was overwhelming and the heightened emotion had left them all shaking and quiet. The van was full of subdued boys, each lost in their own thoughts, reliving the moments when they’d been blinded by the lights, ignoring the beaming faces in the audience when the enormity of the crowd became more than they could handle. Taehyung was pressed up against Hoseok, head resting on his shoulder, feeling the thrum of residual energy under his skin. The new album was being released in a few weeks and that meant more promoting. But first, more practicing. He’d thought the last choreography was difficult but this was just insane. His brain was constantly checking and rechecking the steps because his feet could just barely keep up.

His brain. What a mess that was. Since they were back in LA, he’d hoped he would have another one of his dreams, the good ones where he brushed long hair and felt peaceful and content. Instead he’d dreamed of saying goodbye to a pair of adorable kids, chubby cheeks and messy hands that waved clumsily. He dreamed he was spinning around, fists clenched as excitement and gratitude washed over him. Then he was sitting behind the wheel of a car, and the radio started playing "Tomorrow" and he was sobbing again, fingers wrapped around the wheel so tightly it hurt, words falling from his lips between sobs and so much hurt spilling out, his eyes squeezed tight but unable to hold back the tears. He sobbed and sobbed, trying to catch his breath, to keep singing in that soft sweet voice that wasn’t his, yet singing his part with such familiar emotions. It was overwhelming. He woke up shaking, wiping at his cheeks that were surprisingly dry. He had missed her. Sam. He missed her and it scared him, but now she was back, even if just for that one night, and that scared him too. Maybe it was no big deal. Maybe they were just dreams. But she had been singing his song, his part of the song and if felt like him even though it wasn’t his voice.

It was late now, and he was tired, but he was almost scared to sleep. What if he dreamed of her again? What if he didn’t? He honestly wasn’t sure which was better. Hoseok put his hand on Taehyung’s knee, pressing gently to quell the jiggling Taehyung hadn’t even noticed he was doing.

“Sorry, hyung,” he whispered.

“S’ok TaeTae. We’ll be at the airport soon and you can sleep on the plane.” Hoseok tapped his knee gently. “It was a good show tonight.”

“Yeah it was. Never seen so many people so happy to see us before.”

“Someday, we’ll have our own concert in an arena that big.” Taehyung nodded. Hoseok was good at imagining the big picture. Sometimes Taehyung forgot that, too busy making his own goals seem so ridiculously large that no one could expect them to come true. It saved him a lot of disappointment, but sometimes it also robbed him of the joy of seeing his plans actually happen. Like this. KCon was a big deal for them. Good exposure to a growing American audience. He’d have to work on his English more.

He wondered if dreaming in English was even helping. Three weeks in America had certainly helped, even if they were almost constantly surrounded by staff. He’d started understanding more of what he’d heard in his Sam dreams. That was good practice. That was a good thing his brain was doing. He would sleep on the plane a little bit, and if he dreamed of her, it would help keep his English skills sharpened. That felt logical, if a bit of a stretch, but he was grasping at straws suddenly. Searching for reasons to be okay with these dreams that scared him but he missed when
they were gone.

The trek through the airport was thankfully uneventful this time and when he was finally tucked into his seat with his pillow and his earbuds, he sighed deeply. This was as good as it was going to get for a while, so he slipped his sleep mask on and tried to let the music and white noise of the plane quiet his jittery thoughts.

His hand hurt, tired from signing so many documents. He shook it out and briefly cracked each knuckle, grimacing as he popped his thumb. He eyeballed the stack of papers in front of him. Just a few more pages to go. His eyes scanned the words and even with all the English practice he’d been getting, this was all gibberish to him. There was a blank line at the bottom and he signed, a scrawl with many loops that looked nothing like his signature, which is when he actually noticed the hands. Her hands. Sam’s hands were now printing words. Her name, he thought, but it went faster than he could really focus on. He was turning the page and grabbing the next sheet of paper, repeating the process. Swirling loopy signature then printed name. Samantha. He caught that much before reaching for another page. Samantha C… something. He couldn’t quite make it out and now he was grabbing all the pieces of paper and stacking them neatly to the side. It looked like a small novel. What on earth could require this much signing? Still, he felt satisfied and proud looking over the pile. He had done something good here.

He jerked to the side a bit, hearing Hoseok’s mumbled apologies over the drone of the plane as an elbow jostled him. He bit back a groan and tried to get comfortable again, hoping he could get back to sleep quickly. Whether or not he wanted to get back to Sam, Samantha apparently, he still wasn’t quite sure.

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“I’m not saying you should hop on the next plane to O’Hare, Mom, just that I wouldn’t wait too long before scheduling a visit.” Samantha tried to keep the irritation out of her voice. Her mother was always prone to exaggeration and making everything more dramatic than it needed to be.

“Alright darling. You know I worry.”

“Yes Mom, that’s why I’m telling you.”

“So when you say she seemed ‘off’ darling, what exactly is it she was saying?”

“I don’t know exactly. This visit was pretty mundane, actually. Talking about about her sisters, and she still thinks I’m you most times. But she kept rubbing my scar, and last time was even weirder. She was talking about Gramps and Little John, which is pretty normal, right? But then she grabbed my hand and starting rambling about dreams and something starting and I needed to be strong? It was just kinda spooky, Mom.”

“Oh the Dream thing.” Samantha could hear the emphasis in her mother’s voice, the same weird emphasis Nana had given.

“What dream thing, Mom? Nana talked like I should have some clue what she was talking about but I really, actually don’t.” She was rolling her eyes, glad they were on the phone and not Skyping because she didn’t want a lecture about politeness right now. She wanted someone to explain this thing that apparently everyone knew about except for her so she could stop feeling like such an idiot.

“It’s just some old Welsh legend. Don’t pay it any mind, darling.”
“What legend? I’ve never heard anything about this.”

“Of course not, it’s just a bunch of nonsense.” Samantha could practically hear her mother waving her hand dismissively.

“But,” Samantha pleaded, hoping to sound endearing and committed, not desperately curious, “it’s family nonsense.”

“Yes, I suppose it is,” her mother sighed. “Mother is convinced that she comes from a long line of prophetic dreamers. It’s a legend about broken hearts seeking their healing in a… I don’t know, soulmate or something? It’s supposed to be comforting to people who’ve just gone through something traumatic, though personally I just think it’s cruel to try and give someone who’s grieving false hope like that, but Mother always insisted she had dreamed of your grandfather long before she actually met him. I don’t know, darling, it’s just something that helped her get past losing Uncle John in the war.”

Samantha’s hands had gone cold. She was gripping the phone so tightly her hand hurt. Because this was ludicrous. This couldn’t be happening. This wasn’t real. She was dreaming about a pop star because she loved music and was maybe just a little bit crazy, not because of some sort of family legacy of soulmates because if ever there were a delusion that would get her laughed out of polite society it was that she was destined for, fated to, somehow linked with in any way a member of a famous boy band. That just wasn’t a thing that was happening. There was no way. They were just dreams, bits of fiction from her subconscious based ever so tenuously in a smattering of facts she’d somehow absorbed through listening to music and talking to Hyemi. That was all. It had to be all. The alternative was too insane to wrap her brain around.

“How’s your new job going? I’m so glad you found something without that horrible commute.” Samantha cleared her throat and tried to shove her panic to the background so she could continue having a civil conversation.

“It’s great, Mom. I had to sign like a metric butt-load of paperwork for the agency for all the background stuff, plus a bunch of agreements about the daily schedules of these two toddlers. They’re three years old and have trust funds with more money than I will ever see in my life. But, the parents are pretty down to earth, despite being organized within an inch of their lives. The kids are actually really well-behaved and seem to like me a lot, so it’s really nice.”

“Well, being an au pair is great practice for when you start your own family someday.” The words, however kindly meant, were like a bucket of ice dumped inside her heart. Samantha sucked in a breath and prepared her goodbye speech, ready to get off the phone before she screamed obscenities at her well-meaning mother, but then she heard a small sniffle. “Oh, Sam. I’m so sorry. That was a horrible thing to say. I’m sorry.” She could hear the tears her mother was holding back and it made it that much harder to keep her own in check.

“Thanks for saying, Mom. I... I know what you mean.” She sniffled too, wanting to laugh instead of cry, but couldn’t find anything funny about anything just then.

“How are you really doing? I miss you.”

“I’m sad, Mom,” Samantha said, choking back a sob. “I’m just still so sad.”

“Of course you are, darling! It’s hardly been any time at all.”

“Six months and three days. I can’t stop counting.” Samantha wiped at her face, trying to remember the last time she went a whole day without crying.
“Do you need anything? Want me to send you some cookies? I could overnight a package. It’s so convenient being stateside again.”

“Thanks, Mom, but I’m okay, really. I mean, I’m not great or anything, but I’m doing better. Really.” Samantha didn’t bother explaining that she was already past the worst part. She hoped she was past the worst part.

“Well, you just let me know if you need anything, and keep working. Keep busy, it will help make things seem more normal.” Samantha snorted a bit at that. She’d successfully kept her mother unaware of her disastrous summer activities, her Crooked phase as Hyemi had called it. She didn’t even know what normal was anymore, but she was trying to rebuild it, one day at a time.

“I will, of course. Now, go hug Dad for me and I’ll talk to you soon.” It took several more minutes of repeated assurances that she would, in fact, call if she needed help and she would, in fact, be fine, but Samantha finally hung up the phone, stopping her pacing to slide onto the couch. She couldn’t really blame her mom for worrying. After all, she hadn’t reached out to her family when she was saddest. She’d retreated and ignored and avoided, putting her own feelings first and forgetting that other people cared about her and might be hurt if anything had happened to her. She was trying to be better now. She was trying. She was.

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Taehyung stared at his computer, mouth slack and eyes glazed. It had come to him in the wee hours of the morning, creeping through his brain, slithering into his consciousness and he’d been unable to let it go. Samantha Cale. That was the name he’d been writing in his dream, and the not knowing had been eating at him every time things slowed down enough for him to think. The dreams were back. Weeks without them and now they were back. Just as they were getting ready to release the new album, just days left until they made the new video public. Was it stress? This whole year had been a rollercoaster of events and promotions and recording and travel and mayhem. He thought he was coping well. Aside from not sleeping, he was the very picture of health and youth. Probably. Also probably a little bit crazy.

At this particular moment, he was leaning into the crazy. Embracing it. Taking a hold of it and shaking it with both hands. Shaking it at the internet, specifically. He was on a mission to convince himself. Of what, he still wasn’t quite sure. He’d typed her name into the search bar and now he was scrolling endlessly through pictures of random, mostly white girls. And some guys. And some random Instagrammed pictures of food that looked absolutely unappealing as he tried to keep his eyes open. He should be sleeping. He felt tired enough to sleep but he was afraid to let this go. He was also pretty sure that if he crawled into bed he’d be wide awake as soon as his butt touched the sheets. So he scrolled, looking for the face he’d seen in his dreams. The face that wore his expressions but wasn’t his face. He wasn’t sure if he was trying to prove to himself that she didn’t really exist, or looking to find her, because that was a whole other level of weird, but he’d read somewhere that you couldn’t dream a face you hadn’t seen in real life. So he was scrolling.

Apparently Samantha was an annoyingly common name in America.

He wasn’t even really sure what he was looking for. He doubted there would be a picture of her with that eerily familiar look of terror and disappointment that he’d seen in his dream, but he thought he would recognize her face. But he wasn’t going to find her face, because she wasn’t real. She was just a dream. But still he scrolled, clicking over to the next page of results, eyes burning and he was going to give up. He was going to sleep and dream things that maybe meant he was losing his mind, but he thought, not for the first time, that it was an acceptable price to pay for a decent night of sleep.
He moved to close the tab when he saw it. Just a pair of red lips, not quite smiling, and something about the angle caught his attention, moments away from closing the whole thing down. He looked down at the picture, tilting his head to squint at it. Then, he scrunched his nose and squinted harder. It wasn’t the look he had seen, but the face was right. Long red hair, in braids this time. Nose just a bit too long. Mouth just a bit too wide. He clicked on the picture and it led to a site full of other pictures of vaguely serious looking girls and a lot of text that he was too tired to try to sift through. Dance. He recognized that word. He bookmarked the page to come back to later. He wished with his whole heart, more than he ever had before, that he could take dreams out of his head and show them to someone else, because the more he stared at the photo, the more he convinced himself simultaneously that this picture both was and wasn’t the girl from his dreams. He tried to calculate the probability that his brain had come up with both her face and her name at random and came up with a giant screaming blank because he had never been that good at math.

He was falling asleep. He knew better than to skip this moment, so, after checking that the page was indeed saved, he pushed his computer away and pillowed his head on his arms. He would just take a nap here on the desk. It would be fine. Just a little nap.

He woke to the sound of the door closing and Jimin humming a bit of the new single to himself as he toed off his shoes.

“Yah! Go to bed, TaeTae,” he chided, pulling off his hoodie and walking towards the bathroom. He was right. Taehyung knew he was right. He should be crawling into bed, but it was far and involved climbing a ladder and none of that sounded as appealing as just putting his head back down on his arms.

“What’re you watching?” Hoseok asked from behind him.

“Nothing. Just… browsing. Things,” Taehyung said sleepily, not caring to keep the suspicious tone out of his voice.

“Oh, it’s like that, is it? Just make sure the computer doesn’t get any viruses, yeah?” Taehyung could hear Hoseok’s chuckle and knew he wouldn’t be living that down anytime soon. He didn’t have the energy to defend himself, but suddenly, an idea struck him.

“Hey, Hobi-hyung, come look at this, would you?” Hoseok’s face scrunched up around the spoon sticking out of his mouth.

“Yah, pervert!” he muttered.

“No, not like that. It’s a dance thing.”

“What kind of dancing, Kim Taehyung?”

“I don’t know, the American kind? Just come look at this page and tell me if you’ve seen them before.” Hoseok ambled over with a skeptical grin. Taehyung pulled the page back up, a screen full of small pictures. Ten girls, all with varying degrees of serious smiles next to blocks of undecipherable text.

“Ooooh, pretty! It’s a dance crew?” Hoseok asked, skepticism quickly melting into interest.

“I think so. Do you know them?”

“No, but let’s watch this video thingy. See what they’ve got.” Hoseok scrolled down to the bottom of the page, clicking the video and as they watched, Taehyung felt his skin go clammy. It was six girls, dancing in a style that he was pretty unfamiliar with but looked beautiful. Fluid and strong,
they bent and twisted around each other, each girl taking a few measures for a solo before melding back into the whole. When he watched her dance, the girl with the red hair, it felt familiar. Not like he’d ever seen it before--he was sure he hadn’t--but like he’d done it. He could almost feel the roll of her hips, the twist of her shoulders. He’d danced that way. In his dreams. He was sweating.

“They’re good,” Hoseok muttered, hand resting on his chin as he watched intently. “So in sync and whoa! Look at the flexibility. Oh, nice contagion!”

“You’ve never seen them before?” Taehyung tried to keep the fear out of his voice. He must have seen this before, somewhere, for his subconscious to have woven these details into his dream. He must have somehow seen it, even out of the corner of his eye, and Hoseok was his best bet for random American dance team practice videos.

“No, no I haven’t, but it’s good. Not our style at all, but good. Where did you find this, Taehyung?”

“I don’t even know,” Taehyung said with his eyes glued to the screen. It was too crazy to say out loud that he’d dreamed it.

“Well, send me this link, would you?”

“Sure, hyung. Of course.” Taehyung moved to copy the site’s address, mind whirling with possibilities. He’d ask everyone tomorrow. Everyone he saw. Members, staff, coordinas, interns. Someone would know this group. Someone would explain why he was dreaming the imaginary life of some American dancer. Someone would know. Someone would.

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“You sound good, Sam.”

“I’m feeling better.”

“I’m glad you’re taking care of yourself. Finally.”

“Well, it turns out if you spend all day trying to talk tiny people into eating and sleeping, it kind of starts to sink in.”

“Good. I’m glad.”

“And, hey, I’m dancing again, too.”

“That’s great! You should send me some videos. I’ll learn whatever it is you’re doing.”

“Hyemi. Friend. I love you, but you should not attempt these dances. You’ll break something. Possibly just my heart. Probably your own leg.”

“Samantha Branwen Cale!”

“Seriously, I’m amazed you can even pronounce that mouthful.”

“Shut up. I’m not as hopeless a dancer as you think I am.”

“You’re not hopeless. You’re enthusiastic. But not necessarily flexible, and you know, I’d hate for you to pull a muscle just for the hell of it.”

“Alright. Point taken. And you’re forgiven.”
“Yes, of course. Forgive me.”

“So, more sleep means more dreams?”

“...yeah... I guess so.”

“That doesn’t sound very convincing.”

“It’s still weird. I know they’re just dreams, but I’m trying really hard not to fall down an internet wormhole of crazy kpop research trying to validate some insane family legend because that seems like some Grade A level wish fulfillment bullshit right there.”

“Eh, so long as you introduce me to Hoseok, I’m fine with your potential descent into madness.”

“Gee thanks, Hyemi.”

“Anytime, friend. Anytime.”
Samantha stared at the mirror. She curled her lip and stuck her tongue out. This new choreography just wasn’t working out. She couldn’t quite figure out what it was she wanted or needed to make this piece work. It was sort of her triumphant return to the dance team. Jess had asked her to prepare a short solo. Not an audition, really, but sort of. Almost. A show of commitment. It was just a minute and a half but she was struggling. She loved this song and had some parts of it down, but it just wasn’t gelling.

She restarted the song, shaking her head and trying to get back in the right frame of mind. She’d dreamed of dancing last night, dancing in the body that wasn’t hers, didn’t move right, wasn’t flexible but still danced and danced until every muscle burned and sweat made her clothes stick to her skin in all sorts of uncomfortable ways. It was the middle of August and Chicago was still trapped under the oppressive heat of summer, making the studio extra muggy and uncomfortable. She stood in front of the fan, trying to shake the free from the choreography she couldn’t quite remember from her dream. It was really throwing her off. She couldn’t replicate the moves though in the dream they had felt so natural, like muscle memory taking over everything, but now it was a jumble of half remembered steps and gestures.

She rubbed the back of her neck, rolling her head around to clear the remnants of dream and then froze. She rubbed the back of her neck again, then moved her feet and shoulders reflexively. She stopped and did it again, a little slower, feeling it settle in her bones and it felt right. She thumbed the song back to the beginning, stepping to her mark and moving through the choreography she’d made and then at the beginning of the chorus, she incorporated the new piece in and suddenly it clicked. She finished the piece and started again from the beginning, grinning. She’d done it. Fixed it, found the way to make all the pieces fit. She’d really missed this part of dance--the problem-solving aspect of choreographing mixed with the satisfaction of seeing the movements in her mind become reality through her body.

“Looks good, Sam,” Jess said from the doorway. Samantha smiled, grabbing a towel to wipe her face with.

“Thanks. I really missed this.”

“We really missed you. I’m glad you’re back.”

“Yeah, me too. Thanks for letting me back in. I know you didn’t have to,” Samantha said, ducking her head a little. She’d really abandoned everything for a while and trying to make amends, pick up the pieces where she’d left off, trying to fit back into a life that wasn’t really hers anymore was hard, but this was one piece she wanted to fight for.

“You know it pains me to admit it, but we weren’t as good without you.”

“Oh Captain, my captain! Does this mean you’ll let me have a say in the next showcase line-up?”

“Don’t push your luck, Cale. Just show me what you’ve got here.” Samantha nodded and queued up the music. Heading back to her mark, she nodded at Jess to start the track and let the music push her through the motions, moving her, guiding her, shifting her around until the dance flowed with every breath. She finished and tried not to stare at Jess in the mirror, tried to remain composed and collected, but this was so important to her. “Good work, Sam. Really good. There’s a new edge to your style, some moves I haven’t seen before. You’ll have to show me what’s been inspiring you. It’s good.”
Samantha smiled and finally let herself sit down. “Thanks Jess. I’ll send you some videos. It’s mostly Korean stuff.”

“Of course it is,” Jess said, pulling her hair up into a ponytail. “More G Dragon?”

“Actually no. A new group. Well, new-ish. They’ve only been around about a year. BTS.”

“Oh, that’s at least a less silly name than Big Bang.”

“Well it stands for Bulletproof Boy scouts, so…”

“Oh.”

“I know, but just listen, ok? They’ve got a new album coming out in like three days. I’m pretty excited.” Samantha reached for the iPod.

“Later. For now, show me how to do this new choreography.”

“Yeah? I’ve got an idea for a fantastic contagion too.” Samantha stepped into position, ready to break down all the pieces, feeling the rush of being part of a team again. She’d missed this more than she realized, and it felt good to be back. She was getting the pieces back together, even if they didn’t fit the same way anymore.

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Taehyung was beginning to lose hope. He’d shown the video to everyone he’d seen that day. His phone’s battery had never drained this fast. He had the pertinent 32 seconds memorized by now, could describe every swish of hair and eyebrow raise. He was convinced this was the girl from his dreams, now if only he could figure out where he’d seen this video six months ago, then maybe he could start to understand why his subconscious had chosen this girl to fixate on. He knocked tentatively on the studio door. Yoongi had said Namjoon was just fiddling with some ideas for his mix tape so it should be safe to interrupt. Still, Namjoon’s near growl was far from inviting.

“Hey, hyung. Do you have a minute? Literally just a minute. There’s a video clip I want to show you.” Taehyung slipped into the room as quietly as possible, holding his phone out in front of him like a peace offering.

“Is it the thing with the cat? Because Hoseok already showed it to me.”

“Uh, no. Not the cat thing, though that was pretty funny, yeah?” Namjoon rolled his shoulders and let out a sound that was more grunt than sigh, but Taehyung stepped closer anyway. “This is just a dance video. It’s half a minute long.”

“Yeah, ok.” Namjoon twisted his chair around and looked intently at the screen while Taehyung pressed play. Taehyung tried to keep from moving his hands too much, fighting the urge to dance along with her. The video ended and Namjoon looked at him blankly.

“Alright,” he said after a pause. “That was nice. Thank you?” Taehyung’s face fell. Namjoon was his last hope.

“So, you’ve never seen this before?”

“No, why?”

Taehyung let out an overly dramatic sigh and collapsed into the couch next to the desk where
Namjoon was leaning. “It’s hopeless! I’m doomed.” Namjoon rolled his eyes this time, seemingly searching for the deep wells of patience that made him the perfect leader for these boys.

“Why are you doomed, Taehyungie? What about this dance video has brought about your demise?”

“Well, other than the fact that I’m somehow slowly going insane? Nothing. I’ve been dreaming of this girl for months and I finally found her on the internet and can’t figure out where I saw this video and why my brain picked this random girl that I don’t even remember seeing as the avatar for unconscious angst and the whole thing is killing me!” Taehyung wailed pitifully. Namjoon grabbed Taehyung’s phone and started scrolling, looking through and reading the site.

“Taehyungie, relax. The brain is a complex system of neurons and impulses. It’s unfathomable. Besides, this video can’t be what inspired your dreams.”

“What? Why not?” Taehyung had his face buried in his knees, sounding more and more forlorn by the minute.

“Well, the giant flashing banner at the top that says ‘Welcome to our new site’ is kind of a tip off. This site is only a few weeks old.”

“What?” Taehyung said, leaning forward to grab at his phone in Namjoon’s hands. Namjoon pointed patiently.

“This here. Says the site launched on the first of the month. It’s brand new for this group. They’re going to be uploading videos every week, they’ve got 10 girls and there’s a little bio for each of them.”

“Really? Read me Samantha’s.” Namjoon raised his eyebrows. Taehyung tried again, without the demanding and impatient tone. “Uh, please, Namjoonie-hyung, would you read me the part about Samantha?”

“Yeah, ok, um, let’s see… Samantha Cale, 21, has been dancing with DMB since 2011, after returning to the US from, oh, Seoul, South Korea, nice. Um, she brings a fresh take on modern dance and keeps us all on our toes with the latest from the Far East.” Namjoon snorted a little but Taehyung was too busy trying to rationalize everything. Twenty one, ok, so just a little older than him. He knew she spoke Korean. He’d dreamed it. She spoke and wrote Korean even though she certainly didn’t look Korean. He knew that. How could he have known that? Was it just coincidence, wishful thinking as he dreamed this mystery girl?

“She likes cooking and reading, Missy Elliot, BigBang and Portishead. Then there’s just a link to the page of videos. Oh, but there’s just the one you showed me on there,” Namjoon said as he handed Taehyung his phone, turning his chair back to the computer, a silent dismissal.

“Yeah, ok. Thanks again, hyung.” Taehyung walked out of the studio, staring at the picture of Samantha. He’d known she spoke Korean. How could he know that? How was that a real thing? She’d lived here. Where? Had he actually met her? Seen her on the street? At a show? He was grasping at straws. He’d dreamed she was singing Bangtan songs, so obviously she was a fan. It was possible he’d seen her somewhere. There had to be a reason why he was dreaming her face, her life. It was all just a coincidence. It had to be. It was the only logical explanation. Every other explanation led to paths of the supernatural or the insane and he wasn’t ready to face either of those options yet.

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“Sam, this is really great stuff. I can’t believe it took me this long to watch these videos.”

“Welcome to kpop, Jess. There is no escape. Grab a drink and make yourself at home.”

“Funny. But I can totally see where you get your inspiration. This new BTS video is intense.”

“Danger? Yeah, I heard the song but I haven’t watched the video yet. I’m waiting to Skype my friend Hyemi. She likes to watch me flail and critique the dancing, but the waiting is so hard.”

“You’re kidding, right? I could have sworn your solo piece was inspired by that video.”

“No, that video just released today. I’m going to watch it tonight after I’m done working.”

“Oh. Huh. Interesting. Well, maybe you’ve just seen stuff by that choreographer, because it’s eerily similar.”

“Huh, I’ll keep my eyes open for that. I watch a lot of kpop stuff and several groups use the same choreographers, so... maybe that’s it?”

“Probably. Anyway, thanks for telling me about them. I’m going to go watch the other stuff on this list you sent me. Up next is... E-X-O?”

“Exo. Yeah. They’re great. Watch Growl. And the hats! Watch how they use the hats, it’s great.”

“Sure thing. Thanks, Sam. See you Saturday?”

“I’ll be there.”

“Good. You need to get a battle back under your belt. It’s been too long.”

“Yeah, just don’t be disappointed if I lose, ok?”

“Girl, I saw you in the studio. You’re gonna be just fine.”

“Thanks, Jess.”

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There was a complicated ritual for Skyping with Hyemi. They tried to work their schedules around the 14 hour time difference on a semi-regular basis, making exceptions for new video releases. Samantha was cocooned on the couch, laptop living up to its name as it perched on her knees, glass of ice water within easy reach but far enough away to be safe from the frantic gesticulations that were sure to occur. She’d been waiting all day to watch this, growing more and more intrigued the longer she thought about Jess’s comments.

Hyemi’s face popped up and before Samantha could even squeak out a greeting, Hyemi was shouting, “Press play! Press play! Three, two, one, go!”

“Hold on, hold on. It’s buffering.”

“No, no buffering. Do you know how long I’ve waited?”

“Hours, Hyemi. Just some hours.”

“Hours is too long! Jung Hoseok is waiting for me so you need to get ready right now.”
“Yes, yes, I’m ready. Ok. One, two, three.”

“Go!” Hyemi shouted and Samantha tried not to giggle as the BigHit logo filled the screen. She was so very excited. This was the first BTS comeback she’d really paid attention to and Hyemi’s enthusiasm was contagious. The first minute was spent excitedly gasping over their hair. Then at the two minute mark, Samantha fell silent. She was frozen. She wasn’t sure what she was expecting, but it wasn’t this. It was more than she was prepared for. This was exactly what she’d dreamed. Not in these costumes, in sweats and snapbacks, but this dance. Exactly this dance. Not an interpretation of this dance; exactly this dance. The music had sounded familiar and unsettling when she’d listened earlier, but she’d chalked it up to the general familiarity of kpop, but now, bits of dreams she’d forgotten were resurfacing and she was shaking.

“Hyemi.”

“I know! They look so good, right?”

“No, Hyemi. Stop it.”

“They’re killing me. Look at Hobi move! He’s incredible.”

“No, Hyemi, stop. Stop the video!” Hyemi looked up then and must have seen the panic on her face as she paused the video around the three-minute mark.

“Sam, what’s wrong? Shit, you look like you just saw a ghost.”

“I dreamed this.”

“You dreamed what? Us watching videos?”

“No, this dance. I dreamed them doing this dance, in a practice room full of mirrors, and then I put what parts of it I could remember into my solo for DMB.”

“What do you mean? Did you see a teaser somewhere? You’re usually so stringent about spoilers.”

“No Hyemi, I just dreamed it. I have a video of me, doing parts of this dance from a week ago and I don’t understand how that’s even possible.”

“How are you dancing a dance before it was even released?”

“I don’t know! That’s why I’m freaking out.” Samantha stared hard at the screen, willing something about this to make sense. “Ok, hold on, let’s just finish the video. Let’s do that first.” Hyemi nodded and after synchronizing their computers they pressed play and Samantha tried to get lost in the music, Hyemi’s enjoyment, Hobi’s rapping, the really excellent dancing, but every time she saw that move, that one iconic dance move that she’d woven into her own choreography her fingers tingled and she felt like reality was slipping away a little bit.

“So, are you feeling better now that it’s over?” Hyemi asked hopefully. Samantha shook her head, trying to find something to say that sounded reasonable.

“No, I actually feel worse. I need to figure out where I saw that bit of choreography before I dreamed it, because that’s the only thing that makes sense. The neck grabby part, and the chest thing.”

“You can’t have seen it. The teasers didn’t have that part in it. I watched them both, a lot of times, and that part wasn’t in there, because I was excited to see it for the first time tonight. Are you sure
“It’s the same move?”

“Let me send you the practice video of my solo and you tell me, but Jess noticed it when she watched the video.”

“Are you saying that you’re actually psychic?!” Hyemi squeaked.

“No, no, of course not. That sounds crazy. I’m not psychic, I just…” Samantha let the sentence die on her tongue, because there was no ‘just’ about it. Either Nana was a loon, family legend was just fiction, and Samantha was having strangely vivid dreams of a pretty singing, dancing boy who laughed away his troubles or Nana was right and her dreams were somehow tied to the actual reality of that boy by something crazy and… yes, psychic. Shit. “I don’t know what I’m saying, but I’m not saying that.”

“It’s okay if you think you’re psychic. It’s really fine.”

“I’m not psychic, Hyemi. I can’t be, because that’s not a thing that exists in the world, alright?”

“You don’t know everything. You can’t explain molecular physics or subatomic particles, so you never know. There might be a totally logical, but highly technical and involved, explanation for all of this.”

“Hyemi, you’re not helping.” Samantha ran her hands through her still disturbingly short hair in frustration.

“Sure I am. Don’t rule out everything just because you don’t understand it. I don’t understand plumbing but I’m not giving up my shower, right?” Samantha laughed at the exaggerated frown on Hyemi’s face.

“Right. But I’m not convinced this is a thing that’s really happening. There is probably a very simple explanation for this. One that involves spoilers not science.”

“Whatever, Samantha. Dream big.”

“Dreaming big is exactly the problem here.”

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Taehyung collapsed into a chair backstage. Double broadcast days were always a beating—so much time spent waiting. He thought about pulling out his phone to check Twitter, or play a game, maybe some music, but his eyes were already closing before he finished the thought. Just a quick nap. He had time before he had to be anywhere. He felt tired in every pore and for once, his thoughts felt sluggish and tame. He crossed his arms over his chest and let his chin drop.

He was running, thankful for the movement that kept him from feeling too much of the sweat that was dripping down his back. His legs ached and his lungs burned, but he was smiling. He felt good. It took a few strides before he really felt the wrongness of it though. Nothing was moving quite the way he anticipated. He tried to look down and realized he couldn’t, and that some of the tightness he felt around his chest must be a sports bra. He was dreaming of her again.

He came to a stop light and jogged in place, keeping his eyes focused on the traffic signal, focusing on the driving beat of the music pouring in through his headphones. He sensed movement out of the corner of his eye and turned his head slightly to watch as another jogger joined him, also running in place while waiting for the light. He stole a quick glance before snapping his eyes forward again. A man, probably about his age, in a tight tank top and bike shorts, sweat glistening
off rippling arm muscles, short spiky hair and a wide, friendly grin. Taehyung felt his eyebrows furrow, which wasn’t usually his response to kind-seeming strangers.

“Good run?” the man said and Taehyung swallowed nervously. Why was he nervous? Why was this guy talking to him if he had headphones on? Still, he nodded politely, eyes never leaving the road ahead. “You like running?” he persisted.

“No, I like eating,” Taehyung replied, feeling just a little delighted and surprised at how natural the English sounded coming out of his mouth, which was ridiculous. Why be surprised? What was the point of dreaming if not to be better at all the things you wanted to be anyway? Plus, wasn’t Sam American? Of course she’d be good at English. The light turned green then, a little man lighting up in white and he was running again, thinking about what he’d just said, in her voice, with her mouth, to distract himself from thinking about the way he was moving, the way her body was moving. Everything just… bounced a little more than he was used to. But she’d said something about eating, he was pretty sure. She liked to eat. The answer surprised him because it seemed completely unrelated to the question the man had asked. He was trying to make polite conversation about running, right? Why had she answered about food? Was he missing something in translation? Oh, or was she saying she was like Jin, who only exercised to he could eat more food. Oh! That made sense. He felt proud of himself for having deciphered the joke.

The man was jogging next to her now and he felt irritation rising. Usually he loved talking to strangers. He did. Maybe Sam didn’t. He reached out, turning the volume down on his phone, strapped to his arm conveniently. He was irritated but also wary, afraid of surprises from strangers. He spotted a bench ahead and sprinted to it, stopping to check the laces on his bright purple and orange sneakers, which were perfectly fine, but his hands fluttered over them anyway. He waited for the other jogger to pass, to leave some distance between them but the guy didn’t run on. He stopped too, breathing heavily, stretching obnoxiously and Taehyung felt his face scrunch up again.

“Can I help you?” Taehyung said in her voice, her English.

“Yeah, gimme your number so we can do this again sometime. I love the view.”

“No, thank you.” Taehyung stood and jogged forward, nervous energy propelling him faster than was advisable.

“Let me at least buy you dinner!” the man called behind him and nervousness turned to cold fear as Taehyung raced ahead, scanning the path ahead, eyes darting about quickly. He was afraid in a way he had never been before, and because of what? Because another jogger had asked for his number? It didn’t make sense, but the emotions were there, thick and strong. Thankfully he didn’t hear the sound of steps behind him.

“TaeTae, scoot over,” Yoongi said, bumping him with his hip. Taehyung scooted obligingly, reaching up to rub his chest. His heart was pounding. The fear from the dream had left his thoughts hazy, but as Yoongi snuggled up to him, he leaned into his hyung, grateful for the comfort of another warm body for a moment. What had he been so scared of? What had she been so scared of? The echo of the man’s voice as he shouted after her rang through his head. That’s what had turned her anxiety into panic. Had the other jogger said something threatening? Offensive? Taehyung ran through the words in his head, fairly certain he’d heard and understood them correctly. The man had been pushing for her number, for a date. He was pushing and she was scared.

He was certain he wasn’t going to be able to sleep again with his brain bouncing around inside his skull. He grabbed his phone and pulled up the video of Samantha dancing again. He watched it to reassure himself. Of what, he wasn’t quite sure, but he felt better afterwards. Calmer, like seeing
her face had let him believe that she was okay. Which was ridiculous, because first of all, this video was from weeks ago and had absolutely no bearing on her current state of wellness. And secondly, it’s not like he actually knew her. She was just the face his brain was using. And thirdly, maybe most importantly, these dreams weren’t real. They were just his dreams. She wasn’t in any danger, couldn’t be in any danger, because nothing about this was real.

He repeated it to himself over and over again, but the more he said it the less he believed it. Nothing about it made sense, but he wanted to believe that she was real. Not just that somewhere out there a Samantha Cale with red hair and the face he recognized was out there, but that he knew her, that the girl he knew, the girl he’d been dreaming of for months was really real, that she was out there, a real person. He wanted to believe in the miracle of it, because despite what he thought he knew, he cared about her. Cared enough to be scared that she was scared. Cared enough to let curiosity drive him to endless internet searches, looking for news and information about her. He cared enough to want to believe.

“She cut her hair,” he said softly, details of the dream filtering back through the fear.

“Who did what now?” Yoongi mumbled from beside him.

“Nothing, hyung. Sorry. Go back to sleep.” But Taehyung knew he was right. She’d cut her hair. He let the memory of running wash over him, ignoring the strange sensation of her body and tried to recall all the details. He was running, listening to music in those funky wrap-around headphones that she always wore, and he reached up to adjust a headband, then let his hands slide over the back of his head before dropping back into position. And there had been no ponytail, but no hair down his back. He’d run and felt it lightly brushing his cheeks, clinging a little with sweat. Her hair was short now, somewhere between her shoulders and her chin. He was suddenly desperate for an update on that dance site, to see a current video, to see her dancing, because he knew, he just knew that he was right and the next time he saw her, she would have short hair.
Destiny, Dancing and Dye

The Fourth of July decorations were still up. In a few more day, they could just call them Labor Day decorations and pretend like it was on purpose. Maybe it was on purpose. Samantha rolled her eyes and tried to focus on the squeaking of her shoes against the tile as she walked to Nana’s room. How different it felt coming mostly well rested, freshly showered and presentable. She still stopped to read a text from Jess. After winning the dance battle, apparently they had a bunch of messages on the new website that Jess wanted her to take a look at, and lots of traffic coming from South Korea. She smiled. Hyemi must be bragging about her. It warmed her heart and that was a good feeling to walk in with. She took a deep breath before knocking, gathering all the pieces of her heart that Nana touched and holding them close before stepping into the room.

“Good morning, Nana.” She glanced around the small room until she spied her grandmother, sitting up in bed, a book held lightly in her hands, but her eyes unfocused. “Nana? It’s Samantha. I came to visit. How are you doing?” Nana’s head turned slightly, eyes slowly taking in information, the book falling from her hands.

“Good morning, darling. How are you?” Nana gestured to the chair next to the window, smiling graciously. Samantha wasn’t sure how present Nana really was, but she had a whole slew of questions she wanted answered. She just hoped she had the patience to keep trying, and the grace to accept that there might not be any answers to be had.

“I’m doing really well, Nana. I’ve…” she hesitated. This was crazy, but she had to dive in and embrace it a little bit if she was going to understand it. “I’ve been dreaming, Nana. Dreaming about a boy?”

“Oh yes, yes. Delightful, isn’t it? Like a peeping Tom almost,” Nana said with a dainty laugh. “I dreamt all sorts of things no young lady should ever dream before I met Harold. I blushed all the way to my toes more than once, never let him live it down either. Have you had those sorts of dreams?” Samantha couldn’t help the smile. This was the Nana she remembered and loved--cheeky and bright--and Samantha wished every visit was just like this, like this moment when it was easy to forget that Nana often forgot. She wanted this moment to last and was almost hesitant to push her luck by asking too many questions, but she knew she had to seize this opportunity while she had it.

“A little bit, yes. But Nana, what do the dreams mean?”

“Just destiny darling, Destiny.” Nana’s hands waved in the air dreamily. “You might have a long wait ahead of you, though.”

“What destiny, Nana? Why am I dreaming of this boy in particular? Why this one?” Samantha had asked herself the question since the dreams began and still had only half answers.

“Who knows darling, who knows? It’s just the way of it. Your heart was broken, and this is how you mend it. His heart is for you and yours is for him now. You’ll dream and dream until you bond, then the dreamfasting is ended.” Samantha felt her stomach drop. That sounded an awful lot like some made-for-TV movie plot about true love and she was not ready or willing to accept that.

“No, Nana. No. I don’t want to…” she stopped to swallow the hurt rising like bile in her throat. “I don’t want to fall in love. I did that and I don’t want to do it again.”

“I know, darling, I know. But give it time. Time heals, you know,” Nana said, stroking her gnarled...
fingers over her age-worn palm, the spot Samantha knew held a scar eerily similar to her own. “Mother told me that, too. Time heals, she said while crying over my poor hand. I thought she was just talking about the wound, or Little John, but she knew.” Nana looked up and blinked quickly, as though seeing her for the first time. “Mother was so angry you know. Didn’t want me to be a Dreamer, I suppose, though I didn’t understand that for a long time, not until you came along. No one wants to see their babies suffer, darling, and the dreams only come to the broken hearted.”

“Nana, why? Why these dreams?”

“Oh don’t worry, Angela darling, you’ll never have them. Don’t you worry at all.”

“No, Nana, it’s Samantha. I’m Samantha and I am dreaming. I’m having weird dreams of a Korean boy and I’m dreaming things that I have no earthly way of knowing but they’re coming true and I’m really getting worried, so please, Nana, please, tell me why.” Samantha couldn’t keep the panic out of her voice. She had more questions now than ever. What was “dreamfasting” and what bond would break it and still the pressing question of why Kim Taehyung and maybe the most important one of all—was any of this real?

“Oh, Korea! That’s quite a ways away. I’ve never really traveled, darling. Only roadtrips, you know. Remember when we drove out to the Amish colonies in Iowa? Your father bought that bookshelf for the dining room. Such craftsmanship!” Nana smiled brightly, reaching for Samantha’s hand but Samantha was up and pacing.

“No, no no, Nana. No, I’m not Angela. I’m Samantha. Please, tell me about the dreams. Please. Tell me what it means.”

“I’ll tell you a secret,” Nana said with a smile, looking so much like her old self that it was hard to believe the grim reality that her mind was decades in the past. “Your father wasn’t my first beau, you know. I was engaged before I even met him.” Samantha stopped and looked at Nana, confusion and frustration pulling her eyebrows down and her mouth up. “Oh don’t look so disapproving! I didn’t know the dreams were real, how could I? I just thought I had a very active imagination. I very nearly married the wrong man.” Nana laughed, sounding smug.

“Yes, Nana, how? How did you know they were real?” Samantha dropped down into the chair, leaning forward. Maybe she could still get her answers after all. She scooted her chair closer to the bed, leaning her elbows on her knees.

“The telephone, darling. One day he called me on the phone. Said he’d learned my name in a dream and looked me up. I thought he was a loony, of course, but he was persistent. Called every day for a week, telling me things no other human could possibly know, and that was that.”

“That was it? He just… called you?”

“Oh and Mother was so put out! She knew Mitchell wasn’t the one I was destined for but she liked him so much, and had so much fun planning the wedding, she was awful sore when I called the whole thing off.”

“You canceled your wedding because of a phone call from a stranger?” Samantha couldn’t believe it. There was no way this was real life. No one could convince her so easily. How would she even go about building a case that these were anything more than dreams, anyway? She certainly wasn’t about to go calling Kim Taehyung on the phone and other than some odd timing, she didn’t think she knew anything that couldn’t be easily discovered with a quick Google search.

“Oh, things were easier back then, darling. I just hope it doesn’t take little bird as long to find him
as it did me.” Samantha nodded absently, not sure what to think. Nana believed. Nana was convinced that she’d dreamed of her husband for years before they met. Samantha wasn’t anywhere close to believing that her dreams were anything of the sort. She wasn’t going to marry Kim Taehyung. That was just insane. “Little bird?” Samantha was pulled out of her thoughts by the tenderness in Nana’s voice. “Little bird, are you alright? Have you found him?” Nana had reached out and was thumbing at her engagement ring, looking hopeful and that hope felt like ice in Samantha’s tender, healing heart.

“No, Nana. No. I haven’t found him yet.” She wasn’t even sure which him she was talking about. Matthew was gone. Kim Taehyung was famous. And in Korea. And not even on her radar because no one was on her radar. She wasn’t looking for someone new to love. She just wanted to stop hurting, and maybe stop dreaming. “Nana, how do I make it stop? How do I make the dreams stop?”

“That comes with time, little bird. It’s different for every Dreamer. Mother once told me of a pair who kept dreaming for over a decade after they were married, but mostly, once the bond is consummated, you’ll know. Like a wedding ends a handfasting.”

“A wedding?” Samantha felt nauseated at the thought. There was no way she was getting married any time soon. Maybe not ever. She didn’t want to be alone for the rest of her life, but she literally couldn’t stomach the thought of trying to love anyone again. And consummated was not a word she could even think about. She and Matthew had never, not really, even after dating for years they just hadn’t gotten there yet; a fact she deeply regretted now that he was gone. Why had she wasted so much time waiting? Why had he let her?

“Are you getting married, darling? This is a beautiful ring. Tell me all about the lucky boy!” Nana patted Samantha’s hand gently. Samantha sat up straight, taking a moment to look out the window and collect her thoughts as she prepared herself to say it again.

“No, Nana. I’m not getting married. Matthew’s gone.” The words still burned to say. She wanted to spit them out or hold them in and let the heat burn away everything inside her. Instead of running away though, which everything in her wanted to do, she reached out and took Nana’s hand, pressing their palms together, scar to scar. Nana smiled up at her.

“Oh darling, don’t you fret. You’ll meet a nice young man someday and settle down. It took a long time for me to find your father, you know, but it was worth the wait. It will be worth the wait, Angela darling.”

Samantha patted Nana’s hand, content to let it slide this once. She would smile and pretend to be her mother for a little while. Her mother, who never had this heartbreak, or these dreams, who just met a boy, married him, and started a family. Wasn’t that how it was supposed to work?

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Taehyung thought the hanboks were surprisingly comfortable, but horrible to dance in. Peeling all the layers off, he was still laughing to himself about the silliness of their Chuseok broadcast. He pulled out his phone to scroll mindlessly for a few minutes while everyone got changed. He glanced at Twitter and KKT, sent a quick message to his mom and then went to go look at the DMB website. He’d sort of gotten into the habit of checking it every few days, to see if they had uploaded anything new.

He told himself he just liked watching the girls dance. And he did, but he was checking for news of Sam. It was ridiculous, but ridiculous was kinda his thing. He smiled when he saw the new video and clicked before the preview picture even loaded. Three girls in hoodies, hoods up, stood, back to
the camera and Taehyung raised his eyebrows appreciatively while the video loaded. They were wearing some sort of boots and shorts. He tilted his head and examined their legs. He liked the one in the middle. She looked dainty. When it started to play, he was surprised. The music was faster than any of the things he’d seen them do before, and the style was more the kind of thing he’d seen Hobi practicing late at night. The girls moved together and apart, finally turning to face the camera and Taehyung smiled as he recognized Sam on the left. He focused on her, watching her move, wishing he could zoom in. He was surprised at how tall she looked compared to the other dancers. He hadn’t remembered her standing out this much in the last video. She wasn’t even wearing heels. But there was no mistaking that she was bigger. The other girls had a fluidity she lacked. They were lithe, she was… strong was the only word that came to mind. This dance was aggressive, a little bit wild. He liked it, found himself rolling his shoulders and lifting his hands, trying to imitate and follow along, which is why when he froze, it was with his hands in an awkward half prayer, half flying panda like position. But Sam had thrown back her hood, unzipped the hoodie and stood in the center rolling her hips. With short hair. It was pulled back on top, but the rest hung around her chin. Short. Not at all the hair he had enjoyed in his dreams, but this was what he had dreamed about. This was it. She really had cut her hair. He liked long hair on girls. He liked dainty, lithe girls with long hair. He liked the one who had started in the middle, but now flanked Sam to the right. Sam with the short hair. Strong Sam in the middle. Sam from his dreams.

Taehyung wanted to stand up and back away from his phone as fast as possible. He wanted to snatch it up and hold it as close to his face as he could manage. He wanted to, but he didn’t. He just sat there, arms awkwardly in the air, which is how Seokjin found him.

“Whatcha watching, Taehyungie?” Taehyung jumped up, phone flying off his lap, hands fumbling, and failing to catch it as it clattered to the floor. “Whoa, calm down. Didn’t mean to startle you.”

“Sorry Jin-hyung. Sorry. Um, just a video. A dance video.” He inspected his phone thoroughly for damage, avoiding looking Seokjin in the eye.

“Ah, Jimin’s influence?” Taehyung nodded absently, then shook his head.

“Not exactly. Uh, excuse me, I’ve got to go. I’ll be right back.” Taehyung walked quickly, but without purpose. He just wanted to get away from, well, everyone for a little bit. He’d dreamed her with short hair and now she had short hair in real life. He’d dreamed her dancing and she was a dancer. He’d dreamed her speaking Korean and she’d lived, at least for a little while, in Seoul. He had dreamed things he couldn’t have known and they were true. True things. Real things happening half a world a way. He pulled his earbuds out of his pocket, shoving them in and staring at his phone. He didn’t want to listen to music right now. He didn’t want to do anything but sit and think and figure this out, but time wasn’t a luxury he really had, so he hoped to at least avoid casual conversation by looking busy. Jungkook said it usually worked really well for him.

He turned down hallway after hallway, wandering aimlessly until he found a familiar spot. Just a corner, out of the way of most of the traffic in the building. A little corner he liked to sit in when he needed to be alone with his thoughts. He slid to the floor, shoulders pressed tight against the two walls. Not as comfortable as leaning on his members, but it would do for now. He squeezed his eyes closed and rested his forehead on his knees. Was he crazy? Was this real? All the rest of his frantic questions boiled down to those two. If it was real, was he still crazy? That was the one he wanted answered most. He tried to remember every ghost story and legend he’d ever heard about people dreaming true things. Didn’t they go crazy because no one believed them? Weren’t they outcast and ashamed, left to wander the streets and beg for a living? Were they really crazy or just forced to behave in a way that looked crazy? If his dreams were real, what did it mean? Why this girl? What made her special? He shook his head and pulled his hands into fists. No, first things first. He had to figure out if this was real. He had to find some way to test it.
She was drenched in sweat. It wasn’t enough. Two hours of practice and it wasn’t enough. She hadn’t eaten anything vaguely resembling a carb in two weeks and it wasn’t enough. They were going to perform in crop tops. Halter tops. That ended so far above her bellybutton that they were just glorified bras. Not even two months of self-destructive avoidance of food had removed the soft pudge she’d carried with her her whole life. She wasn’t soft. She was strong, the base for so many lifts and the foundation for their formations. Need to build a pyramid of dancers? She was the cornerstone, holding firm while her tiny companions flitted to the top. Most days she loved that. Loved not asking for help lifting heavy things. Loved the surprised looks and appreciative smiles from men when she lifted her hundred pound teammates with ease. Most days.

Days like this, with a revealing costume waiting for her, it wasn’t enough to be strong. She wanted to be lean. She didn’t want broad shoulders and a tiny waist. She didn’t want thick thighs and “curves.” She wanted to be a ballerina, not a bodybuilder. She had abs, underneath it all. Her stomach had definition, the slight indentation on either side showing where the muscles lay stubbornly covered by a layer of “baby fat.” Not from being a baby, but for having babies, her mother was always reminding her. As though she herself weren’t a waifish size Wear-Anything-I-Want. Samantha took after her father’s side of the family. Strong Danish women with hips and the ability to plow fields.

She stood in front of the mirror and lifted her shirt. Just a little. Just enough to see what she knew she would. If she stood very straight, pushed her shoulders back and didn’t breathe too deeply it wasn’t too bad. Still soft, but at least smooth. Pretty, even. But unfortunately, her part of the choreography didn’t involve being still. And as soon as she bent, as soon as she relaxed, as soon as she moved, the rolls appeared. Maybe she could move fast enough that no one would notice. Maybe everyone would be looking at Jess. Or Priya. Or any of the other beautifully thin girls. She would be in the back for most of the choreography. Maybe no one would notice.

But there would be pictures. There always were. And a recording for the website. And then it would be out there for the whole world to see. And maybe no one but her would notice. But she knew and that was enough. There were plenty of costumes that she loved wearing, that made her feel confident and fierce, even beautiful. But this one… belly-baring halter tops were just not her best look. She reached for her water bottle, sucking down a mouthful before heading back to the stereo. Just one more time through. Then she would shower and be done. Go home and climb into bed and try not to think of french fries. She briefly contemplated the list of crimes she would be willing to commit for some fucking french fries. Not a full felony, but several misdemeanors. She hoped tonight would be one of the nights she fell asleep quickly, exhausted and worn out. She’d been sleeping much better recently. Almost regularly even.

She had tried to ignore the dreams that came with more sleep. Tried to ignore them while losing herself in the new album. Dark & Wild. She’d spent the whole Saturday after it released listening on YouTube, breaking one of her cardinal rules of album appreciation. She’d searched for the lyrics, asking Hyemi for translations for the phrases that she couldn’t quite decipher. Every time she listened she liked it more. It was really good. Surprisingly good. She’d thought Skool Luv Affair was good, but this was better. Still too many love songs, but she wasn’t feeling quite as raw these days so it wasn’t as hard to listen to them. Except for “Let Me Know”. She still couldn’t listen to the whole song without crying. It wasn’t even her story, but it pulled the emotions right out of her and made her feel things she spent all day pretending were manageable. Some nights she sought it out, putting the song on repeat and sobbing into her pillow, trying to cry out all the pain and frustration, trying to fill the emptiness of her apartment with tears.

She would never admit it to Hyemi, but after so many listens to that song, Kim Taehyung was
her. His voice. It was still Min Yoongi’s genius behind the words, and that helped, but Taehyung’s voice was definitely growing on her. It was so painfully familiar in ways it shouldn’t be. She felt like she’d had a thousand conversations with him. What she actually had were dozens of dreams where she spoke in his voice, the deep rumble and unusual accent had become almost as familiar as her own voice now. It was still strange to feel the way his body moved, so different from hers, but it was also familiar now, a second skin. He was so familiar, like a friend and that thought always stopped her short. She didn’t have a lot of close friends. She had Hyemi and the girls from dance, but that was really it. She was just used to doing things on her own, taking care of herself, not having anyone other than her parents checking up on her. To feel this sense of strange entitlement over a celebrity was just unreal, and unhealthy.

She’d spent a lot of time actively not thinking about anything Nana had said. It was just more than she could manage right now. They were dreams. Something more than normal dreams, that much she was willing to admit. She’d accepted that they didn’t fit the strict definition of normal. She wasn’t ready to call them supernatural yet. Yet. She could feel the pull, the part of her that wanted to surrender to the surreal, to embrace the unusual and let the mystery consume her. She was morbidly fascinated with the possibility of her own tenuous grasp on sanity. So she pushed it down, ignored what didn’t make sense, left the siren call of her enigmatic dreams on her pillow and pushed through her routine.

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“He’s going to be blond.”

“No way, they just got rid of the orange hair and now it’s back to dark brown.”

“Hyemi, I’m telling you, it’s going to be blond for the next mv. I saw it. I dreamed him in the studio, playing with Jin, and it was blond.”

“Sam, this is getting a little out of hand. They’re just dreams, remember?”

“Yeah, I know. I know it’s crazy, I just wanted to say it out loud, I guess. Well, when the new video comes out you can laugh at me for being wrong, okay?”

“I will. I totally will. I will laugh and point, because that is what real friends are for.”

“And here I thought it was all about unconditional support and calling me on my bullshit.”

“Isn’t that what I just said?”

“Thanks, Hyemi.”

“No problem. Speaking of, how are you doing?”

“Good? I guess? I work, I dance, I eat, I sleep. Lather, rinse, repeat.”

“Huh?”

“I just mean, I’m doing the same things over and over again. Nothing new.”

“Which is an improvement, yes?”

“It’s definitely better than drinking myself into oblivion, yes. And I love my job. Spending time with the twins is really great most days. Days are good. Mostly. Nights are still hard.”
“Well take care of yourself, Sam. I kinda like having you around.”

“Even if I’m on the other side of the planet?”

“Yeah. You should fix that. You should come visit.”

“I’d love to, but things are just starting to feel normal again. Maybe for my birthday.”

“Alright. But you know, I’ll bet Taehyung looks stupid with blond hair.”

“Uh, he doesn’t. He looks annoyingly good in everything.”

“Do I hear a change in bias?”

“No, of course not. I just said he’s annoying.”

“You said he looks good.”

“Yeah, well, he can’t rap for shit, so…”

“Uh-huh, Sam. Keep reminding yourself of that.”
Taehyung was distracted, which was fine for the moment. Sitting in the chair in their hotel room, waiting for the van to take them to the venue, there wasn’t much that he was supposed to be doing, but he had to find a way to focus for rehearsal today. They were in Mexico and the jet lag was messing with his tenuous grasp on sleep. At least he’d slept on the plane. Maybe he would be worn out enough after their performance tonight that he could collapse. He noodled around with some ideas for lyrics. He peeked at Twitter. He paced the room and fiddled with his watch.

“Just sit down and relax. Save your energy for the stage,” Yoongi said from his position, corpse-like, on the bed. Taehyung sat on the opposite bed and looked through his phone for some music to calm him. Portishead. He’d looked them up after Najmoon had read their name on Samantha’s profile on the dance website. It was good, mellow, relaxing, but it reminded him of Sam, which only got him worked up again. Every time he’d fallen asleep for the past few weeks he’d dreamed of her. Anytime he slept long enough to dream, that is. He’d dreamed of her playing with kids and sometimes driving. He’d dreamed of her dancing in a studio very different from the practice room he was used to, and yet totally familiar in the way all dance rooms were. The wall of mirrors, the smooth and slightly springy floors, bright lighting that let every flaw and imperfection be scrutinized.

That was a weird dream, one that he thought of over and over again. Watching her dance in the mirror while he was dancing in her body was trippy. She was practicing a new dance. Something fluid and languid with lots of slow, writhing arm movements and some really impressive floor work. He felt his muscles burn with the stretch and the strain of holding his core in place while his arms and feet moved rhythmically. But the weirdest part was looking in a mirror and seeing someone else’s reflection. He should be used to it by now, after so many months, but he rarely saw her clearly in his dreams. Once, when he dreamed he was putting on makeup, he’d gotten a close up look at her bare face. Watching her transform herself with makeup was fascinating. He never got tired of the miracles of concealer and contouring the coordi noonas worked on his face. Feeling his hands maneuver the brushes, the complicated rituals of squinting and blinking to get the eyeliner on just right was all familiar and yet not.

He was getting used to her face, freckles and all. It was still a surprise to him how different it was; how different she was. They both danced. They both loved BigBang. That was the end of their similarities as far as he could tell. She ran and took care of some kids. He traveled and sang and recorded and performed. He was still trying to figure out what it was that made his brain connected to hers. He’d decided that there was something electrical going on. Some sort of as yet undiscovered wavelength that his brain was picking up on, like a radio tuned to just the right station. Sam’s station. It was a piss-poor metaphor but it was all he had.

He still hadn’t told anyone about his discovery. He wasn’t sure he had enough to convince anyone. He wasn’t sure how he had convinced himself, but he was sure. Every dream only solidified the feeling in his gut that he couldn’t shake, couldn’t explain but also couldn’t ignore. He couldn’t show anyone the dreams, and being able to describe the way she put on lipstick wasn’t really enough of an identifying feature to prove that he was possibly genetically more highly evolved than the rest of the world. He didn’t even know who to start with. Jimin was the one he trusted most, who trusted him, but this felt like the kind of thing that even Jimin would squint at. Namjoon was always thinking about things, theories of the universe and shit, so he seemed like a good candidate for this bizarre confession. Seokjin was good at comforting and Yoongi didn’t have the patience to lie just to spare his feelings. Hoseok and Jungkook would just think it was some sort of elaborate prank.
He chewed on his bottom lip, pulling on his top lip while staring at a spot on the wall where the wallpaper pattern didn’t quite match up at the seam. He reached for the ubiquitous pen and paper on the nightstand, doodling a series of circles, just for something to do while his brain spun in endless and useless loops. He wasn’t sure when it changed, but he looked down and started to comprehend what he was seeing. Her name. Sam. He’d written it over and over, large and small, as though testing it out. He tried the whole thing. Samantha. It was awkward to write the English letters, his hand tense and clumsy now that he was concentrating. He stared at the paper, whispering the name to himself. He couldn’t say it well. The “th” just wouldn’t work in his mouth. Samanda. It was close. It wasn’t sure why he was trying so hard. He’d never need to say it out loud. Even here, so far from his home, but close to her timezone maybe, he had no idea where she was, what she was doing. He wrote it all out together, Samantha Cale, pressing down harder than he needed in his concentration. As he thought about all the facts he knew about her he doodled around her name. Stars and circles, squiggles and triangles, a little dog.

“What’s with the art project?” Jimin asked, startlingly close. Taehyung jumped a little, covering the paper guiltily with his hands. “You writing English? Is it lyrics?”

“Uh no. No, it’s nothing.” Jimin was nothing if not persistent, grabbing at the paper and pulling out of Taehyung’s hands.

“What is this? I don’t know this word.” Jimin looked genuinely confused and Taehyung wanted to come clean, fill in all the blanks he’d been keeping to himself recently, tell Jimin everything but the words wouldn’t come.

“It’s a name.” Even that admission felt uncomfortable. He’d always shared his burdens with Jimin, always come to him for comfort and understanding. This reluctance was pricking his conscience.

“Oh, is this your dream girl?” Jimin said, waggling his eyebrows suggestively and doing a lewd little body roll in Taehyung’s direction.

“It’s not like that,” Taehyung replied, smiling anyway.

“I know, but my way is way more fun. So, why are you doing the name thing?” Jimin set the paper back down on the bed. Taehyung tapped on it, letting his fingers ghost over the places where the ink was shiny and dark from the pressure of his drawing.

“Just… something to keep my hands busy.”


“Is it time to go?” Taehyung asked, tempted to crumple the paper and throw it away but also feeling strangely protective over it, as though her name in his crappy penmanship held power or importance.

“Yeah, we’re supposed to head down to the lobby in like five minutes. Come on.” Jimin stood, holding out his hand to pull Taehyung along. Taehyung slipped the paper into his pocket and let Jimin guide him along. He’d keep it for now. It couldn’t hurt.

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“Jin-hyung?”

“Huh?”
“You know how the fans dress up like us?”

“Yeah?”

“Have you… have you ever seen one look better than you?”

“No.”

“Well, yeah, ok, maybe not better than you, pretty pretty hyung.”

“Don’t mock me. I’m the visual for a reason.”

“I know. I know you are. And it’s totally understandable. I’m not arguing with that. You’re definitely the right one to be the visual.”

“Aw, TaeTae, are you feeling a little insecure?”

“What? No, it’s just…”

“You should spend a little less time on the internet.”

“Hyung, it’s not like that. I wasn’t… it wasn’t… those pinstripe pants looked good on me, right? But on this one girl, they were…”

“Yeah, girls and curves and stripes is a good combination.”

“…yeah. Curves.”

“If you’re going to think about that any harder, you might want to excuse yourself.”

“It’s not that. I just wonder…”

“You’re still pretty, Taehyungie. Don’t worry.”

“I’m not worried. Just… you know… “

“Confused? Jealous?”

“Something like that.”

“It’s not a big deal. Everyone loves you. You’re everyone’s favorite everywhere we go, so just relax. You look good.”

“Thanks, hyung.”

“Now, get out of my space and let me read.”

“Yes, hyung.”

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Samantha adjusted her necklaces again, trying to get them to lay just right. Taehyung didn’t have these kinds of problems. He didn’t have boobs. Or round hips. Or a considerable ass. She should have dressed as Jimin, put the booty to good use. She tugged on her jacket and smoothed her hands down her thighs. Pinstripes. Why did it have to be pinstripes? She texted Hyemi a quick picture.

_Whose idea was this, anyway?_
You look fantastic!
You even got the lavender hair!!

It’s a spray-on
I hate you.

Why didn’t we at least choose our own biases?
My ass looks huge in these pants.

Shut up.
Our biases, sadly, are not bffs
and we are
Also, your ass is your best feature.

You shut up. And show me yours.
My ass??

If you’re not wearing tight red pants with suspenders,
I’m going to kill you.

I am, I am. Hold on, let me get a picture.

Why do you look so adorable???
Superior genetics?

No one here is going to get my costume.
I’m not explaining it either.

Yeah, well, no one here was all that impressed with mine either.

I guess going as the 95z would have made
more sense if we were attending the same party

Yeah, well I’m tipsy and tired
It’s been a while since I pulled an all-nighter
that wasn’t for studying
so I’m going to bed.

Have fun tonight!
Samantha checked the clock again. It was too early to head down to the party. She didn’t even really want to go, but she’d promised Hyemi she would try to have a good time. She was trying to be more social, stay connected. She wandered to the bathroom to put on her makeup, figuring she had plenty of time to try something new. If it didn’t work, she could just wash it off and start over.

She was starting over. At least a little bit. She was bracing herself for the holiday season, trying to keep herself from the constant comparison game. This time last year, she and Matthew had been dressed up as Dorothy and the Cowardly Lion, heading to a party with his lawyer friends. “This time last year” was on endless repeat in her head these days and she didn’t know how to drown it out without actually drowning it underneath so much liquor and regret, the way she’d gotten through the day they had planned to get married. She’d spent that whole day drunk, crying and sleeping. Not a widow. Not a bride. Something bitterly in between. But the next few months were going to be an assault. Thanksgiving. Christmas. Matthew’s birthday. Her birthday. The anniversary of the accident.

Thanksgiving she’d spend with Nana, focusing her attention outward and trying to care for someone else. She had a tentative plan for Christmas, getting the hardest part out of the way by being out of town, and it was going to be nice to see her parents again. Yet as the weather turned colder and she brought out her scarves and gloves, it was hard to ignore all the bitter memories attached to them. The jacket she wore on the plane ride home, alone. The scarf she wore to the funeral. The gloves she bought to replace the ones she’d thrown into the fire in a fit of anger when they got stuck on the bandaid on her hand.

She’d thought about just throwing it all away, using the surplus of money to buy a new winter wardrobe, one that wasn’t saturated with sorrow. Instead, she’d spent two days thrift store shopping for the perfect leather jacket and pinstriped pants, decorating the jacket with band pins from her two and a half years college and smiling with nostalgia. She didn’t miss school, but she did miss going to shows on campus.

Three failed attempts at a seductive smokey eye later, Samantha looked at her face in the mirror. Her eyes were red from all the rubbing on and off of makeup. She looked like she’d been crying, but for once, that wasn’t it. She snorted a laugh at the unfairness of it all and reached for her favorite black eyeliner. “Winged eyeliner and red lips. Can’t go wrong with a classic,” she muttered to herself as she started the process all over again.

She’d dreamed about having her makeup done the other night. It was soothing and also a little strange as she caught glimpses of not her face. His face. Taehyung’s face. It was a good face, she was willing to admit. Prettier than her own, that much was certain. She still wasn’t sure why she was dreaming of him. He wasn’t her favorite in the group. He wasn’t even in her favorite group. He loved BigBang though, and he danced even more than she did. But as far as she could tell, that was where their similarities ended. He was an idol, she was just… her. She was nothing special. She was living her life as best she could. Sure, she was good at stuff. She was great with kids, and a decent dancer. She was no slouch in the kitchen and could recite every word from every Disney movie song released since 2002. Those were party tricks and quirks, but they didn’t make her exceptional in any way that she could see. Maybe it was genetic. Maybe family legend was just someone’s way of explaining something they couldn’t explain, some biological abnormality that caused a specific brand of insanity. She didn’t feel insane, mostly, except tonight, when she was
dressed like him. She’d even practiced some of the choreography from the new video.

The video where he was blond. She still wasn’t sure how to deal with that. It was too surreal, too coincidental. How had she dreamed it before it had happened? Had she really? Like with the choreography, had she somehow seen something somewhere without realizing it, her subconscious spinning stories out of things only glimpsed in her periphery. Hyemi had called her, trembling after the concert, still days before the video was released, high on adrenaline and shouting, unable to really hear herself over the ringing in her ears. She’d babbled about the amazing show, the choreography, the costumes, and then she’d fallen oddly silent.

“Sam, I don’t even know how to tell you this, but you were right. He’s blond.”

“Haha, very funny.”

“I’m not joking. I lost like two minutes of N.O. because I was watching him. I nearly missed Hobi’s whole rap because I was distracted. His hair is blond now, Sam. Taehyung has blond hair.”

Samantha had felt her stomach clench. She tried to control the shivers. She’d watched the video with a sick fascination. That was a week ago. Now she stared at the mirror, trying to decide if she was really crazy or not. Had she really dreamed anything that would prove that she had some sort of strange brain-to-brain connection with Kim Taehyung, international pop star? Was there anything she could recall, anything concrete that would make anyone other than Hyemi believe her? Was she even willing to believe it herself? Hyemi called her psychic now, teased her about learning facts before they were released, called it insider information, giggling at her own pathetic jokes, but Samantha wasn’t ready to laugh just yet. It was still scary. It was still weird. She was potentially scary and weird, dreaming things she had no right dreaming. Was she crazy? Was this real? If the dreams were real, was she still crazy?

She didn’t have any answers, so she fluffed her sprayed-purple-ish hair and checked her lipstick one last time. At least these pants had pockets. She would survive this party. She would enjoy this party. She would put these questions aside and think about it later.

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Japanese hotels were Taehyung’s favorite. The pillows were almost as good as at home. Not that he had much time with them, but he loved these pillows. He grabbed two and squished them against his face. He just wanted to stay here, burrow under the blankets and sleep. Sleep and maybe dream. He liked the dancing dreams. Girls dancing in short shorts and tank tops. If he couldn’t dream of brushing long hair, the dancing dreams were a good substitute.

“Come on, lover boy, let’s go.” Taehyung sighed deeply, unearth thing himself from his little nest. He’d finally talked to Namjoon about his dreams, trying to convince him of his own sanity and possible prescience. It hadn’t been as difficult as he’d imagined, Namjoon rambling on about the unknowable nature of the universe and the power of the subconscious mind. The relief Taehyung felt was immediate but short lived, because then the teasing had begun. He knew that was the likely result. His members never let an opportunity go by to throw someone under the bus without milking it for all it was worth. It was an offhand remark from Yoongi about love making people do crazy things. Jimin overheard and the whole thing had snowballed. They’d called him Cupid, Romeo, Casanova, Adonis--like they’d gone through the encyclopedia of world legends of lovers--and finally settled on just plain “lover boy.”

No amount of protesting had convinced them that he wasn’t in love, not even close, not even a little. She was just… some girl. No one was buying it. Crazy dream link to a random American was believable, but Kim Taehyung not being hopelessly in love was a bridge too far. Just because he
liked sad love songs and sad dramas and yeah, okay, maybe he wanted to be part of a grand, sweeping, epic love story, but later! When things were easier, not so busy being an idol. When he was older. Not now. Not with someone he hardly knew. He’d walked in her shoes, literally, in dreams, but he didn’t really know her. Not really. He’d been trying futilely to convince his members, but his heart wasn’t in it. Everything he wanted to say just sounded mean. He wasn’t going to fall in love with some girl that looked like she could benchpress him. Especially not one who he had no way of ever meeting. It just wasn’t going to happen. Sure, he cared about her. Worried about her. Wanted her to be happy. Hated when she was sad. But that’s all. That wasn’t love. That was just concern for a human being whose emotions he experienced on a regular basis.

He followed Jimin out to the van, enduring a few more pokes and jokes at his expense. They started asking about his dreams the second he woke up now, and rarely did he have the presence of mind while only half-conscious to be evasive or deceptive. So when he dreamed he was driving, they teased him about never getting his license because his dream girl could just shuttle him around. When he dreamed of dancing, they teased him that the extra practice would be good for him, accusing him of slacking on stage. They asked all kinds of rude questions about her anatomy. All in all, everything was totally normal. He wasn’t sure anyone really believed him, not really, not all the way, but they weren’t bothered by the fact that he seemed to believe it and that was good enough for now.

There wasn’t a way to prove it, not really. He’d started writing down details from his dreams in a tiny notebook. It all looked like gibberish mostly, but it helped him hold on to the little details. Like the fact that she did use the same lipstick the coordi noonas liked, and she drank her coffee very sweet, ate broccoli like it was a treat and was always, always moving. She never really sat still, not really. Her foot would tap, or she’d bite her lip while she was reading, fingers drumming on her knees when she rode the train. He knew her, but he didn’t. A collection of details that didn’t amount to a whole person, just an idea. She was still just some girl out there, who occasionally listened to his music, and swore at him and Yoongi a lot, for some strange reason.

He was just him, and he needed to focus, to get his head in the right space, to rehearse and do his part, not let his members or their fans down. They had three concerts here in Japan before heading home and he couldn’t really afford to be thinking about her, wondering why she had been in Seoul and if he’d ever really seen her in real life. He needed to be thinking about the concert, his parts, remembering his lines, giving a good performance, hitting his marks.

“Hyung, you’re thinking too hard.” Jungkook elbowed him in the ribs for good measure. “Play a game with me.” Taehyung smiled, grateful for a distraction that grounded him in reality. He leaned into Jungkook, pressing their shoulders together and losing himself in the game for the rest of the ride to the venue. He would figure this out. Of course he would. He would figure it out because he had his members to help him, even if only by keeping him here and out of his complicated and confusing brain.

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Samantha paced the halls, gathering courage and strength. Pumpkins and dried corn were on every counter and turkeys painted on the windows. She’d splurged and had a lavish dinner delivered. Dinner, at 3 in the afternoon, as was fitting for Thanksgiving. She was anxious to eat, to celebrate all the things she had to be thankful for as she tried desperately to ignore all the things she was missing. But today it was worse. Today she’d woken up with shaking hands. She’d dreamed, like she almost always did these days, of Taehyung, sitting in the practice room. That room was familiar now not just from her dreams but from watching the ridiculous Bangtan Bombs that Hyemi sent her. It was surreal to see the boys playing and goofing on camera. It was just like her dreams, only not quite. Subtly more reserved somehow. But she’d dreamed of the practice room,
and Jimin and Hobi dancing in turns, which was all good and fine. It was frustrating because Taehyung never watched as long as she wanted, or looked at the things she would choose to focus on. But even that much was fine.

What set her on edge was the paper in Taehyung’s hands, the little piece of hotel-looking stationery covered in doodles. He was drawing on it again, adding to the mess, but not just swirls and stars. He was writing her name. Her name, coming from his pen. She, through his eyes, in his skin, felt the concentration it took to make the letters, felt herself biting her lip, his lip. Over and over, her hands that were his hands wrote her name in his handwriting. Then switched to Hangul, writing it more naturally. His hands shook as he wrote it again and she woke with her own hands, her real hands, trembling.

They were trembling now in the hallway outside Nana’s room. She wasn’t sure why she was so nervous. This practically proved that her dreams were just her overactive imagination. She’d put herself in her dreams in a tiny way. Just her name in scratchy, unfamiliar handwriting, but it proved they weren’t real, didn’t it? It had to. There was no way the real Kim Taehyung could know her name, so it must be just a dream. It should have been a relief. She should be full of peace and gladness knowing that she wasn’t on the verge of some existential crisis fueled by her unreliable brain. Instead, she was a little sad. It felt a little like losing a friend. Which really was crazy, because Taehyung wasn’t her friend. He was an idol. And a figment of her imagination. She shook her head and pushed the door to Nana’s room open.

“Happy Thanksgiving, Nana!” Nana was sitting by the window today, dressed in a vibrant orange and red shirt, pearls on, hair done. She looked happy, smiling at something beyond the glass.

“Hello, darling. Come on in, I was just watching the birds a bit. Would you care to stay for dinner?”

“Yes, Nana. I ordered us some turkey and stuffing, sweet potatoes, green beans, even pumpkin pie. It’s supposed to be delivered in a little bit.”

“Well that sounds delightful. What a sweet gesture. How have you been, darling? I haven’t seen you in a while.” Samantha smiled. She couldn’t tell if Nana was really remembering, or just bluffing. There was a lot of bluffing that went on when memory couldn’t be counted on.

“I was here at the beginning of the month, like usual. We talked about my mom and dad, and a little bit about Aunt Birdie.”

“Oh Birdie! What a hoot she was, always getting into trouble. You look just like her.”

“Do I, Nana? I thought I looked more like my dad’s side of the family.”

“Oh, of course not, no no no. You take after my side, sure as anything, Angela.” Samantha sighed. She never understood why Nana always mistook her for her mother. They bore little physical resemblance to each other, though their voices were eerily similar, especially on the phone.

“No, Nana. It’s Samantha. Angela’s daughter. I came to spend Thanksgiving with you.”

“Of course you did, darling. Of course. And where is Wayne, that cad?”

“He’s in San Antonio with Mom. They send their love. I’m sure Mom will call later this afternoon. I’m going to visit them for Christmas.”

“I do love Christmas, but not as much as Thanksgiving. Thanksgiving is the perfect holiday. Just food and talking. No gifts to get in the way. So tell me what you’re thankful for, darling.” Nana
gestured to the chair next to her, smiling widely. She seemed too happy. Samantha gave her the best smile she could manage.

“Well, I’m thankful for you, Nana. It’s good to see you.” For the first time in a long time, Samantha actually meant it. It was good to be here. Hard, and if she thought too much, or too long, the sadness that floated always beneath the surface would bubble up and spill out, but now even that sadness was tinged with gratitude. Everything still hurt, but she was getting to be grateful for the hurt, because it meant it was real. It was real. Matthew was real, not her silly dreams about Kim Taehyung.

“You too, darling. You too. Now, tell me all about what you’ve been up to. Don’t leave out any details. I don’t get out much these days, so I need your stories to keep me busy.” Samantha told her about the dance team, competitions and performances. She told her stories about the twins she cared for and all the silly things they did and said, their fourth birthday party and the hilarious disaster that had been the clown with balloon animals, scrolling through the pictures on her phone and narrating each one. Suddenly she was looking at the awkward selfies she’d taken on Halloween.

“Is that Halloween, little bird? You always loved to dress up.” Samantha looked up, glad to hear Nana had joined her in the present.

“Oh, yes. Yeah, I did. I do. I, um… I dressed up like a rock star,” Samantha said, feeling a little embarrassed. It was all true, mostly. Kim Taehyung was kind of a rock star, but Nana didn’t need to know all the details.

“That’s lovely darling. Which one? Your mother loved David Bowie, dressed up like that… oh what was the name, the crazy space alien one? With the pink hair?”

“Um… Ziggy Stardust?”

“Yes! That’s the one. Oh, she had such a crush on him. I never understood that myself. Too much makeup for me. I prefer to be the pretty one in my relationships, you know.”

“I know what you mean, Nana,” Samantha replied, tucking her phone away. She reached out, wanting to hold Nana’s hands, to anchor herself to reality a little bit more, to forget the silliness and embarrassment of her dreams. “I love you, Nana.”

“Oh, shush. I love you too, little bird. You’re my favorite granddaughter, you know.”

“I’m your only granddaughter, Nana.” Samantha fell into the familiar responses. They’d said these words so many times over the years. It felt good to say again.

“I know, I know. You’re passing down the history after all. The only daughter of my only daughter. I’m glad the legend won’t die with me. The world needs Dreamers.” Nana sighed and Samantha felt the questions rising in the back of her mind. She pushed them down, refusing to give any time to flights of fancy today. Today, while Nana was really with her, she would enjoy the time she had, not spend it chasing down proof for something that couldn’t be proven. A knock on the door interrupted their story telling, but once the food was set up, they fell back into a comfortable rhythm. Sometimes Nana called her Angela, sometimes little bird, but all the time was spent being grateful, being thankful, and that was enough for now.

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There’s a sinking feeling, a combination of chills and a flush of fever, when someone discovers
your secrets. Taehyung watched Jimin casually flipping through his notebook, oblivious to the horror and embarrassment warring in Taehyung’s gut. It was his fault. It wasn’t a diary, or even anything marked personal or private. It was just a notebook. He supposed he should be grateful that it had taken this long for it to be discovered, but he was frozen to the spot, mute and useless as he tried to find something to say that wouldn’t betray all the emotions simmering in his skull.

“Is this me or you?” Jimin asked, finally looking up to see Taehyung standing awkwardly in the doorway.

“What’s that?” Taehyung wanted to run and snatch the book out of his hands but didn’t want to give them any more reasons to tease him.

“Is this observations about me or you? Some of them are definitely me, and I’m pretty sure some are very you, but some I can’t place.” Jimin was casually flipping through the notebook, fingers tracing over words and phrases. “So, ‘Never stops moving, even when seemingly still’, that’s you. ‘Not confident with body, despite high level of fitness’, ok, that’s me. ‘Always running fingers through hair’, probably me. ‘Laughs loudly at inappropriate times’, totally you. ‘Loves animals and babies’, you again. ‘Passionate about dance’, obviously me. ‘Pushes self too hard, too much perfectionist, feels criticism deeply’, I’m guessing that’s you, but could also be me. What is this, TaeTae?”

Hearing Jimin categorize his observations about Sam in the only frame of reference that he had, Taehyung was suddenly eager to reread them all. But first he had to find a graceful way out of this situation. He briefly considered lying, making something up, but he was never good with on the fly deception. He needed time to craft a narrative before he could lie with any kind of conviction.

“Uhh… it’s just…” he stuttered before taking a deep breath. “It’s my dream journal.” He felt ridiculous saying it out loud. He felt pretentious and flighty.

“Oh yeah, cool.” Jimin tossed the notebook back on Taehyung’s bed and walked towards the door, patting him casually on the belly on his way out. “I’m gonna go work out with Jungkookie and Jinhyung. See you at dinner.” Taehyung nodded, grateful for the easy acceptance, and a little miffed that his friends thought he was at that level of weird that they didn’t even blink twice at his antics.

He grabbed the notebook and dug around in Jungkook’s backpack until he found a pack of highlighters. Scrambling back up to his bed, he pulled out the highlighters, taking a moment to pull the green and blue out and put them next to him. Then the pink. Then he climbed down and went in search of a red pen and a pencil, then climbed back up. He grabbed the orange highlighter too then spent the next few minutes making a color-coded chart at the beginning of the notebook. He lost hours while he went through all his observations, color coding them, writing notes in the margins and when he finally reached a blank page his eyes burned and his brain was spinning. He’d skipped dinner, shooing Seokjin away with promises to eat when he was finished, but his appetite was gone.

Sam wasn’t a stranger at all. She was some sort of mix of his personality and Jimin’s. With some Jungkook thrown in, and lots of Seokjin. Not a lot of Hoseok, Namjoon or Yoongi though. He tried to imagine her here, in the dorm, with all the members. She was the same age as Yoongi, probably wouldn’t take a lot of flack from the younger members, but possibly would spend her time with them. Taehyung wasn’t sure if he was really imagining it, but she seemed really nice. Really good. Like someone he’d like to know. Like someone he did know, in a way that he could never share or explain. This couldn’t be real, could it? He was so sure that he’d been dreaming true things, that he knew her, but she couldn’t really be this familiar. What were the odds that she was out there and nearly perfectly suited for him? That had to be wishful thinking, didn’t it?
Or was that the point? That she was someone who he would get along with. But he got along with everyone. He had loads of friends, made them easily, was well-liked, well-loved even. Why would he need some super-special psychic connection with a girl he had no chance of ever meeting?

Wasn’t that just cruel? Which sounded a lot more like the fate he’d always read about. He flopped back in bed, thumping his head on the pillow a few extra times for good measure. He wasn’t in love with her, didn’t have time to be in love, but the part of his heart that ached at every sad love song was vibrating with excitement. He didn’t have time to be in love, but he wanted to be.

Someday.
The drive home gave her too much time to think. Nineteen hours alone in a car, with only the contents of her iPod to keep her company. Somewhere around Kansas she started wishing she’d just bought the plane tickets. But it had sounded fun at first. A road trip. Junk food. Playlists. Leg cramps and loneliness. But Samantha was nothing if not stubborn and an extended cross-country drive was her act of victorious rebellion against her brain. Her driving anxiety had gotten so much better, and the open highway without the clutter of cars was appealing. It felt like a big deal, being able to do this. She’d made it to her folks’ new place, on base and startlingly familiar for having never set foot in it before. But now the drive home was stretching her patience.

She’d tried calling Hyemi and Jess, looking for someone to talk her through the rough hour where she felt droopy and tired, but neither had answered. So she’d just cranked the music louder, let some cold air in through the windows and shouted along to her favorite songs. She tried to avoid stuff that reminded her of Matthew, even though it didn’t hurt as much as it used to. She’d spent too long listening to all the songs that were “theirs” and having a big purging cry over them. They still made her throat ache, especially if they came up unexpectedly, but the ache was duller now. Almost welcome, like a sweet reminder of how well she’d been loved once.

Her mother had nagged her about still wearing her engagement ring. Samantha knew she meant well and tried not to let it get to her. It was habit to wear it. It had taken weeks to get used to the weight of it around her finger, sneaking glances at it daily after he’d asked. Now it was so much a part of her that even taking it off to shower or dance felt strange. It didn’t always make her sad to see it glinting out of the side of her eye now. At least, not too sad.

She’d braced for an onslaught of emotions at Christmas, ready to dive in and tackle each one head on, feel the feelings and find somewhere between wallowing and avoidance to live until it passed. And the emotions had come, but not as strongly as she’d feared. Sure, she spent a lot of time thinking about last Christmas, newly engaged and giddy with possibilities, full of sappy holiday cheer and stupidly annoying young love. There had definitely been a lot of tears this year, but she’d been waiting for the other shoe to drop, waiting for a more devastating sense of loss to take her breath away, sweep her ability to cope right from under her feet, like she’d felt right after. The anniversary of their engagement had been harder than Christmas itself, and she’d stayed busy with dance and baking with the twins that day, drowning those feelings in butter and sugar instead of beer and shots.

Her dreams had been full of melancholy and longing too, but just a normal sort of homesickness, familiar and yet different through Taehyung’s eyes. She’d stopped believing that she was anything special, that these dreams were anything special, ignoring the part of her brain and heart that longed for a miracle. She was too vulnerable, too willing to believe in something otherworldly, something bigger than herself, some purpose and reason behind the painful reality of her life. It was just wishful thinking. She told herself that every morning, while she shook off details of new songs, new music she’d never heard. She ignored the nagging thoughts of invasion of privacy if these dreams had any grain of truth, because it wasn’t like she had a choice, and ignoring the complications was easier than getting lost in the obsession. She had even managed to avoid spending too many nights poring over the internet for any and every fact that would show some critical flaw in her dreams, some detail that she could point out, some continuity error that would prove they were just in her head. She’d forbidden herself from doing this very thing when she was trying to sway herself the other way. If the internet could verify the truth of these dreams then surely it could disprove them too. But after a few searches that left her skin crawling with the unsettling sensation of deja vu, she’d closed her computer and vowed to stick to baking as a
distraction.

But now, here, in a car with an almost empty stretch of highway across some of the flattest parts of the country, she couldn’t keep herself from rehashing each thing she’d learned and holding up to the scrutiny she’d avoided earlier. Taehyung was goofy, enthusiastic, loved kids and animals, silly, dramatic, passionate about music but seemed to not take himself too seriously. He didn’t like beans and was always craving a hamburger. He was sensitive to the moods and feelings of others, always trying to cheer and encourage them, offering supportive touches and pats without thinking. He was a good dancer. Better than her, for sure. He loved his family intensely. He loved his friends intensely. He did everything with his whole heart. Her dreams were often full of the overwhelming sense of pride in the accomplishments of his members. Everything she’d seen online had only corroborated these observations.

So why wasn’t she happy? Wouldn’t millions of girls around the world be delighted to be dreaming their way into his head each night? Why wasn’t she? It couldn’t be just because he wasn’t her bias. Everytime she started to believe, to really accept and let herself believe she was somehow extraordinary, she heard Nana’s voice ringing in her skull, talking of destiny and consummating bonds and the thought of being that dependent on anyone, the way she had been so tied to and consumed by Matthew, made her sick to her stomach. She wouldn’t let herself believe because she couldn’t accept all of it. If they were just dreams, then she had no destiny tied to Kim Taehyung. He was just a stranger, a fellow human on the planet who had put his life on display for the whole world to watch, but nothing special to her. She didn’t want him to be special to her. Being special hurt.

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Coming back to the dorms after being home was always a mix of relief and sadness, but now, neither place felt like home. They had a new dorm, with more room, more rooms even, separate rooms to sleep in, more than one bathroom, a kitchen big enough for them all to be in simultaneously. This trip home had been great, wonderful to see all his cousins and sit with his Grandma while she fussed over him and stuffed him with the kind of food that he could only get at her table. It was a great trip, full of rest and he felt better for having gone. He didn’t want to leave because he knew it would be much too long before he got back, but he was also keenly aware of how that life didn’t fit anymore. He tried not to think of the future when he didn’t have Bangtan to come back to, how he would try to fit back into a life that he’d so quickly outgrown, like they’d all outgrown their first dorm. He put his bag on his bed, the bottom bunk this time, and stretched out next to it, trying to adjust to the new smells and sounds of this place. It wasn’t familiar yet, but he knew it would be soon. It seemed so big right now. How long before it seemed as tiny as the last place?

Being home, whether Seoul or Daegu, wasn’t really home right now. The dorm hadn’t been broken in yet and even with all the love of his family, which he craved and needed and missed more than he could ever express, the house he grew up in just wasn’t where he belonged anymore. He felt a little aimless and lost. His dreams had been full of a different family, different holiday traditions, different dinners and treats and presents, none of which quite fit either. They felt welcome and familiar while he was dreaming, but then he woke up. His own emotions settling back into place after having been replaced by hers was a shock and adjustment. She was feeling sad again. She’d spent one dream twisting the ring on her finger and crying. He woke up from that one trembling and sucking down deep breaths until he could remember that he wasn’t sad. She was sad but he wasn’t. He wasn’t sad at all. The ring though. He’d never paid much attention to it before. She wore simple hoop earrings frequently, a variety of necklaces, and this ring. It was just part of everything, like background noise. But he’d felt so sad and empty looking at it. Also like he wanted to smile wide enough to let all the hurt out because it glittered and sent tiny rainbows across the
wall by his face, like he was warm and cold all at once, like he was so happy he wanted to cry except he was already crying because he was sad.

So he added an entry to his notebook: *possibly married?? or was??*. That entry didn’t get color coded. It didn’t fit any of the members. None of them had ever been in a relationship like that. Obviously. No one was married, but none of them had even dated that seriously. It stood out, stark white and black in the mess of colors. It hurt his heart to think of her so sad. Which was just because he was a compassionate person, not because he had any special feelings for her at all. It was like a drama in his dreams. He felt sad and wanted to make things better for every heroine and every second lead who didn’t end up with a happily ever after. This wasn’t any different. This was just a little closer to his heart, because it was in his own head. It was just selfish. He wanted happy dreams, which meant he wanted her to be happy so he would be. In a very literal sense his happiness kind of depended on hers.

Taehyung was feeling unsettled. He didn’t know this new neighborhood as well as he wanted. He needed to find the places that would become his favorites soon. Someplace he would wish he could sit and watch birds. A corner store for late night snack runs. A path to walk in the early morning when he couldn’t sleep. He thought about getting his shoes on and going to look for some of those places, but even though nothing smelled quite right yet in the house, his pillows were still his pillows. He sighed deeply, squeezing them close to his chest. Soon the hectic days that he loved and dreaded would start. Soon, but not yet. He had a little bit of time left to just enjoy being here and being still.

He’d had that Adele song stuck in his head for what felt like forever, ever since he recorded it for his birthday. He really thought his English was getting much better. He wondered if Sam would hear it. He wondered if she would like it. He wished he had some way to communicate with her, to tell her that he was thinking of her. But even if there was a way to do that, he couldn’t. For one, it had to be unbelievably creepy. *Hi, you don’t really know me, but I hope you’re happy because it hurts me when you’re sad.* Yeah, no. Not a good plan. Also, who would believe it? *Hi there, you don’t really know me even though I know you know who I am, but I’ve been dreaming of you for almost a year.* It all sounded like a series of really bad pickup lines. He might be really good at making friends under normal circumstances, but nothing about this was normal.

“Oh good, you’re home,” Yoongi said, sticking his head in the doorway. “Wanna come get a snack with me?” Taehyung abandoned his pillows with a grin.

“Always.” Nothing like a good snack trip with his hyung to set his mind at ease.

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“I’m just saying, you know, objectively, that you have more in common with Taehyung than Suga.”

“First of all, I don’t think that’s true. Suga is my sleepy, scrunchy, dedicated and hardworking spirit animal, ok? We are kindred spirits and you can’t convince me otherwise. Secondly, even if you were right, which I totally don’t think you are, being similar isn’t the same thing as being compatible.”

“Alright, fine Sam, but by that very same logic, why would you and Suga be compatible then?”

“Because he’s a genius and I...appreciate his genius. I don’t know Hyemi, but I’m not jumping on the Taehyung bandwagon. He’s got enough fan girls.”

“Yeah, but he covered Adele! You love Adele!”
“That’s not a sign that we’re somehow the perfect couple! Lots of people like Adele.”

“But it was so good!”

“Yes, that I will admit. It was really good. Painfully good. No one should sound that good.”

“Plus, you’re too tall for Suga. You could never wear heels on dates.”

“Look, if that’s your logic, I’m too tall for all of them except maybe Namjoon, heels or not. Besides, I don’t think Min Yoongi gives two shits about height.”

“He’s always saying he’s frustrated by being so short, though.”

“Yeah, but he’s going to fall in love with someone’s mind and not care, one bit, at all what’s on the outside.”

“Ok yeah, fine, that sounds right.”

“So I’ll wear heels or not and be just fine.”

“I still think you should give Taehyung a chance.”

“He’s already in my dreams. I don’t need to give him any more than that.”

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Sweater season was her favorite time of year. Time for turtlenecks and hot chocolate, and the forgiving nature of wool and knit. Except for holiday parties. Samantha had hoped to skip this one while she was off visiting her parents, but Jess had gotten the flu and the whole thing had been rescheduled to the end of January to combine it with her birthday celebration, so she couldn’t even politely decline with a flimsy excuse and stay home watching the new Hyun Bin drama.

So, she put on a red dress, curled her hair that was still shorter than she thought reasonable, even if it did touch her shoulders now, smudged on some eyeliner and grabbed her favorite red lipstick. And heels. She would have fun tonight, because it was her birthday party and she wanted to make some good memories. She did not want to think about how this was almost the last in the long line of firsts she’d had to spend without Matthew. It was a good plan, and it was working pretty well. She stayed away from the spiked punch bowl and the dessert table. She danced with her girls and ate more hummus than strictly advisable. She was feeling pretty good. Then Melissa showed up. They’d never been close, even when they danced together, but now that Melissa had decided that she was better off forming her own dance team, it was worse. Jess, ever the peacemaker, had extended the invitation hoping she wouldn’t show up. Wishful thinking because Melissa loved drama like Samantha loved cake.

“Sam! Look at you! I love the new hair. Must have felt good to drop a few pounds, eh?” Melissa said at top volume as she crossed the room, arms open for a hug. Samantha contemplated sticking the cocktail toothpick in her hands through Melissa’s left nostril, but decided it wasn’t worth the assault charges.

“Hi Melissa. How are you?”

“Drunk and fabulous.” Melissa spun around, her short skirt swirling up to reveal her startlingly tiny undergarments.

“So, same as ever then. Well, I’m going to go get a refill. See you around.” Samantha shook her
half-full glass for emphasis and tried to maneuver past the exuberant drunk girl, but Melissa reached out a hand to grab at her arm.

“So are you dating yet, Sammy? I know some really great guys who don’t mind a little junk in the trunk. I could hook you up.” Samantha pasted a tight smile across her face and reminded herself that hitting people was painful and useless.

“No thanks, Mels. I’m fine.”

“Oh come on, you always were such a prude. Just go get laid and get over it!” Melissa was waving her hands around and people were starting to stare. Samantha could feel her face get red, and she honestly wasn’t sure if it was rage or embarrassment.

“What are you talking about?” Samantha said, reaching out to take the hand Jess was offering. With a friend in her corner, she was much more willing to pick a fight with this drunk idiot. She looked over her shoulder to see Priya and Angela flanking Jess. Her girls. They were here for her.

“Hey, Melissa, maybe you want to go get some air and cool off a bit,” Jess said, giving Samantha’s hand a squeeze.

“Nah, that’s no fun. I mean, Ice Princess over there is such a buzzkill. Can you imagine dating her for two years and not getting any? I don’t know why whatshisface even stuck around.” Samantha’s hand was in the air and it wasn’t until she felt the pressure of Jess’s fingers around her wrist that she realized she was attempting to slap the living shit out of Melissa’s foul little mouth. “Oh, big girl gonna get mad?”

“Nah, wouldn’t want to break a nail on a cheap bitch like you.” Samantha said coldly, more calmly than she felt and wrenched her arm out of Jess’s grip. “I’m going to go get that refill now. Have fun, Melissa.” Samantha pushed past, trusting Jess and the girls to keep Melissa from making too big a scene. She heard shouting, and shushing and possibly shoving but she just kept walking. She threw her cup in the trash, grabbing a fresh one and filling it with punch. She tucked herself into a chair in the corner of the kitchen, out of way of the bodies all pressed around the food and outside the conversations competing with the music. She sipped slowly, trying to ignore the echo of Melissa’s words inside her head.

She wasn’t a prude. She just wasn’t rushing to get into just anyone’s pants. The only pants she’d maybe wanted to get into were Matthew’s and he wanted to go slow, so they did, which was fine by her. She’d never done more than some rushed making out and was honestly relieved to let someone else set the pace. It had never felt like too little or too slow, until it was too late. But Matthew had always been so careful, so gentle with her. She’d felt loved and cherished. Sometimes it was hard, because weren’t all men supposed to be desperate for sex? There were times she’d wondered if there was something wrong with her that he wasn’t trying harder to get her into bed, but he was sweet and he was kind and he showed her how much he loved her in so many other ways. If she wasn’t anxious to cross that bridge, and she’d never been anything more than curious about it, then it wasn’t a problem that he wasn’t either. She’d always appreciated that about their relationship, that they’d been so in sync about stuff like that. Now, after some stupid comments from a stupid girl who wasn’t even really her friend she was second guessing it all.

She had reached the bottom of her cup when Jess found her, sliding a chair over to sit down next to her.

“Hi,” she said, putting a hand on Samantha’s knee. “How are you?”

“A prude ice princess, apparently,” Samantha said into her cup.
Jess had the decency to snort a laugh. “Hardly. Remember last year, when we all went to karaoke for your birthday, and you decided that singing Fiona Apple and giving Matthew a lap dance was the best idea you’d ever had?”

“No. I remember no such thing. All evidence of that night was to be stricken from the records and forgotten by all parties involved, as stated in the contract for 21st birthday celebrations and the embarrassment they inevitably lead to.”

“Right, right. I forgot. Alright, what about the solo piece you did when you first joined us? That Depeche Mode piece, with the veil and the amazing floorwork? I had to take a cold shower after watching that performance.” Samantha just grunted, still staring at her empty cup. “You’re beautiful and fully capable of being a sexual creature when and if that’s something you decide to do. You’ve got time, trust me.”

“Jess, you’re barely older than I am, so stop talking like some wizened old granny dispensing life advice.”

“Ah, chronologically, that may be true, but I have so much more life experience, young one! Listen to your old friend Jess!” Samantha laughed and put her cup down by her feet.

“What if I’m not though? What if I really am frigid?” Samantha examined her hands intently, pinching the skin on her knuckles gently. She felt Jess take a deep breath and braced herself for the overwhelming rush of positivity that was Jess’s trademark response to stress.

“Ok, so, let’s just play pretend for a minute. Let’s say that’s true. You’re frigid. You don’t like sex. You’re not in a relationship, so no one is sitting around waiting for you to satisfy their sexual needs. And if that’s true, the frigid part, which I’m not saying it is, but it might be, ok, so we’ll just think things through. You’re obviously still capable of functioning in the world--you’ve made it 22 years so far. If it’s a thing that’s true… well it’s no one’s business but yours and anyone with whom you might or might not be having the sex with in the future, right? No one else gets a say in it.” Samantha looked into her friend’s earnest face. It was hardly the answer she was expecting.

“But you like sex.”

“Yeah, I do. A lot. And I have it. Not as much as I would like, but that’s just life, right? I’m kinda picky. But just because I like sex doesn’t mean you should. I’m not asking you to sleep with me.”

“Thanks.”

“Not that you’re not attractive! Were you not on my dance team and thus off limits, and also possibly confessing your crisis of sexuality to me, I’d totally shag you senseless.” Samantha smiled at that. Typical Jess.

“That’s sweet, Jess.”

“Hey, you’re kinda my type, ok?” Samantha scrunched her nose and laughed as Jess waggled her eyebrows suggestively.

“You’re weird.”

“Admittedly, but you love me.”

“I do. Thanks. For helping back there.”

“Yeah, I don’t know why I thought it was a good idea to invite her. She’s a raging bitch and I’m
glad she’s not our problem anymore.” Jess stood up and held out her hand. “Now, let’s go dance this off, ok? It’s your party. Let’s celebrate, yeah?”

“Yeah.” Samantha took Jess’s hand and let herself be led onto the dance floor. Jess went to fiddle with the iPod and when Fantastic Baby came blasting through the stereo, Jess grinned at Samantha and they danced together wildly. Samantha spun and laughed as she taught Jess the key choreography. It was a good thing to make into a memory. It was a memory worth making. Everything was going according to plan. Everything was going to be okay.
The shower dreams were sort of the best and the worst. He had never realized how much he loved just standing under the hot water, but somehow it felt even better when he did it in Samantha’s skin. He rarely had time for a leisurely shower, but she seemed to take a very deliberate sort of pleasure in it. She scrubbed and washed with so many different and delightfully scented things. Always fresh and clean and crisp smells. Blue and green smells. Things he felt like he would choose for himself. Maybe they only smelled good because they smelled good to Samantha. Still, the shower dreams were relaxing and full of good sensations, like scalp scrubbing and the slide of his hands along wet skin.

And a naked girl. He’d always liked that part, even if she wasn’t really the kind of girl he would have picked to see naked. Only now that he felt like these dreams were real, he was a little embarrassed. This was a real person who was out there in the world and had no idea that he was seeing what he was seeing. He was peeping. Sort of. Except he had no choice. His brain was doing the dreaming and her eyes were doing the looking. He couldn’t see anything she didn’t see. And most of what he saw was the shower walls.

This time was different though. This shower was different. It was huge, big enough that he could barely touch both sides with his fingertips. Well, her fingertips. Large slabs of rock for tiles on two walls, with niches and shelves full of fancy looking soaps, bottles, sponges and scrubbers. The other two walls were clear, smooth glass--a door and a wall that faced the large vanity across the room. The vanity which was topped with a mirror that stretched the entire length of the wall. So as he stood, rinsing his hair, still unaccustomed to the feeling of it tangling around his ears and neck, he was facing a mirror. She was facing a mirror. She was naked in front of a mirror and even the rising steam only barely clouded the glass.

Here, out of context and without anyone to compare to, she appeared much less intimidating than she had when dancing. He wanted to look away, but she wasn’t looking away, so he had to look. He wished she would close her eyes at least, because he couldn’t unsee this. She was maybe just staring out into space with her eyes pointed at the mirror while the water beat against her shoulders. Maybe that was it, but for Taehyung, it was almost torture. He tried to think of it like art. He’d seen naked statues before and it wasn’t a big deal. This wasn’t a big deal. He wasn’t guilty of anything other than having a brain tuned into her frequency, so he thought of her as a statue. He thought she’d make a really great statue. She was soft and smooth and round in places. She had more freckles than he’d ever seen. Her legs and arms were long. He wondered idly how tall she was. He watched as she moved, feeling himself move, still fascinated by her reflection, being in this body, feelings things he could never feel as though they were happening to him.

He turned the shower off and squeezed the water out of his hair. He watched her reflection as they both reached for the door, grabbing a towel and dragging it across their face. His face that was really her face. They shared this body for a few moments nearly every day. It was more intimate than he really wanted to think about. It was a little frightening. She had no idea, had no control over his intrusion. He didn’t seem to have any control either, just as helpless to stop these dreams as she was, but he wasn’t the one who was being watched in his most vulnerable moments. Why had it never occurred to him before? How many rules was he breaking by being in her head? Was this quirk in his brain really a defect? He toweled off and got dressed and felt so very grateful.

He didn’t want to be a bad person. He didn’t want to make her uncomfortable, even if she was unaware. He knew and that was enough. He moved around the large house, walking down stairs and a hallway, turning into a room he recognized as the place the children usually played. This
must be the their house. Mansion, more like. He picked up stray toys and straightened up, thinking about how he could keep these dreams from being too weird. He had to keep a respectable distance, from inside her head. He wasn’t sure how to do that, but the first step was to try to keep her naked just naked. Just like a statue. Art. Nothing more. Just a statue, a body, no feelings or emotions attached to it. Detached. That was what he needed, some detachment. Some space.

“I need space,” he said, startling awake and looking around in confusion.

“So roll over. There’s plenty of room on that side.” Jimin shoved him with a shoulder. Taehyung took a shuddery breath and complied, rolling to face the wall. He had to be respectful, even when he couldn’t control the eyeballs he was using. Somehow.

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Samantha finished picking up the school play room and then walked into the play play room, glancing around at all the wooden, handmade, free-trade, cerebrally stimulating toys. She loved working for this family. She loved these infrequent but delightful overnight stays. She got to take advantage of the luxurious accommodations and pad her bank account. Living on Lake Shore Drive wasn’t a dream she’d ever really aspired to, but it was nice to get just a little taste of what it might be like. Marble counters, custom cabinets, eight burner gas stove, stainless steel fridge wider than she was tall. And that was just the kitchen. She was pretty sure the rug in the formal dining room was actually Persian and the art on the walls was original and expensive.

Her favorite part of this house though was by far the music room. It had padded walls for sound absorption, surround sound speaker including speakers in the floor. With the baby monitor clipped to her pants, she could curl up in the giant leather armchair and just get lost in the music. She always thought about trying to develop new choreography in here, when she could hear all the depth and nuance of every song, but inevitably she didn’t get very far because she would just sink into the music, laying prone on the floor as the bass rumbled through her chest. When she babysat for an evening, this room was her first stop. At naptime, this is where she would retreat. Now, with the kids asleep and her skin still warm from the shower, she plugged her phone in and pulled up Dark & Wild. She was determined to just listen to the whole thing, from start to finish. She hadn’t managed it yet, always pausing when her feelings got too overwhelming. But here, in the nest of sound, she wanted to absorb the album as it was intended.

As the strings started on the intro, she got chills, hearing them chase around the soft dark room. She wasn’t fluent enough to understand every word without looking it up, but she’d read these lyrics enough to feel it, the break in Namjoon’s voice echoing in the broken places in her heart. It wasn’t her story he was singing. That wasn’t the love story she’d experienced and yet, the longing, the hurt, the desperation were all so right. The opening bars of “Danger” crashed and filled the room and Samantha felt all the dark and predatory urges of the summer just under her skin. The need to lash out, to act out, to get it out of her system by filling her system with everything else. Again, it wasn’t her story, but the emotions in it, behind it, running through it struck just the right chord and it left her shaking. “War of Hormone” made her smile, though the smile was bitter, wondering why she didn’t feel that rush, that needy, heady surge of lust and desire.

Song after song pulled her emotions tight, strung them along, poured them out and spun them around. She felt her heart being sung by strangers and she longed for a connection to them. To feel like her piece of the giant puzzle in the world mattered to these artists so many miles away. “Let Me Know” still made her cry, but this time the tears were few, tempered by the fear that she would never be able to extend the kind of thanks these boys deserved for how they’d impacted her life. She wasn’t sure how she’d have gotten through this year without these songs to anchor her. Or the dreams.
She still wasn’t willing to write them off completely, works of a desperate and hurting mind or the complicated by-product of some biological, genetic or hereditary disorder that tied her unconscious mind to that of another. She wanted to believe, was afraid to believe, was afraid not to. Her last few visits to Nana had been uneventful in a calm and familiar way. She’d read the newspaper to Nana, showed her more pictures from her phone and avoided the topic of dreams as much as possible. Nana still commented though, still touched her scar and talked about other Dreamers in the family, women stretching back through generations of suffering and recovering after life had dealt them crappy hands. Samantha had listened but tried not to take it to heart. Her heart was already too full, too tender, too afraid to hope in anything again, even something as silly as dreams.

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Being in Japan was becoming so familiar it was almost like a second home. Taehyung sat in the green room, waiting for his turn in the makeup chair, passing the time playing on his phone. Jungkook, freshly styled and awake after his chair nap, came and pressed himself against Taehyung’s side.

“Taehyungie-hyung.” Taehyung grunted in response, not bothering to look up from his phone. He loved days like this, but didn’t want to seem too eager, didn’t want to chase Jungkook away. The days when Jungkook was talkative and only content when they were touching were special. So often he was just a busy bundle of energy, real thoughts and feelings hiding behind perfectionism and goofiness, but when he settled just a little, everything changed. Jungkook would seek out comfort and reassurance from his members without ever really asking. “Hyung, help me practice my lines.”

“You sure you don’t want to ask Namjoon-hyung for help? His Japanese is the best.” Taehyung watched Jungkook out of the corner of his eye, nudging him gently with his shoulder.

“Your Japanese is good enough for this.”

“Oh thanks, you rascal.” They ran their lines a few times, repeating the simple thanks and greetings. Neither of them had much to say. Namjoon and Hoseok took care of most of it. Taehyung knew it was just an excuse to have something to do while they waited, to keep the nerves at bay.

“Taehyungie-hyung?” Jungkook was staring at him with his head cocked to one side, like an inquisitive bunny.

“Yah, what is it?”

“Do you… do you think this will last?”

“Us practicing our lines? I really hope not. We’ve got a concert to do.”

“No, I mean, all this. Touring and albums and stuff.”

“We’ve got a contract. You know it’ll last that long.”

“But will they keep liking us that long?”

“Oh, Jungkookie.” Taehyung reached out to pat the young boy’s head.

“No, don’t… I’m serious. We’re doing really well right now, and we’re making a lot of progress here in Japan and our international fans love us, but back home it’s… different, you know? I’m just not sure we can make it last. We’re good at this. We’re really good at this, but being good isn’t
“enough. They have to like us. The fans have to like us, whether we’re good or not.”

“Yeah, but we can’t force them to like us. We just have to give them our best and keep working harder.”

“But is that going to be enough? Is it going to last?”

“You’re composing a song for the new album, right?” Jungkook nodded. “I did, too. We’re getting better. This one is going to be our best yet. As long as we can keep saying that—that whatever we’re doing, right now, is the best we’ve ever done—then that’s what matters. Our fans aren’t stupid. They like us because they like what we do.”

“Like that thing with your tongue?” Jungkook smirked.

“Yeah, actually. It started as a nervous habit, a way to help remember choreo, and then it became a thing and I’m not going to pass up the opportunity to make our fans happy. It’s simple, it’s easy, it costs me nothing, and it works.”

“But isn’t that just a trick?”

“This is all a trick, Kookie. Performance isn’t… well, okay, it’s authentic, right? These are our songs. The hyungs pour themselves into this music and we perform it, so it’s us. But the costumes and the makeup and the lights… it’s all a trick. The fans are here for the trick. They want to see the stuff they’ve seen on their tvs and computers in real time, in real space and know that we’re really the ones doing it. So that’s real. It’s really us working hard and dancing and singing and making this show amazing. But I’m not really heartbroken every time I sing ‘Let Me Know’ even though I have to make it sound that way. It’s performance. It’s pieces of ourselves that we make real for those moments on stage.” Taehyung put his finger under Jungkook’s chin and tickled him a little.

“You know that it’s okay to put on an act, to put on a show, right Kookie?” Jungkook nodded, eyes sliding away and Taehyung let him retreat back into his thoughts a little.

“Yeah, I guess. I don’t really want them to know too much about the real me anyway.”

“Exactly! You’ve done so much, done so well being just the right amount of you on stage. Why the sudden doubts?”

“Not enough eyeliner anymore,” Jungkook said with a snort. Taehyung wrapped an arm around his shoulder and nuzzled his forehead into Jungkook’s cheek. “Ugh, hyung, you’re going to mess up my contouring!”

Taehyung just smiled and stood up to stretch. “You just trust me, little brother, alright?” He stuck his tongue out lasciviously and gave a little wink.

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure if I tried that I’d look like an idiot.”

“Probably, but you’ll find your thing.” Taehyung couldn’t stop himself from smiling with so much pride. He knew Jungkook lived for praise and approval but also got furiously uncomfortable with too much sincerity. “Precious maknae.”

“Go get your makeup done, hyung.”

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Samantha opened the door and there was Jess, smiling and holding up a grocery bag.
“Ice cream, brownies and a fresh box of kleenex. Let’s do this thing!” Jess said, walking into Sam’s apartment and straight to the drawer of spoons. “Now remember, you can’t get so drunk that you can’t explain to me what the hell is going on.”

“That’s what subtitles are for, Jess.” Samantha plopped down on the couch, grabbing the remote and a pillow. “But trust me, once you’ve seen this dimple, it’s all over. You’ll forget everything else.”

“You’re not getting me to switch teams for a dimple. Anyway, let’s commence Operation: Drown Our Sorrows in the Safety and Comfort of Your Home. What are we drinking?”

“Soju, of course!”

“What is exactly?”

“The devil. It is deceptive; a little sweet and perfectly innocent seeming until you finish a bottle and can’t find your feet.”

“Sounds fabulous. Now, hand me your keys.”

“Why? You’re the one who drove here.”

“Safety. If we are too drunk to get them out of this,” she held up a wooden box, “then we are too drunk to drive.”

“It’s a box?”

“It’s a puzzle box. Watch.” Jess pushed on a some swirls in the wood, swirls that Samantha would have sworn were just part of the grain of the wood, but they moved and others shifted and it looked very complicated, but suddenly the top of the box was lifting and Jess was shoving their keys inside and pushing everything closed.

“Wait! I didn’t catch any of that.”

“No worries, I’ve had this box for years, everything is safe. Now! Bring on the kdramas and the drinking.”

“Alright, there are eight episodes of this show, so--”

“No sleep, go with God. Got it.”

“Well it’s barely three in the afternoon, Jess. I didn’t figure you for the early bed time type.”

“Well, eight episodes, plus all the pausing we’re going to have to do for you to tell me what the hell is actually going on, explaining subtext and cultural references, and you told me I was going to cry but no one cries alone, so we’ll have to pause it to cry together, which is just going to make you cry harder, and don’t forget bathroom breaks, and we’ll have to invent a drinking game or two, then at some point we’ll need to eat and I also brought over some of my makeup because you have to show me how you get that perfect cat’s eye eyeliner.”

“Right. No sleep. Go with God.”

Four episodes, some Chinese take-out, one drinking game that Sam was clearly winning despite Jess’s protests that previous exposure to both kdramas and soju constituted cheating, and numerous pauses later, Jess attempted to stand, which was a fatal mistake. She fell back on to the couch.
“So wait a minute, when are these two, or three, going to get together? She’s gonna fall in love with the alter ego and the stuffy CEO is gonna fall in love with her, but when do we get to the hot stuff?”

“No hot stuff in kdrama!” Sam proclaimed loudly, waving her pillow like a flag.

“But the music videos are so sexy!”

“Yes, but in dramas you must wait for the good stuff. And by good stuff I mean hand holding, back hugging, and maybe one or two kisses. Total.”

“No wonder you like them so much,” Jess said, reaching to fill her empty glass.

“Excuse me?” Sam tried to sound offended, but it took too much energy.

“Sweeping love stories without all the sex parts. That’s your speed, isn’t it?” Jess was squinting at her but there was no malice in her face. Samantha wanted to change the subject, but that took too much energy too.

“But I like kissing. Kissing was always pretty good.”

“And then what?”

“Then what, what?”

“You just kiss and then stop?”

“Yes? No. No, there was cuddling. Lots of cuddling. Fuck, I miss cuddling.” Samantha reached for the glass of soju Jess had poured only to get her knuckles smacked. “Ow!”

“Ok, but kissing, snuggling, making out?” Samantha nodded. “And then… you just… stop?” Jess sipped daintily at her soju.

“Yes? We just stopped when either of us got uncomfortable.”

“What about before Matthew though?”

“Well I didn’t date at all in high school. Then I moved here, met Matthew and that was kinda it.”

“He was the first boy you ever kissed?”

“Yeah.”

“And you were going to marry him?”

“Yeah.”

“So you kissed until it got uncomfortable.”

“Yeah, what is going on in your head. Why is this so confusing?”

“But it felt good?”

“Why would being uncomfortable feel good, Jess?”
“No, no, no, the kissing. You like kissing.”

“Oh. Yeah. I did. I do.”

“So why did you stop? Or no, why didn’t you keep going?”

“Because we had to sleep sometime. Or you know, be productive members of society.” Samantha let her head fall back against the couch cushions. “This is a very strange conversation.”

“I’m just confused and so I’m being rudely nosey while I have alcohol as an excuse.”

“What’s confusing?”

“Why you didn’t make the jump from making out to getting it on!”

“Oh. Well. I dunno. We both just kinda liked the kissing parts.”

“And it felt good, but you stopped?”

“Well it felt good, but not in an underpants area kind of way. It was just kissing.”

“Have you ever kissed a girl?” Jess said suddenly, leaning away to squint harder at Samantha.

“No.”

“Are you opposed to the idea?”

“Not exactly, but I never really thought about it.”

“Wanna try?”

“Um…”

“No pressure, no pressure Sam. It’s just… you sound like me back in the day. I liked boys. Boys were great, kissing was nice, but it never really felt like I thought it would. Then I kissed a girl and boom, whole new world, lipstick lesbian and all that.” Jess ran her hands through her hair. “I mean, I’d always suspected, but I wasn’t really sure until I met the right person, so maybe that’s how it is for you.”

Samantha felt her face go red. “Matthew was the right person for me, Jess.” She glanced at the clock. She still had hours to go before midnight, before this day was over and she could start fresh on a new year that wasn’t The Year Matthew Died. This was the last day, the last first. The last. She felt the tears on her cheeks before she realized she was crying.

“Oh shit, of course he was Sam, I didn’t mean it like that. Of course he was. He was perfect for you and you were perfect for him, I just thought… oh shit. I’m sorry. I was trying to help because you sounded so much like me. I thought I could help. Fuck, I’m sorry.”

“S’okay,” Samantha sniffled. “I know you didn’t mean it like that. I… I haven’t really thought about it, or talked about it at all, but that trip? To San Francisco? It was all this beautiful elaborate surprise he’d planned for Valentine’s Day. We flew out there and rented a car on the 13th. He wanted to drive me back to Travis, where I was born, had this whole plan to ‘start our new lives together’ after visiting where our lives started. He was born on Travis too, did you know that? His dad was Air Force too. Then we were gonna drive to Reno. We were gonna have a pretend wedding, just to try in on, he said, just a practice run.” Samantha stopped to pour herself another glass of soju and wipe her face dry.
“We, uh, we didn’t make it to Reno. We came back to the city after driving around Travis. He wanted to get a nice dinner and then drive out to Reno late, so we could see all the lights glowing, just be alone in the dark on the road he said. We had a great dinner on the pier. We, uh, we found a little spot by the Palace of Fine Arts and Matthew had a blanket and we sat in the grass even though it was cold and…” Samantha took a shuddery breath.

“I don’t even know why we started. It was just kissing at first, and you know, that’s mostly all we did, but for the first time, it kinda felt different? Strange and different, in a good way, but in a scary way too, and we were out in public, and even though it was dark, it wasn’t, you know, private at all, so we grabbed the blanket and headed to the car. God, we were giggling and running like idiots, but… but it felt good. We were gonna go find a hotel. Stay the night in the city and drive to Reno in the morning, because he said he didn’t want to wait anymore. He, uh, we…” Samantha shook her head. “I don’t know. I don’t know if we would have actually done anything or not, but I wanted to. For the first time, I actually wanted to for some other reason than curiosity or feeling like I was supposed to, but then--”

“Oh my god, Sam.” Jess reached out and pulled her into a hug and Samantha didn’t have the strength to resist. She wasn’t sure she wanted to be hugged but she didn’t want to not be hugged, so she lay there, limp in Jess’s arms while she murmured soft words into Samantha’s hair. At some point Samantha started crying. At some point Jess did too. Eventually, they both sniffled and wiped at their faces.

“You look like a hot mess, there,” Samantha said, reaching for a box of tissues and handing them to her friend.

“Yeah, you’re no picnic yourself,” Jess croaked around the lump in her throat. “Now, turn this damn drama back on and let’s cry over fictional things instead, yeah?”

“Hell yeah,” Samantha agreed, already reaching for the remote.

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“They’re coming to Chicago.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Hyemi, they’re coming to Chicago. They’re going to be in Chicago. In Chicago!”

“Yes, I know.”

“I might get to see them in concert.”

“Yes, it’s awesome. I’m going to see them in like two weeks.”

“Stop bragging. This is a big deal for me. Min Yoongi is going to be in my town.”

“I get it. It’s exciting.”

“They why do you sound like you’re contemplating your grocery list?”

“Because I’m tired. I was asleep. You’re crap with time zones.”

“Oh. Right. I didn’t even look at the clock. I just saw the announcement and kinda freaked out.”

“I can tell.”
“Could you at least pretend to be excited?”

“Yes. In the morning. When I’m actually awake.”

“Fair enough. G’night Hyemi. I love you.”

“Love you, too, Sam. G’night.”

“Did I mention that I am going to be in the same room as Bangtan?”

“You did. Go away.”

“Fine.”

“Fine.”
Surprises and I Need U

Everyone had cried out there and for once no one was trying to deny it. They’d all come so far since the song was written, but performing “Born Singer” to a sold out audience for two nights in a row, in Seoul was just more than any of them could handle. They were all just so tired. Who had thought that dancing in winter coats and backpacks was a good idea? They were also proud and happy and nervous. They had a brand new album in the works and it all felt so fragile. All this love and attention, what if it was gone? What if they couldn’t live up to the hype? What if they did?

Taehyung texted his mom, just telling her that he loved her, which wasn’t totally unusual but maybe not as normal as he wanted it to be when she responded with concern that he wasn’t feeling well instead of warm fuzzy gratitude like he’d intended. But reassuring her that everything was fine was a good distraction, and it reminded him that everything was fine. Jungkook was still sniffling quietly next to him and Hoseok had a red nose atop his glowing smile. Jimin had pulled himself together and was being his usual cheeky self with all the coordi noonas as they packed up and tore down the green room. Namjoon and Yoongi were quiet, serious faces on, talking more with gestures and eyebrows than with words, but they shared the bulk of the burden when it came to new music. Seokjin kept pacing, stopping to put his hands on each of the members briefly before starting his rounds again, like a mother hen. So yeah, everything was fine.

The sweat was drying on his skin and he was desperate for a shower, but very glad to at least be in fresh, dry, reasonably comfortable clothes. They’d be heading home soon and tonight Taehyung was very glad he had the bottom bunk because it was one fewer thing to climb before he could sleep. He was hungry and restless even though he felt like he could sleep for a week. His brain was still spinning through everything that was coming soon. New album, new video, new choreography, new promoting schedule. He missed his family. He missed his bed. He missed midnight hamburgers. He scrounged around the green room, looking for snacks that might have been left behind. Or the secret stash that Seokjin kept to keep him happy, but always pretended was just a coincidence. He wasn’t fooling anyone, least of all Taehyung. No one “just happened” to stuff peanut butter crackers and Choco Boys in their bag on accident.

Back at the dorms, Taehyung collapsed onto his bed, but knew he was still hours from sleep. There was just too much going on in his head to wind down. He scrolled through pictures of home, sighing and smiling at his dog and his cousins. He wondered about what he would be doing if he weren’t here. Would he be in university, studying something normal and respectable? No one really respected an idol. It was hard work, but it wasn’t meant to last, and while he was burning his youth in front of cameras and fans, the rest of the world was growing up and making a name and a place for themselves. What would he have when all this was over? Would he ever be able to go back to a normal life? He tried to tell himself to stop worrying, that he was barely an adult and these questions could wait. He tried to lose himself in pictures of fluffy animals and anime. He tried.

He never really felt the weight of the world on his shoulders like Namjoon did. He thought it was because he didn’t think as deeply on any one thing as Namjoon did, but he made up for it by thinking about at least a hundred more things that Namjoon never really bothered to consider. He knew his brain worked differently than most people he knew. He saw connections and patterns sometimes that helped him make sense of some of the mysteries of the world, but he could rarely explain them to anyone else. He found himself worrying about things that would only matter if a long list of other things he worried about happened in a particular order. It all boiled down to the same thing though. He was afraid that he was a burden and a disappointment.
He thought, not for the first time, that it took a certain kind of broken person to need thousands of people screaming his name each night for him to be happy and feel normal. He loved making people happy, loved making music, loved dancing even, but the satisfaction of hearing a whole venue shout “Kim Taehyung” was a particular kind of addictive. He loved to perform and had since he was a kid. He’d started entertaining his grandma with silly stories and it was always the highlight of his day. The smiles he got helped soothe the less kind looks from the kids he grew up with, the jeers and the stares for being just a little too weird, a little too loud, a little too much.

Now all of that was his trademark. His concept. He was the weird one, the goofball, the alien. Image and branding, right? That’s what mattered now. V was a star. V was amazing. V was fearless and unstoppable and Kim Taehyung was along for the thrilling and enjoyable ride.

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Samantha was still surprised at the phenomenon, though she herself was far from immune to it. In October, 60 degrees was freezing, a reason for coats and scarves. In April, 50 degrees was a revelation, a celebration, people breaking out short sleeves and shorter skirts. Still, after spending nearly half the year in a monotonous winter, seeing spring finally flirt with them was a relief. So, Sam hung her yellow coat on the peg by the door and twirled in her floral skirt in her living room. It had almost gotten all the way to 70 today, but she still wore tights under her skirt, just in case. It was her day off and she was giddy, the mild weather and clear skies infecting her like a plague of sunshine. She’d gotten up early, gone for a horrible though productive run, stopped by the grocery store, put dinner in the crock pot and then taken a quick walk to the mailboxes. No mail for her on this day, but that didn’t bother her at all. She looked at her bed and decided she would treat herself to a midday nap after she changed to some more seasonally appropriate sheets. Out with the snowflakes, in with the tulips!

Curled up in a pile of pillows, she grabbed one of the books she’d been meaning to read and snuggled in with a sigh. It was hard to concentrate. Her mind was stuck in the dream she’d had last night. She was running through a train yard, boots crunching on gravel, chasing someone up into a container car. Jimin reached out his hand as she climbed in, laughing. Then someone was yelling and she was climbing back out to do it over again. The denim on her jacket and pants felt stiff, the boots tight around her ankles. She adjusted a beanie on her head and sighed. She was excited and exhausted. She climbed up a ladder to the top of the containers, waiting for the cue to begin running, chasing Jimin again. Someone yelled cut and Jimin began dancing and she joined him, body moving without thought in familiar and strange ways. Jimin was waving his hand, signalling her to join him a few steps down and she smiled as they ran to join the other boys, legs dangling in front of the cameras. She loved the dreams where she was smiling, where he was smiling.

She sighed and stretched. She tried to focus on the book. She tried, but she didn’t get further than a few pages before her head was drooping. To avoid a crick in her neck, she put the book aside and pulled a pillow into her chest instead, and in moments she was running again.

She was running towards a scared looking man in a white shirt, lifting a bottle in her hand and bringing it crashing down. Crashing down onto nothing and someone was shouting. She turned and bowed to the man she’d nearly attacked as someone in the shadows shouted instructions. She stepped back, lifting her arm to swing the bottle again experimentally at the head of the man who now looked bemused and happy. She stepped back to a doorway, shaking her hands and head, feeling her face settle into a mask of sadness. Her heart was racing and she felt her stomach tense, with fear and excitement and then she was pushing through the door bottle in her hand and running those few steps towards the man who looked scared again. And then she hit him. She hit him in the head with the bottle. She didn’t feel it connect, but he slumped and crumpled into the wall, the force of it all sending her reeling into the wall beside him. Then she pulled back, staring at him as
he tried to catch his breath. Her heart was in her throat and she looked at the bottle in her hand and rushed forward, a scream ripping through her as she placed her hand on his shoulder and thrust the bottle forward.

She sat up, the echo of the scream in her ears and her heart racing just like it had been in the dream. She pushed her hands through her hair, half expecting to feel the hoodie fall off her head. It took a few deep breaths to settle back into reality, to sort through the images racing through her brain. It was almost nice to have just a regular nightmare for once, because why on earth would Kim Taehyung be beating anyone up, even on a set. She was pretty sure it was a set. A drama maybe. Anyway, a work of fiction. After dreaming they were filming something fun last night, this nap had brought her a thankfully brief though certainly intense little nightmare. She wondered if she had some unresolved anger that she was trying to work through, though dreams were rarely so transparent or helpful.

She stretched lazily, knocking a few of her pillows onto the floor. She blinked at the ceiling then heaved herself out of bed to check on dinner.

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“Samantha darling, I got you a little surprise.”

“Alright, Mom. You didn’t have to do that. I still haven’t even spent the birthday money you sent me.”

“I know, I know, but I miss you and I was doing a little poking and found out that one of your bands was coming to Dallas this summer.”

“Oh my god.”

“Now, it was pretty crazy on the website to get tickets, but—”

“Oh my god, Mom, no.”

“I managed to get some VIP tickets. They’re not the front row or anything, I hope that’s alright.”

“Mom, you’re kidding me right?”

“I figured you could fly down and we’d spend the whole day together. I know it might be hard for you to get time away from work, but it’s in the summer, so maybe their schedules will be easier, right?”

“Mom, are you serious? You bought tickets to the BTS concert in Dallas?”

“Yes, they aren’t the best seats, but they were the best I could get. It seemed to sell out pretty fast.”

“Mom, you’re amazing, you know that? You’re absolutely amazing!”

“Well, I miss you, alright? And you deserve something happy to look forward to.”

“Thank you! Thank you so much, but Mom. You know they’re coming to Chicago too, right?”

“Are you telling me you don’t want to see them twice? Because I can sell the tickets if you don’t want them. I just wanted an excuse to see you.”

“One, you don’t need an excuse, Mom, but wait. Tickets? You’re… you’re going to come to a kpop concert with me?”
“Sure, why not? You only live once, right?”

“Right, Mom. Exactly right. Oh my god, Hyemi is gonna flip!”

---

Being lost in his own head wasn’t as bad as it seemed today. He’d woken up from a dream where he’d been jamming out to “Cypher: Killer” in his car, hands flying as he flew down a highway, windows cracked open, radio cranked up, shouting into the wind. It was exhilarating and felt so honest. How often had he just let go and lost his shit dancing and singing that very song? Not while driving, admittedly, but he woke with a smile, feeling a fondness and kinship with Sam that fascinated him. She wasn’t as different as he’d once thought.

Wherever she was, the weather was starting to warm up, just like in Seoul. He wished he could read English faster. Maybe then he’d recognize some of the street names. America was annoyingly large.

“Head out of the clouds, Taehyung. It’s time to load up to head to Naver,” Namjoon said, tapping his hand on the doorframe gently. Taehyung looked up with a start. Namjoon almost always caught him daydreaming.

“Yes, hyung, I’m coming.”

“What’s going on in that head of yours today?” Namjoon asked while Taehyung struggled with his shoes. Unlike some people, Namjoon always expected an answer, a real one, and actually wanted to hear it.

“I was just thinking about spring,” Taehyung said evasively, stepping out into the hallway.

“The album concept getting to you, young one?” Namjoon said with a smile, reaching out to ruffle Taehyung’s streaky hair.

“No, not that really. Just that it’s starting to get warmer here, and…”

“And you’re afraid we’re going to make you wear short sleeves again?”

“Maybe. No, but wherever Sam is, it’s getting warmer there, too.”

“She’s in Chicago, TaeTae.” Taehyung stopped walking and stared at his leader, mouth agape.

“She’s what?” Namjoon stopped too, turning to look at Taehyung quizzically.

“She’s in Chicago? At least, she’s on a dance team that’s based in Chicago, so she probably lives pretty close.”

“Why didn’t you say anything before now?” Taehyung squeaked.

“I thought you knew? You’re the one who showed me the website! You just showed me that new dance piece yesterday, with the halter tops and the… you really didn’t know where she lived?”

“No! I’m not fluent in English, Namjoon-hyung, that’s why I brought things to you in the first place. It’s been months and you’ve known this all along?” Taehyung was shouting now, waving his hands about to express his deep sense of betrayal.

“You didn’t ask! I thought you knew! Your English isn’t that bad, after all, and you have access to the same internet I do. You can find translations.”
“Yeah, that tell me things about caterpillars and microphones and nothing that makes any kind of sense in context!”

“Look, yell at me in the van, alright? We’ve got to get going.” Taehyung swallowed his grumbling as he crawled in, sliding all the way to the back to pout.

“We’re the first ones in the van, what’s the rush, Leader-Mon?”

“I just don’t want to be late.” Namjoon was tense. They were taking a big risk here. This new album was different and for the first time, they were relying on the strength of the music, with no dancing in the video. Of course they’d dance on the music shows, and Taehyung’s knees were battered and bruised from learning the choreography, but for the first 24 hours, it would just be the music and their hopefully not terrible acting. As leader, Namjoon had more to do with those decisions than any of them, even if sometimes all that meant was he was the one to tell Bang PD yes and bow politely.

Taehyung shook his head, letting his hair fall back into place and smoothing it with his hand. They were on the edge of something. He could feel it. He was so proud to have a song on this album. He’d worked so hard and it wasn’t easy. It didn’t come naturally to him like it did for Namjoon and Yoongi. He struggled to make his ricocheting thoughts submit to the meter and rhythm of songs. He wasn’t cool and full of swagger. He was full of sad love songs and crooning, which wasn’t exactly "Bangtan Style". Yet everyone had been so encouraging and supportive, helping him and guiding him until the tune and sentiment in his head were a reality. And in just a few more hours, it would be released. In the hands of the public. He hoped they would be as kind as his members and all the staff.

The members started climbing into the van, bits of conversation trailing and filling up the space where his thoughts were echoing. Namjoon turned around from his spot in the passenger seat and smiled, tension easing a little as everyone got settled.

“Bangtan, Bangtan!” he said when all the fidgeting stopped.

“Bang bang tan!” they all responded.

---

“You’ve got to stop changing your KKT icon.”

“I can’t decide on one I like.”

“Samantha, you’ve had at least eight different ones today. And that’s just the ones that I’ve noticed.”

“Yeah, yeah, okay. But there are just some really nice pictures of me from the showcase, alright?”

“Not denying that at all. I saw the video. You look good.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Now, pick an icon and stick with it. I like the red one, for what it’s worth.”

“Yeah? I was thinking of something with just my hair and eyes.”

“It was pretty good eyeshadow.”
“So much glitter, right?”
“So much glitter.”
“Too much?”
“No such thing.”
“And this, Hyemi, is why you’re my best friend.”
“I fully support the use of glitter for nearly everything in the whole world. Everything’s better with a little sparkle.”
“Too true.”
“Did you change your cover picture too?”
“Yes, but that was a moral imperative.”
“What, morally, obligates you to have a picture of Min Yoongi in your KKT profile?”
“Pink hair. It’s like the unspoken rule of kpop.”
“Huh, I guess you did have that picture of GD with his pink hair for a really long time.”
“And man, how I miss that hair.”
“If that’s the rule, I should tell you who else has pink hair.”
“Kim Taehyung hasn’t had pink hair since I started listening to BTS, so I don’t want to hear it.”
“Whoa, defensive much? No, Kai from EXO has pink hair now.”
“Oh. Well, he can wait his turn. I’m not getting rid of Strawberry Suga anytime soon.”
“Uh-huh.”
“Shut up.”
“Uh-huh.”

---

She’d watched the video eight times in a row before she’d forced herself to turn the computer off and walk away. There were tears drying on her cheeks and throat hurt from screaming, but mostly she was numb and feeling regret like cold sweat trailing down her back. She should have waited for Hyemi. She should have waited to watch with her, to watch her reactions instead of being alone with her own thoughts and fears and feelings. She’d listened to the song alone first, wanting an unbiased first opinion, without someone else’s visuals coloring her thoughts. It was a beautiful song. Tender and full of emotion, but not slow at all. It was so different from what she was expecting. It was haunting. Then she’d watched the video.

The first time through she only made it one minute in. It had started off dark and a little upsetting, which made sense for a broken love song, but everyone looked so beautiful, she was able to look past it. Then she saw Taehyung running. Saw him climbing into a railroad container car and she paused the video, her fingers and face gone suddenly cold. “Third time’s the charm,” she’d
muttered to herself, staring at the still frame of the maknae line running on top of the train cars. She squeezed her eyes shut and tried to forget the feeling of the cold air in her face as she’d run those same steps. She tried to forget the joy she’d felt when she and Jimin stopped to dance in that same spot. She tried to forget the cold of the metal under her hands and the way her heart had soared looking out above everything, just a little higher up than normal and suddenly the world was different and new again.

But she couldn’t. She had no way to explain it, no way to prove it, but she couldn’t deny it anymore. She was dreaming Kim Taehyung’s life. She wasn’t sure she was ready to watch the rest of the video, but a sick determination gripped her. So she pressed play and watched with a sinking heart as the boys she’d come to care about got sadder and sadder alone while playing happily all together. And Jin. Jin crying and Jin grieving and Jin trying to find the light and just when she thought she was coping so well with the revelation of her brain’s strange nocturnal activity, Kim Taehyung pushed his way into a room and rushed at a man, holding something in his hand.

Samantha knew it was a glass bottle. She knew he was going to hit him, hit that man over the head and together they would both stumble into the wall. Then Taehyung would step back and rush him again, only this time the bottle would be aimed much lower. She knew it. She remembered it happening. She could feel it in her arm and her stomach, the feelings from that dream. She knew it would happen, but as she watched, it never did. Kim Taehyung rushed into the room, and a few seconds later pulled back looking shocked, but all the things in between were gone.

So she watched the video on repeat, trying to absorb all the details, trying to piece them all together with the things her brain shouted were true, that her heart screamed were impossible. Her heart wasn’t the only one screaming now. She felt it more than heard it, the blood rushing too loudly in her ears, but the sting in her throat was painfully familiar. She didn’t know when the tears came, but she was gripping a pillow so tightly her hand ached. She wanted to throw it at the computer screen, to block out the things she was seeing. They weren’t real. She knew it was just pretend, just acting, just fiction, but it all felt real to her. It was eerie seeing her pain in their faces. The happy laughter contrasting so sharply with the sad reality of loneliness. She was screaming, and sobbing, and she wanted to run away from it all, but she didn’t. She pressed play again and this time just talked to the screen like they could hear her. She begged them to stop, to smile, to be strong, because she had been strong, dammit. She had stumbled through the worst year of her life and she needed them to make it through too. She knew it wasn’t real, this music video, but what was real and what wasn’t didn’t really make sense anymore.

The last time through though, she was silent. She just watched. It wasn’t real, but her dreams were. She believed that now, believed it deeply. It had settled on her like a blanket, calm and comforting. It was impossible and it was crazy but it was real and it was happening to her and she was going to get through it. Because she’d gotten through worse. And she was strong enough to handle anything now. She was strong enough for the impossible.
Congratulations! We're half-way through (words-wise)! You made it! Thanks for sticking it out.
Also, this chapter relies heavily on conversation through text. This is the longest chunk of that in the whole story, so if you can make it through this part, the rest should be pretty painless.

Taehyung was pacing and Jimin was watching. Taehyung hated that he was being watched but there was no way to get away from watching eyes for now. He was debating. He was debating and it was driving him a little nutty. He didn’t like feeling indecisive. He rarely thought this hard about things. He trusted his instincts. He trusted that he saw the right path, that he’d already thought out all the possible connections before the decision every came to a head. Then he took that path and dealt with the fallout afterwards. It wasn’t a flawless plan, but it had worked out really well overall, which was good because he wasn’t sure he could change it now.

If there was any lingering doubt in his mind that his dreams were real, his last dream had blown them out of the water. At first he hadn’t thought much of it. It was KKT, that much he knew, and she was changing her icon. A lot. He saw her name there. Her email and her name and a rotating picture of her face in different poses and Yoongi’s face as he lay sprawled on a bed, one of the concept photos from the new album. When he woke up, he reached for his phone, searching for the name, half expecting to not find it. Every dream couldn’t be true, could it? But there she was, there was her name, her email address, and her face. Or well, at least her eyes and her hair. And she was there, she was really there and he could send her a message.

Saying what exactly he wasn’t sure yet. But he could make contact. He could bridge this gap and let her know… what? That he existed? She knew that. That he was dreaming his way into her head without her say? Yeah, he hadn’t figured out how to break that news yet. There really wasn’t a non-creepy way to do that.

“If you don’t sit down, I’m going to sit on you.” Jimin didn’t even look up from his phone to scold Taehyung.

“Jimin, if you… if accidentally found out the KKT of a girl, it’s… it’s not cool to just message her out of the blue, right?”

“Generally that’s considered a bad idea, yeah.”

“Okay. Right. Yeah, that’s what I thought.” Taehyung flopped down on the couch next to Jimin, collapsing half into his best friend. “The whole situation is creepy and weird and I don’t know what is normal anymore.”

“Did you have another dream?” Taehyung only nodded, rubbing his face on Jimin’s shoulder petulantly. He hated this feeling. He would almost rather plow ahead and make the mistakes, apologize and clean up the mess afterwards than sit here and stew in indecision. Almost. Because it wasn’t just his life, his embarrassment at stake. There was a real person on the other end of this. He didn’t want to be a burden. Easing his conscience, or curiosity, wasn’t worth upsetting her. He
cared enough about her feelings. Mostly. But he wanted to know her. Outside of his head. He was
going to be in Chicago in a few months. They would be so close. He was anxious to reach out, to
find out if the connection that he felt was real. He thought it couldn’t possibly be, but he wanted it
to be. He wanted to believe. The miraculous was here, in his lap, and he wanted so badly to grab it
and hold it close.

“Well, this whole dream thing is so bizarre, it doesn’t really follow any kind of normal rules, so,
maybe you should just try. In a non-creepy way,” Jimin said with a shrug.

“And how do I do that exactly?”

“Well maybe find out if it’s even her to begin with.”

“Why do you make everything sound so logical and simple?”

“Because I’m older than you and therefore wiser.”

“Jiminnie, you’re an idiot.” Taehyung grabbed his phone and opened KKT, looking at the tiny icon
as though it could tell him what to do. “So, here’s the really practical question. What language do I
use?”

“Uh… English. She’s American, right?”

“Yeah, but she speaks Korean.”

“But maybe she only speaks as much Korean as you speak English.”

“If that’s true this is going to be super awkward,” Taehyung said slowly. He thought she was pretty
fluent, at least in texts, but what he thought and what was true weren’t necessarily similar.

“Just start with hello. She might not even answer. Who answers random KKT messages anyway?”

“Thanks for the pep talk.”

“That’s what I’m here for,” Jimin said with a grin, eyes fixed on his own phone. Taehyung stared
at her icon. And Yoongi. And clicked to send her a message. He typed in English, slowly.

Hello. Is this Samantha Cale from DMB dance team?

It was simple and direct, which is pretty much all his English would allow. He glanced at the time
and searched for the time conversion from Seoul to Chicago. It was 2:12 on a Sunday afternoon
here, which made it just after midnight in Chicago. Was it too late to send a message? He could
send it and she would see it when she woke up. Worst case scenario, she never responded and
blocked him outright.

So he pressed send. And then put his phone down and left the room. He wandered the halls, trying
to distract himself from the sinking sensation in his stomach. He knew the feeling. It was nerves.
The special kind of nerves from waiting to be acknowledged by someone. He felt this way at
awards shows and anytime they performed alongside a group whose music he really admired. This
was totally different and yet exactly the same. He had feelings for this girl who only knew him as
an idol, and from the looks of things, not even her favorite. He wasn’t surprised by that. And he
certainly wasn’t jealous, because that would be ridiculous and petty and just downright silly.

He made it down one and a half halls before turning abruptly on his heels and walking as fast as
dignity would allow, which was not quite the speed of sound but as close to it as he could get
without running, right back to his phone. Which he stared at as though it were a live viper before picking it up and swallowing hard at the KKT notification in the corner. He opened the message and closed his eyes, both wanting and not wanting to read it. When he finally peeled one eye open enough to see, he sighed and started translating in his head.

Yes, who’s this?

That’s all. That’s all it said. It was her. Confirmation. It really was her. And… now the awkward part. How did he introduce himself? As a fan? It was technically true. He was a fan of her dancing. Did he give a nickname? A fake name? His KKT id was obscure and his display name just said KTH. He decided that honesty was the best policy, and if he ever got around to trying to explain the dream thing, he would at least have a history of forthrightness to back him up.

Kim Taehyung

Standard polite greeting. Nothing fancy or threatening. This time he just stared at his phone. They still had over an hour before they had to be on stage. He could certainly afford to use all his brainpower into willing her to respond.

Not funny. Please identify yourself.

This is my personal account, not the DMB main.

Of course she wasn’t convinced. He flipped to his camera and took a quick selca, smiling what he hoped was a winning and trustworthy smile. He watched the tiny 1 disappear as soon as he sent it. So she was waiting as eagerly by his phone as he was. That, at least, felt like a good sign.

So, you found a selfie online. Good job, Google.

Taehyung stumbled over “Google.” What kind of insult was that?

How can I prove it is me?

Take a picture with a banana

Taehyung scrunched his nose and tilted his head. It seemed an odd request, but he couldn’t remember ever posting a picture with a banana anywhere public, so maybe not an unreasonable one. He stood and ran to the craft services table. Sadly, there were no bananas. But there was a small container of banana yogurt. He held it next to his face and snapped another photo.

No bananas here today. Found this.

He was fumbling with his English, hating the way he sounded clunky and stupid. He’d much rather make an ass of himself in his native language at least.

Not good enough, sorry.

Why? Please. Let me try again. I am at

Sure you are.

Ok, then send a picture with your shoes on your head
both shoes

and a V sign

and stick your tongue out

This was ridiculous, but he couldn't really blame her, so he pulled his shoes off and tried to balance them on his head. It was more difficult than he thought, so he settled for holding them with his wrist, flashing the requested V sign, and sticking his tongue out while squinting cheekily at the camera and snapping the selca quickly.

Is good?

He saw that she read the message. He saw the 1 wink out of existence, but this time there was no reply. He glared at his phone, wishing he could see what she was doing. He’d done everything she’d asked. She had to believe him. He tapped the screen, as though that would cause her to hurry and then nearly dropped the phone when a new message appeared under his fingers.

Send a picture with Min Yoongi

Please

Glancing around the room, Taehyung looked for his requested target. Asleep in his chair. Of course. Taehyung stood and walked softly over to Yoongi, taking a deep breath and holding it as he crouched down as close as he dared, angling the camera just right to get both of them in the frame and taking the picture before sprinting back to the couch. He looked back to see what damage and anger he’d brought down on his head, but thankfully luck was on his side for once because Yoongi stayed sleeping, never batting an eyelash.

very dangerous

How did you get my information?

How do you know me?

What is going on here?

Taehyung took a deep breath. He’d started with honesty and it had worked pretty well, so he plunged ahead.

I dreamed it.

Please, Korean now?

Yes, but please explain

I don’t know where to start

the beginning

last year I started having strange dreams

I dreamed I was a girl
LAST YEAR?!??!

I didn’t know they were real

I thought they were just fun dreams

Yes, last year. Around Boy in Luv, I think

But I thought they were just dreams

and I couldn’t ever control the body I was in

just watch

and saw you

Taehyung stopped. He wasn’t sure how to continue. He wanted to let her absorb and respond. She was watching the messages roll in, that much he knew, but he didn’t know how to begin to convince her that he wasn’t crazy. And also to apologize for the intrusion.

how did you find me though?

I saw you signing your name once in a dream

and then looked you up online

found the dance website

then dreamed about you changing your KKT icon

and took a really big chance and decided to message you

I’m sorry if I’m intruding

I’m sorry for intruding

I didn’t ask for these dreams

I didn’t mean to have them

I’m sorry

this is insane

I know

It really is

but I’m not lying

I’m not making this up

I wouldn’t do that
but why me??

I don’t know

but I swear it’s true

it can’t be

but it is!

I know you. I know stuff about you I shouldn’t and I’m sorry

but it’s true

no

Fine.

I’ll prove it.

You dance and take care of two cute kids

You already said you looked me up online.

Anyone could find that out

You run but you mostly hate it

you like your coffee really sweet, with lots of milk

you have a bunch of really colorful socks

your couch is blue with red and yellow pillows

you sing along with every song on the radio

you sing BigBang while you cook

you’re afraid of washing knives so you always do it last

there are about 17 pillows on your bed

but you shove most of them on the floor when you climb in

you swear at Yoongi-hyung

and me

every time you listen to Let Me Know

which you can’t do without crying

no
I’m sorry but it’s true
you used to cry a lot
you went out dancing at clubs
you visit a nice older lady
somewhere with a big window and uncomfortable chairs
and
alright
I’m sorry
I had no choice
you have to believe me
I didn’t want to say it like this
but please, you have to believe me

Taehyung watched her reading and not responding, not believing and he’d told her all the safe things he could think of. What more could he tell her to convince her, things that only she would know, things he couldn’t have learned any way other than by being inside her head. It was dangerous. It was embarrassing to them both but he had to do it. She had to know.

I’m sorry
but
when you take a shower you start with the water just middle of the way warm
then you gradually turn it hotter and hotter until you can barely stand it
then at the end you turn it back to the middle
and it feels cold by contrast
and you shiver but you like it
and you smell like flowers and clean things
you have one of those gritty sugar scrubs that smells like oranges
Please
say something
I’m sorry

Taehyung thought his eyes would water from the intensity with which he was staring at his phone.
He’d just confessed to dreaming of her in the shower. It was so far from the “not-creepy” Jimin had told him to be. It was the worst. And yet he felt instantly lighter for having confessed. Horrible for what he was inflicting on her, the shame and embarrassment she must be feeling. He felt a little guilty for feeling relieved but he was relieved nonetheless. She wasn’t responding. She wasn’t saying anything. She was going to block him and he would lose this chance to ever find out why all this was happening. He was going to have to go perform and forget all about this somehow. Then he saw it, a message. And his eyes grew wide as saucers. Because this changed everything.

Yeah, well you cried when you got your legs waxed for the comeback

and then chased Jungkook around making him feel your smooth legs

---

Samantha was restless and fidgety. Five days ago she’d been an emotional mess, crying over a music video. She’d called Hyemi in a daze, trying to explain something Hyemi thought was already a known fact. Hyemi teased her and had jokingly been offended that Samantha didn’t wait to watch the video together. Samantha had pleaded and tried to explain that she wasn’t joking, she wasn’t playing around. She was painfully serious that somehow her Nana was right and she was some sort of prophetic dreamer through a bizarre family legacy and she didn’t know what to do. At the very least she was violating the privacy of a celebrity. Though unwillingly, and without any sort of conscious control that she could think of, but she wasn’t sure that excused or exonerated her.

Hyemi had talked her down from her rising panic. She’d tried to visit Nana, but she was sick with a cold and between the sniffles and the napping Samantha wasn’t able to get any answers. She’d even called her mother, trying to sound casual and ask subtle questions about any other dreamers in the family. Her aunt or her cousins maybe? Unfortunately her mother was dogmatically practical and annoyingly fixated on planning their brief summer reunion.

And she was still dreaming. She woke up with the colors of someone else’s life still flashing in her mind. Unlike other dreams, these didn’t fade as much. The details stayed with her, like watching a movie. Those details of his life, his private life, the part he didn’t put in front of a camera, they were in her head. His feelings, the things he felt when he was out on stage, or in the practice room, or lying in bed trying to sleep, they were in her head too. In her heart.

She’d never admit it to Hyemi, but she did care about Kim Taehyung. She liked him as an artist well enough, and his face wasn’t unpleasant to look at, but months and months of dreams, dreams she now saw in a different light, were all sifting through her memories, reminding her of so many tiny moments when he was endearing, charming, hardworking, caring. He was a whole person with his own dreams and fears and she cared about him.

She didn’t love him. Not at all, not as anything other than another person who deserved love and respect. Maybe admiration. But she wasn’t in love with him. She would accept the dreams, but she resisted the notion that he was somehow her destiny. Or that her destiny was to love him. He wasn’t… he wasn’t Matthew. Maybe Nana had dreamed of Gramps and they’d fallen in love, but this was different. Her story was different. It had to be.

Her story involved a celebrity on the other side of the world. She rubbed her hand across her face and lay back on her pillows. She wanted to stop thinking. She wanted to sleep, but she was afraid to dream. She’d already dreamed so much about him.

She sat up with a start. She’d dreamed so much about him. She’d dreamed him writing her name. She’d dreamed that he knew her name. Nana said that Gramps had called her after dreaming of her
name. Gramps had dreamed of Nana. Her heart was racing. She’d thought it was proof that this
couldn’t be real at the time. Now she relived those moments of Taehyung carefully writing her
name and felt sick to her stomach. He’d been dreaming of her too, right? This thing worked both
ways. He knew her name? She grabbed her phone to text Hyemi. She needed Hyemi to reassure her
that there was no way this part of this craziness could be true. But she saw a message notification
pop up.

**Hello. Is this Samantha Cale from DMB dance team?**

She didn’t recognize the user name, KTH. She’d talked DMB into getting a KKT account for
social media. And it was her job to manage it. Jess handled Twitter and she handled this. But why
was she getting messages on her private account? She typed a quick reply and tossed her phone on
the bed. She covered her face with her hands and tried really hard to not think about the times she’d
dreamed of Taehyung naked. Because that meant she’d have to think about the possibility that he’d
dreamed of her when she was naked. How much naked had she really seen afterall? It would be ok.
She could just burn up from the inside out with repressed embarrassment and blow away in a puff
of awkward smoke and never have to dream anything ever again. Instead of spontaneously
combusting though, she grabbed her phone when it dinged.

**Kim Taehyung**

She rolled her eyes so hard she thought she might have sprained something. Alright, so someone
had gotten a hold of her info and was teasing her. Probably Hyemi. Or Jess. Except Jess didn’t
speak Korean, though it didn’t take much Googling to figure out a simple hello. She sent a stern,
but polite response and glared at her phone. She wasn’t falling for whatever this bullshit was. It
was after midnight and she was too tired and stressed out to deal with someone’s idea of a sick
joke. Then there was a picture loading. Kim Taehyung. Smiling somewhat goofily. Was that
supposed to prove something?

**So, you found a selfie online. Good job, Google.**

**How can I prove it is me?**

Well if this asshole could Google, so could she. She opened up a new tab and searched for
Taehyung selfies. There were a startling number of results. Now to think of something ridiculous
that they couldn’t provide. Fool them at their own stupid game.

**Take a picture with a banana**

Then she sent a message to Hyemi telling her it wasn’t funny and to cut it out. No response. She
sent the same message to Jess and got a curt “can’t talk, on the road, call me later” a few seconds
later. Texting at stoplights was a very Jess thing to do. She waited, staring at the chat room with
this strange KTH who claimed to be Kim Taehyung. Maybe it was a common Korean name and
this was one of a thousand Kim Taehyung who got off on impersonating his famous namesake to random American girls. That almost made sense. Sort of. Up popped a new picture. Kim Taehyung smiling with a container of… banana yogurt next to his face.

**Not good enough, sorry.**

Samantha grinned. Good. The joke was over. That was quick and satisfying. But the messages
didn’t stop.
Why? Please. Let me try again. I am at 가

Was this dude a glutton for punishment? Why keep up the lie? Was Bangtan even performing at Inkigayo today? A quick search told her that yes, actually, they were. But if she could find that out, then so could everyone else. Fine. This guy--she assumed it was a guy if it wasn’t Hyemi or Jess and at this point she doubted that. Neither of them would take it this far. This guy wanted to play the game, she’d play the game. She sent a string of messages asking for a very specific selfie. Two shoes on his head, with a V sign. And the tongue. She scanned the images her previous search had pulled up. Nothing even close. She sat back and crossed her arms while watching the screen. *Gauntlet thrown dude.* Ball in your court and whatever other bad sports and battle metaphors were appropriate. But then another picture appeared. Of Kim Taehyung. Holding his shoes on his head and flashing a V sign with this tongue sticking out. She flipped back to the page of pictures that the internet had provided. There was nothing there that matched this description. There was no way anyone could have photoshopped something so specific so quickly, and in the same outfit each time.

Her stomach did a barrel roll and she felt her hands grow cold. It couldn’t possibly be… actually Kim Taehyung. She hadn’t even considered the possibility because it was so ludicrous. Yet so was dreaming yourself into someone else’s life and she was willing to believe that was a real thing that had actually happened. Was it really possible that this was really him? She made one more request, politely this time, and watched her phone for what felt like an eternity until the picture arrived. Kim Taehyung crouched near a sleeping Min Yoongi.

very dangerous

She typed furiously, ignoring the humor in both the picture and his words.

*How did you get my information?*

*How do you know me?*

*What is going on here?*

It was all too surreal. It couldn’t be real. This couldn’t be real life because she only had room in her brain for one extraordinary thing and that thing was dreaming Kim Taehyung not texting Kim Taehyung.

*I dreamed it.*

*Please, Korean now?*

Samantha thought her heart must have come to a complete stop. She’d connected the pieces of the puzzle herself but seeing it like this was still a shock. She switched over to her Hangul keyboard and typed quickly.

*Yes. but please explain*

*I don’t know where to start*

*the beginning*

*last year I started having strange dreams*

*I dreamed I was a girl*
LAST YEAR?!?!

Had he been dreaming as long as she had? She knew the dreams had started shortly after the car accident. That was almost 15 months ago. So much had happened since then. Had Kim Taehyung really been dreaming of her through all of it? How boring for him to dream her ordinary life, the worst parts of her ordinary life. The messages started rolling in as he explained. Since "Boy in Luv." Orange hair. Over a year ago. She interrupted to ask how he’d managed to get a hold of this information since he hadn’t gotten around to that part and that was the part she was most curious about right now, or at least the part she was most willing to focus on. The answer was obvious, though still startling. He’d dreamed it.

Then he was apologizing, saying right back to her the words she’d been thinking these past few days. It was just too much.

this is insane

I know

It really is

but I’m not lying

I’m not making this up

I wouldn’t do that

but why me??

I don’t know

but I swear it’s true

it can’t be

Samantha wasn’t even sure why she was protesting so much. She knew he wasn’t lying, wasn’t crazy, or at least only as crazy as she was. Then he started rambling. Saying he knew her, which put her hackles up because even if these dreams were truly happening, he didn’t know her. He just had dreamed of her. There was no way he could really know anything real about her, but as he rambled, she grew still. She tried to deny it at first. Anyone with an internet connection could find out about her job and her hobbies, but then the details became smaller, more personal. He was sending the messages so fast she almost had a hard time keeping up with them as she struggled to translate with her brain trying to process everything all at once.

you swear at Yoongi-hyung

and me

every time you listen to Let Me Know

which you can’t do without crying

no

I’m sorry but it’s true
Samantha wanted to cry again. She felt so vulnerable and exposed. The reality of him dreaming of her started to close around her, like a fog, like smoke smothering her. There was no way to tell how many ugly and broken moments of her life he’d seen when she’d been unaware. She’d been worried that he’d seen what she looked like without her clothes on. She forgot to worry about him seeing her really naked. He was apologizing again, rambling and then he was talking about her showering. She’d thought that would be the worst of it, knowing he’d dreamed of her just like she’d dreamed of him, wet and naked and content, but after the shock of knowing he’d seen her crying when she thought she was totally alone, well the physical nudity wasn’t as big a deal. It was kind of cute the way he kept apologizing. She understood that part at least. She’d felt that way after she’d accepted that these dreams were real, but he just kept going. Finally the messages slowed and stopped.

Please

say something

I’m sorry

Samantha took a deep breath and tried to think what on earth she could possibly say. There was no social etiquette to follow in this situation, no rules to follow that made any sense. But she realized something. He hadn’t made the connection yet. He knew that he was dreaming of her. He still didn’t seem to realize that she had been dreaming of him. Maybe it was a little vindictive. Maybe it was a little petty and spiteful. She couldn’t think of anything truly embarrassing that she wanted to admit to just yet, but there was a recent dream that had left her smiling for hours after waking up.

Yeah, well you cried when you got your legs waxed for the comeback

and then chased Jungkook around making him feel your smooth legs

She grinned as she watched the little 1 vanish, knowing he’d read it. Then she put her phone on silent, turned out the lights and buried her face in her pillows to giggle. Let him think about that for a while.
Realization, Rules, and Rewards

Taehyung was more grateful than ever for the distraction of performing. Rushing on stage, singing and dancing, then back to dance practice to wear himself out. Other than feeling super self-conscious about needing to use the bathroom, it all went pretty well. Nothing there that he minded her seeing. Not really. He showered as quickly as possible, looking intensely at the wall.

He’d never even considered the possibility that this dream connection went both ways. All this time he’d been dreaming of her, she’d been dreaming of him too. He hoped that she’d mostly dreamed about times when he was on camera. He knew that she hadn’t seen only the stuff the rest of the world had, but he hoped maybe the majority of what she experienced was the stuff he was already sharing with the rest of the world. It was selfish. She didn’t have that luxury. He was invading her life all the time. He thought maybe it was only fair then that she get to see whatever she did. But he still felt that the loss of what little privacy he thought he had was unfair.

At least she seemed like a good person. A nice person. Trustworthy, which was good because he couldn’t afford a scandal. He sat down on his bed and started typing her some messages. Maybe they could come to some sort of agreement, some arrangement that would let them deal with all this peacefully and respectfully. Some sort of rules. It felt like grasping at straws, with what little control it seemed they had, but it was a start. An understanding, maybe. He thought maybe they had that. He felt like he understood her. Maybe she could understand him, at least as well as anyone ever did.

“Hey, you should try to sleep. I know you’re tired. Put your phone down and close your eyes,” Hoseok said, staring at him from across the room.

“Yeah, hyung, I will. When Jiminie gets done with his shower, I’ll shut it all down.”

“I’m not waiting for that. I’m going to sleep right this second.”

“Alright, hyung. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight TaeTae.” Taehyung rolled to face the wall, tugging the covers up to tuck them under his chin and untucking them from the end of the bed in the process. He sat up and tried to reach down to smooth them, but he couldn’t quite reach, so he crawled down to the foot of the bed. Then, because he was kneeling on the covers he was trying to maneuver, he had to stand up and tug the covers back down.

“What the actual fuck are you doing over there and why aren’t you sleeping?”

“Sorry, sorry, Hobi-hyung. Sorry. I was just re-tucking the covers.”

“Go to bed, you gangly terror.”

“Yes, yes, sorry.” Taehyung climbed in bed and settled in as best he could, as quietly as he could, as quickly as he could. It was neither quiet nor quick, but he was trying. “Hey, Hobi-hyung? Can I ask you something?”

“If this is about some random internet thing, I’m going to come squish you into the bed until you sleep.”

“No, no, I was… I was just wondering, you know, if you ever get tired? Of being watched all the time?” Hoseok grunted and rolled to face Taehyung, who was peering over his covers with an
owlish look.

“Yeah, sort of, I guess.” He sighed deeply and sat up, giving up on sleep for the time being. “I mean, no, not really. I don’t want to give up performing. I like it. I like being the center of attention. I like people watching me dance. I like making people laugh.” He ran a hand through his hair. “I’m not like Kookie, you know? Or even Yoongi-hyung. I don’t really need that recharging time to recover from being on camera. I like it. Why? You’re not usually camera shy. This comeback bothering you?”

“Maybe. I don’t know. I like being on stage. I like the shows and stuff we do.” Taehyung fiddled with the edge of his blanket.

“Is this about the thing you’re filming with Namjoon tomorrow? You two did great on the last show. I’m sure this will be good too.”

“No, I’m not really worried about that. Namjoon-hyung does most of the work, most of the talking. I just show up and look pretty, right?” Taehyung flashed a wide grin. “No, I was just thinking that it’s hard to have any secrets with a life like this.”

“Yeah, but what’s so secret that you’re worried about?” Taehyung didn’t want to meet Hoseok’s eyes. Everyone knew about the dream thing, but he couldn’t bring himself to tell them that they were being watched too. He was putting them in an awfully awkward situation. He’d have to tell them soon but what if they all got weird? What if they stopped talking to him or stopped hanging out with him off camera? He had to tell them, but he didn’t want to lose them. So he’d wait just this one night. Let this one night be normal. Or as normal as things could be with him.

“Oh you know, nothing in particular, but I couldn’t have any secrets even if I wanted to. None of us can. What if I wanted to develop a secret skill, like, like knife throwing?” Taehyung waved his hands in demonstration.

“No one lets you anywhere near a knife, Taehyung. I think your aspirations of knife throwing have more than just idol life impeding them. Now, seriously, go to sleep.”

“I will, hyung, I’m just waiting for Jiminie.”

“Well do it quietly then.”

“I will.” Taehyung concentrated on laying very still, listening for the sounds of Jimin finishing his shower and walking quietly back to their room. Taehyung sat up in bed and put his hand on the ladder, their quiet way of signalling one another when Hoseok was sleeping or grumpy or both. Jimin nodded at him and after hanging his towel up, came and crawled in on top of Taehyung’s blankets, rubbing his damp hair against Taehyung’s forehead.

“What’s up?” Jimin whispered. Taehyung didn’t answer, just reached out to pat Jimin’s knee. He wasn’t sure what he wanted other than to just not be alone right now. In a way he had control over. Maybe Sam was dreaming this whole thing right now. Maybe she was here with him, but he couldn’t be sure and he didn’t have any say in that. But Jimin, that was his choice at least. “Tae, you’ve been thinking in overdrive since before we went on stage. You need to let some of those thoughts out or you’ll never be able to sleep.” Jimin’s voice was soft and soothing, so quiet Taehyung could barely hear.

“Yeah, probably. But it’ll be too noisy,” Taehyung answered in a rumble that Jimin probably felt more than heard.
“Then don’t say them. Just write them on the wall, alright? Let them out so you can sleep, friend.” Taehyung nodded and lifted his hand a bit to draw lazily on the wall, letting his worries flow from his fingertips. Sometimes this actually worked. Jimin was so good at helping everyone, especially Taehyung. He gave a sigh and tapped the wall gently, not wanting to disturb his hyungs sleeping in the next room, or the one sleeping in his room, and pretended that the rhythm was a spell to banish his insomnia. He was only a little scared to dream of her, now that they both knew.

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Samantha woke up to another long list of messages from Taehyung and a few confused ones from Hyemi and Jess. She rubbed her hand over her eyes, pushing memories of texting… herself out of her head and spent a few bleary moments responding to the girls. She assured them that nothing was wrong, just a misunderstanding and she’d tell them all about it later. She wasn’t sure exactly what she was going to tell them. Jess had no idea about her unusual dreams and Hyemi was sure to freak smooth out at the fact that Samantha had somehow managed to make contact with the actual, real, live Kim Taehyung.

Kim Taehyung who had panicked and sent her rambling, frantic messages that started with:

*How did you*

*That means*

*Omo*

Those he’d sent before she’d fallen asleep. How long had it taken her to fall asleep? How long did it take her to start dreaming? What was the science behind all of this? Did they work like regular dreams, where hours and minutes were all crammed into mere seconds of synapses firing off information? Was she really dreaming in real time, minute for minute in his skin? She didn’t remember feeling like she’d dreamed hours and hours of his life. How long did she actually spend dreaming each night? She tried to think through these things while reading through poor Taehyung’s growing concern and embarrassment. Some of these she remembered sending. Or rather, remembered him sending while she was dreaming that she was him. This was all too confusing. She paused and tried to think through what she actually remembered dreaming. Dancing wearing the clothes from the album photoshoot. Texting while pacing backstage. Desperately needing to pee. Texting some more. Getting scolded to hurry up. Really, really needing to pee. Texting again. Running into a bathroom and into a stall and…

Yeah, this dreaming thing wasn’t all glamorous idol life and screaming fans. She shook her head and scrolled through Taehyung’s messages. She chuckled at his increasingly desperate pleas for her to wake up so he could use the bathroom. As though she had any control over this thing that was happening to them. As though it were her life goal to share a bathroom with him. As though it hadn’t already happened in all the time she’d been dreaming of him.

There were more messages after that she didn’t remember sending. She’d missed some time somewhere because the next thing she remembered from her dream was dance practice. Getting ready for the tour, everyone tired but focused, running through the set list to keep themselves sharp. Jungkook had giggled and elbowed him for being distracted on the way back to the dorm. Why was there a gap? What had happened in between? Did it have something to do with REM sleep cycles? Samantha made a mental note to go research sleep and dreams and anything else she could get her hands on that might help her make sense of this. Finally, at the end of Taehyung’s messages was a really good idea.
Alright, we’ve got to figure out some rules

I can’t control anything when I’m dreaming

I guess it’s the same for you

so…

uh…

let’s just try real hard not to look at anything

we don’t want to be seen

and not mention it if it happens, ok?

Bodies are just bodies right?

I’d be worried about you selling your story to a tabloid

but who would believe you, right?

shit

someone probably would

please don’t do that

I can’t tell Bang PD about this

so I’m trusting you here

which may be the stupidest thing I’ve ever done

I have to sleep now

Uh… see you soon?

I guess?

Samantha stretched sat up slowly, thinking over what rules they could really have. She’d never been able to influence anything that Taehyung was doing when she was dreaming. It was good to hear that he hadn’t either. She glanced down at her favorite pink pajamas. They were thankfully modest, but she would definitely be re-evaluating some of her sleepwear choices. No more tanks and panties for a while. She stood and walked over to the bathroom mirror, flipping on the light and examining her bedhead. Not as impressive as when it was shorter, but still respectable. She waved at the mirror, feeling a bit like an idiot.

“Hello there. If you’re there. If you are, you should text me later and… uh, I don’t know. Nevermind.” Now she really felt like an idiot. Talking to her own reflection. She could just send him a message electronically, like any civilized person would. She thought about the regularity of her own schedule and the absolute irregularity of his. She could at least predict when she would be sleeping, give or take an hour or so. That would at least let him know when he might be sharing his brain space. But how often did he sleep? And for how long? Was there anyway to predict when it
was safe to take a long bubble bath?

Good idea about rules
except I can’t really think of any
other than, yeah, let’s just keep everything to ourselves
also I don’t think of you like that

Just so you know

No offense

Suga is my bias
so don’t, you know, go looking at him naked or anything

but I usually sleep from like 11ish to around 6 on workdays

weekends are different

but, how about we just text each other before heading to bed

just, like a warning I guess

Samantha stared at her phone, waiting for the one to go away so she could get in the shower. But it didn’t. She looked at the clock and did some quick math. It was a little after 8pm in Seoul. Too early for him to be asleep, right? She stepped out of the mirror’s reflection to undress, just in case, taking care to keep her eyes fixed on the shower head, the wall, her towel, anything but herself. It was one thing to think about all the times in the past she’d possibly been showering with him in her head and be calm and collected about it. Bodies were just bodies. She was a dancer. She touched and was touched by people all the time in ways that would be bizarre and uncomfortable in non-dance situations. This was just like that, really. Except this wasn’t anything like that. This was totally not like that. She grabbed the shampoo and closed her eyes, navigating by touch. She could do this. She’d showered with her eyes closed while hungover before. She would just get really good at doing that for the time being.

How long though? How long would these dreams last? She needed to talk to Nana because she certainly wasn’t in a rush to marry anyone, and if that was the only way to stop the dreams then she would have to find a lot more coping mechanisms. She reached behind her to turn the water just a little hotter but stopped. Taehyung knew about that habit. She opened her eyes just enough to grab the conditioner and rubbed it on, grateful that her hair was long enough now to sit on top of her head, out of the way, while she finished the rest of her scrubbing. She grabbed her sugar scrub, fumbling around until her fingers closed around the right container. This was taking more time than usual and she didn’t really want to be late. She’d skip the sugar scrub today, but she wasn’t giving it up for good. She’d just have to get up a little earlier from now on. The thought made her groan, but she soaped up and rinsed off as quickly as possible, trying to touch as little as possible while still being appropriately thorough.

She turned the water off and opened the shower curtain, staring at the ceiling as she felt around for her towel. Once she was covered she stepped out and grabbed her clothes, dressing as quickly as possible. She wasn’t as late as she’d feared, and everything from here on out was totally fine for the eyes of Kim Taehyung. She grabbed her brush and blowdryer and set to work. Once she
finished her makeup, she slipped into her shoes and shrugged on her purse, fishing for her keys. She grabbed her phone and saw she had messages. From Taehyung.

**Please don’t ever do that again**

**don’t shower with your eyes closed**

**when you close your eyes I have nothing to distract me**

**just way too many, uh, sensations**

**please**

Samantha blanched and sat down on the bed hard. Her cunning plan had backfired, and though he hadn’t said anything, he had very heavily insinuated that it was unpleasant. Or too pleasant. She honestly wasn’t sure which was worse.

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“So, uh, Taehyungie. How’d you pull that off?”

“Pull what off, hyung?”

“Dancing in 12 centimeter heels. You… practice that in your spare time much?”

“No, but girls do it all the time. It’s not that different.”

“I can barely dance in sneakers. I have difficulty when we wear those damn lace up boots. How can heels be not that different?”

“I dunno. You just… find your center of gravity? Lean into it a bit, put the weight on the ball of your foot, not the heel and then let muscle memory take over?”

“My muscles can’t remember shit.”

“Well that’s true. But besides, I’ve done it in my dreams a bunch of times.”

“You dream of dancing in heels?”

“Well, Sam dances in heels.”

“You’ve got to stop talking about her like you’re friends. It’s weirding me out.”

“We are sort of friends. I mean we texted and she hasn’t blocked me, so I’m gonna say we’re sort of friends.”

“Who share some weird dream connection that no one has ever heard of or can explain?”

“Yeah, like that. Don’t worry, Namjoon-hyung. It’s all going to work out. I can just tell. You gotta trust me at least a little, alright? It’s gonna be fine.”

“I trust you. I don’t understand you, but I trust you. Except with the heels thing. That has to be some sort of witchcraft.”

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The funny thing about dreams, the goal kind of dreams, the inspiration and wish kind of dreams, is that when they come true, it’s still just as much a shock and unexpected, even though it’s been wanted and wished for so long. Since debut, winning first place had been the dream of all of them, and now Taehyung couldn’t stop staring at the little trophy. Yoongi wouldn’t let the thing out of his sight, following everyone around when they took their turns taking pictures with it and texting everyone they knew. It was Taehyung’s turn now and he had taken enough goofy selcas to send to his family, but he still stared. They’d all talked about this so much. They had all wanted this so much. It was the last thing on their list of things to achieve. Nearly two years and this was the last piece of the puzzle. This was it. They’d won the rookie awards. They’d released a full album. They’d had their own concert. They were producing their own music. They were about to embark on a world tour. They’d been close to winning first place before. They had hopes for it with several of their comebacks. Hell, they’d even made the skit on this album about it.

And now it was here. So now what? That distant and elusive goal and been achieved. Now what did they do? Work harder, be better, do more, keep going. Yes, obviously all of that, but what was the new goal? Taehyung reached a finger out to touch it, this trophy that wasn’t even really theirs yet. The award was theirs, but the actual trophy with their names carved into it wouldn’t be ready for a while. This was just a placeholder.

Sometimes he felt like this life, this unreal world of idol life was just a placeholder. He’d eventually have to give it up and get on with real life. He didn’t have music in his blood the way Namjoon, Yoongi and Jungkook did. He didn’t have dance deep in his bones like Jimin and Hoseok. He was a performer though, and that much had always been true, would always be true, but he was never sure how long he had on this stage, in this way. Nothing about him was particularly hip hop, yet here he was, part of this hip hop group. He was built for ballads and sad love songs, goofy physical jokes, bad puns and gags. He was too soft and too silly for hip hop, but he’d never felt more at home than here with these boys and these songs that he loved. It was a good life, no matter how long it lasted.

He flipped through his pictures, looking for the right one to send to Sam. She should be awake by now, if she was sticking to her schedule.

**We won**

**I know. I couldn’t watch the whole show, but I saw online**

**Congratulations!**

**I voted, for whatever that’s worth**

**Thank you. That means a lot to me.**

Taehyung smiled and bit his lip. He knew they had lots of dedicated fans that had voted to make this possible. All of the members had thanked them, on the show, in the fan cafe, on Twitter. And they meant it, they really did. Having fans was still surreal and delightful, but this. Knowing that Sam had voted. It warmed his heart the same way it did when his family took the time to vote. Sam wasn’t his family, but something about her made her congratulations, her effort, feel different than his other friends.

“Yoongi-hyung, smile!” Taehyung said suddenly, snapping a quick picture of Yoongi’s blissful face, catching a half smile and dazed expression. He sent that to Sam too.

**He’s in love.**
If she was busy taking care of the kids, “the twins” she called them, then she might not get the message right away, but he still smiled, imagining her joy at seeing a candid picture of her favorite member. Taehyung wasn’t jealous. Not really. He was plenty confident in his place in Bangtan now. He had plenty of fans. His face was widely adored and appreciated. It was totally fine that she preferred Suga. He was fine with it. But he sent her another selca with a goofy grin just because. They had dance practice and another broadcast tomorrow. He thought about maybe catching a short nap in the car on the way back to the studio, but he was too excited to sleep.

They’d really done it. They had somehow managed to inspire enough people that they had won. They had really won. The Show wasn’t one of the biggest of the music shows for their promotional circuit, but it was still an important first. He wondered if they would win again. Maybe tomorrow night. Maybe they would keep winning. With BigBang having a comeback at the same time, it was really unlikely. This was maybe their only chance. He pulled out his headphones and listened to the new songs.

He was almost as excited for BigBang’s comeback as he had been for their own album to be released. To be promoting at the same time wasn’t great for their chances of winning, but it did mean getting to share a stage with his idols and that was pretty great. It wasn’t his favorite part of being an idol but it was definitely near the top of the list. He’d gotten to meet so many wonderful people that he looked up to and respected, and now rookie groups were coming to greet him, calling him sunbaenim and it made him smile. It had only been two years but it was so satisfying to be looked up to. The thought that he was inspiring other people to make music, just by being a part of Bangtan, just by being himself, that was what got him through some of the grueling rehearsals. It was a strange middle ground; looking up to so many and yet no longer being on the bottom. He was someone’s idol.

It was all real and it was all happening and it was all too much to be believed. This was such an honor and a surprise. He knew the weight of responsibility would come crashing down soon, the pressure to keep it up, to keep winning, to keep getting better and better was only being held off by this thin moment of hope and enjoyment.

He shook his head. He would have to work so much harder now. He couldn’t disappoint anyone now. There were so many more people watching now. He had to do his best for his members, his company and for the fans that were supporting them. He needed to make them all proud. He wanted to make them all proud, to make them smile when they said his name. He wanted the name Bangtan to make the whole world happy just hearing it, the way he and all the members were happy now, smiles pressed into their faces, unable to stop grinning like fools, full of pride and excitement, nervous and eager to do better. Taehyung stood and spun in a quick circle, just to let some of the energy building under his skin out.

“Save it for the practice room,” Hoseok said, rubbing a hand affectionately across Taehyung’s shoulder.

“I can’t!” Taehyung jumped up and down, watching Hoseok’s smile stretch wider until he was laughing and grabbing Taehyung’s hands to jump with him. It didn’t take long for Jimin to join them, trying to wrap his arms around them both at once, which somehow led to Jungkook jumping on Taehyung’s back and Namjoon pulling Jimin off to tangle his own hands around Hoseok’s waist as Seokjin rubbed Jungkook on the back with one hand while reaching the other out for Yoongi to grab. Soon they were seven boys in a tangle of limbs and laughter, making too much noise and not enough sense. It was perfect. It was why they started down this long and difficult road together in the first place, for moments like this. Just like this. Just this moment. Just perfect.
Samantha didn’t usually vote on music shows. Or, at least, she hadn’t since she’d graduated high school and come back to the states. She usually trusted Hyemi to do those parts for her and just watched the videos a bunch, bought the albums she liked and called it good. She couldn’t imagine doing this regularly anymore but she had more invested this time. BigBang and Bangtan had released new songs right on top of each other and she was full to bursting with pride and excitement. Her favorite band back after a long break and her second favorite, by a slimmer and slimmer margin every day, sharing a stage finally. Sort of. Sharing a broadcast at least. But this was different, too. She’d stayed up late the other night letting the “I Need U” video play over and over on the Toudo site, watching the miniscule gap between BTS and Uniq, willing with all her might for her boys to win.

Her boys. She was just another fan voting for her favorites, but this time it was more personal. Not that she could tell anyone about it. Or anyone other than Hyemi. She wondered briefly if Taehyung had told the other members. She realized that she was invading their lives to an extent too and that made her uncomfortable. It wasn’t her fault she had this connection, or only her fault inasmuch as she was born into it. She just had to be a good enough person that this connection wouldn’t make anyone worry. No pressure there. Just be an impeccable specimen of humanity above reproach. Sure. That was easy enough.

Especially on less than four hours of sleep. She’d stayed up late talking to Hyemi about the crazy staffing changes at her clinic and the struggles of university life. It was nice to focus on something other than herself for a bit, something not so insane and unnatural. It was nice to be the calm, supportive voice of reason. What wasn’t reasonable was waking up at four in the morning to watch M Countdown. She’d been dreaming of Taehyung backstage, pestering the members and talking to literally everyone in the room. The members, their staff, other groups, other groups’ staff, Mnet staff, possibly the janitorial staff. Shaking off the residual giddiness and excitement from Taehyung, she pulled her hair up into a ponytail and pulled her laptop closer, pulling up the site to stream the live broadcast and saying a quick prayer for speedy internet. She smiled at all the opening graphics and set up. It had changed a lot since the weeks when she and Hyemi would sit together watching this in her tiny bedroom, squealing and imitating the dances, but for all the changes it was still the same.

She wasn’t sure when in the 90 minute program BTS or BigBang would perform but she wanted to take this opportunity to shower completely alone. She spent a few minutes trying to convince herself what she wanted more-- to see her favorite groups dancing live on television or to take a long luxurious shower without having to worry about what she was or wasn’t seeing or touching. The shower won, which was why she tripped over her own shoes on her way back to her computer because she was hurrying when she heard the opening bars of "I Need U". The choreography was just stunning. She couldn’t help herself from doing bits of it along with them, repeating certain moves, thinking of how she could adapt them, incorporate them into pieces with her girls. Watching BigBang was just as delightful and emotional. They all looked so good, even if T.O.P. did have stupid hair.

She finished getting dressed and sat down to braid her hair while the broadcast finished, hurrying to finish as they began the final recap. Her heart was in her throat. She was so nervous, waiting to see the results. It was ridiculous. It wasn’t her efforts being rewarded, she wasn’t winning any awards here, but she was pacing and bouncing on the balls of her feet. Maybe it was lingering excitement from Taehyung, from dreaming his emotions. She couldn’t even watch the numbers being tallied on screen. Her eyes were glued to Taehyung. She remembered the eager anticipation he’d felt backstage. The dread and disappointment he was ignoring to put on a smile and be friendly. The jokes with Jungkook about sneaking off to meet G Dragon and T.O.P. She watched
him now, nervously mouthing something to himself as the MCs counted up votes. Was he singing?

Then the screen filled with the pre-canned graphic and there was cheering. When the camera panned back, Taehyung was definitely singing now, dancing with joy, Hoseok jumping up and down, RapMon hugging Jungkook and Suga clapping from behind them. RapMon gave his thanks and Samantha was shouting too, feeling overwhelmed. Why? It wasn’t her win. She spun around and then looked back down to see Taehyung thank his parents and ARMYs and why did he have lipstick smeared all over his face? There was more thanking and then the good byes and then Suga was rapping, with more pink lipstick smudged across his lips. What on earth were these boys doing?
There was always a tiny flame of doubt that lived in the back of Taehyung’s mind. He couldn’t pinpoint when it had been lit--he’d been a fearless and optimistic child--but it was a constant companion and had been for years. Somedays it was a tiny, distant flicker with nothing to feed on. Today it was a bonfire. He was too much, too weird, too wild, too emotional and too uncontrolled. He’d messed up. He’d let everyone down. There were people angry at him, vocally and virulently angry with him, and worse, it was casting a shadow on what should be the best moment for Bangtan. He’d let his members down. He’d acted without thinking, singing a song that made him happy at the wrong moment, and now people were calling him disrespectful, rude, arrogant, and worse.

Like the months before debut when he worked hard alone, afraid he would never debut, afraid he’d wasted so much time and resources to train for something that would never happen, he wondered why he’d chosen this life. It was Parent’s Day and instead of sending love and support to his family, they were sending love and support to him. He was a burden and he’d ruined things for everyone. He’d withdrawn into himself. He knew it would pass. He hoped it would pass quickly, but knowing that the storm would end didn’t lessen the sting of the wind.

And just like his parents and his grandma, the other members had been nothing but supportive, reading him all the comments from fans defending him, trying to cheer him up. Jimin even showed him the hashtag on twitter where fans were making mole elephants, calling them Taelephants. It made him smile, but the smile couldn’t reach his heart. Not yet. He would be fine, but he needed a bit to feel these things, really feel them, before he could move on. If he didn’t, he’d never learn. He would make the same mistakes over and over until he was nothing but one big mistake.

So he fed the fire. It was easy to do. It was always easier to believe the voices that called him a fake, a screw up, a loser. Those were the voices that sounded true because it was what he felt was true, the very reason why he loved the song so much, loved hearing his idols expressing those same flames of doubt that he felt. It’s why the song was always on his mind these days, on the tip of his tongue and even when he was happy, really happy, truly happy the song just spilled out of him. He’d meant no harm, and certainly no disrespect to anyone, least of all BigBang, the ones he looked up to the most, but he could see--now, in retrospect when it meant nothing--how singing a song called "Loser" as his group was winning was making people angry. It wasn’t at all what he’d intended, but intent counted so little in the spotlight. No one cared about the why, only the what, and the what here was that he’d screwed up big time on national television. He was just playing around, being happy, being himself amplified, turned up to the maximum volume, which usually the fans loved. It was his concept to be himself to the extreme but now it was all wrong. He was all wrong.

Every insult in his memory came crackling to life and the flames rose higher. He needed to burn them out, let the fire light the dark places and push him back into the light. He’d apologized to everyone he could, voice low, bowing lower. He’d been talked to by the managers and he’d accepted their words without flinching, kept his head down and nodded politely, afraid even to speak. Even they were kinder than he deserved, speaking praise and punishment in the same breath.

So this time, when they won, Taehyung stayed in the back, bowed politely, said thank you, and kept his mouth shut. When the members switched parts for the encore stage, he just said his lines and stayed out of the way. It was a fitting punishment. He’d made other people feel bad by his careless actions, so he would give up some of his happiness. Maybe it would be enough to balance
things, on some cosmic scale where these kinds of sacrifices meant something. Maybe it would matter enough to someone somewhere. Maybe.

His phone dinged and he swiped at the screen, curious but irritated. He’d chased Jimin and Jungkook away with his sulking, looked Hoseok in the eyes until he’d backed away with his hands up. He just wanted a little time and space to himself right now. They only had a few minutes before they would all be shoved into the van for the drive back anyway.

Hey

He wondered why Sam was texting him now. She had said she was usually busy until much later.

Hey, you’re not sleeping yet

He wouldn’t be sleeping for a while. They still had a dance practice to get through, and Taehyung had plans to beat himself up a little more before bedtime.

No

Then can you talk to me?

He stared at his phone. What did she want him to say? He wasn’t feeling particularly chatty. Did she expect an apology too? He knew she loved BigBang.

I’m sorry

For what?

Look, I’m worried

You’re not ...

You didn’t seem to be very ok

Is everything ok?

yeah

No, no it’s not

You really shouldn’t try to lie to me

I’m in your head, remember?

I felt all that stuff in there

sorry

Stop apologizing

I just want you to be ok

I don’t want you to be sad

thanks
You better be

If you’re lying, I’ll know

Taehyung smiled. She was kinda pushy even if she did have a point. He thought about all the times he’d woken up with her sadness in his head, her heartache weighing him down. He felt guilty that she’d had to feel any part of the guilt and shame and doubt he was stewing in.

Hey. You can talk to me, if you want

You don’t have to

But

You know

I… I kinda get the sad thing

Yeah, I guess you do

I have practice now

But yeah, we should talk sometime

He really needed to get out of this funk. The fan cafe was full of love and support. The members were full of love and support. Twitter was full of mostly love and support. Now Sam was full of, well, support at least. He owed it to them to be better than this. Better than moping and roasting himself from the inside out.

He would leave it all in the practice room. Just like so many other days, he would turn that fire to fuel and use it to dance, to conform, to earn his place here in Bangtan, in the world. He would sweat it all out and when he was exhausted and drained, he would let all that love and support in, fill himself up until he burst with it, until the joy and adoration of so many strangers came spilling back out of him, until he could give that love and support back to his members, his brothers, like they deserved.

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It had only been a week, but already it felt completely normal to text Taehyung first thing every morning and last thing at night. He, on the other hand, was sending an adorable emoticon of himself with an animated moon and a pile of Zs at all sorts of random times of day and night. Sometimes she wouldn’t hear from him all day, and she would start to worry, because she knew he was busy, and she wasn’t expecting to have conversations with him all the time or anything, but she did worry when he went more than 24 hours without at least trying to sleep. Sometimes she got messages when he woke up from an unexpected nap. Usually those were another emoticon, blushing this time. It was the new normal. She didn’t feel like she had any more insight into his life than before, except to know that he slept less than she thought reasonable, which worked out in her favor honestly.

It was a little weirder to dream of him now that she, sort of, kind of, maybe a little bit knew him. They didn’t talk much. They didn’t talk at all actually. Just texted a bit. Sleep warnings, as she thought of them, and once Taehyung had said that her dance practice had looked fun. She
wondered if she should tell the other girls they were being watched. There was no way to make them believe her though, so she would just keep it to herself. She couldn’t inform everyone she ever saw that she was potentially broadcasting everything she saw to the brain of a Korean boy. Maybe if she wore a sign around her neck. That was sure to win her friends.

But this Monday, she had the whole day to herself. The twins were going on a trip with their parents for a few days, so she was getting a little vacation. The city was in the sweet spot between the chill of winter and summer’s oppressive heat. She’d opened all the windows in her room and stretched out across her bed sideways, taking some time to think about what to do with all her free time. She remembered Taehyung saying that he’d be on a plane for a while tomorrow and would try to sleep then. Maybe she could take him to the Shedd Aquarium. No, she would go to the Shedd Aquarium. She would go to the aquarium because she liked sharks and rays and jellyfish and if Taehyung happened to dream himself there too, then that was fine. She wasn’t going to start planning her days around things that he might or might not see. That was really going too far.

But she realized that she’d started thinking of things like that more and more. Taking Taehyung with her wherever she went. She was never really alone anymore and even if she knew he was awake, like when she got up early to watch him perform on the music shows, she felt like they were still connected. She hadn’t asked for this connection and neither had he, but it was here and she still had no way to end it, so she figured she should at least make the most of it. How many people in the world had a connection like this? It was rare and special so she was trying to appreciate it. Sure, it had some really strange side effects, but she was trying to focus on the positives.

She had started making a playlist to share with him. He’d texted one morning saying he was getting songs he didn’t even know stuck in his head, so she was going to give him a list to explore when he had the time. He seemed to like the same kinds of music at least. He seemed to like all the music ever, so it was probably nothing special that he liked what she was listening to. When she wasn’t listening to BigBang or BTS of course, because that was the first thing they’d known they had in common. She’d actually listened to very little BTS this week, feeling oddly self-conscious about that part at least. He’d already seen her lose it over *Dark & Wild*. No need to make him deal with her holding back tears as she listened to “I Need U” on repeat. When her album arrived though, all bets were off. She was going to tear that package open, put her good headphones on and settle in.

Hyemi was so impatient, urging her to just go listen to it on YouTube like every other international fan, buy it off iTunes or whatever, but Samantha had always enjoyed the delayed gratification of waiting until she had the actual CD in her hand. She wasn’t so snobbish as to insist that it sounded any different, but the experience of opening it all up, flipping through the photobook as the songs played was definitely better if it was the first time she was hearing the songs. It was a quirk but one she wasn’t willing to give up. And if Taehyung happened to be sleeping when the package arrived, then she would just deal with the embarrassment of him watching her lose it all over again.

He’d been with her through the last album and seemed pretty unfazed now, so it couldn’t have been too horrifying. That thought had been tugging at her brain a lot the past week. He’d been with her. For over a year, he’d been dreaming of her. She knew he’d seen some of her darker moments. Eventually, she wanted to find out just how much he really knew. The thought made her stomach churn with agitation, but it was already done. Knowing the extent of it would keep her from worrying about it being worse than she was imagining, if that was even possible. Still, she realized that he’d been there through the worst time in her life. If he’d started dreaming of her during “Boy In Luv”, then that was just days after the accident. That’s when she started dreaming of him, so it made sense.

BTS were barely a blip on her radar back then. She had the one CD and knew their names, or at
least their stage names, but that was it. And now? Now she knew their names, their dogs’ names, 
their birthdays and almost every word to every song they’d ever released. Well, not the new ones, 
but soon even those would be in her brain. Just like Taehyung was in her brain. And had been 
through all her grieving. When she’d been at her lowest and saddest, he had been dreaming of her, 
feeling all the things she wished she didn’t have to feel. He’d been there through all of that. When 
she’d felt totally alone and abandoned by life and fate, Taehyung had been there. It was almost 
comforting. It would be comforting if she didn’t think about what she’d had to give up to get this 
connection. Then it was just bitter. She didn’t want this special dreamfasting, as Nana called it. She 
wanted Matthew.

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“Hyung, she's so annoying.”

“How's that, Tae?”

“She doesn't laugh at my jokes.”

“You're just texting. How do you know she's not laughing?”

“Come on Jin-hyung, she's not saying that she's laughing. She just says that I’m funny, which is 
totally not the same thing. And sometimes she only responds in emoji.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I mean, what the hell does ‘thumbs up, wink, airplane’ mean?”

“I don't know. Why don't you ask her?”

“I can't ask her! She'll think I don't understand!”

“But you don't understand!”

“But I can't let her know that!”

“Then go ask Jimin or Hobi or someone else that actually uses emoji, alright?”

“But Jin-hyung… you know how to talk to girls.”

“Taehyung, this is not something I can help with. If you're not going to take the advice I’ve 
already given you…”

“Okay fine, hyung. Thank you, hyung.”

“Aish, this kid…”

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It wasn’t a vacation. Not really, but it felt like one. They still had a schedule, a purpose, things to 
do, but almost every single one of those things was fun and mostly relaxing. This was the kind of 
schedule he could get used to. Everyone was calmer and things moved slower. Kota Kinabalu was 
beautiful in a way that made them all take a deep breath. They were still riding the high of four 
wins. Everything had blown over and here, in paradise, he hardly minded the cameras. He’d spent 
the afternoon playing with Jimin and Jungkook in the pool. He was tired in a totally different way 
than he was used to, muscles sore from pushing against water not from dancing. Now, while 
everyone drifted off to do their own thing, he scooted over to a corner of his room and grabbed his
He and Sam were going to talk. Really talk for the first time. She had a day off and he was here, almost on vacation. Not that he could tell her that, but he also couldn’t totally control what she saw when she was asleep. He took a deep breath and pressed the tiny video icon, watching it dial her, turning the camera until it caught him at a good angle. Then suddenly his face was gone, replaced by hers.

“Oh, hello,” he said awkwardly giving a little wave.

“Hello.” She waved back and it was so strange to see her smile from this side, in real time. She was sitting up in her bed and it felt strange to know exactly what that felt like.

“So… um, how are you? Is it too early there?” He wasn't sure where to start this conversation.

“No, no it’s fine. I slept in a little bit and it felt nice. Are you on vacation?” Her accent was a little funny. Not hard to understand, but just different, like her own personal satoori.

“Well, I can’t actually answer that right now. It’s pretty much a secret.”

“Oh, right. Okay, I’ll just forget that I saw you pushing Jungkook in a pool earlier.” He liked her smile. It felt comforting. “Is… is this weird for you? I’m used to seeing your face a lot, but, you know, you don’t usually see me.”

“Yeah, actually it is a little bit. But it’s good. I like it.” Taehyung wanted to take the words back as soon as they were out, but instead just grinned wider, like he had no idea that he’d said anything that could possibly anything other than innocent. She bit her lip and scrunched her nose and Taehyung thought it was adorable. “I have a question.”

“I have an answer. Let’s see if they match.” She raised her eyebrows as she said it. Taehyung wished she'd stop doing that. Texting was so much easier.

“Ok, well, um, why do you speak Korean?” Her smile grew wider on her too-wide mouth.

“I used to live there. In Osan. My dad is in the air force. Actually, we were stationed at Kunsan when I was little. We moved there when I was three. My mom is super big on learning at least a little of the language wherever we went, so by the time we left when I was six, I could say sort of the basics. I forgot a lot of it though as we moved around. I learned a bit of German and some funny British sayings.” She stopped and tapped her nose. He knew that gesture. He’d done that same thing in his dreams. “I started trying to re-learn Korean when I found out we were going back. It was in high school for me, so I was already studying, and when you move around so much, it’s hard to make friends, so learning kept me busy.”

“You moved back to Chicago after you graduated?” Taehyung wanted her to keep talking. He liked the sound of her voice and it took the pressure off of him for a while. He could just watch her. It was fascinating how familiar and yet how different it all was. She nodded and ran a hand through her hair, like Jimin did.

“In 2011, yeah. I stayed the whole summer and then went to college in the fall.”

“I didn’t know you were in college!” Taehyung said, tilting his head. How had he missed such an important detail?

“No, no, I’m not.” She was waving her hand in front of the camera so fast it was all a blur. “I, um, what’s the word. I stopped. I quit! That’s it. I quit. At the beginning of my 3rd year.”
“Oh, really? Why?” She was scrunching her nose again. Her too long for her face nose, all scrunched up like a bunny.

“Okay, don’t laugh, alright? But, um… sort of because of one of your songs.” She squinted and turned her face away, as though expecting a blow, but her smile remained.

“Oh, really? That’s not… that’s not what we meant!” Taehyung felt his heart drop.

“No, it really is. I wasn’t happy doing it. I was only doing it because I thought that’s what I had to do. I wanted to quit but was too afraid. I wanted to work and dance, not study. Then I heard ‘N.O.’ and it motivated me to do it. And I did. I quit.” She shrugged and worried her bottom lip with her teeth as though waiting for judgement.

“I think my mother would be horrified if she found out I helped convince someone to quit school.” Taehyung was trying to make a joke, lighten the mood, but he saw the tense set of Sam’s jaw and knew it wasn’t working.

“She should be proud. You inspired me to follow my dreams.” Taehyung was suddenly grateful for the dim lighting and the afternoon in the sun. It was nice to not worry about actually blushing right now. The silence stretched a bit. “I’m sorry if I’m a little slow. I’m not used to speaking in Korean to anyone but Hyemi. I’m much faster texting.”

“Don’t be sorry. I am very slow in English, too.” Sam nodded. “You have much more practice in Korean than my English.”

“Then let’s stick to Korean, yes?”

“Yes.”

It was surprisingly easy to talk to Sam. They already seemed to know the rhythm of each other and Taehyung was also surprised to find that she did actually think he was funny. He was able to make her laugh easily and he knew from hearing it both ways that this wasn’t a forced laugh out of politeness the way her texts had sounded. Her laughter was genuine. It was addictive. She also made him laugh with her silly expressions. She had no poker face at all; every emotion flashed across her features clear as the sunshine. She didn’t ask too many questions which was nice, but he asked her tons. He wanted to know all about the music she listened to, what she was doing with her dance team, stories about the twins. He was shocked to find that she’d never had a pet. Not even a fish or a turtle.

“How do you live your whole life without pets?” Taehyung wailed, grateful that he had the room to himself for now and didn’t have to temper his flair for the dramatic.

“We moved around a lot, Taehyung! Every three years we were somewhere new. We couldn’t drag a dog all across the planet.”

“Yeah, but fish don’t live that long. Or hamsters! They’re pretty short-lived too. You should have gotten one of those at least.”

“Oh sure, and just subject myself to the added heartbreak of losing a pet in addition to all my friends every time we packed up? No thank you.” She was still smiling, but the truth of her words was sharp behind the joking tone.

“You’re right. I’m sorry.” He watched her smile falter as she nodded in understanding.

“Samantha?”
“You should just call me Sam. It’s easier.”

“I think of you that way. Sam is easier for my mouth.” Her eyes dropped to his mouth, so he stuck his tongue out at her playfully, but she licked her lips and looked away, over his shoulder somewhere. “Um, Sam? Are you, or, you know, were you… married?” It wasn’t the smoothest way to ask, but the question had been nagging him. “You don’t have to answer. I was just wondering.” He watched her closely, trying to interpret every sigh and shake of her head. So many of them felt familiar but on the other side of her eyes it was harder to tell what they really meant.

“No. I’m not married. I never was. I was engaged but my fiance died.” Her voice was flat, as though she had pressed all the emotion out of it with the weight of self-control. “That’s when,” she stopped to swallow, still not meeting his eyes. “That’s when I started dreaming. The first time it happened, I dreamed you were on stage dancing. You were so happy that I knew it had to be just a dream.” She looked up at him finally and he was surprised her eyes were dry. He thought for sure she’d be crying now. He didn’t want to make her cry, but he’d been bracing himself for the tears.

“What was your first dream? Of me?” She lifted her chin and her eyebrows, as if in challenge, though he couldn’t for the life of him figure out what for.

“High heels. Strappy high heels in the grass. It was raining. There was loud music and flashing lights and I think I was, you were, sitting on a curb somewhere.” He watched her face as he spoke, looking for a reaction, for recognition, for something, but she’d gone blank. That look he knew. That one he understood. “I’m sorry.”

“For what? There’s no need for you to apologize. You didn’t do anything wrong.” She was shaking her head and a single tear slipped down her cheek. “Hey, um, I’m going to go shower and get ready for the day, so, you know, don’t fall asleep for a little while, alright?” She was smiling again, mouth wide and tight and he felt the lie in it but didn’t have any room to call her on it.

“Yes, you too. Sleep well. Later. See you around.” His screen went back to her profile page and he stared at her eyeball, and Yoongi’s prostrate form. That had gone really well, right up to the part where it hadn’t.

He tossed his phone up on the bed and slid down the wall. He had screwed it up by asking about her life, but at least he knew about the ring now. What did she mean “that” was when she started dreaming? When her fiance died? The realization settled slowly and horribly. In the midst of her grief and suffering, she’d begun dreaming his life. A strange sort of escape from all the pain. He remembered crying with her, feeling empty and hollow and alone. Yet, she hadn’t been alone in those moments. He’d felt alone, felt her feeling alone, but they were together. She didn’t know that at the time, but maybe it could be some small measure of condolence to her now, or someday, that even in those dark times, those bad days, she wasn’t really alone after all. Maybe it would be. Maybe.
Hold Me Tight and Trust Me

Everything was normal, or as normal as her life got these days. Sunday nights she and Taehyung would set up a video call where he would ask her a bunch of questions about seemingly random things in her life. He liked the Shedd Aquarium. He liked the Adler Planetarium more. He wanted to go with her the next time she took the twins to the zoo or to feed ducks in the park. Samantha had laughed at that and told him that if he would sleep at regular intervals she could arrange that.

Her album had arrived and she’d done exactly as she planned, crawling up in bed with a box of tissues, just in case. She had spent at least a half hour just looking at the pictures. She was stunned at how forlorn they all looked. She gaped openly at pink-haired Suga and his flawless face, but more often than she was comfortable with, she caught herself staring at Taehyung, especially as the photocards tumbled out into her lap. She’d never thought he was unattractive. She’d just been too busy directing her attention elsewhere to give it much thought. She had thought about it then.

She had stared at the photocard with nine little squares full of mostly goofy pictures of Taehyung, dark hair looking wet and hanging in his eyes, just like when he got out of the shower. She liked the goofy pictures, his rectangular grin, his pointy chin, his scrunchy button nose with the little mole she always wanted to poke. It was harder to look at the other pictures, where he was biting his lip and looking seductively at the camera, or turned coquettishly away, showing off his flawless profile and jawline. She had slammed the photocard down and gone back to the photobook, where Taehyung lay, fully clothed, in a bathtub, face neutral. Her reaction however was far from neutral. She found herself thinking much too long about his lean cheeks with soft, high cheekbones, his perfect cupid’s bow and the intensity in his dark eyes. She flipped to the back and grabbed the cd to listen and distract herself from the haunting look in his eyes.

Taehyung had been anxious to hear her thoughts on his song but she didn’t want to wait until the next time he called to listen to it, so she had decided to record herself listening to it. Like a reaction video. She’d recorded it, but never sent it to him, because from the first bits of piano on “Hold Me Tight” she felt her whole chest grow tight. She paused and took deep breaths, grabbed the tissues and muttered “Fuck you, Kim Taehyung” without any bitterness at all. By the time the song had finished, she’d sworn at every single member, but none more than Taehyung. She’d paused at least three times and cried so hard she had to rewind, because did he know? Did Taehyung know? Did anyone other than her know that the last words she ever heard Matthew say were, “Trust me?” Why, of all the English Taehyung knew, why were those the words he chose? She’d avoided texting him after that, other than to send the little sleeping emoticon when she went to bed. She didn’t accept the video call the following Sunday night, texting that she was too tired. Taehyung hadn’t pressed, but in her dreams that night, he’d been concerned. The next week was much the same, but finally her own curiosity got the better of her.

“Hey there,” Taehyung said with a smile. She knew her own smile was tenuous and insincere.

“How are you?” she asked politely.

“Busy, like always. We did a concert in Malaysia this week and—”

“Yeah, I know,” she interrupted, all the polite gone. She had to know. She had to ask before she lost her nerve. “Hey, what’s the deal with ‘Hold Me Tight’?”

“Oh, you listened?” His grin was so bright, it was almost contagious. Almost. “Did you like it?”

“Yeah, I listened to it, but…” She didn’t quite know where to start. She had hoped he wouldn’t be
so oblivious. She had hoped he would just know what she meant, just read her mind the way he appeared to have already done.

“I kinda missed you this week.” She squinted at him. Was he trying to change the subject? Was he trying to soften her up? What was he really thinking behind those stupidly long eyelashes?

“Yeah, I was just… I needed some space.” His nod was too understanding, too kind. She didn’t want him to be understanding and kind. She wanted him to be the kind of person who would exploit her painful past by turning it into a beautiful love song so she could just yell at him and feel better. She wanted answers and she wanted them to be the answers that let her vent her righteous indignation. “But Taehyung, listen, about the song.”

“You didn’t like it.” His voice was flat, his face suddenly blank.

“No. I mean, yes. I liked it. It’s beautiful and I wish you had sung more of it, but that’s not what I mean. Why did you use those words?”

“Hold me tight? It… it fit the mood of the song.”

“No, Taehyung, the English. The English. Why ‘trust me’? Why those words?”

“Oh, that. Again, it’s what fit the song. We don’t use English in every song, but the English fit the scansion better there than Korean. Why?” His eyebrows were scrunched together. He was genuinely confused. She felt her anger starting to crumble.

“You really don’t know.” She shook her head. How could he know? No one knew, but she’d been afraid this connection was somehow deeper than she realized. She’d never felt anything other than his emotions, never had his thoughts in her head, never heard him thinking, but maybe it was different for him. The bewilderment and vulnerability in his face seemed to say otherwise. She ran her fingers through her hair, dragging her nails along her scalp. It helped her focus on something other than the impotent rage lurking below her distrust.

“Sam? What’s going on? You look upset.” She stared at his face, taking a deep breath and trying to figure out how much she wanted to say. She didn’t want to say anything. She wanted to tell him everything.

“It’s the last thing he said to me. Matthew. My fiance. In the car.” She was surprised at the words, how cold and bland they sounded. She watched Taehyung’s face fall slowly as she spoke, confusion melting away to something else, pity maybe. “It was raining. San Francisco has these tiny, winding streets, all these hills and parking is kind of a nightmare, but anyway. We were driving up a hill and it was one way and someone came down the wrong way, lost control and they were sliding down. They’d been going too fast and Matthew couldn’t brake in time. There was no where to turn to get out of the way, so he just turned the wheel.” She felt like she should be crying. These words deserved tears. She hadn’t spoken them outloud in over a year. She’d stopped telling the full story to friends as soon as she could and now, with some distance, they didn’t sting the same way they had then. The sting that had been such a constant in her life had dulled. She wasn’t sure she liked that.

Taehyung was very still, watching her intently. She thought she saw the shine of tears in his eyes, but it could just be the glare from the screen. “He said ‘Trust me.’ He turned the wheel and took the full impact on his side. The,” her voice got thick and she swallowed. “The emergency medics said he saved my life. That we both would have been crushed by the engine, the airbags wouldn’t have had time to stop it, fatal whiplash or some other horrible thing. Who knows, but it doesn’t matter.” She tried to keep from thinking of all the grisly details she’d learned later, like how his
head had hit the window with enough force to shatter the glass, or how the impact had broken his ribs, pushing splinters of bone into his lungs and heart. “He made the choice to turn the car and he’s dead and all I have is this scar,” she said, holding her hand up to the screen, not finishing the thought. All she had was the scar and the dreams.

Taehyung was quiet for a long moment. “Sam. Samantha. I’m sorry. I’m very sorry. I really didn’t know. I wasn’t, I didn’t, I never.” He took a deep breath and tried again. “I apologize. I really didn’t know. I just wrote a song from my heart. I didn’t intend to hurt you at all. I know you’ve been through enough. Maybe feeling what you felt impacted me in some way. Please believe me. I never wanted to hurt you. I didn’t know.” He was so earnest and sincere. She was certain now that he had tears in his eyes. “I’m sorry.”

She nodded. “I know. I know, Taehyung. I… I gotta go, okay? I’ll text you later but I need to sleep.”

“Alright. Sleep well. I’m sorry.”

It was a painful coincidence, though so little seemed coincidental between the two of them. After that short conversation, she’d tossed and turned while trying to get to sleep but when she’d dreamed of him, he had been doodling her name again, saying he was sorry under his breath. She felt it, the shock, the sympathy, the embarrassment and the concern. She texted him when she woke, telling him it was going to be alright, that she forgave him, and thanked him for trying to speak to her in all the ways he knew how. Things were better the next week.

His English was getting better, and so was her pronunciation and vocabulary in Korean. She struggled less to find the words she wanted and stumbled less over the words she did know. She tried to explain the mish-mash of Korean and English that she and Hyemi often fell into when they talked for long hours, or the set of emojis that they used as an auxiliary language, like why a thumbs up and an airplane meant see you soon. Taehyung had wrinkled his nose and protested that the Korean word for airplane didn’t sound anything like “be hanging” in English and she was just trying to confuse him.

She tried to keep from asking a million questions about idol life and all the things he probably couldn’t talk about because of pages and pages of confidentiality agreements. She also didn’t ask much about his other friends, or his family, trying to give his as much privacy as she possibly could. She liked that he was curious about her though. She felt boring and mundane, but he seemed genuinely fascinated by the trivia and minutia of her days.

She’d told him about Nana, and her theories about the dreams. She’d tried to explain as best she could, waiting for him to get mad about being caught up in her strange family history, innocent bystander though he was. She had purposefully left out most of the parts about destiny, and tried to skip over the marriage parts as quickly as possible, emphasizing as strongly as possible that she had nothing to do with these connections and didn’t want to imply that they meant anything other than dreams. He’d taken it all in, nodding and asking a few questions of his own, but he hadn’t asked the question she thought he would. He seemed completely unconcerned with making the dreams stop.

She realized that she, too, wasn’t really eager to end this connection now that they’d found a way to live with it. It was getting less and less strange as they adjusted to it. There were things they’d sort of agreed to not talk about—anything that happened in a bathroom for one. She didn’t ask about the other members and tried to respect their privacy as much as possible, which had relieved Taehyung immensely. He said he’d been so worried about telling them about her dreams, but they had all just blinked at him, asked a few questions and then shrugged, saying it was just like one
more camera. She had noticed that they had all pulled back from him for a few days though, his
dreams laced with a loneliness while being surrounded by people. She didn’t mention it directly,
but she could tell that he knew she was aware. Soon though, everything had fallen back into
comfortable and familiar rhythms, Yoongi somehow breaking the ice with a gruff “fuck it” without
any context that led to Jungkook being his usual goofy self again and Hoseok nagging and chiding
Taehyung to pick up.

She had felt guilty, knowing she was disrupting their lives too, but now, over a month later, things
felt pretty normal. The new normal. She went to work, she danced, she talked to Taehyung. She’d
gotten the twins practicing basic Korean phrases, which their parents thought was delightful. She
was even teaching them Hangul along with the regular alphabet, calling Hyemi to practice nursery
rhymes.

Hyemi had been having a really rough time with work, being understaffed and trying to balance a
job she was passionate about with school work that she loved was taking a toll. Samantha had been
looking at flights to Seoul, thinking she could take a week, maybe ten days and just go be moral
support for her best friend. She missed Seoul more than she wanted to admit. Maybe after the
concerts this summer she could go visit, crash in Hyemi’s tiny room and visit all the places they’d
hung around in high school. She was feeling painfully nostalgic, longing for things that were
probably just as messy and complicated in reality as her real life but which memory and softened
and glossed over. It was probably time to go look all those things over, see the difficulties for
herself, so she could quit fixating and get back to focusing.

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“What’s the best thing you’ve dreamed so far?”

“Huh… probably one of the concerts. You are so…”

“Sweaty? Exhausted?”

“Alive. You’re so alive on stage. And focused in a way that is so familiar. I get that way when I
dance too, but I’m not also trying to sing while I do it.”

“I’m not singing the whole time.”

“Yeah, but when you do… It’s really impressive. I like being on stage with you. It’s really
exhilarating.”

“Well thanks.”

“What about you? Best thing you’ve dreamed.”

“When you’re putting the twins to bed.”

“Seriously?! You like wailing children and stalling tactics?”

“No, but back in the beginning, they were smaller, and still climbed up into your lap when you
would read them a book and sing to them, and their little heads were right under your chin and you
would kiss them whenever you turned the page. It makes me miss my family, but also miss them
less, too. It felt like home.”

“Wow, you really do love kids.”

“Yeah. Well, it was either that or the shower dreams.”
“Hey!”

“What?! You take really nice long showers and I never get to anymore. I’m always rushing to get to the next thing and don’t get to just relax in the shower anymore like you do. Why, what were you thinking?”

“Nothing.”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought.”

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Two full years since they debuted and still, some things never changed. Yoongi had a sharp tongue, Namjoon had oddball jokes, Jimin had greasy charm, Hoseok had boundless energy, Jungkook had little patience with sitting still and Seokjin just wanted everything to go smoothly and make everyone happy. It was a good combination most of the time, but today they were tired and grumpy and putting on their best faces for the ever-present camera. It was easier to fake it in front of thousands of fans.

The MERS scare had canceled their FESTA celebrations, so instead they sat on the floor of the practice room and did a live broadcast from relative safety. Taehyung loved seeing the art that fans made. It was amazing to him, not just that they had the talent to recreate these images, or imagine new ones, of them, their faces and outfits, but that they took the time to actually do it. He’d always been a little jealous of Jimin and Jungkook’s ability to just sit down with any writing implement and a flatish surface and make something beautiful. Taehyung couldn’t do anything more complex than a doodle.

He had thought about trying to learn more, because his doodles weren’t horrible, not when he really tried, but when did he have time to learn something new? He was still trying to cram as much knowledge and skill into his head about producing and composing, on top of all the other regular Bangtan stuff, plus keeping in touch with his family and friends from back home. And Sam. Somehow he’d managed to find time for her in all this. Waking time that was. He still dreamed about her most times he slept, but now he found himself looking forward to their weekly video calls, seeing her face from the outside. He liked her face, with all her emotions on it all the time, her easy laugh, her wide smile.

She was always teasing him about something. Last week, she called him a dirty cheat. She said she’d been watching the American Hustle Life broadcasts and Rookie King. Taehyung hadn’t even tried to deny it, just dissolved into a fit of giggles. When he’d collected himself he’d said, with a straight face and full sincerity, that winning was worth breaking the rules. She’d just smirked at him and told him that she wouldn’t put up with any of that nonsense. He liked the underlying assumption that someday they would be playing games together. He didn’t know how that would ever be possible, but he liked that she just assumed it would happen. He hoped it would.

In a month they would be on tour, performing all over the world for a month, but before that they had a Japanese single and the second song from the new album to release. The videos were done being filmed at least, and the promotional period would be shorter, but he was still tired just thinking about it. Sometimes this life he’d chosen seemed like he lived it in fast forward. Every hour of every day packed with more work and fun and excitement than would fit into a normal year. He wondered if he was aging faster too, if when he stepped out of the spotlight, hopefully in another ten years or so, if he would feel ancient and run down. He couldn’t imagine the day when he wouldn’t be able to do everything he wanted on very little sleep and lots of junk food. He knew the time would come, but knowing it would happen was very different from being able to think coherently about what his life would be like then.
For now, he had chores to do back at the dorm, just like any other twenty-one year old. If he didn’t do his chores, he didn’t get his video call. Simple rules to keep things going smoothly. But Sam was worth breaking the rules.

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“We’re going to be in America in July.” Taehyung mumbled around the thumb he was chewing on. He didn’t know why he was suddenly feeling shy about this. She had to know about the tour. Even if she wasn’t a fan, she was in his head most nights.

“Yeah, I know.” She was smiling at him in a way he couldn’t quite decipher. Was she laughing at him, or nervous about being on the same continent?

“Are you… did you get tickets to the Chicago show?”

“Yeah I did. I’m bringing my friend Jess with me.”

“Oh, good. That’s good. I’m glad. It’ll be nice to be in the same place in the flesh, right?” She was biting her lip and trying to hold in a smile. Why? What did that mean? He wished he could be inside her head while he was talking with her. He felt like he understood everything about her when he was asleep, but then he woke up and it was so much more complicated than he remembered.

“I guess it will be. It’s kinda weird though, right? Having a fan in your head all the time? I wasn’t always a fan, you know. At least, not like I am now. When this whole thing started I only knew the stuff off of O,RUL8,2? and yeah, I liked it, but I wasn’t like, you know, all… you know?”

Taehyung shook his head. “I actually have no idea what you mean, but it’s fine by me that you’re a fan. I think I’d rather have someone who likes me than a total stranger in my head. At least you’re sort of predisposed to find me endearing and charming.”

“But I wasn’t in the beginning, that’s all I’m trying to say. I don’t think I even knew your real name when the dreams started.” Sam was worrying her lip again. What wasn’t she saying? What was she trying to say that he wasn’t hearing? He didn’t want her to keep telling him how she didn’t like him. He didn’t want that.

“And just look at you now! You know what it’s like to drool on my pillow.” Taehyung grinned, hoping he looked casual and calm. She could usually see right through him. She was much better at reading him than he was at understanding her.

“That’s true. I just… even if I hadn’t known any of your music though. Even someone not a fan… I don’t think anyone could not like you after spending time with you.” Sam covered her face with her hands. “Aish, that didn’t come out right. I’m sorry, I just meant that it’s really easy to be comfortable with you because you’re really easy to be comfortable with. Oh shit, I’m just rambling now and not making any sense. I’m sorry. Ignore me. I’m not saying any of this right.”

Taehyung was sure she was blushing under all of that. He really wasn’t sure what she was saying, but she obviously wasn’t trying to say that she didn’t like him, and that was enough for him. “I’m sure it’s just getting lost in translation. Maybe say it in English,” he said with a smile. He liked teasing her. Her laugh made him feel invincible.

“Would you even understand if I did?”

“Hey, I’m getting pretty good. Try me.” She let out a heavy sigh and crossed her arms. He liked when she used her laptop instead of her phone because he got to see her talk with both hands. He sometimes thought that if she had to sit on her hands she wouldn’t be able to say a thing.
“Kim Taehyung.”

“That’s not English.”

“Hush, I’m getting there.” She uncrossed her arms, ran a hand through her hair, just like Jimin did when he was flustered. “Sometimes I really hate that you’re stuck with me and I’m stuck with you. If I could go back in time I wouldn’t choose this path at all, but since I can’t change the past, I think that maybe you’re the best thing that’s happened to me since the worst thing that ever happened to me.” The words spilled out of her in a rush, so fast he couldn’t keep up. Something about time and a path and best. He didn’t know what to say, but she was waiting so patiently, her eyes huge and slicing a hole right into his brain. He didn’t know what to say.

“Alright. My English isn’t that good after all,” he sighed. Somehow it was exactly the right thing to say because her answering smile consumed her whole face. Had he ever really thought her mouth was too wide? It was perfect for smiling.

“I know. Which is actually good. Thanks for everything, Kim Taehyung.”

“Of course. Uh, thank you, Samantha Cale.”

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“It came out of nowhere, Sam!”

“I know.”

“What do you mean, you know? You knew this was coming?”

“No, no, I didn’t know it was going to be released like this. I barely even realized it was a thing. I don’t really have that much inside knowledge, Hyemi. He can’t really talk about things and I’m not always sure what I’m seeing when I’m dreaming.”

“You’d better not be holding out on me.”

“Hyemi, I would never do that.”

“Yes, you would. You’re probably going to wind up signing a thousand documents that say you get to know stuff but can’t tell anyone.”

“I doubt it. Who would believe that I had any reason to sign them?”

“True. But anyway, back to this crazy video.”

“I really wish we’d studied Japanese harder.”

“They all looked so good. So soft and beautiful. Sam, why are the Japanese videos always so much prettier?”

“I don’t know but it’s really, really unfair.”

“It really is.”

“I’ve been singing the chorus over and over.”

“The whole thing, or just ‘for you,’ because that’s the only thing I understood.”

“Yeah ok, just the English parts.”
“How cute was Taehyung though?”

“How cute was Taehyung though?”

“Stupidly cute. Really annoyingly cute.”

“You need to admit that he’s your bias.”

“No. No way. Min Yoongi is still, and always will be, my bias.”

“You live in a land of delusion.”

“I’m not delusional. Taehyung is great. I might even consider letting Yoongi and Taehyung share the number one spot on my list, but even so, Min Yoongi is 1a and Kim Taehyung is 1b.”

“We’ll see how long that lasts.”

“Oh shut up, Hyemi.”

“Uh-huh.”
Taehyung wasn’t jealous. Jealousy was a waste of time. He had enough love to go around, to love every dog, stray cat and baby he saw without running out. He knew that it was impossible to run out of love. He knew and believed all this to be true. So he couldn’t possibly be jealous because that was ridiculous. Of course Sam would be shocked by Yoongi’s blond hair. That was the whole point. They’d worked hard to keep that a secret for the big reveal before the mv dropped. That was the point of teaser photos.

It only made sense that she would spend the majority of their video call raving about the video because it was fresh and new and it really was one of the best pieces of choreography they’d ever done. And she did talk about the dancing. But she also mentioned Yoongi’s blond hair more than he really thought was necessary. He’d gone blond too and she hadn’t freaked out about that. Technically that was before either of them knew each other, so it wasn’t really a fair comparison, but his rational brain wasn’t working at full capacity at the moment.

“What’s eating you?” Yoongi asked after dance practice. He never was one for subtlety or tact.

“Irrational jealousy,” Taehyung responded. If Yoongi was going to be blunt, Taehyung would be honest.

“Yeah, it’s really hard being internationally loved and adored by thousands of people.”

“Hyung, you say that like you aren’t equally popular.”

“No one is as popular as you, Taehyung,” Jin said over his shoulder. “I’m the prettiest, but you’re the most popular. Everyone knows it. Stop being modest.”

Taehyung shook his head. It wasn’t modesty. He knew he was beautiful and photogenic, neither of which he really had anything to do with. This was the face he was born with and he was lucky enough to have a small face, long lashes, full lips and a fantastic jawline. He was reasonably tall and didn’t easily gain weight but again, all that was just winning at the genetic lottery. He knew people liked his face, and the rest of him. He knew that. What he didn’t quite understand was why they seemed to like him better than the other members. He didn’t have Jimin’s muscles, Namjoon’s wit, Yoongi’s talent, Seokjin’s face, Hoseok’s moves, Jungkook’s… anything. He knew he was special and popular and desirable, but he didn’t think he deserved the distinction as “fan favorite.” Well, some fans anyway.


“Yeah, that’s not quite what I meant, but thanks.”

Quieter, so only he could hear, Jimin said, “You alright, though?” Taehyung slumped over briefly, resting his head on Jimin’s shoulder before sitting back up with a sigh. It wasn’t really an answer, but it was enough for now.

It wasn’t as though he’d never felt jealous before. He knew what the emotion felt like, he just didn’t like it. He thought he’d grown past that after many long night conversations with Namjoon over ill-advised cups of too sweet coffee. He’d talked himself out of it. Jealousy wasn’t a thing he did anymore. He didn’t want to be anyone else. He wanted to be himself. Just the best and most capable version of himself. He envied things about his members. They had skills and talents that he didn’t, but it was more admiration than envy. He worked hard to improve himself where he
could, learn what he could, better himself, but he also accepted his own limitations and preferences. He never wanted to work as hard as he had for the tight, defined abs they had during Bulletproof promotions. He liked food and sleep and disliked things like running and lifting any more weights than absolutely necessary. He would never be as fluid and as natural as Hoseok or Jimin or even Jungkook when it came to dance, but he wasn’t far behind them either. He was learning to compose, and with a few more years practice, maybe he would be producing like Yoongi and Namjoon.

The thing with Sam wasn’t even worth worrying over. The situation was so bizarre. She had all of Bangtan to contend with while he just had her. It wasn’t fair to expect her to choose him just because he’d chosen her. Except neither of them had really chosen. If Sam’s Nana was to be believed, it was just a quirk of fate, some random lightning strike of inescapable destiny. Why it chose him, of all people, he had no idea. He was already living a life so far out of the ordinary. Did he really need this added twist? He liked it though, liked being reminded that the world was infinitely mysterious and unexplanable. He didn’t know what he’d done to deserve being swept up in this story of hers, but most of the time he was grateful. Most of the time.

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“Have you heard from them at all?”

“No. I’m sure they’re fine. They have to be fine.”

“But you’re worried, Sam.”

“I’m sure they’re fine.”

“So sure that you called me in the middle of the night?”

“It’s the middle of the afternoon in Seoul.”

“It’s after midnight in Chicago.”

“I’m not in Chicago, I’m in Dallas.”

“Oh right. Say hi to your mom for me.”

“I will.”

“It’s the same time zone though, so stop avoiding the question.”

“There’s no reason for them to not be fine. Security did their job. And it’s not like I’m on the short list of people to notify. I just hope their parents know they’re alright.”

“It was just some random anti on Twitter?”

“I don’t know what’s really going on, but there were lots of death threats going around.”

“I can’t believe anyone would take it that far.”

“People are really pissed off, Hyemi. It’s… it’s a much bigger deal over here and we’ve had a really shitty summer when it comes to this kind of thing. You can’t just use ‘black’ as an insult and not have people freak out.”

“But Namjoon…”
“Yeah. Nothing justifies death threats though.”

“You should try to sleep. See if they’re okay.”

“I… I don’t want to. I don’t want to be there right now, in his head. I don’t belong there.”

“Then try to get some sleep for you.”

“I’ll try. Hey, Hyemi, thanks for listening.”

“Of course. Keep me posted, alright?”

“I will. As much as I can.”

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Her mother was adorable but also embarrassing. Samantha didn’t know quite what she expected from this little mother-daughter adventure, but she really hadn’t expected this. Her mother stood in their hotel room, giving a little spin to show off her new t-shirt proudly. It was official BTS merch, with “Suga” emblazoned on the back. Samantha was only a little embarrassed that she had gotten to the point where she talked about this group so much that her mother even knew which member was her favorite, and ordered a special shirt just for the concert.

“You look really cute, Mom.”

“I bought the shirt a little big so after the concert you can take it with you.” Samantha smiled and nodded. Her mother didn’t even realize that she was being hurtful. Maybe it was Samantha’s fault for being over sensitive to the fact that she was bigger than her mom and had been since puberty.

“Thank you.”

“Do you want to go downtown at all, see any of the sights before we get food and head out to the concert hall?” Samantha shook her head. She really just wanted to curl up and read a book while she obsessively checked her phone for messages from Taehyung. She’d texted him last night, just a quick little message to say she was thinking of him and hoped he was alright, then the standard sleep warning. She’d seen his tweets but he hadn’t responded to her yet. That was fine. She told herself it was totally normal. He didn’t always respond to every single message and he had a lot going on.

“Maybe we could just do a little shopping, find somewhere fun for lunch? What’s good in Texas? Meat, right? Like all the meat, ever? And, uh jalapenos?”

“Barbecue. All the meat, and occasionally jalapenos.” Her mom sat on the edge of the bed and patted her foot through the covers. “Go hop in the shower.”

Samantha nodded, chewing her bottom lip distractedly.

“Are you still worried about the gun thing?”

“I know it’s stupid, but I just--” Samantha stopped herself from saying she hadn’t heard from Taehyung. Her mom didn’t believe in the dreams, wouldn’t believe her and she had no other way of explaining how she was texting one of the band members. “You’re not, you know, upset? You still want to go?”

“Of course I do. I’ve lived on military bases for most of my adult life, married to a man in active
service, sometimes in some not very safe places. I deal with that fear all the time and I don’t let it control me, or keep me from doing fun things. Everyone is going to be so alert and on top of things tonight. It’ll probably be the safest concert they’ve ever had.”

Samantha stared at her mom, trying to imagine what it must be like, living the life she’d had. Her mother was a fully formed person, with her own hopes and fears. It was sometimes a startling thought. “That’s a great way to think of it, Mom.”

“Everything is going to go perfectly tonight. Security will do their jobs and everything will be fine. Don’t worry, alright darling?” Samantha nodded again, peeling herself out of bed and shuffling to the bathroom. She knew her mom was right. She wasn’t worried about her own safety at all, which was maybe foolish, maybe brave, maybe just realistic, but she was worried about the strain this was putting on Taehyung and the other members. Also a little embarrassed that their first full concert in the US had ended so poorly.

Tonight would be different. They were being extra careful and she was glad. They hadn’t even greeted fans at the airport yesterday. As she toweled off and got dressed she ran through the logistics of the evening again and again in her head, the timeline of when they needed to leave to get to the venue with enough time to park and make it to their seats. She was thankful that both of the concerts she was attending had assigned seats. She didn’t want to spend the day standing in line and fighting the crush of bodies instead of just enjoying the show.

It was going to be so exciting to see them perform. From the outside. She’d looked over the setlist and was excited to see so many of her favorites on there. She couldn’t quite believe it was happening. She pulled her hair into pigtails and smiled widely at her mom. “Alright. I’m as ready as I’ll ever be.”

“You look lovely, darling. Now, let’s go shop ‘till we drop, then kpop!”

“Oh Mom, come on!” Samantha couldn’t stop her smile, though. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d gotten to just spend one-on-one time with her mom, doing something fun and frivolous. Probably shortly after graduation before she packed up to come back to the US. “I want to buy a pair of boots. Cowboy boots. Something subtle enough to get away with wearing with like a denim dress or something.”

“No, but a straw one maybe.”

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Taking a quick nap before soundcheck

Thanks for checking on me

Taehyung tucked his phone in his pocket, crossed his arms and let his head rest on the back of the little couch in the greenroom. He was a master of the pre-show nap. They all were. It was just a necessity of touring and idol life. He was resisting the temptation to ask Sam where she was. He’d dreamed of her in some hotel room, with a small, dark-haired older woman. They were laughing and painting their toenails, Bangtan music pouring from Sam’s phone as she tried to teach the other woman fanchants. He wanted to ask but he also wasn’t really ready to talk about anything yet. Not with Sam. He didn’t want to have to reassure anyone else that he was fine, that everything was ok,
that he was safe. He was fine. Everything was ok. He was safe. He was also angry and confused and really, really ready to stop thinking about the whole thing. Sam would ask questions and he couldn’t lie to her. Not convincingly anyway.

So he let his curiosity fester and closed his eyes, breathing deeply in the pattern that was scientifically guaranteed to increase oxygen flow to the brain and improve sleep. He let all the sounds in the room fuzz out and blend together. He scrunched and unscrunched his toes, releasing the tension he was always carrying.

And then he was standing in the bright sun, adjusting his sunglasses and swiping at his pig tails, bouncing on his toes.

“Is that your mom?” the girl in front of him asked. He turned and saw the dark-haired woman from last night walking up with water bottles balanced in her arms.

“Yeah. She’s pretty great,” he said with Sam’s voice.

“She’s wearing a Suga shirt. Is that her bias or yours?”

“Mine. I don’t think she can really tell who is who apart from hair color.” Sam and the other girl laughed and he reached to take the bottles. “Thanks, Mom.”

“Of course, darling. Of course. Now, here. You take one.” She extended her arm to the group of girls in front of them, ignoring their thanks and polite refusals as she pressed the bottles into their hands. “It’s hot and we have at least an hour before they open the doors, so drink up. Your mothers will thank me.” Taehyung was smiling because Sam was smiling and he felt the pride welling up inside him. He didn’t need to understand every word to understand the thoughtfulness and generosity being displayed. He felt his feet, her feet, moving and realized she was going through the “Boy In Luv” choreography.

“Oh! Do you know the dances?” squealed one of the girls, white shirt with a big black V on her chest.

“Yeah, most of them actually. From the videos anyway.” He shrugged and bit his lip.

“Do you want to do them? I’ll put the music on,” the girl said, pulling her phone out.

“Um, sure. Just a few though.” He heard Namjoon’s voice and felt his face split into a wide grin at the beginning of "Dope". "Oh sure, just start with the hardest one!

“Do you want me to switch? I just, I know the little vocal line part but I can’t do the chorus at full speed at all.”

“No, it’s fine. Just hold my water, ok?” He was stretching a little as Jungkook sang, dancing, but just barely, singing along under his breath. As Jimin’s voice cut in, a little tinny and fuzzy from the phone’s small speaker, he was rolling his shoulders and hips, then running in place as the music kicked in and the choreography began in earnest. He heard the applause and cheers from people in the queue and it only made him smile more, wrists snapping and feet flying. Then Hoseok was rapping and he was singing along, but dancing Hoseok’s part too, only not anything Hoseok had ever danced that he’d witnessed. This was more hips and elbows than his signature knees and arms. This was Sam just dancing how she felt. He kept dancing as Yoongi rapped, and some of the people watching were clapping along. A couple had even stepped up behind, pumping their fists in rhythm, just like he would on stage. He wiped his chin with the back of his hand and began to growl his part, the familiar words and movements suddenly foreign in her body. There were girls
on either side of him, doing the choreography along with him.

The girl with the phone stepped up and joined in for the vocal line part, just like she’d said, but scurried away at the chorus. He felt more than saw the girls on either side dancing with him. It was strange to be in the center for this part. There was giggling and scrambling to figure out who went where as Namjoon’s rap filtered through the air, but he stepped back and let another girl take the lead, falling into place. Not his place. He would be on the other side of things, but there were only three of them, not seven, so he supposed he was in Yoongi’s spot. He stood and shouted Yoongi’s line, hearing it echo through the small crowd as they chanted right along with him. He finished the dance to applause and cheering and saw Sam’s mom clapping and beaming.

“That was really good! You looked really good.” He grabbed the water bottle, sucking it down as fast as he could without choking.

“Thanks, Mom. Ugh, I should have stretched.”

Taehyung was being jostled awake, eyes snapping open as he turned his head to try and see who was talking to him. He licked his lips and stretched his eyebrows as he focused on Jungkook. He was holding out his hand to Taehyung with an expectant look on his face.

“Come on, Taehyungie-hyung. Let’s go.” Taehyung blinked and nodded, standing as he stretched his arms and took hold of Jungkook’s hand, letting himself be pulled along. Then he suddenly stopped, feeling the tug of Jungkook’s continued motion all the way to his shoulder.

“Oh man, holy shit.” Jungkook turned and stared at him blankly. “She’s here.”

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You’re here?

In Dallas??

Samantha grinned at her phone. “Who is making you smile like that?” her mom asked.

“Oh, just a friend,” she said as she typed.

“Good nap then?”

“A boyfriend?”

“Mom. No. A friend who is a boy. Come on. I’m not dating anyone. You think I would have made it two whole days with you and not told you if I was dating?” Her mom rolled her eyes and sipped her water.

“With you, who knows. You ramble a million miles an hour about stuff and still manage to surprise me. I’m not sure I ever really know what’s going on in your head.”

“Right now, I’m trying to type in one language and speak in another. It’s confusing. Give me a minute.”

Why didn’t you tell me???

Samantha laughed at the pouty face emoticon he sent. She didn’t have a good answer. She had a hi-touch pass for Chicago and knew she’d see him there. She couldn’t explain why she wanted this to be a surprise, especially since all she was doing was seeing the concert.
“What language? Have you been practicing your German?”

“Nein.”

“Smart ass.”

“Apples don’t fall far from the tree, Mom.” Samantha looked up to see her mom smiling at her fondly. She was such a trooper, coming to this concert, going all out, just to spend time with her. She had never really doubted that her mom loved her and missed her, but she didn’t often stop to think that apart from maternal pride and affection, her mom might actually, you know, like her.

Where are your seats?

Will I be able to see you?

Are you going to the hi-touch?

Stage leftish, about 40 rows back.

I doubt you’ll be able to see me.

And no, no hi-touch here

Oh. Ok.

Uh, enjoy the show

Your mom is pretty

“So you’re texting a Korean boy.” Samantha couldn’t decipher the tone in her mother’s voice. Curious and possibly disapproving.

“Yeah. It helps me practice my language skills.”

“I just thought you had Hyemi for that.”

“I do, but she likes to practice her English too, so she doesn’t get too rusty, and it’s different talking to me than with her folks, so… you know, this works.” Samantha pursed her lips, unconsciously imitating the look on her mom’s face. “Why? Do you have a problem with that?” Her mother’s face became suddenly smoother, blank and serene.

“No. Of course not. I just want you to be happy. I’m glad you have a friend that makes you laugh and helps you with your Korean.”

“Mom… what aren’t you saying?”

“Nothing, darling. It’s nothing. Just stupid mom worries. Now, show me more of these dances you know!”

“Ugh, not in this heat. Besides, you’re going to see the real thing in a little while.” Her mother relented and soon they were walking in, thankful for the air conditioning and the comforting presence of multiple security guards at each entrance. They took their seats and Samantha tried to keep from vibrating with excitement. She chatted with the girls sitting beside her, a couple of local
high school girls who were both head over heels for J-Hope. She made a note to tell Hyemi about that later. She kept checking the time on her phone, anxiously watching the minutes dwindle away.

**Fighting! See you soon.**

She knew he couldn’t answer, but she was bursting with excitement. And then, at 7 o’clock on the dot, the lights went down and Samantha’s voice was lost in the chorus of the crowd screaming. The music was loud, the bass pounding through her chest, making her fingers tingle and her head feel light. She clutched her mom’s hand, beaming with excitement. Song after song, she sang along, shouting and cheering, wishing she was just a little closer so Taehyung could see her, grateful for the dark and the crowd that kept her safely anonymous. Suga was glowing, radiant and relaxed on stage, owning it in a way that no video could adequately capture. She wanted to watch him all the time, but she was distracted trying to take it all in. Namjoon was confident and calm, thanking Dallas for all their love and being a majestic MC.

“They all look so good!” she squealed to her mom. She lost herself in the music, proud of herself for holding back all but a few tears during “Let Me Know” and not completely embarrassing herself as she screamed and sang along to “Cypher: Killer” with the whole crowd. It was all too much to take in. She’d always loved live music and concerts but this time, everything felt… more. More personal, more overwhelming, more confusing. She couldn’t stop herself from watching Taehyung, shining in his element. It was just like so many dreams and yet nothing like that at all to see it from the outside. She was shaking. She was too hot, but she was shivering, voice hoarse as she belted out the words to “I Need U” with everyone else in the venue, her mom even laughingly singing the chorus. The stage was empty now, the lights back on and all the energy was slowly draining as she came down from the incredible high. She could hardly believe it was over. She let her mom lead her through the crowd, barely trusting her own feet.

On the drive back to their hotel she noticed her mom glancing at her with growing worry.

“Samantha, are you alright? I expected you to be talking my ear off, reliving every bit of the concert. Why are you so quiet, darling?” Samantha shook her head, trying to clear the swarm of thoughts that were choking out her ability to form sentences.

“I’m just still processing it all. It was so good, Mom. I don’t even know what to say.”

“Okay. Well, let’s see if we can get a good night’s sleep. You’ve got to fly home tomorrow and I’m driving back alone.”

“Mom. Thanks for this. This was amazing. I can’t believe you did it, came to a concert with me. It...it was perfect. Thank you.”

“Oh darling, you’re so welcome. It was actually really fun. A little loud for my old self, but they’re really good performers. And they dance almost as well as you!”

“Mom! Seriously, you’re so embarrassing!”

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“Mom! Seriously, you’re so embarrassing!”

“So, how was the show?
Are you kidding?

It was amazing. You all sounded so good.

The tech was kinda crappy

they couldn’t get the singalong parts in sync

but everything else was flawless

Thanks

Can you talk?

Sure

Samantha sat and waited for Taehyung to call. It wasn’t even Sunday. Not for another 14 minutes. The front facing camera kicked on and she waited for Taehyung’s face to show up. Instead she was looking at nothing. A sort of white nothing.

“Hello.”

“Hey. Should you even be talking after that concert? Shouldn’t you save your voice?”

“We have a few days before the next concert. I’ll be fine. I’ll drink some honey water.”

“Oh. Okay. Well, uh, how are you?” She searched the nothingness, looking for signs of life, signs of Taehyung.

“Tired.” He sounded tired. He sounded half asleep already. She looked around her own darkened hotel room and thought about how strangely intimate this was.

“I can imagine.”

“I’ll bet you can.”

“Am I just going to stare at your pillow this whole time, or do I get to see your face?” Samantha asked. The nothingness wiggled and a blanket was pulled down until she was staring straight up Taehyung’s nose. “Oh, yeah, that’s better.” She didn’t even try to keep the sarcasm from her face.

“I’m too tired to hold the phone at a decent angle.”

“Then why did you want to call? Go to sleep.”

“Because. We’re in the same time zone. We’re in the same city.”

“Yeah.”

“So what happens when we sleep?” Taehyung shifted the phone a bit, moving his eyebrows closer to the screen and she blinked at the closeness, pulling her phone back.

“Angels sing, our skin clears up, everyone gets one step closer to world peace?”

“But if I’m asleep dreaming of you and you’re asleep dreaming of me… what happens?”

“I honestly have no idea.”
“Do you dream my dreams? Do I dream yours? Why is that so much worse than you dreaming my regular life?”

“Well, maybe that’s when we dream our own dreams,” she said softly. Taehyung was silent for a while, and if his eyes hadn’t been open Samantha would worry he’d fallen asleep on her.

“Like in Europe.”

“I’m sorry, what? I haven’t been to Europe since I was a kid.”

“This summer, I was in Europe. I didn’t dream of you for about two weeks. I thought maybe we were traveling too fast for you to find me.” His voice was deep and raspy, soft and slow. His satoori was starting to poke through. She was straining to understand. She was just so distracted by the sound of his voice. She brought her phone closer to try to hear better.

“Oh. I don’t remember dreaming of you in Europe. When did you go?” She closed her eyes to help her focus, to ignore his fluttering eyelashes.

“End of July. Beginning of August.”

“Oh. Yeah. I was… kind of a mess this summer. I quit my job in June and spent the better part of two months avoiding my responsibilities.” The words burned to say, to admit to someone like Taehyung, who worked so hard, worked past the point of exhaustion for his dreams.

“You got drunk. Gave some guy a lapdance.” Samantha swallowed her response, heart beating too hard, mouth suddenly dry. “But this was after that. I was hardly sleeping at all, but I only seemed to have my own dreams.” She nodded, not sure if he was really watching her at all.

“I slept a lot. Drank a lot. Went out too much.”

“I remember. You felt...empty.” Empathy was one thing. Other people grieving had been sometimes a huge comfort, to know that she wasn’t alone in her suffering, and sometimes too much a burden. She had all but lost touch with Matthew’s parents because seeing them now was awkward and painful as they talked about Matthew and how much they’d loved him but never talked about the vast future ahead of them where he was gone and she had no reason to be sitting in their living room, politely eating snacks and trying to be some bridge to a future that didn’t exist. Now, here was Taehyung, reciting her feelings back to her, but unlike Matthew’s parents, it wasn’t grief from a different perspective. It was her actual feelings, as he’d felt them, riding around in her head while she’d been drunk and out of control. Again she felt vulnerable and naked, skin crawling as she remembered too many shots, too many hands, too many nights wasted in a stupor, trying not to feel. “Also, that was the first time I’d ever kissed a guy.”

Samantha laughed, covering her mouth to keep from waking her mom, but she watched Taehyung as he smiled, holding the phone properly now, eyes disappearing into little crescents as he grinned his boxy grin and she knew he knew that the spell was broken. The sadness, the fear, the vulnerability were still there, but this was the Taehyung she knew. Cracking jokes and lifting the mood, thinking seemingly impossible things and saying them without filters.

“Must have been quite a shock,” she said, biting her lip to hold her laughter in.

“Yeah, I think it freaked Jimin out too when I told him.”

“I can’t believe they’re all just taking this so calmly.”

“I’m a little offended, to be honest. Am I really so weird that this doesn’t seem out of the
ordinary?” He was still smiling but she felt the truth in his words.

“Nah, not really. They just know better than to argue with your unorthodox genius.”

“That’s a fancy way of calling me weird.”

“You know, it really is.”

“I’m going to bed now. When do you fly to Chicago?” Taehyung mumbled around a yawn.

“In the morning.”

“Me too. See you there?”

“In Chicago? Yeah, I’ll see you at the concert.” Samantha smiled, excited that she would get to do this all over again.

“That’s six whole days away. Maybe I can find a few hours and you can show me the aquarium in person.”

“You really think management is going to let you take that kind of security risk to go hang out with some random girl?” she snorted.

“You’re not that random. Sejin already had you vetted.”

“He what?” she hissed.

“Your background check was squeaky clean. It’s fine.”

“Taehyung, why was there a background check in the first place?” She was clutching the sheets to her chest, feeling somehow more violated than she ever had knowing that Taehyung was seeing through her eyes at her most intimate moments.

“Sam, you didn’t think I could just start making weekly phone calls without telling my managers what’s going on, did you?”

“So you told them you were dreaming about me, and I’ve been dreaming about you and surprise, giant security leak? And they just went with it?”

“What? No. Of course not. They’d think I was crazy. I just told them I made a friend online and we’re practicing my English skills.”

“But we hardly ever use English.”

“Yeah, but they don’t know that. Look, English language partner is a much easier sell than dream buddy.” Taehyung yawned again and Samantha could hear his jaw cracking with the strain.

“Go to sleep. Sleep well. Dream your own dreams and I’ll talk to you when you’re lucid, alright?”

“Goodnight Sam. Sleep well. Oh, maybe we can go to the zoo!”

“You can’t even keep your eyes open. Put the phone down.” Samantha hung up and stared at the ceiling for a moment. She’d passed a background check she didn’t even know she was having. At least that was a test she didn’t have to study for.

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“Alright, I’m going to just bite the bullet.”

“Why would you do that? Wouldn’t that hurt your teeth?”

“No, Taehyung, it’s just a phrase. An English one that doesn’t translate well. Sorry. Anyway, tell me what the most embarrassing thing you’ve ever dreamt. Let’s get it over with.”

“Embarrassing for you or embarrassing for me?”

“Embarrassing for you. I’m pretty unflappable.”

“Other than shower stuff?”

“Yeah, that’s kind of a given.”

“Most embarrassing… well, I guess, um… there was a dance. To, um… ‘Shake the World’? And, uh…”

“Oh. Yeah. I was trying something new, for the dance team, but I… I just…”

“Yeah. So that was…”

“Yeah.”

“What about you? What was the most embarrassing for you?”

“For me? Probably, uh, probably Jungkook.”

“Are you going to elaborate, or just Jungkook’s existence is embarrassing to you, because I understand that completely.”

“No, but you know how he… when he… right before the show? He comes around and…”

“Oh, when he grabs our butts? That’s the most embarrassing? Really?”

“Look, if you can be embarrassed about me dancing, I can be embarrassed about getting groped by a minor.”

“But he didn’t grope you. He groped me. You were just along for the ride.”

“Potato, Potahto, Taehyung.”

“What’s a potahto?”
Taehyung stood at the railing, wishing he had something to throw to the ducks. Seokjin stood at his elbow, staring at the map, plotting the most efficient path through the zoo. Taehyung just wanted to see the elephants and the penguins and whatever else was on the way. Sejin was hovering just a few feet behind. Taehyung had worked his ass off for two days straight to earn the privilege of a few hours out, dragging a patient if confused Seokjin and Sejin along with him. He glanced at his watch for about the hundredth time. Samantha said she was going to meet him on the Nature Bridge. He was still twenty minutes early.

“I’m still impressed you managed to pull this off. I was certain after New York that we were going to be stuck in the hotel room until the concert,” Seokjin said without looking up from the map.

“What did you do in a past life to deserve such luck?”

“Probably saved a bunch of kittens from the Han river.”

“Probably.”

Taehyung squinted up at the sun, adjusting his snapback nervously. He felt the sweat trickling down his back and knew that not all of it could be blamed on the blistering heat. There was no reason to be nervous. They already knew each other so well. Meeting in person was really just a formality, right? He watched the people passing, telling himself little stories about who they were, where they were from, what they wanted. He just wanted to go see the elephants. With Sam.

He checked his watch again, squinting to see the tiny hands in the bright sunshine. He felt Seokjin tap his arm, and when he looked up, there she was. Sam was walking towards him, each hand being tugged by an adorable dark haired child. Eva and Evan. She stopped several feet away, pulling the twins in close to her, waiting for Sejin to step forward as she bowed politely. He couldn’t hear what they were saying, but he didn’t miss the way Sejin counted things off on his fingers, listing the rules that he’d been drilled with on the drive over. No touching. No photos. Keep a respectable distance. Sam nodded and spoke to the twins, who each gave an adorable little bow.

Finally Sejin stepped aside, gesturing towards Taehyung who knew his whole face was taken over with the smile he couldn’t contain. She was really here. She stepped forward, bending to speak to the twins as he pushed himself away from the railing, leaving Seokjin behind as he moved to greet her. He wasn’t sure what to expect, but he was stunned at how good it felt to see her face in person. She nodded and pushed the twins forward.

“Hello, Taehyung,” Eva said with a smile.

“Hello, Taehyung,” Evan echoed.

“Hello, Eva. Hello, Evan. How are you?” Taehyung said as he kneeled down.

“Miss Sam! He knows our names!” Evan said, tugging on Sam’s hand.

“Of course he does. I talk about you all the time. Now, what animal should we see next?”

“Giraffes!” cried Eva.

“Alligators!” screamed Evan.
“We should let Taehyung choose, since he’s never been to this zoo before.” Taehyung watched her handle the twins deftly, tucking a wisp of hair behind Eva’s ear and squeezing Evan’s hand.

“Taehyung, what animal do you want to go see?” she said, slipping back into Korean for him.

“Elephants, please. But first, meet Seokjin-hyung.” Taehyung reached his hand out, waving to Seokjin and feeling pleased as Sam stuttered her greetings. Of course he was pleased that she was flustered by his handsome hyung. Of course he was. They walked to the elephants, keeping the tortuous distance between them. He wanted to scoop Eva up and put her on his shoulders, hold Evan’s hand. Hold Sam’s hand too. He wanted this to be a memory of them together, not just in the same place at the same time, but these were the rules he had to abide by in order to get the privilege to be here in the first place.

So they saw the elephants and then the penguins, talking amicably in a mix of both their languages. Seokjin and Sejin hung behind, giving them as much space as they could. Eva and Evan were just as delightful as he’d imagined them to be. Everything was wonderful, except for the gaping distance between them. He shook his head a little, cringing that they would be closer at the concert, at the hi touch than here at the zoo. It wasn’t fair. It was logical and prudent and he understood, but it wasn’t fair.

He tried to absorb as many details as he could. Sam was tall. He knew that, but standing next to her made it so much more real. She turned and smiled at him and didn’t have to even tilt her chin to look him right in the eyes. He glanced at her shoulder, just one step away from his and thought if he could take that step, he could press his shoulder to hers, the same way he would to Seokjin’s considerably wider shoulders. Her hair was up in a ponytail. She had a mole behind her left ear. She was wearing a pair of scuffed up Doc Martens that had maybe once upon a time been red but now were faded a soft, comfy kind of pink.

She was patient and kind with the kids, who had obviously been to this zoo about a million times before. They had been shy for nearly a whole minute before their words came tumbling out in a rush, one on top of the other, trying to tell him everything they loved about animals simultaneously. He looked up at Sam with panic in his eyes because he couldn’t understand half of what they were saying, but she just stood there, smiling sweetly as she translated the important parts. Taehyung knew the way to the heart of every child was through ice cream, so he pleaded with Sam to let him buy the twins each an ice cream cone. Her eyebrows climbed all the way up to her hairline, but she relented.

“I’ll go grab some napkins then. Eva, Evan, come with me to get napkins!” Two nearly identical tiny voices began the familiar and somehow genetically programed whine that all children worldwide seemed to know. “Quietly, or I’ll eat all your ice cream myself.” The silence that followed was impressive. Taehyung watched them walk away with a longing in his heart. He missed his family all over again at moments like these. His cousins were growing so quickly and he wasn’t there to see it. Phone calls and video chats only did so much. He purchased ice cream for the twins, Sam and himself. Seokjin insisted that he was saving himself for their amusement park outing the following day and refused all of Taehyung’s adorable pleading. Taehyung knew better than to push Sejin after one firm refusal.

“Thank you, Taehyung. You really didn’t have to do this,” Sam said as he handed the tiny chocolate dipped cones to Eva and Evan. He didn’t look up from watching them eagerly devour the treat as he replied.

“I wanted to. Really, it’s the least I could do. I don’t get to spoil my family back home like I want to. This is the closest I get sometimes, so really, I should be thanking you.”
“If you say so. Still, I’m grateful. Eva, honey, use your napkin, not your sleeve.”

Taehyung let the silence stretch as he tried to keep this moment in his mind forever. The wind was blowing through Sam’s hair and it glowed in the sunlight, the kind of reddish orange he remembered from “Just One Day” promotions. In most normal light, her hair was darker, more like amber than honey, but here in the sunshine... he was getting poetic about her hair and that was probably a bad idea. He turned his attention to a safer subject, like the adorable twins. Eva and Evan were competing to see who could take the biggest bites. Seokjin and Sejin were smiling, looking almost relaxed. This day was a gift and he didn’t want to spend it being disappointed that it wasn’t better.

Then all too soon, it was over. Sejin was pulling at his hand and Seokjin was bowing to the twins, saying his thanks and waving just like he did on stage. Taehyung knew it was no less sincere for being familiar, but he was suddenly reminded that this was really his only chance to see her, really see her. He dropped to his knees outside the polar bears habitat.

“Thank you for coming to see me,” he said to Eva and Evan, watching Sejin from the corner of his eye as he reached out his hands. If Sejin was going to stop him, he’d have to pull him bodily away. Eva shuffled closer, shyly watching Taehyung through her lashes as she pressed close for a hug. Evan hung back, clinging to Samantha’s hand so Taehyung whispered into Eva’s ear, “Give this hug to Sam, please.” He then stood and nudged Eva back towards her brother.

“Thanks for coming,” Sam said, lacing her fingers with Eva’s. “And please extend my thanks to all your managers, and the other boys as well. It was... It was really special.”

Taehyung chewed his lip as he thought of all the things he wanted to say that would have to wait until later. “Thank you. I know you’re working, so I appreciate you making time for me. For us,” he said, gesturing to Seokjin and Sejin, standing just a few steps away looking anywhere but at Sam and the twins.

“Yes. Please. I’ll see you later.”

“See you later. Bye-bye.” Sam tugged on the twins hands. “Wave goodbye to Taehyung, Seokjin and Sejin. We have to go now.” And just like that they were gone, walking away and back to their normal lives while he went back to his abnormal one.

“Come on, TaeTae, let’s get back to the hotel, alright?” Seokjin tugged at his elbow and Taehyung tore his eyes away from the crowd Sam had disappeared into. “This went really well. Let’s get back before anything goes wrong.” Taehyung nodded and let himself be led away. Seokjin was right, of course. It was a privilege to even have that much time with Sam. It was a privilege his family at home rarely got. He should be more thankful, more appreciative, less disappointed. He would see her again at the concert after all. And the hi touch. And he talked to her everyday on KKT. So why did he suddenly feel so alone.

In the car, he spun his phone in his hands as he watched the world slip past the window. He didn’t want to think. He just wanted to watch the world and let his brain be quiet for a while. Seokjin was the best companion at times like these, because he just let it happen, not pushing for conversation or any other kind of commitment. Seokjin was the best.

“So, you like her.” Seokjin wasn’t looking at him. Taehyung could pretend to be oblivious and ignore the statement. He hadn’t been asked a question so technically it wasn’t really rude not to answer, but Seokjin was also the best at finding these moments, these quiet, private moments and
cutting through all the small talk to get at the kernel of what was bothering Taehyung, to get at it and pull it out into the light so they could talk about it and defuse it. But Taehyung didn’t want to talk about this. “Taehyung, you like her.”

“It’s not like that, hyung. She’s just a good friend.” Taehyung wasn’t looking at Seokjin either. He was looking at the cars and the clouds and the circus of ordinary life outside.

“It would be good if that were true. Because she’s an American. And you’re an idol.” Taehyung felt Seokjin’s eyes on him now, but he clenched his jaw and kept looking out the window. He loved the window seat best, was always fighting Jungkook or Jimin for the privilege of sitting with his face pressed to the glass. He liked the hint of his own reflection pressed against him at night. He didn’t like the painful truth of Seokjin’s gentle words worming their way into the carefully constructed quiet spaces in his brain. He didn’t have any response to give, though he knew he had to respond, so he nodded, pressing his forehead to the glass harder, trying to push the thoughts he couldn’t afford to have, didn’t have time to have, didn’t have the right to have out into the bright summer sunshine where they could burn up and float away like smoke and dreams.

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Samantha was smiling, texting Taehyung and looking out the car window to watch the rain against the windows glittering in the sunlight. She laughed at something funny and turned to show Matthew, just knowing he would get a kick out of this little play on words since puns were always his favorite kind of joke because he was secretly an old man hiding in the body of a hot, young soon-to-be-lawyer. She stretched her arm out, putting the phone where he could see it and he turned to look at it, smiling up at her as he did, lips stretched back as his teeth fell out.

Samantha sat up screaming, struggling to catch her breath, quiet her voice, calm her racing heart. It was just a dream. A nightmare. Some variation of it had been playing through her mind the past few days. She’d dreamed little snippets of Taehyung dancing or laughing with the other boys, but mostly she’d dreamed over and over some horrible version of that crash. The details were always just a little wrong—the wrong time of day, the wrong weather, now texting Taehyung instead of trying to navigate to the hotel with the best price and the AAA discount Matthew was so proud of getting.

Still, every one left her feeling the same. She stood, hands trembling as she fumbled with the covers and out of her clothes. She stepped into the shower, turning it on full blast and letting the cold water shock her awake as she attempted to scour the guilt and loathing out of her skin. She resisted the temptation to scratch at her skin, settling for a washcloth instead, watching her skin bloom pink and red as the water turned from frigid to scalding. Everyone had told her it wasn’t her fault and she made all the right noises of reassurance, telling them she knew they were right, but that was a lie.

It was her fault. In so many ways that the weight of it still threatened to crush her sometimes. If she had chosen a different path to get them to the hotel, they never would have been on that road. She should have insisted they get on the main streets even if it was just for a few blocks rather than navigate the city in the rain and the dark. If she had been watching the road maybe she would have seen the other car in time for some other course of action, despite the sneaky nature of those tiny roads with the hills where a small flat stretch suddenly gave way to a steep incline. She should have seen even though the other car had practically flown over the crest of the hill, out of the foggy night. If she hadn’t been so fucking selfish, trying to get out of the car first, cutting her hand in the process. If she’d checked on him first instead of just screaming for him to follow her. If she had checked she’d have seen that he wasn’t moving, would never move again and maybe she wouldn’t have clawed her way out of the car. She might have stayed with him, wouldn’t have left him alone
in that ruined car while they called the police. If she hadn’t fallen in love with him, sitting in the mind-numbingly dull statistics class watching him chew a pencil instead of watching the professor, getting caught staring and eventually, after a few days of exchanging glances, exchanging numbers instead, he’d still be alive. If he’d never loved her, they wouldn’t have taken the trip to San Francisco in the first place and he would still be alive.

Tomorrow was the concert. And soon Taehyung would be out of her time zone and maybe then she could stop reliving her worst moments in her own dreams. She struggled to not read anything into the fact that this time she’d been dreaming of Taehyung as well as Matthew. Her brain weaving those different types of guilt together. She didn’t love Taehyung, but she wasn’t oblivious to the fact that she had a connection to him that she didn’t have with any other person on the planet, not even to Matthew. The guilt over that she’d mostly been able to keep as a dark, niggling thought in the back of her mind that she forcefully ignored until she’d had to dream her own dreams.

It was her one Thursday off each month, the twins spending the day with their parents for familial development that coincided with a monthly meeting of regional managers that Mr. Castillejos wanted to avoid or something, so she had nothing to distract her from the gaping hours ahead. She dragged her shoes out of her closet and decided to go for a run to clear her head. Maybe she could sweat out her feelings and if not, at least it was an excuse for another shower. She just hoped Taehyung didn’t decide to take a spontaneous nap.

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“This is crazy,” Sam said as soon as the elevator doors opened.

“What crazy? It’s a hotel room.” Taehyung was grinning like a kid with cake, pointing down the hallway as she stepped out cautiously. Hotels were boring and he was tired of being cooped up so he’d begged and begged to be allowed a visitor.

“It’s your hotel room. And it probably has people in it.” She crossed her arms and looked around as though expecting people to jump out from the nonexistent shadows.

“Not people, just Jungkookie. Come on!” Taehyung grabbed her elbow, pulling her along impatiently. Sejin was probably the one who had made this possible. He must have had a good impression of Sam from the zoo. Taehyung made a mental note to thank him later.

“This is such a bad idea,” she grumbled.

“No, it’s a fantastic idea, agreed upon by all four managers, which is like a miracle itself since they can hardly agree upon a meal.” He thought it was funny that she was so eager to meet them at the concert, but so very reluctant to hang out with them now. He had convinced her that this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity though, and they should grab it and enjoy it while they could.

“I’m probably going to die of embarrassment. This is all your fault.”

“Of course it is.” Taehyung fumbled a bit with the keycard and then pushed the door open, stepping into the darkened room and dragging her inside. “Hey, Jungkookie! This is Sam.” He gestured obviously towards the far bed. “Sam, this is Jungkookie and Jimin! Hey Jiminie, what are you doing?”

“I came to hang out,” he mumbled around the spoon dangling from his mouth.

“Yoongi-hyung kicked you out?” Samantha was stuck just inside the doorway. She hadn’t taken any more steps inside, just letting the door shut behind her as she stood frozen with her eyes as
wide as planets.

“Yeah, shut up. He’s composing.”

“Ah. Well, anyway, Jimin, this is Sam.” Jimin stood up, pulling the spoon out of his mouth and smiling until his whole face crinkled and beamed. Jungkook scrambled to stand up next to him, giving an awkward bow and staring intently at his shoes.

“Hello, Sam. It’s nice to meet you,” Jimin said, elbowing Jungkook in the ribs until he mumbled a greeting too.

“I-hello.” She still wasn’t moving. She was just nodding and staring at them. Taehyung stepped back to her side, leaning in to whisper to her.

“Relax, Sam. It’s just us. Jiminie and Jungkookie are the least scary ones anyway.”

“Oh yeah, I’ll just be here, all calm while three international pop stars play… video games?” She tilted her head and took a small step forward.

“Yeah, grab a seat, you can play the winner,” Jungkook said, folding himself back onto the floor and pulling on Jimin’s hand to get him to resume playing.

“Jungkookie, be nice. She can have the next turn and play whomever she wants.” Taehyung smiled widely at Sam, wanting her to feel as comfortable as possible.

“Yes, Taehyungie-hyung.”

“I… I actually really suck at video games, so…” She brushed her hair behind her ear and shrugged.

“Do you want to do something else, because I can make these two go somewhere else and we can watch a movie or something?” Taehyung was already reaching for the remote.

“I doubt they’re going to have the right subtitles, Taehyung.”

“If you don’t want to translate every little thing for me, yeah. But we could watch something on my laptop?” He sat on the bed, pulling his feet up and reaching for the laptop perched on the pillows.

“It’s fine. I’ll just watch. You guys do whatever. I’ll stay out of the way.” She moved towards the chair in the corner. This was not what he wanted. He wanted to hang out. He wanted to spend time with her without a screen in between them. He thought it would be perfect for her to just come and sit around with him in his room. Totally casual and friendly and they would talk and laugh and giggle like they always did, but it wasn’t working. Her eyes were still in danger of falling out of her head. Was she just too overwhelmed?

“Alright. So… what did you do today?”

“I went for a run. I… took a nap, but you know that part.” He nodded.

“Yeah. You want some Choco Boys?” He held the box out, knowing she couldn’t reach. Like trying to lure a skittish animal in with trust and chocolate.

“Yeah.” She squinted at the box then stood, stepping closer. Taehyung tried to contain his satisfied grin as he slowly retracted his arm.

“Great! Come sit by me.” He patted the edge of the bed and then scampered back to sit among the
pillows, giving her plenty of space, but drawing her into the center of activity. Jimin and Jungkook sat on the floor between the beds, elbows out as they jostled one another. She shook a few cookies into her hand and pushed the box back across the bed to him.

“Thanks.”

“Thanks for coming. I know you didn’t have to, and it means a lot to me that you would come hang out on such short notice.”

“It’s fine. It’s crazy, but it’s fine.”

“Really? Because you seem pretty nervous.”

“It’s a bit strange for me, yeah. It’s like living in a Bangtan Bomb.”

“Well no one has started doing girl group dances, so you’re safe.”

“Yes!” Jimin and Jungkook sprung to their feet, both moving apart to make room for their arms and then it started. The dancing. Jungkook dancing to EXID while Jimin made a mess of Miss A. Taehyung even clambered off the bed to join them though it was definitely not really his party trick. He just wanted to keep Sam laughing.

Soon enough she was standing, waving her hands. “No, no, Jungkook, that’s not how it goes. You can’t do that with your shoulders. You don’t shimmy with your shoulders. It’s all in the ribs.” She demonstrated and all three boys stopped to stare with slack jaws for a moment before remembering their manners and looking away. “Fine. You do girl groups. I’ll butcher your choreography!” She shuffled to the far side of the bed and started in on the “Boy in Luv” dance while Jimin and Jungkook fell over themselves laughing.

“Wow, she’s really good!” Jungkook exclaimed from the floor.

“You can’t even see her, Kookie,” Jimin chided.

“I don’t need to see her, just look at Taehyungie-hyung’s face! She must be really amazing.”

Taehyung glared at Jungkook and kicked at him. “Sam is a great dancer. Probably better than me.”

“No way. I can barely keep up with your dances,” she said, coming to sit on the edge of the bed. She was smiling and relaxed, just the way Taehyung had hoped she would be.

“Alright. Better than Namjoon-hyung and Seokjin-hyung, eh?” She nodded enthusiastically at that and opened her mouth to reply but was cut off by a knock at the door. Jungkook scrambled up to get it.

“Oh, hi Yoongi-hyung! What do you need?” The door swung open and Yoongi stepped in. Taehyung glanced back at Sam, whose eyes were wide again, staring at Yoongi, whose eyes were scrunched as he stared back at Sam.

“I came to tell Jiminie that it was safe to come back to the room,” he said slowly. “Hello. You must be Sam.” He waved and Sam attempted to wave back, but her arm seemed to get stuck halfway. “I hope the maknaes are treating you well. Anyway, Jiminie. Don’t stay up too late.”

“I won’t, hyung. Thank you.”

With another nod, Yoongi slipped back out the door and Taehyung waited for Sam to breathe
“Are.. are you okay?” He asked, coming to sit on the bed next to her.

“That was Min Yoongi.” All three boys let out a giggle. Jimin even picked up a pillow to squeeze it to his chest.

“Aish, she’s so flustered. Look at her blushing!” Sam’s hands flew to her face and she chuckled too, reaching for a pillow and hiding her face. “Min Yoongi! Min Yoongi!” Jimin chanted, dancing around the room.

“She didn’t blush that hard meeting any of us,” Jungkook said with a half-hearted grumble.

“And why would she?” Taehyung asked. “None of us have the swag of genius Min Yoongi.” He reached up to tug at the pillow Sam was hiding under, hearing her giggles spill out from underneath. She sat up so suddenly Taehyung fell backwards, sliding off the edge of the bed and onto the floor with a thud deadened only by the laughter of everyone in the room.

“Shut up you guys. I wasn’t prepared for that,” Sam squeaked out. “Geez, give a girl a one-two-three next time!”

As the giggling and teasing subsided, Taehyung climbed back on the bed, scooting closer to Sam. “Sorry about that.”

“It’s alright. I was just surprised. But thanks.” She leaned over, bumping her shoulder against his. He rested his hand on her arm, just above her elbow, feeling the coolness of her skin.

“Are you cold?” She nodded. “Yeah, Jungkookie is like a little furnace, so we have to keep the room pretty chilly.”

“Is that why you’re wearing this in the middle of summer?” She pinched the sleeve of his hoodie and shook it.

“If I could wear this every day of the year I would be happy.” He reached up to unzip his hoodie, shrugging out of it. “But you’ve got goosebumps and that just won’t do.” He draped the hoodie over her shoulders as she smiled at him, slipping her arms into the sleeves.

“Thank you. I didn’t think to bring a jacket when it’s still so hot outside.” Taehyung bit his lip to keep his smile from taking over his whole face.

“TaeTae, put on a movie!” Jimin said, climbing onto the bed, dragging Jungkook along behind him. They all shuffled and got situated with Taehyung in the middle, his laptop resting on a pillow across his knees, Jimin grumbling about Hobi forgetting to cord to connect it to the TV again. Taehyung barely had to turn his head to the left see Sam grinning as Jimin and Jungkook on his right argued over whose elbows went where. Jungkook eventually climbed behind him, settling in while trying hard not to touch Sam at all but still be able to see the movie. She just smiled and scooted aside, letting him have enough room as she angled herself sideways next to Taehyung.

“Can you see?” Taehyung asked as everyone mumbled. “Sam, are you alright?”

“Yeah, Taehyung. I’m great.”

Another knock on the door led to much grumbling and complaining as Jungkook climbed out from the middle of their tangle to go answer the door. Sam pulled her hands into her sleeves and brought her hands up to her face as she stared at the door. This time when Namjoon and Hobi poked their
heads inside, she wasn’t quite as shocked.

“Hello. I just wanted to stop by to say hello to Samantha. Hello, Samantha. How are you?” Namjoon said smoothly, hardly any trace of accent in his English.

Sam peeled her hands away from her face, revealing a wide grin. “I’m wonderful, thank you.”

“It’s nice to meet you. Yah, Taehyung, Jimin, Jungkook. Be good to your guest,” Namjoon said with a wave as he disappeared out the door, leaving Hobi grinning at them from the doorway.

“We just had to check on you, make sure you weren’t being too crazy in here. Sam, it’s nice to meet you,” Hobi said sweetly.

“It’s nice to meet you, too. Oh, J-Hope. My… my best friend Hyemi, um… she thinks you’re amazing and… I just wanted to tell you that.” Taehyung watched as Sam fumbled her words again. She wasn’t blushing this time, but she was flustered again. He wanted her to be comfortable. That’s why he was so uncomfortable with how she was reacting to all the others. That was the only reasonable conclusion. He certainly didn’t want her to be uncomfortable around him. He didn’t want her to blush and stutter because of him. That wasn’t it at all.

“Oh wow, thank you!” Hobi said while smiling almost as widely as Sam.

“Alright hyung, thanks for checking on us. We’re just going to watch a movie, so…” Taehyung resisted the temptation to shoo him away like the busybody he was being.

“Oh, great!” Hobi said as he climbed over the first bed to join them on the second. “Make room!”
Samantha hadn’t thought the boys were subdued in Dallas. She had thought the dark cloud after New York had lifted completely by the time they took the stage in Dallas. They had been gracious and lively and she’d loved every minute of the concert, but now, in Chicago, with more than a week since all the fear, she saw, in contrast, just how tame the Dallas concert had been.

Because the Chicago concert was just much more intense. The boys were laughing more, playing more, dancing more and goofing around between songs. The between song patter was the same, same words, but a much lighter feeling. She wanted to blame the difference in experience on her relative closeness to the stage. Since here she could make eye contact with the boys as they danced by, that naturally increased the feeling of intimacy and intensity. But it was more than that. Her heart all but froze when Suga looked her way during “Cypher: Killer” and she couldn’t be 100% certain, but she was sure that Jimin had winked at her during “Miss Right”. She knew Taehyung had come and pointed right at her during “We On” and she knew that at least ten girls would be telling an identical story to all their friends in the morning.

BTS happy and engaged in doing what they loved was really a moving experience. Jess was a perfect concert companion, cheering loudly and dancing with the crowd to every song. She declared that if she had to pick a favorite, it would be Namjoon, and thanked Samantha at least fourteen times for convincing her to come along to the concert. Samantha just smiled her wide grin, happy to share her happiness and theirs. Knowing what it felt like on that stage, having dreamt the exhaustion and satisfaction that permeated every song made being on this side of the stage much more gratifying. It was a cycle of love and support she was happy to be a part of, cheering loudly and screaming wildly.

As the concert ended, where in Dallas she’d started to feel the calm and regret of it being over settle in, now she was getting more and more nervous. Now was the hi touch and as she stood in line with all the other eager and excited fans, she wasn’t sure what to say, or if she should say anything at all. It was all going to happen so quickly. Maybe she would have time to mumble a quick thanks. Maybe she would just stare at them in awe as she shuffled down the line. She took comfort in the fact that she at least knew that if there was ever anything that she really needed to say, she could say it to Taehyung and know that he’d pass it along to the other boys with a smile and a grin, teasing her about it for as long as it made her squirm with embarrassment.

When she made it close enough to see the boys all lined up, she bit her lip to keep from squealing. Yoongi was first. Min Yoongi was first in line. At least she could get that out of the way first. She couldn’t stop herself from patting her hair and smoothing her shirt down as she inched closer. The line was moving so quickly, she hardly had time to think. She turned to Jess, giving her a big, nervous grin, looking for approval before it was too late.

“You look great.”

“Thanks for being here, Jess.” Jess just scrunched her nose and pushed Samantha gently forward. It was almost her turn. She could see Yoongi saying thank you to each fan as they came by. And then, it was her turn. His hand was extended and she reached for it, willing herself to look him in the eye.

“Hi, Sam,” he said softly with a tired smile. Before she could blink or even process what had happened, she was standing in front of Jimin who took her hand with a grin,

“Hi, Sam,” he said and as she tried to find her voice Namjoon was reaching for her hand repeating
the same thing. And on down the line, each boy greeted her calmly, but by name, and even Taehyung smirked at her as he pressed his palm gently against hers. Then Hobi, grinning like nothing in the world could be better than this exact moment.

“Bye, Sam!” he said and waved as she made her way up the few steps and out of the venue. Jess came up behind her and grabbed her shoulders excitedly.

“Oh my goodness, that was amazing! How do they all look so good in person? I swear we never look that good after a performance. I wanted to say hello but I just wound up staring at them all. They’re unreal. Like, how can anyone be that good looking? Superior genetics, man.” Jess shook her head. “What did they say to you? I was too focused on trying not to be embarrassing to pay attention.”

“Oh, just hi. They just said hi.” Samantha smiled and bit her lip, trying to contain the giggle that was bubbling up inside. She wasn’t sure if Taehyung had put them up to it, or if they just all decided to try and make her blush after hanging out the other night, but either way she was happier than she could remember being in a long time. Almost as happy as the first time she’d ever dreamed of Taehyung, and she felt almost as alive. As the thought settled in, accompanied by the familiar guilt, she shivered in the sweltering night.

“Come on, Sam, let’s go grab something to eat before we crash.” Jess pulled her along to the car, chattering about all the things she had enjoyed about the concert and Samantha tried to focus but the words just slipped around her like so much white noise.

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“They’re moving to Philadelphia?”

“Yeah, Mr. Castillejos got a fancy new job and they’ve got three weeks to pack up and relocate.”

“So, you’re out of a job again?”

“Unless I want to move to Philadelphia.”

“Sam, are you really going to do it? Move with them?”

“No. I don’t love Chicago so much that I’d never want to leave, but I also, you know, don’t want to go to the East Coast right now.”

“So what are you going to do now?”

“Well, I’ve already got plane tickets to come see you, so I’m going to do that. And then, I don’t know. Find a new job. Figure it out.”

“I’ll stuff you so full of japchae you won’t ever want to leave.”

“Oh Hyemi, I already don’t want to leave and I’m not there yet.”

“I cleaned out a whole corner of my room for you. We’re gonna have sleepovers and get drunk on soju and watch every sappy drama ever.”

“That sounds like heaven, honestly. But you’ll still have to work, right?”

“Yeah, but you can come to the clinic, see what I’ve been doing all this studying for.”

“That sounds good, too.”
The fun part of traveling around the world was seeing how different things were from home. New foods and new scenery and new people. The hard part of traveling was that everywhere they went, the expectations were different. Taehyung loved being loved, adored by large and loud crowds of people. It filled him up in a way that nothing else did, chased away the emptiness and doubts for a while, but if he had his say, he liked that large and loud crowd to be at a respectable distance. He wasn’t afraid of skinship, loved touching people, loved the connection and comfort that it gave, but he liked it on his terms. Structured. Predictable. Agreed upon by everyone involved.

Hi touch events were fun, if exhausting, because he got to literally touch his fans, not just emotionally through music or dance, but physically and he saw the joy it brought them. Seeing Sam come through the line in Chicago had made him want to giggle. It seemed so out of context to see her in with all the other fans because she was so much more than that, like having his sister come through.

He’d been worried she would feel weird after hanging out in his room. It had taken her a while to warm up and settle in. She was sort of like Jungkook in that way. Once she was comfortable, she was shoving the other members around, kicking and elbowing with the rest of them like it was no big deal, but it had taken more time than he thought. Well, more time than it took him to be comfortable with reaching out for her anyways. He was more pleased than he had any right or reason to be when she took his hoodie, snuggling into it as they watched the movie, trying to stay on the edge of the bed and touch everyone as little as possible at first, then slowly inching her way over until she had her leg and shoulder pressed against his.

He loved the press of being squished with his friends, puppy piles and big hugs. It reminded him of his family, of home. He didn’t like the press of strangers, the deafening volume of screaming crowds up close to his face. He didn’t like the stiff set of Namjoon’s jaw or Yoongi’s shoulders as they followed their managers through the press of people. He didn’t like the endless scanning of Seokjin’s eyes, trying to keep everyone in sight at all times while hiding his nervousness behind a blank face. He didn’t like the absence of a smile on Hoseok’s face as he looked straight ahead and tried to ignore the hands grabbing at him. He didn’t like seeing the forced strut Jimin got when he was upset but didn’t want anyone to know. He didn’t like the way that Jungkook crawled inside his own skin, shrinking and retreating like a turtle as the crowd swarmed around them, trying to press in closer, to touch, to claim them. He knew, in his heart he knew, that they were overwhelmed with emotion, acting out the frenzy of their affection, their devotion. He knew they weren’t intending to harm them, but that didn’t lessen the feeling of being crushed, of being smothered, of being consumed by a hundred strangers all reaching to grab his hair, his clothes, his face, whatever they could get their hands on.

It was better on stage, with the crowds safely behind barricades, with enough distance that he could reach out to them when they reached out to him and know they would never connect in anything more than gaze and intent. It was better on stage where he could be free and be himself without the looming fear of being pulled away into the energized crowd. He and Jimin sometimes joked about how “love hurts” after a particularly forceful high-five from a fan, or a too enthusiastic fist bump, but it wasn’t love. Not really. Affection, sure, devotion maybe. But not love. Not with the lack of respect or regard for the safety or comfort of the object of their affection. He’d seen fans try to touch Jimin’s stomach, lost in the moment and out of their minds with single-minded desire, but that wasn’t love.

He was loved by his fans, genuinely and he knew it. They all were. The gifts and the letters all told them how much of an impact they were having on the lives of people they’d never met. The stories they told each other on bad days, about how one of their songs had kept someone from hurting
themselves, or got them through a dark time with their family or friends, or even just helped them study and pass an important test. Making music that touched people’s lives was the goal here, and they were achieving it every day.

The price wasn’t too high. The sleepless nights and the occasional crush of a rowdy crowd were part of the deal, but that didn’t mean he had to like them. It felt ungrateful to dislike any part of this gift of a life, but through the sanity of the other members he was able to see that knowing the path was difficult didn’t mean it wasn’t worth it or enjoyed.

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“But you’ve thought about it, right?”

“No, not really. I have tried to tell you, from the beginning, it’s really not like that.”

“You dream of a naked girl, but you don’t think about it?”

“Do you go around thinking about naked statues?”

“But Taehyung, I’ve never showered with a naked statue.”

“But Jimin, I haven’t showered with her. Just showered as her. It’s different. Look, it’s just not like that.”

“But she’s hot.”

“Jimin.”

“What? I was in that room same as you. I know she’s not your type, but let me tell you, she is attractive. Jungkookie and Hobi-hyung both agree with me.”

“I can’t think like that. We’re… it’s not like that.”

“Not that you have time for anything, but this whole crazy situation is about the only thing close to dating you’re likely to get. Why not make the most of it?”

“Because it’s just not like that. We’re not, we haven’t, we’re just friends. It would be weird if we tried… because… with the dreaming and all.”

“But you like her?”

“Not in a showering together kind of way.”

“If you say so.”

“I say so.”

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Everything was different and everything was the same. Hyemi had a new apartment, still tiny so she could send as much money back home to her grandmother and cousins, but she still had the same abundance of pillows and the sunny yellow curtains that Samantha had hung up in her first apartment before she’d left Korea after graduation. Hyemi had insisted she was sick and tired of moving and that she wasn't leaving Seoul until she was old and grey. The city was the same, but Samantha was disoriented, not using the old, familiar subway stops for her landmarks, instead just walking with Hyemi to the store, the clinic, to new subway stops.
Being back within touching distance of Hyemi was such a relief. Samantha had hardly realized how much she’d missed the ease with which they fit into each other’s space. She wasn’t generally a touchy person by nature. She’d gotten more so after working with the twins who were always wanting to hold her hand or crawl in her lap, but long before that she’d learned the language of touch that she and Hyemi spoke. Even after being away for three years she was still fluent. Here, lying on the same bed, legs tangled as they each scrolled through whatever on their phones, trying to unwind from the day enough to actually sleep, was the perfect time to reflect on all the choices that led them here.

“So, you’re officially a nurse now.”

“Yes.”

“But the clinic is still understaffed.”

“Yes. We need support staff. Right now the nurses are all doing the filing and the intake paperwork and it just slows everything down.” Hyemi rolled her eyes and stuck her tongue out, her opinion of that particular situation evident.

“And you don’t have enough volunteers.”

“We have some high school kids looking to get into good universities, but that’s about it. We need a full time receptionist.”

“But you haven’t hired one yet.”

“We’re trying, but I think the director is a little distracted. He’s a good man, but he’s also trying to get a tutor for his kids. He wants a full time private English tutor and nanny and he thinks his sons are the most precious things ever created, so he’s really picky about who he’ll let into his house.”

“Oh. Like an **au pair**?”

“That’s a fancy word I don’t know.”

“It’s just a fancy nanny and tutor all rolled into one with a snooty French name.”

“It’s what you do for the twins, right?”

“Right.” Samantha let the words sink in, an idea already niggling the back of her brain that she was shoving away, back into the dark sleepiness clinging to her now. She would sleep on it, let the idea grow in silence and if it still seemed reasonable in the light of day she would ask Hyemi about it. But for now she would sleep.

Hyemi turned out the lights and she flipped over to KKT to send her sleep warning to Taehyung, smiling at the string of emoticons he’d sent earlier. The boys were in Thailand for a concert and Taehyung had sent her pictures of everything they were eating. She’d sent him pictures of her teokbokkie in response and he’d used every weeping emoticon he had, claiming she was cruel and heartless to taunt him like that when he hadn’t been home in so long it was painful. It was weird, a little bit, to be in Korea when he was off touring. It was natural, of course. He travelled all the time. But now she was here and he wasn’t.

They were back in different timezones and she was back to dreaming mostly his life and less her own trauma. She knew he was tired and missing his own bed. She almost wanted to go find it, his
dorm, crawl into that bed and send him pictures, tell him to take a nap and she would walk him through his own life. It was impossible and she knew it, but the desire was still there. The need to take care of him, to help him while she was closer to his home than he was.

Here, in Seoul, with her foolish American accent and all the familiarity of the place she’d called home for some of the most pivotal years of her life, she felt the stretch of having grown up more than she realized. So much of the nostalgia she’d felt now chafed. She’d outgrown half of the things she’d missed so fervently. The other half were different, but still touched her heart in ways that made her miss the person she’d been before all the accelerated growing up she’d been forced to do. It wasn’t just soju and japchae, though both of those held a place in her heart. It was this city and this language and Hyemi and years of memories all steeped in the self-discovery and righteousness of being a teenager.

“Stop texting Taehyung and go to sleep,” Hyemi mumbled sleepily.

“I was just doing my duty, telling him I was going to sleep, so he knew not to do anything too embarrassing for the next six hours or so.”

“I don’t know if Kim Taehyung is capable of going six hours without doing something embarrassing.”

“Well, there’s been an admirable lack of nudity since we started this little notification system, so I’ll take that as a win.” Samantha yawned and tugged on the covers, which Hyemi immediately tugged back.

“What’s it like?”

“Not seeing him naked?”

“No, having him in your head. Being in his.”

Samantha tried to come up with the right words. Hyemi had asked lots of questions before, most of them hilarious and inappropriate, but she always came back to this question, and Samantha never had a good answer. “I don’t know how to describe it, still. It’s awful. There’s no hiding or lying to him. He sees through nearly everything. I can’t keep a secret from him. He doesn’t know everything. He can’t read my thoughts, but he knows when I’ve been sad and I can’t just tell him everything is alright, because he knows. Not like other people do though, he isn’t just imagining what it’s like, or what I feel. He actually really knows because he’s in there feeling it with me. It’s horrible being so exposed like that.” She took a deep breath, reaching for Hyemi’s hand and squeezing it as she continued, the words she’d kept bottled up for so long pouring out of her now.

“I hate it, Hyemi. I hate that he’s in my head because he understands in a way no one ever has and probably never, ever will, because who else is feeling it just like me? Everyone’s grief is different, right? So no one can really know how it feels, except he does. He knows exactly how I feel. He knows me better than anyone.” She stopped to take a ragged breath, hoping to keep the tears at bay for a little longer. “You’re my best friend in the world, and he still knows me better than you.”

Hyemi squeezed her hand. “Say it.” Samantha shook her head, feeling tears spill down her cheeks. “You need to say it, so I can tell you that you’re wrong.”

Samantha hiccuped a laugh and wiped at her cheeks, then forced the words out past the lump in her throat. “He knows me better already than Matthew ever did.”

“Bullshit. Matthew loved you. I love you. I know your stories and your past. Matthew knew details
about you that you don’t even know or realize. So Taehyung can feel what you feel when you’re sad or happy or whatever. He knows your emotions, he doesn’t know you. You are more than just some feelings held together by dreams.”

“Are you sure? I don’t feel like much more than that sometimes.”

“Yes, I’m sure. Taehyung might know you better than he would without the dreams.”

“Yeah, because without the dreams he wouldn’t even know I exist.”

“I meant more than any regular friend would, just from talking for a couple of months. He does know you well, but he’s not… Samantha, he’s not taking Matthew’s place, okay?” Samantha nodded, chewing on her lip and let Hyemi rub soft circles into her hand in the darkened room.

“But I kind of like it,” Samantha whispered. Hyemi’s hand stilled but she didn’t respond, just waiting for Samantha to keep going. Hyemi was really good at waiting while Samantha tried to find the words. “I like that he knows me. It… it feels good to be understood.” Samantha pulled her hands away and covered her face, mumbling between her palms, “Does that make me a horrible person?”

“No. It makes you incredibly lucky.” Samantha slid her hands down and turned to look at Hyemi, who was staring at her intently, face serene and without judgement. “I think that’s kind of the goal of every human relationship on the face of the earth. To be understood. Well, to be loved, really, but being understood helps, right?” Samantha nodded, tucking her hands under her chin.

“But Matthew always said he didn’t have a clue how my brain worked. He was always asking me to think out loud so he could see how the gears turned.”

“But he loved you. You know that, right?”

“Of course. Yes, I know that. I sometimes hate that fact, but I know it’s true.”

“Well, he loved you even though he didn’t fully understand you. He knew you pretty fucking well though. He knew you and he loved you. That’s special too. Taehyung, he… he understands you, and yeah, he knows you in a way that honestly even I’m jealous of sometimes, but he doesn’t love you. I do. Matthew did. And it’s okay to like being understood.”

“I just feel so guilty.”

“Of course you do, because you’re a decent human being who thinks about the feelings of other people. The problem is you’re trying to be considerate of the feelings of a person who isn’t here anymore.”

“You make that sound so illogical,” Samantha snorted.

“It is. It’s what everyone does, but that doesn’t make it any less ridiculous. Matthew loved you. That fact isn’t going to change any time soon. And part of that love is wanting you to be happy.”

“Oh, yeah, I know. I know. Everyone has said that. Matthew would want me to be happy. I have to live a good life because that’s the gift he gave me. Yeah, I know that, but it’s still my life and I’m still living it and I’m still hurt because he’s not here.”

“Good. It hurts because it was real and now it’s gone.”

“But it hurts less than it did. It’s hurting less and that terrifies me.”
“It’s supposed to heal. It has to get better, Sam. You want to heal, don’t you?”

“No. Because healing means it gets easier, and I don’t want it to be easier, because what if I forget him?” Samantha curled herself into a ball, tugging on Hyemi’s hands to bring her closer. “Hyemi, I can’t move on because I can’t leave him behind. I need it to hurt because then I can remember that it happened, that he loved me, that I loved him. Right after he… right after it happened, I had to keep reminding myself that it had happened, that the accident hadn’t just been some horrible nightmare, that I’d left him in that car while I clawed my way to safety. I left him there, Hyemi. I saved myself and didn’t pull him out. I needed the hurt then and I need it now. I can’t be unfaithful and just forget about him.”

“Sam, oh Sam, you’re never going to forget him. And it will always hurt just a little, even after years and years. It will never be the same as it was before. Never. But healing doesn’t mean that you loved him any less or that his love for you wasn’t real.” Hyemi rested her chin on Samantha’s shoulder, taking a deep breath, steadying her own breathing and letting her own tears fall. “Being happy, someday maybe even falling in love again, it isn’t being unfaithful. You know I can only imagine how that feels, but please don’t hang on to the hurt more than you have to. Let it hurt when it hurts, but please, please let yourself be happy too. You deserve that, you really, really do.” Samantha shook her head, not wanting to believe the words that sounded too good to be true. She couldn’t do that yet. She wasn’t ready, but she heard the truth in it, heard Hyemi’s kind heart in the words of comfort, like something she would say to a friend who was hurting. Maybe someday she could be as kind to herself as Hyemi was to her.
Leaving Chicago and Truth or Dare

There was so much waiting. They were all here at the Idol Star Athletic Championships, in matching uniforms, except Yoongi who was down with the basketball competition, and they were waiting. Endlessly waiting. They’d walked and waved and now they waited for it to be their turn to run for four minutes and then be done. So while they waited they talked and played simple games with their hands to pass the time. There was an awful lot of hitting each other but that was pretty normal. It kind of felt like a waste of time to be sitting and waiting instead of practicing or working on the new album or even sleeping, but it was also a little nice to just sit and talk.

Jungkook and Jimin were needling him again about Sam. They hadn’t really let up since that night in Chicago teasing him about his girlfriend, calling him “lover boy” again. He had hoped that letting Sam hang out with his closest friends would put an end to all that, let them see that it really wasn’t like that at all. She was just like them, just like one of the guys, just a friend. Instead, they’d given him endless amounts of grief about how she’d blushed when Yoongi came in, how she’d snuggled into Taehyung’s hoodie, forgetting that she was wearing it until she was already in the elevator and running back breathless to shove it into Jungkook’s hands without an explanation. They thought it was hilarious that his dream girl went all stuttery and wide-eyed over Yoongi. It was hilarious. He thought it was great that Yoongi was her favorite, that Yoongi made her blush, that Yoongi’s songs were her favorite. It honestly took a lot of the pressure off of him. He wasn’t exactly shy of the spotlight but a crowd of screaming fans were very different than just one painfully observant friend in his head. Sam noticed so much more than he wanted her to. She knew when he was annoyed at his hyungs or frustrated with himself. He couldn’t pretend to be fine when he was too tired to think straight. He wanted to appear more collected and competent than he felt. It should have been annoying, losing even more privacy. It should have felt invasive and rude. Maybe if it was anyone else it would have, but Sam was supportive and encouraging and funny and also kind of enamoured with Yoongi. It wasn’t as though Taehyung didn’t understand. He was frequently impressed and amazed by the things Yoongi did. Like taking care of everyone in the sneakest way possible.

It was a little strange to be here without him. The last time they’d been here they’d had a tiny white teddy bear instead of Yoongi himself. Now he was here, but not with them. He was off being amazing with a whole different team. It was really better that way. None of them were half as good as Yoongi when it came to basketball. They weren’t lacking in care or anything without him. Seokjin and Namjoon were being excellent supporters, cheering and dancing for the fans. They’d all eaten a nice lunch and now they waited some more. They waited and they talked and they goofed around while a hundred cameras recorded every little thing they did. It was just another day in the life, but one that he would have rather spent dancing or sleeping.

There was always the schedule though, always promoting to do. The past four months had been incredible. He’d thought that “Boy in Luv” had put them on the map, but now this new album was putting them on a different level, reaching goals and taking them new places. Not here, necessarily, sitting around waiting to pretend to be athletic for the cameras. They’d done this before. Jungkook was excited though. Any chance to compete in anything for any reason was enough for him to grin. Taehyung loved to win but no one loved it as much as Jungkook. So he took this opportunity, sitting on the floor of the gym, to beat him as many times as possible in this crazy made up game. Of course, Seokjin was beating them both.

It was a slow way to pass the time. He wanted to text Sam but she was sleeping. She was here in Seoul and he still couldn’t see her. They were back in the same town but there was no way for him
to see her. She was busy catching up with her friend. He was busy being famous. It wasn’t new or anything. It happened all the time, missed connections with friends. Same city, same day, but no time for anything other than exchanging a few selcas. He was used to it but this time it was different. It was different and he wasn’t sure he really liked that at all.

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“I’m just not sure if it’s sane.”

“It is a little unreasonable, but you’ve got a good plan.”

“I guess.”

“Look, Sam, you know I like you right?”

“Yes?”

“Really, I really like you.”

“Jess, are you hitting on me?”

“No. I just need you to have the right foundation for what I’m about to say.”

“Alright. I have the foundation.”

“Go away.”

“Excuse me?”

“Go. You’re bored here.”

“No, I’m not. I like it here.”

“You’re always talking about Seoul. You miss it like crazy. You miss Hyemi.”

“I do, but… it’s not all sunshine and roses, you know? It’s not easy to be a foreigner in Korea.”

“But you have a place to live and a job, right?”

“I have a connection to maybe get a job, yeah.”

“And here? You have no job. What’s keeping you here?”

“Responsibility? This doesn’t feel like a very responsible thing to do.”

“Responsible for what though? Yeah, we love having you on the dance team, but it’s not as though we’ll fall apart without you. Your family is on board with it, right?”

“My parents are… supportive but not excited. And Nana, well I’m the only one she has really.”

“But Sam, how often does she really know you’re there?”

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Outside, the sun was blistering, the pavement shimmery with heat. Inside, Samantha was shivering. The sweat from the short walk from her car was drying behind her knees and the creases in her elbows. She untangled the cardigan draped over her purse and shrugged into it as she knocked on
“Hello, Nana. How are you today?” Nana looked up from her usual seat by the window. Usually Samantha was greeted with a smile, even if Nana didn’t know who she was smiling at, she smiled. But today, her lips only twitched a little before she looked back at her lap, hands roaming shakily. “Nana, it’s Samantha. Are you feeling okay?” Sam walked over and dragged the other chair, the one she thought of as her chair, to the window too.

Nana barely glanced at her, focusing instead on what Samantha could now see was a notebook in her lap. “It’s not done. I can’t finish it. I just… I don’t remember,” Nana said. Her voice quivered in a way that made Samantha’s stomach clench.

“Can’t finish what, Nana?” Samantha reached out to hold Nana’s shaking hand, but Nana pulled away, gripping the notebook tightly.

“I’ve been trying to write it all down, but I can’t remember.” Nana looked up at her now, watery eyes unfocused but still full of anguish. Samantha had never heard Nana be so aware of how little she was aware of. She smoothed her suddenly clammy hands down her legs.

“Maybe I can help. What are you trying to remember, Nana?”

“It’s been so many years.” Nana shook her head. “I miss them you know, now that he’s gone. The dreams. I wish I’d had them longer.”

Samantha bit her lips together and nodded. “Is that when the dreams stopped, Nana? When Gramps died?”

“Oh no no no, little bird.” Nana rubbed her knee softly, looking up and giving her a wavering smile. At least she knew who she was talking to. “They stopped long before that. I don’t remember when exactly. It was so long ago. After we were married, though by then they were so few and far between. He worked the night shift after the war but once we were on a similar schedule we hardly ever dreamed of each other. Hard to tell when they stopped.”

“Yeah, Taehyung and I hardly ever seem to be on the same schedule.”

“Taehyung. That’s an unusual name.” Nana was smiling again, seeming more relaxed. Samantha wasn’t sure if it was because she was literally forgetting why she’d been sad or if she was just moving on for the time being.

“Yes, Nana. He’s Korean.”

“How lovely! And how did you meet him?” Samantha kind of liked this part of Nana’s forgetfulness. Every time, Samantha got to tell Nana the same story and each time Nana was surprised and delighted all over again. This time though, the weight of guilt made it hard to tell the familiar story.

“Actually, I’m… I’m going to move to Seoul,” she blurted out. Samantha watched Nana’s face for disappointment, or betrayal, or sadness.

“Oh, that’s delightful. I never did get to travel as much as I wanted to.”

“You’re not sad?” Samantha leaned forward, searching Nana’s face. She looked completely genuine, but Samantha knew that there was no way to tell how long that would last. Would she be sad and devastated after Samantha left?
“Of course not. You should go. Travel. See the whole world.”

“Won’t you be lonely, Nana?” Nana reached for Samantha’s hand, pressing their hands together, scar to scar.

“My life isn’t what you should be worrying about, little bird. You know,” Nana looked at Samantha, unshed tears threatening to spill. “You know I won’t remember most of the time.”

“Nana, please.” Samantha didn’t have the years of self control that Nana did. She wasn’t able to keep the tears from falling.

“Little bird, you have to do what’s best for you. Don’t stay here for me. You go. You live and dream and write me letters. Send me letters and I will read them and be happy.”

“Nana, I’m scared,” Samantha whispered. “I don’t know why all this is happening to me.”

“Don’t be afraid, little bird. It’s not finished, but I hope it will be enough. You take it with you. You finish it.” Nana pressed the book into Samantha’s hands.

“What is it Nana?” Nana smiled then, finally a real smile, not tinged with sadness.

“Mother started a project, just collecting the stories she knew. I kept up with it for a while. It’s not finished. I can’t remember as much, but it’s as much as I have. You take it. You finish it.”

Samantha clutched the book to her heart, not trusting herself to speak. These days with Nana were getting rarer and rarer, days when Nana knew who she was, who Samantha was, when they were and what was happening. She wanted desperately to end this on a good day, to see Nana and say goodbye when her words would mean something, would be more than just a blip in Nana’s repetitive days. She didn’t want to think that this was the last time she would sit with Nana, the last time to talk and ask questions. It might be, but she hoped it wasn’t.

“I love you, Nana.” It wasn’t half of what she wanted to say but it was suddenly the only thing she could manage.

“I love you, too, little bird. Always.”

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“Taehyung, it’s incredible. She’s got stories in here all the way from Wales. Like, from my great-great-great grandmother or something. Some of it is handwritten, and let me tell you Nana’s handwriting is not easy to decipher, but she’s got the typed up bits stuck to the pages too, that I think are from Nana’s mother. So many stories.”

“And they all have these dreams?”

“Yes! I mean, no. Not every woman in the family. Sometimes it skips generations, or one sister gets it but the other doesn’t. I think it’s pretty random.”

“But it’s only the women?”

“Yes. The people they dream of get it too, but, and maybe it’s just the family bias or whatever, but it seems like it’s the women who… I don’t know, cause it? So really, this is all my fault?”

“Well sure, Sam. You definitely asked to be born in this family and then have a personal tragedy that left you with an oddly specific scar that caused a psychic connection to a stranger. What a
horrible human you are.”

“When you put it like that…”

“And so, um… in these stories, do… do they all get married?”

“Oh. Um, no actually. There are two where they don’t. I think. It’s all pretty vague and I think Nana’s grandma is telling what she heard from her sister, so it’s hard to sort out. Plus the typewriter ink is fading so it’s hard to read. But, um, yeah. There’s a woman who dreamed of another woman and of course they didn’t get married. And I think one woman who dreamed of a married guy, so, you know, the marriage there isn’t between the dreamers.”

“But… but they’re all in love, right?”

“Looks that way, yeah.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.”

“But we’re…”

“No, no, we’re not. Taehyung, I don’t think it has to be like that. I don’t…”

“Yeah. Of course. I mean, we’re on opposite sides of the world.”

“For now, yeah.”

“Yeah.”

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Every inch of his skin was covered in sweat. Every muscle he could feel was aching. Taehyung couldn’t keep his eyes open but he couldn’t sleep, jostled between the members on the road back to the hotel. The Summer Sonic concerts had been a whirlwind. Their sponsors had provided them with hoodies and he’d sweat through all his layers before the first song was even finished, but the crowd was amazing. These big outdoor festivals were always such a big show, so much louder and wilder than a regular concert and everyone had felt it. He’d never seen the rap line go as hard as they did tonight, Jungkook joining them as he attacked his lines in “Rise of Bangtan.” He’d gotten to be on stage for “Cypher: Killer” which was always exciting. They were all running on fumes and adrenaline, so for this concert they just went all out. No holding back, no saving it for tomorrow, just pushing themselves to the limit and feeling the crowd give the energy back ten times stronger.

The Red Bullet tour was almost over. Just one more concert left in a couple of weeks, then a short break before heading back to America for another week in four new cities. It was strange to be heading back to America and not seeing Sam. Not that she wouldn’t gladly come to their shows, but by the time he got back to her continent, she would be in his. He could still hardly believe she was moving to Seoul. It all made so much sense when she had explained it to him. Her job was ending. She was feeling restless. Her friend in Seoul had a connection so she had a job waiting for her. She missed the city and had enjoyed her recent visit so she was moving back.

He would still be travelling all over the place, and even when he was in Seoul, he didn’t have that much free time. It shouldn’t be so exciting that she was going to be in the same city as him. Sam had made it very clear that she wasn’t moving to Seoul for him. He probably wouldn’t ever see her
because of their different schedules. Probably. But the chance of seeing her was much greater when
she could just take a taxi to meet him, instead of a plane. The chance was there. He got to hang out
with other friends sometimes. Not often, but sometimes. And Sam was likely to be the kind of
friend that could pick up right where they left off after long stretches without seeing each other.

Except, he would still be seeing her in his dreams. Would they still dream of each other as much
when they lived in the same town? He still kept odd hours with many late nights and early
mornings. She might be working the same kind of hours she had before, regular and normal, or she
might spend nights with her charges so there was no telling when they would be sleeping together.
Asleep at the same time. Dreaming their own dreams. It had been a nice break, refreshing really, to
go back to his own random dreams while they were closer geographically. In the end though, as he
got on a plane in L.A., he was grateful to be able to dream of her as he flew.

Just a few more days until he could get home, sleep in his own bed and try not to think about what
it would be like when Sam was only minutes instead of many hours away. It wouldn’t be any
different, really. They would text their warnings, maybe still talk each week, though those calls
were harder to maintain in the midst of touring. Maybe every couple of months they could get a
bite to eat somewhere. Without cameras. Or people.

The logistical nightmare of trying to have friends while being an idol was nothing new to
Taehyung, but it was different now. Sam was a girl. Sam was American. The press would rip him
apart if they thought he was dating anyone, but the carnage would be much worse if he were dating
a foreigner. Not that he was planning on dating her. Because that wasn’t something he could do
with his schedule and he really wanted to focus on music and his members and his family. Besides,
even if he were able he wasn’t sure she was willing. Or that he really was either for that matter.
She was pretty and familiar and that was comforting and nice but he didn’t feel sparks and
butterflies when she was near so it was totally different. It was different and that was wonderful
because if it weren’t, everything would be so much harder. And more difficult.

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Samantha stood with a broom in her hand, staring at her empty apartment. It looked so small now.
How had she fit her whole life in here for so long? How had she thought that Matthew would fit in
here, too? She was leaving so many memories behind, in all the cracks in the floor and walls.
Some of them were good, though even the good ones were still tinged with sadness these days.
Less than before, when even the best memories were covered with a film of rage and regret. Her
mom came up behind her and rested a hand on Samantha’s shoulder.

“We’re all loaded up in the car. Let’s make this last trip to the storage unit and go get some food,
alright?”

Samantha nodded. There really wasn’t anything left for her here. Even the dust and cobwebs were
gone, thanks to hours of cleaning. Bare walls and floors made all of this feel much more real all of
a sudden. Her whole life was going to be turned upside down. She wondered again if she was
making a mistake, if she was doing the right thing, if she was completely out of her mind. “Mom,
I’m not…it’s... You’re alright with this, right?”

Her mom shook her head. “I don’t like it much. It worries me a little.”

“Seoul is safer than Chicago, Mom. And I won’t be living alone.” Samantha opened the door and
waved her mother through, shutting it behind them. Her mother loved a good worry but usually
talked herself out of any real panic.

“No, darling, that’s not it. I’m just worried that you’re not making progress,” she said as she
walked down the hallway. “It feels like you’re moving backwards, not forwards, but it is your life, darling. You’ve got the bases covered—a place to sleep and a way to pay the bills. The rest you’ll figure out. If you don’t, you can always come back.” She smiled and Sam wrapped her arm around her mom’s dainty shoulders.

“It’s like a fresh start though, just somewhere a little familiar. I need to get out of here, move on, right?”

“Well I didn’t think that moving on meant actually moving, but you’ve got your mind made up and I’ve known you long enough to know you won’t be changing it anytime soon.”

“You’ve known me my whole life, Mom,” Samantha said with a smile, the familiar joke easing some of the tension.

“So, where do you want your last meal to be?”

“I’m moving, not dying, Mom!”

“You’re moving to the other side of the planet. Let me have my melodrama.” She nudged Samantha with her shoulder. Samantha wanted to enjoy these last few days with her family, cram as many memories as she could in.

“Thanks for coming up here and helping with all this, Mom.”

“Of course. We’ve been meaning to make it up here for a while. I’m just sorry that we’re only here to help you leave.”

“Well, I don’t fly out until Tuesday, so let’s get this done, get some food, maybe make a trip to the post office to mail the big boxes and then call it a day.”

“You really want to do this, don’t you?” Hands on her hips, head cocked to the side, it was one of the few times that Samantha really saw the resemblance between them. Samantha knew she stood the exact same way when she was thinking too hard and trying not to blurt out everything.

“I do, Mom. I think it’s going to be really good. Mr. Choi likes me and Hyemi says he’s a fair and decent man. His wife is really sweet and the boys are a handful, so I’ll have plenty to keep me busy.”

“Just don’t forget to call once in awhile, alright?”

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“Truth or dare?”

“What? How are we going to play Truth or Dare over the phone, Taehyung?”

“Just answer the question.”

“Fine. Dare.”

“You’re ridiculous. Alright, go put on every pair of socks you own. All of them.”

“Sure I will.”

“Send me a picture to prove it.”
“And while I’m doing that?”

“You ask me the question.”

“Okay. Truth or dare, Taehyung?”

“Truth.”

“Of course. So, um… who is your favorite member?”

“I don’t have favorites, of course, but, uh, Jimin.”

“Really? Not Jungkookie?”

“Yeah, Jimin is… he’s my best friend. I chose him. Jungkook is like my brother. We’re different but the same, like he was always going to be my friend, no matter what, but Jimin… I picked him to be my best friend and he picked me and that’s special.”

“I can’t fit all these socks on my feet.”

“Then put some on your hands, too.”

“I’m switching to speakerphone then.”

“Well, since you’re taking too long, you’ll have to do a truth.”

“Truth, then.”

“Have you ever dreamed any…uh… embarrassing alone times?”

“Like shower stuff? You know I have.”

“No, Sam, not just shower stuff, but other… you know… lower… area… things.”

“Uh… oh. Oh! Um… well… no, not, you know, not a lot.”

“But you have!”

“Yes. And now I can’t take a picture because my hands are covered in socks. But I did it, so it’s your turn again. Truth or dare?”

“Nice way to change the subject. Truth.”

“Are you… are you sad that all this happened to you? This dream stuff?”

“No way. It’s fascinating. I know so much more about being a girl now. Some stuff I seriously never wanted to know, but it’s still really cool. But, uh, Sam?”

“Yeah?”

“Why didn’t you ask me if I’d ever dreamed of your… alone times?”

“Because I already know the answer.”

“How can you know?”

“You can’t dream me doing something I don’t do.”
“Oh come on, girls do it too!”

“Yeah, I’m not saying they don’t. Girls do it. Boys do it. Lots of people do it. But not everyone does it.”

“...Really?”

“Really.”

“But you were going to get married!”

“Yeah, but that doesn’t mean--we never--not everyone is all up in each other’s businesses like that all the time.”

“...Never?”

“No. I, uh... never really felt the need to.”

“Huh, what’s that like?”

“Normal. For me, at least.”

“Right. Sorry.”

“It’s okay, but I’m taking these socks off now.”

“Good idea.”
Taehyung rubbed his face and tried to find some more patience. The whole day had been an organizational disaster. Their flight had been delayed, so they arrived later than usual and still the venue wasn’t ready. What had the promoter been doing all day? Soundcheck was sloppy and unprofessional. The techs couldn’t get the light cues right, couldn’t seem to keep the mics straight and the staff was pissy and rude.

All the members were tense. Yoongi was simmering and Taehyung knew it wouldn’t take much before his anger boiled over and spilled out at these people who were supposed to be helping them on this tour but instead were just making a mess of everything. Namjoon was pacing, cracking his knuckles repeatedly, almost without thought. Jin sat in a corner of the dressing room next to Jungkook, neither speaking, just staring at fixed points in the air in front of them, lips tense with the effort of keeping all the things they wanted to say to themselves. Jimin had his legs draped over Taehyung’s, his back resting against Hoseok as they sprawled on the floor, waiting for someone to remember that they needed cars to get back to the hotel for the night.

Hoseok’s smile was thick with disgust, but he was still smiling. He and Taehyung had tried to keep everyone focused on the fans, on why they were here, or rather, why they wanted to be here. Contractually obligated to do this mini tour as brand-ambassadors, the fun part was getting to meet their fans, in new cities in the States, places they’d never been yet. But even the fans had been stressed and tense, jittery with nerves and anger.

Taehyung just wanted to get back to the hotel. He wanted to get into his room, crawl into bed and sleep. He wanted away from this venue and their snapping security. He wanted away from this management company that treated them and their fans like cattle, or worse, like a product.

Of course, once he got his wish, once they were back at the hotel after two trips involving three cars (because no one had gotten a van big enough for all of them and only Yoongi and Jimin could squeeze in the backseat of someone’s borrowed Prius), after Taehyung found out he wasn’t rooming with Hoseok so they could relax and recharge together to find their reserves of optimism to keep the group running smoothly, but instead he was rooming with Namjoon (which was still good, but not what he expected), after a too cold shower and a too soft pillow, after all that, he couldn’t sleep.

Namjoon snored next to him, dreaming of who knows what, but Taehyung was wide awake. Wired and antsy, he just wanted to sleep and dream of Sam. He just wanted Sam. The realization wasn’t exactly startling. The thought had been creeping up for a while. She was his refuge and escape. She was the one he wanted to talk to after a long day with the members he could never really escape, not that he wanted to. But when he needed someone who wasn’t Bangtan to talk to, he always chose her. He toyed with his phone. He wanted to call her. He checked the time, did the math, and decided she was probably in the middle of her day and probably unavailable.

He sent a quick message on KKT anyway, just in case.
It was nothing he hadn’t said before, but it was still strange to him how comfortable they’d become, talking like old friends, expressing sentiments he usually kept to himself or his closest friends, but so often she knew how he was feeling anyway, so it was pointless to hide. He told her the things that Jungkook and Jimin would tease him about.

**Kids are at piano lessons. Want to talk?**

Taehyung grinned at her message, pressing the button to call her as fast as he could manage. He was suddenly glad he was rooming with the unflappable Namjoon instead of the light-sleeping Hoseok.

“Bad day how?” Sam said, skipping the greetings as per usual.

“Ugh, it was such a mess.”

“Well, I hate San Francisco on principle, so…”

“Right. Well, no one knew what anyone else was doing, or where anything was, or what was supposed to happen. The staff at the venue looked at us like we were freaks. We hardly had any room to change. And some girl jumped on me.”

“I’m sorry, what? A fan? Jumped on you?”

“Well, she was just trying to hug me, but honestly, it startled me. I’m never quite sure what to do when that happens, but it makes me feel seven different kinds of awful.”

“You don’t hug idols! You don’t touch them unless they give you permission. Hi touch is not a free-for-all. It’s just not.”

“I know. And I don’t like it, but I also feel bad for causing a scene and--”

“Whoa, you didn’t cause the scene, she did! You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“I know that, but--”

“No, Taehyung, listen. She was out of control and made bad choices. None of that is your fault. The only thing you did was stand there.”

“I did say hello.”

“Oh, well that explains everything!” Samantha laughed and Taehyung felt the tension in his shoulders start to dissipate. “That was your fatal mistake. She probably was overwhelmed by the melodic sound of your smooth, deep voice and lost her mind.”

“I smiled, too.”

“How dare you, you monster! Flashing that gorgeous grin around, making ladies swoon left and right. And a few gentleman too, I’d imagine. It is San Francisco after all. Next you’ll be telling me you waved at her.”

“A little, yeah.”

“You can’t just go waving those giant hands of yours around and expect people to control themselves, Taehyung. You need to stop being so handsome, alright. And don’t even think about
batting those stupidly long eyelashes of yours at people. It’s just rude.”

Taehyung bit his lip and let his head fall back on the pillows. It was always so good talking to Sam. She made him see the bright side of things. She was a bit like Hoseok, only not as loud. “I will keep my eyelashes to myself,” he promised.

“Good. They make me jealous, and I get to wear them most nights, so I can only imagine what it must be like for the rest of the population.”

“Oh yeah? And you really think my voice makes people lose their minds?”

“Seriously, don’t be modest. You know that you have the perfect soft, breathy-growly thing going on.”

“And you think my smile is gorgeous?”

“Are you fishing for compliments? Yes, your smile is like puppies frolicking in fields of flowers.” He could just picture her, sitting somewhere with her phone pressed to her cheek, waving her free hand about.

He wasn’t sure why he said it. Maybe he was just the right kind of tired and frustrated. Maybe he’d spent too much time today wondering why things weren’t going right and wanted answers only she could give. Whatever the reason, he couldn’t quite bring himself to regret the words even as they were tumbling from his mouth. “But you don’t swoon for me.”

The silence on the other end should have been ominous. He should have blurted out apologies, taken it all back, changed the subject, but he didn’t. He just let the statement hang in the air, listening to her breathe across the phone line.

“Taehyung, it’s not… I… I don’t swoon for anyone. It’s not anything wrong with you. I don’t… I don’t think like that. Remember? No embarrassing alone times. I’m not the swooning type.”

“You swoon for Yoongi-hyung. You blushed and stammered and giggled when you met him.” Taehyung hoped he didn’t sound as petulant and petty as he felt.

“The first time, yeah. But not since.”

“You didn’t act like that around me, even the first time.”

“But I’d had you in my head for over a year by then. You weren’t a stranger to me, some idol on a pedestal, you were real and that made it easier to talk to you, because we’d already been talking for months.” He heard the sigh of frustration. “I think you’re wonderful and beautiful and amazing, Taehyung but--”

“But you don’t like me. I know.”

“I don’t like anyone. Not like that. You… you know why.”

Taehyung hated that the catch in her voice was because of him. “Yes, I do. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have pushed it. I know you still miss him.”

“That’s right, I do. A lot. And I don’t have time right now to sort through all that, and a new job, in a new town, in a new country where I’m stared at everywhere I go because I’m too tall and white. I just don’t have time for that.”
“And you think I do? With touring and promoting and getting the new album ready and filming and dance practice for a three day concert? I barely have time to sleep. When am I supposed to make time for a girlfriend?”

“Exactly! That’s what I’m saying. We don’t have time for this, so why are you shouting at me?” He was shouting, he realized. He was leaning forward, shouting at his phone. He glanced over at Namjoon, afraid the break in his snoring meant Taehyung had woken him, but there he slept, breathing deeply and evenly.

“I’m sorry, Sam. Really, I’m just all wound up from this stupid day. I’m sorry I shouted at you. You’re right. This isn’t a thing we should even be worrying about right now.”

“Hey, I get it. It’s okay, but Tae? You know I care about you, right? Because I do. A lot.”

“I know. I’m sorry for shouting. Thanks for talking. I should go try to sleep.”

“Tae, please don’t--”

“I just need to get some sleep. I’ll see you soon.”

“Alright. Sleep well,” she said softly. He pressed the button to end the call and plugged his phone in, turning the screen to the end table and pulling a pillow over his head. Why had he brought it up in the first place when he already knew the answer. He wasn’t lying. He didn’t have time for anything else in his life right now. But he’d already made time for her.

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Samantha stared at her phone, ignoring the atonal plinking of the piano in the other room. Hyunsik and Hyunki were just messing around now, not really practicing and she knew she should pull them out of the music room and get them ready for swimming but instead she stared at her phone. She wasn’t quite sure what had just happened. It wasn’t a confession. Taehyung wasn’t confessing to her. That wasn’t what it was, it was just… he didn’t like her but he wanted her to like him? Did he think that she didn’t like him at all?

She’d tried so hard to keep her feelings as friendly as possible without leading him on. Maybe she had tried too hard and left him feeling like she didn’t care. She had been upfront and clear about it, or so she thought. Maybe she’d left things unsaid because of the dreams, assuming he knew the tangled mess of her emotions well enough to sort out her grief from the rest of it. Either way, the conversation had been awkward and uncomfortable. She didn’t swoon over Taehyung but not because she didn’t think he was worthy of swooning. She just didn’t like to think about it long enough to get around to the swooning.

Nineteen months and ten days since the accident and she still wasn’t ready to think about dating anyone else. She shook her head and tucked her phone away, calling to the boys to get ready for their swim lessons. While they splashed and practiced, she sent Taehyung a message, hoping he was sleeping so deeply he didn’t even have time to dream.

It was good talking to you. I hope the rest of the tour goes better

See you soon

The rest of the day passed in a blur of activities and games. She kept herself busy, even as the boys were studying or playing by themselves. She didn’t have time to think about all the things she didn’t have time for. It’s what she’d been telling herself since before she’d moved to Seoul. There
was no room in her life for a romance right now. She had work. She had Hyemi. She had Taehyung in a strange and unconventional way that she couldn’t explain to anyone, couldn’t even talk about to anyone because there was no way to explain.

She ignored the dreaming notebook from Nana, not wanting to dwell on stories of her relatives falling in love after heartbreak. She didn’t want to think about her great-great aunt who’d fallen in love with an Irishman who spoke no Welsh and she spoke not a lick of Gaelic and they lived together for years before they could exchange a full sentence fluently. She tried not to think of some distant cousin who dreamed and loved a dark-haired man she never met who spoke a language she didn’t recognize. Apparently this dreaming thing didn’t respect borders or languages. It followed no pattern she could discern. Just two people who, if they ever met and weren’t otherwise occupied, fell in love and lived happily ever after. Or at least as happy as anyone ever is in this world.

Once she was home though, with Hyemi out working at the clinic, she had nothing to distract her. She couldn’t focus on music or the TV. She folded laundry and cooked dinner mostly so she could then do the dishes and keep busy. There was a thought trying to squiggle its way to the front of her mind and she just didn’t want to acknowledge it. She stuffed her mouth with rice and sang the alphabet song in her head in all the languages she knew it in. Twice. Which sadly only took about five minutes. She finally gave up and crawled into bed, tucking the covers up around her shoulders and under her chin.

She didn’t want to fall in love. She didn’t want to be in love. She didn’t want to go on dates or do any of the things that she had loved doing with Matthew, but if she did, which she didn’t, but if she did, she’d want to do them with Taehyung. It was bitter and it made her want to cry, but she knew it was true. She didn’t love him. Not yet, and maybe not ever, because he really didn’t have any time to be with her, but if he had, and if she would just let herself, she could imagine herself being very happy with him. Someday. Maybe never.

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There was no time to dwell on anything awkward. Their comeback had been pushed back but they still had so much going on. Performances at festivals all over, outdoors and in a variety of outfits. Jimin’s birthday tomorrow had them all scrambling to find just the right adorable and embarrassing picture to put on Twitter. They were enjoying their day at the dorms before they ran off to more far flung performances across the city. Taehyung welcomed the distraction that was neither album nor abnormal brain activity.

He’d talked to Sam plenty in the weeks following their unfortunate conversation. She’d spent Chuseok with Hyemi’s family and sent him pictures that made him homesick and sad while he grinned and greeted another group of fans. It was just photos, four songs, a hi touch and then autographs, but he wanted to be home, at least in Seoul if not all the way in Daegu, eating rice cakes and playing games.

And now, just enough time had passed that he couldn’t really bring it up again without reawakening all the uncomfortable feelings that came along with it, but not enough time had passed for him to stop kicking himself about it once or twice a day. He didn’t really want anything to change. Not really. They were friends. Good friends. He was as close to her already as he was to his members. They shared something no one else on the planet did. Maybe. Maybe there were other dreamers out there somewhere. Other family trees full of weird synapses and destinies.

He just had to be patient. He believed that. If Sam was to be trusted, and he had no reason to think she would keep the details from him, then all the pairs of dreamers had some sort of romantic
connection. He didn’t have the time, freedom or ability to maintain a relationship outside of what they already had. They shared so much and made time to keep in touch more than he did with anyone other than the people who shared DNA with him. He couldn’t really ask for more.

What more was there, other than the physical stuff anyway? They had an unspoken commitment. He supposed she could leave at any time, stop talking to him and they would go back to the way things were in the beginning, just dreaming and never knowing what was going on beyond that. They could never see one another again. They didn’t have to stay together except when they were sleeping, but just thinking about losing what they had made his skin feel clammy and his stomach hollow. He didn’t want to lose it, not even a little.

Things were normal now. He wanted them to stay that way. He didn’t want to chase her away by being too much, too intense, too needy. She had been remarkably laid back about the pace of this unusual relationship, letting him call her, never pestering him about not returning texts. She pestered him about going more than 24 hours without sleeping, but that was mostly the extent of her latent mothering, which she extended to all the members, through him, whenever she could. He’d never actually gotten around to telling Yoongi to go to bed because Sam was threatening to confiscate his leather jacket until he took a nap, but she threatened it often enough that one of these days he just might blurt it out at the wrong moment.

She mothered him and he let her and everything was fine. For now, it was good. It was good enough to just be the little brother she looked after. He wouldn’t think too far ahead because he couldn’t speed up this process, couldn’t erase the hurt in her heart or the fear he felt but didn’t understand. All he could do was be there, be himself, and wait. He hated waiting, but he was getting better and better at it the more practice he had.

He wondered if she even really knew how he felt about her. He thought about her all the time, but she couldn’t read his thoughts, only feel his emotions, though sometimes the specificity of the desires he’d felt from her made it feel like there were words to each emotion. She craved french fries almost as badly as he did. But without telling her, and maybe making her super uncomfortable in the process, how could he express how he felt in a way that gave them both plausible deniability. He wasn’t so brave or so bold as to just talk to her when she was sleeping. That had felt ridiculous all the times he’d tried it before and Sam had only once actually heard him so it was ineffective as well as embarrassing.

“Stop scowling at the wall like it insulted your mother,” Hoseok said as he walked into their room, arms full of shirts. “You’re thinking so loudly, I could hear you all the way in the kitchen.”

“No, you couldn’t,” Taehyung said grumpily.

“No, I couldn’t, but what’s going on? You’ve been in a bit of a funk today.”

“Oh you know, just stuck my foot in my mouth again and don’t know how to fix it or if I even should try.”

“So, the usual?”

“Yeah, hyung, the usual.”

“Is this about Sam?” Taehyung rolled over to face Hoseok as he sat down on his bed next to the pile of laundry.

“Am I that obvious?”
“To us? Of course.”

“Ugh, so annoying.” Taehyung grabbed a pillow and hid his face. It was one thing to be cared for and known by his members, but sometimes he wished he was better at hiding his feelings, able to manipulate them the way he wanted to on camera, showing only his best side to the public. That wasn’t an option with the members though. There was no pretending that he wasn’t immature, selfish, messy, picky, competitive, and moody.

“You don’t have to talk to me about it. It’s none of my business, but I’m going to sit here and hang shirts up. If you want to say things out loud, I will hear them.”

Feelings were such a pain sometimes. All he really wanted was to know that she felt the same way, that there was the potential there for these feelings to be something more than just friendly, someday, when they had more time to themselves. He wasn’t sure when that would be. He couldn’t offer her a future with him when he had no idea what his future would hold, but he couldn’t imagine a future that she wasn’t a part of. He wanted to keep her as close as his life and schedule would let him, which was selfish if she didn’t feel the same way. He hoped she felt the same way.

“No, Hobi-hyung, I think I’m alright. Thank you.”

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“You’re scaring me!”

“Why? Why, what did I do?”

“Taehyung, you know I hate heights. And falling. And falling from heights.”

“It wasn’t that high and it was for the mv. What was I supposed to say? ‘Sorry, director, I can’t do this trust fall thing because the girl in my brain hates falling.’?”

“It was awful though.”

“I know. I was nervous too.”

“I know you were. Ugh. Why? Underwater with clothes on is such a gross feeling.”

“I was so cold, too.”

“That’s because you don’t have enough body fat to keep you warm.”

“Yeah, yeah, but at least it wasn’t bungee jumping, right?”

“That was the worst. I still haven’t forgiven you for that. You are an insane person and that was an actual nightmare.”

“Yes. I know. But it was fun, too, wasn’t it?”

“You had fun. I thought I was dying.”

“But you felt me having fun, so that counts for something, right?”

“I still hated it.”

“If you say so.”
“I’m saying so right now, Taehyung!”

“Yes, noona.”

“...okay.”

“Sorry, sorry, it just slipped out.”

“It’s fine. It’s really okay, if you want to... I mean, I don’t... I wouldn’t... but you... it’s fine.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, it’s fine. If you’re fine with it, I’m fine with it. It’s your language after all.”

“You can call me oppa!”

“No. No, I can’t. That’s the benefit of being older than you.”

“Yes, noona.”
Another Bad Day and Movie Night

Chapter Notes

these last few chapters are a bit longer because THINGS are happening (finally)

Samantha stood on the subway, pressed and crowded. She thought she was used to this, but after just a few years back in Chicago she found herself missing the concept of personal space in public places here in Seoul. It wasn’t a bad day, not like other bad days she’d had, but she was weary and longing for the comfort of hot food and the cozy couch she and Hyemi shared. Nothing had even really gone wrong today. The boys were a bit riled up and pushing their boundaries. She’d been a few minutes late arriving which had earned her a stern and disapproving look from Mr. Choi that had set her on edge with guilt all day.

There was no reason to cry though. Everything was better than it had been a year ago, and as long as she could keep saying that, she would try to be happy. At some point though, she had to stop comparing everything to the worst days of her life and trivializing the frustrations of everyday life. She wasn’t suffering daily any more, so she needed a new yardstick to measure things with. At least, that’s what Hyemi had said and it sounded smart.

She pushed her way out of the subway, down the streets to her home.

“Hyemi, tell me you love me,” she called as she struggled out of her shoes and into the obnoxiously orange slippers she’d bought her first day back in Seoul. Taehyung teased her for them, saying she’d never be able to sneak up on anyone with slippers so loud, but Samantha loved them. They were aggressively cheerful. She hung her jacket and scarf up carefully, letting the warmth of the apartment sink in slowly.

“I love you more than banana milk.”

“Banana milk is gross, Hyemi.”

“Only to uncouth Americans like you. I happen to love it. A lot.”

“But not as much as you love me?” Samantha collapsed on the couch, not even bothering to offer to help Hyemi in the kitchen. She was a horrible roommate, but it wasn’t her night to cook dinner so she wanted to take full advantage of that and just work on her ass-groove in the indescribably brown couch.

“Not as much as I love you. Rough day?” Samantha shook her head. She had no right to complain. Hyemi worked ridiculous hours doing grueling work. All Samantha did was deal with a couple of kids and their complicated schedules of activities. “You’re such a terrible liar, Sam. You look like someone insulted G Dragon to your face and you couldn’t respond.”

“It wasn’t that bad.”

“Why don’t you tell me about it and I’ll decide. You aren’t very objective when it comes to stuff like this.” Hyemi handed her a bowl of fried rice and a spoon before settling into the couch beside her. Samantha used the distraction of food to formulate her response.
“Well, I left my coffee on the counter.”

“I know. I found it when I got home.”

“And I missed my train, so I was late.”

“Ooh, Mr. Choi hates that.”

“Right? So I felt horrible.” Samantha shoveled more rice into her mouth, watching Hyemi out of the corner of her eye. Hyemi was always so supportive. Sometimes she felt guilty. She didn’t deserve such a sweet and selfless friend. Samantha had invaded her life and her house. She walked right in and made herself at home, and no matter how many times Hyemi said she was glad of it, she felt guilty. How could she continue to burden Hyemi with her troubles when Hyemi had been so unfailingly good to her?

“How were the boys? Is Hyunki doing better in math?”

“Yes, but both of them refused to speak a single word of English today. So I refused to speak a single word of Korean, because I’m spiteful and not at all a grownup.”

“Sounds reasonable to me.”

“No, it just made everything more complicated because they pretended not to understand the simplest instructions that I know they know perfectly well. I shouldn’t have been so stubborn.”

“It’s language immersion. It’s the best way to learn, right?”

“Sure, that’s the excuse I’ll use. So then, when Mrs. Park came home, she told me how grateful she was to have me as their nanny.”

“Well that’s good.”

“Oh-huh. Yeah, she’s grateful to have me instead of a young Korean girl because she wouldn’t want her boys getting any ideas but because I’m so big and homely she doesn’t have to worry about that. In fact, the only way she would agree to her husband choosing so young a nanny was if he could find an ugly one.”

“She said all that?” Hyemi’s jaw dropped open even though Samantha knew they were both well aware that these kind of comments weren’t unusual here.

“Yeah. So that was my day. How was yours?”

“Fine. Really, pretty normal all around. No stubborn children, no rude employers or missed trains. I even got to drink my coffee. Pretty much the opposite of yours.”

Samantha laughed and reached for Hyemi’s empty bowl. She carried the dishes to the kitchen to keep busy for a second, knowing what was coming next. Faithful Hyemi’s comforting was inescapable and she wouldn’t have it any other way. She just wanted a minute to pull herself together so she could hear the kindness with an open heart and not all the guilt she felt right now.

“So, have you talked to Taehyung lately?” The dishes clattered in the sink. That was not the sentence she expected to hear.

“Just the usual, why?” She walked slowly back to couch, squinting at Hyemi suspiciously.

Hyemi shrugged and reached for the remote. “You miss him. Want to watch Running Man?”
“Yeah, sure, but wait. What do you mean, I miss him. Miss him how?”

“You check your phone like a hundred times an hour and you’ve started checking fansites for pictures.”

“That was one time! I just wanted to make sure he was dressed warmly enough. When he was packing, he forgot his scarf.”

“Sure. But you miss him.”

“He’s busy getting ready for the comeback.”

“Yep. And you miss him.” Hyemi was immovable, more stubborn than a mule.

“Fine. I miss him.”

“I knew it.” She grinned triumphantly, nudging Samantha with her shoulder. “I’m always right about this kind of stuff.”

“What kind of stuff? There’s no stuff.” Samantha grabbed one of the small pillows and held in against her chest. Ever since spending Chuseok with her family, Hyemi had been nagging her about Taehyung. Hyemi’s grandmother had asked endless questions about the young man Samantha was in love with, refusing to accept Samantha’s answer that she wasn’t in love with anyone anymore. After that, she’d moved her ring from her left hand to her right. She wasn’t ready to take it off yet. She wasn’t ready to stop wearing it completely, but she was ready to stop wearing it as though the promise still held.

“Of course not, but Grandma is never wrong about these things. She’s predicted every family wedding for like three generations.”

“Good thing I’m not in your family then. I’d hate to break her winning streak.”

“Samantha, you are so stubborn. And possibly also blind.”

“What blind? I’m fine.” Samantha snatched the remote out of Hyemi’s hand, turning the volume up to put an end to the conversation. “Now, let me watch my Giraffe in peace.”

“You’re so ridiculous. Kim Jong Kook is totally the best one.”

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He couldn’t sleep. He was nervous and wound up. Even playing with puppies for hours hadn’t helped settle his nerves, though being on camera, and messing up on camera, slipping into satoori without realizing it, and thus revealing himself as an unsophisticated idiot probably had something to do with it.

“Relax, TaeTae. It was a good show. Everyone loved you. You heard all the comments. They wanted to be your dog. Or your grandma, just to be close to you. You’re fine.” Jimin patted his back and Hoseok leaned his head on Taehyung’s shoulder.

“Don’t think about it,” Hoseok echoed. Taehyung nodded. It wasn’t as easy as they made it seem and he knew they both over-analyzed and replayed each one of their own mistakes a hundred times before moving on, but when they did he said the same things to them. After a few more pats, Jimin climbed up the ladder to his bunk and Hoseok rolled off and climbed into his own bed leaving Taehyung to stretch out like a starfish in his. Then he curled himself around his pillows and closed
his eyes. He wasn’t serious about sleeping yet and they both knew it by the absence of his earbuds.

He hadn’t dreamed of Sam in almost two weeks. She’d settled into a regular and normal schedule. She still dreamed of him, bits of his evening, dance practice and sometimes playing in the dorms, but when he finally managed to sleep, she was already asleep. So he dreamed of their choreography and of running from faceless crowds that wanted to hurt him, and of dolphins and jellyfish, sometimes of acorn jelly, and at least once of floating in a warm pool full of rose petals and thorns.

In nineteen days their album would be released. In sixteen days they would perform their third concert for three days to sold out crowds. He was stressed. He was excited. He wanted to sleep. He missed Sam. It wasn’t fair that she could still dream of him but he hadn’t dreamed of her. He couldn’t see her when he was awake, the least he could do was see when he slept, but no. He knew she was alright, happy, adjusting pretty well and not too homesick, but all that was from texts and one too short phone call while he was in Beijing. He wanted to call her now, but she’d sent her sleep warning message thirty minutes ago.

_I miss you_

_Are you dreaming?_

_Did you have a good day?_

_Did you stay warm?_

_I like that fluffy purple scarf you bought last year_

_Are you wearing it?_

_Do you miss me?_

_I thought about buying that sugar scrub you use_

_I miss you_

_Want to come over tomorrow?_

It wasn’t what he wanted to say, not by a long shot, but all the things he wanted to say were too much. He couldn’t burden her with his feelings, whether or not she actually knew them. It was far from ideal, because he was still going to be at home, working and practicing, but he didn’t have to go out in public for three whole days. Three days. It was like a miracle, a tiny blip full of sweat and work, but still, it was a blip where he could have a few hours at home. Maybe with Sam. If her schedule was free. Maybe after work. Maybe they could watch a movie again. Get her to play some Wii Sports. Eat a meal. Something normal. Maybe.

He slipped his earbuds in, pulled his sleep mask down, started his breathing exercises and tried to get his muscles to relax. Whether or not he dreamed of her, whether or not she could make it to hang out, whether or not he actually got to see her, it would be okay. He could be patient. He would sit and hold on to his feelings and the memories of dreams. He would work and put his energy into being better at all the things he was responsible for, none of which were Sam.

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Samantha sat on the couch, arms crossed over the pillow clutched to her chest and she pouted. It wasn’t mature or attractive, but she was doing it anyway. Hyemi sat on the coffee table, holding
out a cup of tea and trying to be comforting and soothing, but Samantha was just frustrated and annoyed.

“I’m not running a fever! I’m probably not contagious!” Samantha squeaked, her voice breaking as she tried to force the words out.

Hyemi tilted her head a little and sighed before she said, “Is that a risk you’re willing to take? Getting all of Bangtan sick so close to their concert and comeback? You really want to be the plague rat?”

“But he invited me to the dorms! I was going to get to be there, you know, in their living room. Sit with them. Have snacks and watch a movie. Like real, normal people do on a Friday night.”

“And instead, you’re going to stay on this couch, under blankets, drinking tea until you can talk without croaking.”

“I’m just tired, that’s why I’m losing my voice. I don’t have a cough. I don’t have a runny nose or a fever! It’s just my voice.” Samantha waved her arms, pillow falling to the floor dramatically. At least, she hoped it was dramatic. She feared it was really just pathetic.

“And they live by their voices, so you will stay here until your condition is better. Maybe you’ll be well enough to go play tomorrow. Trust me, I want you to go as much as you want to go. I need you to touch Hobi and then touch me as soon as possible afterwards. I want you to be there, but I also don’t want you making yourself worse. Or spreading it around.”

“You’re right.”

“Of course I am!”

“But I don’t like it!”

“Of course you don’t!” Hyemi stood, putting the tea down next to Samantha and walking back to the kitchen. “I’ve put the rice on a timer. The soup is simmering on the stove, so just grab a bowl when you can and put the rest away for later, alright?” Samantha nodded forlornly. “I’ll be home around 2. Send me a text if you need me to pick up anything on the way home.”

“Thank you Hyemi. You’re really the best,” Samantha croaked.

“I know. Now save your voice and I’ll see you in the morning.” Hyemi slipped out the door and Samantha reached for her phone.

Not going to make it tonight

I’ve lost my voice

Probably just tired from working so much

Hyemi has forbidden me from leaving the couch

She made me tea

So I’ll stay home tonight and rest

Taehyung, true to form, responded with a string of weeping emoji. And that was it. She was disappointed and she had no reason to be. He was probably already in the middle of some intense
video game with Jungkook or Jimin, stuffing his face with who knows what. She was jealous and she didn’t like it.

She wanted him to be worried. She wanted him to fuss over her at least a little, maybe even say something like “rest well” or “I hope you feel better soon.” She wanted him to care that she wasn't coming over as much as she cared that she wasn't coming over. She wanted him to care as much as she did, and that wasn't right. She wasn't missing Taehyung. She missed Matthew. Obviously she missed Matthew. She missed him multiple times a day. Or she used to. It was less now, the missing him. It came at odd moments and caught her by surprise, which was a strange change from the times when anytime she didn’t actively miss him was the rare anomaly in her day. But she was missing him now.

So she petulantly decided to make a list in her head of all the ways that Kim Taehyung was not Matthew. It was the stupidest thing she’d ever thought of, probably, but she was feeling vulnerable and cranky, so she decided to lean into the skid and just convince herself of what she already knew was true. She was still in love with Matthew and Taehyung was nothing like Matthew so all the feelings she had for Taehyung were just friendly.

For one thing, Matthew was a lawyer, or would have been if he’d survived to pass the bar that February. Still, he was a scholar not an entertainer. He was fascinated by justice and equality. He wanted to change the world to be better and safer. He was dedicated to the idea of serving people, helping people, giving back to the world for all the gifts that had been given to him. His mother, a dainty woman who had worked for the Cook County Police Department her entire adult life, had raised him to always be watchful for injustice and inequality. She’d fought her way out of poverty, overcome discrimination and prejudice and wanted to help as many other people as possible. His father, a decorated police officer, was proud and hard-working despite coming from a more than comfortable family. Matthew was the best of both of them. He just wanted to make people’s lives better.

Taehyung, well, he… he was a singer. Who wanted to touch people through his music, which frequently dealt with issues of injustice and societal expectations when it wasn’t all sad love songs. So, no comparison there.

Matthew was a brilliant student, always getting top grades, top of his class, loved by everyone, students and teachers alike. He was driven and focused. He studied hard, worked hard, gave up sleep and fun to make sure he was the best he could be.

Taehyung… he was… just a student. Unremarkable. Popular, yes, but… and well, he did work hard, too. He was driven and focused, giving up sleep and fun to make sure he was the best he could be.

Matthew was funny, always lifting the spirits of his friends and family. Not really class clown, but definitely the one to talk to when life got to be too heavy. He took care of people by making them smile.

Taehyung was…funny too. He made people feel better by making them smile. They both loved puns and jokes designed to make children giggle. They both loved children. And animals.

Matthew would eat anything, though. He once ate a whole octopus as a dare. Taehyung was a picky eater who got grossed out by beans.

Matthew was American. Taehyung was Korean.

Matthew had never and would never pierce his anything. Taehyung had three earrings.
Matthew loved animated movies and old cartoons. Taehyung loved anime.

Matthew loved comic books. Taehyung loved manga.

There just wasn’t a comparison. Matthew was the love of her life and Kim Taehyung was just…

Her destiny.

She scoffed and stood up from the couch abruptly, disgusted with herself for even thinking it. Taehyung was her friend. They were close in a way she never would be with anyone else, but that was all. Maybe it was the similarities with Matthew that she’d only subconsciously noticed that were causing her emotions to be so confusing. She missed the comfort and easy relationship she’d had with Matthew, missed being loved and cared for in that way, but she was still only missing Matthew.

She was startled out of her musings by a knock at the door. She scrunched her nose and stepped cautiously to peer through the peephole. She stared and squinted. It looked like Tae was standing outside her door in a long coat, a big scarf and a paper bag, but that was ridiculous. Her phone chimed from across the room. She shuffled over to grab it, thumbing open the message from Taehyung.

Are you awake?

She made her way back to the door, looking through the peephole again to see the couldn’t-possibly-be-Taehyung staring at his phone.

Yes.

Are you on my doorstep?

If he answered with anything other than a yes, she was going to scream and call the police.

Yes.

Surprise?

Open up, it’s cold.

Samantha yanked the door open and glared at Taehyung. “What are you doing here?” she gasped.

He lifted the bag and shook it a little. “I brought noodle chicken soup.”

“It’s chicken noodle soup, Taehyung,” she said, stepping aside to let him in and closed the door firmly behind him.

“I’ve heard it both ways,” he said. “Let me just text manager-hyung and let him know I’m safely inside.” He was standing awkwardly in her tiny apartment, with a bag of soup by his feet, texting and grinning at her.

“But Hyemi left soup on the stove,” she said lamely, voice shuddering with a squeak as she gestured to the kitchen in confusion. Of all the questions she had, the soup issue was the easiest to resolve.

“You didn’t tell me that.” Taehyung’s smile quickly turned into a pout that was infuriatingly adorable as he shrugged out of his coat, unwinding his scarf and slipping out of his shoes.
Samantha was embarrassed they didn’t have any guest slippers. They never had guests.

“I didn’t know I had to!” she croaked. “You shouldn’t be here. What if I get you sick! You can’t lose your voice. You have to go. Call your manager-hyung and do whatever you need to get safely back to the dorm right this minute, Kim Taehyung!”

“Alright, most of that was so broken and squeaky I’m sure only hamsters and certain small breeds of dogs could understand it, so I’m just going to go get a bowl and spoon. Go sit on the couch and I’ll bring this over.”

It was a sign of how shocked she was that she obeyed, not fussing about a stranger rummaging through her cupboards in search of a place setting. Her mother would be horrified that she was letting a guest help themselves to her kitchen, but she didn’t have the fight in her at the moment. She also didn’t have much of a voice, so she grabbed her phone and did the thing she always teased people for doing. She texted the person who was in the next room, who she could see as she typed.

What are you doing here?
You can’t get sick.
Go home.
Thank you for the soup.

She heard Taehyung’s phone dinging as she sent each message.

“Hold on, I think I’ve finally uncovered the secret location of the spoons.” Taehyung returned to the living room with the paper bag and a spoon, but no bowl.

No bowl?

“Are you always this impatient?” he asked as he pulled the container of soup out, looking down at his pocket as his phone chimed.

Yes

His phone chimed in response. “I’ll take that as a yes,” he chuckled as he set the spoon down and turned to face her, pulling his phone out of the pocket of his oversized grey hoodie, the one she’d seen so many times in her dreams, and online. This time though, she thought it looked extra comfy, like she could just crawl right in there with him and be warm. Her eyes widened at the thought, and she hoped she covered her surprise well by pulling herself back on the couch as Taehyung reached for her, a mask stretched between his hands.

“Look, I don’t want to get sick, but if you’re just tired then I can at least come hang out while you rest and eat some soup.” He bit his lip in concentration as he slipped the mask over her ears and adjusted it over her chin and nose. She tried not to think about the chills she got from his cold fingertips against her ears. “Cute,” he proclaimed, booping her on her now mask-covered nose. He reached one hand back into his hoodie and pulled out another mask, slipping it over his face easily. “And now we match.”

Samantha was grateful for the mask hiding half her face because she couldn’t hide her grin at the monkey print mask he was wearing. At least they would look ridiculous together. She eyed the spoon on the coffee table and raised her eyebrows.
“Alright, alright, hold on. Let me get my...oh.” Taehyung was staring at his phone, catching up on her messages. “Good point. Well, fine, take it off, eat your soup, then put it back on.” He stood suddenly. “Where are the movies?” he asked, eyes scanning the living room.

Samantha pointed to the appropriate shelf with the spoon before pulling the container of soup forward. Chicken noodle soup. The quintessential cure for just about everything. It was a really sweet gesture, one she didn’t want to think too hard about.

“Hey, where are all of your movies? The American ones?”

**In a storage unit in Illinois.**

“Oh, right. Well, how about this one?” Taehyung said, waving the box of Tazza2: The Hidden Card in the air.

Samantha looked up and shrugged.

**Fine by me. I like TOP**

“Your roommate really has a thing for spy movies, huh?”

**And horror**

Taehyung grabbed a pillow from the end of the couch and sat down as far away from Samantha as possible. “Finish your soup and put your mask on. I don’t want to have to hover all the way over here all night.”

**Just press play and leave me to eat in peace**

Taehyung pulled his mask down just long enough to stick his tongue out at her but pushed the button anyway. Samantha focused on eating. The soup was good. More vegetables than she was used to, and it was udon noodles but still good.

**Thanks again for the soup, by the way**

**It’s pretty good**

Taehyung glanced at his phone. “Thanks. I asked Jin-hyung where to get some, so I’ll tell him you liked it.”

**Why aren’t you at home playing video games with the other members?**

“Because we were gonna hang out tonight.” Taehyung kept his eyes fixed on the TV and his phone, never looking at her. Samantha lifted the container to drink the last of the broth but kept her eyes fixed on him. It wasn’t the answer she expected or wanted. She didn’t know what she wanted, other than Matthew, which she couldn’t have.

**How did you even get here?**

“I had a manager drive me. He’ll come pick me up when it’s time to go home. Now, stop asking silly questions and watch the movie.”

Samantha slipped the mask back on, not thinking about the fact that Taehyung had said she looked
cute and turned her attention to the TV. Watching Choi Seunghyun was a good excuse to not think about how weird it was to be sitting on a couch in Hyemi’s apartment watching a movie with Taehyung. She tucked her feet underneath her, trying to take up as little space as possible. She grabbed a blanket from the basket next to the couch and tossed one to Taehyung before tucking another around her legs. He sighed and pulled his feet up on the couch, spreading the blanket over them.

Samantha looked at the little corner of his blanket that was draped over a corner of her blanket. Overlapping blankets was hardly intimate, but her heart was racing. She watched the movie intently, feeling her ears grow warm with embarrassment as the characters on the screen started clawing at one another and removing clothing. She kept her focus on the movie, not on Taehyung, who had somehow wormed his feet underneath her thighs and was slowly inching his way down the couch in an attempt to get comfortable. Only that, only get comfortable. He wasn’t trying to get closer to her.

“When does Hyemi get home?” Taehyung asked as the movie reached a lull that seemed like the end but they both knew was only a false alarm for the devastating scenes ahead. Samantha held up two fingers while looking at the clock in the kitchen. It was almost eleven. Not late at all for a weekend evening, but here on the couch, not cuddling, not even close, but touching underneath their own blankets, it felt suspiciously date-like. Not first-date-like, though she had enough nervous trembling when she thought too hard about the kissing on her TV, but date-like once you got past the counting of dates. Date-like in the way that she and Matthew would hang out in the evenings as he studied and she watched trashy romance dramas and shouted at the screen in Korean. It was comfortable which made her uncomfortable.

“Water?” she squeaked as she launched herself off the couch, scrambling out of the blanket and racing to the kitchen, tugging her mask down and sucking in fresh air. At least her hands weren’t shaking as she grabbed a glass and filled it. Her hands were steady and she was calm. Everything was fine. It was perfectly fine to be enjoying an evening on the couch with a friend, comfortably watching a movie under blankets. Separate blankets. No snuggling. Just watching a movie. She gulped her water down, ignoring the curious look Taehyung was giving her from the couch.

“No, I’m fine. Thank you. Do you want me to pause?” He was sitting up now, his hood pulled up, but he’d unzipped the front a bit, maybe he’d gotten too warm under the blanket, but his clavicles were...there. They were right there, just hanging out in her living room, on her couch, on Taehyung on her couch. She shook her head and shuffled back, focusing on picking up and arranging her blanket exactly the way she wanted it.

Once she was settled, Taehyung paused the movie and twisted in his spot to stare at her. She blinked slowly, trying not to be intimidated by the intensity of his gaze. There was nowhere to look but right at his eyes, with his hair hanging covering his eyebrows and his mask up over his nose. He was just staring at her with an inscrutable look, then suddenly he flopped, resting his head on her thigh and sighing contentedly. She froze, pulling her arms up and letting him wriggle into place. She could have shoved him off. She could have stood back up and found another place to sit. She could have, but she didn’t, because she realized as he settled in that she wanted him there. She wanted him to snuggle in and get comfortable the way she had felt comfortable all night when she wasn’t too busy thinking about how uncomfortable she was with feeling so comfortable.

“Is it okay?” he asked, his voice soft and quiet.

She nodded, then realizing he couldn’t see her with his face to the TV, she grabbed her phone. It also gave her something to do with her hands.
It’s fine.

Press play

She held her phone to her chest, so she could easily respond if he spoke again. It wasn’t at all because she didn’t know where to put her hands. It was only so she would be ready in case he talked to her. She hoped he wouldn’t. His voice reverberated against her leg in a painfully distracting manner. It had been a long time since she’d been this close to anyone. She and Hyemi overlapped on the couch sometimes. She had gotten tangled up with all the girls in dance, but that was dance and so a different part of her brain.

This was… snuggling. Taehyung was snuggling her leg. Just her leg. She tried to focus on the movie. Tried to watch the action and drama but all she could think about was how nice this felt and how horrible it felt to feel nice with someone other than Matthew.

She tried to logic herself out of it the way Hyemi would. Matthew wasn’t here, would never be here again, would want her to be happy. Taehyung was nice and comfortable and safely uninterested. He had legions of women throwing themselves at him and was too busy to date. It was actually kind of perfect. She was a bit surprised she hasn’t thought of it before. What better way to test the waters of having a crush again than to do it on someone unavailable? Suddenly, she felt like a genius.

Holding her phone lightly in her right hand, she let her left drift down to rest on Taehyung’s shoulder. When he didn’t immediately cringe or shrug her off, she let out the breath she’d been unconsciously holding. This was fine. This was comfortable. She was not in any way full of fluttery feelings, feelings that had been dormant under layers of sadness and grief now stretching and waking up. No, that was not happening. This was just a comfortable evening with a friend. A very attractive friend. She willed herself to look ahead, watch the screen just like he was. Her phone vibrated in her hand, startling her.

You’re soft

She smiled. Taehyung was sneaky. She hadn’t even noticed him texting.

Thanks

I’m comfortable too

She hoped he would understand all the ways she meant that. Hoped he felt it too, the ease and warmth of this new thing they were doing. On the screen, Ham Dae Gil started to take off his clothes and Samantha was very glad Taehyung couldn’t see her face right now. Taehyung reached up to slide his hood off his head, his hand brushing against hers where it rested on his shoulder. She thought about moving out of his way, but she was too slow. He grabbed her fingers and gave them a quick squeeze before tucking his hand back into his pocket. She bit her lip and watched the movie, trying to remember the plot, the twists she knew were coming. She and Hyemi had squealed and held hands the first time they’d watched this. It was very different now. As the tension on screen mounted, she gave into the temptation to slide her fingers into his hair. It was as soft and silky as she knew, from her dreams, it would be. Taehyung made a tiny sound, somewhere in the back of his throat, that she thought was a happy one.

Is this ok?

It feels different
touching you with my own hands

She’d already hit send when she realized how those words might be taken, out of context. She fumbled to quickly type up a one-handed correction, not wanting to move the hand now resting on his head in case that made things even weirder. Was it weirder to still be touching him or weirder to stop touching him?

It feels different being touched by you

It was an incredibly unhelpful response. Did he know what she meant, just that this was different than their dreams? Did he understand? How could she make it clear that she wasn’t trying to be suggestive or flirtatious? She was only trying to explain away any confusion or maybe there was more truth in the words than she wanted to admit. She left her awkward explanation unsent. It would probably only make things worse.

While on screen everyone was shooting everyone else, Samantha was listening to the beating of her traitorous heart and tracing the piercings on Taehyung’s ear, the little scar from his gauges, as if to remind herself that this was Taehyung in her lap, not Matthew. As if she needed the reminder.

The credits rolled and Taehyung stretched his arm and sat up slowly, rubbing his face and blinking slowly at her. “It’s a good movie. Thanks for watching with me.”

Samantha just nodded, not trusting her squeaky voice or her fragile thoughts. She stood and reached for her phone, but Taehyung grabbed her wrist gently.

“I’m going to text my ride. Let you actually rest.” Taehyung dropped her hand, and sat twisting his rings around on his finger, looking at the ground and his sleeves, at anything other than Samantha. She chewed on her lip, wishing her voice worked, suddenly uncomfortable with the silence and the closeness that felt artificial without the background of the movie. “If you… If you want, if you’re feeling better, do you want to do this again tomorrow?”

Samantha squinted down at him, gesturing at the apartment around them.

“Yes, here, if that’s okay. It’s nice to get some space without all the other members. It’s… It’s nice to spend some time with just you.” Taehyung finally looked up at her, standing slowly, reaching for her hand again. He squeezed it once as he walked to the door. Samantha followed, watching him put on his shoes and coat and scarf as though he were some mathematical equation she could figure out if only she held her head at the correct angle. Taehyung turned to her, hood back up over his head, only his dark eyes peeking out above his silly monkey mask. He tugged it down gently and Samantha was briefly grateful for the distraction of seeing more of his face, but then that distraction became distracting when she realized she was staring at his mouth. “I know this is not a lot, but things are going to be really busy soon. I want to see you as much as I can.”

Samantha watched his mouth form the words, heard them and understood them but couldn’t really believe what they meant. So she nodded, again, feeling like a silly bobble-head toy. She reached up to peel the mask off, but again Taehyung reached for her hand to stop her.

“Keep it.” He was staring at her again, long eyelashes fluttering as he thought too hard about something she couldn’t imagine. He looked down at their hands then back up at her face and with that stupid monkey mask tucked under his chin, he leaned forward. Samantha wanted to pull back, to get out of the way, to do something other than stare at him, wide-eyed as he kissed her mask-covered nose gently, resting his forehead against hers for a moment.

He pulled back and grinned at her, the close-mouth smile that she knew was keeping a thousand
secrets from spilling out. “It’s not a lot, Sam, but I really like what we have. I really like… well, I-"
Taehyung’s phone chimed in his pocket. He reached for it, thumbing across the screen. “Oh, my
ride is here.”

Samantha wanted to reach out and grab his face, shake his shoulders, stare into his eyes until he
finished that thought. Instead she smiled behind her mask, hoping it reached her eyes enough.
Taehyung peeled his fingers away from her wrist, opening the door and waving one hand out into
the cold night. “I’ll see you soon, okay? Sleep well.” And then he was gone.

She stood with her forehead pressed to the door, willing the cold to leach the heat from her skin
faster. She was flushed and flustered. Her heart was out of control and she didn’t know if she
wanted to stop it.
He Freaks and She Freaks

Chapter Notes

don't worry, I promise... it gets better

Taehyung was texting the members, trying to sound casual, not like he’d almost kissed a girl, a fan, while alone in her apartment when she was potentially contagious in a voice-stealing way, and also maybe not as interested as he thought he possibly was. Jimin and Jungkook were at the gym. Yoongi was holed up in the studio, as though there were anything left to do on this new album. Maybe he was already writing the things for the next one. Seemed likely. Hoseok was in the practice room with teacher Sungdeuk going over choreography. That left Namjoon or Seokjin. Namjoon was the first to respond, extending an invitation to the floor of his room for unloading his troubles.

Taehyung wasn’t troubled. There was nothing to be troubled about. He spent his nights dreaming of a girl who he sometimes dreamed of… as… living her life, and she dreamed of him, and now they had hung out, alone, in a small villa in Seoul, watching a racy movie that definitely didn’t give him any feelings in his underpants area, roughly two weeks before a major comeback. Everything was obviously fine.

Still, he shuffled into Namjoon’s room, pushing aside some of the mountain of stuff on Jungkook’s bed to make a space to sit. Namjoon had barely looked up, pen scratching over paper as he waved Taehyung in. “What’s going on in that head of yours today?” Namjoon asked, the words familiar after so many repetitions.

“Namjoon-hyung, do you ever… I mean we always…you know, sing about love and stuff, but do you ever wish you had… the time… to really do it? Fall in love, I mean?” Taehyung mumbled, chewing on his bottom lip between phrases.

“Sure. Sort of. It’s kinda lonely having no one but you assholes to share all this glittering fame with, but on the other hand, I can barely keep my head above water most days, so I don’t really have much, you know, to offer, for a real relationship, you know? I barely make time to call my mom most days, so where would I find time to add a woman into that mix? Plus, I have to give my everything to Bangtan, right? To the music and the promoting, and the producing, and the writing, and being a good leader, and being a good dancer, and all that, so I don’t have room in my brain, let alone my heart, for a girl. All I would have to talk to her about is stuff she would only barely understand, unless she was an idol too, and then there’s the whole scandal aspect and if she’s an idol then she doesn’t have time either, so you know… it’s just me and my computer.” Taehyung raised his eyebrows, trying to keep focused on Namjoon’s rambling monologue. “I mean for music, Taehyung, I mean for music. You pervert.”

“I’m not the pervert in this situation, hyung.”

“Why the sudden interest in the fairer sex, my little Taehyungie?”

Taehyung was quiet for a moment, letting all the things Namjoon had said sink in. He knew there was no time in his life to add anything more. He was already sacrificing sleep, and sometimes it seemed, his sanity, to make his dreams of being a singer come true. He hadn’t much thought about
the fact that physically and emotionally he didn’t have anything left to give anyone that wasn’t
Bangtan or BigHit.

But he didn’t have to worry about Samantha not understanding, because she lived it with him,
every night when she slept, she lived the stress and the exhaustion. She knew all that part so well
already. Was that enough, to sustain this… whatever it was, for as long as it would take? There
wasn’t an explicit dating ban in their contract, but it was definitely the unspoken rule. Anytime
anyone spent a little too long talking to a fan, or staff, or a trainee, it was assumed they must have
too much free time and suddenly found themselves with extra duties and responsibilities that kept
them much too busy to even think about continuing such friendships. But this…

“TaeTae, why the sudden questions? What’s on your mind?” Namjoon was looking at him now,
with that piercing gaze he usually reserved for cameras when he was trying to be extra charismatic,
but Taehyung knew he was just trying to see to the heart of things. Namjoon wasn’t particularly
perceptive when it came to people, at least not the people he was close to, but when it came to the
big picture, the sweeping grand overtures of human nature, Namjoon was practically an expert.

“So, this thing with Sam, it’s…” Taehyung let his voice trail off, not sure what he wanted to say.
The weight of guilt, of possibly putting Bangtan at risk over something that he had no control over,
but no one would believe, was stifling.

“Well that’s a horse of a different color, Taehyung.”

“A what?”

“It’s just a saying. What I mean is it’s not the same. You’re not dating her, and management is on
board as much as they can be, so it’s safe. Relatively speaking. None of this is safe. It could all
blow up in our faces at any moment, you know. Fragile as glass, as permanent as smoke. It’s all
just a phase anyway.” Taehyung controlled his face, just barely keeping his eyes from rolling right
out of his head. “Is that what you’re worried about? Sam?”

“It would be such a scandal, Namjoon-hyung, if anyone ever found out about it. She’s a fan. She’s
American, and the netizens would have a party while they eviscerated her, and me, and the fans,
they would… they would freak out. They would hate me. I can’t do that to her. I can’t do that to
Bangtan. I can’t--”

“What about you, Taehyung?” Namjoon interrupted. Taehyung blinked, train of thought
evaporating under the force of his leader’s stare.

“I don’t… I don’t understand.” Taehyung’s face was blank as the thoughts spun out of control
behind his eyes. Wasn’t this what Namjoon should be worried about? The future of Bangtan that
Taehyung was putting at risk?

Namjoon stood up from his desk and crossed to the bed, nudging Taehyung aside with his hip.
“I’ve heard you talk about Sam, about Bangtan, about what you think is best for her, for us, but can
you stop for just a minute and tell me what you, Taehyung, Kim Taehyung, want out of all this?”
Ever the gentle giant, afraid to break things just by touching, Namjoon was a bundle of awkward
wrapped in the kind of consideration that only someone used to making mistakes could have for
those around him.

“Does it matter?” Taehyung kept his face as blank as possible. He was horrible at handling
disappointment. It was so much easier to never let anyone know you were hoping than to get your
hopes up only to have them crushed.
“Yes, it does. It’s not your job to worry about the future of Bangtan. That’s my job. You just worry about you, about doing the best that you can as often as you can. That’s your job.”

“Well, right, but doesn’t that mean not putting Bangtan at risk by creating an opportunity for scandal?”

“You aren’t going to mess up Bangtan for some crush. I’ve seen you walk away from casual friendships before. I know you know how to put Bangtan first.”

“But this is different, hyung. I can’t walk away.”

“You didn’t ask for these dreams. When you figured it out, you handled it by talking to us, talking to management and getting everything sorted as best you could. You’ve been discreet and it’s been fine. You managed to pull off a date in a public place. In America. And no one knew anything about it. She’s already a part of your life, right? She’s going to be there in one way or another, so why not make it the way you want it to be? What do you want it to be, Taehyangie?”

Taehyung looked at him, feeling the spinning giddiness from earlier resurface.

“I don’t really know, hyung. I think I was hoping that you would just tell me what to do. Cut ties and never see her again or something.” Taehyung shrugged, looking sheepish.

“You know it doesn’t work that way, TaeTae.”

“Yeah, I know, but I just want someone to tell me what to do.” Taehyung sighed, trying to worm his way towards Jungkook’s pillow through a tangled mess of plain t-shirts and hoodies.

“No one can. Hell, no one even really understands what the hell is going on.”

“Me neither!” Taehyung wailed, voice muffled by a sudden avalanche of beanies.

“So, how was your date?”

“That’s the thing, hyung! It wasn’t supposed to be a date. It was just supposed to be a thing. Hanging out. Normal.” Taehyung took a deep breath, shaking his head and smoothing his hair back into place over his forehead. He was twisting his rings around again, not able to look Namjoon in the eye as he thought about the events of the evening. “Not a big deal, but then she looked extra cute all snuggled up in this fuzzy pink blanket with nothing but her big brown eyes poking out and the movie was tense and there was nudity and she was running her fingers through my hair and I don’t even know what was going on but it felt different and I have no idea how she really feels about me. I don’t want to ruin anything. It’s not like I can get away from her, even if I wanted to, which I don’t. She’s still going to be dreaming of me and I really, really miss dreaming of her. I miss her. I want to see her all the time and I can’t and that’s hard and if this is what love is like then I don’t know why anyone does it because this sucks and she’s already had her heart broken into a million pieces so I can’t do anything to hurt her. I just can’t. But I like her, hyung. I like her, but like you said, I don’t have anything to give her.” Taehyung sighed, looking up to see Namjoon smiling at him fondly. “Besides, she likes Yoongi-hyung best anyway,” Taehyung muttered as an afterthought.

“You’re adorable, you know that?”

“Hyung, I’m serious! I almost kissed her tonight. If she hadn’t been wearing that stupid mask, I might have! That changes everything, doesn’t it?”

“Maybe, but you can’t get away from her so you’d have to find someway to work it out, right?”
“But even though we’re connected, that doesn’t mean… does it?”

“That might have been a full thought, but it wasn’t a full sentence.”

“So, we’re connected, right? Our brains are connected by something and she’s got this weird family history thing going on, but other than that, what do we really have? We know each other almost too well. There’s no mystery. I know she poops! I’ve pooped in her body which is maybe the weirdest thing I’ve ever said.”

“Not even close, Taehyung.”

“Whatever, hyung, you know what I mean. How can I be flattery and nervous around her when I know that she gets gassy when she eats broccoli and banana milk makes her gag and she hates running but does it anyway, and I know the way everything moves and bounces. I know her whole body already.”

“Whoa, more information than I really need.”

“But these are old married people things to know is what I’m trying to say. These aren’t first-date things. How can you even have a relationship at all when you already know all the little details that make people too familiar to feel romantic?” Taehyung grabbed a spare beanie and began spinning it around his fingers.

“So you don’t want to have anything romantic with her? You’re not attracted to her in that way?”

“No, she’s not even my type. She’s not unattractive but she isn’t…” Taehyung stopped because he suddenly didn’t know what he was trying to say. It was true. She wasn’t his usual type. He didn’t even think she was pretty when he first saw her. He thought she was too big, too tall, her face not quite what he usually was drawn to, but now he didn’t feel like any of that was true anymore. She wasn’t too tall. She was just the right height for leaning in to kiss. She wasn’t too big. She was soft and perfect for snuggling. She wasn’t pretty in a delicate way. She was pretty in a bold and fascinating way.

“You’re thinking really hard over there. Don’t hurt yourself.” Namjoon was smirking at him but Taehyung didn’t care.

“Do you even believe in soulmates, hyung?”

“Sure. I don’t think everyone has one. No way everyone could be that lucky, but I think they exist.”

Taehyung took a deep breath, bit his lip and blew it out slowly as he asked the question that had been bugging him all night. “Do you think Sam could be mine? My soulmate?”

Namjoon held his gaze for an uncomfortably long time, just staring at him, as if he could read Taehyung’s mind through the erratic blinking. “She could be, yeah.”

Taehyung nodded solemnly. “Then I need to figure this out. Thanks for being here, hyung. I… I really appreciate it.”

“No problem, little dreamer. Now go to sleep yourself. We still have a lot of work to do tomorrow. Don’t waste this rare chance to rest. We won’t get too many of these before the comeback.”

Taehyung nodded obediently as he walked back to his room. He tried to list out the things he knew were true. One, he was sometimes, when their schedules allowed, dreaming of life through Sam’s
eyes. Her life through her eyes. Two, he really liked doing that and her. He really liked her. Three, she was dreaming his life through his eyes. Suddenly he felt all the blood rush out of his face. She dreamed his life. He’d left her apartment, told her to get some rest, and then come to confess his feelings to Namjoon while wallowing in the destruction of Jungkook’s bed. It was hardly the most embarrassing thing he’d ever done while she was riding shotgun in his head, but it still had him fumbling for his phone to see if she’d sent the standard sleep warning.

Sure enough, there it was. The little emoticon of him, School Luv Affair era, in front of an cartoon moon and stars. Well fuck, he thought grimly. There was no way to salvage his dignity now. He walked out of his room and into the bathroom, flipping the light on and staring at his own reflection. She couldn’t read his thoughts, but he’d said enough to Namjoon that she would be able to fill in the blanks. Fuck.

“Hey there, uh, Sam.” He felt so stupid talking to himself but that didn’t stop him. “So, I… uh… hope you’re resting well. Sorry if I made things awkward tonight. I had a really good time. I said that already, right? Well, I did, and, I hope you did, too.” He squinted, leaning forward, searching his reflection, as though he might see some hint of Sam in his own eyes. “I don’t know how much of my talk with Namjoon you were here for, but, I guess we should, you know, talk some more, about stuff, if you want, tomorrow.” He smiled what he hoped was a reassuring and confident smile, though he felt neither confident nor reassured. He felt ridiculous and eager and excited and confused. He sighed and went back to collapse onto his bed. He wanted to sleep but his thoughts were spinning. He didn’t want to sleep because he didn’t want to dream his own dreams. He, very selfishly, wanted Sam to wake up so he could dream her life for a while, see if that brought any clarity to the situation.

What had she been thinking during the movie? Did she know how good it felt to have her fingers in his hair? Did she know how good it felt to just be close to her again? Was she startled when he kissed her nose? Did she know what he was going to say before he got interrupted by his phone? Did she know? It was all he wanted to know.

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Samantha woke up slowly, the details of a strange nightmare involving some squid/hyena hybrid floating through her mind. It was early still. Not even four in the morning. She should go back to sleep, rolled over to get comfortable but then sat up quickly, grasping at the falling blankets and letting out a squeak as memories of her other dreams pushed themselves to the front of her mind. Her voice was still shot, but she stood up quickly, wrapping a blanket around her like a robe and tiptoed out to the living room to pace and freak out without worrying about waking Hyemi.

She’d laid in bed, certain that it would take her hours to fall asleep, with her heart still pounding from the chaste nose kiss and Kim Taehyung’s stupendously beautiful face. She was convinced that she would be wracked with guilt, tossing and turning while she berated herself for letting someone into the heart she’d promised to give to Matthew. Instead, she’d fallen asleep mid-scathing mental comment and dreamed of Taehyung, sitting on a bed covered in piles and piles of who knows what, talking to Namjoon. Confessing to Namjoon. Saying things he probably didn’t intend for her to hear, but he had to know she was sleeping. She’d sent the sleep warning. He himself had told her to get some rest.

But in the swirling mess of emotions she felt, her own and Taehyung’s all a tangled ball of fear and regret and doubt and nervousness and affection, she also felt the dawning mortification as he had the realization, checked his phone, and then talked to her in the mirror. She wanted to laugh, remembering when she’d done the same thing, but it wasn’t funny now. She knew and he knew she knew and it was all going to get messy.
She thought about texting him, but she didn’t have the slightest idea what she wanted to say. She wanted to take a shower, but she didn’t want to wake Hyemi up, so she shuffled to the kitchen to make some more tea. A watched pot never boils, she thought, but she and Taehyung were watching each other all the time. She looked at her phone and saw that Taehyung had finally decided to try sleeping about an hour ago. Was he watching her right now?

“Hi, Taehyung,” she whispered into the empty kitchen. She wished, not for the first time, that there was some way to know when he was in her head. A tingle or a tickle or a twitch that gave it away. She grabbed her tea, and Nana’s notebook, and headed to the couch to wrap up in her favorite blanket. For a moment she lost herself in thinking of the night before, sitting in this same spot, with Taehyung in her lap. She’d been warm and content and nervous.

If she wasn’t going to sleep, and since she couldn’t shower, she decided to add some more details to Nana’s notebook. She’d been avoiding putting her own story in here, not that she didn’t believe it, but it was more permanent if she wrote it down. She was still a little skittish of permanent things, but she didn’t think Taehyung was going away any time soon. She flipped through the pages, thinking of all the generations that had done this before her, without the benefits of technology. She wasn’t the first Dreamer to find herself dreaming in another language. At least she had the benefit of being conversationally fluent in that language.

She wondered what Taehyung really thought about all this, if he really did enjoy their connection as much as he said he did. She turned to a blank page and picked up a pen from the cup beside the couch. All the other accounts had started with a brief description of the tragedy that had caused the scar that had started the dreams. Some woman had scars that covered their whole palms, some lost fingers, or the whole hand. One had escaped a fire that had killed her whole family. In comparison, sometimes Samantha felt grateful for the relatively minor injury she’d suffered both to her hand and her heart. They didn’t feel minor to her, but she could at least now appreciate that there were worse things that could have happened.

She tapped the pen on the page. She wanted to keep things as simple as possible so she just wrote down the bare minimum of facts. February 13, 2014. Car accident. Fiancé died, hand cut on metal of car door. She stared at the ink, wondering how so many emotions were contained in so few words. She had some distance from it now. In three months the second anniversary would roll around and she would spend it working instead of giggly and drunk. There was no way to know what she would be doing when the third anniversary came. Or the fourth.

She twirled the pen in her hands, contemplating what to write next. How much of this story was she willing to put down here for future generations to read, assuming she ever had a future generation to give it to? Maybe there was a distant relative out there somewhere who would need it. The idea of someday having a family of her own was still too painful to think about for long. Began dreaming of Kim Taehyung, Korean musician. It was true in the most minimal sense. She shut the book and put the pen away, unable to contemplate putting any more of this crazy story into words. What more was there to say?

She was slowly falling out of love with Matthew. The truth of it was sobering and she grabbed her tea, wrapping her fingers around the almost too hot ceramic, drinking too fast, hoping the heat would help erase the chill settling in her bones. She still loved him so much it hurt when she thought of all the things she’d never get to do again, but a part of her recognized the truth that she wasn’t really in love with him anymore. That hurt too. More than she thought it would, because if that were true, then shouldn’t there be more healing, more distance and space and less searing guilt in the pit of her stomach?

She set her mug down and pulled her shaking hands, still warm, in and wrapped them around her
elbows, squeezing herself tightly, as though to hold the pieces of herself together. She chewed on her bottom lip and tried to just let the tears fall without holding them back. She knew, from more experience than she wanted to, that the full body sobs would come in time and it hurt less in the morning if she didn’t fight them. It wasn’t quite like losing him all over again, but just like the decision to move her ring to her right hand, it felt like letting him go.

It was too early to grab the tissues, but she did it anyway, clutching one in each fist in preparation for when her nose decided to join the party and start running. She wasn’t sure if she wanted to know if Taehyung was still asleep or not, if he was here, dreaming this moment. She wanted to reassure him that she was fine, that this crying wasn’t his fault or anything. But it was sort of his fault. If he hadn’t snuggled up to her on the couch, she wouldn’t have spent so much time thinking about how nice it was to be touching someone again. She wouldn’t have been so satisfied and comfortable that when Taehyung leaned in, her first thought was to lean in too, meet him halfway, and maybe it was only the mask that stopped her.

Wasn’t that just what Taehyung had said? That he’d nearly kissed her, but stopped because of the mask. That was a surprise. It would change everything, wouldn’t it? She was honestly surprised that she had even considered it. Kissing him. Health concerns aside, she couldn’t even imagine what it would be like. He was so delicate and pretty, nearly the opposite of Matthew’s square-jaw and broad shoulders. Taehyung had so much swagger and charisma on stage and yet she knew the truth of his goofy, off the wall personality off stage, the flights of fancy that left him quiet and serious. He’d also said that she wasn’t his type and that he didn’t find her attractive, which she knew already. She already knew him better than she had known Matthew when they’d kissed for the first time after a midnight showing of “Rocky Horror Picture Show” that had left him blushing and flustered, just like the Brad on screen.

Thinking about their first kiss helped her smile through the tears, but all too quickly it brought to mind memories of their last kiss, at a stop light on some tiny San Francisco street, the lights glittering on wet pavement, Matthew laughing as he pulled on her sleeve to coax her closer. It hadn’t been a heated kiss, not like the way he’d kissed her under the foggy night sky, as though trying to ignite a fire under her skin to keep the February chill at bay. Tears spilled down her cheeks as she thought, for what must be the thousandth time, about how things would have been different if they’d ever made it to that hotel, how she would be different now. Really, nothing would be different, other than maybe having some peace about not missing out on something, or maybe the knowledge of what she was missing would be worse. She had never come to a definite conclusion on that topic.

She sniffled and began the work of wiping up her face. She looked up guiltily when Hyemi opened the door to the bedroom. “Hey, sorry, didn’t mean to wake you,” she said, voice still croaking and cracking.

“I think that was supposed to be English, but I’m too tired to figure it out. Scoot over.” Hyemi sat heavily on her end of the couch, tipping over to rest limply on the arm of the couch. “So, why are we awake?”

“Miss what, friend?” Her voice hardly cracked at all.

“The part where you need me? Did I miss it?”
“Oh, that.” Samantha ran her fingers through her hair, pulling on the strands while she gathered her thoughts. “No, I don't think so. I was just thinking.”

“About Matthew?”

“Mostly. Also about Taehyung. Tonight was a little confusing. He was just so warm and near to me and it was nice, but then--”

Hyemi sat up suddenly. “Samantha! I told you to stay home!”

“I did! I stayed right here in this couch. Taehyung came here. Apparently your address is on file because I live here. Crazy security. Anyway, he came with soup--”

“Kim Taehyung was in my home? Did he bring Hobi?” Hyemi asked, shaking Samantha’s arm.

“No, he just brought soup. And masks. And we watched a movie on the couch.”

“My couch? Kim Taehyung was on my couch?”

“Yes, he sat right where you’re sitting.”

“I can’t believe you didn’t tell me he was coming over! What kind of friend are you?”

“I didn’t know he was coming over! You think I would invite him here, when I’m sick? I looked like twice-warmed death, I’m sure, and he shows up in his stupidly good looking wool coat, carrying soup like some sort of kpop Florence Nightingale.”

“Who?”

“Nevermind. It was a surprise to me is all I’m saying. And it wasn’t really a big deal. He just watched Tazza 2 and then he left.” Hyemi eyed her skeptically and Samantha felt her cheeks growing warm. “We sat on the couch and he kinda used my lap for a pillow. And maybe I ran my fingers through his hair.” Samantha wished her voice would give out again so she would have a legitimate excuse to quit talking but the worst seemed to be over. She silently cursed the healing effects of tea and bit her lip while Hyemi glared at her.

“You snuggled him?”

“No. He snuggled me.”

“And you were a willing participant?”

“Yes! It felt nice! I miss cuddling!”

“Alright, as long as you’re happy, I’m happy.”

“And then he sort of kissed me,” Samantha mumbled into her mostly empty mug of tea.

“You’re going to have to say that again because I thought you said he kissed you.” Lips pursed, arms crossed, Hyemi was every bit as intimidating as Samantha’s own mother would have been in this situation. Samantha just nodded as she set her mug down.

“On my nose. Over the mask, so no risk of contamination or anything. It wasn’t a big deal, it was just a spur of the moment thing, a whim, just a silly impulse.” She tangled and untangled the fringe of the blanket, hoping the words sounded truer to Hyemi than they felt to her.
“He, on a whim, decided to kiss your nose.” Hyemi’s eyebrows had climbed all the way up her forehead.

“Yes, and then he left and I went to bed.”

“Where you writhed in guilty agony for hours before dropping into an exhausted sleep, torturing yourself over something that logically makes no sense?”

Samantha glared at her overly perceptive friend, feeling smug satisfaction in being able to say, “Actually, I fell right asleep. Oh, put your eyebrows away, it’s true and it surprised the hell out of me, too. I thought I’d be awake all night but I passed right out.” She tugged on her hair again, struggling to put words to the things she’d seen and felt.

“Did you dream of him? Don’t just nod at me, say something!” Hyemi bopped her on the knee with a spare pillow, one of the red flowered ones Samantha had brought from Chicago, a silly space-devouring indulgence.

“Yeah, I dreamed he was talking to Namjoon. About me.”

“Oooh! Eavesdropping in the best, creepiest way! Did he know you were there?”

“Apparently not until later.”

“Didn’t you send the thingy? Your ‘sleeping now’ thingy?”

“I did, but I guess he missed it? I don’t know, what I remember is walking up some stairs, into the dorm, heading straight to Namjoon’s room and making a space to sit on Jungkook’s bed.”

Hyemi uncrossed her arms, reaching out to hold Samantha’s hand, her smaller hand wrapped around the fist that was holding onto the tissues. “So what did he say? To Namjoon, what did he say? What has you out here spinning your wheels before dawn?”

“Lots of things.” She shrugged. “About how he couldn’t put Bangtan at risk by dating me, how he wanted to protect me, that he likes me, some stuff about soulmates and I’m not his type, there’s no mystery because we know each other too well, like old married people with no romance—”

“Wait, hold up, rewind, he likes you? He said that? He said he likes you?”

“Yes, but he also said that I wasn’t his type, so I don’t know what to believe.”

“Who gives a shit about type? People are going to fall in love with whoever they want, type or not.”

“No one is talking about love, Hyemi. I am not in love with Taehyung.”

“I know, I know. You still love Matthew,” Hyemi said softly, squeezing her hand. Samantha bit her lip to keep it from trembling.

“Yeah I do, but not as much as I used to.” Her voice broke again, and the tears were back. She tried to wipe at them with the back of her hand, ignoring the tissues crumpled in her fists. “Or not in the same way, I guess.”

“But that’s a good thing, right?” Hyemi asked, stroking her arm gently. Samantha just nodded and cried harder.

“I’m not happy about it though. A part of me just wants to go on loving him just like I did forever,
let my heart just be the way it was and never, ever change, even though I know that’s ridiculous and that actually really hurts a lot and isn’t how I want to live my life, but I just can’t think about loving somebody else right now either.”

“But you said it, Sam, no one is talking about love. Taehyung said he likes you, that’s all. He’s not asking you to run away and marry him. Actually, he’s kind of perfect for you.”

“Don’t start with the Adele thing again.” Samantha rolled her eyes, but smiled despite herself.

“No, I’m serious. This kind of relationship is actually perfect. He’s super busy, so you wouldn’t be spending a ton of time together, so you have no choice but to take things slow. Unlike every other long distance relationship, you two can actually stay really closely connected even when you’re not trying, because of the dreams thing, so all the texting and phone calls is just a bonus.” Hyemi was grinning and nodding enthusiastically, obviously pleased at her own assessment.

“I’m glad you’ve got all that figured out, but that doesn’t sound any different than what we’re doing now.”

“It’s not! That’s why it’s so brilliant! You just keep doing what you’re doing, only now you’re doing it in a more than friends kind of way. He did say he likes you, right?”

“And that he wanted to kiss me.”

“Seriously? You lucky little--”

“But I can’t do that.” Samantha shook her head, tears leaving little drops on her pajamas.

“Someday, I’m sure you can. You’re probably not going to spend the rest of your life single and alone, you know.”

“No, I mean I can’t kiss Taehyung. If the public ever found out…” Samantha watched as the blood drained from Hyemi’s face. “Right? Rich white girl from the American suburbs? The symbol of thousands of years of shitty oppression and awful behavior? Hell, they crucified G Dragon for dating a Japanese girl but at least she was still Asian. I’m the kind of scandal that could end his career. No one would believe the dreaming stuff. All they would see is some entitled bitch taking whatever she wants. I mean, isn’t that the whole reason I turned him down when he offered to use Hobi’s connections to find me a dance team in the city?”

“Actually, he first offered to sneak you into their offices so you could practice with Son Sungdeuk.”

“Right, but if that was going to be a problem, too much taking advantage of him and his fame, then this is...too much. Way too much. You know I’m right.”

“Shit, you are right. I guess I never really thought about all the practical implications and stuff, but fuck, it would be a disaster.”

“A nightmare, for both of us. They would hate whoever he decided to date eventually, but wouldn’t it be worse with me? They would find every unflattering picture out there, and there are plenty, and make me into a national joke. Just another fat American ruining life for the rest of the world.”

“But you’re not--”

“It doesn’t matter what I am. It doesn’t matter what I’ve done to try to be respectful and learn
about your culture and life. It just doesn't because no matter what, I’m still just some white girl as far as anyone in the press is concerned. I don't have any business dating an idol. A foreigner messing around with a kpop idol is flat out disaster. They would destroy Taehyung for not choosing any one of the millions of nice Korean girls out there, and they’re kind of right. He should choose one of them.”

“He didn’t choose you though. Fate did!”

“And if this were a drama, that would be enough, wouldn’t it? But it’s not.” It was Hyemi’s turn to nod and chew her lip.

“So what are you going to do?”

“I don’t know. Nothing, really. What else can we do?” Samantha shrugged, feeling the disappointment settle in her stomach, like giving up on a dream before it even has a chance to come true.

“I don’t know, but don’t just make decisions on your own. Talk to him about it. Promise me you’ll at least do that much?”

“I solemnly swear,” Samantha said, holding her hand to her heart.

“Good. Now, let’s go back to sleep. It’s Saturday.”

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“So, we should talk about stuff.”

“Yeah, except I don’t really want to get into it right now.”

“Sam, please, let me explain.”

“No, don’t. You need to focus on the concert and the comeback.”

“The concert is in two weeks. You want to leave this to fester for that long? Can’t we just talk about this and get it over with?”

“No, I don’t. I don’t think there is an ‘over with’ we can get. I think it’s just going to be awkward and make things awkward and nothing will change so let’s just not talk about it and then nothing will change and it won’t be awkward. That’s a win for everyone involved.”

“I’m sorry I made things awkward.”

“You didn’t make things awkward. Things just are awkward. Let’s not make them more awkward.”

“So, just because I can’t hang out tonight, you’re going to put this whole thing off until… when?”

“I don’t know, but let me think about it for a while. Let me figure out what I want to say.”

“Are you going to do that? Really think about what you want to say or are you going to ignore it and hope it goes away? Are you going to run away from me like you’ve run away from everything else in your life?”

“I don’t know, Taehyung! I’m going to do something and whatever I do it will be on my own, on my own time and you don’t get to change that.”
“Fine. You think as long as you need to I guess. I’ll go back to working my ass off and not worrying about you.”

“That’s what I wanted in the first place!”

“Well it’s not what I want at all.”

“You can’t always get what you want, Taehyung.”

“But apparently you can. I gotta go. I’ll see you later.”

“Fine. Bye.”
For a week, Taehyung hadn’t gotten anything more than a sleep warning out of Sam. He’d apologized but still there was silence on her end. He’d tried talking to her in the mirror again, even though it left him feeling stupid and ineffective. He was trying to respect her request for space. It was hard because he just wanted to tell her everything in his head. He wanted to blurt it all out and know that it was all going to be okay. It had to be okay. He sat on the floor of the practice room, shoulders hunched as he curled himself around his phone.

He allowed himself one response per text of hers. He’d said he was sorry. He told her he missed her. He asked if she’d liked the latest V app. He wished her rest and peace of mind. He was running out of safe, bland, kind things to say. It had been a week of platitudes so he decided that he would just ask some questions. Maybe she was waiting for something more from him, but at this point he wasn’t sure what. He knew he’d said awful things and a simple apology didn’t make that go away, so he was waiting. He’d pushed her too hard and pushing more wasn’t going to make things better. That’s what Seokjin had said when Taehyung was ranting about wanting to just call her non-stop until she answered. But it had been a whole week and he was tired of waiting. In one more week he’d be on stage, on camera, and out of reach. They didn’t have much time to work this out, whatever this was.

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You don’t have to answer these questions, but I’ve had a lot of time to think

Are you not attracted to me, or just not attracted to anyone

and if it’s not anyone, then how did you handle being engaged

this is really none of my business

but I used to ask you questions all the time

I sort of miss it

Are you planning on staying in Seoul forever?

Are we going to have these dreams forever?

Have you ever dreamed of acorn jelly?

Do you like acorn jelly?

I like it a lot

but sometimes I dream it’s chasing me

Do you miss me?

I miss you

Taehyung stared at his phone. She wasn’t reading them. He sighed and stood, groaning at the
protest in his back, but there was still at least an hour of practice before the day was done. The other members were slowly returning to their marks, so Taehyung put his phone down and put Sam out of his mind for a little while longer.

He threw himself into the rehearsal. He was louder and funnier and pushed harder than he usually would have, needing more than anything to exhaust himself to the point where he could actually sleep. Always here, in this room, with these people, he pushed himself to the limits, trying to make up for every deficiency, every mistake on the ever-growing list of things he’d ruined by not thinking things through.

He was shaky and sweaty but he still reached for his phone as soon as they were free to go. His heart was already racing, but he felt a chill when he saw that Sam had sent 8 messages. Was she going to tell him to leave her alone again, to go away and just shut up? It’s what he expected.

I only like jelly the American way
you know, the stuff on toast
not the wiggly weird stuff you eat
I’ve never dreamed of acorn jelly
as for the rest
well, maybe we could talk soon
Do you have any free time tomorrow?
I miss you too

Taehyung grinned and let out the breath he didn’t know he’d been holding. He was still trembling after the dance practice, but now he felt a new wave of energy.

acorn jelly is amazing
you’re totally missing out
I have a couple of hours in the afternoon
I’ll see if I can get someone to take me to your place?
Shouldn’t you be sleeping?

Why, so I can see you shower after dance practice?

At least she was beginning to sound like herself again. For the first time in a week, Taehyung was feeling hopeful again.

---

She was pacing. She was pacing and Hyemi was laughing at her even though there was nothing funny about the situation.

“Oh, come on. It’s a little bit funny.”
“How? How is this funny? He’s taking time out of his stupidly busy schedule to come over here so we can have some sort of State of the Relationship talk in which I have to tell him all the ways that this will never, ever work.”

Hyemi frowned a bit. “It sounds like you’ve already made up your mind. Doesn’t he get a say in any of this?”

Samantha stopped her pacing to stare at Hyemi, crossing her arms and tilting her head. “Of course, but from what I heard, it sounds like he knows that this is a bad idea too, he just wants to do it anyway. I have to convince him not to, for both our sakes.”

“Yeah, that doesn’t really sound fair or reasonable, but you know… you’re the one with the brain-to-brain connection, so you do whatever.” Hyemi unfolded herself from the couch and glanced at the clock. “Are you going to spend the next twenty minutes pacing? Because I think maybe you should conserve some energy for actually having the fight you’re bracing yourself for.”

“I can’t sit still. It’s easier to remember what I want to say if I can keep moving.”

“Ok fine. I’m going to go ahead and head to work then.”

“What?! No! You can’t do that. Your shift doesn’t start for another hour. You’re supposed to be my buffer, my reason for not shouting and being irrational. If you leave, all hell could break loose!” Samantha clutched Hyemi’s hand desperately. She was exaggerating, but not by much. She wasn’t sure she could handle being alone with Taehyung again.

“I was going to have to leave in the middle of this little get together anyway, and I think it would be less awkward for both of you if I just get out of the way now.”

“Fine. Some best friend you are. Leaving me alone and defenseless.”

“To face Kim Taehyung? Yeah, I think you’ll be fine. He probably rescues spiders instead of squashing them, so I’m sure you’re in no imminent danger of anything more than maybe more kissing.” Hyemi winked as she slipped her shoes on.

“Don’t say that! We’re not kissing. We’re going to do the opposite of kissing.”

“Which is what exactly?”

“Breaking up before we start dating.”

“Uh-huh. Good luck with that.” Hyemi twinkled her fingers as she slipped out the door. Samantha stepped forward to rest her forehead against the cool door, trying to clear her head. She needed to be calm and rational. She needed to be firm and clear. None of those things seemed possible with Kim Taehyung in the room.

Hyemi had spent the week gently nagging her and slowly talking some semblance of sense and humility into her. Samantha was still convinced that attempting anything other than the mostly long-distance friendship they already had was a recipe for disaster. Even stewing on it for a week, trying to think of every possible outcome hadn’t yielded any new results. It was still a mistake. She rubbed her forehead on the door. It was a mistake and she would tell him that and he would agree because he knew it, too. Then they would shake hands amicably and he would go back to his busy and complicated life. She would continue on with her boring and simple life and neither of them would have their lives ruined.

She just had to get all that out before he could do something that would weaken her resolve,
something cute or endearing, like smile or whatever. She wouldn’t even look him in the eyes. There was no need for that temptation. She would stare at his nose so she seemed intent without subjecting herself to the intensity of his face. She could just stare at his little boopable nose mole. No, that wasn’t a good idea. She certainly couldn’t look at his mouth.

She’d spent way too much time this past week thinking about his mouth. Not on purpose, but it just kept happening. She would try to list all the reasons any attempt at a romantic relationship was doomed to fail and somewhere along the line she would find herself daydreaming about running her thumb over his bottom lip. She’d loved doing that to Matthew, just holding his chin in her hand and idly stroking his mouth while they stared at each other. It was stupidly cheesy but she missed it. She missed the closeness of being loved, of being touched by someone who wanted to hold her. She didn’t know quite how Taehyung felt about holding her but she was trying not to think about it too much.

The knock on the door startled her. She glanced at the clock. It was too early for Taehyung to be here, but as she slowly opened the door, there he was, fluffy coat with the fur trimmed hood pulled up, mask tucked under his nose, eyes smiling at her.

“Hello. I got done a little early.”

“Hi. Um, come in. Would you like some water or tea?”

“No, thank you. I’m fine.”

“Alright. Good. I’ll just…” Samantha pointed over her shoulder to the kitchen lamely, then gestured to the couch. “You should…”

“Yeah, I’ll sit.” Taehyung peeled off his coat, tucked the mask in the pocket, and ducked his head as he slipped into the brand new guest slippers. Lime green with yellow and blue. His mouth stretched into the wide, boxy grin she loved. Liked, that she liked. No one was going to be talking about love today. She poured herself a glass of water and walked slowly to the living room, still rehearsing all the things she wanted to say before she got distracted by Taehyung’s soft hair and delicate, annoyingly perfect face.

He was playing with the fringe on her blanket and as she sat in the chair, as far away from him as she could politely get, he smiled at her again. Jerk. “I’m sorry I--”

“No, don’t. I don’t…” She waved her hands at him, taking a deep breath to say what she’d practiced. “I’m sorry. You were right. I was… not dealing with things well and wanted to run away from just about everything.”

“Oh.”

“I’m not… I’m not good at handling change, apparently,” she scoffed.

“Says the girl who picked up everything to move halfway around the world.”

“Totally beside the point.”

“Well, for whatever it’s worth, I forgive you. I did days ago.”

“I forgive you too.” Taehyung’s smile was nearly blinding, his eyes scrunch up in delight. Samantha couldn’t help herself. She was smiling too, feeling the week-long tension in her gut unravel slightly.
“Awesome. So, now that we’ve got that out of the way…” He looked at her, right at her face, eyebrows raised up into his bangs. She grabbed her phone, thankful for the excuse to look away.

“Well, you asked some questions, so I thought we could start there?” She peeked up long enough to see him nod before turning her attention back to her very fascinating phone. “So, about the dreams, I don’t have a good answer. As far as I can tell from Nana’s notebook, it depends on the pair of Dreamers.” She mentally congratulated herself for remembering not to refer to them as couples. “It seems like it has something to do with how well they know each other, because the pairs who knew one another before the dreams don’t Dream very long and the ones who never met, well that woman Dreamed her whole life. So, no telling. Could stop any moment I guess?”

Taehyung made a pouty sound but Samantha refused to look up, knowing she would just see him sticking his lower lip out and she didn’t want to get distracted now. “Well that’s sad. I don’t want the dreams to stop. I hardly have them anymore as it is,” he grumbled.

“Yeah, but, you know, we don’t have any control over that part, so…”

“Right.”

“Um, about Seoul. I… alright, I don’t have an answer for that either. I don’t have any plans to leave, but then again, I didn’t really have plans to leave Chicago until it happened, so who knows? As long as I have the means and a reason to stay, I think I’ll stay.” It wasn’t quite what she’d rehearsed but at least she hadn’t blurted out that she would do whatever she could to stay close to Taehyung like she’d wanted to. It was a truth that she’d only recently admitted to herself and she certainly wasn’t ready to say it to him yet. She risked looking up. Taehyung was absorbed with the blanket again, so she let her breath out in a small puff. He really was beautiful, like art, like some sort of elf prince she’d expect to meet in a mysterious forest.

His eyes snapped up and she felt caught, exposed. “That just leaves the last question.” His voice was quiet, gentle like he was afraid of scaring her away. She tried to focus on the nose mole to get her thoughts in order, but she was unable to ignore the way he was worrying at his bottom lip with his perfect teeth.

“Right. Okay, so. This is going to be a little awkward, but I’ll try to explain.”

“You don’t have to. I was just curious.”

“No, I want to. It’s just… weird.”

“Okay.” He tucked his hands under his thighs and leaned forward a bit, watching her eagerly.

“Okay. Well, there’s stuff that I like. Physical stuff, on people. Aesthetically, right? I like hoop earrings and leather pants, um… high heels, pinstripes, turtlenecks, stuff like that.” She paused, gathering her thoughts and her courage to begin her manifesto about why they should just be friends but she made the crucial mistake of looking to see if Taehyung understood. He was smirking a little, lip still caught between his teeth, looking like he had a delicious secret he couldn’t wait to spill. She felt her thoughts straying from the point as she thought about all the things she liked that she wasn’t going to tell him, like long delicate fingers, soft lower lips, long eyelashes, the way his hair fell into his eyes when he tilted his head to smile at her. She cleared her throat and her mind. “That’s just stuff though. I…uh…I…” He licked his lips and, reflexively, she did too. What had she been saying? What was she trying to say? Right. Manifesto. Just friends. Not friends who kissed because that led to disaster. Kissing was a disaster. Kissing Taehyung would be delightful. No. A disaster.
“I like those things, too.” Samantha blinked, looking up at Taehyung’s eyes like an attentive person, briefly confused. Then she remembered that he couldn’t read her thoughts and was probably responding to the things she’d said out loud.

“Good. That’s good.”

“So it’s just me that you’re not attracted to. You were obviously attracted to Matthew, right?” He was still smiling, but it wasn’t the same now. It was his on camera smile.

“Yes. No. Wait, hold on. Yes I was attracted to Matthew, but it’s not just you that I’m not attracted to. I’m attracted to you as much as I am anyone.” She shook her head, frustrated that she couldn’t make this make sense outside of her own brain. “Look, it doesn’t really matter that much. The point is, we need to stay just friends.” There, finally, she’d said it. She felt her stomach drop as Taehyung’s face fell but she knew this was for the best. It was what was best for both of them.

“Just friends,” he repeated numbly.

“Yes, like we are now.” She tried to sound firm and confident.

“Friends. Who talk on the phone and hang out sometimes.” He was beginning to smile again.

She tried to keep the tremble of disappointment out of her voice. “No, probably not.”

“Wait, what? Why? I thought this was alright. I thought you liked this!”

“I do, but we shouldn’t keep doing it. It will just get complicated.”

Taehyung pushed himself off the couch. “Complicated? As if everything in my life isn’t complicated. I’m fine with complicated. It’s normal for me.”

“Not like this. We can’t just hang out and pretend like it’s alright. What if we get caught? What if we get bored and try to take things further?”

“Exactly! Isn’t that the whole point of this? Or are we just supposed to text and call forever?” He was waving his hands around, eyes wide and wild.

“Yes! We can’t change things. It will just end horribly.” She stood suddenly. She was finally making her point but he wasn’t agreeing with her like she thought he would. He was pushing back and she didn’t like it. She wanted him to be agreeable and polite, the way he usually was.

“But things change, Sam! Everything changes or it dies.” He stopped suddenly, covering his mouth as he realized the harshness of his words. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean--”

Samantha wasn’t as shocked as his face suggested, but she saw the opportunity to turn this to her advantage. She had to make him see what a bad idea this was, so she interrupted by flinging her hands up. “You’re right, and I’ve had enough of that. I don’t want to do that again. I don’t want to do this, Taehyung.”

“But you said--”

“No, what you said was that I’m not your type,” she sneered, letting the bitterness she only barely felt rise to the surface as ammunition. “We shouldn’t even try to have a romantic relationship if neither of us is really interested in the other romantically.” Taehyung stepped closer, reaching for her hand, but she twisted away, crossing her arms across her chest. She didn’t want to be consoled or cajoled. She wanted to stay angry and hold on to the heat of indignation until it burned away the
hope. “I’ve already had my romance, Taehyung and you aren’t it.”

His face snapped from pleading to neutral so fast she thought her words might have actually had a physical force, wiping the emotions off his face. “You heard a lot of things, but you don’t seem to understand them,” he said, his voice smoother than it should have been.

“There’s no mystery, no excitement, no romance. You said so yourself!” She kept shouting because the absence of his emotion was more frightening than his previous anger. She wanted him to get angry again. She wanted him to show her any sign of emotion again.

“Yes, but after thinking about that for a week I realized something.” He was still standing too close but he had stopped reaching for her. He rubbed the back of his hand across his mouth and Samantha thought briefly that she knew what that meant, the determination suddenly clear on his face. He took a deep breath and she wondered why she had wanted to see his emotions so clearly. “I know all that stuff and I still want to be with you.” He stepped even closer and Samantha was tempted to step back but she was feeling too stubborn to retreat. “I know what you look like puffy and bloated in the morning. I know you have cellulite and stretch marks. I know what you’re like when you’re sick and whiny. I know that you’re stubborn as a fucking donkey, and I still want to be with you. I know everything about you and I still want you in my life.”

“But you don’t! You don’t know everything about me. You think you do. You know lots of little things that don’t mean shit in the long run. You think you know me, but not really.”

“What don’t I know? Name one thing that’s important that I don’t already know.”

“I’m not in love with you!” she shouted. She hated that she was shouting again. Where was the calm, rational clear communication she’d spent all day practicing?

Taehyung took another step, and now there was no space between them, no way to escape his dark eyes flashing, voice ringing in the close proximity. “You think I don’t know that? You think I don’t feel your heart break all the time with the kind of sadness I can’t even imagine? You think I don’t wake up and hate myself for not being Matthew, for not being able to comfort you because you wouldn’t even know me if he were still here? You think I wouldn’t give up all of this if it meant he was still alive? Because I would. Without question I would give him back to you if I could, but I can’t. No one can, Sam.” His voice was softer now and he reached for her hand again.

She was stunned. She never thought the whirl of emotions she felt from him when she was dreaming amounted to any of that, the guilt and the longing. Had she missed what he was feeling all this time, thinking it was just the echo of her own emotions? Did it even matter?

“I can’t ever love you the way you deserve, Tae.” Her voice was small and trembling.

“Why? Because your heart was broken? Don’t you have a book full of stories that say that it is possible to love again? What we have is special, a miracle, a gift. Don’t just throw that away!”

“I’m not talking about my broken heart, Taehyung. I’m talking about my broken head. Or possibly body. I don’t even know.”

“What do you mean? I’ve been in your head and in your body. What’s broken?”

“Taehyung, I’m not… I’ve never… I can’t even…” Her hands were trembling. This was so much more difficult than that drunken conversation with Jess so many months ago. So much more was at stake now.

Taehyung pulled her close, sitting back down on the couch and stroking her hands gently. She
allowed him to tug her down until she was sitting next to him. “Hey, hey, relax, it’s okay. You can
tell me. I’m here, please, just talk to me, Sam. I want to help. Take your time. Find the words and
talk to me.”

“So, I’ve never… Matthew and I never…”

“I know. You told me that part. For what it’s worth, I’ve never either, so…”

Her laugh was bitter. “Yeah, but you at least want to.”

“You… you don’t want to?”

“No. I don’t know. Maybe. I mean, I’m curious, sure, and everyone talks about how great it is, or
complains about not getting enough, but I’m over here, just… not thinking, well, no, I think about
it, but I don’t have any feelings about it. Does that make any sense?” She pulled her hands free to
run them through her hair. “I’m not against the idea or the practice, I think, but I’ve never felt the
need to practice. And I don’t… I’m curious. I’m interested, but I’m not… Ok, wait, let’s just…
People need to eat, right?”

Taehyung nodded, squinting a little.

“So, that’s a thing that humans do to survive. They eat. And some people are really hungry all the
time. Some people are only a little hungry. Are you with me?”

“I think so. I like food and want to eat all the time…”

“I’m not really talking about food, Taehyung.”

“Yeah, I got that much.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.”

“Ok, well, alright. Perfect. So. You like food. Which is great. But I… never really get... hungry. I
eat sometimes, or I used to. With Matthew. Not eat eat, but you know… taste stuff. This isn’t
helping anymore. Shit.” She shook her head, wishing for some way to just have him know what
she felt without having to fumble for an explanation that made sense outside of her head.

“No, it is. I think. So, you’re saying that you don’t… you don’t hate food, you just don’t ever
really think about eating.”

“Yes. Basically that. I almost ate once, but then my fiance died in a horrible car accident and
surprise, surprise, I haven’t really thought about ever eating again.”

“I can’t say that I blame you. That sounds awful.” Taehyung leaned back on the couch, blowing air
out into his bangs. He looked remarkably comfortable for all the uncomfortable nature of this
conversation.

“So that’s what I mean. If you like food, then… then this wouldn’t really work out. Because I don’t
get hungry.”

“But you like food.”

“Theoretically? I guess. I like… snacks?”
“Ok, hold on, can we just use real words for a minute, because I’m getting confused again.”

“I like kissing. Kissing is nice. I like snuggling and cuddling and kissing and back scratches and massages and…and that’s about it.”

“Well, I like those things, too. We… we don’t have to eat… food… anytime soon. I don’t even really have time for food anyway.” He was smiling too brightly for her comfort because he was too close here on the couch, knees touching hers, his golden skin nearly glowing in the ambient sunlight.

“Taehyung, this is honestly the least of our issues.” He was being hopeful again. She needed him to stop that. It was so tempting to give in to his enthusiasm. He was tempting and she wanted to give into him, to the kissing and snuggling she'd been missing, even if she still felt guilty for wanting that.

“What else is there? I like you. Do you like me?”

“Yes but--”

“No. That's it. That's the first step. Can't we just take a minute and be happy? This is kind of a big deal.” He stretched his hand out, palm up. She knew it was a mistake, only a distraction, but he was looking at her with his whole heart exposed. He was so innocent and trusting, optimistic and enticing. She was such a sucker for his smile so she slid her hand into his. He twisted his palm around to lace their fingers together. His hands were warm, his long fingers tapping gently as he spoke. “Let's just have this moment to appreciate that we made it here. You and me, together.”

Samantha took a deep breath, struggling to push all her doubts and objections away for just a moment. Her smile was fragile but gained strength the more she looked at Taehyung. His contagious hopefulness was such a contrast to her own natural pessimism. For just a moment, she wanted to believe.

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Real life wasn’t anything like the dramas that Taehyung loved watching. He’d expected to come sit on Sam’s couch, fumble their way through apologies and confessions, and then spend the rest of the time exploring the perks of their new relationship, like holding hands and maybe even kissing. Instead they’d spent it arguing and had only now gotten around to the confessing, which didn’t go at all like he’d hoped or imagined. Still, at least she was sitting with him, holding his hand and looking at him with something less fearful in her expression.

He didn’t at all understand what was going on in her mind. She was thinking of things much further down the line than he was, which was a bit unusual for him and caught him quite off guard. “Let’s just have this moment to appreciate that we made it here. You and me, together.” He wasn’t oblivious of the challenges ahead of them. He just wanted to ignore them for a little while.

“Just a moment,” Sam said softly, looking down at their tangled fingers. “You’re too busy for much more than that.” Taehyung heard the disappointment in her voice, and it hurt because it was true. He really didn’t have anything to give her. He reached out to stroke her cheek and her chin snapped up, eyes flying to his.

“You’re right, but can we stop thinking about tomorrow for a minute, and just think about this?” He cupped her jaw gently, letting his thumb brush against her bottom lip. He was surprised his hand wasn’t trembling. He felt like a jittery mess, trying to imagine that this was a drama and he was someone suave and confident. He scooted closer, bumping her knees out of the way with his
hip and she swung them to the floor, twisting awkwardly to try to keep her face towards him. This wasn’t smooth or romantic. This wasn’t how he wanted this to be. There were no swelling violins or candlelight and he certainly didn’t have the right words to make her swoon, but she wasn’t pulling away. She was nodding and letting him press closer. “Sam.” It wasn’t a question. He didn’t know what to ask, but it didn’t matter because she shook her head, soft hair brushing against his hand as she leaned into him, pressed her forehead to his and then stopped. Maybe it was her way of stopping him. Maybe she didn’t want all the things that he did. Maybe this was as far as it went.

“Have you kissed many girls?” Taehyung blinked and would have pulled back to look at her if she hadn’t snaked her hand up behind his neck, holding him close, just not as close as he wanted to be. He shook his head, loving the way it felt to rub his forehead against hers. “Me neither. I mean, only Matthew. I’ve never kissed a girl either.” Her laugh was soft, but he felt it against his lips and in the pit of his stomach. He licked his lips, the way he always did when he was nervous, only now, with his face so close to hers, it was a very different feeling. He heard, and felt, Sam gasp.

“Is this okay?” he asked, holding his breath while he waited for her answer. He half expected her to pull away and go back to telling all the reasons they shouldn’t be doing this. What he didn’t expect was for her to lean in, pressing her lips gently to his. He should have been embarrassed but he was too busy listening to the way Sam sighed. He untangled his fingers, intending to reach for her hair, but she leaned away, running her tongue along her bottom lip in a way that Taehyung was certain he’d be thinking about for a very long time.

“Back to reality, Taehyung.” He hated the way her eyes clouded over as she pushed herself back. “This is exactly the kind of thing that could get us both into a lot of trouble.”

Maybe it was because his heart was still pounding, echoing in his fingertips and toes, but he was having a hard time making sense of what she was saying. “Because kissing is dangerous?”

“If we get caught, yes.”

“Because your roommate will get mad?”

She squinted at him, tilting her head as though he were speaking in tongues. “Because the press will get mad. The fans will get mad. BigHit and Bang PD and all your managers will probably get mad. Hell, maybe even the rest of your members. I don’t know, but you kissing anyone would be problematic for a lot of reasons. You kissing me is just a disaster.”

“Because you’re a fan?”

“Because I’m American! And white! And relatively gigantic compared to the girls you should be dating.” Taehyung hated to hear her stating the awful truth so plainly. He knew she understood the severity of the situation. He just hoped that she also had his sense of hope and optimism. She was taking all the worst parts and making them the most important parts, which was infuriating.

“Should be dating? I'm not supposed to be dating anyone. Bangtan gets 100% of me.”

“I know. I understand that. I know how much you love what you do. I've felt it and I don't want to mess that up. That's why I'm saying that this,” she gestured frantically to the space between them, hands flapping, “is a bad idea.”

“I've thought about it a lot, though. Thought about what my parents would say if I brought you home for Christmas. How the members would all tease me if they knew this was happening. Those are the only people whose opinions matter to me.” He wanted to put more force into his words,
make her feel how sincere he was. “I have very little time to be anything other than V of Bangtan Boys, but you’re already a part of that. That doesn’t change, right?”

“Of course not. I have no idea how we break this connection.”

“Do you want to? Break it?” She was quiet longer than he wanted, rubbing the scar on her hand and crinkling her eyebrows.

“No.”

He let out the breath he’d been holding. “So, we keep doing what we’re doing and we don’t get caught.” He reached for her hands, wanting to go back to the kissing.

“It’s not that easy, Taehyung.”

“Why not?” he exclaimed, hands rising in frustration pull at his hair. “We made it this far with the relative blessing of my managers and no one outside knows. We haven’t gotten caught yet being just friends. Why do you think we can’t just keep on keeping this a secret?”

“Because nothing stays a secret. Someone will figure it out and everything will blow up and be ruined.”

“Idols date in secret all the time. Why is this any different?”

“Are they dating tall white girls from America?”

“Why does it matter?”

“Because it does! You know it does!”

“Not to me! I got over it.”

“But they won’t. You know they won’t. It’s the kind of scandal that could ruin you.”

This was the reality he’d been trying to avoid. This was the painful truth he wanted to hide from. He slumped back onto the couch, letting his head bounce off the cushions, allowing himself a moment to wallow.

“You know I’m right,” she said from her end of the couch. He sighed and nodded.

“But what if we didn’t get caught,” he whispered. His heart was sinking. His hopes were crumbling. She was right and he hated it.

“Eventually we would. Everyone always gets caught. And maybe worse, if we didn’t, I… I don’t know that I’d like having to be a secret forever.” Taehyung tilted his head to look at her. She was curled up, legs tucked underneath her, arms crossed with her hands tucked under her chin. “You have a comeback to focus on.” She was already farther away than he wanted. “You probably should be getting back to… I don’t know, practice or something.”

“If you want me to leave, I will, but I have some time before I need to get back.” This was awful. Worse than awful. Moments ago he’d been happier than he could ever remember being, thinking everything was going to work out, someday, eventually, somehow.

“Okay. You can stay as long as you want. I’m not chasing you away, I just--”

“Aren’t you though?” His voice was cold, full of hurt and he felt a little guilty about that, but only
“I meant right now. Today. I’m not telling you that you have to leave, but you know this is for the best, right? For you and for me and for Bangtan above all. I’ll… you know I’ll always be your friend. You’re practically my best friend, Tae, but… it can’t be more than that.” She was reaching for him now. He grabbed her hand, running his finger over the scar on her palm.

“Is this all it is? Just some crazy dreams?”

She shrugged but didn’t pull away. “Maybe it started that way, but even if we never dreamed again, we’d still be friends, right? There’s something to this fate thing because… well, you’re really comfortable. We fit together.” He stared at her hand in his, not wanting to look at her face, fearing the resignation he might see there. Instead he moved his other hand to cover hers. His hands just barely covered hers. It was so different from what he was used to with the other women in his life. She was so familiar that he sometimes forgot how different she was.

In so many ways she was right, how much easier it would be to eventually have a publicly acceptable relationship. More than that, how removing the cultural differences, the (rapidly diminishing) language barrier, the distance to her family, the potential disapproval from his family, removing all that would make having a relationship, even as an idol, so much easier. He couldn’t imagine it though. He couldn’t have imagined Sam, the way she fit into his life in a way no one else could, but now that she was here, he couldn’t imagine a life without her.

“We do fit,” he said finally. He tugged on her hand and she moved into his arms quicker than he would have thought. He held her close, breathing deeply as she settled her head next to his. He leaned back, stretching his legs out and she slid into his lap, tangling their legs together and snaking her arms around his waist.

“I don’t know what I did to deserve you,” she whispered into his shoulder.

“I was thinking the same thing.” He braved pressing a kiss to her cheekbone and she shook her head, nuzzling in closer.

“I’m going to miss you.” He wished she would stop talking. He didn’t want to hear the way she was already saying goodbye. He didn’t want to feel the way her lips moved against his neck, the way she pressed him into the couch.

“You won’t. Because I’m not going anywhere.” He pressed a hand to her head to still her protesting squirming. “Not right now.” She sighed and gave him a little squeeze.

“And we’ll just… be friends.” She sounded sad. It shouldn’t have made him happy, but it did. She wasn’t happy about this not-change that they were doing and that was reason to smile. So he did, pressing his cheek to hers.

“For now.”

“Taehyung, I thought we--”

“Shhh. We didn’t anything. You decided. And you’re right. But just for now. It won’t always be like this and we won’t always be like this.”

“That’s good. One of us is bound to need the bathroom sooner or later.” He felt her laughter rumbling against his chest. It felt so good. Too good. Not enough. But for now, it would have to do.
“Yes, that.” He tapped her right arm. “Gimme this.”

She pulled it out from beneath him, balancing awkwardly on one elbow and looked up at him, twinkling her fingers. “Now what?”

He tapped her ring. “I’ve got Bangtan. You’ve got this.” He grabbed her hand and wrapped his fingers around her palm, pressing both of their hands to his chest. “So I figure we’re both going to be busy for a while.” He reached up, cupping her cheek and he was delighted by her smile.

“We can be friends while we’re busy though.” She nuzzled into his hand and blinked at him slowly. “But just friends. This,” she kissed his palm, “has to stop here.”

“Of course.” He glanced at the flowered clock above the TV. “In one hour and seventeen minutes, we can be just friends.”

“An hour and seventeen minutes?” Sam smile stretched slowly as she arched an eyebrow. She was smirking at him. He thought he recognized the look, the one he used on stage, the one he tried on fans and cameras. He wondered briefly if he looked half as good doing it as she did now, but he didn’t have time to think too long because she was leaning in to bump her nose against his and suddenly breathing took all his concentration. He tilted his chin up and closed his eyes. It wouldn’t last, not right now. Just an hour to pretend that this was happening now instead of in some distant future he could only dream about. Taehyung knew it was a dream, but that didn’t stop him from believing it.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for sticking with me through all of this!
"Leather pants, huh?"

"Yeah."

"Is this going to be like Dark & Wild, part 2 or something?"

"What? No? It's hwa yang--"

"I know that, I just meant style-wise. Leather and denim and lots of eyeliner?"

"Oh. Well, yeah, mostly."

"Great."

"You don't sound excited. I thought you liked leather pants."

"I do. I really do. And you look really good in them."

"Thanks."

"But I was kind of hoping for more flowers and stuff like last time."

"Oh."

"It's just easier."

"Easier?"

"You're less distracting when you're dressed like a country club snob."

"A what?"

"Nevermind."

"So you want me to wear shorts more?"

"You know what, leather is fine."

---

"Favorite song on the new album?"

"Hyemi, you know I can never pick. They're all so good."

"But if your life depended on it, what song would you choose?"

"Under immense protest, ‘House of Cards’ by a very small margin."

"I knew it! You are such a sucker for slow songs. I'm only surprised it's not ‘Autumn Leaves’ with the epic slow jam feel."

"I know. I've betrayed Min Yoongi and it hurts me."
“But you're drawn to the angst like a moth to flame.”

“It’s true.”

---

“What are you doing here?”

“Giving you your birthday present.”

“But how did you get back here?”

“I don’t know, but I think you should be doing Jungkook’s chores at the dorms for like a month.”

“Oh. Okay. So, where’s my present?”

“It’s me, dumbass. I’m your present.”

“Well that’s unfortunate. I don’t have time to unwrap you right now.”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself. I’m not the unwrapping kind of present.”

“Oh.”

“I just didn’t know what to get you. It’s the first birthday we’re spending together, sort of, kind of, anyway, I knew the fan sites were going to get you a million things, and the members and your family, so I couldn’t think of anything that I could give you and then I realized that I can give you one thing that no one else can.”

“But I don’t get to unwrap you?”

“Don’t you waggle your eyebrows at me, sir.”

“Yah! Sam! Don’t mess up his makeup, the coordi noonas will throw a fit!”

“Thank you, Jungkookie. Now go away.”

“Yes, noona.”

“So, Kim Taehyung, happy birthday.”

“Best birthday I’ve had so far.”

---

“Do you even know how seatbelts work?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Then maybe you should wear them sometime. I hear they’re useful in, you know, SAVING YOUR LIFE.”

“Right. Yes. Sorry, noona. I’ll try to get better.”

---

“Sing to me?”
“I can't sing, Taehyung.”

“You sing all the time.”

“But you're a professional singer. Shouldn't you be singing to me?”

“What should I sing to you?”

“The Henry song I like.”

“Henry again? Should I learn how to play the piano?”

“You do have the hands for it.”

“Oh, so you're only interested in musicians now?”

“Funny bit of trivia, in English, it’s called a pianist.”

“A what?!”

“Exactly. I’m only interested in pianists now.”

“Well that sounds dirty.”

“Just sing the song.”

“I'm getting tired, I guess I'm dreaming alone. Will you strongly shake me and wake me up, wake me up?”

“I'm trapped, I'm trapped.”

“Sam, are you--”

“No, it's just a song. Just a good song. I don't want to stop Dreaming.”

“Me neither.”

---

“Why would you do that?”

“I've been thinking about it for a while. For years, really.”

“It hurt like hell, Sam.”

“I'm sorry. I had already started when you sent your sleep warning.”

“It's pretty, though.”

“Thank you.”

“What's it mean?”

“It's Welsh. It means dreamer.”

“I can't wait to see it in person.”
“Taehyung!”

“What?”

“I'm not in the habit of taking my pants off when we're together.”

“So wear a skirt and lift it.”

“That's not any better.”

“I’m not asking to see into your bathing suit area. It’s just your thigh.”

“Yeah, but… it's my thigh.”

“...Alright. Well, I will wait to see it. Someday.”

“Someday.”

“My father would scold me if I ever got a tattoo.”

“Oh. My father has three.”

---

“I miss you.”

“I miss you too. You looked really good today though.”

“You think so?”

“Yeah. And your dancing was amazing.”

“Thanks. The new choreography is really hard.”

“You did great. Hyemi sent me the video. I'm just sorry I couldn't be there in person.”

“It's just a showcase, Taehyung. I'll dance lots of other times and maybe you'll be in town for one of those.”

“But it was your first performance in Korea. It's a big deal.”

“Well, thanks for watching.”

“Anytime. I love watching you dance.”

---

“It was equal parts ridiculous and intense.”

“Well yeah. Part of the fun of a club is dancing with lots of people. When it's just the two of you in our living room...”

“Right. But he took it pretty seriously. He showed up in leather pants and eyeliner with his hair all…and he made this epic playlist of songs and had Yoongi mix them all together like a real DJ would have. He even brought this little colored light thing. It was adorable.”

“It sounds sickeningly cute.”
“It was. Except for the leather pants.”

“What did you wear? Did you wear your leather pants?”

“No. No, I actually wore the blue dress.”

“You didn’t!”

“I did. I figured since I wasn’t leaving the house it was ok.”

“That dress barely covers your oh-no.”

“I know.”

“What did Taehyung say?”

“He didn’t say much. He blinked at me a lot. And then we danced. A lot.”

“Like club dancing or like get-a-room dancing?”

“Yes? Both?”

“And how is that not dating. What the hell are you two even doing?”

“I don’t know but I like it and that makes me a horrible human.”

“For liking things?”

“For liking the benefits of being close to Taehyung without making any commitment to actually be with Taehyung.”

“Oh, for playing it safe but still acting dangerously.”

“Yea, that.”

“I still don’t understand how you can keep your hands off him when he’s around.”

“I can’t. That’s the problem.”

---

“That was mean.”

“What? How was it mean?”

“I tell you I’m taking a nap so you decide that's the perfect time for a candlelit bath?”

“Yes? I thought you would like it. You seemed stressed. I just wanted to help you relax.”

“That's very thoughtful, but for the record, waking up all...up... isn't as relaxing as you might think.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah. Maybe don't listen to our playlist next time.”

“Good idea. I’m sorry.”
“It’s alright. I’m used to it.”
“T’m sorry for that, too.”
“Don’t apologize for being beautiful.”
“I’m not--that’s not what I--um, thank you.”

---

“You look like hell, Samantha. Oh don't raise your eyebrows at me. Have you two been fighting again? I’m going to guess that eye-roll is a yes.”

“He's getting impatient. He said he'd wait but what he meant was he would wait what he thought was a reasonable period of time, but not actually wait, you know, for me.”

“Well it has been a year”

“Sort of”

“What sort of? His 22nd birthday is in like a week.”

“21st”

“You count your way and I'll count the way that he does.”

“Whatever. It's been a year, but I've only seen him four times in that year.”

“It's been more than that! Hell, I've seen him at least that many times.”

“I'm only counting times where the two of us were alone for more than 5 minutes.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah. So it's not like we've had a whole lot of time to work things out.”

“But if the problem is your feelings for Matthew, what does it matter how often you see Taehyung?”

“Because when he's not here, it's easier to convince myself that it's not really happening. That he's off living his life happily without me and I'm just here, trying not to love him.”

“But Sam, you know he loves you. He tells you all the time. He shows you all the time. You two text and talk all the time. Plus the dreams."

“I know! But none of it makes sense. He should be with someone who--”

“Stop! You are worth being loved. You never doubted that Matthew loved you, so why the self-depricating tirade?”

“Matthew wasn't internationally famous and lusted after by millions of people.”

“But Taehyung isn't lusting after millions of people. Only you. “

“And isn't that crazy and weird?!”

“No. He loves you.”
“That's weird.”

“You love him, too.”

“I know and that’s even weirder.”

---

“So what, she’s like the perfect girl?”

“No. She’s not perfect. She’s kind of a pain in my ass sometimes.”

“That’s more information than I really needed, hyung.”

“Not like that, you pervert. She’s stubborn and playful and sort of delights in making me squirm sometimes.”

“But you’re like stupidly in love with her.”

“I really am. She’s funny and kind, she loves kids and is going to make an amazing mother someday. She’s passionate about dance and she works so hard to try to fit in here in Seoul. We fit together and it doesn’t really make much sense. Someday, it’s going to be a mess but I really can’t imagine any life that she’s not a part of.”

“Even though she makes you so mad you yelled at her in Japanese.”

“Yes. It’s the only language I have that she doesn’t understand enough of to be dangerous. If she gets to rant in English when she’s pissed, I’ll just rant back in Japanese. See how she likes not understanding.”

“Real mature there, hyung.”

“Thanks, Kookie.”

---

“Where’s your ring?”

“...In my jewelry box.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.”

“So… does this mean…”

“It means I want… you know… to be… more than just your friend.”

“You’ve been more than my friend for long time. You know how I feel.”

“Yeah, I do. I just… I guess I’m ready to try moving on.”

“So, you wanna be my girlfriend?”

“Pretty much, yeah.”

“Awesome. Scoot over!”
“Ouch, watch your elbows!”

“Battle snuggles. Sometimes love hurts! Hey, no tickling!”

“That’s not in the rules. Tickling is totally fair game.”

---

“Hold still.”

“What are you doing?”

“Seriously, stop squirming.”

“But what are you doing, Sam?”

“I’m kissing your moles.”

“All of them?”

“All the ones I can find, yeah.”

“That might get interesting.”

“I’m counting on it.”

“So, can I return the favor?”

“Sure.”

“Really?!!”

“Yeah, I only have like six moles.”

“Oh. Well, can I kiss your freckles then?”

“Oh. Um… yeah, I guess so.”

“Really?!!”

---

“Is this okay?”

“Yeah, it actually feels really good.”

“Oh, good.”

“You can… you can go a… a little harder if you want.”

“I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You won’t. I promise. I’m not made of glass. I promise, it really feels good.”

“If you say so. I just… I don’t… Namjoon will kill me if I hurt you in the middle of promotions.”

“Well it’s his fault we had an extra hour of dance practice that gave me this stupid cramp in the
first place, so you just keep rubbing and I’ll deal with Namjoon-hyung.”

“Whatever you say, Taehyung. Brace yourself.”

“Oh shit, yes. That’s the spot.”

---

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Because we don't have to--”

“I know that. I'm a grown woman capable of making my own decisions.”

“Of course you are, but I don't want you to do anything that makes you uncomfortable.”

“And I love that about you. Really, I want to do this.”

“You… want to?”

“Not in the same way that you want me to, but not everything is physical. Emotionally, I want to.
So shut up and come here.”

“Yes, noona.”

---

“Ugh, hyung, she’s driving me crazy.”

“Oh no. Don’t you dare come complain about how awful it is to have a girlfriend and shit. You’re
still getting more action than the rest of us combined, so maybe shut up.”

“But she’s wearing that hoodie again. The one with the zippers everywhere. I just wanna--”

“Kim Taehyung, I swear if you finish that sentence I will stuff my foot so far up your ass…”

“Yes Joonie-hyung. Sorry, hyung.”

“Good. Now. Go be mopey and lovesick somewhere else. I’m trying to write a song here.”

“Aren’t you trying to write a mopey, lovesick song?”

“Yes, but I don’t need all your unresolved sexual tension stinking up my studio. Go away.”

---

“You sound awful.”

“Thanks, Taehyung.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean… I just was worried, that’s all.”

“I’m fine.”

“You don’t sound fine.”
“I’m a little sad, that’s all.”

“You’re missing Matthew.”

“Yeah.”

“Okay.”

“I miss him, but I love you.”

“I know, baby.”

“‘Baby’? I’m like three years older than you. Who are you calling ‘baby’?”

“Only you.”

“Oh. I guess that’s alright then.”

---

“So, why is the water always colder when we shower together?”

“What?”

“The water. It’s colder when we shower together.”

“Colder than what, Taehyung?”

“Than when you shower in my head. In my dreams.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. It’s the same temperature.”

“No, it feels hotter in my head.”

“Well there’s a sentence if ever I heard one.”

“Sam, I’m serious. In my dreams, when you shower, the water feels hotter than when we shower together in your apartment. It’s weird.”

“Are you saying that things feel different to my skin than to yours?”

“I guess so.”

“Well, it makes sense. Women have like three times as many nerve endings per square inch of skin compared to men.”

“Really? Wow, now I want to feel everything in your skin.”

“That would be difficult because you have to be asleep to be in my skin.”

“I didn’t mean… hey, get your mind out of the gutter!”

“I’m just saying…”

“No, you’re right. But it would be interesting.”

“It is.”
“But you already kind of know what it feels like for me.”

“For you what? To shower? Yeah.”

“No. I mean… alone times.”


“I wish I could feel your alone times.”

“I would have to have them first.”

“Exactly.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah. Only if you want to, you don’t have to, it’s just a suggestion.”

“I can… I mean, I can try. If you want. I don’t… I don’t really know what to do.”

“Just do what I do.”

“Uh, I kind of don’t have the same anatomy, so that’s gonna be difficult.”

“No, I mean, just do what I do to you.”

“I’m not that flexible.”

“Sam! You know what I mean.”

“I do. Sorry. Humor is my default when I’m nervous.”

“Why are you nervous?”

“Because I’ve never done it before, and I don’t want to disappoint you.”

“You won’t disappoint me. I have no expectations. I just… want you to be happy. And also I’m curious.”

“I want to make you happy. We know all the parts work, I’ve just never tried to make them work without you.”

“Then think of me.”

---

“So… how’s it going?”

“Slowly. But not. We’ve only had like five real dates and I’ve already done things that I never did with Matthew, but Matthew never really wanted to and Taehyung does, so…”

“And how is that slow?”

“I only get to see him once every couple of weeks if I’m lucky.”

“But you’re happy?”
“I’m really happy. I kind of hate how happy I am.”

“Because being happy is bad?”

“Because I never thought I’d be this happy again. Because it still kind of feels like I’m betraying Matthew by being happy.”

“Isn’t that the whole reason he--”

“Yes, don’t say it. I know. I never claimed any of this was rational. I miss Matthew and I still love him but I’m starting to love Taehyung more and that makes me feel awful while at the same time feeling wonderful.”

“You’re a mess, you know that?”

“Yeah, I really am. But I’m a mostly happy mess, so that’s good, right?”

“Right.”

---

“I love you but I don’t know if I’m in love with you.”

“How is that different?”

“It’s different. I love Hyemi but I’m not head over heels, butterflies in love with her.”

“Do you regularly make out with Hyemi, too?”

“Of course not!”

“Then what’s the difference between loving me and being in love with me? You love me, you make love to me, what’s missing?”

“I’ve never, we’ve never--”

“We’ve never had sex, in the strictest definition, but that doesn’t mean we weren’t making love.”

“You just… you deserve more than this. Than me.”

“Even if that were true, which I don’t think it is, but even if it were true, you don’t get to decide what I want! I get to decide. That’s my job. You don’t have to like it, or accept it, but it’s still the truth. I choose you.”

“But you didn’t! Some crazy fate thing did!”

“And I’m so glad because how would I ever have met you without it? Sam, I love you.”

“But I can’t love you enough.”

“Why not? I want you. I want you and all your baggage and faults. Why won’t you believe me?”

“Because it’s not fair, Taehyung! It’s not fair. You should be with someone who wants you desperately, who can’t wait until you get home to shove you against the door and tear your clothes off, someone who swoons and drools over you, who has the same kind of desire. Not me.”

“But you do swoon. You do drool. I’ve seen it. I’ve felt it. You have plenty of desire when we’re
“But not like you do. I enjoy it while we're doing it but I don't exactly miss it when we're not.”

“That's fantastic. That's wonderful. I wish I were that lucky. As it is, you make the most faithful girlfriend ever. I never worry about you when I'm gone.”

“As though that were the only thing keeping me faithful? The fuck, Taehyung? What's keeping you faithful, then?”

“No, I'm just saying that it's easier to not be tempted. If you don't miss it--”

“But I miss you! I miss touching you and holding your hand. I miss holding you and I miss kissing you and every time you bite your lip on camera I hate it because that's my job, dammit.”

“...I didn’t know that.”

“You thought that I just, what? Stopped thinking about you when you were touring? *Out of sight, out of mind?*”

“No, but you always say that you don’t ever get, you know, hungry, so I just assumed that meant that you weren’t missing me like I miss you.”

“It’s not the same. I don’t… I miss you. I miss kissing you and being near you and the smell of you and the feel of your stupidly gorgeous skin and your perfect goddamn mouth, but I don’t… I don’t have a physical reaction. It’s all emotional. Unless you’re actually here with your perfect mouth, it’s just in my head.”

“I’m okay with that.”

“How can you be okay with that? Why aren’t you angry that I don’t want you like you want me?”

“Because you’re always willing when I’m here. You’re so selfless. You are always putting me first, trying to make me happy, take care of me, even if you don’t feel like it. It’s how I know you love me. I’m always afraid I’m taking advantage of you, or pushing you to do things you don’t like because I’m greedy and selfish. I want all of you, all the time, but you… you just give me all the things I want and it’s almost scary how much trust you put in me.”

“You make me sound like some sort of martyr. It’s easy to take care of you because you’re not around that often. I get to be selfish and put myself first most of the time.”

“That's still special! Not everyone is willing to do that!”

“Sure they are. It's just part of being in a relationship.”

“No, it's part of being in a healthy relationship. So many people don't know that. You don't even realize how amazing you are.”

“I'm worried your expectations are painfully low.”

“Either way, I think you're wonderful.”

---

“Are you alright?”
“I’m fine. Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Because my company just issued a statement denying the existence of our relationship and that seems like the kind of thing that might be upsetting to you?”

“It was just a blanket statement about everyone. Hobi’s the one who got caught dancing with a girl and the tabloids took it too far, like they do. It’s not as though they specifically said you and I weren’t dating, so…”

“But you know they would if anyone ever suspected, right?”

“Yes. And that would suck. A lot, but it’s what’s best for you. I knew that long before we started this thing, so I don’t really have any room to complain.”

“But you want to, don’t you?”

“Yeah. A lot. I want to whine and throw a fit and bitch about how hard it is to not talk about my secret boyfriend because he’s famous.”

“You should get a stunt boyfriend. Find some nice boy to take to parties and things so no one will hit on you.”

“No one is hitting on me at parties, Tae. I’m like a giant here.”

“You’re only one centimeter taller than me, and I’m going to catch up.”

“That still puts me 10 centimeters taller than the average girl at these parties, so don’t worry. I’m fine.”

“Really? Because it kind of sucks.”

“A lot.”

---

“Your mom is really nice.”

“Thanks. She thinks you’re very polite.”

“That’s a relief. I was afraid I was going to violate at least fifty customs I don’t know anything about.”

“Well, other than being too tall, my grandma thinks you’re pretty great too.”

“I guess you should wear heels more often then.”

“Hey!”

“It’s the only logical answer. I mean, I’m not getting any shorter.”

“But I might keep getting taller.”

“You might. Eat more vegetables.”

“There’s plenty of vegetables in japchae.”

“I only wish I could eat the way you do and look half as good as you do.”
“You do.”

“What?”

“You look good. Better than half as good as me.”

“That’s quite the compliment.”

“You started it.”

“You’re right. Thank you.”

“I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

End Notes

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This story was born out of a dream of my own, inspired by the Dark Crystal, where I took the phrase "dreamfasting" from, and a lot of needing to process my own feelings. Thank you for reading.

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