

Traffic Thinking

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I. Tiffany

"Shoot," she mumbled.

The air hung loose as the last leaves of autumn dropped on the pavement. Tiffany stepped outside the building and made her way towards the parking lot, carefully choosing the path she walked. The gritty crunch of dried leaves she stepped on rung softly in her ears. It was cold and damp after it had rained again that day, the erratic weather making her impatient and worse, much more emotional than she already was.

She pulled her cardigan closer to her body. Up in the sky, the horizon looked gentle and serene, with faint streaks of purple and red. It was close to six in the evening.

"What's taking him so long?" Tiffany said out loud to herself. Impatient, she drew out her phone and began punching the dials.

'Where are you?' she hurriedly typed and sent it to their manager. Hunger and exhaustion had claimed her after a long day of work at the broadcasting station. Tiffany hated doing solo schedules, and for the lack of a better reason, she just simply didn't want to spend today alone. This morning when she woke up, that familiar heavy sinking feeling was starting to gnaw again at her insides.

Taeyeon had been gone for almost two weeks now. She had rushed home one evening, back to Jeonju without notice, to visit her sick father. A small note on the refrigerator had been found the next morning by Sunny. Taeyeon had written that she had an urgent matter to attend to, and that she would be back as soon as possible. There hadn't been time for her to say goodbye to Tiffany, or to the rest of the members.

Upset with the lack of a proper farewell, Tiffany firmly decided to hold herself together throughout Taeyeon's absence. It wasn't that she was being clingy or needy, Tiffany just wasn't used to not having Taeyeon around. Even with the other members around to keep her company, it just wasn't the same, like something was missing.

Tiffany continued to walk a few paces further, looking across the aisles, hoping to find the car parked and their manager waiting for her. Looking to her left and right, she hummed loudly to silence her thoughts.

I wonder what you're doing right now.

No luck and no car. Tiffany stomped her feet like a child. With a defeated look on her face, she tried to keep herself busy while she waited. She was starting to feel a little cold and lonely but it wasn't long until their manager arrived a few minutes after, and they were soon out on the highway.

"Oppa, can you please open the radio?" Tiffany asked from behind the driver's seat.

Music had always been Tiffany's immediate comfort. There were times when she would mindlessly put the volume up and loud enough to hurt her eardrums just so she could feel her heart swell in tune with the progression of the song's melody. Instead of keeping her emotions in, Tiffany would rather let them out through music, and this habit always reflected on how her mood changed with the song she listened to.

Tiffany looked closely at her window. Small traces of the afternoon's rain were trickling slowly down the glass. Her eyes followed a moving droplet as it fell and crashed into another, forming a tiny pool of

water. She closed her eyes and let her mind wander freely, unable to comprehend the scenery that changed too fast outside her window. The radio played a slow and steady ballad.

If only you were here with me this moment, I wouldn't have to wish for this day to end. My hands and feet are cold, but you always knew when they were. You'd smile and reach out to my pocket, both of our hands inside my jacket.

How do you know? How do you always know what I'm feeling?

You would rub my knuckles that were balled into fists, slowly prying my fingers to come loose. You would open them and close them with your fingers intertwined in mine. You'd carry that childish grin in the dark beside me, but I can tell even with the little light, that your eyes twinkled brighter than you let it show.

Why do you do this to me, Taeyeon? How do you do this to me?

You tug and pull along my strings so easily and effortlessly. I die and live again every time you kiss me on the forehead, yet we both know this trick of yours so well. Your lips would gently plant its softness against my skin, and it would send shivers down my spine. Never in a hurry, you'd stare deep into my eyes. Sometimes it's too intense that I just have to break it and look away, kiss you right after so I can breathe. I can't breathe. I feel your tenderness every time you hold me close to you. Then when you kiss my eyes and my nose, I feel like I'm about to burst, but I don't want to just yet.

When you barely put your lips to touch mine, how can you stand to wait and hold still in that moment? How can you have self-control when I open myself willingly for you to have?

Just when it's more than I can bear, you come close and end that little distance between us. Your lips would part mine and your hands would wander down my waist. You'd hold my head when I know you're yearning and I'd give in. I always give in. I let you have me without having you worry what I want from you too.

You break away so suddenly at times that it takes me longer to regain my breath and composure. After the kisses, you'd lie down beside me, still with that deep look in your eyes.

What is it do you want, Taeyeon? I can't catch what you're thinking. You're always a step ahead of me.

Tiffany quickly opened her eyes, feeling a little light headed from her thoughts. She missed Taeyeon so badly she wanted to text her to come home already, but she knew better. Taeyeon would come home soon. This time was set for Taeyeon's family, and Tiffany didn't want to get in the way of that.

Tiffany arrived home a little past dinner time. She felt her appetite disappear as soon as she rung the doorbell, that familiar empty feeling sinking deeper. She dragged her body up the stairway, took off her clothes, and retreated herself in Taeyeon's blankets. She inhaled its familiar scent and took in its warmth. Sleep knocked at her door and just like that, she fell asleep, her mind out of consciousness and Taeyeon lingering in her last thoughts.

Come home, Taeyeon. I miss you.

II. Taeyeon

"Appa, please take care of yourself," Taeyeon repeatedly said as she dropped her luggage on the floor.

It was a quiet early morning at the Kim household. Nearly two weeks had passed since Taeyeon arrived home upon hearing the news of her father's illness. His illness wasn't anything serious or life threatening but the news had caught Taeyeon off guard. It was also the frantic tone of her mother's voice that made her rush home immediately.

Taeyeon's father sat by the window, a book and a blanket on his lap. The sun's rays shined brighter this morning. They bounced against the wooden floor, causing the entire room to light up. "I will, I will. You shouldn't have stayed here so long. Won't you get in trouble?"

"Appa, I already told you. Oppa cleared my schedules for me. He said I might as well take a short vacation while I was here."

"Hmph. I'm still convinced he just wanted the long drive here to be worth it."

Taeyeon chuckled at her father's skepticism. It was kind of their manager to have driven her home on such short notice. She reluctantly admitted the sad truth in what her father had said—that it wasn't easy to visit home lately, not when the group had been working doubly hard to widen their popularity.

Taeyeon's mother busied herself in the kitchen, making food for the girls. They always liked her cooking, and they would be glad to see Taeyeon bring them home some. Her voice echoed faintly in the background every now and then as she gave reminders to Taeyeon.

"Taeyeon, make sure to eat well," her mother said as she walked to Taeyeon and tidied her hair.

"Yes, umma. Please don't worry so much about me," Taeyeon affectionately replied.

She glanced up at the clock in front of her, "*Where is oppa? He should've been here an hour ago.*"

'Where are you?' she calmly typed on her phone and sent it to their manager. Outside, the autumn wind blew gently against the trees, pushing and scattering the fallen leaves in different directions. Taeyeon pressed her hands together and pinched lightly at her palms. The anticipation in her chest had been building ever since she received Tiffany's message the other night.

'Are you taking care of yourself over there? I hope you are! Don't be in a rush to come home, I'll be here waiting,' the message read. Taeyeon read it over again a few more times and bit her lip. She looked at the wallpaper on her phone and ran her finger along Tiffany's face, tracing that smile she had come to know so well. She couldn't wait to come home and see Tiffany again—how she missed that warm and eager smile.

Soon the doorbell rang; Taeyeon bid her parents a cheerful farewell. However, she suddenly turned to a pensive mood as she boarded the car. All nervousness and excitement died as she let her head fall back against the window, and looked across the dirt road they passed. Softly, she hummed to herself as thoughts of Tiffany entered her mind.

Do you miss me, Fany? Because I really miss you.

It's surreal how my heart can stop and jump at the same time just at the sight of your smile, especially when I know you're smiling because of me or because of something I whispered to you. Your ears would turn red as you hold my hands. Playfully, I'd crinkle my nose in response whenever I'm faced with your smile. I don't know how else I could possibly fend off your loveliness.

Do you think of me often, Fany? As much as I think of you?

I can't help but look deep into your eyes whenever I'm given the chance. It's almost as if I could fall in them and forever lose track of the present. Even in the way you would gracefully close them, your lashes perfectly frame your face whenever you look down. I'd trace my finger along the bridge of your nose, then along the outline of your lips and you'd smile ever wider. Right then and there, I'd feel your defences come feebly crashing down, as if I could easily hurt you.

You know this right, Fany? I would never hurt you.

You'd look at me closely for as long as you can, and then you'd hug me, drawing me nearer to you. I'd close my eyes and feel my hands taking a mind of their own as they wind down your hair. Locked in your arms and still with our eyes closed, I'd find your lips in the dark. Lazily, I'd draw lines and circles on your back, touching the warm skin that pressed against mine.

You're so fragile, Fany. Delicate and breakable that I always have to have you with me but I can't. This isn't right.

Taeyeon opened her eyes. She proceeded to open the radio, switching through the channels to find an upbeat tune. This ought to help take her mind off things, or off someone. Satisfied, she talked to their manager about what she had missed for the two weeks of her absence.

She arrived home soon after and went straight to her room. It was the middle of the day and the rest of the members were out on their schedules. Taeyeon quickly closed the curtains in her room, and lied down on the bed. With one arm on top of her head, she began to think of the proper time to talk to Tiffany, and how they would reunite that evening.

Fany, you know I love you.

III. Members

i. Seohyun

Meanwhile, in a large auditorium filled with students not far from the girls' dorm, Seohyun sat in the last row with her back straight and her eyes fixed on a stack of papers that lay neatly on top of her desk. Her thumb robotically clicked the top of her pen over and over again as she waited for the dismissal bell to ring. It was out of character for her not to listen to the lecture, but she argued with herself that she read the discussion in advance, so what she was doing passed as excusable. Seohyun shifted her weight in her seat as she thought about what she and Tiffany had talked about a few nights ago.

Seohyun had been the first to notice the drastic changes in Tiffany's mood the past few days. A week ago, when she had awoken in the middle of the night and decided to get a glass of water, a lifeless silhouette of Tiffany surprised her in the dining room. Tiffany had a blank expression on her face as she sat by the dining table.

Cautiously, Seohyun approached her, "Unni, why aren't you asleep yet?" She took the seat next to Tiffany.

"Seohyun, do we always have to have a reason for the things we do?" Tiffany slowly turned her head to look at Seohyun.

"What do you mean, unni?" Seohyun replied. She felt confused by the randomness of Tiffany's response.

"Aish—how can I explain this. Never mind, you wouldn't understand." Tiffany shook her head.

"Unni.."

"It's just that—sometimes I think of how I ever got this far—"

Seohyun fell silent at the wistfulness of Tiffany's response. A small voice in her head understood that Tiffany was talking about Taeyeon, but she knew better than to ask and make sure. Being the loyal dongsaeng she was, she silently stood by her two unnies, and supported them despite she and the others' speculations. No matter what it was they were going through, they would stand by them. All of them would. They were a family this way.

Seohyun tapped Tiffany's hand and gave a quick reassuring smile, "Unni, it's late and we have to get up early tomorrow. We should sleep."

"You go ahead. I'll sleep in awhile."

Seohyun hesitated. She knew that if there were a right moment to say it, that moment had finally come, "Fany-unni.." she began, "There's no denying that we've noticed things—things between you and Taeyeon-unni. We don't say anything because we trust the both of you."

Tiffany looked up at Seohyun, her face alarmed for a second. Her eyes reflected a shallow hint of frustration and pain, but she quickly looked away. "Seohyun, there's nothing to worry about."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Fany-unni, Taeyeon-unni will understand."

Seohyun wasn't completely sure on what she had meant. However, she did know that Taeyeon has always been an understanding person. She listened well to each of the members, and never judged them for their faults. If Tiffany had problems with Taeyeon, she was sure the latter would listen to the former.

"I think you should talk to her."

"It's not that easy, Seohyun."

"But unni, if you just try—" Tiffany cut Seohyun off mid-sentence. She stood from her seat, turning her back on Seohyun. Tiffany walked towards her room.

"Unni, think it through and talk to her," Seohyun said after her, with confidence.

The bell rang loudly as the clock ticked three o'clock in the afternoon. Seohyun packed her things and picked up her school bag. Still bothered by her and Tiffany's exchange of words, she walked to the parking lot unhurriedly and waited for their manager to pick her up.

ii. Sooyoung, Hyoyeon, Sunny

"Yah! Kim Hyoyeon, stop getting all the meat!" Sooyoung growled.

"This is my share! You ate all of yours already," Hyoyeon shot back.

Sooyoung, Hyoyeon and Sunny sat at the far end of a small eatery near the broadcasting station. Few tables were occupied as lunch hour had already passed. The three of them had finished their schedule earlier than the others, so they took the remaining time to fill themselves with food. Their manager trusted them enough to leave them by themselves for awhile. He also had to accompany Yoona and fetch Seohyun from her classes.

"Guys, what do you think is going to happen now that Taeyeon's back?" Sunny opened up the topic as she took a piece of meat with her chopstick.

Sooyoung raised her eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, now that she's back, as in now that the two will be together again, do you think things will still be like this?" Sunny explained.

"I don't know. I still think we should leave them to figure it out whatever it is that's happening to them," Hyoyeon replied.

"True, true," Sooyoung agreed. She eyed the piece of meat Hyoyeon turned on the grill.

"But this can't go on forever! I barely get to talk to Fany now, you know," Sunny said with an upset tone. She took a bite and slowly chewed her food.

"Me too," Sooyoung agreed again. She still had her eye on the piece of meat Hyoyeon held with her chopstick.

"Taeyeon and I talk less now more than ever too," Hyoyeon added.

Everyone else in the group had noticed Tiffany and Taeyeon's actions the past few months, but nobody dared to raise the concern. Not only was it awkward for them to see their two members holding hands for long periods of time, stealing glances at one another, and keeping to themselves, they also respected the privacy more if the two were truly in a relationship, though they couldn't imagine the reality of it.

"You know what, I've actually gotten used to the whole situation already. It's been awhile anyway. Plus, I think things are better now than they were the first times it happened," Sooyoung confessed.

Sooyoung talked about how the first few weeks of Tiffany and Taeyeon's relationship had caused problems for the group. Even if she and the others only speculated, it hurt them more that it was affecting the two's relationship with the others. Tiffany and Taeyeon isolated themselves too much from everyone that tension always presented itself whenever a third party joined them. They also didn't like the fact that said third party would be left out in conversations and inside jokes. It drove all the members crazy.

They just wanted the truth to be out in the open already, so that things would go back to normal. They had all agreed to accept it, if what they had supposed to be happening shockingly turned out to be true. Being in the business long enough, they've learned to become mature about their opinions. This was

also Tiffany and Taeyeon they were dealing with, two people they had come to hold dearly in their hearts.

"Like I said, they'll come to us in their own time. Seohyun told me that she sort of hinted at Fany that we all know a few nights ago. So at least they know we know, right? This isn't easy for them too," Hyoyeon began. "Imagine, all your life you liked boys and then bam! You liked girls too! I can imagine Fany ripping her hair out the first time she realized that about herself." Hyoyeon laughed at her own imagination.

"I can imagine it too. She would have probably laughed like a crazy person," Sooyoung shook her head.

"Worse, she probably laughed *and* clapped," Sunny chimed in.

The three girls laughed at the turn of their conversation. Though deep inside, they knew the seriousness of the situation they were in was not to be laughed at so easily. They continued to eat amongst themselves with thoughts of Tiffany and Taeyeon's relationship not lost in their minds.

iii. Yoona

Yoona sat in front of the mirror in her dressing room as she went through her script. She was used to this process by now after going through a series of dramas. Her phone beeped with a message from their manager, saying he'd wait for her in the lobby when she had finished.

Yoona decided to skim through her message entries. Her inbox was filled almost to its full capacity as she hadn't had the time to organize it. She began to delete them one by one, and soon by bulk.

She suddenly stopped at a message numbered in the hundreds. It was a message from Tiffany dated almost four months ago. It was also one of the last few messages Tiffany had sent to Yoona when the latter was still out in the late night filming her drama.

The message read, *'Yoona, are you not done there yet? Will filming finish at dawn again? Aigoo. Try to get some rest in between takes alright? I'm cooking breakfast tomorrow so make sure you'll be home!'*

Yoona smiled. Yuri and Tiffany often texted her to show their support but lately, Tiffany had stopped leaving her messages. At first, it didn't bother her because she knew Tiffany always asked stories from her the next day, but ever since she kept to Taeyeon more often these past months, she almost showed no interest at all when Yoona would talk about her day.

She clicked her phone closed, unable to delete Tiffany's last message to her. Tiffany's mental absence from the group would pass eventually, Yoona thought. They couldn't stay like this forever, not when secrets have a way of setting themselves free from their closets.

She stood up from her seat and looked at herself one last time in front of the mirror. "Time will pass without you looking back searching for me," she recited over and over again. Yoona submissively put on the mask of the character she portrayed, burying her hurt feelings towards Taeyeon and Tiffany. She would deal with them another time.

iv. Yuri, Jessica

"Yul, Taeyeon's back right?" Jessica asked Yuri who sat next to her on a stone bench.

"Yeah, I texted oppa if he picked her up already," Yuri quietly replied.

The autumn leaves on the ground threw themselves at Jessica and Yuri's feet. With few people out on the streets, the two gratefully spent the day by themselves. It was rare for the both of them to have a break from their busy schedules. They went for a leisurely walk to the park to relax and enjoy the changes autumn season brought.

"I see."

"I know that tone, Sica. What's wrong now?"

"Nothing," Jessica finally said. She closed her eyes and hoped for a small nap as she leaned on Yuri's shoulder.

"Sica, did you ever have a hard time adjusting here?"

"Why do you ask?" Jessica opened her eyes. She held and turned a gold leaf that flew to her lap with her fingers.

"Nothing. I just wondered about Fany and how lonely she must have felt when she first moved here."

"Oh yeah, Fany had it hard the first few months. I thought we talked about this already before?"

Jessica looked at Yuri.

"I know, but this time I wonder just how hard was hard."

Jessica, with a doubting look on her face, raised an eyebrow, "Yah, Kwon Yuri. Why so serious?"

"Well, for one, Taeyeon's back. Second, if you haven't noticed, Fany's been pretty out of it ever since Taeyeon left and third, they still haven't talked to us about it."

"Yah, Kwon Yuri. You worry too much. I know Fany. She wouldn't do anything stupid."

Jessica was worried herself. Now that Taeyeon was back, Tiffany would definitely be giving her full attention to Taeyeon again. It had taken all of the members' efforts to get rid of the tension between them and Tiffany when Taeyeon had left. They had seized the opportunity to spend time with their friend again and ultimately, have her confess to them what was really going on the past few months. Sooyoung tugged Tiffany to eat with her every meal time, Hyoyeon dragged Tiffany along whenever she went to the grocery, Sunny nudged Tiffany to go shopping with her, Seohyun followed and questioned Tiffany a lot about her English pronunciations, Yoona chatted endlessly to Tiffany about her stories and Yuri pulled her old cockroach pranks whenever she got the chance.

As for Jessica, she quietly asked Tiffany one night to sit outside with her and enjoy the cool breeze.

"Fany, is there something you wanted to tell me?" Jessica asked. She didn't look at Tiffany, instead she looked up at the blank night sky.

"Hmm. No, not really. What's up Jessi?" Tiffany innocently replied.

"Oh, nothing."

They fell silent for a few minutes. Surprisingly, neither girl felt any awkwardness in the silence.

"Ah—I love the weather! I'm going to have a good night's sleep tonight!" Jessica happily announced.

Tiffany playfully punched Jessica on the shoulder, "You sleep too much."

"When did I ever not sleep too much?" Jessica laughed.

"You got that right. I wonder if that will ever change about you." Tiffany laughed along with her.

"Probably never."

"Hey, Jessi. Let's call the others out too. We can have dinner outside here in the garden," Tiffany suggested.

"Okay, you do it."

"Hmph. Don't you want to help me?"

"You suggested it so you do it." Jessica jokingly rolled her eyes.

"Never mind. I don't want to move anymore."

"Okay, okay. I was kidding."

"I know." Tiffany smiled her cheerful smile.

Jessica smiled back, and without a moment's hesitation she hugged Tiffany, "I'm just here when you need me, Fany, through whatever—"

Tiffany hugged Jessica back, and as if both girls knew what the other was thinking and really meant she replied, "I know." with that smile on her face.

Jessica thought about Tiffany often, when the latter would have that blank expression on from time to time. They had known each other for so long, that she felt hurt Tiffany would keep secrets from her, yet

was she really keeping something from her? She sighed and pushed aside her upset feelings towards her friend. Turning to Yuri, she changed the flow of their conversation to a different topic.

Soon the day began to unwind itself faster than what Jessica and Yuri had hoped. Before they knew it, it was time for them to head on back to the dorm and welcome Taeyeon from her vacation.

IV. Evening

The doorbell had buzzed numerous times before Taeyeon could open it. Yuri and Jessica had their hands full from the paper bags of clothing and food they carried. Since Taeyeon was back, they had decided to have a small party at their dorm with some cake and ice cream. After a few minutes standing outside the doorstep, Yuri and Jessica had begun to think Taeyeon wasn't home when suddenly the door opened and Taeyeon appeared with a towel on her head.

"Yah! What took you so long?" Jessica chided Taeyeon.

"I was taking a shower! Didn't you bring a key with you?" Taeyeon let the girls in and helped them with their bags.

"Ask Kwon Yuri. I told her to bring the key."

Yuri, unable to hold herself, hugged Taeyeon tightly. "Taeyeon! Welcome back! How's your family doing?" A smile spread on the taller girl's face.

Taeyeon smiled back. "Everything's fine. I brought back some food for us."

"Are the others back yet? I'm hungry," Jessica flatly said as she walked past the two. She felt exhausted from carrying all the paper bags they had carried. Yuri had insisted they walk home instead of taking a cab. She claimed they would be able to enjoy the cool breeze from the upcoming winter, and even get a little exercise while they were at it. Jessica repeatedly asked herself why she let Yuri do this to her.

"Nope, just me," Taeyeon replied.

Taeyeon and Yuri prepared the dining table for the evening meal as they talked with each other. They would laugh every now and then when they looked at Jessica who had fallen asleep on the couch with her mouth hanging open.

Half an hour later, a car pulled up on the driveway, and the doorbell buzzed again repeatedly. Taeyeon could hear boisterous laughter from outside as she made her way towards the gate. She smirked at the noise, amused with the lively chatter she heard. Sooyoung's voice stood out from the other members' voices. Her clamour for food never went unnoticed.

"Taeyeon! Hurry up! I heard Yuri bought cake and ice cream!" Sooyoung shouted.

Taeyeon had missed everyone equally, but only next to the person whom she suddenly felt nervous seeing again. She opened the gate and one by one, Sooyoung, Hyoyeon, Sunny, Yoona and Seohyun appeared in front of her with big smiles on their faces. Taeyeon's eyes right away looked for Tiffany, but to her surprise, she wasn't with them. Taeyeon felt her heart drop for a second. She was sure Tiffany would be with them, but it seemed Tiffany had another schedule she didn't know about.

"Where's our mushroom?" Taeyeon asked no one in particular. The girls made their way towards the house.

"Oh, Fany-unni said she needed to get a few errands done. So oppa let her go home by herself tonight," Seohyun calmly replied, pretending not to know the real reason why Tiffany wasn't with them. Tiffany had been with their manager when the latter picked her up from school that afternoon.

"Fany-unni, Taeyeon-unni's back! Aren't you excited?" Seohyun turned to Tiffany, hoping to lighten the awkward atmosphere their conversation a week ago had brought.

Tiffany didn't answer. A deep look settled in her eyes. "I know. I really missed her."

"I missed her too, unni."

They sat quietly for awhile at the back of the car. Seohyun held her bag on her lap while Tiffany listened to her music player and busily looked out the window.

"Hey, Seohyun, I'll be home late tonight, okay? Don't wait up for me," Tiffany finally said.

"Okay."

"Don't tell the members I'm meeting someone. Just say I ran a few errands for my sister, okay?"

Seohyun nodded. Tiffany then turned to their manager, "Oppa, I'm meeting one of my old friends tonight. Somewhere not too far, so is it alright if I just go home by myself?" Tiffany had a hopeful look in her eyes.

Their manager hesitated for a moment. He had also witnessed Tiffany's moodiness the past few weeks. Figuring the girl must have needed a break from her busy schedule, he immediately relented.

Tiffany got off the car as soon as she got their manager's permission. She reasoned she needed to get her friend a gift because her friend was visiting from the States. Before she left, she repeatedly reminded Seohyun not to tell anyone of her plans that evening, especially not Taeyeon. Seohyun could only nod to Tiffany in obedience.

Taeyeon and the rest of the girls had a happy meal that evening. They poked fun at their leader for not buying them gifts from her break. Their lively chatter and laughter filled the air, even more when Sooyoung and Yoona shamelessly did their character impersonations. Taeyeon welcomed the light and easy feeling the moment had brought to her heart. It had been awhile since she last spent time with the members like this. She swore she had never felt any happier, if only Tiffany were there with them that instant.

After the cake and ice cream had been consumed and the day's stories had been bantered, one by one the girls stood up from their seats, and headed for their respective rooms, tired from the day's work. It would be another long day for them tomorrow.

"Fany, where are you? Aren't you glad that I'm back?" Taeyeon thought to herself as she got ready for bed.

V. Meeting

Tiffany walked slowly that afternoon, along the busy streets without a destination to head to. Up above, the sun shined bright despite the waning daylight hours before evening fell. She toddled along a busy marketplace full of noisy stall owners shouting here and there. The marketplace was bustling with activity, and Tiffany paid no attention to it despite the people who walked by and brushed past her with light and sure steps.

Not wanting to attract any unnecessary attention, she eventually settled on a wooden bench at the back of the market, hoping to get some time to think. She lied to Seohyun and their manager about meeting a friend of hers that evening. Her mind had thought about getting some time away for herself before she saw Taeyeon again, and she impulsively acted on it.

Tiffany breathed in deep the fresh air that surrounded her. It filled her lungs and helped her calm herself when her thoughts mercilessly pushed her over the edge.

She missed Taeyeon. That wasn't a lie. She ached to hear Taeyeon's voice again, to hear her call her name. She wanted to hear her stories, to know how she was while she was away. She wanted to know if Taeyeon found it hard to sleep at night like the way she did. She wanted Taeyeon to hug her and kiss her. She wanted to find out if her memories of Taeyeon weren't just a fabricated fantasy in her head. She wanted to be with Taeyeon again, but she felt she wasn't ready for some reason. She felt scared.

Tiffany spent the afternoon by herself, reflecting on the turn of events the past few months had brought. She thought of the members, and how she spent little time with them, but despite that happening, the members didn't seem to show any hard feelings towards her. She felt grateful for their understanding.

Then she thought about her relationship with Taeyeon. She replayed her memories of Taeyeon over and over in her head, convincing herself that it was real, and not just some made up joke. She thought about her feelings, her unexpected feelings, and how unreal everything felt. Almost dreamlike. Tiffany was afraid that one day she would have to wake up from this beautiful dream, with the regret that she was unable to express how she truly felt. The two weeks of Taeyeon's absence had given her more than enough time to think, more than enough time to finally find the words to explain herself.

The hours had quickly gone by when Tiffany pulled out her phone; it was close to eight in the evening. She hadn't realized how much time she spent lost in her thoughts. The night was still young, and there were more streets to be walked on, but Tiffany decided it was time for her to head home. She didn't want anyone to worry, especially Taeyeon. She smiled at the thought of finally seeing Taeyeon again. Her worries were way past her now. She suddenly felt nervous and excited to say the things she once felt unsure of.

Carefully, Tiffany opened the gate to their dorm, with the key she had brought with her. The house was still and quiet, few bedroom lights were left open. She stopped to look at the shadows moving inside the window frames.

Tiffany shook her head. "Seohyun, you should really stop studying so much. You're going to rub off on Hyoyeon soon."

Gusts of wind from the north gently swayed the trees in the neighbourhood. The sound of rustling leaves was pleasant to Tiffany's ears. She took her time sitting on the stone bench in their garden, admiring the moon that hid itself up in the sky. She didn't know why she wanted to stay out longer. It wasn't a matter of wanting more time to think anymore. The moment she realized what she wanted, and how she would go about in getting it, Tiffany felt proud of herself and the amount of courage she had gathered.

Silent and her eyes closed, Tiffany sat elated with the thought of her affirmation singing in her mind. There was no rush. Now that she was sure, she had all the time in the world to confess.

A soft and calm voice came from behind her, "I thought you'd welcome me home," it quietly said. Tiffany didn't open her eyes. She knew that voice from miles away, even in a crowded room, she knew how to silence out the rest and listen closely to that voice. A smile crept to Tiffany's face. "Ah, did you want me to welcome you home?" she amusingly replied.

"Would you welcome me home?" Taeyeon teasingly answered back, sitting next to her.

Tiffany turned to look at Taeyeon, her eyes twinkling in the darkness. "How did you know I was out here?"

Taeyeon shrugged her shoulders and smiled. "Wild guess."

Tiffany nodded, as if content with Taeyeon's answer. "Why aren't you asleep yet?"

"Because you weren't home yet."

Tiffany's heart began to race. She could feel it pounding madly inside her chest as she looked into Taeyeon's eyes. They both faced each other, their gaze fixed into another. Neither girl moved nor spoke for a few minutes, as if scared to lose the moment if one looked away. They sat there silently as if the conversation privately continued in their minds. Tiffany broke out into a smile. She couldn't help herself. She loved it when Taeyeon looked at her like this. Taeyeon slowly reached out to touch Tiffany's hand. Her fingers lightly caressed the soft skin as she held onto it tightly.

"You were gone too long. I really missed you," Tiffany began to speak. She could feel her nerves break free from her control. The moment she imagined the entire afternoon had finally come. "What are we doing, Taeyeon? What are we? Who am I to you? Am I the only one affected by all of this?" She held up her hand that held Taeyeon's tightly.

"Am I the only one who feels something?" Her words were eager. "Taeyeon, I'm in love with y—" Taeyeon abruptly kissed Tiffany on the lips, stopping her from finishing her sentence. The kiss caught Tiffany off guard. She closed her eyes to regain control of her senses. Her heart beat like a drum and thumped in her ears. It was unbelievable how Taeyeon had so much power over her.

Tiffany tried again. "Taeyeon, I'm in love with y—"

Taeyeon put her finger to Tiffany's lips. "Don't say it, Fany. Don't say it."

Tiffany felt a punch hit her on the stomach. "What?" was all she could respond. Her mind didn't reel in what had just happened. One minute she was ready to confess, and all of a sudden she was getting shot down. Was Taeyeon rejecting her?

Taeyeon looked at Tiffany intently. Her eyes were mellow with affection and sincerity. "Fany, don't say it because you might not be able to take it back." Her hand cupped Tiffany's cheek. "We both know what we're doing. There's no need for words," she quietly said.

Taeyeon's mind quickly took hold of the situation before her heart could protest to what she had just said. She loved Tiffany too; there was no doubting what she felt. Taeyeon was only afraid that once those words were finally out in the open, things would get more complicated as emotions were now on the line. It was easier for them this way, she thought. It was easier in the long run to act without confession. How she could explain this to Tiffany, she didn't know.

"This may sound selfish but I don't want to hold on to those words. They'll bring nothing but expectations. I don't want that, Fany. I don't want you to have a hard time because of me. Because of this."

"Fany, we both know the consequences of what we're doing. I don't want you to say it because it would hurt me more if you were to leave." Taeyeon couldn't help but plead with reason.

"What makes you think I'll leave?" Tiffany's hurt now reflected in her voice. She didn't understand what Taeyeon meant. Taeyeon felt the same way towards her too, right? She wasn't being a traitor to her actions, right? Tiffany shook her head in slow disbelief that Taeyeon felt nothing about everything between them.

"Fany, listen to me. I'm giving you the choice to turn back on this anytime. Please don't think you mean nothing to me." Taeyeon felt her heart shatter into tiny little pieces as she scrambled to make Tiffany understand. She drew Tiffany's hands to her face. "This isn't what you want. I'm just a part of the present. Time will pass and you'll realize how awfully young we are now." Taeyeon cleared her throat. She, herself, tried to believe what she was saying.

Tiny pools of water had begun to form in Tiffany's eyes, but she held them back. She tried hard to concentrate on what was happening. Taeyeon was breaking her heart, and it was breaking faster by the second.

Taeyeon could only watch as Tiffany fought back her tears. She felt stupid and angry at herself for making Tiffany cry like this. But what could she have done? She felt terrified at the thought of Tiffany's future and career being taken away because of what she started. This was one risk she couldn't take anymore. She had to be cruel to be kind.

Tiffany pulled herself away from Taeyeon's touch. Sudden outbursts of pain took control of her and she stood up. "What are you saying? Are you even listening to yourself right now?" Her eyes flooded with tears. "I love you, Taeyeon! I'm in love with you!"

"It took me a month to finally realize that! At first, I doubted myself and everything I felt. I second guessed my actions and my thoughts about you but in the end, I couldn't deny it—" Tiffany continued to hold Taeyeon's stare. There was no turning back.

"The first time you kissed me shattered everything I thought I was. You continued and I thought why was I letting you do this? You used to be just one of my best friends. Without me even knowing, it hurt me a lot every time I saw you hurt. I felt happy whenever you were. I was getting too involved with you but I didn't mind. How could I dare myself to think of you as more than just my friend?"

Tiffany continued, "Taeyeon, I'm not stupid to not know that the world won't give us a chance but how could *you* not give *us* a chance?" she turned her back on Taeyeon, and walked hurriedly towards the house.

Taeyeon flinched at Tiffany words. She willed herself to run after Tiffany, but her feet refused to move.

"Fany—I—"

VI. Dawn

Taeyeon sat dead still in her seat, curling her small hands into fists. Her nails dug deep into her skin, but she didn't feel anything. Her knuckles turned white as they shook uncontrollably on her lap. Her whole body was shaking from the blow of Tiffany's words. She looked up to prevent her tears from falling. What has she done?

Her mind couldn't form anything coherent. All she could think about was she hurting Tiffany. How could she stomach that? She looked around her, trying to take in where she was, and what she had done. Feebly, she tried to make sense of her actions, to justify herself and her intentions. It was too late now.

Taeyeon sat there for what felt like an eternity. She had difficulty breathing from the explosion of her tears. Small droplets escaped her eyes and fell short on her chin. She hugged herself to stop the uncontrollable shaking. Is this how it feels when your heart breaks?

Time had a painful way of magnifying everything in an isolating way. Taeyeon wished for time to pass by faster. She wished for something, anything, to happen at that moment, but nothing happened.

The silence was deafening and it went on haunting the last of Tiffany's words along with it. *"How could you not give us a chance?"* Taeyeon could feel the guilt crawl all the way up to her. She couldn't believe her cruelty. It was she who started this—this never would have happened if she just let her feelings pass in the first place. Her eyes saw nothing but the image of Tiffany crying in front of her. It hurt too much, they were both hurting too much.

What am I doing? Taeyeon thought repeatedly. Tiffany only said out loud the words she, herself, wanted to say but what did she do? She dismissed it like it was nothing important.

"Taeyeon, I'm in love with you." Taeyeon cried weakly at Tiffany's sincere admission. She didn't keep the hot tears from drowning her now. If only she had the same amount of courage, if only she could be selfish for once, she might have been happy with Tiffany this moment. Can she ever take back what she said?

Taeyeon couldn't resist herself any longer. It was just too much for her mind to reason with. She swiftly stood up and hastened towards Tiffany's room. She could hear Tiffany's muffled cries from outside the door.

She knocked hesitantly, at loss for words. "Fany—," she called out. There was nothing she could have said to make things better. "Fany? I'm coming in." Taeyeon slowly turned the metal knob. Her hands sweat profusely from the tension she felt. She stopped for a moment, afraid that Tiffany would send her away, before taking a quick glance inside.

Darkness enveloped Tiffany's room, but her stifled crying resonated audibly. Taeyeon frantically looked around in search of where the sound was coming from. She turned around and saw Tiffany curled up, hugging her knees, her head bent low. She was furiously crying and shaking in one corner of the room. Taeyeon quickly knelt and brought her face near Tiffany's to examine the damage she had done.

Tiffany cried with her eyes shut close. Her long lashes dripped heavy of her tears, forming wet trails down her cheeks. Taeyeon gently wiped them away with her trembling fingers. Tiffany's hands gripped tightly at her knees, sinking her nails in an attempt to feel anything, but she was devoid of all feeling after what Taeyeon had said to her.

Taeyeon reached out to stop Tiffany's hands from hurting herself any further. She pulled gently at her wrists as she whispered in Tiffany's ear, "I'm here, I'm here. I'm sorry, Fany."

Tiffany didn't move. Her sobs started to choke her. Taeyeon drew Tiffany closer to her chest, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry—," she hugged Tiffany tightly and kissed her on the forehead, wishing she could take away her pain.

Tiffany couldn't stop herself from crying. Everything felt so open and raw for her to take in. She buried her face in Taeyeon's chest and her hands snaked selfishly at Taeyeon's waist. "I—"

Taeyeon released her hold on Tiffany. She tenderly put her finger under Tiffany's chin to draw Tiffany's lips to her own.

Sparks flew at the point of contact. Taeyeon felt her body shiver as Tiffany pressed her lips closer to hers. She could feel Tiffany's tears on her face. Tiffany's breathing was hard and heavy from the violent sobbing she let out. Taeyeon tilted her head, cupping Tiffany's face as she deepened their contact. Her mind went blank and her senses heightened with Tiffany so close to her. She could feel her hurt and anger melt away. Tiffany held on to Taeyeon's hands for support, her arms wobbling from her lack of strength. She had gone through too much for the night.

Taeyeon fell back on the floor towing Tiffany along on top of her. Tiffany felt her heart pound madly from her longing. She had stopped crying now. Her eyes flicked open when Taeyeon's hand found its way on her back. Taeyeon swayed her fingertips lightly on Tiffany's skin, running back and forth against the softness.

Tiffany shifted her weight to lie partly on her side. She rested on her elbow to hold herself up, her hair falling on Taeyeon's face as she continued to brush her lips against Taeyeon's. She didn't care right now, whether Taeyeon wanted her or not. It was enough that she could have Taeyeon hold her like this. Tiffany held up her hand to rest on Taeyeon's neck. She gradually traced her fingers along Taeyeon's shoulders, her collarbone, finally stopping at her chest. Under her hand, she could feel Taeyeon's heart beating against her palm.

She stopped to look at Taeyeon. Taeyeon's eyes smouldered in the dark. For a second, Tiffany felt like saying those words again, but she stopped herself. She didn't want to ruin this moment, not like she had awhile ago. Taeyeon held her gaze on Tiffany as she sat up on the floor. She crossed her legs and held Tiffany's hand tightly in her own. They sat facing each other with their knees touching. Their eyes looked into another, quick to notice what the other might be feeling.

Taeyeon cleared her throat. "Fany—," she said finally, her eyes never straying from Tiffany's.

Tiffany could have sworn she saw a hint of sadness in Taeyeon's eyes.

"Fany, I'm in love with you too." Her voice was so low, it was barely enough for them to hear.

Tiffany's heart swelled at the sound of Taeyeon's admission. A part of her rejoiced and another part felt guilty that she might have pushed Taeyeon too far. If there had been any other way, any other way for her to know what Taeyeon truly felt about her, she would have done it in a heartbeat. She felt selfish, but triumphant.

Tiffany pulled Taeyeon up to her feet. She took off her sandals and walked barefoot to her bed. The wooden floor felt strangely cold after such a heated moment. It pricked Tiffany's feet, causing her to shudder in the dark. Taeyeon bit her lip and followed Tiffany's pull.

On the bed, they lied down facing each other, their eyes quiet and content with what they saw. The sound of their even breathing was all there was to hear. No further words were exchanged between them, no questions, and no predictions.

Taeyeon put her hand to rest on Tiffany's cheek, and tried to take in everything there was in the moment. She knew that once morning comes to catch them again, she would be looking back to this evening for the rest of her life.

She kissed Tiffany on the forehead. "I love you, Fany."

VII. Morning

Daylight sneaked its way into the farthest corners of Tiffany's room the next morning. The bright rays passed through her curtains and cast themselves regally downwards on the foot of her bed. Taeyeon felt the heat tickling her feet awake. Half of her upper body was neatly covered under Tiffany's blanket. She slowly stretched awake, feeling her right arm numb from the weight of the body that slept near her. Tiffany had her face resting on Taeyeon's shoulder. She was fast asleep, her chest steadily rising.

Taeyeon looked at her tenderly. Tiffany appeared perfectly peaceful in her sleep. Tranquil and serene looking she was, Taeyeon had to touch Tiffany to prove to herself she wasn't dreaming.

Taeyeon gently brushed Tiffany's stray bangs away from her face. Her fingers stroked Tiffany's hair, tidying the mess of hair strands on Tiffany's forehead. Taeyeon lightly stirred Tiffany's body as she adjusted her position to face her. For some reason, she wanted to catch a few minutes of Tiffany sleeping before the girl woke up. This wouldn't be the first time she did this, but today seemed different to her. This morning things would be different.

Taeyeon watched Tiffany sleep. "Fany—," she reached out to touch Tiffany's cheek with the back of her hand. It felt soft and supple to her touch. Her fingers shyly reached out to touch Tiffany's lips when, suddenly, a hand grabbed hers and a hoarse voice started to chuckle, "Kim Taeyeon, what do you think you're doing?" Tiffany croaked, her eyes still closed.

Tiffany's voice sounded worryingly heavy, almost sick, and an awful contrast to the beautiful morning that greeted them. Taeyeon let out a gasp, surprised that Tiffany was awake. She felt her cheeks flush from embarrassment.

"Fany, you sound awful. Are you okay?" Taeyeon asked, quick to dodge Tiffany's question.

"Mhmm, I'm okay." Tiffany released Taeyeon's hand, only to intertwine her fingers with Taeyeon's, "And you? Are you okay?" Her eyes smiled the brightest this morning.

Taeyeon broke into a smile in the brightest way she possibly could to match Tiffany's. "Fany, good morning." She squeezed Tiffany's hand.

Tiffany felt like she was dreaming, to wake up and find Taeyeon holding her close. Her mind quickly raced through the events of what happened last night. The skin of her thighs stung a little as she moved closer to Taeyeon. Her nails had left an ugly trail of small scratches from the sheer force she inflicted upon herself last night.

"Taeyeon, good morning to you too!" Tiffany's voice cracked as she spoke. She cleared her throat, "Am I dreaming? I think I'm awake but why do I feel like I'm dreaming?"

Taeyeon pinched Tiffany's cheeks, causing the latter to break out into a giggle. "Yah, Fany. You sound really bad. Your face is really bloated too—" Taeyeon said, almost a whisper. She still felt guilty for the way she treated Tiffany last night. It hurt her to remember that she caused Tiffany so much pain; pain which she always tried to protect Tiffany from.

"Oh?" Tiffany consciously touched her cheeks to check.

"Yes, but you look just as beautiful like you always do."

There was truth to what Taeyeon said. To her, Tiffany looked twice as lovely as she ever did this morning. Tiffany's eyes reflected so much joy and happiness that Taeyeon found it hard to look at anything but Tiffany. The images of last night Tiffany crying and in pain were at last pushed to the back of her mind.

Outside Tiffany's room, Sunny sat at their dining table awake earlier than she normally was. Her fingers tapped idly on the table as she waited for the members to wake up. Sunny awoke in the middle of the night because of the muffled noise that came from under her window. She looked to her side and found Taeyeon gone from her bed. Lifting her body awake, she peeked outside, her eyes squinting to see what was going on. Sunny saw Tiffany and Taeyeon having, what seemed like it, a fight judging by

their actions. Curiosity got the best of her as she stood there and watched her two friends from her room. She saw Tiffany scramble towards the house, and Taeyeon sitting motionlessly. Sunny couldn't make sense of what she had seen. She thought the two were always happy together. What could they have possibly fought about? She waited for Taeyeon to come back to their room, but Taeyeon never came back for the night. Sunny could only guess that Taeyeon spent the night at Tiffany's room.

Suddenly, Hyoyeon appeared in the kitchen. Her hair was tied to a messy bun and an apron was tied to her waist. She opened the drawers and the cupboards, pulling out kitchen utensils and packets, ready to make the morning breakfast when she noticed Sunny sitting there.

"Hungry already?" Hyoyeon smirked.

"Good morning to you too."

"Why are you up so early? I'm not changing the breakfast menu today," Hyoyeon quipped.

"I didn't sleep well—," Sunny's tone lingered, "I saw Tiffany and Taeyeon last night outside my window. I think they had a fight."

"Spill!" Hyoyeon dropped what she was doing and sat across her.

"Uhh—well, I couldn't really hear what they were saying. Something about being friends and chances."

"You think they're okay now?"

"Probably. Taeyeon didn't come back to our room last night."

Hyoyeon stood from her seat. She motioned for Sunny to follow her as she tiptoed towards Tiffany's room. Both girls pressed their ears to Tiffany's door. They could hear laughter coming from inside.

"Guess things are okay," Hyoyeon declared. She straightened up, and turned towards the kitchen when she accidentally bumped into a tall girl standing behind her.

"Ah! Sooyoung!" Hyoyeon exclaimed in surprise. Sunny jumped behind her, surprised that Sooyoung was awake.

"What are you guys doing?" Sooyoung pressed her ears to Tiffany's door. She heard silence. "Lemme guess. Taeyeon is inside?" Hyoyeon and Sunny walked back towards the kitchen, turning their backs on Sooyoung.

"Hey, tell me! Did something happen?" Sooyoung followed the two girls and sat at the dining table, "What's for breakfast?"

Hyoyeon shook her head. "Pancakes and bacon. Your favorite."

"Nothing happened," Sunny dismissed Sooyoung's question. There was nothing concrete to make out of what she saw last night and what she heard this morning after all.

Tiffany and Taeyeon then appeared, with their hands joined as they walked. They let go reflexively when they saw the members awake and occupying the kitchen. Tiffany took her seat, a big smile plastered on her face.

Sooyoung looked at her, intrigued by Tiffany's smile, "So, what were you up to last night that you're so happy this morning?"

"Ah, nothing." Tiffany kept smiling innocently.

"Yah! Fany, if you're secretly dating you should've taken me with you!" Sooyoung kidded. She knew Tiffany wouldn't be secretly dating anyone, not when Tiffany always stuck by Taeyeon like the latter's shadow.

"What? I wasn't out on a date. I just ran a few errands. That's all."

Taeyeon stood in front of the stove holding a skillet in one hand. She placed it on the stove and skillfully cracked an egg open with the other. Taeyeon grabbed a plate and put the cooked egg on it when she had finished scrambling it. She put the plate in front of Tiffany and began to scramble another egg for herself. Hyoyeon, Sunny and Sooyoung watched the two with caution.

"I thought I was cooking breakfast today?" Hyoyeon asked Taeyeon. She stirred the pancake batter evenly with a spatula.

"Yeah, we just wanted some eggs this morning." Taeyeon smiled. She took the seat next to Tiffany, bringing it closer before she sat down.

Tiffany forked her eggs contentedly, appeased that Taeyeon had made her breakfast this morning. She bit on her toast and looked lovingly at her eggs.

Sunny didn't stop herself from staring at Tiffany's actions. The wheels in her head turned and studied the two. "Taeyeon, you weren't in bed when I woke up. Where were you?"

Taeyeon's eyes shifted quickly to her side. "I-I helped Tiffany early this morning with her errands."

Sooyoung lifted her eyebrows at Taeyeon's response. "What? This early in the morning?"

"I asked her to. My sister called so the time difference kept us up," Tiffany answered the question for Taeyeon. She stood and carried her empty plate to the sink.

Taeyeon swallowed the last of her breakfast and followed Tiffany walk away from the kitchen. She looked down on the floor, thinking that they couldn't keep lying to the others like this.

Hyoyeon frowned. "They didn't even stay to eat my pancakes."

"More for me!" Sooyoung sang happily. "I can have their bacon too."

"Hey, I want some too!" Sunny whined. "You can have Fany's share and I'll have Taeyeon's."

Yuri then showed up in the kitchen. She drowsily tied her hair into a ponytail as she sat next to Sooyoung. "Pancakes? Hyoyeon, I want my pancakes shaped like a heart!"

"What? But you're going to eat it anyway!" Hyoyeon replied. She flipped the pancake expertly in the air.

"Guys, I can't stand the two anymore. Are we going to have to force the truth out of them?" Sunny whispered loudly to Sooyoung and Yuri.

Yuri reeled her mind to focus. "What are you talking about?" She rubbed her eyes awake.

"Just this morning, the two were at it again," Sunny explained.

"Soonkyu, you can't force these things. And can you imagine how awkward it'll be once it's out in the open?" Sooyoung retorted.

"Like it's going to get any worse at the rate we're at?" Sunny shot back.

Sooyoung paused for a second. "What are you suggesting then?"

"Nothing. I'm just saying the two will have to come clean to us eventually."

Yuri turned her head around to check if Tiffany and Taeyeon were in earshot. "We can always just ask them once and for all."

Hyoyeon continued to cook quietly, not commenting on what the girls talked about. She figured that messing in other people's businesses will only attract more trouble.

"No! I can't do that. Besides, if Taeyeon flat out lied again to us, I'd really take it against her," Sunny frowned in protest.

Sooyoung shook her head. It was too early in the morning for them to talk about this. She cut her pancakes into tiny even slices. "Let's deal with this another time. We have a busy day ahead of us."

Yuri stood up and headed for Sooyoung's room. Someone had to try and wake Jessica, she figured.

Meanwhile, Tiffany and Taeyeon had retreated back inside Tiffany's room. Taeyeon quickly closed the door and let out a sigh. She looked anxiously at Tiffany. "Fany—"

"That was a close call," Tiffany relieved. She plopped down on her bed and lied on her back.

"Fany, I think they're already suspecting us," Taeyeon began. "They're not blind." She lied down next to her, furring her eyebrows. "I think we should tell the others."

Tiffany suddenly turned to Taeyeon in protest. "No! What do you think they're going to say if we tell them? They won't understand."

"Well, we won't know if we won't do it."

"Taeyeon, I don't think they'll understand." Tiffany put her arms around Taeyeon possessively. She felt afraid that Taeyeon would be taken away from her if she came out with the truth. "Can we not tell the others? Not yet?"

"Are you sure?"

Tiffany remembered what she and Seohyun had talked about a week ago. "Yes, let's just lay low for awhile, act normal and all. They won't suspect anything and turn their attention to us if we acted normally." Seohyun had told her before that she and the others knew what she and Taeyeon were up to. Panic and fear overcame Tiffany at that instant. She dismissed Seohyun words, deciding that she would tell Taeyeon about the incident another time.

"But—"

"Taeyeon, I don't want to lose you—now that I have you, I don't want to lose you just like that." Tiffany looked at Taeyeon in earnest. She felt afraid that the members would separate them once they found out. Who could blame Tiffany for keeping this a secret? This relationship would get more than its fair share of disapproval.

"I don't want to lose you too."

"As long as we have each other, I don't care. I love you, Taeyeon." Tiffany shook her negative thoughts away from her head. Nothing else mattered this moment than to have Taeyeon with her.

"Yeah, as long as we have each other."

VIII. Plans

Few minutes passed and the doorbell buzzed angrily. Hyoyeon's voice echoed throughout the quiet household. It was the middle of another hectic morning.

"Oppa's here! We have half an hour to get ready!" She bellowed and bolted to her room. Seohyun was awake and combing her hair straight in front of the dresser.

"Already? I haven't even eaten breakfast yet." Seohyun pulled out her clothes from her closet.

"That's okay, sweetie. You can eat it in the car. I left some pancakes for you on the table." Hyoyeon rushed to get her towel to take a quick shower before anyone got there first.

In the other rooms of the household, the members hurriedly prepared themselves for the day's schedule. Jessica grudgingly got up from her bed and changed her clothes. Her body didn't respond when Yuri had previously tried to wake her up. Sooyoung bumped her as she rushed out of the room, "Sica, you're going to have to hurry."

"Ugh," Jessica grunted in complaint.

Yoona yawned loudly as she waited in the living room couch for the members to finish dressing. Her doe-like eyes drooped tiredly from the lack of a proper sleep routine. She let her head fall back on the seat, looking groggily up at the ceiling. Eventually, her eyes closed asleep again. Yuri sat beside her fixing the contents of her bag. Sunny appeared and sat between them, eyes fixed on the game console she held.

Yuri peered in, "You're still playing that game?"

Sunny nodded. "I can't seem to get past this level. I'm a little rusty."

Yuri yanked the game console away from Sunny's hands. "You're not doing it right. Let me do it."

Sunny bumped her head to Yuri's, concentrating on the console screen. "What are you doing? You're going to get me killed!" she grumbled.

Yuri stuck her tongue out as she cleverly pressed the buttons, clearing the level for her old roommate. A smile of satisfaction spread across her face as she handed the console back.

"Since when did you learn how to do that?" Sunny asked, impressed with Yuri's help.

Yuri laughed. "I played your console a lot whenever you were out on your schedule. I had to find out why you always spent your free time with that thing."

The doorbell buzzed loudly again. Yuri stood up and yelled, "Guys! Time to leave!" She patted Yoona gently on the cheeks. "Yoona, wake up. We have to go."

One by one the girls assembled in the living room, carrying their things with them. They headed out the door in a hurry, their heels clicking loudly as they walked. Taeyeon stayed behind and waited for Tiffany to appear. She wanted to sit beside Tiffany in the car and spend time with her while she could. Tiffany blushed red as Taeyeon fixed her scarf and smiled at her dotingly. She held Taeyeon's hand when they walked hurriedly towards the others.

Silence soon engulfed them as they rode to the broadcasting station. It was relatively a short drive, but traffic in the city always afforded them the luxury of spare time on their hands. Each member had their minds decided on how to spend the precious time for themselves before the day's activities overworked them.

At the back of the car, Yoona and Jessica used up their time to catch up on sleep, their thin bodies seemingly worn out despite the early rest last night. Jessica had her head resting on Yuri's shoulder while Yuri coached Sunny quietly and animatedly with her video game. Sunny was dead intent on finishing the level before she had to let go of the game console.

Up front, Seohyun kept to her school books, studiously reading the text from page to page. She made mnemonics in her head to make it easier for herself. Next to Seohyun, Tiffany and Taeyeon sat beside each other closely. They tried their best to prevent themselves from smiling too much, and for no

apparent reason at all. The ends of their hands touched from the position they sat. Tiffany had one earpiece in her ear while the other earpiece played in Taeyeon's. They listened idly to the music playing in Tiffany's music player, their attention not really turned to the music they heard.

Tiffany scrolled through the menu of her music player from time to time to play upbeat tunes. She felt high and happy like the song she hummed. Tiffany and Taeyeon looked at each other carefully, stealing glances from the corner of their eyes. Sooyoung sat at the other end of the row, watchful of the interactions of the couple beside her. She turned her attention elsewhere.

"Hyoyeon, let's go to the convenience store later and buy food." She raised her head to the side of the passenger's seat.

"I just fed you pancakes!"

The car screeched to a halt upon arrival at the broadcasting station. The members had separate schedules for the morning. Hyoyeon, Sooyoung, Seohyun, Tiffany, Yoona and Yuri got off the car first, because they had a variety show taping. Jessica and Taeyeon had vocal practice for a future project, while Sunny had a recording at a different broadcasting station. They were used to the constant shuffling of who they spent the day with by now. Today, they could be working alone, then complete as a group the next.

Tiffany thought of Taeyeon throughout the morning even though they would be together again in the afternoon. She tried hard to be mentally present where she was, and she did succeed, but it was never too long enough for the members to fully appreciate her efforts to participate in their conversations.

Sooyoung noticed this and put the most effort in fixing it. She talked and joked with Tiffany, teasing her about Korean propriety that Tiffany apparently wasn't completely used to yet. Hyoyeon and Yuri eventually joined in. They childishly made fun of Tiffany's disgust for insects, causing the latter to scream and shout on national TV. Tiffany took the teasing lightly, because for once, she found herself thinking of other things aside from Taeyeon.

Later in the day, the entire group met with their manager and the rest of the staff that handled them. Taeyeon was quick to stand by Tiffany's side the moment she had seen Tiffany come in through the door. Her face lit up, eyes round with anticipated happiness. She held Tiffany's hand, pinching lightly Tiffany's fingertips.

They were in a small conference room at their entertainment company. The white walls hung placards, records of various artists that the company has handled through the years. Chatting noisily amongst themselves and the crew, the members sat around a marble table while the crew huddled behind them. Controversy seemed to fill the air as everyone talked with everyone.

"What? Another lawsuit was filed?"

"Who told you?"

"I'm hungry again—!"

"No, he didn't! They did what? You're kidding, right!"

"The morning news already reported about—"

"What's going to happen now?"

"I don't know."

"Does this mean we get a vacation?"

"Let's wait until—"

Their manager leaned darkly against the wall. His eyebrows creased deep in thought above the rimless glasses he wore. He thought quietly to himself on how the group could continue to work despite the legal issues their entertainment company was facing.

For nearly a year now, numerous controversies had surfaced in the public that questioned the treatment their artists receive, the girls included. Human rights violations, unreasonable clauses in contracts and invasions of privacy were just some of the concerns that damaged the company's reputation. To this day, a compromised solution between the parties involved in the legal dispute seems

impossible to be met. Even more under the scrutinizing eye of the public, the truth will be hard to keep and be revealed at the same time.

The girls discussed openly with their staff on how long the crisis might continue. For the past months, they felt their work threatened by the possibility that they could be dragged into the picture. All of them had religiously kept quiet on the subject matter, except amongst themselves. This was too big of a mess for them to get involved in.

"Does this mean the plans for Japan will be postponed?"

"Even my mom is asking me if it's true!"

"Oh! I remembered him telling me—"

"What are we going to do?"

"But that's impossible!"

"Check the newspaper front page."

"The CF is cancelled?"

"How could they agree to that?"

"Nothing?"

Taeyeon held Tiffany's hand protectively under the table. The last thing their company needed right now was to be given more attention and flak from the public. Taeyeon thought of how her relationship with Tiffany might suffer because of the critical atmosphere the entertainment industry currently stood on. Everything could collapse in an instant.

It was common knowledge to the group that fan-taken pictures of them circulated the internet, but what kept them on the edge of their seats were the pictures that could raise questions about their relations with each other, pictures that could categorize as scandalous at the most. Between everyone in the group, such suggestions were harmless and nonsensical to consider, but it seemed their company felt otherwise.

Their manager was aware of this predicament too, which was why he cleared the members' schedules for the rest of the day, and called for an informal meeting. The group had gone through scandals before, and they faced them the best way they could, but the situation was different and dire this time. If the company failed to handle the situation in the best way it could, then everyone will be put at risk.

"The upper management has yet to tell me about their plans. There's a rumour going on that even employees will go on strike a few days from now." Their manager scratched his head. "I, myself, can't believe that things are piling like this one after the other." He looked at the girls with a troubled look on his face. "Girls, as your manager of course I'm here to look after your best interests, but it seems we're going to have to lie low for awhile. This doesn't mean however, you'll stop with your activities because the company still needs to operate regardless of the legal matters that are being pressed."

"Oppa, what do you mean? Are we going to go on a hiatus again?" Yuri asked. She held Yoona and Seohyun's hands. The girls were hugging and holding each other now, their faces coloured with uncertainty.

"Only until the heat from the public dies down. When that will happen, I don't know. Plans are pretty uncertain at the moment. The media has been using every possible angle to make the situation worse. Even I, myself, find it hard to separate fact from fiction now. The upper management won't let me in on any information about the validity of the claims."

"Oppa, how can you not know anything? You're part of the upper management!" Sooyoung disputed.

"Aish, managers don't concern themselves with other artists' businesses. I'm busy enough as it is handling all of you."

"So we're going on an indefinite break?" Sunny clarified.

"Yes, an indefinite break. I don't want any of you getting involved so it's best we clear the air first. I've raised the suggestion to the upper management and they seem to agree to the plan. I'm meeting them tomorrow to discuss the details."

Mixed emotions swept the girls. At first they felt shocked by the sudden news from their manager. They didn't feel the gravity of the situation until now. An indefinite break suggested a lot of things. One, their career would be put into an uncertain hold. Two, their popularity could easily die down and last, a needed vacation came with it.

The girls tried to contain themselves from reacting inappropriately, but with this kind of news, what was the appropriate reaction to begin with? Jessica, Yoona, Tiffany, Sooyoung and Hyoyeon welcomed the idea of a vacation first inside their heads while Taeyeon, Sunny, Yuri and Seohyun worried instead for what this break meant to their career.

"Taeyeon, we can visit your parents!" Tiffany whispered excitedly. Spending time with Taeyeon was the first thing that entered her mind.

"What? Oh yeah, we can go there." Taeyeon took the suggestion with surprise. It didn't occur to her that an indefinite break meant more time on their hands. She had just come from a short vacation.

"I want to go as soon as possible! When do you think we can go?"

"Wait, Fany, who's going? Just the two of us?"

"Of course, just the two of us! Who else do you think is going?"

Taeyeon looked at the members to signal to Tiffany what she thought. She bit her lip and waited for Tiffany's reaction.

Tiffany looked at the members, adjusting the expression on her face accordingly. She didn't want to bring the others along, but what would they excuse to go by themselves? Tiffany didn't want the attention to be on her and Taeyeon. It had taken her long enough to come into terms with how she felt. She was far from ready to share this discovery about herself to the others. Was it even necessary that she shared it? Was this something the members could understand?

Back at the dorm, the girls gathered around the kitchen to talk about their respective plans for their indefinite break. Tiffany and Taeyeon stood closely next to each other. They waited cleverly for the perfect opportunity to tell the others about their planned trip to Taeyeon's province when everyone else had already voiced out their plans.

Sunny and Sooyoung leaned on the kitchen counter top, arguing whether going on a vacation to Europe or to the US was better. Hyoyeon, Yuri and Seohyun agreed amongst themselves to stay at the dorm for awhile to clean and renovate the house, while Jessica and Yoona listened in to the discussion. Jessica stood by the microwave, heating the frozen pizza Sooyoung wanted.

"No, we should go to Europe instead! There are a lot more places to see there!" Sooyoung insisted.

"But there a lot of places to see in the US too!" Sunny insisted back.

"I've been to the US. Europe, on the other hand, is waiting for me!"

"What's wrong with going again? Aish. Why am I arguing with you?" Sunny shook her head. "Taeyeon, let's go to the US! The hamburgers there are pretty delicious."

Seohyun let out an automatic gasp. "Unni! Don't eat those things!"

Sunny let out a laugh. She knew that her hamburger comment wouldn't go unnoticed by their youngest, "Seohyun, you really won't let me eat what I want?"

Sooyoung rolled her eyes. "Yah! Sunny! There are hamburgers in Europe too! If you're going to the US just for those hamburgers, then I'll have a dozen frozen hamburgers delivered here just for you. Let's go to Europe instead, please?" Sooyoung pleaded.

"What do you think? Where should we go?" Sunny asked Taeyeon for a different opinion.

"Oh? Me? I—me and Fany plan to go to Jeonju next week." The members stopped talking and turned their attention to Taeyeon. They were curious as to how Taeyeon was going to spend her time. Also, where was Tiffany spending her vacation?

"Is your father ill again?" Sooyoung asked, concerned if there was something wrong.

"No, no, I thought it would be nice to see them again. I don't always get to go home."

"Ah! I haven't seen your family in awhile. Which day next week do we leave?" Yuri put her arm around Jessica's neck. "Sica! The strawberries there are delicious!"

Tiffany lingered gruffly on what Yuri had just assumed and said. The last time Tiffany checked, it was just her and Taeyeon on this trip, but apparently, the members thought they were going with them.

"You're coming with us?" Tiffany asked a little too loudly.

Sooyoung blinked at Tiffany's tone. "Yeah! I want to eat Taeyeon's mom's cooking again!"

"But you ate most of the food Taeyeon brought home!" Hyoyeon reminded Sooyoung.

"I know! It was that good!"

Jessica handed Sooyoung the heated food from the microwave, "Okay, whatever, you eat anything and everything."

"Unni, we don't have any exams soon. I really want to see how your umma is doing!" Seohyun said, smiling.

Taeyeon weighed the words of the members carefully. There didn't seem to be a way out, to prevent the others from going with her and Tiffany. "We leave tomorrow afternoon."

"Already? Okay, give me a few hours to pack everything I need." Sooyoung ran towards her room in a sarcastic hurry.

Taeyeon hit herself mentally in the head. That plan to throw the members off did not go the way she expected. Tiffany looked at Taeyeon with a dejected look in her face. She was looking forward to spend time with Taeyeon without the others. Taeyeon smiled at Tiffany reassuringly. There was nothing else to do but to make the most out of the situation.

"Hey! Don't get my luggage! I put it under your bed, but don't use it!" Jessica called after Sooyoung.

The other members soon went to their respective rooms to start packing their things. They knew that Tiffany and Taeyeon would be on the move, but what Tiffany and Taeyeon didn't know was that the members were just as convinced to move along with them, whether Tiffany and Taeyeon liked it or not.

IX. Hints

The trip to Jeonju the following day had taken longer than expected. The members had departed later than what was planned because not everyone had finished packing by midday. Surprisingly, Tiffany took the longest to finish. She had taken her time choosing and matching the clothes she would bring with her. Dressing up had always felt second nature to Tiffany, but because of Taeyeon, Tiffany felt shyly conscious of how she appeared most of the time. She would run her fingers through her hair, lick her lips when she felt them dry, and looked at every opportunity to check her reflection.

Tiffany's mood swung from sulking to excitement, and back again, in quick tiny intervals as she packed. She tried her best to cheer up about the situation, but she couldn't help but feel irritable towards it either.

Something somehow always stood in the way whenever the chance to be with Taeyeon alone presented itself. The members' presence wasn't just the problem. Tiffany faced a harder problem with herself. The complexity of her feelings had caused her to think and act irrational sometimes. It was beyond her control, to be a little too possessive with Taeyeon and a little too paranoid about the members.

Tiffany was nothing but irritable once she stepped out of the car. Dusk had fallen, and soon it would be time for dinner. The sun glowed orange as it disappeared from view. Tiffany exhaled heavily through her nose, clenching her jaw shut tight. Her eyes narrowed coldly on Sunny's back who unexpectedly cut in line as the members boarded the car previously, and seated herself between her and Taeyeon. For a few hours' worth, Tiffany felt the car ride was one of the longest she had ever taken.

Taeyeon gently grabbed Tiffany's hand as she stepped out of the car. She squeezed it when she made sure the members weren't looking. Taeyeon put her hand around Tiffany's waist as she walked alongside Tiffany's slow and heavy steps. The members were already inside the house greeting Taeyeon's parents. They carried their luggage with them and some wrapped food as a present.

"Fany, cheer up. Sunny didn't mean to. We just continued where we left off when we were packing." Taeyeon said to Tiffany in an attempt to lighten her up.

"Hm," Tiffany hummed.

"Aw. Why are you upset?"

"Nothing."

"What? Tell me." Taeyeon tried to charm her way into fishing a smile from Tiffany.

"It's nothing," Tiffany reassured Taeyeon.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. It's nothing."

"Okay—smile for me?"

Tiffany forced a smile. It was still a lovely grin in Taeyeon's eyes.

Taeyeon thought guiltily to herself whether she had done or said anything to upset Tiffany. Was Sunny the only reason for this? If it were, it seemed a little silly Taeyeon thought. Tiffany and Taeyeon were always together whenever their schedules permit them. They rarely separated from each other, even when they talked with the other members.

If there was something Tiffany seriously worried about that Taeyeon didn't seem to consider, it was time. Time alone with each other was as rare as this vacation handed to them, and to spend it with a handful of other people meant that this time could be easily stolen, intentionally or not.

"Stephanie, is that you?" Taeyeon's mom greeted Tiffany with a warm hug. "You lost weight! Hurry and come inside, it's almost time for dinner."

The members gathered noisily around the dinner table. Bowls and plates of food were passed around at a rapid rate. Sooyoung and Yoona's arms extended from side to side to distribute servings. Taeyeon's

father chuckled at the burst of energy in his home. Nine active girls under one roof seemed too much to handle he thought. He wondered how Taeyeon could manage them all at once.

"Taeyeon, here, get some more." Taeyeon's father put pieces of meat in his daughter's bowl. "So, how are things? How long will you stay here?"

"We can stay as long as we want. Oppa said it would be good if we hid from the public for awhile." Taeyeon chewed her food slowly.

"Hiding, eh? Why? Is there a scandal I should know about?" Taeyeon's father looked around the table. He eyed each of the members with humor.

Upon eye contact with Taeyeon's father, Tiffany choked on the piece of meat she swallowed. She coughed loudly, and reached for a glass of water to soothe herself. Taeyeon's father had caught her off guard. Tiffany bent her head low and resumed eating.

Taeyeon looked at Tiffany and back at her father, "Appa! We don't have any scandals. That's what we're trying to prevent."

Sooyoung laughed at what Taeyeon's father insinuated. "Appa, we never get to date. We rarely go out so it's impossible for us to have a scandal."

Sunny snorted amusingly as she listened in to the conversation. Wasn't Taeyeon and Tiffany's unconfirmed relationship considered a scandal? For some undeclared mischievous reason, Sunny grinned to herself.

On the other side of the table, Hyoyeon, Yuri and Yoona talked with Taeyon's mother. They chatted with enthusiasm as they narrated their funny experiences whenever they were at work. Taeyeon's mother laughed, delighted with the stories, "But girls, have you been getting any rest? Don't overwork yourselves. I don't want any of you getting sick."

Yuri raised and wagged her finger at Taeyeon's direction, "Ah, umma! You should scold Taeyeon, even if she's not feeling well she still goes to her schedules!"

Taeyeon's mother opened her mouth in shock. "Taeyeon! How many times have I told you to rest instead when you're not feeling well?"

Taeyeon turned her head to the other side of the table. "What? I do take care of myself—I'm okay, really. I know my limits." Taeyeon felt embarrassed to be scolded by her mother in front of the members. Yoona and Seohyun laughed at the mother-daughter interaction.

"Taeyeon, I'm serious. I don't want you overworking yourself. Health must always come first."

"Umma, I'm not overworking." Taeyeon looked down at her food. "Everything's fine, everyone's well."

"Yes, umma. Taeyeon has been taking care of herself well. There's no need to worry," Tiffany reassured Taeyeon's mother.

"Taeyeon, you know how hard it is to get sick nowadays, and with new kinds of illnesses coming out, you should be more careful. Do I have to send you extra vitamins?" Taeyeon's mother replied unconvinced. She continued on for a few minutes with her sermon about health and work.

Yuri put her arms around Taeyeon's mother. "Umma, I was only talking about one time. Taeyeon really does take care of herself," she said, in an attempt to calm down Taeyeon's mother. "Tiffany's also always with Taeyeon to remind her about her health so you can be sure Taeyeon's in good hands." Yuri smiled innocently.

The other members except for Taeyeon and Tiffany gawked at Yuri's bravery to hint at something. Under the table, Jessica kicked Yuri for being too obvious with her choice of words. Sunny smiled amusingly to herself again while Yoona covered her mouth to stop herself from laughing.

Sooyoung put her chopsticks down dramatically. "Yah! Yuri! You're the one who caught the swine flu last year. How dare you talk about Taeyeon not taking care of herself?" Sooyoung tried to divert the attention in case Taeyeon and Tiffany caught in on them.

Tiffany, however, lingered on what Yuri had said, wondering if there was something else to Yuri's words. She remembered what Seohyun had said to her. Did they know what Tiffany feared them to

know? Tiffany felt her palms sweat from nervousness. Taeyeon, on the other hand, felt her lips draw to a smile as she realized that Tiffany was always watching over her. Tiffany took care of her even if it wasn't necessary.

"Taeyeon, you should watch over the others. Healthy must really come first," Taeyeon's father interrupted. The members nodded together in unison. They obediently heeded the words of Taeyeon's parents.

"Taeyeon, you can move your brother's things down to our room. The girls can use his room if the rooms upstairs aren't enough," he instructed.

The second floor of Taeyeon's house had three rooms to it. Two rooms were next to each other on one end, one belonged to her brother, while the other was Taeyeon's. At the other end was the last room which served as a spare room for guests. The members headed up the curved stairway carrying their heavy bags with them.

Sooyoung reached the floor landing first, her arms spreading to block the members who stood behind her on the staircase. "Okay, so, since there are only three rooms, let's follow the dorm room assignments except Tiffany can bunk in with me and Jessica. Hyoyeon and Seohyun will also have to split up. Fair is fair."

"What? I'm not sleeping in her brother's room!" Hyoyeon sneaked under Sooyoung's arm. "If you want, you can have that room."

"But me and Jessica are getting the guest room."

"Wait, why are you giving the room assignments? It's Taeyeon's house!" Yuri objected.

Taeyeon walked in front of the bickering members, she thought to herself how she and Tiffany could share a room despite the limited number.

"Okay, guys, quiet! Settle down! I can get my brother's room. The rest of you can share my room and the other room there." Taeyeon pointed southwards and looked at Tiffany. "But I doubt four girls could fit in the guest room so one of you is going to have to share with me."

Tiffany right away volunteered herself. "Taeyeon, I can share with you." Tiffany knew what Taeyeon was getting at.

Sooyoung opened the door to Taeyeon's bedroom. "Oh, Taeyeon, there's enough space in your room!" Taeyeon's room had a single bed and a big closet that stood at the far end of the walls, opposite to each other. A small dresser was situated at one corner, while a wooden table and chair occupied the center. It wasn't comfortably big, but it was enough to fit five girls, provided they moved out Taeyeon's table and chair. The other rooms of the second level had about the same floor space.

"It's okay. I can move in to my brother's room," Taeyeon insisted.

"No, it's okay. We can fit here in your room. Me and Jessica are stick thin anyways so no problem." Sooyoung put her bags down on the wooden floor. "It's your house so we don't want you to go through the trouble to make us comfortable."

Jessica sat down on the soft bed. "Yeah, Taeyeon. We can fit here. It'll be fun." Sunny nodded in agreement.

"Okay, I'll bring down some things for us then, like mattresses." Taeyeon went upstairs to the attic to pick up some extra blankets. The members were unusually persistent to have her company. She knew Tiffany wasn't going to be happy about this. Tiffany quickly followed Taeyeon up the stairway.

Once they were up in the attic, Tiffany hugged Taeyeon from the back as Taeyeon bent over to pick up the things for the members. Tiffany had her arms around Taeyeon's waist. Taeyeon leaned back on Tiffany's hug. "Hey," she whispered. They stood in the silence like that for a few seconds.

Tiffany rested her chin on Taeyeon's shoulder. "Hey." She kissed Taeyeon on the cheek.

Taeyeon felt the short kiss erupt wild butterflies in her stomach. "Everything okay? How are you holding up?"

"Not good. I miss you even if you're just there, a feet away from me."

Tiffany and Taeyeon talked to each other in hushed voices. They didn't want the others downstairs to hear them.

"I'm here, I'm just here." Taeyeon turned herself around to look at Tiffany. She looked deep in Tiffany's eyes. "Don't be sad. They're already here. We can't do anything about it anymore."

Tiffany looked back at Taeyeon. "I know. I know. We tried." She wanted to have this small moment with Taeyeon alone last a little longer.

"Smile for me?"

Tiffany relented, smiling. "Good enough for you?"

Taeyeon felt her heart skip a beat. She took a breath to regain her senses. "Fany—"

Tiffany leaned in to kiss Taeyeon on the lips. She closed her eyes as their lips briefly met, their hands clasped tightly. Taeyeon could feel Tiffany smile as she moved to kiss Tiffany on the cheek.

"I love you," Taeyeon whispered.

"I love you too."

Taeyeon walked towards the stairway and sat on the steps. Tiffany followed her, bending her head to rest on Taeyeon's shoulder. She played with Taeyeon's hands on her lap.

"Fany, do you feel like telling the members? Maybe it's time we told them the truth."

"Now? But they might not understand," Tiffany tried to reason with Taeyeon. Deep inside, she felt terrified. Tiffany didn't completely understand how she got into this relationship in the first place, so how could the members understand it any better if she, herself, couldn't?

"What makes you think that? We've gone through a lot of things as a group and they know us better than most people."

"Yes, but this is different. What's going to happen if they take it negatively?" Tiffany wasn't sure if she knew everything there was to know about herself. To be in love with another girl was beyond her. Tiffany had also been trying to let the members' suspicions die down. She thought back to her incident with Seohyun; Tiffany hadn't said anything to Seohyun then. She neither denied nor confirmed Seohyun's words. Tiffany simply ignored what Seohyun said, hoping that Seohyun would feel that she was mistaken. She also wasn't sure if she had said the right thing to her, or if Seohyun had even completely understood what they were talking about. Tiffany hadn't been in her right mind to deal with anyone.

Taeyeon shrugged her shoulders. "But do you think they know? They've been acting like they do especially when Yuri said you were always with me."

"Yuri? Ah, no, she just simply stated a fact. We're together most of the time, aren't we?" Tiffany didn't want to lie, but her fears trapped the better of her. It seemed bad enough that Tiffany wouldn't be able to accept the judgments thrown at her because of this relationship, and if she were to lose Taeyeon all of a sudden, what would she do?

"Taeyeon, I love you. I don't want to risk it."

"It's okay. We don't have to tell them if you don't want to." Taeyeon easily gave in to Tiffany. She loved her too much to resist.

"Just not yet."

"You're not ready?"

"I don't know." Tiffany argued madly with herself. Why was it so important what the others would say? All that mattered to her was Taeyeon, but why did it bother her so much?

"Well, we'll tell them when you're ready," Taeyeon quietly said. But was Taeyeon, herself, even ready to be open about this?

Taeyeon heard a door open downstairs. Footsteps echoed into the direction of the attic. Taeyeon stood up and pulled Tiffany to her feet. She quickly kissed Tiffany on the forehead, turning to gather the blankets in her arms. Yoona and Seohyun appeared on the stairway. They helped Tiffany and Taeyeon carry down the things the members needed.

In Taeyeon's room, the night light from the back of the bed shone timidly. Tiffany could make out the features on Taeyeon's face as she turned to face Taeyeon. Taeyeon sat up to turn the night light off. Tiffany and Taeyeon lied down beside each other on the mattress on one side of the bed, while Sooyoung and Sunny were at the foot of it. Jessica was fast asleep on the bed.

"Why does Jessica get to sleep on the bed?" Sooyoung grunted as she pulled the blankets to her body, "We should take turns. It's my turn tomorrow!"

Sunny slapped Sooyoung's arm in the dark. "Goodnight Sooyoung," she declared.

X. Accident

"Can you be any more obvious?" Sooyoung rolled her eyes at Yuri. She stabbed a piece of meat on her plate with her fork. The broad daylight cascaded over the horizon the following morning. It was a perfect breezy day for strolling.

"What? I had to say it! It was the perfect chance to." Yuri laughed loudly. Hyoyeon laughed with her. Jessica put down her bowl of rice. "I should've kicked you harder. You made things awkward!"

"Yeah! I had to step in and say something!" Sooyoung added.

"Come on, I thought the plan was to force the truth out of them?"

"Yeah, but not like that." Sunny eyed Yuri. "Now they might back away from telling us even more."

"It's not like I said it in a disgusting way. I think I even sounded supportive actually." Yuri defended herself and the bold comment she had made over dinner last night.

"Look, we came on this trip on the off chance they would tell us. Now, stop forcing it or it might never happen!" Hyoyeon reminded everyone.

Sunny, Hyoyeon, Sooyoung, Yuri and Jessica were in small canteen in Taeyeon's neighbourhood. They had stopped for an early lunch after exploring the town by themselves. Yoona and Seohyun were with Taeyeon's parents. They gladly accompanied them to buy food at the grocery.

"You're really bad at this," Sunny said to Yuri. "You're going to have to be more subtle than that." She put her shades back on.

"Be more subtle? Then they're not going to get the point!"

"So, are you saying that we should just go straight to the point then?" Jessica asked.

Hyoyeon shook her head. The members were making too big a deal of Tiffany and Taeyeon's actions, "What if we're overreacting? What if there's really nothing going on? What if it's all in our heads?" Hyoyeon thought to herself how easily influenced she was by the suspicions of the other girls. Her opinion had changed often to agree with the members.

The girls all turned to look at Hyoyeon. Sooyoung raised her eyebrow. "I bet you my dinner that there *is* something going on. They keep on disappearing to have time for themselves. What other explanation is there?"

Hyoyeon kept quiet. She thought of other possible explanations for Tiffany and Taeyeon's actions. Was it so important that they extract the truth from them? And more importantly, were they getting in the way of Tiffany and Taeyeon's supposed relationship?

Earlier in the morning, Tiffany and Taeyeon had awoken a little after sunrise to sneak out of the house. Taeyeon had planned something special for Tiffany to make up for the time they could have spent together alone. She carried a basket of food with her as she led Tiffany through the neighbourhood. Most households were still asleep, the sun barely up in the sky. Their footsteps echoed around the quiet alleys as they walked hand in hand with Taeyeon leading the way. Taeyeon knew the town and its places like the back of her hand.

The short walk eventually led them to a big metal gate with high concrete walls that surrounded an entire block. Old, gigantic trees from inside peaked at the top ledges. The thin branches extended outwards towards the streets. Green vines crept all over the hedges and the railings of the gate. Tiffany shook it. "It's locked."

Taeyeon pulled out a small, rusty key from her pocket. She turned the lock and opened the gate. "Glad I found this last night." Tiffany smiled at Taeyeon. Taeyeon was always a step ahead of her.

Tiffany hurriedly pulled Taeyeon inside. This was their chance for some time alone together. Tiffany opened her mouth in awe as she looked up at the large trees that hung vivid red and gold leaves on top of them. The vibrant colours danced before her eyes. Branches above them gleamed silver linings as the sun tried to shine the morning sunlight in.

"It's much more beautiful here in Spring." Taeyeon looked at Tiffany. "I used to go here a lot before but after the malls and shops were built, people sort of forgot about this place." Taeyeon looked around at the trees. It looked like they had stepped into a picture from a postcard.

They walked on the cracked stone steps on the grass and the fallen leaves that led to the center of the field. The park looked more like a big garden than it was a park. The only pavement found inside was in the direction towards the gates at opposite sides.

Tiffany looked around her first before pulling Taeyeon close to her. She grabbed the collar of Taeyeon's jacket and smiled brightly in front of Taeyeon's face.

Taeyeon blinked at the sudden sight of Tiffany's smile. She took in immediately Tiffany's brown and expressive eyes. "Fany, I love you."

"I love you too."

"Are you hungry?" Taeyeon tilted her head up to kiss Tiffany on the forehead.

Taeyeon pulled out a red chequered blanket from inside the basket she brought with her. She laid it on the ground and kneeled to prepare their early picnic. Tiffany sat opposite Taeyeon, still with that smile on her face. She felt perfectly happy to see Taeyeon taking care of her like this.

Out of the basket came a metal flask of hot chocolate Taeyeon had prepared for them before they left the house. It was still too early in the morning for the air to warm up. She laid down plastic containers of rice and sidedishes in front of Tiffany.

Tiffany smiled, "Taeyeon, you prepared all this for me?" She held her chopsticks ready to eat. Taeyeon felt herself blush, "Sorry, I just brought leftovers from last night."

Tiffany laughed at Taeyeon, feeling touched nonetheless with Taeyeon's gesture. "No, it's okay. I don't mind." Her smile lingered. "What's important is that you're here now with me."

Taeyeon looked down at her hands, she felt surprisingly shy with what Tiffany said. She could feel her cheeks burn despite the chilly weather.

"Taeyeon, do you ever think about that night?" Tiffany felt herself suddenly reminiscing with Taeyeon.

"You mean that night I kissed you on the—?"

"Mhmm." Tiffany extended her arm to feed Taeyeon a bite of fish.

Taeyeon couldn't help but laugh at the memory, "Looking back at it now, I feel so embarrassed!"

Tiffany laughed. "Why? If it weren't for that accident, we wouldn't be here right now."

Tiffany and Taeyeon talked about the first time they had realized something could be going on. They agreed that this was the night that changed everything between them. Unexpected thoughts suddenly found its way inside their minds. Questions were raised only to have more questions born.

Nearly three months ago, Taeyeon had accidentally kissed Tiffany on the corner of her lips. The members were hugging and kissing each other for another win at the music charts. Taeyeon was supposed to give Tiffany a kiss on the cheek, when the movement of Yoona's arm on her back suddenly caused her to lose her balance. Taeyeon had her lips halfway on Tiffany's while her hand clung on Tiffany's arm for support. Their eyes had looked in definite surprise at one another. It was a brief and awkward moment for the two.

"Aigoo." Taeyeon adorably put her hands on her face.

Tiffany gushed at Taeyeon's embarrassment. "I remember the look you had on your face! You looked a little guilty to be honest." She teased her. "Did you kiss me on purpose?"

Tiffany recalled that strange, warm tingly feeling inside her stomach when Taeyeon had suddenly kissed her at that moment. She felt her cheeks grow hot after Taeyeon had walked away to hug the other members. What had happened? Tiffany touched her lips instinctively. She pressed her fingers on the area where Taeyeon had kissed her. It burned under her fingertips. Taeyeon had kissed her plenty of times before, but there seemed to be something different this time. Was it because the kiss was almost on the lips that Tiffany suddenly started having those thoughts?

It was normal for the girls to kid around and pair themselves with one another. They knew their fans did it for enjoyment, and so the group had often played along with them. The members also knew each other too well to find it uncomfortable, but since that moment with Taeyeon, Tiffany had thought about the pairings more thoroughly to herself, especially she and Taeyeon. What if there was more to their friendship than she thought?

Taeyeon thought way back to the days even before the kiss happened. She thought of the times the fans would pair her with the other members. Taeyeon tried to compare her thoughts and reactions everytime she was paired with Tiffany in particular. Come to think of it, the bizarre thing was that Taeyeon felt nonchalant about it as opposed to the others. The absence of disgust when it came to Tiffany surprised her. Why did it seem okay to her when it wasn't normal?

For a year or two, Taeyeon tried to test the reasons behind her nonchalance. She picked at her thoughts to know how much did she really care for Tiffany, and why did she care so much in the first place. Taeyeon often found herself in Tiffany's company even before the group's debut. They would eat together, practice together, and during times of Tiffany's distress, she would comfort Tiffany despite feeling too tired to even eat.

Taeyeon grew to be overprotective over Tiffany through the years, but what was there to protect Tiffany from? Taeyeon found herself bothered every time there was something wrong with Tiffany. She couldn't stand the sight of Tiffany crying or having a hard time. Was it because she and Tiffany really got to know each other when they were trainees?

For some unexplainable reason, Taeyeon felt that to fall in love with Tiffany wasn't impossible. It was unlikely, but not impossible. There didn't seem to be a valid reason why it could or couldn't happen. It just happened to work that way.

Tiffany lied down on her back. "But you know, I'm glad you did, even if it was just an accident." She looked up at the trees and breathed in the fresh air of the morning.

"Me too." Taeyeon lied down beside her. She smiled to herself at the turn of events between her and Tiffany.

After that night, Taeyeon had often kissed Tiffany on the lower cheek whenever the chance seemed valid enough. She would hold Tiffany's hand more often, and intertwine it tightly in hers. They would talk longer than they usually did, sometimes into the late night, and they stuck to each other more compared with the others. Tiffany, on her part, found herself always looking for Taeyeon's company.

If there was one person in the group that seemed to understand her the most, it was Taeyeon. Taeyeon could finish her sentences and tell what she felt without any explanations. She could make Tiffany laugh without even trying. It was Taeyeon who Tiffany turned to in times of pain and loneliness.

Tiffany had kissed Taeyeon back one night in the kitchen. A month had passed after the accidental kiss happened. They were up late talking about the events of their day, working on their respective schedules. Tiffany kissed Taeyeon goodnight on the cheek when suddenly, Taeyeon held Tiffany's wrist, and kissed her on the forehead.

Why did Taeyeon suddenly kiss her there?

Tiffany could feel the strange, warm tingly feeling coming over her again. She closed her eyes and leaned in without thinking twice. Taeyeon kissed her gently on the lips, and withdrew in an instant. Tiffany felt her knees wobble. She didn't know what hit her. They looked at each other after, trying to tell what it was they had just shared. Taeyeon closed her eyes, and kissed Tiffany again for a short moment. She hugged Tiffany tightly, and bade her goodnight without saying anything else.

"Have you always known?"

"Know what?"

"That I could be someone more than just your friend?"

Taeyeon paused and thought of her answer. Did she know it all along? "I just knew it wasn't impossible and I never expected it."

Taeyeon was right; love had a way of showing up when one least expected it to. Tiffany smiled. For some reason, she felt happy to hear that Taeyeon could have loved her even before they realized they had feelings towards each other, "So you don't regret that you did?"

"That I made a move?"

"Yes."

"No. Never," Taeyeon replied. If people always said to think twice before they act, her sudden whim with Tiffany seemed to be the exception.

"I'll never forget that night in the kitchen. I barely got any sleep even if I was so tired and my brain was shutting down. That moment kept rewinding itself in my head. I thought I was going crazy!" Tiffany laughed. She put up her hand to cover her face.

Taeyeon laughed too. She recalled how a permanent smile was fixed on her lips when she got to her room. She felt incredibly high and her hands shook from impact of what she had done. She couldn't feel her knees strong enough to support her. She fell back like a log on her bed.

The moments between Tiffany and Taeyeon had only grown more frequent in the coming weeks after their kiss in the kitchen. They had become braver with their actions, but they always did them in silence. Words didn't seem to be enough to explain themselves, or to understand what was happening. Taeyeon was also afraid to find out what she truly felt for Tiffany. The what-if's held her back. Love comes to people in different forms and reasons, but what was her reason? Was it even enough to be considered love?

Taeyeon got up on her feet. She and Tiffany had spent more than half of the morning by themselves. They had talked and laughed at their stories about each other—reminiscing felt wonderful with the one you loved. Taeyeon started to put their things back in the basket. It would be close to midday when they arrive home. She and Tiffany had run off without telling the members were they were going. Taeyeon knew that the members would be talking about them, if not looking for them.

"Fany, let's go. We still have to pick up a few things on the way home." Taeyeon had planned on stopping by the fish market to buy some fresh fish shipped early morning to cover their real whereabouts. She hoped the members wouldn't ask them because she didn't want to lie. Hopefully, food would be good enough a reason.

"Like I said, you're always a step ahead of me," Tiffany said quietly to herself.

Back at the house, Taeyeon put the fresh fish in the sink. Taeyeon's mother attended to it and prepared the midday meal with Hyoyeon. Taeyeon's father left early to run their business while the members busied themselves in the living room. Tiffany sat on the sofa next to Jessica and Taeyeon stood beside Sunny.

Yoona held up DVD's in her hands. "Okay, which one? Brad Pitt or Johnny Depp?"

"Johnny Depp!" Seohyun replied with glee. She never grew tired of watching Captain Jack Sparrow in action.

"Brad Pitt! I forgot how his butt looked like!" Sooyoung laughed loudly.

Yuri slapped her on the arm. "Is that your only reason?" The girls laughed at Sooyoung's mischievousness.

Jessica turned her attention to Tiffany. "Hey, where were you? You and Taeyeon weren't around this morning."

"Oh, we went out and bought some fish." Tiffany wasn't completely lying.

Jessica hung on to Tiffany's words. "I see." She wished that Tiffany would just be honest with her. "Are you doing anything this afternoon?"

"No, why?"

"Do you want to go with me to the mall? Yuri's going to stay here and watch DVD's with Yoona and Sooyoung."

Tiffany hesitated for a second, but this was Jessica who asked for her company. "Sure."

"Nothing better than shopping, right?"

"Yeah, nothing better." Tiffany agreed.

XI. Reasoning

Jessica and Tiffany visited the local mall in Jeonju after they had eaten their lunch. They took a taxi to navigate their way around the unfamiliar streets of the bustling city. Without Taeyeon around to guide them, they didn't want to get lost by themselves.

Meanwhile, the other members stayed behind in the house. They didn't feel like going out again in the afternoon when Tiffany invited them to come along. Taeyeon also had to stay behind to help her mother with the chores.

The city mall was fairly big enough to last Jessica and Tiffany a few hours by themselves. They wandered around and had possibly visited every shop there was. They held several paper bags full of clothing and shoes with them when they decided to stop at a local cafe for some rest before heading home.

Outside, the autumn sun was about to set. A light tinge of orange blended subtly in the sky.

"Whew, I'm tired. It's been awhile since I last shopped like this," Tiffany said. She felt tired, but happy to have spent time with Jessica again.

"Yeah, there are a lot of nice things here. Who knew?" Jessica answered in surprise.

Tiffany took a sip of her warm coffee. "Yeah, I think my sister is going to like the pair of shoes I bought for her." She blew gently at the top of her cup.

Jessica paused to look around her for a moment. The cafe was nearly empty, except for the people who occupied the tables outside and smoked. She slowly stirred her coffee, thinking if this was a good moment to try and talk to Tiffany about Taeyeon.

"Fany—," Jessica started, "I was hoping we could talk like, you know? A heart to heart talk?"

Tiffany looked up at Jessica in full attention. She knew this was coming sooner or later. "Hm?"

"Yeah, I'll be straight to the point because I might end up in going in circles." Jessica looked straight at Tiffany. "The thing is—are you and Taeyeon together?"

Tiffany looked back at Jessica. She shifted uncomfortably in her seat. "Together?"

"Yeah, together. Like, together together." Jessica waited patiently for Tiffany to answer. She couldn't be any straighter to the point.

Silence lingered between the two. For a few minutes, Tiffany looked down at her cup, weighing the options she had. Maybe telling Jessica would make things feel a little more normal, Tiffany thought. If she lied to Jessica, she might as well have lied to herself. Tiffany also knew that if any of the members could understand her situation, it would be Jessica. At least Jessica had an idea of what Western culture was like. Tiffany's relationship with Taeyeon would have been easier to accept if they didn't live in such a closed, conservative society.

"Yeah, me and Taeyeon are together."

"I see." Jessica felt a little shocked at Tiffany's answer. She knew they were together, but to hear Tiffany confirm it made Jessica want to look at Tiffany in disbelief. Jessica only nodded and continued to look at Tiffany. She was speechless.

Tiffany tried to read Jessica's face and response, "Well?" Is that all Jessica was going to say?

"Well, what?"

"I don't know. What do you think? Crazy, huh?"

"You've always been a little crazy, Fany."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Tiffany broke out into a small laugh.

"Nothing." Jessica laughed along. "I meant, wow. I don't know. Are you happy?" Tension finally rid itself from the air.

"Yes, unbelievably. It feels like a dream."

"So, when did you know?" Jessica was more than curious to understand.

"A few months ago?"

"But how did you know?"

"I don't know." Tiffany couldn't have been more honest with her words. She honestly didn't know how she fell for Taeyeon all of a sudden. "It's like—it just happened. I woke up one day and saw something different in her. Different in the sense that I could see her as someone more than just my friend. Do I sound crazy?"

"You have no idea."

Tiffany laughed. "Of course I never pushed the idea any past that. It just lingered inside of me for awhile until I was sure, until I was absolutely positive that I didn't think of her as my friend anymore."

"What do you mean?"

"I can't explain it. Sometimes you just know. You just know when you love someone already." Tiffany actually didn't know she was in love with Taeyeon already until Taeyeon had left to visit her sick father. Taeyeon's absence had made Tiffany realize how much she couldn't stand to be away from her. Her existence seemed to be marked by the times she and Taeyeon were together. Without Taeyeon by her side, life seemed a little rough.

Jessica continued to nod, trying to follow Tiffany's train of thought. "I see. So, you love her?"

Tiffany looked down again. She felt embarrassed to admit it so openly. "Yes. So much."

"Wow," Jessica could only respond. Tiffany in love was a side to Tiffany Jessica didn't know.

"I love her. I really do." Tiffany felt relieved that Jessica didn't seem to look at her differently. She felt the heavy secret she kept in her chest lighten. It was finally out in the open, at least to Jessica.

"So, who knows about this?"

"Just you."

"Are you going to tell the others?" Jessica asked. The members were going to flip when they find out. Jessica could already hear Yuri screaming in shock. Would it even be shock at the very least?

"No. I don't want them to know. At least, not yet."

"Why?"

"Because—"

"They might not understand?" Jessica finished the sentence for her. She, herself, wasn't sure if she completely understood what Tiffany felt towards Taeyeon. How did Tiffany suddenly think of Taeyeon as something more? Did something happen?

"Yes. I mean, you know, it took me a whole month to come into terms with myself. What more the others?"

Jessica saw the logic behind Tiffany's point. This wasn't exactly the easiest news to take in. "When do you plan to then?"

"I don't know. When I'm ready, I guess."

"I see." Jessica tried to understand Tiffany's situation more, as best as she could. "Are you scared of how they'll react?" How would the members react? Jessica wasn't sure anymore after finally hearing Tiffany confirm her and the others' suspicions. They had all agreed before to accept Tiffany and Taeyeon's relationship if it turned out to be true. Yet, the truth felt strangely different out in the open, even if one expected it.

"Of course, I am. If we were in the US right now, I'd probably be a little less scared, but still significantly scared."

"Yeah, I'd be scared too," Jessica agreed. What did Tiffany get herself into?

"Look, Jessi. At least you can understand that things like this can happen, like in other parts of the world. I'm just so afraid that the members would look at me differently."

"Yeah, girl and girl relationships aren't common here."

"And you very well know that Taeyeon would end it, even if she doesn't want to, if this causes problems for the group."

Jessica sensed Tiffany's fear transfer to her. Tiffany's voice sounded so scared and worried that it was easy to empathize. "Yeah, typical of Taeyeon to do something like that."

"I know all of you are suspecting us already, but I'm trying to let the suspicions die down. I don't want to give anything away. I know I can trust you. Please don't tell the others."

Jessica felt herself stuck in a tricky position. Where did her alliance stand now? Was it with Tiffany who was just trying to have her chance at happiness, or was it the members who clamoured for the truth?

"Yes, your secret is safe with me," Jessica assured her.

"Thank you." Tiffany rested back on her chair. She knew Jessica would keep this a secret.

"No problem." Jessica smiled weakly.

Jessica's mind reeled a million questions for her to answer on the ride home. She looked blankly at the back of the passenger seat, thinking what it was she was going to do now that she knew the truth. Yuri and the others would definitely be asking her about Tiffany once she got home. Jessica suddenly regret being too frank. Would being subtle have helped?

Hyoyeon was right. Jessica should have just waited for Tiffany and Taeyeon to come out with it, because this was one secret that was too dangerous to carry. Tiffany and Taeyeon's relationship was so fragile that they needed all the support they can get to keep it together.

The slightest crack, a single mistake can set everything off in a moment. What were the members going to think? Could they handle hearing it? Jessica remembered the tone of Tiffany's voice as Tiffany came clean to her. Her friend was happy, afraid, and desperate all at the same time. Tiffany just wanted a chance at happiness with Taeyeon, and who was she to take it away from her, Jessica thought to herself.

Back at the house, the girls' attention was glued to the television screen. They had decided to watch horror movies instead. Sooyoung, Yuri and Hyoyeon were shouting in a horrid frenzy when Jessica and Tiffany walked into the living room. Yoona and Seohyun had their eyes covered with the blankets they held.

"Unni, I told you we should have watched Johnny Depp instead!" Seohyun whined from behind her blanket.

Taeyeon stared at the screen, trying to concentrate past the screaming of the girls beside her. Sunny laughed at the hysterical shrieking she heard. This wasn't scary enough to get a scream out of her.

"Oh, you're back." Taeyeon greeted them. She got up from the floor to help Tiffany with the paper bags she carried. "Don't tell me you bought the entire mall."

"I did not." Tiffany slapped Taeyeon teasingly on the shoulder. "What are you guys watching?"

"Some Japanese horror movie. I think my hearing has been impaired thanks to a certain shikshin." Taeyeon eyed Sooyoung suggestively.

"Don't look at me! Yuri's the one who starts screaming even if nothing's happening yet!"

Jessica went straight to her room. She felt drained of all energy after spending the afternoon with Tiffany. Shopping with Tiffany had patched up a few wounds inside her, but Jessica suddenly felt nervous, unnecessarily and uncontrollably nervous now that she knew the truth.

Her heart pounded in a loud, steady rhythm as she tried to absorb everything she and Tiffany had talked about. How can you suddenly fall for someone you never expected to? Was one to stand helpless when love came knocking at the door? Surely, there must be something in Taeyeon that no one else has, for Tiffany to take this gigantic leap of faith seemed so rash and sudden for her character.

Why did Jessica feel so nervous to know about the truth? Jessica jumped on the bed in surprise as Yuri entered the room without knocking. What was she going to do when Yuri asked?

Jessica closed her eyes immediately, in hopes that Yuri would think she was asleep.

Yuri sat on the bed beside Jessica. She peered closely at Jessica's face and laughed. "Sica, are you okay? Why are your eyes trembling?"

Jessica turned her back on Yuri. "I'm tired. Wake me up when it's time for dinner."

"No! Tell me first what you and Tiffany talked about."

"Can't it wait until later?" Jessica bit her tongue. Now, Yuri would assume that there was something to talk about.

"Did you ask her like we planned?"

Jessica cleared her throat. She didn't doubt her skill at lying, but what good would that do? Was everyone going to keep lying at everyone like this? "No, I didn't get to ask her."

Yuri weighed Jessica's response. She knew it when Jessica was lying. "Why not?"

Jessica, still with her back turned, brushed it off. "It slipped my mind, I guess."

"Look, it's okay if you don't want to tell me."

Jessica silently grunted. Why did Yuri have to use the guilt card on her? "There's nothing to tell, Yul."

"So, it's true then. What are we going to do now?"

"I don't know." Jessica automatically responded. She suddenly started cursing in her head. Did Yuri notice her slip? She didn't exactly say anything that would confirm Tiffany and Taeyeon's relationship, right?

Yuri felt her face freeze in shock. She let out a loud gasp. Hearing the truth didn't seem funny all of a sudden. Yuri expected herself to laugh it off when Tiffany and Taeyeon came clean with the truth, but why did her reaction turn out this way? Tiffany and Taeyeon were really in a relationship? Yuri couldn't seem to comprehend the thought of it. Jessica turned her body towards Yuri. She put her hand on Yuri's arm and squeezed it tight. "I did not say anything."

Yuri looked at Jessica, her mouth open to speak, but nothing came out. She looked down on the floor, her gaze fixed on the wooden tiles. Her mind didn't seem to register the truth fast enough.

"Yul, why are you reacting this way?" Jessica sat up on the bed. She knew she had to do something to clean up the mess she made. "Don't say that you're surprised because we all knew this was coming."

Jessica looked at the wooden tiles on the floor with Yuri. "Fany asked me to keep it a secret. She's happy, Yul. She's scared, but she's happy, and I don't want to take that happiness away from her."

Yuri looked at Jessica, she didn't know what to respond, let alone think.

"You see? This is exactly the reason why she wouldn't share it." It was Jessica's turn to use the guilt card. "Are you judging her? Don't you dare judge Fany for this."

Yuri still didn't respond. Was her mind even mentally present with Jessica right now?

"Fany has gone through a lot of things," Jessica continued. "When she first arrived here from the U.S., she didn't have anyone with her. She carried a big, empty space in her and worse, she carried it alone. Do you know how hard that is?"

Yuri knew what Jessica was getting at. All the members knew how Tiffany had ended up in Korea. It seemed to them then that Tiffany didn't put much thought to her decision to pursue a career here. Tiffany just wanted something that would keep her life going when everything came to a sudden standstill with her family.

"The only thing I can tell you is that she really does love Taeyeon."

The silence from Yuri made Jessica feel a little frustrated. Were all the members going to react like this?

"She fell for Taeyeon at the right time and at the right moment, I guess." Jessica laughed quietly. It sounded a little absurd and vague to her, but it was the best she could do to understand what happened.

"What now?" Yuri quietly asked.

The vague question Yuri posed surprised Jessica. Was there something to be done? "Nothing and you're not going to tell anyone about this, understand?"

"But—"

"Yuri, listen. Fany and Taeyeon will tell us when they feel like telling us. Taeyeon doesn't even know that Tiffany told me."

"Huh?"

"She's afraid that if she told Taeyeon that she told me then Taeyeon will want to tell everyone."

"What's wrong if everyone knows?"

Jessica paused for awhile. She thought of Tiffany, and how irrational her friend was being. "Because the fewer the people who know, the longer they can last." Jessica didn't want to question the reasoning Tiffany had, but just how long can a relationship like this continue? She didn't want to think the end of it, not when it had just begun, but somehow, Jessica had a horrible feeling in her that Tiffany knew exactly just how long she and Taeyeon can last.

XII. Hunches

"So, have you ever?"

"Have I what?"

"Fallen in love?"

"No, I don't think I have," Jessica answered.

Probably the biggest mistake Jessica had made was to try and explain to Yuri what Tiffany and Taeyeon's relationship was like. After she had accidentally answered Yuri's question with an open-ended response that could have been left open for interpretation, Yuri began to question if there were plenty of other things she didn't know about the people around her. She started to doubt the certainty of her safety, from falling trap into such a circumstance like Tiffany and Taeyeon were in. They were young. It was too easy to fall in love when you're young.

Jessica shouldn't have said anything further and mention the complications of such a relationship, but Yuri caught her unprepared. The news was still too fresh to Jessica's ears for her to have come up with a believable excuse then. Jessica had sworn to Tiffany that she would keep everything she was told to herself, but why did she suddenly go as far as tell Yuri the reasoning Tiffany had to keeping it a secret?

Jessica felt the need to justify Tiffany's actions, but when it came to love, did things have to be justifiable in the first place? Yuri thought too much of the things Jessica had told her that she started to avoid Tiffany and Taeyeon on purpose in the coming days. In a thoughtful sense, she kept a safe distance from Tiffany and Taeyeon to give them the time and privacy they seemingly needed, but just how much of what she did was done in the name of support?

Yuri grew to be unusually quiet around the other girls, except when she was with Jessica, in fear that she might say something she wasn't supposed to, but deep inside, she was itching to come out with it. It was too much for her to contain in herself, which was why she stuck closer to Jessica for assistance.

Anything the members say could have helped her better accept things at this point. Yuri needed more explanations for her to understand how Tiffany and Taeyeon could suddenly fall for each other. How could one understand something without raising questions about it?

Unfortunately, Jessica provided few answers for her to piece everything together concretely. If Yuri wanted to understand, she was going to have to get the answers from the two people directly involved, but the situation was far more delicate than how it looked. Yuri wasn't even supposed to know, but now that she did, what was she going to do with the truth? The truth played in her mind like a broken song, repeating over and over, until it bore on her that she had been too naïve about this world.

Guilt had also been watching Yuri close by, in case a call to tease Tiffany and Taeyeon came from the other members who didn't know what she and Jessica did. It got back at her immediately for the times she made fun of the two's actions, and now with the truth in place at the forefront of her mind, the teasing didn't seem funny anymore. In fact, it seemed tasteless at the very least.

Yuri and Jessica began to talk to each other in low and incomprehensible voices whenever the members were nearby. They appeared suspiciously stiff and quiet, a far cry from the cheerful mood they were often in. Their lips barely moved when they spoke, but it was their eyes that understood perfectly the things they said to each other. They kept to themselves the way Tiffany and Taeyeon had done that it was hard not to notice the sudden change in their actions.

Regardless, it was Yuri and Jessica's poor coordination to suddenly switch topics whenever another person joined in on their conversations that gave way to new tensions among the girls. The change of pace in their shared conversations with the other members wasn't smooth enough to hide what they seemingly knew. Weren't they all supposed to be on the same side? The rest of the girls noticed how the two would avoid them, and they took the distant behaviour with great frustration.

"They know something. I know it," Sooyoung hurriedly said as she locked the door one evening. A few days had passed since Jessica went out shopping with Tiffany. Since then Yuri and Jessica had been physically absent from the group more often than not, like Tiffany and Taeyeon were. Sooyoung went to Hyoyeon, Yoona and Seohyun's room to get away from Jessica and Yuri. If the latter were going to play this game, Sooyoung was more than ready to play along with them.

"Who does?" Yoona asked. She looked up and closed the book Seohyun had lent her. Seohyun was beside her on the floor, scribbling neat lines on her diary.

"I can't believe they're going to keep us in the dark like this."

"What happened?" Hyoyeon moved from her position on the bed to give Sooyoung some space to sit.

"They were talking so I approached, and then Yuri started acting weird again. She couldn't look straight at me." Sooyoung recounted what happened with Yuri and Jessica in her room awhile ago. Yuri had abruptly come in and started talking to Jessica alone in one corner of the room. "Sica was quiet but you know how Yuri is when she's up to something. She gets all awkward and nervous."

"Yuri-unni does seem awfully quiet around us these days," Seohyun said quietly.

"It's like they're hiding something, but I don't want to assume yet what." Sooyoung crossed her legs on the bed beside Hyoyeon.

"You mean hiding something about Fany-unni and Taeyeon-unni?" Yoona clarified.

"Yeah, what else do you think?"

"Maybe those two are having a secret relationship themselves?" Yoona threw in the ridiculous idea for what it was worth, but anything was possible at this point. Ridiculous didn't seem ridiculous anymore, knowing that two other members in the group acted the same way.

"What? No!" Hyoyeon looked at Yoona. "She's talking about Fany and Taeyeon!"

"Sica said she didn't get anything out of Fany when they went shopping a few days ago." Sooyoung played with the loose threads on her shirt. "But I think she did and she told Yuri."

"I don't think Sica-unni would lie to us," Seohyun defended Jessica.

"Yeah, you'd think that Fany and Taeyeon wouldn't lie to us either after all the things we've been through."

Everyone kept quiet at the actuality of Sooyoung's answer. The cold treatment they had received from the four girls seemed hard to excuse. As much as they wanted to confront them and feel hurt, they couldn't help but reason and defend them from their own accusations. They pushed the limits of their kindness and tried to believe the better of the situation, but it couldn't be helped. The bonds of their sisterhood were slowly being cut into helpless pieces.

"What are we going to do now?" Yoona looked around her. "From the looks of it, we're the only ones who don't know what's going on."

"Ugh!" Sooyoung grunted in frustration. "And I was the one who said we can't force these things. What was I thinking? Fine, if this is how it's going to be, then so be it." If there was one thing that Sooyoung hated the most, it was not being told what was going on right in front of her. Sooyoung felt worthless to be outside the circle the four girls surrounded themselves in. The girls inside seemed more than determined to keep her out. Why? Do they not trust me enough? Sooyoung thought pitifully to herself.

"Don't say that. Who knows? Maybe Yuri and Sica do have an entirely different problem." Hyoyeon held Sooyoung's arm and comforted her. She knew Sooyoung was taking this hard against Jessica since the three of them had practically grown up together. "We can only wait to find out."

"Wait?" Yoona asked. She, herself, was starting to feel irritated. "We've been waiting since Day 1, unni. I don't think I can wait any longer. They're shutting us out completely." Yoona was no stranger to feeling left out. Having been absent from group activities plenty of times, it was important for her to know what happened to the others when she wasn't around. Yoona did what she could to prevent loneliness from overcoming her. Being left behind scared her.

Seohyun remained silent as the older girls tried to decide what they would do about the situation they were stuck in. She felt sad that everything was turning for the worse. It seemed to her that they would all eventually forget about each other in favor of their own wellbeing. Was it only a matter of time before she put herself first before them? Seohyun began to cry. She had no idea what was truly going on, but seeing their friendships strained was harder. How could one secret tear nine people apart?

Yoona patted Seohyun's head. "Hey, don't cry." She put up a reassuring smile for Seohyun. "We're all sticking together no matter what, okay?"

"Yeah, Seohyun." Sooyoung hugged her. "We're going to be okay. No worries." She felt ashamed to let the youngest see her so aggravated towards the others.

Hyoyeon was more than crushed to see Seohyun having a hard time trying to cope with this mess. She thought to herself that if there was something to be done, then it had to be done now before alliances were destroyed only to be realigned again with someone else. Why was there even a problem in the first place? Did all of this start because of Tiffany and Taeyeon? Were they the ones to be blamed? Hyoyeon tried to be firm with herself before she got caught up with her emotions. This wasn't the time to be understanding and considerate anymore. She was through holding her peace.

"If they can shut us out, we can shut them out too." Hyoyeon braced herself. "You'll see." She was ready to side with Sooyoung and play along.

Likewise, Tiffany too had the same hunches as Sooyoung did towards Jessica and Yuri. Tiffany happened to make sure she knew the exact whereabouts of the members, and who they were with whenever she wanted to spend time with Taeyeon alone as a step of precaution. Whenever she checked on Yuri however, Tiffany found her always to be with Jessica. They kept to themselves, and they always seemed to be seriously talking to each other. What was going on?

The paranoia in Tiffany watched Yuri's actions closely and alarmingly. She speculated if the secret she shared with Jessica a few days ago had been passed on. Jessica didn't seem any different, but why was Yuri acting strange around everyone? Incidentally, Tiffany caught Yuri's eyes on her one time as she sat besides Taeyeon on the floor. Yuri quickly looked away and stood up from her seat on the sofa. Was Tiffany being observed?

Yuri made her way upstairs, and soon after, a door was heard shut close. Tiffany's instincts made her believe that Yuri went to Jessica again, but for what? Jessica wouldn't break her promise and tell anyone Tiffany thought.

Without a choice, Tiffany pushed and tested the situation further. She had to do something, anything, to pacify her worries. If Yuri didn't know about her relationship with Taeyeon, then she wouldn't be acting like this.

Tiffany talked to Yuri one evening with the plan of finding out up to what extent Yuri might avoid her. She knew very well she didn't spend time with the others as much as she did with Taeyeon, but her concern for the members was something unquestionable. The members knew that when Tiffany cared, she really cared.

"Yul, are you okay?" Tiffany asked her. "You look a little tired." She sat opposite Yuri on the sofa and faced her.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine. I just need a little more sleep, I guess," Yuri quickly dismissed it. Her eyebags had started to become bigger and darker from the lack of sleep. She had stayed up late more often to talk to Jessica when the others were asleep. Yuri stood from her seat and proceeded towards the stairs.

"Ah, get some sleep then," Tiffany called after her without saying anything else. She kept her eye on Yuri's back as the latter quickly walked away from her.

Taeyeon suddenly appeared in the living room. She had spent most of the day with Sunny in town to run errands. "Fany, let's go up and sleep? I'm tired." Tiffany surprisingly chose to stay behind in the house that day. She always claimed every chance to be with Taeyeon, but she needed to keep her eye on Yuri and Jessica in case something new happened.

"Do you know what's wrong with Yuri? If she has a problem?" Tiffany remained seated. Maybe Taeyeon knew something from her conversations with the others.

"No, why? What happened?"

Tiffany dropped the possibility of it. It didn't seem Taeyeon knew anything. "Nothing, she just looks a little tired, that's all."

Taeyeon smiled at Tiffany's apparent innocent concern. "She's probably sick of Jeonju already. There's nothing else to do here." She laughed. They had been staying in Jeonju for almost a week now.

"I'll take her to the mall then. Me and Sica can show her all the nice shops we found there." Tiffany smiled back. Her mind was resolute. Someone had a lot of explaining to do.

XIII. Secrets

The secrets Tiffany kept were the very same secrets that paralyzed her from confiding in anyone, not even Taeyeon. She purposely kept from Taeyeon the incident with Seohyun, and she was definitely not going to recount what happened with Jessica either any time soon. It wasn't exactly dishonesty to Tiffany unless she lied to Taeyeon when the latter asked, or was it? Tiffany felt that if Taeyeon knew these things, she would want to come out completely in the open about them. An idea that Tiffany didn't welcome all too warmly yet. Was Tiffany ashamed of getting into such an involvement with another girl?

To Tiffany, the world was cruel and judgmental. No matter how hard Tiffany tried to convince herself that what the world thought wasn't important, it still mattered to her. She didn't think she could handle hearing anymore labels, even if it came from strangers. Anti-remarks from the entertainment industry had been more than enough to instil trauma in her. Tiffany held her head up high, and smiled through the midst of the public criticisms, but deep inside, she wanted to crumble and hide.

Selfishness also smothered Tiffany's rationality completely silent. It was Taeyeon's love against herself. Her want for Taeyeon's love had been too great for her to ignore it, but how far was she willing to go to choose it? How much further could her own flaws and weaknesses prevent her from coming out? Everyday was a choice for Tiffany to leave or to stay. Of course without the risks involved, if circumstances were easier, this wouldn't even have to be asked—Tiffany would never have to leave Taeyeon.

Arguably, the attitude Tiffany had shown ever since Taeyeon happened wasn't her best. She had lied, connived with her paranoia, and doubted the good in her friends. She became an entirely different person. Was Tiffany forced to sacrifice the best of herself just to stay in love with Taeyeon? Tiffany was moody and irritable when things didn't go the way she wanted them to. She felt that without Taeyeon around nothing seemed right. Yet safe to say, all these things were just the many faces a young girl showed when she was madly in love.

Taeyeon, on the other hand, always gave in too easily to Tiffany. She had grown used to putting Tiffany first before herself that sooner or later, to her own discovery, conceding her own wants from the relationship eventually made her feel suffocated. Taeyeon wanted to share to the others the cause of her happiness, but Tiffany always reasoned out against it. Tiffany loved Taeyeon, yes, but what would it hurt to try and tell the others? Would it be such a risk? Taeyeon felt a little tired basing most of her decisions on Tiffany, yet she continued to do so despite herself.

Apparently, Taeyeon didn't deal any better than Tiffany did when it came to the irrationality of love. As the leader of her group, she should have considered the members' feelings and placed herself in their shoes. How much would it hurt for someone to find out that the truth was kept from them?

Now, the members were distant. Some avoided them while some looked permanently upset. Taeyeon wanted to reach out to her members, but she knew she wasn't in the best position to. How could she when she had been the first to cut her communication lines with them? Tiffany didn't give her much of a choice, but she didn't complain. Something inside Taeyeon knew that Tiffany choosing to be in this relationship wasn't the tip of the iceberg; it was the whole of it.

At some point, Taeyeon had to do something for herself. She too was part of this relationship, which was why she suddenly found herself slipping from control when she went to town with Sunny previously to run errands. Taeyeon couldn't help herself; the truth had to come out sooner or later.

Taeyeon thought that if there were someone mature enough to handle such news, then it would be Sunny. Sunny had a surprising maturity in her that greatly contrasted the image she portrayed to the media. As a member of her group, Sunny showed her cuteness and innocence, but as Soonkyu, she was

fairly level-headed, quick to comprehend and adjust into any situation. Taeyeon hoped that Sunny would take the news well because if she did, probably the others would too.

Taeyeon and Sunny had stopped by the local grocery when they were in town. Supplies stocked in the cupboards of their kitchen depleted quickly from the sheer number of occupants in the house. Some members even counted as two people considering the huge appetites they carried despite their lean bodyframes. Taeyeon pushed the cart slowly, looking up at the shelf of snacks beside her. Sunny walked by her side, comparing two different brands in her hands. She looked at the nutritional values at the back of the box, a silly habit influenced by their youngest.

People in the grocery looked and watched the two as they shopped. They followed and smiled, whispering excitedly amongst themselves to have spotted them in public. The daily news had reported about the group's sudden hiatus. Their indefinite break, according to the rumours, was made in accordance to the upcoming overseas promotions the girls would soon undergo.

The girls knew otherwise; plans of their future activities were currently put on hold until flak from the public died down. Taeyeon suddenly noticed the attention she and Sunny were getting, so she hurriedly finished getting everything written on the grocery list. The attention felt a little uncomfortable this time.

Once they were out in the streets, Sunny told Taeyeon that she wanted to eat. All that walking had made her feel a little hungry. A light snack was all she needed as she planned on eating hamburgers later when it was time for lunch.

Taeyeon decided to drop by a small teahouse she knew from her childhood. The place was indeed small but it was pleasantly cozy. Its ambience felt relaxing and home-like. Paintings of various landscapes on scrolls hung on the walls and different antique furniture were displayed for visitors to appreciate.

It was an old house that catered to the local residents of the neighbourhood. Taeyeon knew the owners of the house because of her parents. She bowed before the grandmother respectfully as the latter ushered the two of them in. Taeyeon and Sunny were in a private room with thin paper partitions that divided the main area into sections. The rushing sound of water flowing down from a small fountain echoed faintly outside.

"Wow, how old is this place?" Sunny looked around them. The house felt old, but it was well-maintained by its owners.

Taeyeon ordered some tea. "A few decades?" It warmly soothed her throat. "This was already here even before my parents met each other." Outside, the weather remained chilly and damp despite the bright sunshine. It wouldn't be long before the harsh winds of winter came.

"Really?" Sunny crossed her legs properly and poured herself some tea.

"Sunny, I wanted to tell you something—" Taeyeon looked at Sunny nervously. She traced the rim of her tea cup with her little finger. "About me and Fany."

"Hm?" Sunny smiled.

"Me and Fany—" Taeyeon felt her voice stuck to her throat. What was the easiest way to say it?

"What about you and Fany?"

"You know—"

Sunny laughed at Taeyeon. She wasn't about to assume it out in the open in case she had it wrong, "What?"

Taeyeon broke out into a silly smile. She wished Tiffany was there so they could break the news together. "Me and Fany are together."

And just like that, there it was, out in the open for Sunny to react in whichever way she wished. Waiting seemed easier than to force the truth out of its keepers. "Aw, Taeyeon, I'm happy for the both of you!"

"What?" Taeyeon was taken aback with Sunny's answer. She felt relieved, but surprised. That wasn't as hard as she thought.

Sunny laughed some more. "Don't think I didn't suspect anything. I kinda guessed this would happen."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, I don't know." Sunny tried to find the right words. "I guess I could just see the both of you together."

"But we're both girls?"

"Yeah, but aside from that, you both just seem to fit together."

Taeyeon's curiosity was piqued instantly. "We fit together?"

"Yeah, your personalities, I mean."

"How? In what way?"

Sunny found Taeyeon's questions funny. Was she about to hand Taeyeon her unsolicited analysis just like that? "Taeyeon, I know you care for us like family, but you never really saw Fany as just family, did you?" Taeyeon looked at Sunny without answering.

"Because if you did, you could stand to leave her by herself when she has problems, like you could with us," Sunny continued. "Sure, we're all together to comfort each other, but that doesn't necessarily mean we'd be there for each other every second of the way, right?" She looked down at her cup.

Taeyeon, too, had her gaze fixed on her cup.

"And I mean, literally every second when we have a problem," Sunny finished.

Taeyeon looked up at Sunny with a smile on her face. It was true. Taeyeon couldn't bring herself to leave Tiffany alone, not when she was absolutely sure the latter was feeling better. There was something in the way Taeyeon felt fulfillment from being able to comfort Tiffany. It filled her up to be able to make Tiffany happy, like she was someone important.

"I guess," Taeyeon shortly answered.

"It's nothing bad, Taeyeon." Sunny smiled. "I guess you just really care for her that's why you're always there."

Taeyeon recalled the times Tiffany would be up awake in the late night in the early years of their friendship. She would be crying alone by herself, and would instantly wipe her tears when she saw Taeyeon approach. Taeyeon would ask her what was wrong, and Tiffany would easily dismiss her crying away, saying it was nothing, after which Taeyeon would often go out of her way the following days to make sure Tiffany was surely alright again.

"I do, I do care for her." Taeyeon didn't say anything before, whenever Tiffany had remained silent. She would just stay by her side until the mood lightened up, and the ugly feelings passed. Eventually, Tiffany confided in Taeyeon the problems she carried. It mostly revolved around her loneliness, and how hard a time she was having trying to move on with life.

"I know you do. You should see yourself!" Sunny teased Taeyeon.

"Why? What about it?"

"Nothing, but you're like her angel or something."

Taeyeon laughed lightly. "Sometimes, I'm unsure of myself, of what I'm doing." Her mood suddenly turned serious. "I feel bad keeping this from the girls, but it seemed to be the right thing to do." Taeyeon had a lot of depressing thoughts she pushed to the back of her mind.

"Being right is relative, Taeyeon." The members' opinions seemed to matter the least at this point, and Sunny wasn't about to take sides with anyone.

"Do you think they'll understand?"

Sunny paused, she wasn't sure what to answer. "If I can understand, then they can understand it too."

"Yeah, I hope so," Taeyeon hoped. "I know we can't stay like this forever." Taeyeon needed to unload everything she kept bottled up. "What about our families? Our career? You guys?"

"Taeyeon, you're here now, aren't you? Why can't you just stay in the moment?"

Taeyeon somehow always kept the thought of the end of their relationship lingering in her mind. It wasn't because she was being pessimistic about their chances, but it was more of a reminder for herself, that when that day did come, she should be ready to accept it. It was being a step ahead.

"I'm scared."

"Yeah, but nothing worth it is ever easy."

"I know."

Sunny smiled, a sign of her unwavering support. "Hey, don't go home looking like that or Fany will kill me."

"I'm serious, Sunny. The farthest I can imagine being with Fany is a year or two from now, any farther and it starts to get hazy," Taeyeon confessed.

Sunny sighed. She knew Taeyeon wouldn't get into a relationship unless it was for the long run. Feelings were a serious matter to Taeyeon, and she was careful to reveal them when she had to. "What does Fany think?"

"We don't talk about it."

"Ah." Sunny thought quietly to herself. Did everything in this world have an impending end to it?

"But knowing her, her fears and insecurities—," Taeyeon flinched at her thoughts. "I don't know," she digressed. "I'm happy though. This is something I don't regret."

"Yeah, come on. No regrets! That's your motto, right?"

"I'm glad you took this well."

"Why shouldn't I? You're both good people, gay or not." Sunny patted her friend on the shoulder. It was the most she could do to show her support.

Taeyeon laughed suddenly. "What? I'm not gay!"

"Then what are you?"

"I don't know, but I honestly can't imagine being with someone else, let alone another girl."

"That's a relief then!" Sunny teased Taeyeon. "I was beginning to wonder why you always—," she burst out into laughter.

Taeyeon laughed at what Sunny was getting at, "Yah! I do not think any of you in that way!"

Sunny continued to laugh. "I'm just kidding, Taeyeon."

"Yeah, I know." Taeyeon smiled shyly at the exception. "It'll only be Fany. Something about the mushroom."

Sunny smirked at the sight of Taeyeon gushing happily about Tiffany. If only Taeyeon knew what she looked like whenever Tiffany's name was mentioned, she would have shrunk from embarrassment. Her smile was too big and her eyes too round from excitement.

"Hey, don't tell the others yet, alright? I'll tell Fany first."

"Sure." Sunny was complacent that she could keep the truth from the members until Tiffany and Taeyeon were ready. It was only a matter of time or so she thought.

"Sunny, thank you. I'm glad I was able to tell you." Taeyeon thanked Sunny again. She smiled and drank the last drops of her forgotten tea. It had turned cold and bitter to the taste from the time they wasted talking.

XIV. Departure

"Seohyun, are you done?" Hyoyeon looked to her side to check if Seohyun had finished packing. Several of the girls' luggage were on the floor, waiting to be picked up. The sound of heavy footsteps outside the room grew nearer. A knock came, and Sooyoung rushed inside the room.

"Ready? The taxi's arriving in half an hour."

"Almost, unni!" Seohyun answered without looking. She continued to fold her clothes and piled them neatly inside her suitcase.

"Let me help." Yoona came over from the other side of the room to help Seohyun finish packing.

After the evening Seohyun cried and Sooyoung let out her aggravation towards the others, Hyoyeon decided that she too was through putting up with something that didn't seem to want them to be involved. If the others were determined to keep them out of the loop, then so be it. Meddling in other people's affairs was the least of her concerns, and to Hyoyeon, the four girls could avoid her as much as they want, just as long as they expect the taste of their own medicine.

Seeing Seohyun cry was the last straw Hyoyeon could spare, this matter, most probably, didn't concern Seohyun, so why does she have to be affected like this? Hyoyeon stood her ground. Never mind if things were seriously turning for the weird and awkward, that was probably better than to be deliberately ignored by the people you kept so close with over the years, people who suddenly acted like strangers, people whom you thought were close enough to entrust their secrets in you.

The girls packed their things that evening, with the exception of Sooyoung whose things were in the other room, because to them, the dorm seemed the better place at that time. It was home. They wanted to leave and get away from the silent tension that was brewing uglier by the minute. When Yuri came inside the room, the girls continued to pack silently. They ignored her.

"Why are you guys packing? Are we leaving?" Yuri looked at the girls.

"No, just the four of us," Hyoyeon replied curtly.

The tone of Hyoyeon's voice was enough for Yuri to understand that they were hurt. They have had enough of Tiffany and Taeyeon, probably she and Jessica too. At that instant, Yuri wanted to come clean to them, explain to them the things they wanted to know, but she knew she couldn't. It wasn't her story to say. Silently, Yuri apologized to the girls. Maybe all of this could pass without the truth having to come out.

Yuri went to lie down on her mattress, and thought what could be done to ease the situation. She pulled her blankets closely to warm and comfort herself. Nothing else was said between them. The cold stares that were exchanged were enough to speak for itself. Yuri endured the heavy disappointment that hung in the air the entire night while her three roommates packed in silence.

When Sooyoung went back to her room, Jessica was fast asleep on the bed, while Sunny was on her mattress, concentrating on her game console. As Sooyoung expected, Tiffany and Taeyeon weren't in the room yet. They were probably downstairs finishing up washing the dishes, or finding something alone to do, Sooyoung thought.

"Sunny, we're leaving." Sooyoung took out her luggage from the closet.

Sunny looked up in confusion. "Huh?"

"Me, Hyoyeon, Yoona and Seohyun are going back to the dorm. Are you coming with us?" Sooyoung and the girls didn't mean any harm; they just wanted to go home.

"Why? What about the others?"

"We can't stand it here anymore. If you're coming with us, you better start packing. We leave tomorrow morning," Sooyoung whispered loudly enough for Sunny to hear without waking Jessica.

"Already? Wait, hold on. What's going on?"

"I wish I knew, but I don't."

"Is this about Tiffany and Taeyeon?"

"Not just." Sooyoung eyed Jessica. Jessica's back faced the two girls.

Sunny turned her head to follow Sooyoung's stare. "Ah," she replied. Sunny also noticed the changes in Yuri and Jessica's behaviour lately. She however, thought nothing about it, whether the latter were in the same context Tiffany and Taeyeon were in. "I think I'll stay here, someone has to keep an eye on the four." Something different must have happened with Yuri and Jessica, Sunny thought.

"Suit yourself."

"I'll let you know if something happens."

"Oh, please do," Sooyoung replied sarcastically. She would have welcomed any explanation from anyone at this point. Things were turning a little too different for reasoning to help.

Sooyoung had finished packing her things by the time Tiffany and Taeyeon came inside the room. She hid her luggage inside the closet to prevent them from finding out their trip the next morning. The girls had planned on leaving without saying anything, much less goodbye. That ought to remind them we have feelings too, Sooyoung thought. Revenge may seem immature at first glance, but sometimes, the end could surprisingly justify the means.

"Is Sunny-unni coming with us?" Seohyun asked Sooyoung while they waited in the living room for the taxi to arrive. The girls had already bid their farewell to Taeyeon's parents. They apologized for their sudden departure, but someone had to watch over the dorm they reasoned. Like the previous mornings, Tiffany and Taeyeon were missing again. They often disappeared, and only showed when it was already midday. Sure enough, they always brought home food with them whenever they came back.

"No, she said she was staying," Sooyoung answered.

When Jessica woke to find Yuri sitting alone quietly in the living room, she didn't have to ask to know something had happened. The expression on Yuri's face said it all. It looked like she had been abandoned, left without a home to return to.

"Yul, hey, what's wrong? Is everything okay?" Jessica walked over and sat beside Yuri.

"Sooyoung, Hyoyeon, Yoona and Seohyun left. Sica, what are we going to do?"

"They left?"

"When I entered our room last night, they were already packing. I think they're angry at us." Yuri looked at Jessica with worried looks in her eyes.

"Huh? What did we do?"

"I think they know we know something."

"What? I didn't tell them anything! Did you?" Jessica slightly raised her voice.

"No! Of course not!"

"Then what happened?" Jessica stuttered. "Do you think they found about Tiffany and Taeyeon? That's why they left?"

"I hope not. I don't think they would leave though, if ever they found out, they would have probably told us if they did."

"Told us?" Jessica kept quiet as it hit her then. She pursed her lips in annoyance—the members left because of her and Yuri. It's not that they purposely chose to turn their backs on the others, Jessica and Yuri were just tightly bound to the complications of knowing the truth, and knowing it meant they ought to keep it to themselves. Why couldn't the members just let this slide for once? If only they knew how serious this was, what was really happening, things wouldn't have to come to this, Jessica thought.

"Where's Tiffany and Taeyeon?"

Yuri shrugged her shoulders. "They're gone again."

"Where's Sunny? Did she leave with the others too?"

"No, she's helping umma in the kitchen."

"Is she mad?"

"No, I don't think so," Yuri guessed.

"Did she say anything about Sooyoung and the others leaving?"

"No, she didn't even seem surprised that they left."

"Huh," was all Jessica could respond. There were too many questions and too little answers. What were Tiffany and Taeyeon going to say when they arrive home and find the others gone? Jessica began to worry. Things didn't look good.

"Give me your phone." Jessica held up her hand.

Yuri took out her phone and handed it over. "Who are you going to call?"

"Maknae."

Meanwhile, Seohyun was busy talking to Yoona and Sooyoung about Jessica and Yuri when her phone rang. The girls were somewhere along the outskirts of Jeonju already. Hyoyeon sat on the passenger seat, while the three girls talked amongst themselves at the back, discussing what it was that hurt and troubled them about the others. Seohyun was about to put the phone to her ear when Sooyoung grabbed it, and closed it immediately.

"Unni, why did you do that?"

"Who was it?"

"It was Yuri-unni."

Seohyun's phone rang again. Sooyoung put her hand over the mouth piece. "Don't tell them anything." She gave the phone back. Sooyoung was sure Yuri would try to fix things through Seohyun.

"Unni?" Seohyun quietly answered. Yoona and Hyoyeon watched Seohyun take the call.

"Seohyun, where are you?" Jessica's calm voice came from the other end.

Yoona leaned in closer. "Put it on speaker phone," she whispered to Seohyun.

Unable to say no, or even decide what to do, Seohyun did what Yoona instructed. "Sica-unni, we're on our way home—"

"Why did you guys leave? And without telling us about it?"

"Yuri-unni knows. We left because—," Seohyun lingered. She didn't know what to say, let alone know how to lie. "There are a lot of chores waiting to be done at home."

On the other line, Jessica listened intently and calculated the tone of Seohyun's voice. She knew the others were coaching Seohyun on what to say. "Seohyun, what's wrong? Are you guys mad at us?" Yuri listened in too.

Sooyoung scoffed quietly in her seat. She wondered who Jessica collectively referred to when she said the word us because it surely didn't include Sunny.

"Unni—"

Hyoyeon motioned for the phone. "Give it to me."

"Sica, look, we get it, you guys don't want us around," Hyoyeon said without a hint of aggression in her voice. "So, yeah, we'll just be at home 'til you guys feel like talking to us again." She sounded strangely indifferent this time, distant, but a little hopeful too, Jessica recognized.

Immediate relief came over Hyoyeon on the ride home. She hated stressing unnecessarily, and now that they were away, she could finally start on making the most out of her vacation, without this pointless clashing.

"But—," the dial tone echoed in Jessica's ear, "—it's not what you think."

Jessica and Yuri looked at each other. What now? The members were obviously upset with them. Was this better than having the truth out in the open? Yuri wasn't sure. She didn't like the feeling of anyone having grudges against her. Jessica, on the other hand, was determined to keep the truth hidden from the others. She had already spilled it to one person, any more and it could surely spell the end of her and Tiffany's friendship. Trust, once broken, rarely opened itself to second chances.

"What are we going to tell Fany and Taeyeon?"

Jessica leaned back on the sofa and looked helplessly up at the ceiling. "I don't know." How could things get so complicated? "But whatever they say, act normal." Jessica hoped that by the time they

reunite with the others at home, the members would have already warmed up. This cold war that appeared out of nowhere was tearing the girls' relationship too easily. What happened to the bond they always felt proud of? A little distance and time away ought to help ease and put things back to normal, right?

Suddenly, Taeyeon appeared in the living room. There was a skip to her step as she held Tiffany's hand. "We're back!" She held up a plastic bag full of popsicles. "Where's Sooyoung? I bought her favorite."

Tiffany looked at Jessica and Yuri. Her smile faded as quickly as their eyes met. Something seemed off.

"They left, Taeyeon." Yuri tried to answer nonchalantly. She avoided Tiffany's eyes.

"Where did they go?"

"Uhm, home—"

Tiffany let go of Taeyeon's hand. "Sica, can you come with me outside for a minute?" She looked straight into Jessica's eyes. "I think I'm missing some bills. I must've dropped it somewhere." Her voice sounded like she was about to attack any minute.

"Uh, sure," Jessica quietly agreed. She stood up, and followed Tiffany walk towards the door.

Yuri looked on as Jessica follow Tiffany outside. Did Tiffany know that she knew? Yuri prayed that Tiffany didn't suspect anything, but that was as unlikely as Taeyeon understanding why the members suddenly left without saying anything. Jessica was going to get into a lot of trouble if Tiffany found out, and it would be her fault.

"What? They left?" Taeyeon asked, confused. "Why? And why didn't they say anything?"

"They remembered they had things to do." Yuri stood up and took the plastic bag from Taeyeon's hand. "Taeyeon, let's put this in the freezer before it melts." She evaded Taeyeon's questions.

In the meantime, outside in the garden, not too far from the house, but far enough to be out of anyone's earshot, words of shock, anger and disappointment were being carelessly thrown.

"*You what!*"

"I didn't mean to!" Jessica stammered.

"How could you? I trusted you!"

"Fany! It was an accident!" Jessica stood there defenceless. "I'm sorry. I really didn't mean to—"

"Jessi—," Tiffany tried to calm herself down, she felt her face grow hot from the unexpected news, "How did it happen? Tell me every single detail."

"I was in my room when Yuri came up to me. She asked how did our trip go, and what did we talk about, then all of a sudden she goes what are we going to do about you and Taeyeon, and I said I didn't know, and there, she caught me." Jessica looked at Tiffany with pleading eyes. She was so sorry that this happened. "Before I could recover and say something, she had already realized it. I think it was the expression on my face that gave it away." Jessica had looked like a deer caught in the headlights then—word vomit had struck her at the most unfortunate time.

"How could you?" Tiffany couldn't believe Jessica had told Yuri.

"But, Fany, it's okay—Yuri didn't say anything bad when I explained it to her," Jessica tried to reason out. What she said should've done the trick, but what Jessica dealt with was Tiffany's fear. Something that heard no reason and refused to die.

"You tried to explain?" Tiffany raised her voice. "You don't even understand what my relationship with Taeyeon is like so how can you explain it to her?"

Jessica was speechless. She had never seen Tiffany so angry and so upset. "Fany—I'm sorry—I promise Yuri didn't say anything to anyone." Jessica put her entire trust on Yuri. It was the only thing left that could calm Tiffany's fears down of losing Taeyeon.

Tiffany couldn't look at Jessica anymore. "I hope you're right." She looked up to prevent her angry tears from falling. "You have no idea how badly I am wishing right now that the reason why the others left has nothing to do with me and Taeyeon." She clenched her hands into fists. "Because I swear, Jessica

Jung, if Taeyeon leaves me because of this, because of the members leaving for who knows why, I will never forgive you."

XV. Curiosity

Tiffany slammed the door shut when she reached her room upstairs. Her feet stomped loudly from the amount of anger she kept inside of her. How could Jessica slip, out of all secrets, the one secret that she wanted to protect the most? She lied down on the bed, and let the tears on her face dry.

Jessica's confession had left her feeling utterly betrayed and disappointed. Tiffany tried to calm herself down with Jessica's assurance that Yuri didn't think of her any differently, but could she trust on Jessica that Yuri didn't tell anyone? It seemed to be the only hope left Tiffany could hold on to. She panicked at the possibility of the others leaving because they found out about her and Taeyeon. Were they that against them being together, that they had to leave without saying goodbye?

Tiffany tried to piece the series of events together to make sense. She was more than determined to protect her and Taeyeon's relationship. Tiffany would have done anything to keep it alive, yet who's to say what she could or couldn't do? All there was to see was that love drowned out everything else important in her eyes.

A knock came from the door. "Fany? Are you inside?" Tiffany couldn't make out who it was. The voice was too unrecognizably low. "Fany?"

"Come in." Tiffany thought it was Taeyeon.

"Fany—," Yuri stepped in with her head down. She looked extremely nervous and apologetic. Jessica had come in crying inside the house when Yuri saw her head towards the bathroom. Yuri took it upon herself to come clean to Tiffany. She owed Jessica at least that much.

Tiffany sat straight up on the bed and wiped the tears from her eyes immediately. "So—you know," she said unevenly.

"Fany—" Yuri rushed to Tiffany, hugging her. "I'm sorry. Sica didn't do anything wrong. Please don't get mad at her."

Tiffany had her stare fixed far away as Yuri hugged her. She didn't hug back. "Why did the others leave?" Yuri had one chance to save her and Tiffany's friendship. If she had spilled the truth—and that was the response—Yuri could start to forget about asking for forgiveness.

Yuri pulled away from the hug she wished Tiffany returned. "I don't know."

"Did you tell them anything? Don't lie."

"I didn't. I promise I didn't tell them anything." She looked sincerely in Tiffany's hard eyes. "Please don't get mad at Sica. She's actually the one who's been helping me understand and adjust to this—"

Yuri tried hard to break free from her initial judgments about the relationship. It wasn't her fault she felt uncomfortable around Tiffany and Taeyeon. How could you feel you knew a person all your life, and have them suddenly come out as someone they supposedly aren't? It seemed unfair, to be restricted by meager understanding, and then to be suddenly faced with this kind of betrayal. Was it even betrayal, and whose was it if it was?

"Do you think of me any differently?" Tiffany's voice unexpectedly cracked. The cold exterior she had put up in front of Yuri started to crumble. She had badly wanted her support and acceptance, but it was such a hard gamble, knowing it was her and Taeyeon's future at stake. Tiffany started to cry.

"Fany, why are you crying?" She held Tiffany's hands. "I'm sorry—I should've been a better friend."

Tiffany continued to cry, tears of confusion overwhelmed her. "I just love her so much—," she buried her face in her hands, "I don't think I could stand to lose her—"

Yuri didn't understand where Tiffany was suddenly coming from. "It's okay, Fany," she soothed. It was the safest, although generic, known response to any problem.

Tiffany didn't know why she was crying so much. At first, she felt angry towards Jessica for telling Yuri. Tiffany saw Yuri's knowledge as a threat to the security of her relationship with Taeyeon, but now that

Yuri was right in front of her, why did it seem like she had everything wrong? Who was she supposed to protect her relationship from anyway?

"It's okay to cry—," Yuri tried to soothe her. "Just let it out." She felt bad for not knowing the right words to say this moment. Fortunately, she was able to swallow the reality easier, even if it was just bit by bit, because of Jessica's help. What was so hard to accept to begin with?

"I hope the others can understand—," Tiffany barely got the words out.

Why was it one thing to acknowledge this kind of love if it only involved strangers, and another thing if it involved your closest friends?

"They will," Yuri tried to comfort Tiffany. She guessed the reason Tiffany was crying was because of the members' leaving. "They will. It might seem a little shocking at first, but you and Taeyeon are still the same people we know, right?"

It was Yuri's closeness with Tiffany that prevented her from passing any further judgment. She knew this Tiffany that faced her this moment was the same Tiffany she'd grown to be so fond of over the years. It stung Yuri to think she thought of Tiffany any differently. Yet, quite frankly, if this had been anyone else, anyone of less importance, the sentiments might not have been as warm and welcoming. This was what Yuri tried to change about herself; her simplistic view of relationships.

"I'm still me!" Tiffany exclaimed. "I'm still me, Yul!" She didn't know how to gauge the look Yuri was giving her. Was it disgust she saw?

Yuri smiled, and stuck her tongue out playfully. "Yah! I know you're still the same Tiffany I know." She hugged Tiffany again. To have seen Tiffany cry that much over the thought of losing Taeyeon moved her. How could you love someone and stand not to cry at the thought of losing them?

"Stop crying, okay?" Yuri broke away from their hug. "Your face is going to get bloated. Taeyeon will blame me for making you cry, and she's going to kill me for it."

Tiffany couldn't help but laugh despite her tears. "Yeah, she will so be nice!" She jokingly shot back, but Taeyeon would have to know that Yuri and Jessica know, Tiffany thought. She settled to tell Taeyeon about it later this afternoon. Maybe this was the first step to coming out.

Yuri's laughter gradually subsided. "I'm curious though," her tone in wonder, "what's it like?"

"Hmm?"

Yuri thought of the right words. She didn't know how to phrase exactly what she wanted to know. "Is it the same with other couples? Oh! Who's the guy?"

Tiffany broke out into another silly laugh. "Of course, it's the same! And of course, Taeyeon is the guy!" She joked again. Tiffany had stopped crying now.

Sometimes, it took mere tears to bridge people closer. There was nothing more real than to witness one bare their whole heart unabashedly, and for Yuri to have seen that firsthand dissolved the last portions of her wariness.

"I knew it!"

"What? I'm kidding!" Tiffany continued to laugh.

"You're too girly to be the guy!"

"Does it matter?" Tiffany thought about it. "I never saw her as the guy. I thought of her as—," she paused and continued to think, "just someone who makes me effortlessly happy." She smiled. "She's the first and last person I think about everyday."

Yuri suddenly felt like she was watching a cheesy romantic movie play out right in front of her, only it didn't have a predictable ending to it. "Fany! You're making me cringe!" She curled her fingers on cue.

"It's a different kind of happiness." Tiffany felt relieved that Yuri was warming up to the thought of her and Taeyeon well. Yuri's curiosity amused her. "Definitely on a whole new level. It's like we don't even have to talk about anything, and it wouldn't be uncomfortable. The silence is comfortable." She couldn't stop smiling. "I just see her for a second and I'm already happy."

"You do look happy." It was Yuri's turn to share what she thought. "Oh, and the look you give Taeyeon? You should see yourself! That's why we thought something was going on. It was too sticky to say the least."

"Why? What do I look like?"

Tiffany didn't realize how much her eyes gave away whenever she looked at Taeyeon. Her pupils dilated like shiny pools of water, beautiful with a mysterious twinkle to them.

"Like I said, happy." Yuri grinned wide. "You look very happy when you're with Taeyeon."

"I do?" Tiffany gushed. "I can't help it, I guess. I'm happy, Yul."

Yuri continued to smile at Tiffany. She never noticed until now how strangely more beautiful Tiffany looked, like the happiness added a glow to her. Did people really bloom when they were in love?

"Oh, is Sica okay? I don't want her to think I'm angry. I mean, I was but I'm okay now."

"She was crying when I saw her, that's why I came up here on my own." Yuri felt guilty for getting Jessica into trouble, but now that Tiffany knew she knew, she could finally be a little less conscious of how she acted. "She really helped me a lot. I wouldn't be surprised if she's already annoyed at me though. I asked her too many questions, I think."

"Well, you can always ask me now." Tiffany slightly hesitated. Matters that concerned Taeyeon were easy to say, but hard to explain. She already had a hard time telling Jessica.

"I'm just trying to figure out how and when it happened. It's not like it just hit you, right? I mean, love at first sight is a lie!" Yuri wasn't sure. "Unless, you've been hiding it since the first time you met her." She smirked mischievously. "And you two were roommates! Omo!"

"Why are you laughing?" Tiffany punched Yuri on the shoulder. "Stop it! Don't get any ideas! It's not like that." She raised her eyebrow at Yuri. "I didn't like her that way then."

One could never really tell how certain thoughts and ideas arrived to mind. They just sometimes sprung deftly into consciousness without notice. It would jump out innocently, staying there at first until it began to pull the ropes of rationality, pulling deeper and deeper into its gravity of promise, until believing in its infinite possibilities remained the only option. Why couldn't it be or why couldn't one be?

"I don't know!" Tiffany gave up trying to think of when did she really start liking Taeyeon. "It just happened. Things happened too fast." Honestly hidden, she somehow admitted to herself that she liked Taeyeon ever since she really got to know her, when she saw how good a heart Taeyeon had for others.

"Maybe it's because you two are always together. You guys are inseparable, you know!"

"Maybe." Tiffany thought about it. "But I'd like to think that it goes deeper than that." She recalled how warm and comfortable it felt to be around Taeyeon. The loneliness faded as quickly as Taeyeon spent time with her.

"Just because two people spend a lot of time together doesn't mean they'd fall in love already, right? I mean, what about you and Jessica, you two are together most of the time, but you guys are just friends, right?"

Yuri suddenly laughed out loud. "What? Me and Sica are just friends!"

"Right. I believe you." Tiffany smirked. She knew they were, but she wanted to prove her point. Spending most of her time with Taeyeon couldn't be the only reason why she fell for her. That would just be plain ridiculous.

"Why are you smiling like that?" Yuri demanded. The smallest hint of a blush coloured her cheeks. Was it wrong she spent most of her time with Jessica?

"Nothing! I believe you." Tiffany smirked again. She was enjoying this.

Yuri was slightly panicking in her head. She wondered how exactly did one's actions play out in the eyes of others. "I don't think of Sica in that way!"

"I said I believe you, right? Why are you still insisting it then?" Tiffany cunningly asked.

"Ugh. Never mind." Yuri raised her hands in defeat. She started to wonder if her actions meant other things, other motives she wasn't completely aware of. A bulk of her time was spent with Jessica, that

was true, did it mean she could fall in love with Jessica the way Tiffany had for Taeyeon? Silly and impossible, Yuri concluded.

"Look, all I'm saying is it's not impossible to fall in love with someone you never expected to. Take me as the perfect example."

"But I really don't think I like Sica in that way." Yuri hesitantly questioned if she already knew everything there was to know about herself.

"Then you don't," Tiffany concluded. "I didn't immediately accept my feelings about Taeyeon, but now that I'm here, I don't regret a single minute of it."

"Yeah, I'm still getting used to the thought of it. You and Taeyeon together?" Yuri scratched her head. "Unbelievable."

"Believe it, Yul." Tiffany smiled brightly. "You can find love at the unlikeliest of places."

"Right, right," Yuri dismissed Tiffany's words. "All this talk is making me hungry. We should go down before they start looking for us." She got off the bed. "Sica's still probably beating herself about this. We should go to her."

Yuri consciously kept the experience behind Tiffany's words. Although she easily dismissed them, she couldn't help but think why it couldn't be possible for it to happen to her. She had never felt love the way Tiffany tried to explain it, like standing helplessly in quicksand, only to fall in heaven. When would love find her, and would she be ready for it when it did?

When Yuri and Tiffany headed downstairs to find a crying Jessica, Taeyeon and Sunny were busy talking in the kitchen. Their faces looked serious, obviously deep in thought from their discussion.

"Maybe I'll wait a few days—," Taeyeon murmured to Sunny.

"Are you sure?"

"Won't I seem obvious if I don't?"

"I still think there's nothing you can do about that. Don't you even care what they think about you?"

Taeyeon shook her head. "I do, but that's not important—"

"As sweet as that is, I hope you know what you're doing," Sunny tried to corner Taeyeon. She didn't want to explicitly show her worry about the consequences of the others leaving and Taeyeon not doing anything about it.

Taeyeon hid her own doubts. She put on a straight confident face in front of Sunny, and convinced herself that this was the right thing to do, that she was in control of the situation. Taeyeon had no choice but to try and hold out for as long she could. Tiffany needed her and she needed Tiffany. Taeyeon couldn't have her vulnerability come out now.

Perhaps, there was nothing scarier than to show weakness, to show how unsure one is with their decisions. To have these kept securely under lock meant that the delicate threads of sensible reasoning still tightly held every ounce of sanity altogether; otherwise, every doubt, every hesitation, and every uncertainty along the way would have come out, and hauntingly struck back, twice as hard, and definitely twice as painful from its due.

Sunny trusted Taeyeon that she knew completely what she was doing, inside and out. Taeyeon had to be, or else, everything would start falling apart. Permanently.

XVI. Fear

"There's something I have to tell you,," Tiffany finally said.

An hour had passed since the girls' lunch altogether. The remaining girls had briefly looked stiff and uneasy then; the effect of being suddenly huddled without having clarifications made on what could or couldn't be said. They appeared wary, cautious with the words they used. The small smiles they showed did little to conceal their respective thoughts. Silence lingered between them for most of the time, and if it were not for the presence of Taeyeon's parents to break the monotony, safe to say, the lunch would have been practically unbearable.

Although Tiffany and Jessica had quickly made up and sincere hugs were exchanged, the underlying tension from the others leaving, and no one daring to bring it up out aloud, was palpable.

Taeyeon and Tiffany were upstairs in their room, away from the rest of the girls that stayed behind. Tiffany had been trying to find the perfect time to tell Taeyeon about Jessica and Yuri. She had resolved to tell Taeyeon everything, including the incident with Seohyun weeks ago.

"Hmm?" Taeyeon straightened herself up on the bed. She slouched on Tiffany's shoulder with her phone in her hand. "What is it?" Taeyeon spun it mindlessly between her fingers. They were both quiet for quite some time, just wallowing and enjoying the other's presence.

Tiffany looked first in Taeyeon's eyes. She faced her with hope that Taeyeon wouldn't immediately draw any conclusions. "I told Jessica and Yuri—"

Taeyeon looked right back, shock this time on her face. "About us?"

"Yes." Tiffany squeezed Taeyeon's hands.

Taeyeon held her stare. "When?" her expression unchanging, "why didn't you tell me?"

"I was waiting for the right time to."

"What did they say?" Taeyeon hesitantly asked, suddenly afraid to know the answer. "I thought you didn't want to tell anyone." She didn't know what to make of Tiffany's confession. It confused her that Tiffany had told someone when Tiffany had been consistently protesting against it all this time.

"They're happy for us!" Tiffany smiled. "They took it well!"

Jessica and Yuri know? Is that it? Taeyeon thought. She knew something was going on, but it never occurred to her until now that trouble might be brewing between the others. For all she knew, the members paid their close attention to her and Tiffany, which was why she had been acutely observing them back.

Taeyeon had been acting innocent and blind to her surroundings, an attempt to give nothing away. She wanted to give the impression that there was nothing wrong with her and Tiffany's actions, just a new change to adjust to, a change which was inevitable to take place in everyone.

Sunny then came to Taeyeon's mind. Taeyeon too had been trying to find the perfect time to tell Tiffany about her conversation with Sunny, but she was also afraid on how Tiffany would react. She did go behind Tiffany's back after all. "I told Sunny as well."

The sudden exchange of secrets between them felt odd, like an unanticipated distance had been drawn.

Tiffany was taken aback. She didn't expect to hear that. "You told her? When?"

"A few days ago."

"How did she react?" Tiffany asked right away. She tried to take a good hold of her fear in her head. A firm grip, that's all it needed.

"Good, actually." Taeyeon began to laugh. "She said she was expecting it!" Her mind was more at ease now, knowing she had finally said it. Taeyeon knew that the longer she kept this from Tiffany was a minute longer their trust treaded on a thin wire. Weren't relationships essentially based on trust?

"What?" Tiffany asked in disbelief. "Expecting it? Sunny was expecting it?" Tiffany wondered why Taeyeon didn't immediately tell her about this. She wasn't sure if she had the right to be upset, knowing she too kept things from Taeyeon.

Taeyeon nodded. "Yeah, she said we had it coming."

"I don't know what she means."

"Neither do I," Taeyeon lied. Truth be told, from the very first time Taeyeon felt something in her heart stir, she knew she had found herself in a trap. Now, whether it was an ugly or a beautiful one to be in depended on what she made of it. Taeyeon chose the latter.

"About the others leaving—," Tiffany began, "do you think they know about us, that's why they left? Seohyun approached me a few weeks ago and told me that they knew what was going on—I didn't say anything, of course."

She was sure Jessica and Yuri kept it to themselves, and it wasn't that she doubted Sunny either, Tiffany obviously knew that hiding forever wasn't made to be foolproof, but she could try nonetheless. The incident with Seohyun reminded Tiffany of what the members' were capable of thinking. But it was just that, and *that* kept the members at bay. It was Tiffany and Taeyeon's words against their own, unverified, unconfirmed.

Didn't we want the truth in black and white for us to consider it, without the gray areas that brought miscalculations? We'd hate to take the blame if ever we're mistaken.

"What if they do know?"

"But they left—?"

"Could we blame them?"

"But knowing and suspecting are still two different things—"

Taeyeon studied Tiffany's eyes. Was Tiffany ready to come out completely? "I'm sure Sunny didn't tell them."

"I'm sure Jessi and Yul didn't either."

"Do you want to tell them then?" Taeyeon straightforwardly asked. The last thing she wanted was to pressure Tiffany, but Tiffany's actions confused her. Taeyeon felt a little frustration come out from within her. "They're really acting like they know, so why can't we just end their misery and tell them?"

It was clear now. The members' departure was an indirect response to the way they've been treated throughout this entire time. Tiffany thought about it. Though her fears may have lessened, her doubts still controlled a big part of her. After all, being human was precedence, the fear was naturally there.

Taeyeon took Tiffany's silence as a negative. But why did Jessica and Yuri know? "Fany." She raised her hands to cup Tiffany's face, and scooted closer to lean in that their noses now almost touched. "You told Sica and Yuri—why?" She whispered her assurances. "They took it well, right? Sunny took it well too. If they left because they're angry at us, I'm sure they'll understand once we explain everything to them personally. We'll tell them together."

Tiffany felt as if Taeyeon's eyes were swallowing her entire being whole. It wasn't hard to get lost in them. They took her in with every bit of love and understanding and Taeyeon's sincerity easily crushed the guilt she had been carrying. Was she really the one making this harder for the both of them?

Taeyeon patiently waited for Tiffany's eyes to answer. She held her gaze, and remained still until she saw Tiffany's eyes begin to water. Alarmed, she kissed Tiffany's nose. Did she say something wrong? Taeyeon's eyebrows furrowed in concern.

Tiffany, on the other hand, was drowning in a sea of emotions, out of breath, and out of direction to head onto. The way Taeyeon held her like this was making it hard for her to breathe, and she kept her tears back. It had been awfully hard with the members around, and it was even harder trying to keep things under control by herself. Tiffany knew that Taeyeon had already sacrificed so much, and for Taeyeon to patiently wait for her to come into terms with her insecurities was beyond her. It was too much. Understanding wouldn't be enough of a word.

Tiffany hugged Taeyeon tight, and buried her face in Taeyeon's shoulder. Tiny droplets of tears escaped her eyes. She blinked to hide them away.

"I love you. I don't want to lose you."

"I love you too—I'm always going to be here."

"But we're hurting other people already, aren't we?"

Taeyeon felt the tears on Tiffany's face fall to her sleeve. "I'm sorry," She tightly held onto Tiffany, her arms firmly in place around Tiffany's back.

"Why are you sorry?"

"If you don't want to tell them, we don't have to."

"No, can't you see? We're hurting them already—"

Taeyeon closed her eyes, she knew Tiffany was right. "All that matters to me right now is you."

"You're not giving up on me, right? You're not giving up on us?"

"Of course not."

"Promise me that you won't ever leave me?"

Taeyeon broke away from their hug to look again in Tiffany's eyes. Tiffany's fear stung her, that Tiffany could even consider the thought of her doing such a thing. She brought her lips to touch Tiffany's, brushing them lightly up and down.

Tiffany breathed in deep. The scent of Taeyeon made her lightheaded, and to have her mouth teased like this escalated her longing. She couldn't imagine living without these pair of lips to kiss every morning, without Taeyeon's hands to catch her whenever she fell, and to simply put it, without Taeyeon in her life, there would barely be any meaning left. Tiffany revolved her world around Taeyeon, and for it to suddenly stop turning would be devastating, a deep defeating blow to the world she had tried so hard to build and protect.

Taeyeon leaned in closer, her lips slowly parting to move along with Tiffany's. She held onto Tiffany by the waist, and lazily grazed her fingers on Tiffany's bare skin, underneath her shirt, feeling the smoothness of her stomach. Tiffany busied her hands in Taeyeon's hair, twirling the silky locks on her finger. Still with her eyes closed, she pushed Taeyeon back on the bed. Tiffany had never felt so weak and alive at the same time. Taeyeon made her heart trip, and she always felt so weak upon contact.

"What am I going to do without you?" Tiffany smiled from behind Taeyeon's kiss.

"Live life, and continue to be happy." Taeyeon answered the rhetorical question. She was dead serious on what she said. If Tiffany was happy, then it would be enough, even if it wasn't with her.

Tiffany pushed herself up to look at Taeyeon, resting on her elbows. The answer caught her off guard, "What kind of answer is that?"

"An honest one?"

"Taeyeon, I want to be with you forever." Tiffany kissed Taeyeon on the cheek. She inched her way towards the corner of Taeyeon's lips.

"I know. But I do mean wha—" Taeyeon was stopped short from finishing her sentence because of Tiffany's kiss.

Tiffany kissed Taeyeon on the lips to stop her from talking. She didn't want to think of what Taeyeon had said. Tiffany knew well the honesty in them, and the bleak possibility that secretly hung behind. How could she be happy without Taeyeon? It was a faint and remote thought Tiffany pushed to the back of her mind.

A day, a moment at a time, already head under water, that's all Tiffany and Taeyeon could do to keep themselves from sinking further. It was murky down there, from where they stood, the muddy depths filled with uncertainty, and the surface only brimming with doubt. But there was hope, and Tiffany and Taeyeon had to find it quick before they get swept off their feet.

To be washed away just like that, without a fight, would be easy, just as long as the right currents came, these unexpected currents that could unfortunately chance on them, and wash them apart when it finally caught on.

XVII. Home

While Yoona looked down closely at her cup of afternoon tea, Seohyun silently peeled some fresh fruit from the kitchen counter behind her. Things were relatively quiet in the dorm, and there were barely any signs of human activity. From down the hallway, only the echo of the television left unattended in one of the rooms could be heard.

Yoona swirled her drink gently, cupping the white porcelain fully in her slender fingers. She sighed.

When Sooyoung, Hyoyeon, Yoona and Seohyun arrived home from Jeonju, different perturbations of emotion came creeping in. Relief coupled with disappointment, almost blankness and uncertainty even, to come home suddenly without the others.

Yoona peered in; the remnants of the tea inside the cup moved along with her movement. She felt strangely calm, held by her observations of the honey-coloured drink Seohyun had prepared for her. Yoona couldn't deny how she too was troubled by the others, and yet she likened herself with the bits and scraps of the tea she drank, helplessly pulled along, careful to settle down, only to be completely unaware when the next attack or movement will commence.

She put the tea cup down on the table a little too loudly. Seohyun turned her head upon hearing the loud thud. "Unni, are you okay?" she asked.

Seohyun's purity still astonished Yoona to this day. Even after several years of friendship, she wondered if there would ever come a time it would be marred. Yoona hoped that day never come. "Nothing," she smiled weakly.

Seohyun carefully brought the tea kettle from the stove over to the table. She took a seat in front of Yoona, and poured her another serving. "It feels really different without the others." Her voice was laced heavy with sadness.

Yoona nodded in response. The ride home had brought her more loneliness than she had ever anticipated to feel, but she never showed it. Yoona knew this feeling all too well. Passing by the same roads, day after day, to and fro, regardless of whom she was with, indeed felt different knowing they were at odds with one another.

It reminded her how happy things could be, and how careful she was when she handled her own loneliness. How many times has she smiled through such a feeling? And yet, this was worse than feeling left out for it seemed like the trust the others had given her had been taken away completely.

"Unni?"

"Hmm?" Yoona snapped back into reality. Her thoughts about the others preoccupied her. She sorely missed them.

"Maybe we should call them?" Seohyun meekly suggested. "We should tell Taeyeon-unni we made it back home safe."

"Oh. Right." Yoona cleared her throat. "We could." She shifted in her seat.

"Unni, let me get it." Seohyun quickly stood up, and headed towards her room.

Yoona looked at Seohyun until she disappeared from view. She looked down at her cup of tea once more, and thought to herself how quickly people changed, with or without notice. Tiffany's diminished presence had already hurt, and to have Yuri suddenly follow in Tiffany and Taeyeon's actions had only poured more salt into her wound. She tried her best not to let such matters get to her, but it obviously did. Yoona often showed a laid-back demeanour, save for the occasional rant, and if it were an act, nobody could clearly tell.

"I'll call Taeyeon-unni," Seohyun excitedly said when she made it back. She began to punch the keys.

"Maybe we should call Sunny-unni instead."

"What about Tiffany-unni?" Seohyun suggested. She hoped to at least get to talk to either one of them.

Yoona drummed her fingers, figuring who it was best to call. If they called Jessica and Yuri, then maybe things wouldn't seem as complicated, like a small truce had been given. If they called Tiffany and Taeyeon, they were surely bound to be hit with questions on their sudden departure. Yoona frowned. Why didn't Taeyeon and the others think of calling them? She felt more salt poured into her wound as she thought of it.

As expected from herself, Yoona suddenly retreated, "Seohyun, let's just wait for Sooyoung-unni and Hyoyeon-unni to arrive home—then we'll call them." She was used to pulling back when she deemed it unnecessary to show personal injury. After all, to show the excess of one's wounds only reminded one how vulnerable they could actually be.

It was Seohyun's turn to frown. She thought calling would be a good way to start and fix things but why weren't they going to call anymore? Seohyun studied the look on Yoona's face. Impassive, yet subtly agitated. Yoona's eyes were as expressive as the rest of her features looked deadpan, like the way her lips formed a straight line.

"Unni—," Seohyun dropped her phone on the table, "I really miss the others."

Yoona nodded, and curled her lips in agreement. "Me too," she couldn't help but stare at the cup of tea she held, "—me too." The warmth from the heat of the drink comforted her as it gently pricked the cold skin of her palms.

"I hope they come back soon already."

Yoona shook her head. "I don't think they'll be coming home until next week."

"But that's too far away."

"Yeah, we're on an indefinite vacation remember?"

"Unni, I know you're also upset over the others, but I hope we can fix things soon."

Naturally, Seohyun would look past any shortcomings the others had. It didn't really matter to her as she believed that people should be fairly distinguished from their actions. Even with the older girls acting like this, Seohyun knew that they didn't mean to purposely hurt one another. Why would they when they considered themselves as family?

Seohyun knew they each had their reasons; everyone has a reason they carry, but what only made it difficult was how trust and understanding came into play it seemed. It was one thing to trust yourself and another to trust other people. How conviction translated in the eyes of others almost always determined how willing one was to stand by their beliefs, and for Seohyun to see how Tiffany and Taeyeon, or Yuri and Jessica, carry on with their behaviour only meant they believed their manner to be right. She wasn't going to argue with that.

Yoona clicked her tongue. "They're awfully taking a long time just buying dinner."

Seohyun laughed a little. "You know how Sooyoung-unni is with food."

"Yeah, but I'm getting a little hungry."

"Do you want some fruit, unni?" Seohyun started towards the refrigerator from her seat.

"No, no, save it for later." Yoona looked deep in thought again, perfectly preoccupied despite not doing anything, except holding her cup of tea.

"Unni." Seohyun reached out. "You know you can always talk to me about anything." She felt worried seeing Yoona's appearance like this, limp and dull, only adequately responsive. Yoona had always been one of the more lively personalities in the group, and if Seohyun was going to lose more of them, she was definitely not going to sit around and wait for it to happen.

Yoona gave a small smile to Seohyun as Seohyun rubbed her arm gently. "I know I can." was all she managed to say.

For awhile, the sudden silence and stillness of the dorm with only the two of them around had stressed the emptiness they were both beginning to feel. Yoona needed to immerse herself in activity and noise in order to burst the grim bubble she was slowly caving in. Unfortunately, Seohyun's warmth

did little to help, and as much as Yoona wanted to let out her grievances, she found it best to remain quiet instead. Seohyun was just going to work herself up, Yoona thought.

Seohyun found nothing else better to do than to stay by Yoona's side. Though Sooyoung and Hyoyeon would be arriving soon, it did little to erase the fact that they were incomplete, and that they left the others in bad terms. Seohyun thought of them, each one, scrutinizing their words and their actions.

"Do you think they'll call us?" Yoona asked. She looked up at Seohyun with definite hope in her voice.

Seohyun remembered the parting words Hyoyeon had left Jessica. "Taeyeon-uni will probably check up on us." She hoped that Taeyeon would, out of everyone who might.

Yoona nodded. "Yeah." If Taeyeon wouldn't call, then what would that speak of their friendship and importance? Yoona didn't want to answer the question she thought of.

"I hope they're not mad."

"No, no." Yoona thought about it. "I don't think they would be." They honestly didn't really mean any harm, at least not much, only enough to show that they were being affected as well. She couldn't find any reasons for the others to get mad. "They're probably just as upset as we are." She paused. "I hope."

Suddenly, the sound of unruly laughter could be heard from down the hall, and Yoona and Seohyun stood up to greet Sooyoung and Hyoyeon home. It had just struck evening, with the sky outside a deep blue, but they were feeling tired and hungry already from the long trip. An early dinner would do them best and cheer up their low spirits.

Sooyoung had declared that a small party was in order when they had arrived home. Hyoyeon didn't feel like cooking either, so she accompanied Sooyoung to buy food instead. Of course, Sooyoung couldn't be left alone to fetch food; otherwise she would have probably never made it back.

"Yah, unni! What is this?" Yoona opened the foil that covered the roast chicken.

Hyoyeon looked over from Yoona's shoulder. "Sooyoungie!" she shouted. Seohyun couldn't help but let out a small giggle as she noticed the bite marks on the chicken's thighs.

"Whaaaat?" Sooyoung called out from her room.

"You touched it!" Hyoyeon shouted back.

Sooyoung then emerged in the kitchen, out of the day's clothes and into her night ones, "It's just one bite!"

"Unni, look!" Seohyun let Sooyoung see how big of a mark she had made. She was still laughing at how comical the situation looked.

Sooyoung laughed at the sight of the evidence. "Okay, fine, I marked my territory." She pinched the piece of meat. "Besides, it needed a taste test! There's no way I'm feeding you guys bland chicken." She put it to her mouth and smiled. "Berry delicious, yo."

Hyoyeon hit Sooyoung violently on the shoulder. "I told you not to touch it until we got home!"

"Ishh delishuss!" Sooyoung licked her lips, and pulled the thigh off. She grabbed a chair, sat, and continued to eat. There was nothing quite like food to comfort one's spirits.

"Should we call Taeyeon-uni?" Seohyun threw the question at Hyoyeon who seated herself next to Sooyoung. She took a small piece of the fruit she peeled earlier.

Hyoyeon looked at Seohyun in surprise. "Hm?"

"We should at least tell them we made it back home safe," Yoona added. She cut herself a portion of the chicken's breast.

Sooyoung swallowed a mouthful. "Did they call while we were away?"

Yoona shook her head. "No, they didn't."

Sooyoung took another bite. She didn't expect the others to call, but Sunny had promised that she would keep in touch in case something new happened.

"Go ahead," Hyoyeon answered. It was just a harmless phone call.

"Okay, what do I say?" Seohyun looked around her.

"That we made it back home safe," Yoona answered as she met Seohyun's eyes.

"Is that all?"

"Well, what else is there to say?" Hyoyeon interrupted.

Seohyun wished that things would look up, given the physical distance between them and the others. Maybe patching up things was easier to start when it didn't require a face-to-face interaction. She still hoped for the best. "Okay, I'll call Taeyeon-unni."

Yoona, Sooyoung and Hyoyeon watched Seohyun as she made her call. They were curious to know how Taeyeon had reacted upon finding out they had left. She should at least have the slightest bit of concern, Sooyoung thought.

"Oh, put it on speaker phone," Yoona instructed.

Seohyun waited as the ringing on the other line echoed in her ear. Seconds later, the dial tone ensued. She stared at the screen of her phone and punched the keys again. Ringing, a long monotonous ringing. She looked at Hyoyeon. "She's not picking up."

"Oh." was Hyoyeon's short response. They had all hoped that Taeyeon would answer, even if they only admitted it to themselves. Taeyeon was probably with Tiffany again. Well, it was more than obvious where she placed most of her attention anyway. "Seohyun, grab a plate and eat dinner already."

"I'll just leave her a message then," Seohyun dejectedly declared.

"Yeah, a message should be enough," Sooyoung assured Seohyun. She made sure not to forget to ask Sunny later what was going on with the others.

Although the company was few, and the atmosphere was bleak, the four girls tried their best to brighten up nonetheless. It was somehow enough for them to know that they weren't alone on one side of the story, that someone was just as in the dark as they were, but that didn't mean however, that they were clueless, entirely oblivious to what was happening, for if suspicions were the only thing they had, at least those suspicions were the very thing that kept them together. On the same side.

XVIII. Alcohol

"Wait!"

"How much longer?" Taeyeon laughed at Tiffany teasingly. She held Tiffany's hands and kissed her on the forehead.

"I can do this!" Tiffany chanted again.

Taeyeon continued to laugh. Tiffany was being ridiculous for suddenly feeling nervous. It was only Sunny anyway. Why would Tiffany shy away from Sunny now that she knew Taeyeon had told her? Taeyeon kissed Tiffany again on the forehead. "Come on." She opened the door.

The remaining girls in Jeonju had gathered inside Taeyeon's room upon her request. She previously called them from upstairs, shouting that she wanted to have a word with them altogether. The sudden sight of Taeyeon's eager smile and thrilled voice helped put the rest of the girls at ease. Though lunch had been stiff and awkward, they sensed something good was about to happen, something good that could hopefully make up for the others' saddened leaving.

Going up the curved flight of stairs, Jessica and Yuri already knew where Taeyeon's meeting was heading at. They were completely convinced that things were going to start looking up. Even if they weren't sure how exactly they were to approach the others who had left, knowing Taeyeon and Tiffany would face them all together was relieving enough.

Sunny, on the other hand, was her usual complacent self, although she did wonder why Jessica and Yuri were suddenly in high spirits.

"Taeyeon, what's going on?" Sunny immediately asked when Taeyeon and Tiffany came inside the room. Tiffany was standing behind Taeyeon with her head down, their hands linked together. She was blushing mad from her nervousness.

Taeyeon was a little nervous herself, but her excitement to finally say it out aloud to the others easily won over. She looked first at Jessica and Yuri. Not sure of how to say it, "So, you know—," was all she managed to say. Her voice trembled, and the big smile on her face caused an eruption of laughter from the two.

When Jessica and Yuri stood up from the bed to hug Taeyeon, Sunny looked at Tiffany and began to laugh herself. She didn't expect Tiffany to come out so soon about this, not when she had been acting so paranoid the past few days. This was surely a pleasant surprise, but why the sudden change?

Sunny hoped that Tiffany would be able to deal with her fears soon enough because she didn't like the way it seemed to be suffocating the relationship. She had had enough of seeing Taeyeon hoping day after day and for nothing. It saddened her to see how Taeyeon was willing to sacrifice so much, and so unconditionally.

Sunny hugged Tiffany. "Fany, I'm happy for you! I know you and Taeyeon will have beautiful babies."

Tiffany and the others laughed at Sunny's comment. "Yah! Sunny! We're too young for that!" Taeyeon looked at Tiffany bewilderingly. Beautiful babies? More laughter escaped from Jessica and Yuri.

Tiffany ruffled Taeyeon's bangs affectionately for a second. "I'm kidding, silly." She crinkled her nose.

"Omo!" Taeyeon gasped. She held Tiffany by the waist and kissed her on the cheek. Jessica and Yuri began to make nauseating sounds. They didn't have to see that.

"Aw, come on guys, there's no need for that!" Sunny whined. She went to sit on the edge of the bed. Tiffany and Taeyeon looked at each other and smiled. They were happy to be out in the open like this for once, even if it was just with their closest friends.

Yuri seated herself beside Sunny while Jessica sat beside her. "So, now what?" She grabbed a pillow and hugged it.

Tiffany and Taeyeon sat on the floor, facing the girls, "What do you mean?" Taeyeon asked. She had her arm around Tiffany's shoulders as Tiffany leaned on her. They never once let go of the other's hand.

Jessica looked down at them. "Well, aren't you going to tell the others too?" She looked at something else.

"Maybe this isn't the right time yet," Taeyeon answered.

Sunny raised her eyebrow. "So you mean to keep this from them?" She didn't like where this was going. "Until when?"

"No, no," Tiffany clarified Taeyeon's response. "We mean to tell them when we get back. Now isn't really the best time, knowing they're upset, or maybe even angry."

"It's because they're being kept in the dark," Sunny reasoned.

"They're not going to hear us out if they're angry," Taeyeon countered.

"Yeah, but imagine hearing 'Okay kids, Fany is my girlfriend, you happy now?' I'm sure their anger will disappear," Yuri interrupted.

Jessica slapped Yuri on the shoulder. What kind of announcement was that?

Taeyeon laughed. "Fany is not my girlfriend." She looked at Tiffany lovingly. "She's my love."

Jessica creased her eyebrow. How could that sound so sweet and strange at the same time?

"I don't want to call Fany my girlfriend," Taeyeon began to explain. "I don't know. It just sounds so temporary to me."

Yuri smiled. "Aw, Taeyeon!" She squealed like a little school girl. Jessica had to restrain her from jumping in delight.

"My love sounds better. Fany is my love," Taeyeon looked at Tiffany, "right?"

Tiffany looked adorably into Taeyeon's eyes. She just wanted to stay like this forever, in Taeyeon's protective arms and the support of the members. Would the others forgive her for keeping this from them?

"Yah! Yah! Stop that!" Jessica scolded Taeyeon and Tiffany. The public display of affection was making her feel a little fuzzy.

Yuri continued to watch the couple in front of her. She couldn't deny how in love and happy they looked. "Aw! You guys!" she gushed.

Sunny rolled her eyes. "The last thing I want is a gag reflex," she joked.

Tiffany stood up, and hugged the three girls in front of her. She thanked them for being so accepting towards this relationship. It helped silence her fears, knowing they weren't against it. The hugs they shared were warm, filled with the comfort and assurance of support. Family had never meant so much until now. The members' approval was just as important to Tiffany, and though she had acted so badly towards them, she was grateful that they took the news well. Now she felt a little braver to face the other members.

"We should celebrate!" Yuri cheered. She pulled Jessica by the hand, headed towards the door. "Let's eat out! I know the perfect place!"

"Ow! Don't pull so hard!" Jessica complained.

Yuri smiled sheepishly. "Oops." She hadn't meant to do that. "Come on!" They disappeared in a second.

"You guys go on ahead. We'll stay here." Taeyeon laughed.

Sunny stood and followed Jessica and Yuri out the door. She didn't want to be alone with the Tiffany and Taeyeon. "Wait for me!" Who knows what they could be doing next? Sunny looked back at the couple before closing the door. She winked before leaving them.

Upon seeing the door close shut, Tiffany tackled Taeyeon down on the floor. She put her entire weight on Taeyeon and pinned her arms to her sides. Grinning to herself, she began to tickle her.

"Oh no, you don't!" Taeyeon frantically squirmed her way out of Tiffany's grip. "No, you do—," Tiffany kissed Taeyeon full on the lips. She crashed her lips so hard on Taeyeon's that Taeyeon fell back on the floor again, her head causing a loud thud.

"Ow—," Taeyeon moaned in slight pain.

Tiffany released her hold on Taeyeon and rubbed the back of Taeyeon's head gently. "Sorry," she mumbled.

Taeyeon smiled and reached out to touch Tiffany's cheek. She continued to sweep Tiffany's bangs away from her face, wanting a better view of her expressive eyes. Those eyes, Taeyeon had never seen a more beautiful pair. Taeyeon felt her heart crash from the intensity of her feelings.

How could she ever resist it when Tiffany looked at her like that? Taeyeon pulled Tiffany down on her, and hugged her tight. She closed her eyes, and began to hum.

It was the first time Taeyeon had done that, and though she didn't exactly sing Tiffany a song, her humming made Tiffany's heartbeat slow down from its frenzied rhythm. Tiffany adjusted her position, moving to her side so that her weight only partly rested on Taeyeon. She put her hand on Taeyeon's chest, feeling the hypnotic pounding of her heart. Taeyeon's humming was relaxing, soothing to all her senses. She could easily fall asleep listening to it. It was amazing how Taeyeon could make her feel so safe and protected.

"Taeyeon."

"Hmm?"

"I love you."

"I love you too." Taeyeon bent her head to kiss Tiffany on the forehead.

"I don't know what I'd do without you—"

Taeyeon bent her head down again. "What's wrong? Are you sad?"

Tiffany shook her head. She looked up at Taeyeon. "I just wanted you to know how much you mean to me."

"Aw, Fany—"

"Don't ever leave me, promise?"

"I promise." Taeyeon closed her eyes and leaned in to kiss Tiffany. If only she could be sure to keep that promise, she would promise it everyday. Why was it so easy to feel sad being in a relationship like this? Taeyeon tightened her hold on Tiffany. She raised her hands to cup Tiffany's face. If only time could stop.

"You have no idea how happy I am right now."

"Really?"

"Yes, love. So ridiculously happy, it's crazy!" Taeyeon flailed her arms in gesture.

"Call me that again."

"Love?"

Tiffany giggled. The butterflies in her stomach made their presence felt all over again.

"I love you."

"I love you too."

"Do you want to eat out with the others?" Taeyeon asked. She felt the need to celebrate as well.

"I would agree to anything just as long as I'm with you." Tiffany smiled and pushed herself off of Taeyeon. "Come on, maybe they haven't left yet."

Taeyeon raised herself to her feet. She grabbed Tiffany by the waist and hugged her again. "Last one down is a rotten mushroom!" she yelled and ran out the door.

Tiffany quickly ran after her. "Hey! No fair!" she whined loudly for Taeyeon to hear.

Downstairs, Yuri crossed her arms playfully once she saw Taeyeon descend from the stairs. "Thanks for making us wait, Taeyeon."

Taeyeon smirked. "Oops. I thought you guys already went ahead."

Sunny and Jessica headed towards the door as soon as they saw Tiffany in sight. Tiffany giggled as she caught up with Taeyeon. She pulled her by the hand, and tugged her along towards Sunny and Jessica outside. Yuri smiled as she looked at the couple in front of her. They look so happy, she thought as she walked behind them.

Out in the streets, the girls walked leisurely under the yellow light of the neighbourhood streetlamps. Yuri and Jessica were skipping and laughing to themselves, making fun of their shadows on the ground. They enjoyed the cool breeze that blew from the north. It was getting a little chilly, but it didn't feel so cold when they had each other to bear it with.

Tiffany held Taeyeon's hand inside the pocket of her jacket. It was warm to hold onto. She looked to her side only to see Taeyeon already looking at her from the corner of her eye. Taeyeon smiled. It was hard not to. Would it make sense if Taeyeon permanently smiled for the rest of her days with Tiffany?

Midway through dinner, "No, no alcohol!" Tiffany protested. The girls were at the tea house Taeyeon and Sunny had visited a couple of days ago. Plenty of people, old and young alike, were happily busy drinking alcohol at their tables. Karaoke music blared in the background. The tea house had completely transformed into a karaoke drinking house.

"Aw, why not?" Yuri frowned.

Tiffany remembered the last time she had a little drink. She had vomited and Taeyeon had to clean her up. This had happened a week before their kiss in the kitchen. She snuck a few cans in her room, wobbled out to get a glass of water, and was scolded by a very upset Taeyeon who caught her. Tiffany looked red as a tomato then, blushing mad from the alcohol in her system.

Sunny raised her hand. "Five bottles please!"

Yuri applauded. "Yes!" Tiffany wouldn't be able to take back that order now.

"It's just one bottle," Jessica said to Tiffany. She had seen Tiffany consume much, much more than that.

Taeyeon laughed as the grandmother looked at them impishly. What was a little fun?

"Fine, fine." Tiffany gave in as soon as the bottles of alcohol were settled on the table by the grandmother. She was actually the first to take a sip.

"Woah! Take it easy." Yuri warned as she watched Tiffany swig at her bottle.

Jessica snorted. "Ha! If there's anyone who should be watching what they're drinking, it's you!" She looked at Yuri.

"What?" Yuri asked innocently. She knew she had a relatively low tolerance for it.

"Cheers guys!" Sunny clinked her bottle with Tiffany and Taeyeon's. "To the couple!"

"Sshhh!" Tiffany slapped Sunny on the shoulder. "Not so loud! People might hear you!"

"Oops." Sunny tried to correct it. "To the YulSic couple for the great fan service! Cheers!"

"That's not any better!" Jessica laughed at Sunny.

Taeyeon looked at Tiffany, her attention fully drawn and pulled by the thoughts that followed Tiffany's words. She couldn't help but let the truth rush up and crash into her. The sad truth that this relationship was something they could never fully reveal to others. She pushed the thoughts to the back of her mind.

"Woah, you too, Taeyeon! Take it easy!" Yuri wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

Surprised, Tiffany looked at Taeyeon. "Taeyeon, cheers!" She smiled gleefully. "To us!"

"To us," Taeyeon responded. She inhaled deeply and let the inevitable thoughts go as she exhaled.

There was no tallying a relationship's time anyway. The only thing Taeyeon could do was to stay in the moment and let tomorrow worry itself.

In the loud and lively atmosphere of the tea house, the girls were momentarily entertained for the night. They drank, laughed, sang and danced to their hearts' content, grateful to be on vacation and have a chance at normalcy together. How often could they be by themselves like this without their manager or the public's close attention?

They celebrated, never to forget how good life has been. Though they may have worked hard, sacrificed more than sleep and health would allow, things can't always be this good. They knew life had a ruthless sudden way of putting things to an end, both good and bad.

And Tiffany knew this better than anyone else, for in the back of her mind, she never forgot how easy it was to end this relationship, not when she, herself, had been the one to come so close to ending it.

IX. Pressure

"So, Stephanie, how's your family doing in the States?" Taeyeon's mother asked. "Your father is doing well, yes?"

"Oh yes, they're doing quite well," Tiffany responded. "Appa's planning to visit. We haven't seen each other in awhile." She lifted her gaze from the countertop to look at Taeyeon's mother. "I think next month. He's not sure yet."

"Ah, I haven't talked to him in awhile." Taeyeon's mother chuckled. "Aigoo, come to think of it, I'm not even sure if I remember how he looks like anymore!" She pulled out a spatula from inside a drawer.

Tiffany laughed. "I look an awfully lot like him, remember?"

"Aigoo, if I recall correctly, it was your sister who looked a lot more like him. You've grown so much, you know."

Tiffany smiled. "Yeah, I know." She finished the sentence for Taeyeon's mother. "I look a lot more like umma now too."

When Taeyeon had gone with Sunny a few days ago to run those errands, Tiffany, meanwhile, found herself spending half of the afternoon in the presence of Taeyeon's mother. She was sitting alone on the living room couch, flipping through a magazine, waiting for Jessica and Yuri to appear when Taeyeon's mother approached her and asked if she could be of help in the kitchen. Taeyeon's mother was busy preparing for the afternoon meal when she saw Tiffany by herself. She had thought of baking some bread and pastries for the girls. Of course, Tiffany agreed to help.

"Aigoo, you know when I saw you a week ago, I thought 'Is this Stephanie?' You've grown to be such a fine young lady."

"Umma."

"I almost didn't recognize you!" Taeyeon's mother chuckled to herself.

Tiffany laughed at the tease. "But you see all of us on TV!"

"Exactly my point! On TV!" Taeyeon's mother pointed out. "You girls look so much paler and thinner in person." She shook her head, "Aigoo, poor Sooyoung. Has she been feeding herself enough, hmm?"

Tiffany continued to laugh. "Umma, don't worry. We haven't been working too hard, plus this vacation is helping us relax and recharge ourselves." She cracked an egg into a bowl.

"Are you sure?" Taeyeon's mother looked at Tiffany. "Taeyeon looks like she's lost some weight."

Tiffany fell silent at this. On the contrary, Taeyeon seemed to have gained a little weight in her eyes.

"And you! I can see your cheekbones and collarbones from here!" Taeyeon's mother eyed Tiffany again from where she stood, a few feet away from the marble countertop. She looked at Tiffany like a mother would when she discovered her child to be hiding the dinner's vegetables.

Tiffany smiled sheepishly. "Well, things have been pretty hectic—"

"Aish. Crack another egg into that, I'll bake an extra serving for you girls."

Tiffany obeyed. "How about you umma? How have you been?"

"Oh you know, the same old." Taeyeon's mother cut open a bag of flour. "Aish, enough about me. Tell me, how's Taeyeon? She seems quite happy these days. Whenever I talk with her on the phone, she sounds a little drunk to be honest, with all that laughing." She paused deliberately. "Has she met anyone? Is she dating?"

Tiffany was taken aback with the sudden look thrown at her. "What?"

"I'm serious. Now I know my own daughter, of course, she came from me—"

"Umma, she isn't dating anyone." Tiffany shook her head and waved her hands negatively.

Taeyeon's mother raised her eyebrow. "You better not be keeping secrets from me, Stephanie. Taeyeon should know better than to keep things from her own mother." She shook her head disappointedly.

"I'm not umma!" Tiffany shot a convincing look at Taeyeon's mother. She still laughed at how funny the suspicions were, though she was starting to feel very nervous if Taeyeon's mother suspected anything between them.

"Well, I suppose so." Taeyeon's mother proceeded to measure the flour and sugar. "There isn't any time, is there? Once, Taeyeon recited to me her day's schedules, and I had to interrupt her to ask what time was lunch and dinner!"

"Ah, but we're able to manage," Tiffany reassured Taeyeon's mother, trying to maintain an even voice, "Somehow, everything gets done, and there's even a little time to spare in between activities."

Taeyeon's mother raised her eyebrow again, "And that's when Taeyeon dates?"

"Umma!" Tiffany giggled for show. This was getting ridiculous. She couldn't blame her however, for being persistent. Almost everyone, even the girls themselves, wondered how they could get by with their youth without dating anyone. Didn't it take several years to finally find the right one? Tiffany, herself, wondered why it took such a long time for her to fall in love like this. Was it all worth the wait, knowing Taeyeon would be the one in the end?

Taeyeon's mother chuckled. "Aigoo, that girl—," she opened the drawers, "she never did let me meddle into her affairs. She's always been quite independent, even when she was young. To be honest, I fear that the one she eventually decides to marry wouldn't be man enough for her." Taeyeon's mother smiled to herself. "He should be able to keep up with her!"

Tiffany let the words drop their entire weight on her. When Taeyeon marries a man? "I know. He's going to be one lucky guy."

"Aigoo, you too, Stephanie." Taeyeon's mother opened her eyes wide. "I hope that the man you end up with will know how to treat you well."

Tiffany gave a small smile. "Don't worry, umma. I'm very picky."

Tiffany hadn't seen this coming. The conversation with Taeyeon's mother that afternoon had put a lot of strain on her mind. It caused her to question further the reality on which her relationship with Taeyeon currently stood on. It was a hard waking slap, to be faced with Taeyeon's mother like this, and to be having this kind of conversation. How could Tiffany forget Taeyeon's place in her family?

Tiffany had thought for some time again why she was with Taeyeon in the first place. She dug, twisted and pulled at her reasons, trying to discern if her selfishness for this love was putting Taeyeon in a lot of danger. How would Taeyeon's mother react if she found out that Taeyeon wasn't just secretly dating, but she was secretly dating a girl? It didn't help Tiffany's worries at all that she spent most of that afternoon with Taeyeon's mother.

The difficult truth had made its presence felt all over again. And it was a slow beating death this time around, the sad reality subtly choking hopes until it finally ran out of breath. Give up, we know how this is going to end, it crooned repeatedly.

Who was Tiffany kidding? She knew how hard Taeyeon had been working to reach this point in her and their group's career. Everyone did. They each sacrificed more than their fair share of time and effort to get this far, and now was this relationship going to get in the way of that? Tiffany sank low into her thoughts, and it put her into a terrible unstable mood whenever she was alone. She not knowing what to rightfully make out of this predicament was making her loosen her hold on Taeyeon. But I can't, Tiffany always reasoned.

On the evening of singing and drinking in the tea house, Tiffany pulled Taeyeon close to her as they walked home. She remembered well the things Taeyeon's mother had said, the man she wanted for Taeyeon, her pride in Taeyeon's achievements. Now, how could all of this even begin to fit in the equation of their relationship?

Tiffany leaned her head on Taeyeon's as they walked. She tried hard to put up a brave front. It was one of the few things she could do to prevent her hold on Taeyeon from slipping.

The choices Tiffany and Taeyeon had made couldn't have been influenced by the people around them; they were too madly in love to consider the place of other people in their relationship. Tiffany knew she would try and hold on for as long as she could, but now she started to fear the inevitable, that time was running out.

It wouldn't matter when it will happen, or for what reason, because when time runs out, it simply does. Time will push one to move, and carry on with what's left because it will surely continue to eat away at every phase of one's life.

Tiffany put her arm around Taeyeon's waist. Even she was frustrated with her own moodiness. It was so hard to control, the thoughts from coming and swallowing her like this. But being with Taeyeon always brought her back, it was the only thing that stopped her mind from self-destructing, and Tiffany made sure she kept those worries locked and sealed whenever she was with Taeyeon.

Denial was bliss.

"Fany?"

"Hm?"

"Are you okay?"

"Yes, why?"

"You're awfully quiet."

Tiffany giggled. "I'm just enjoying this moment with you." She walked slower, and kicked a small rock on the ground.

"Taeyeon?"

"Yeah?"

"I love you." Tiffany looked at Taeyeon intensely, her eyes smiling like they never had before.

"I love you too."

"I hope tomorrow will turn out as good as today." She squeezed Taeyeon's hand. She had felt too many emotions today. Anger, disappointment, relief, love, happiness, sadness. She was both mentally and emotionally exhausted.

"Of course it will!"

Tiffany smiled. "How sure are you?"

"It will be." Taeyeon confidently smiled back. "Because we're together!" she said a little too loudly.

Tiffany wrinkled her nose. "So cheesy!"

Sunny, who was walking in front of Tiffany and Taeyeon, suddenly turned her head. "Aigoo, Taeyeon! That *was* cheesy!" She started laughing. Teasing Taeyeon was fun.

"What? It wasn't cheesy!"

"Coming from you it is." Sunny continued to laugh.

"Yah! Will you cut me some slack?"

Sunny stopped walking. "Let me think about it." She put her finger on her chin. "Hm—no!"

"Yah!"

"The public display of affection is making me cringe, you know," Sunny confessed. "You might want to tone it down a bit."

Tiffany snickered at Taeyeon. "Did you hear that, Byuntae?"

Taeyeon playfully stuck out her tongue. "I'm not doing anything." She then suddenly leaned in, and stole a kiss on the lips from Tiffany.

Sunny shrieked at the sight. "Gag reflex coming on!"

Taeyeon laughed evilly. "Okay, I promise that would be the last!" She called out to Sunny who went running after Jessica and Yuri in front.

Tiffany abruptly stopped walking. She crossed her arms and put on an adorable pout. "Hmph!"

Taeyeon stopped laughing and turned to her side to look at Tiffany. "Hm?"

"Hmph."

"Hm?"

"Hmph."

"Hm?" Taeyeon adorably creased her eyebrows back at Tiffany. "Why are you giving me that look?"

"You hurt my feelings, Taeyeon." Tiffany continued to pout.

Taeyeon began to laugh again, "Oh no, what did I do?"

"You said that would be last time." Tiffany turned her head away playfully. She always liked it whenever she and Taeyeon would have moments like this.

"Aigoo." Taeyeon put her arms around Tiffany. "Of course, that's not the last time." She raised her head up to whisper into Tiffany's ear, "How could I ever resist you?" She kissed her on the cheek. "You know, you're so adorable when you're upset. It just makes me want to take you home and lock you away for myself."

Tiffany giggled, the creatures in her stomach continued to flip and turn. "So why don't you?"

"Oh, but I am." Taeyeon pulled Tiffany's hand to continue walking. "I'm taking you home right now, aren't I? It *is* my house." She laughed.

Upstairs, in the small confines of Taeyeon's bedroom that night, the five girls slept better than they had the past few days. Because, somehow, this was a start. Finally letting a bit of the truth take its rightful place in one another had relieved them some of the heavy weight this secret bore on their shoulders.

Secrets were hard to carry. And ironically, the heavier it was, the more fragile it s too. Delicate and brittle, it was imperative that utmost care was given by its keeper; otherwise it would crack, slip and break faster than one could stop it.

But what was one to do when the coast seemed clear and the storm seemed far away and the secrets were just begging to come out then? Could one risk it? Because after all, as they said, loose lips did sink ships.

XX. News

"I knew I rarely went online for a reason."

"Tell me about it."

"I mean, seriously, I can't believe—"

"Oh wait, here's another one!"

"What the—!"

Yoona laughed out loud, her hand pathetically failing to cover her mouth properly. "It's you, unni!"

"That isn't me! That picture's photoshopped!" Sooyoung leaned closer to the computer screen in front of her. She narrowed her eyes, scrutinizing over the fake body her virtual face was apparently connected to in the picture. "I look—"

Yoona clicked another picture open. "—cheap." She stopped laughing.

To be hit with a scandal was probably one of the last things the girls could think of to happen during their vacation. Being away from the limelight, they expected themselves to have blended in the background, taking a back seat from the frenzy the media was on about at the moment, which was why Sooyoung and Yoona were shockingly surprised at the nature of the articles they had suddenly come across on the internet.

Several netizens had resolved to boycott their company and its roster of artists altogether, shunning away affiliates, spreading propaganda and demanding a new order of fair and humane treatment of their celebrities.

"Stop it you two. You know you guys are just wasting your time." Hyoyeon looked over from Sooyoung's shoulder and shrugged at the pictures on the screen. She arched an eyebrow at the comments written about her picture. "—hey! I didn't do that on purpose, why do they think I did?" Hyoyeon scowled at a past incident where she had gotten the dance moves wrong.

The issues of the company and the various scandals it faced had only grown worse for the past weeks, and with the girls having been secluded from all the news lately, because of the sanctuary that was Taeyeon's home, the three girls hadn't realized how dire the situation actually was until now, finally seeing it for themselves.

Sooyoung, Hyoyeon and Yoona squeezed themselves to get a better view of the screen in front of them. They quickly and silently skimmed through an article headline about the demonstrations and rallies that persistently insisted for the compensation and termination of unreasonable contracts. It was overwhelming to say the least, the sheer force and control the public could show when it deemed necessary to take matters into its own hands.

Though their manager had dropped by their dorm two days ago to inform them of the progress of the negotiations taking place between the parties involved, the girls who stayed at the dorm remained optimistic, not fully realizing the impact and consequences the damage was about to wield their way.

The phone rang and Yoona stood up to get it, "Hello?"

"Yoona."

"Yuri-unni!" Yoona sang. She and the rest were anticipating the return of the other girls from Jeonju later this day. Sunny had called last night to inform them that they were coming home. "Where are you guys?"

"We're almost near. We just decided to stop by the grocery to stock up on supplies," Yuri answered from the other line. "Is there anything we need there?"

Yoona turned her head and shouted, "Sooyoung-unni! Is there anything you need from the grocery? Yuri-unni is asking!"

With her eyes still on the screen, "—just the usual!" Sooyoung shouted back.

"She says to get whatever you can, unni."

Yuri laughed at the other line. "Okay, see you guys later!"

"Okay, bye!" Yoona put down the receiver.

Unexpectedly, the two groups' separation from each other had helped ease and put things back to normal over the course of a few days. While one group calmed down and waited to be missed, the other felt remorse and eventually reached out.

When Jessica had called the following morning to check up on them the day after they had arrived home at their dorm, Sooyoung and Seohyun were more than ready to receive any form of communication from the others. It was a small gesture, but it was an important act of peace nonetheless. Having known each other for so long, it was hard to keep grudges.

The phone rang again. "Hello?" Yoona answered.

"Yoona?"

"Oppa!"

"Yoona, is everyone home already?"

"Nope. Why?"

"I'm dropping by in a few hours. I have something important to discuss with all of you. Make sure no one leaves. This is important and I want all of you there."

"Why? Is the—," Yoona pulled the phone away from her ear. The dial tone echoed. Their manager had sounded like he was in such a rush.

Yoona sat back in front of the computer screen, a frown on her face. She didn't like what she was seeing, the uproar of the public catching the attention of even the government. Scandal had always seemed to work both ways. Good or bad, publicity was publicity. It either helped surge one's popularity all the way to the top, or it drastically crippled one all the way down, quite literally to the brink of the career's demise. Yoona worried over the news she was seeing, her optimism sinking faster by the second. A boycott from the public couldn't go on forever, right? She shook her head.

While Sooyoung continued to look over on the internet for more news, Hyoyeon stood up and threw her hands into the air. "I don't want to read anymore, this is making me depressed!"

"Unni—"

"I'm going to cook now." Hyoyeon walked away.

Sooyoung remained silent. She continued to click away, opening and closing one website and the next, the news making her panic. If the public was determined to reject their company, then what exactly would become of them?

Yoona looked to her left. "I have a bad feeling about this," she said quietly. Sooyoung nodded, the bad feeling inside her rising too fast for her to ignore.

Suddenly, the impatient buzzing of the doorbell rang, and Sooyoung almost jumped in her seat at the sound of it. The girls only did have to ring it once, Sooyoung whined as she stood up. The repeated buzzing only made her more jumpy and feel like something important needed her complete attention.

"Yah! Stop ringing the doorbell!" Sooyoung shouted from inside.

"Open it, open it, open it!" The girls outside chanted and snickered. Jessica and Yuri were at the forefront, eager to shove away the awkwardness that had been building between them. They really did miss everyone who had left Jeonju earlier, and if friendships were going to be fixed, they knew pride and fear was definitely not going to help initiate it. Tiffany and Taeyeon stood at the back, holding hands, and the plastics of groceries, while Sunny stood behind them.

"Yah! Quit it! I'm open—," Sooyoung opened the gate, and instantly, Yuri leapt to hug her.

"Sooyoungie!"

"Yah! You're choking me!"

"Sooyoungie!" Jessica threw herself over the two. Hyoyeon and Yoona soon ran out after to welcome the others.

For a split second, the disappointment and annoyance they had raised inside themselves towards one another were forgotten, pushed to the side as the sincere smiles they exchanged buried deep the resentments that had grown. It felt like just how they were before Tiffany and Taeyeon's relationship burned bridges, with the hesitations long gone, and as if the events at Taeyeon's home were way behind them.

The hugs, the laughter, the jokes, this moment was a testament to their sisterhood, a family that was admired and envied for countless reasons. Love, what Tiffany saw the most was love, as she took a step back and looked at her family. This was home, and if she and Taeyeon could comfortably carry on with their relationship here, then things would be perfect.

As Tiffany took that step back, she held Taeyeon's hand, and looked at the girls nervously. A small smile was on her face as she waited for the others to notice the two of them standing there, their hands just waiting to be noticed. Taeyeon squeezed her hand, and in that moment, it was enough. It was enough for Tiffany to know that Taeyeon would always be by her side.

Tiffany cleared her throat. "Guys—"

Hyoyeon and Yoona turned their heads, their eyes quickly darting down to Tiffany and Taeyeon's hands. No surprise there, but were they now going to find out the truth? Sooyoung released Jessica from her hug, and as she too turned her head to look at Taeyeon, her instincts kicked in, and she rushed up towards the couple in front of her.

"Aish! These two!" Sooyoung said, not exactly knowing what she had meant by it. With her long arms, she hugged them, and quickly backed away. For some reason, this moment too made her feel scared, even if she knew what was likely going to happen next. Maybe the truth really did feel different out in the open.

Tiffany opened her mouth to speak, "Sooyoung, Hyoyeon, Yoona—," She took a small step closer to the audience in front of her, and raised her hand that held Taeyeon's. "There's something I've been meaning to say—"

"—it's just that, I've been so scared. I'm scared to know what you guys might think, if you'll judge me—us."

Upon hearing that last word, Taeyeon looked at Tiffany. Tiffany's bravery had put a big smile on her face and she felt so proud of her at that instant. The amount of courage Tiffany had gathered only made Taeyeon love her more. She hadn't expected how soon this was, for Tiffany to tell the others the moment they arrived home, but she let her anyway. This moment seemed right as any other moment could be. If Tiffany was ready, then she was too. They were in this together.

Tiffany looked back at Taeyeon. "The thing is—the truth is—," she paused, and looked again at the three girls who waited and hung on to her every word, "me and Taeyeon are really together, and I love her so much. I hope you guys won't think of us any differently." She bowed her head.

The silence that followed seemed to have lasted longer than it actually did. And it was a gruelling moment for Tiffany, standing there, waiting to receive the judgment of the girls. How would they react? It could easily have gone either way, given the nature of this relationship, but the suspicions beforehand somehow helped cushion the blow. Tiffany and Taeyeon in a romantic relationship was something the four girls—who were yet to be told—prepared themselves to accept, lest they react the way a true friend wouldn't.

It was only for a few short seconds until Hyoyeon gasped. "Omo—," she quietly let out. It was the faintest expression, but everyone heard it, and it seemed to snap everyone back into life. Yuri and Jessica walked towards Sooyoung, Hyoyeon and Yoona. They placed their hands on their backs, as if in gesture that what they had just heard was indeed real.

It was simple, really. Tiffany's confession wasn't the grandest of declarations, but it was sincere, and it was honest. All the girls felt that.

Sooyoung shut her mouth close; it had dropped open without her noticing. She didn't look away from Tiffany, and again on instinct, without really thinking, she went up to Tiffany and hugged her. Yoona and Hyeoyeon looked at each other, and quickly followed suit in Sooyoung's actions.

"Unni, why are you bowing your head?" Yoona laughed and patted Tiffany's hair.

"Yeah, it's like you're asking for our approval or something," Hyeoyeon snorted. To be honest, she did feel like a parent at that moment.

"I do want your approval—and support," Tiffany said from Sooyoung's embrace.

Hyeoyeon and Yoona joined in on Sooyoung and Tiffany's hug. Though they hadn't said much, like the words were stuck to their throats, they knew deep inside that this relationship would be accepted in this family, at least for Hyeoyeon, it would take a little while to get used to.

Sunny walked over to Taeyeon's side. "I didn't expect this."

"Me too." Taeyeon smiled, her face evident with surprise.

"I guess things are only going to get better from here."

"Hey! I want to be part of this group hug too!" Yuri exclaimed. She opened her arms to hug Yoona and Hyeoyeon's back. Jessica rolled her eyes, amused by the high energy Yuri showed. She too joined in on the group hug.

In that moment, the doorbell rang again, and Sunny turned her head in attention. Who could that be? Seohyun?

When Sunny opened the door, much to her surprise, their manager appeared on the doorstep. He looked haggard, his face unshaven and his clothes untidy. Seohyun stood behind him, her face looking obviously troubled. She brightened up immediately though, once she saw Sunny.

"Sunny-unni!"

"Seohyun!" Sunny walked past their manager to hug her. "I missed you!"

"I missed you too, unni!"

Their manager proceeded towards the house. He stopped short to count the girls who had gathered in the living room.

"Oppa! Why are you here?" Taeyeon stood up from the couch to welcome him in. The other girls stood and greeted him. From behind him, Sunny walked in with Seohyun. Sunny held a hamburger in one hand, ready to eat it. Seohyun had gone out to buy food for the girls arriving home. She had come across their manager on the way back.

"There's something very important I have to discuss." Their manager sat on one of the couches and motioned for the girls to do the same.

Yuri and Jessica hugged Seohyun dotingly as she sat between them. If only she had arrived earlier, she wouldn't have missed Tiffany's confession. Never mind, we'll tell her later, Jessica thought.

"What's wrong?" Tiffany asked.

"Is this about the boycott? I saw it on the internet this morning," Sooyoung's voice trailed.

"Boycott?" Sunny repeated. The girls who had stayed longer at Jeonju hadn't the slightest idea on what was happening. News about their company and the development on the lawsuits it faced didn't quite reach them. They were too absorbed in their vacation to have bothered.

Seohyun held Jessica and Yuri's hands. "A lot of bad things have happened, unni."

"This isn't just about the boycott, girls." Their manager rubbed his temples. "I received a call earlier this morning from the upper management." All eyes were on him. "They informed me that the government has suspended the company and all its operations until further notice."

The girls sat still, completely frozen by the news they were hearing. What?

"That means all of your contracts are considered null and void from this point on."

XXI. Sisterhood

"What?" Most of the girls cried out in unison.

"I didn't expect the situation to reach this far. But what else can I expect from a guilty verdict on one of the lawsuits filed?" Their manager clasped his hands together. "It's impossible though, for the company to completely stop operating. It would terribly ruin the delicate balance the industry has been built on."

"But oppa, our contracts are no longer?" Sooyoung tried to be coherent. Her instincts earlier didn't fool her, something bad had definitely happened.

"Yes, that's another matter I'd like to discuss. Since your contracts are now invalid, I had thought of all of your futures." He looked around at the girls. "Of course, this suspension will only last for a couple of months. Like I previously said, it's impossible for the company to be completely shut down, with all the money and tax we return, but, girls, this is also quite a major risk."

"What do you mean?" Taeyeon spoke up.

"There's no saying how easy the company can bounce back to its feet. Even if the group's doing remarkably well at the moment, I fear the public will think twice for all our artists, given the boycott that's happening right this moment." He continued, "this is a very grave matter, girls. I'm still deliberating with the other managers if there's a chance that we could sign all of you temporarily under a new company while matters are still being ironed out, but there's no guarantee in this."

Tiffany and Taeyeon looked at each other. The happiness in the air had been completely sucked dry by the gravity of the news. What was going to happen to them now?

"If I may," their manager cleared his throat, "more than just your manager, but as an elder, I'm more than willing to stand by your decisions, individually, whether you're willing to tag along with this plan. But if you choose not to, as I'm sure there are plenty of reasons against it, I'll continue to support each of your endeavours, whatever they may be." He looked at them like a father would. "Girls, I want all of you to think about this carefully. Success might not be around the corner this time around."

"To be honest, a part of me wishes that all of you would take this as a chance to walk away from this taxing industry, and have a chance at normalcy. You're all still awfully young, and this industry isn't everything." He looked at Seohyun. "Some of you may choose to concentrate on your studies instead. I guess what I'm trying to say is, just think about this well, and discuss this matter thoroughly with your respective families. I'm not pressuring any of you into doing anything. If you feel whatever you have decided is best, then it is. I can respect that," he finished.

The girls remained silent, letting the words of their manager settle in properly. How could years of hard work end up going in the drain like this? They may have accomplished a lot of things, reaped tons of awards and recognitions already, but did it have to stop there? Money wasn't the only issue here, for they've earned quite enough to live comfortably for the rest of their lives, but what about dreams? What becomes of them when they're only half-fulfilled?

At that moment of realization, of choosing what was more important in one's life, the girls were immediately divided. Their manager had left. He said he would call again in a few days to bring more news, and the girls had remained seated there, immobile, stuck, thinking for themselves which direction their life was now going to head to.

Sooyoung spoke out first. "To be completely honest, I'm having doubts—"

"With the plan—?" Yoona looked at Sooyoung. She too was leaning more towards walking away from her celebrity status. If all this was meant to happen, then it probably was.

"I mean, I've always said that whatever I have right now is enough. Maybe it's a sign."

Yuri secretly looked in disappointment at Sooyoung. She had hoped they would all remain together, but she said nothing about it, as she knew this decision needed to be made individually. They all did.

Jessica nodded to herself. "Aish, this is hard." She remembered her health. Her weight had often fluctuated through the years, and the stress had taken its toll on her in the past.

"I don't know." Yuri clicked her tongue. "I still want to stay and see what's left, if there's any that remains."

Sunny and Hyoyeon looked at Yuri. They too had never thought of quitting the industry. They had practically poured their entire lives to it.

"I don't think I'll go back to school," Hyoyeon declared. The thought of school did little to deserve her interest.

Seohyun looked at Hyoyeon. "Aw, unni, I thought you could enroll at my university!"

"Over my dead body, Seohyun."

Sunny laughed to herself. "Am I cursed or something? This is like the third time I'm transferring companies," she joked in an attempt to lighten the mood.

Meanwhile, Tiffany and Taeyeon remained silent. If there were anyone who needed to seriously think over their decision, then it would probably have been the two of them. Their relationship would undoubtedly have plenty of space to move around, if they chose not to go with it. But, at the same time, they both held plenty of talent for it to go to such a waste either. Their loyalty to the group also remained in question, if they didn't choose to stay for the sake of their relationship. What was more important then, love or career?

Tiffany looked at Taeyeon, her eyes filled with concern and uncertainty. She had thought of walking away, try taking a different path this time, but she wasn't sure. Was it the right decision if she chose that? Tiffany was ambitious, yes, and she had a lot of dreams, but she knew too where to draw the line. If circumstances had told her that she needed to pack her things, and seek something somewhere else, then she would most probably have heeded the advice. Spontaneity, after all, did help push her to end up in Korea.

Taeyeon, on the other hand, didn't know what to decide for herself. She had previously resolved to stick by whatever decision Tiffany chose, but she knew that wasn't right. Her attachment towards Tiffany was taking over, and it was exerting its power quick. Taeyeon couldn't have Tiffany pull away from her now. She loved her too much to ever let them be separated just like that.

"Unni?"

Taeyeon's stare was stuck to her feet, going over from one thought to the next. She knew she wanted to pursue on, because singing was her life, but what if Tiffany didn't want to be a singer anymore? Would that kill their relationship, because of the difference their worlds would soon grow to have once they went their separate ways? She shook her head.

"Unni?" Seohyun repeated.

Taeyeon snapped back into reality, "Hm?"

"We asked what you thought of this—"

Tiffany looked on at Taeyeon, her decision ready to change any minute. "Taeyeon?"

Taeyeon glanced at Tiffany. "Ah—well, I think—," She looked at the members. "I don't want any of you to be pulled down with the other's decision." She cleared her throat. "Don't be pressured to stay loyal to the group—I mean, individually, we can still be successful with our own activities—"

"Taeyeon—," Sooyoung reached out her hand to hold Taeyeon's arm.

Taeyeon looked at Sooyoung, "We all know that one day, we would go our separate ways. Maybe this is it, our time has come."

It was too soon, the group's end too soon and unexpected. What did this feel like? The feeling being familiar to that of someone who had just had their close friend pass away, or their dog hopelessly lost. Seohyun began to cry. She didn't want to be separated from them like this, but she respected the fact that some of them might have wanted to live a different life this time. To be an idol wasn't the easiest of jobs anyway.

Yuri hugged Seohyun close. "Seohyun."

"Unni—," Seohyun cried silently, "I'm sorry if I'm being selfish by crying like this."

Tiffany stood and hugged Seohyun. "Seohyun, you're not being selfish."

"I am."

"No, you're not." Tiffany wiped Seohyun's tears away from her face. "Stop crying." She smiled. "If this makes it any better, me and Taeyeon have happy news for you."

Seohyun looked up. "Taeyeon-unni?"

Taeyeon had walked over and knelt beside Tiffany so they now faced her. "Seohyun, guess what?"

"What?"

"Remember the night we talked in the kitchen?" Tiffany began. "I'm sorry if I snapped at you, but yes," she tried to smile brighter, "me and Taeyeon are really together."

"We're very sorry to have kept it from you this long." Taeyeon hugged Seohyun.

Seohyun looked around her, finally settling her eyes on Sooyoung, "Unni?" The news made her head spin faster. She had expected it sooner or later, but the timing right now compromised the support she wanted to show. Seohyun's mind went blank.

"They told us this morning." Sooyoung smiled a little. As much as she wanted to be happy for the couple right now, the news had just caused too much sadness for her to contain.

Tiffany continued to smile for Seohyun. "I hope our youngest will give her approval and support." She bowed her head again.

"Unni!" Seohyun wiped her tears away, and reached out to include Tiffany in their hug. "Of course you have my support." The words instantly came out. It wasn't that she didn't mean them, it was just that this moment felt like it would be one of their last, one of the last they were all together, that it was better to have shown love now than never. Seohyun began to cry harder.

It was a heartbreaking sight, with the girls beginning to hold back their own tears, and everyone hugging one another. They had yet to voice out their decisions, but somehow they already knew each other too well, that they didn't need to hear anymore the differences that were bound to come up with their respective decisions. Once priority had settled in someone, it rarely moved.

"I'm so sad," Jessica cried out, tugging on Yuri's shirt. The wet trails on her cheeks were quickly wiped dry by Yuri's fingers. "I can feel my heart breaking—"

Yuri hugged Jessica tight. "You're overly dramatic today," she joked. "It's not like we won't see each other anymore."

"But it's not the same."

"I know." Yuri continued to hug Jessica. She tried to soothe her as she too tried to keep it together. The sadness was so high and thick in the air that their cries could literally cut the grief in half. Yuri continued to cheer Jessica up. It was the only thing she could do at that moment.

They all remained in the living room, trying to swallow the reality as much as their hearts would allow. If someone had been playing a joke on them, they wished that it ended now, this cruel joke that was far from being funny, because in reality, it was heartbreaking. They never expected for things to turn out this ugly.

Taeyeon stood and gathered her members in the kitchen. It took all of her power to push away the sadness that threatened to consume her whole any minute. She needed time, and she didn't want to spend the few that remained like this, drowning in tears. Taeyeon tried to cheer her members, and the girls had been sensitive enough to notice her efforts to lighten the mood, and so they pulled themselves up. This day would be solely spent in each other's company.

After a comforting lunch because of the fast food Seohyun bought, they were slightly in better spirits, although it was impossible to completely be. They were careful to speak of the news, not wanting to cause more tears to spill, and they tried their best to let the day end on a happy note. After all, their reunion together did heal some of the negative feelings they had towards one another, but looking back

on it now, after receiving news dreadful enough for even a fan to cry buckets, the dispute that threatened to get in between their friendship seemed in fact, quite small and trivial to say the least.

Night-time fell, and the girls had gathered in the living room, pulling their pillows and blankets behind them. They wanted to spend more time together, to make as much memories while they could. Since there wasn't a bedroom big enough to fit all of them, they had resolved to sleep outside instead.

It was a chilly evening, winter cold and frigid outside the foggy windows. How quickly time had passed by, when it felt just like yesterday when they had first moved inside their house.

"Sooyoungie! You're getting crumbs all over your blanket!" Hyoyeon suddenly pointed out. How she hated doing Sooyoung's laundry for her. It was a rare occasion, but she hated it nonetheless.

Sooyoung looked down. "Oh, oops." Crumbs of chips stuck on the corner of her lips.

The other girls laughed at Sooyoung. They felt slightly better, and as insignificant as the slight improvement may have been, the company they surrounded themselves with comforted and soothed their pain nonetheless. Tomorrow would be different, and they all knew it, but at least for the night, their hearts would be filled with nothing but the talk of love, friendship, and their memories of one another.

Tiffany and Taeyeon huddled together, lying flat on their stomachs. The girls were at odd positions, their beds in close arrangements. They stayed around the couple, all the while tossing food around to annoy Hyoyeon and her compulsive behavior of cleaning.

"You guys are so dead!" Hyoyeon stood up and tackled Sunny on her mattress.

"Ow! You're so heavy!" Sunny shrieked from under Hyoyeon's bottom. More laughter ensued.

The girls had planned to stay up all night, but sleep eventually made its way towards their tired bodies. The emotional turmoil they had gone through for the day undoubtedly wore them out. Taeyeon was the last to close her eyes for the night as she wanted to watch over the members. She sat up on her mattress, looking around at the eight girls who had fallen asleep, these eight girls whom she was entrusted to take care of. Was this really the end?

Taeyeon stood up, tip toeing around to fix their blankets. She didn't want them to catch a cold. She smiled to herself as she passed each of them, her mind flooding with happy memories.

Taeyeon reminisced by herself, looking back on the times where she felt she had failed as their leader. She felt ashamed when she particularly thought of how she had acted wrong towards her members, for choosing Tiffany over them. But, at the same time, she knew herself too well to question her decisions, if they were what she really wanted—to be with Tiffany always and to fully commit to their relationship. It hasn't been easy, but they made it this far. Taeyeon couldn't begin to imagine what tomorrow would be like for her or for anyone.

When she had gone back to her place beside Tiffany, the sad feeling building inside her chest all day had almost lost control. The dam broke and pools of sorrow escaped her eyes. She blinked to hide her tears away, even if it was dark and no one could have seen it. Everything felt like a dream, with Tiffany, with the others who were like close sisters, and she was more than grateful to have been blessed with it.

If Taeyeon cried for sadness, then it probably would have been the loud kind of crying, the wailing of one's sorrow, but she cried quietly instead, the kind that left one short of tears from falling, because they didn't know exactly why they were in the first place. She was sad, yes, but she had faith that the sisterhood they shared as a whole was unbreakable. It was a bond that would last a lifetime.

Taeyeon scooted closer towards Tiffany. It was close around to three in the morning. Dawn would be upon them soon.

A hand reached out, and Taeyeon turned her head to see Tiffany looking up at her. Tiffany rubbed the sleepiness away from her eyes. "Taeyeon?"

"Fany." Taeyeon leaned in, and kissed Tiffany on the lips. "Go back to sleep."

"Why are you still awake? Are you okay?" Tiffany moved closer to Taeyeon, wrapping her arms around Taeyeon's waist.

"It's nothing. Go back to sleep," Taeyeon cooed.

"You sleep too," Tiffany groggily replied. Her eyes dropped close.

Taeyeon smiled as she watched Tiffany fall back to sleep. "I love you, Fany," she whispered.

"I loff," Tiffany mumbled, "you too"

Taeyeon settled herself beside Tiffany. She faced her and rested her hand gently on Tiffany's cheek. The sound of Tiffany's even breathing registered in her ears, and as she brushed a hair strand away, she suddenly remembered that night in the garden, the time she had first told Tiffany she loved her.

Taeyeon looked back to that evening, recalling the feelings that erupted in her to be so close with Tiffany like that, and to finally be together. If she hadn't said those words, would they even be here right now?

She looked at Tiffany tenderly, and in the same way she did back then, she tried to take in everything there was in the moment, Tiffany's breathing, how serene she looked asleep, her long lashes and the shape of her lips, the way her chest steadily rose and fell, how close they were to one another, even the presence of the members around them, Taeyeon took it all in, cementing them firmly in place in her memories because she knew, Taeyeon knew deep inside her, this was one of those evenings that she would want to look back on for the rest of her life.

"I love you."

XXII. Running

Do you know that feeling? That time's passing by too quickly for us to enjoy it? That somehow it's telling us it's running out so let's hurry and run, and make the most out of it, but strangely we can't? That cruelly, it's slipping through our eager fingers, without solid shape for us to firmly grasp, and all we can do is blame ourselves for losing it? For being unable to cope with it?

Would it be fault and flaw, if and when, our differences come to prove just how changed we are now? That when I stand to call, to look back, and pore over the choices we've made, would it kill us to know, to admit, that we weren't always with each other to begin with? That I needed some space and room to keep myself from falling completely way over my head? From falling irrationally?

As time passes, it's showing its face to be as something hopeless, bleak and unforgiving. Yet, why am I still here? How can we still be here? This cold and dragging lull of everything that wants us to be apart, pushing us to be together only to be pulled apart, is getting to me, and I'm scared.

But then again, how could I expect myself to love you and still be the same person?

XXIII. Decisions

i.

"Yes, your father told me about it this morning. He heard about it on the news."

"Yeah—what do you think?"

"Well, to be honest, I'm shocked."

"You're not the only one, umma."

"I don't know what you should do. Only you can decide what's best."

"Mm."

"Whatever you decide, you know we're still going to support you no matter what, your father and I."

"Yeah."

"This has always been your dream, right? Don't let this ruin it, this is just a small bump on the road."

ii.

"What took you so long? I've been waiting all day for you to call!"

"Umma, I'm sorry, I did a lot of things."

"Your sister's been worried. She said you haven't called her either."

"Is she home?"

"No, she just left."

"Ah."

"Have you decided?"

"No—"

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing—? It's just that, there's something holding me back—"

"If you're tired, all you have to do is say so."

"I'm not completely."

"Aish, you know very well that I'm proud of you. You've come so far."

iii.

"Does this mean you can go back to school?"

"Umma, we talked about this already."

"I know, I know—I'm just making sure."

"Umma."

"You really don't want to go back to school?"

"No."

"I really can't convince you, huh?"

"Umma, I really want to stay."

"Mm."

"If it doesn't work out, then oh well—?"

"What are you talking about? Of course it's going to work out! You didn't train for years for nothing!"

iv.

"Are you sure that's what you really want?"
"Why?"
"Well, I don't want you to feel like you worked so hard for nothing."
"I know—"
"And a lot of people are working hard to get where you are now."
"I know—"
"Just think about it again, okay? Call us back when you have."
"Umma."
"Yes?"
"It's okay, right? If I don't?"
"Of course sweetheart, you know we're happy if you are."
"Mm."
"I'm very proud of you."

v.

"How are they holding up?"
"We're doing okay."
"You don't sound like you are."
"Umma—"
"Don't worry so much."
"What should I do?"
"Well, what do you feel like doing?"
"I'm not sure."
"When have you ever been unsure? Whatever you end up choosing, I know you'll be successful."
"Umma—"
"You don't believe me?"

vi.

"Give yourself some more time to think about it."
"But, umma, I'm already sure."
"You're still in school. Maybe you should focus on one thing at a time."
"Don't worry, umma. I can manage my time."
"I'm worried."
"Umma, I can handle myself well. Please don't worry so much."
"Alright then. I might visit tomorrow to see how you girls are doing."

vii.

"I want you to come home."
"Mm."
"Are you allowed to?"
"Yeah, I can—"
"You sound tired. Have you been sleeping enough?"
"Yeah, I guess I'm just tired, that's all."

"You're always tired."

"Mm."

"I always worry for you—especially your health."

"I'm doing okay."

"Yes, but you don't look okay."

"I'm just fit."

"Think of your health first, it's all you'll have once you grow old like me."

viii.

"Yes, your manager called last night. He informed me about it."

"Well?"

"I don't like it."

"What?"

"The plan he has. I want you to go back to school instead."

"What?"

"Yes, you heard me. School. Here."

"But—!"

"You know I'm not the type to risk. Not again."

"But I can't! I don't—"

"You're going back to school, whether you like it or not."

"Don't I have a say in this?"

"You know you can't change my mind."

ix.

"Your father said you should pay us a visit."

"I can't yet. Maybe next week."

"Are you alright?"

"Yeah, I'm okay."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm not sure."

"Have you talked to the girls? Have they decided?"

"No, we haven't talked about it yet."

"Ah."

"I'm just sad."

"Why?"

"Because I have a feeling we're not going to be complete anymore."

XXIV. Differences

"I-I've decided to quit."

"Me too."

If there was one thing that prevented the sudden outbursts of disappointment in the differences of the girls' decisions, it was respect, which would help explain why the girls were unusually comfortable and controlled in the silence like this, when they so badly wanted to question, even berate, one another at the moment. They had gathered in the living room to discuss with one another their respective decisions. Decisions that were impossibly hard to defend, let alone stick with. It was the following night after their manager had brought them the dreadful news.

"Unni." Seohyun stood up to hug Yoona. She buried her teary face on Yoona's shoulder.

"Sica," Yuri mumbled.

Yoona and Jessica had been the first to break the ice, in fear that they would succumb to the pressure, in case they wouldn't be able to resist the hope that showed on some of the members' faces. They had to say it, and they said it before they could change their minds. When they had previously talked with their respective families about the matter at hand, one common issue came out. Their health.

Yoona, herself, wondered how she was able to manage her busy schedules before. Even if her body might have gotten used to it, to the stress and extreme bouts of exhaustion, she didn't want to push herself until her health permanently gave in. Her family had said the same thing too, which was why they had asked her to walk away from the industry already. They knew for a fact that it wouldn't be worth it, if their daughter worked herself to death just for success.

On the same note, Jessica's family also had an issue with her well being. She had drastically lost weight whenever the group's promotions clashed with her solo activities, and her family remained in a constant worry over this. Jessica hated stress herself, because not only did it affect her mood, but it weighed her down mentally as well. Her family had resolved that they return to their home in the States, a new clean slate for Jessica should she agree to go back to school. With Tiffany.

Apparently, Tiffany's father had contacted Jessica's family to tell them that he was unsure of whether he should let Tiffany pursue on with her career. Things didn't look as stable as they had before, not when the girls' entertainment company still carried its notorious reputation of overworking its talents. They were lucky to have had success come and bless their children already, but one couldn't push luck as much as they'd like. The parents talked, deliberated, and unanimously, school had turn out to be the more important and safer option for them. Education did help ensure one of a secure future after all.

Tiffany looked at Taeyeon then, the firm words of her father repeating in her mind. "He wants me to go back to the States—"

"What?"

"He said I should continue with my studies."

"But—"

Tiffany hugged Taeyeon tight. She didn't know how to handle this new predicament their relationship had stumbled on. "Taeyeon," she breathed in Taeyeon's ear, "what are we going to do?"

Taeyeon looked at Tiffany, speechless.

"I'm thinking of going back to school too," Sooyoung suddenly said from her seat. The girls all looked at her.

If Sooyoung had been given the option not to decide for herself, she would have taken it in an instant. But, sadly, no one could, and her mother's words had made plenty of sense, that this life could be lived in plenty of other ways. It wasn't just about all the fame and money.

Yoona continued to look at Sooyoung, surprised at the decision she had chose. She expected Sooyoung to pursue on. "Unni? You're going back to school?"

"Yeah, I like school."

Sunny laughed a little, not sure whether Sooyoung had been sarcastic. "You don't even study."

"Yah! I do!" Sooyoung playfully defended herself. Her eyes lingered on Sunny for a moment, as if trying to apologize when she saw how her decision had made Sunny upset.

"Well—I don't like school—so yeah," Hyoyeon remarked into the air. What she felt was beyond sadness, to hear of the members not wanting to pursue on. Her career was something she couldn't walk away from, not only because did she enjoy it, but dancing was life, and up on stage, she could be in her own world.

Seohyun sat back down beside Hyoyeon. "I decided to stay too." She looked blankly down at the floor.

Seohyun's mother was initially hesitant in letting Seohyun continue with her career, but she trusted their manager enough to believe that he knew what he was doing. He had been there already when the girls were still young and starting out, and through the years, the girls' parents had seen how much he genuinely cared for the girls. It wasn't just about all the money he could have made from them.

Yuri and Sunny shortly agreed soon after to what Seohyun had said, that they were staying. They wanted to keep going, to see where the wheel would stop spinning completely. It didn't seem much of a risk to them, just as long as they were happy with what they were doing. To risk time and effort for another shot at success seemed petty if they couldn't imagine themselves doing anything else anyway.

The girls all turned their attention eventually towards Taeyeon. She was the only one who hadn't voiced out her plans. They looked at her, holding onto Tiffany like that, and tried to make a silent guess. How could she stay with Tiffany if Tiffany was moving back to the States?

"I—," Taeyeon cleared her throat, "I'm not sure yet with my decision," she blurted out. Taeyeon looked at Tiffany, alarmed if she was saying the right thing. "I want to continue singing," she continued. Her voice was so low it was barely enough for everyone in the room to hear.

Taeyeon had always thought of Tiffany first, put her first in her decisions, but this decision didn't involve Tiffany anymore, at least not entirely. Though she too had built her world around Tiffany and their relationship, Taeyeon honestly couldn't see herself following Tiffany's path in the States. What would be her place there?

"But I don't think I can—," Taeyeon finished. She securely held Tiffany's hand with both of hers.

Tiffany looked at Taeyeon, aware of how much their relationship was pulling Taeyeon back. "Taeyeon, you should continue on."

"I don't—"

"Your singing is way too beautiful for you to quit just like that."

"Fany." Taeyeon stared right back at Tiffany. Somehow, she understood how hard this was for her, for Tiffany to push her on. "I don't want to leave you."

"You won't." Tiffany leaned in closer. "I won't. We'll still be together."

"But how?"

"Trust me." Tiffany tried to hold back her tears.

It wasn't final. Their decisions weren't final as they continued to second guess every reason they had that led to it. If only they could look into the future and see what lay in wait for them, then this decision would have been easier to make. Although much of the final say was theirs, the girls couldn't deny the importance of the advices of their own families, their families who had been so supportive through the years, that when the girls felt unsure of themselves, they always relied on them to know what was best. Family did know best, although it may not always be obvious.

Seohyun couldn't keep her tears from spilling. "Unni." She looked at Sooyoung and Jessica. They haven't even left, but she missed them already.

"Don't cry." Jessica soothed Seohyun's hair. She was starting to doubt her own decision. Could she leave the others behind like this?

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't be crying like this." Seohyun wiped her tears away. "Unni, take care of yourself, okay?" She knew she wouldn't be able to stomach it, if she caused the others who had chosen to leave to stay instead because of the pressure that was coming from her actions.

Yuri stood to sit beside Jessica, resting her head on Jessica's shoulder. "And I said it's not like we wouldn't see each other anymore—"

"Well, it's not like I'm dying, silly."

Yuri placed her arm inside Jessica's. "But you'll be so far away."

"I know," Jessica heavily answered.

Taeyeon spoke out again. "I don't want to sing anymore—"

"Don't be like this," Tiffany shook her head, "don't let me, us, stop you."

"But," Taeyeon stammered.

"I'm not leaving you," Tiffany assured Taeyeon. She was just as determined to stay in this relationship.

The night seemed to have somehow continued on, with the gravity of their separation looming closer. They didn't say much for the rest of the evening, not speaking unless it was absolutely necessary, because they were afraid. They were afraid to show that they weren't supportive of one another, even if they stood at different extremities.

Their differences weren't shocking, they were only surprising to say the least. The girls were too different in their personalities and in their goals, that sooner or later, their separation was bound to come up eventually anyway. Only it was very unfortunate how that fateful time had to come now, when it felt too soon, goodbye too sudden.

Tiffany and Taeyeon's relationship had also just been given a new turn, with their confession to the other members who hadn't known about them yet until yesterday. So why did this have to happen now? When things had just turned for the better?

It was difficult, and the girls each had a hard time putting on a brave accepting face. It wasn't that they wanted to blame or to make the other feel guilty about their decision, they were just really too affected by everything that had happened so far.

Hyoyeon hugged Yoona. "You should take a vacation first."

"I should?" Yoona asked reluctantly. Her decision caused her to sink low in her seat, thinking of how hurting the others like this was the last thing she wanted, but how she could even begin to explain this to them, she didn't know.

"Of course! Have fun before school kills you." Hyoyeon joked lightly.

Was this really the end? It almost felt like it, although the girls knew that this wasn't literally the end of them. Unspoken as it was, they knew things would be different once they all went their separate ways, taking their own paths, this sudden change taking some time to get used to. How exactly does one get used to the absence of someone they dearly loved?

"You should go for it," Tiffany continued to push Taeyeon on. She knew that this was the best option for her.

Taeyeon hesitated. "I don't know." She didn't doubt her talent, but what about Tiffany?

"Are you kidding me? You were born to sing."

"But—"

"And not only that, you dance well too. Plus, you're really pretty." Tiffany tried to lighten the mood. Her tears were already threatening to fall, but she held on.

Taeyeon stuck her tongue out. "Look who's talking."

"Taeyeon, listen to me. This is really the best option for you," Tiffany said as seriously as she could. She remembered her conversation with Taeyeon's mother, and how much pride she had in Taeyeon's achievements, "you'll regret it if you don't. We both know that."

"But what about you?" Taeyeon looked at Tiffany intently. What about Tiffany?

"I'll talk to him about it. Things aren't sure yet anyway—I still have a say in this."

Taeyeon sighed. She knew that once the head of the family had already decided, there was no questioning it. "What if I go with you?"

"Taeyeon."

Taeyeon fell silent again, this time in discernment if she could be brave enough to stand by her decision. "I don't want you to go."

"I'm not leaving, okay?" Tiffany tightly held onto Taeyeon's hands. "I'm not leaving us. I love you so much."

"I love you too." Taeyeon hugged Tiffany tight, her fear of being separated from Tiffany coming full force.

If there were such a thing as stopping time, Taeyeon would have stopped it now. All her moments, of being with Tiffany and of being in love, had only seemed to last to cruelly reach this point, the point of their relationship's end. Why did it feel like that everything was against them?

The small voices inside Taeyeon's head had suddenly stirred awake, bringing reality along, and sizing her up. It scrutinized the little sensibility she had left since she first took that big leap of faith with Tiffany, that step she never regretted taking. When would things stop tearing them apart like this? Taeyeon couldn't give in, not when she harboured so much hope that she and Tiffany still had a chance at forever.

Forever. The words love and forever always seemed to have gone together in the same sentence, in the same train of thought, and in the same sphere of time.

But only a fool knew that, believed in such a thing, and what a fool Taeyeon was.

XXV. Visitor

Truly, it was disheartening to note that nearly half of the girls' decisions were made up of their families' opinions. Even if they had somewhat already made up their minds, it was still a little sad to see their disbandment really happening in front of them. Their decisions were never really a private affair to begin with, and having grown from a close-knit family herself, Taeyeon particularly knew that questioning their families' intentions for them wasn't an option, especially Tiffany's.

Tiffany's family was probably the most protective of her out of the lot, and it just happened to be ironic that it was she who lived the farthest from them, despite the security her family wanted her to always have.

Taeyeon bent her head down in defeat on the kitchen table. From her side she could see the skyline just about to break, the silent dawn fading into morning. A week had passed since the girls discussed their respective decisions altogether.

If there were such a way as to bargain for the security of relationships, then keeping these said relationships intact would have been probably a lot easier to do. Distance wouldn't really drift the girls apart, but then again, it wouldn't hurt to make sure it didn't either.

There was Sooyoung who planned on going abroad to study English, Yoona and Jessica who longed for a lengthy vacation first before anything else, Hyoyeon and her dreams of performing on and offstage, Sunny and Yuri who wanted to be well-rounded artists, and finally Seohyun with her diplomatic goals. The girls clearly had their own dreams and personal paths in front of them. It seemed that the only question now was which direction Tiffany and Taeyeon were going to take.

The early morning sun was absent from the sky, and the winter mist outside caused the entire house to feel colder than it actually was. Taeyeon sat alone on the kitchen, with her warm blankets around her, thinking what it was she was going to do, now that the situation with Tiffany has only gotten worse. She hadn't been sleeping well at all since Tiffany had first told her.

When Tiffany confessed that her father had wished for her to go back to the States and study instead, Taeyeon couldn't help but feel that this was the small opening to the end of their relationship. Not that she was being entirely pessimistic however, because for her, it was better to stay grounded in reality such as this than to be in complete denial that they never really had a chance.

It was sad, no, depressing, to even think that Taeyeon and Tiffany started this relationship with thoughts of its end running not far behind them. But they both did, and that was the truth. They tried their best to deal with it, to make this almost impossible situation bearable by sneaking off, finding chances and risking exposure when they couldn't stand hiding anymore. But the situation had changed and turned its back on them again.

Probably, that was one of the things that Taeyeon had always wondered about, how they could sneak off by themselves and never get caught by anyone, as if fate were watching over them, and giving opportunities that they were both only more than happy to seize with their bare hands.

Taeyeon lifted her head up. She looked around the still house, stopping to look blankly outside the foggy windows. She pulled her blanket closer to her body, covering every cranny and nook she could find to escape the morning coldness.

The past few days had been undeniably hard on her and Tiffany, with all the excess strain coming from their uncertainty and indecision only building more trouble between them. Today was another day, another granted day for her and Tiffany to be grateful for, but something wrong was bound to ruin it again she was sure. Taeyeon knew this all too well by now.

Admittedly, it hasn't been the smoothest and happiest days of their relationship. And to think that they could possibly be separated in a few months, or even weeks, only made it more nonsensical that their fighting had to frequent now out of all times. If this was a sign of urgency, a hint of the separation

anxiety that they both secretly grew to have, then it was obvious—Tiffany and Taeyeon were only both too scared to have this relationship abruptly end. But who could blame them?

They started to fight over the most trivial things, small matters that only implicitly hid, and stemmed from, the real cause of their fights, which was the vague direction their relationship was blindly heading for.

Why did she say this, why didn't she say that, why weren't they together this moment, why was she happy and why was she sad, what could she do, what couldn't she do, all these were just some of the questions that boiled over them from the lack of a steady control over their emotions.

And so, this morning when Taeyeon woke up, she felt herself growing weary, not from her relationship with Tiffany, though that would be possible, but from herself, that maybe she was becoming a little too clingy and needy for her own good. She hated to admit that.

Where did this kind of vulnerability come from? An hour wouldn't have even come to pass, and yet Taeyeon would find herself losing control of her emotions when she wasn't with Tiffany. Always wanting to know what Tiffany was thinking or what she was feeling, how she was doing or was there something she could do for her, Taeyeon worried over these things a little too much, or even unnecessarily. Simply put, for Taeyeon, nothing seemed, no, nothing felt right when they weren't together. This was plainly something Taeyeon hadn't prepared herself for. Falling deeper than she initially wanted to.

Taeyeon still couldn't believe how much Tiffany wanted her to continue on, to go with their manager's plan and pursue her career. But she couldn't blame her too for wanting that because one, it was the decision that quietly, but persistently, nagged at the back of her mind, and two, she would have said the same for Tiffany, only that her father's decision strongly opposed it. Taeyeon only wanted what was best for Tiffany, and Tiffany for Taeyeon, but this problem obviously wouldn't permit a fair compromise, if there even was one.

"Hey." A soft voice spoke out from behind her. Taeyeon turned her head and quickly stood up to greet the voice.

"Morning." Taeyeon smiled crookedly. She hugged a pale looking Tiffany a good morning.

"You're up early again." Tiffany held Taeyeon's hand and walked forward to the kitchen table. Her face looked bloated and her eyes appeared smaller than they normally were. She looked like she had been crying the entire night, only she didn't for all Taeyeon knew. Taeyeon sat in front of her, her eyes never straying from Tiffany's face. She quietly continued to look at Tiffany, smiling a little every now and then, while she played with her hand from across the table.

"Taeyeon."

"Hmm?"

"Are you still mad at me?" Tiffany hesitantly asked. She looked at their intertwined fingers. The cold surface of the table was a stark contrast to the warmth coming from Taeyeon's hand. Tiffany held on tighter.

Taeyeon sighed. She didn't want to talk about this now, not in the early morning, "No, of course not." She shook her head. "Why would I be?"

Tiffany bit her lip. As much as she wanted to avoid this topic herself, she couldn't have Taeyeon not listen to her. "I hope you really aren't—"

"I'm not." Taeyeon smiled brighter for Tiffany. The sun's rays suddenly emerged from behind the white curtains of the kitchen windows, shedding light to Tiffany's side of the room. Tiffany's eyes took on a lighter color with the light, a sight too angelically beautiful that Taeyeon couldn't have missed it. Taeyeon felt another wrenching ache come from inside her chest. How could she let Tiffany go just like that?

Unfortunately, last night's fight had only turned to an awful confrontation between the two. It had started when they were both silent, caught up in their own thoughts, when Taeyeon blurted out of nowhere she didn't want to sing anymore. A small lie it was, coming from her, knowing singing was her

life. But Taeyeon only wanted to know how much of Tiffany would stop or support her. It killed her to be unsure of Tiffany's stand in their relationship, no matter the assurances the latter was giving.

Minutes passed and Tiffany still hadn't said a word. She really didn't know what to say. How could that have been easy for her? For Tiffany to convince Taeyeon that she wasn't worth choosing over her career when she, herself, selfishly refused to believe that? Taeyeon had taken the silence the wrong way, that when she resolved to use the same silent treatment coming from Tiffany, Tiffany snapped from her unresponsiveness when Tiffany hugged her. They both snapped from the cold facade they only put up for the other to break down. It was a sad case of miscommunication.

But never mind if what Taeyeon was doing was going to destroy herself. She really couldn't let herself be separated from Tiffany like this. Even if she had to move out and live with her in the States, she would have, given the chance. But was it really a choice? Why didn't it feel like it?

Taeyeon knew, of course, that it would have been too much to ask Tiffany to stay, even if her migration wasn't sure yet. It didn't help too that the members voiced out their strong support for her to pursue on with her career. What a tight situation this really was.

"I love you," Tiffany mouthed the words for Taeyeon to read.

"I love you too," Taeyeon responded back, her hold on Tiffany's hand growing tighter. "I don't want to fight anymore."

"I don't want to fight too." Tiffany stood up and sat on Taeyeon's lap. She cupped Taeyeon's face and kissed her. The morning atmosphere felt warmer, less frigid and dreary, now that they were determined to get through this problem together.

Tiffany looked straight into Taeyeon's eyes; she had to say it, "I want you to be happy, and I know, we both know, that you pursuing on will—don't worry about us. I'm always going to be here."

"But—"

"No buts," Tiffany hushed Taeyeon. "We'll get through this."

Taeyeon held Tiffany's stare, she couldn't silence the small voice that nagged at the back of her mind, that singing made her happy, but what about Tiffany? "Okay," she agreed. She hugged Tiffany tight, burrying herself and her fears in Tiffany's arms. Could they make Tiffany's father change his mind about Tiffany's future?

Sadly for Taeyeon, the thoughts stayed no matter how hard she fought them. And as selfish and selfless as those thoughts were, her mind remained trapped in a confusing pendulum between what was right and what was wrong, swinging back and forth. Taeyeon had never felt so vulnerable in her entire life, thinking what would become of her when Tiffany leaves. Breaking down had never been so easy.

But in this situation—what was right? She really did want what was best for Tiffany, even if that want deeply hurt her. Tiffany studying abroad wasn't exactly an unreasonable decision, so what was wrong? Was it the question of what would become of them? Or where exactly would each other's place be? Taeyeon had no answers for any of this. All she had was an idea, a painful idea that she kept to herself.

The week that followed was anticipated by the sudden arrival of Tiffany's father from the States. He had already planned to visit Tiffany, even before news of her career's future reached him. Tiffany's father had seen the horrendous pictures on the internet, pictures that terribly degraded his daughter's dignity and self-respect. How could any parent react positively to such a thing? It was out of line, and the pictures outraged him, slapped sense into him on how much Tiffany opened herself to the public only to be criticized. He wanted her home, away from this all too judging and pretentious industry.

"Daddy!" Tiffany ran to the door as soon as she heard the doorbell ring. Taeyeon and the other girls stood up and followed Tiffany outside.

"Stephanie!" Taeyeon's father happily bellowed once he saw Tiffany. "Ah! Look at you!"

Tiffany hugged her father tight. It had been months since they last saw each other. "How was your flight?"

Tiffany's father chuckled. "Could be worse." He walked inside and dropped his luggage on the wooden floor. He looked over from Tiffany's shoulder to greet the other girls who appeared in sight.

"Appa!"

"Ah! Jessica! Sooyoung!" Tiffany's father hugged the two girls in front. He smiled at the rest of the girls behind them, saying all of their names, and gathering them in a fatherly hug. Taeyeon felt herself shrinking suddenly in the presence of Tiffany's father. How could she ask him to reconsider?

"Appa! You must be tired. We're just about to have lunch." Sooyoung pulled out a seat for Tiffany's father to sit on. They had moved to the kitchen and Hyoyeon and Sunny continued to busy themselves over the stove.

"I thought you weren't arriving until next week." Tiffany set a glass of water down in front of her father. Taeyeon stood close by.

"There was an opening so I booked it." Tiffany's father rubbed his cold hands together and chuckled, "Why? Don't you miss your old man?" The girls laughed a little, some out of nervousness because they knew what this visit meant to Taeyeon. Taeyeon tried her best to relax.

"No, no. It's not that!" Tiffany playfully nudged her father's shoulder. "I was just unprepared. That's all." She stole a quick glance at Taeyeon beside her.

Tiffany's father looked around and studied the dorm. It looked surprisingly clean for a group of young ladies. He proceeded to look at Tiffany, "Stephanie, look at you." He held Tiffany by the arm and raised it. "You've grown so thin. Look!" He poked his daughter on the stomach.

Embarrassed, "I'm fine." Tiffany frowned.

"And those circles under your eyes—"

Tiffany looked away and turned to the counter-top across the table. "You're making me self-conscious!" He chuckled again.

"Appa, how long are you staying for?" Jessica asked from behind him. Yuri, Yoona and Seohyun took their respective seats around the dining table.

"Not long actually." Tiffany's father looked at Jessica, his hand rubbing his stubbly chin. "I came here to fetch the both of you."

"Huh?"

"I took the liberty to arrange our flights already. I talked to your father a few days ago and I insisted that you were more than welcome to come with us."

"What—"

The girls looked around at each other, ignoring the pleasant look that was on Tiffany's father's face. They didn't think that he had come to see Tiffany only to go back home with him.

"We leave next week."

"What?"

Tiffany's father looked at Tiffany with a surprised look on his face. He didn't think his daughter would react like this. They had talked about this plenty of times on the phone already. "You heard me," he repeated. "Next week. Why?"

"That's too soon!"

"And?"

"But—"

"Stephanie, I want you to come home. You've stayed here for too long."

"But—"

"I've already arranged your school papers."

"What—"

"They said they could schedule your interview as early as next month."

"Wait—"

"Jessica, you can call your mother about this. We arranged your papers together," Tiffany's father turned to Jessica, "you'll love it there. It's not too far from home too."

"Ah—uhm—yes." Jessica nodded slowly, surprised too by this sudden news. She knew she was going back to school but this early? And they were leaving next week already?

"Stephanie." Tiffany's father stood up from his seat. "I want you to come home." He hugged his daughter. "It's time for you to focus on other things." He ignored the baffled look on his daughter's face. "I talked with your manager already and he wished you the best of luck."

"But I—"

The clock ticked noon and her father walked towards his luggage by the door. He quickly waved goodbye, in a hurry to confirm his stay at a nearby hotel. The girls weakly waved back, not sure if Tiffany and Jessica were taking the news well. And Taeyeon, what about Taeyeon?

Tiffany looked at Taeyeon who stood frozen by the kitchen table. "Taeyeon—?" She swore she could see Taeyeon's eyes begin to water.

Taeyeon looked at Tiffany with a small brave smile on her face, but the hurt obvious in her eyes, "Guess it's time to pack your things." was the only thing she managed to say.

XXVI. Promise

When the fear suddenly materializes, becomes real and tangible, it somehow erases all thought, all feeling, and all control with it. Taeyeon felt dead, but her eyes stung without warning, helplessly heavy and ready to pour out tears when she turned to look at something else. She couldn't bear to look at Tiffany and show how affected she was, how unsupportive she seemed to be. Taeyeon bit her lip furiously, trying to stop her tears from coming out. She heard the members gather and walk towards her. They had seen how painful this was for her to not cry.

Tiffany reached Taeyeon first and she hugged her immediately. She tried to stop her own tears from falling, trying to be the stronger person between them this time. This wasn't the moment to show how scared she was too, for it would only discourage Taeyeon even further. What Taeyeon needed was reassurance, security and confidence that their relationship would remain strong as ever. Tiffany struggled to give all these in the best way she could.

"Taeyeon—"

Taeyeon remained silent, frozen in place as her mind tried to reel in some thought, any thought at all.

"Taeyeon—" Tiffany hugged Taeyeon tighter. She needed Taeyeon to respond, to say anything before she crumbled down herself.

"I—," Taeyeon's arms hung lifelessly by her sides, "I—," she managed. A tear fell on her cheek, and just like that she broke down.

The girls who had already gathered around them looked at each other worryingly. It hurt their hearts too, to see Taeyeon crying like this. Jessica walked away, pulling Yuri's hand along with her. This was a private moment for the couple and so the girls followed them walk away from the kitchen.

Tiffany and Taeyeon stood there, holding each other while one cried on the other's shoulder. It wasn't the end of their relationship, but why did it feel like it was? That distance would put the nail in the coffin?

Taeyeon wiped her tears away and kissed Tiffany. She didn't stop until she ran out of breath.

The urgency and intensity that was coming from Taeyeon's kisses momentarily put Tiffany in a daze. She had been scrambling to find some way out of her father's intentions, digging for any excuse strong enough that would allow her to stay. Though she knew that there was no changing her father's mind, now with the arrangements already settled, she refused to admit that it was a lost cause. The least she could do was to try and fight for this relationship, even if it wasn't directly out in the open, otherwise and it wasn't an option for Tiffany.

Tiffany telling her father about her relationship with Taeyeon was the last thing she would ever do, and still she probably would never tell him even with the chance, lest she draw judgment from her own family.

Taeyeon felt numb. Her heart pounded furiously and her hands trembled. Her nerves went haywire, causing her to shake and fumble as she tried to stand up straight. If Tiffany hadn't been holding her, then she would have probably dropped to her knees, in pain and shock. How could Tiffany leave so soon?

"Taeyeon." Tiffany brought her face so close to Taeyeon's, that breath and air was the only thing between them. "Please—say anything."

Taeyeon cleared her throat. "I—," her voice cracking, "I can't believe you're leaving." She looked down at her feet, feeling herself grow smaller and smaller. "What about us?"

"Taeyeon."

"I know it would be selfish of me to ask you to stay."

Tiffany looked on.

"—and I know I can't ask your father to reconsider anymore. You heard him—I can't even face him without calming down." Tiffany remained silent, feeling twice the hurt because she knew she was the cause of this pain.

"I just wish that time would stop. Just once. I mean, next week already? Wow."

Few minutes passed and Taeyeon tried to pull it together. She looked up at Tiffany, setting aside fear and doubt, "I'll wait for you," she decided.

"Taeyeon."

Taeyeon laughed a little to herself. "Look at me—crying like this like a little baby." She wiped her tears away with the back of her hand.

Tiffany continued to watch Taeyeon, studying every emotion that showed in Taeyeon's eyes. "I'm still here. I won't leave us just like that."

"I know."

"I love you."

"I love you too." They whispered only for the other to hear.

For Tiffany, this moment was precious to them just as it was fragile. Seeing how Taeyeon beat herself up over this, over her helplessness, only made it harder for her to do anything for them. She wanted to go up to her father and beg him to reconsider, but that wasn't easy seeing how determined he actually was, that he had even taken the liberty to arrange everything already.

Taeyeon didn't know it, but during the rare times they weren't together, Tiffany had been on the phone talking and arguing with him. She had used all arguments of reason and common sense she could think of to persuade him, but he stayed firm. Tiffany was going back to the States to study, and that was final.

"Taeyeon?"

"Hmm?" Taeyeon looked up at Tiffany. She had finally calmed down after an hour. They had moved to sit on the living room couch, just sitting there and making the most out of the time they had left. What was the best way to spend it, knowing their days were literally numbered?

"We should make a promise to each other."

"What kind of promise?"

Tiffany paused. She thought of the right words so that Taeyeon wouldn't misunderstand. "That we'll always support each other, no matter what. I know we're going to be busy. There isn't a doubt in my mind that you're going to be successful." She paused again. "And when that time comes, when you'll have a busy hectic crazy schedule again and you wouldn't have time for me anymore, I hope you know I'm always supporting you, even if I'm far away."

"Fany."

"I mean, school will probably keep me busy too, and the different time zone will make it hard for us." Taeyeon waited for Tiffany to finish speaking. She listened to every word she heard. "But we can plan it out. I don't want us to fight just because the other isn't there."

"You're going to exchange me for homework?" Taeyeon lightly teased Tiffany.

"Of course not, silly!" Tiffany leaned herself closer. "You know what I mean."

"Yeah." Taeyeon straightened her position. "Promise me too, that we'll always be honest with each other. We'll tell each other everything, even the negative things."

Tiffany raised her little finger. "I promise."

"I promise too." Taeyeon did the same. "I'm scared but as long as I have you, I'm not."

"Don't be scared." Tiffany rested her head on Taeyeon's shoulder. "You're stronger than me."

"I'm not."

"I don't think I could stand a day without talking to you," Tiffany confessed. "I tried before you know, to not talk to you—but I only lasted for two hours."

Taeyeon laughed. "I want to change that to an hour," she teased again. Tiffany pinched Taeyeon on the shoulder.

"Fany."

"Hmm?"

"I'll miss you." Taeyeon turned serious again. "I mean, just thinking about it now—it really makes me want to cry."

Tiffany hugged Taeyeon. "Don't. You've cried too much for today." She looked at her apologetically. "I feel really bad. I hate myself whenever I make you cry."

Taeyeon smiled a little to herself. "Yeah, I don't cry, right? Kim Taeyeon hates crying."

"Yes, so don't." Tiffany leaned in. "It doesn't suit you." She kissed Taeyeon on the forehead. "It may not seem like it, but I do always think of you—you're always on my mind and I know I'll miss you so much too."

"I'll call you everyday."

Tiffany laughed. "The internet exists! That'd be cheaper."

"But then I wouldn't be able to hear your voice."

Tiffany couldn't help but smile upon hearing that. "You're so sweet, you know that? I feel so lucky to have you. That's why I won't be stupid to let you go just like that."

"I'm not letting you go either. You're the only one for me. I can't imagine myself being with anyone else."

"Promise? Not even Sunny?"

Taeyeon suddenly laughed. "What? *Sunny*? How did Sunny get into this conversation?"

Tiffany laughed along. "Nothing! I was just making sure. We're not going to be together as often anymore—so you better not be checking other people out!" She narrowed her eyes.

"Well, what about you? You're going to be with Sica!" She continued to laugh. "Who knows you might suddenly fall for her?"

"What?" Tiffany opened her mouth wide, thoughts of Jessica had never entered her mind at all. "No! Of course not! That's impossible." Yuri would freak, Tiffany thought.

Taeyeon smiled, amused. "I hate to burst your bubble, but if you haven't noticed, the bounds of the word impossible doesn't exactly apply to us."

"I know, and I'm glad it doesn't." Tiffany continued to smile. "To be here right now with you—I've never felt any happier and healthier in my entire life. Thank you."

"For?"

"For choosing me. For loving me. For everything you've done for me." Tiffany leaned in to kiss Taeyeon gently on the lips, a light and short brush that never failed to make the latter's head spin. "It's going to get a harder, with all that distance, but I know we can make it. I trust you."

"I trust you too." Taeyeon pulled Tiffany closer. "I'll be counting down the days until I see you again. For sure, I will be, but until then let's just be happy. I want to make the most out of this moment now with you." She tried to memorize Tiffany's face, those eyes being the last thing she ever wanted to forget.

Unlike last week when most of the couple's fights had happened, the remaining days before Tiffany's departure for the States fortunately passed by without much trouble or tears from the two. Though Taeyeon had returned to her usual composed self, she still struggled to cope with the loneliness she knew Tiffany's absence would eventually bring.

Tiffany, on the other hand, remained her usual cheerful self, careful not to make Taeyeon upset, and rather quick to shower Taeyeon her assurances whenever she felt she was lacking.

The last week Tiffany and Taeyeon had was marked by a lot of firsts, making it as memorable and significant as they possibly could. First letters, first nights without sleep, first movies, first flowers, first poems and first songs, almost every memory made within that short week was something they both

hadn't done before. Aside from the fact that what had made those moments special was because they did them together but also because Tiffany and Taeyeon had made those memories like they weren't in a rush, not in a hurry for time to run out on them. Making the most had never taken a whole new meaning.

"Call me when you arrive, okay?" Taeyeon whispered to Tiffany as she hugged her. She stroked Tiffany's hair as she did, trying to waft as much of Tiffany's scent into her senses. It was the last few minutes before Tiffany had to board the plane.

"It'll be past midnight here when I do. Don't wait up for me," Tiffany whispered back. It was frustratingly hard to show affection to one another, now that they were in public. She hugged Taeyeon with both arms. The other girls huddled around them, talking and laughing amongst themselves to lighten the mood. They had given the couple some privacy to say their proper goodbyes.

Taeyeon released Tiffany. "I wouldn't have anything to do anyway." She laughed. Tiffany's eyes looked so clear and open at that instant that Taeyeon couldn't bear to look away from them. Those eyes had always made her feel sure that all this was happening for real. That Tiffany's love was real.

"Take care of yourself, okay? I asked Hyoyeon and Sunny to watch over you. I also gave them permission to kill you if you aren't." Tiffany lingered for awhile. She took a small step forward, wanting to kiss Taeyeon goodbye, but she stopped herself. Instead, she gave the nearest kiss she could to Taeyeon's lips, at the corner where it could have been easily mistaken as a kiss on the cheek. She took a step back and tried to hold in her tears.

Taeyeon hugged Tiffany again. "I love you," she whispered. "Don't cry now—I'll miss you more if you do, because I wouldn't be there to cheer you up. Remember, I'm just here, waiting." She smiled. "I'll talk to you in a few hours, okay?"

"Jessica, Stephanie, let's go." Tiffany's father suddenly appeared. "Goodbye girls! Make sure to visit us!" He picked up his luggage and walked towards the boarding gate.

Jessica hugged and waved goodbye one last time to the others. She gave one last hug to Yuri and found herself tearing up as she did. "Replace me and you die."

Yuri laughed. "Yah! Stop it! Don't forget to call me, okay? Enjoy the sleep on the plane!"

Tiffany squeezed Taeyeon's hand for the last time. "Hey, cheer up. I can't leave when you're looking like that." She slowed down her walking. "I'll be back soon, so soon in fact you wouldn't even have the chance to miss me."

"I miss you already." Taeyeon tried to cheer herself up. They stopped walking and Taeyeon handed over one of Tiffany's bags back to her. "Take care of yourself there, okay?"

"Fany?" Jessica called out to Tiffany who still stood by the boarding entrance. "Let's go?" Tiffany nodded at Jessica and turned to look one last time at Taeyeon. "See you soon." She smiled as happily as she could.

Taeyeon smiled back, letting the last few seconds of the silence speak for itself. "See you soon." she agreed, that silence she was unsure of what it spoke of.

As the others watched Tiffany and Jessica walk away, their sadness was surprisingly replaced by the excitement of when they would all see each other again. For sure those two would visit and spend some of their holidays with the others. They had a home here that they could never completely walk away from.

Jessica and Tiffany stopped walking to look back at the girls and waved. "Bye! We'll miss you!"

"Take care! Call us!" They girls shouted back with different voices.

Yuri blew her kisses. "Don't forget about us!"

Tiffany and Jessica walked on, their hearts full and heavy of the people they knew they were going to miss the minute they boarded the plane. "Don't worry. Things will be fine," Jessica said to Tiffany without looking.

Seeing them walk away, the reality that they had chosen different paths had never felt more real, and it was nerve-wracking, the thought of continuing life without the people they had always walked with.

"You okay?" Sunny turned to her left, at Taeyeon who still looked ahead. Tiffany had already disappeared in sight.

Taeyeon let a few seconds pass before answering. "Yeah," she lied.

XXVII. Voice

"Taeyeon."

"Taeyeon."

"Taeyeon, wake up!" Yuri shook the sleeping girl's shoulder awake. "Wake up! Fany's on the phone!" Taeyeon jerked forward from the couch. She had fallen asleep, waiting for Tiffany to call. It was an hour past midnight and the house was still, except for Yuri and Seohyun who were awake watching television. Taeyeon rushed towards the phone.

"Hello?"

"Taeyeon! Sorry! Did I wake you up?"

Taeyeon brushed her hair away from her face. "No, no, it's okay." She coughed. "How was your trip?"

"It was okay. Jessi was asleep the entire time." Tiffany laughed from the other line. "Sorry, I woke you."

Taeyeon smiled. "I was waiting for you to call." She transferred the phone to her other ear. "What's that noise? Where are you?"

"We're still at the airport. We just literally arrived. I had to call you." Taeyeon could practically imagine Tiffany saying that and smiling in front of her.

"I'm glad you had a safe trip." She twirled the phone line around her fingers. "I was getting worried that—"

"Wait, I got to go! I'll call you again."

"Okay, bye! I love you!" Taeyeon rushed the last three words in.

"You too!" Tiffany said in a hurry. The dial tone echoed. Slowly, Taeyeon put down the receiver and stared at it after she did. Disbelief overcame her that Tiffany was now thousands of miles away, on the other side of the world. She dragged herself up the stairway, walked to her room and crashed down on the bed. It wasn't a few hours later until she fell asleep, the crack of dawn finally luring her eyes shut.

The smell of coffee and toast filled the air as Taeyeon walked unsteadily in the kitchen two hours later. She rubbed her eyes awake, pausing to look at Sooyoung and Hyoyeon who were already eating breakfast.

"Well, someone woke up on the wrong side of the bed today," Sooyoung greeted her. Taeyeon had gotten out of bed without even as much as combing her hair or changing her clothes. She scratched her forehead absent-mindedly. She walked towards the fridge and grabbed the carton of milk. Not bothering to drink from a glass, she swallowed a few mouthfuls.

Sooyoung and Hyoyeon watched her carefully. "Shorty needs to grow," Hyoyeon quipped

"Hmm." Sooyoung bit into her toast.

Hyoyeon continued to watch Taeyeon who had walked away, figuring whether she should cook the latter some breakfast. "She's not looking so good."

"Hmm." Sooyoung agreed, looking closely at the crumbs on her plate.

"She must miss Fany already."

"Yeah, I gotta hand it to them. I seriously don't know how they're going to work this out."

Hyoyeon pursed her lips. "They'll work it out."

"I hope so."

"I thought you were going to go with them?" Hyoyeon spread some jam into her toast. She was referring to Sooyoung's supposed vacation plan to go with Tiffany and Jessica.

"There weren't any seats left. Besides, I could always go with them once they visit during the holidays."

"Yeah, yeah, enjoy yourself while you still can." Hyoyeon snorted. "Don't come crying to me when you can't do your homework, okay?"

Sooyoung rolled her eyes. "Thanks for being supportive *unni*." Hyoyeon laughed.

Upstairs in her room, Taeyeon lied in a careless sprawl on the bed, looking blankly at the white ceiling above her. Tiffany had just left and thoughts of Tiffany were the only thing that swarmed Taeyeon's mind. She closed her eyes, letting a few seconds pass before opening them again. Taeyeon felt her lips tingle for a second, remembering how it felt when Tiffany's lips were pressed against hers. She curled up on the bed.

Sleep hadn't been coming frequent enough for her to fall back into her usual sleep routine. The nights spent with Tiffany without sleep had also ruined her body clock. What time was it anyway? She raised her hand and lazily drew circles in the air. It was the first day without Tiffany and Taeyeon had no idea how to spend it. Again, she shut her eyes close.

"Taeyeon?"

"Taeyeon? Are you asleep?" Sunny knocked from outside. "Taeyeon?" She knocked louder. "Taeyeon, you haven't eaten lunch yet. Aren't you hungry?"

Taeyeon stirred awake in bed. It was midafternoon and she hadn't stepped outside her room since this morning. She sat up and looked around, squinting her eyes trying to tell what time it was by the daylight, "Ugh," she grunted in response. Her throat felt dry.

Sunny opened the door carefully, peeking first before opening it wide. "I saved you some lunch in the fridge." She sat on the edge of Taeyeon's bed and pulled Taeyeon's blanket away. "I cooked it! So you better eat it." Taeyeon mechanically nodded. She thought it would be around evening already when she woke up. Apparently, time passed by too slowly for her liking.

"Where's Taeyeon-unni?"

"Isn't she in the kitchen? I saw her there awhile ago eating." Yuri responded to Seohyun's question as she walked by the living room.

Seohyun craned her neck to get a better view of the kitchen. "Nope, she's not there." She sank back into the sofa.

"Hm." Yuri frowned. She barely saw Taeyeon today and she looked awful when she had.

"Sunny, did Taeyeon eat lunch?" Yuri dropped by Sooyoung's room. Sunny and Sooyoung were busy playing video games on the floor.

Sunny looked up. "Yeah, I woke her awhile ago. Why? She didn't eat it?"

"No, no, I just haven't seen her that much today. That's all."

"Aha! Dead!" Sooyoung exclaimed and threw a victorious fist into the air. "Wooh!"

"Yah, that was just level 4." Sunny glanced at Sooyoung. "Wait until you reach," she raised an eyebrow, "like level 40 until you celebrate?"

"Ugh." Sooyoung concentrated back on the video game, undaunted. "This thing better not run out of battery while I—"

"So where's Taeyeon now?" Sunny turned her attention back at Yuri. "In her room?"

Yuri shrugged her shoulders. "I guess. I didn't see her outside."

Sunny frowned. "Hm." Sleep again?

And as it would have unfolded, the only thing Taeyeon seemed to look forward to, in the coming days following Tiffany's departure, was evening. With Tiffany gone and her day's schedules empty for quite a time now, there didn't seem to be anything that needed to be done. Ironically, for Taeyeon, the free time was burdensome.

"What time is it?"

"Uhh 5:15," Yoona answered, glancing at her watch. She proceeded to change channels. "Why? You asked me that thrice in the last 10 minutes, unni." Taeyeon yawned at the television screen in front of them, not hearing what Yoona had just said.

Unknowingly, the impact following Tiffany's absence was slowly, but surely, sneaking its way into Taeyeon, with all the time they used to spend together causing her to feel a dire loss now that Tiffany

wasn't there anymore. Throughout their entire relationship, Tiffany and Taeyeon had practically done everything together, from eating to watching television to doing chores. Almost every activity one could think of that could be done in pairs, they had already done, they had cleverly changed their routines to conveniently fit one another's. But now, Tiffany was gone, and a big part of Taeyeon's day had been seemingly erased as well.

"Tell me if it's 6." Taeyeon slumped into her seat. She really did miss Tiffany. She wished she would call already.

Suddenly, as if Taeyeon's persistent wishing were heard, the phone rang and she bounced to her feet to answer it. "Hello?"

"Taetae!"

"Fany! I was waiting for you to call!" Taeyeon brightened up.

"Sorry! I had to cook daddy breakfast."

"It's okay. How are you doing over there? Everything settled already?"

"Yeah, I'm just a little tired. Unpacking is taking me forever!"

Taeyeon smiled at the sound of Tiffany's laugh. "I'm not surprised."

"There are just boxes and boxes and—"

Taeyeon laughed. "Boxes of clothes, shoes, bags—"

"Hey, those aren't my only things!"

Taeyeon chortled. "I was kidding."

"Taeyeon, I have to go for a sec. Daddy's calling me. I'll call you back, okay?"

"Oh." Taeyeon's voice dropped. "Okay. Call back soon!"

"I will! Bye!"

Taeyeon listened to the dial tone. "Bye," she muttered.

Taeyeon hobbled back to her seat beside Yoona in the living room. Waiting for a phone call didn't use to be this hard.

"Was it Fany-unni?"

"Yeah."

"How's she doing?"

"Busy." Taeyeon grimly replied.

Unfortunately for Tiffany, moving back to the States proved to be more troublesome than she had expected. Aside from unpacking and moving in, there were her school papers that needed to be settled, family reunions every few days, neighbourhood parties, and other various chores that got in between activities which entirely ate up her day. The only spare time she had, it seemed, was early morning and late evening, and even then her exhaustion from attending to all these newly-found responsibilities took the little time that was left.

Taeyeon had adjusted to her schedule accordingly. Her days cycled from her waking around dinner time, taking a shower, watching television and waiting by the phone until Tiffany called. She would stay up past midnight, sometimes even until dawn, talking to Tiffany, her sleep having been moved to daytime. Day after day, this exhaustingly went on, all due to Taeyeon's insistence that it was alright. Of course, it wasn't alright.

"Taeyeon."

"Taeyeon, wake up. Oppa's on the phone." Sunny slapped Taeyeon's leg awake. Nearly a month had passed since Tiffany and Jessica had left and Taeyeon's days hadn't changed much at all. "He wants to talk to you. It sounds important." Taeyeon slowly opened her eyes, the dark circles under them becoming more apparent. She squirmed out of her blankets and out of bed.

"Hello?" Taeyeon's voice was hoarse and raspy. "Oppa?"

"Taeyeon? Is that you?"

"Oppa."

"Why does your voice sound different? Are you sick?"

Taeyeon yawned. "No, I just got out of bed." She glanced at the clock behind her. "I'm alright, I'm not sick."

"Okay, good. For a second there, I thought you were. Anyway, I need you and Seohyun to prepare yourselves. I've scheduled vocal practice for the both of you later this morning."

"Okay."

"Taeyeon?"

"Yeah?"

"Go drink some warm tea. You're going to need it."

Later that morning, the vocal practice their manager had arranged for them turned out to be more than just a vocal warming session. Some producers from a different company had chosen Taeyeon and Seohyun to record a song for them, a demo single that would serve as a guide for an upcoming artist of theirs from another regional branch. It was relatively an easy song, a slow mellow ballad that Taeyeon was used to singing supposedly, considering how well-trained she was. But the recording took longer than expected as it had taken her some time to hit the notes right. She also had a little difficulty with her breathing, her voice had come up short at times because of it.

"Unni, drink some water first." Seohyun took out her water bottle and handed it to Taeyeon who sat beside her.

"Thanks."

"I'll prepare you some tea when we get home."

"Thanks." Taeyeon smiled. She looked over the piece again she held in her hands. "Okay, let's try it again."

Eventually, with more effort and concentration, Taeyeon was able to render the song the way the producers wanted. She recorded the song with Seohyun, who had volunteered to play the piano solo, after two more attempts to get the pitch right. Seohyun had been spending her free time practicing the piano, playing her old pieces. She had asked one of the producers if she could sing and play the song at the same time. It was just a demo after all.

Back at the dorm, Taeyeon would hear none of her mistakes during the recording. She hated that she wasn't able to give as much effort she always gave when it came to singing. Her minds hadn't been focused and clear enough for her to fully concentrate. She had thought too much of how slowly time passed and when Tiffany would call. But it wasn't a distraction, not to Taeyeon's mind, it wasn't.

"How was it?" Hyoyeon asked Seohyun who walked into their room after arriving home.

"It was," Seohyun paused, "alright, I guess. Taeyeon-unni had a little trouble," she hesitatingly replied. Intrigued, Hyoyeon sat up on her bed. "What kind of trouble?"

"Well, she wasn't able to get it right away."

"Ah." Hyoyeon quirked an eyebrow, she and the others had always known Taeyeon to quickly master any song given to them. "But she was still able to right? Sing it, I mean."

"Yes." Seohyun walked over to her dresser. "Taeyeon-unni was able to sing it. I played the piano for us!"

"Huh?"

"It was a demo single. I asked if I could be the one to play the piano in the song."

Hyoyeon smirked. "Really? And they let you?"

Seohyun frowned. "Unni! What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing, I was just kidding." Hyoyeon teased Seohyun. "Of course they let you. Piano's your thing." She smiled.

"Hopefully, Oppa can give me a copy. I want you to hear it, unni! It's a beautiful ballad." Seohyun clasped her hands together. "Taeyeon-unni sang it really well."

"I bet she did," Hyoyeon agreed.

The days that passed Taeyeon and the girls during this time was no different from their days as trainees. Most of them had remained in their dorm when their company decided to let them keep the house. It was also to keep a good watch over them, the only difference being that without their contracts holding them down, Taeyeon and the girls were able to leave and stay at their dorm however they wished.

They lived together most days, waiting and anticipating for the right moment when they would be able to go back to the industry. Hyoyeon and Yuri had been taking dance classes together, school kept Seohyun busy, Yoona and Sooyoung were still on vacation, and Sunny occasionally did radio and variety show stints.

Meanwhile, Taeyeon was kept to her vocal practice. Their manager had decided that Taeyeon needed the conditioning because there was something off in her voice lately. He couldn't have her lose that, her most prized talent.

"Taeyeon, is there something wrong? Do you have a problem you'd want share?" Their manager looked at Taeyeon intently one morning, concern all over his face as he noticed the big circles under Taeyeon's eyes.

Taeyeon opened her eyes wider. "No, there's nothing wrong, oppa." She fought off a yawn. "What did you want to talk to me about?" It was exactly two months since Tiffany had left and winter was just around the corner.

As if remembering again what he came for, their manager raised his finger. "Ah, right. Do you remember that song you and Seohyun recorded?" He tried to look past how lifeless Taeyeon looked, "Around a month ago, the one where she played the piano. Do you remember?"

Taeyeon squared her shoulders, remembering how hard a time she had with that song. "What about it, oppa?"

"One of the producers called me this morning. He said their company wanted to sign you and Seohyun together!" Their manager's face lit up, his smile showing his satisfaction from the hard work the past few weeks. "They didn't give the song away. They were impressed at how well you and Seohyun sounded together!"

Taeyeon looked at him, sleep and surprise clashing. "Me and Seohyun? Our duet?"

"Yes, they want to sign the both of you as a duo act. You and your singing, she and her skill at piano, they think it's the perfect combination!" His voice was full of excitement. "They want to remarket the both of you as balladeers!"

Taeyeon continued to stare. "Wait, so—"

"What do you think?"

"I—"

"I've already studied their proposal and I've talked with the upper management regarding this. Legally, there's nothing they can do to stop this deal from happening."

Taeyeon opened her mouth wide. "So, me and Seohyun?"

"Yes! What do think?"

"I think," Taeyeon's voice trailed, "that's awesome!" She grinned.

XXVIII. Holidays

"Well? How'd it go?" Tiffany anxiously stood up and greeted Jessica who appeared. "Did they ask you a lot of questions?"

"I'm not sure," Jessica replied, sitting herself down on the bench outside the Dean's office. "They didn't ask much actually, just the basic stuff, like why are we here, what are our plans. Those kinds of things."

"So it's alright? In short, I'll manage?"

Jessica laughed. "Of course you'll manage! Why are you so nervous?" She patted Tiffany's hand. "Calm down, will you?"

Tiffany seated herself beside Jessica. "I know. I don't know why but it feels like I'm about to perform or something."

"Yeah, but you're not, so relax."

Tiffany and Jessica were sitting outside the main lobby of their university's administration building. Their interviews were scheduled soon after they had arranged their papers, sending in their school transcriptions. It was a special arrangement—Tiffany's father calling in a favor—since the holiday season was around the corner. Transferees and new students usually had to wait for the entire school year to end before applications were processed.

"Ms.Hwang?" The receptionist called out, "You may come inside now." She left the door open.

Tiffany fixed her hair as she stood up. "Wish me luck!"

"You don't need it," Jessica replied, showing her support. "He's harmless."

"Okay, I'll see you in awhile." Tiffany walked in and closed the door behind her.

The Dean's office was a big, well-lit room with red carpeting and wooden interiors. On one corner were trophies displayed on a glass shelf while another had two huge metal file cabinets. Behind the large desk was a middle-aged man, dressed in a tie and suit. The glasses he wore made him look older than he actually was. He looked up at Tiffany who had walked in. "Ms.Hwang, please come in." He motioned for the empty chair in front of him.

Tiffany stood there nervously, extending her hand out of courtesy. "Good morning," she greeted him, her facing showing that famous eye smile.

"Good morning." The Dean shook Tiffany's hand. "Please, have a sit." Tiffany sat down on one of the plush chairs looking around. A small picture frame was situated on his desk.

"So, first of all, welcome." The Dean shuffled some papers in front of him. "I'm glad you and Ms.Jung were able to come. We really couldn't afford to schedule this interview any later." He took off his glasses. "Shall we start?"

"Uhm, yes." Tiffany sat uncomfortably. She didn't know why but this man intimidated her.

"I've gone over your school records, and I must say, I'm quite impressed."

Tiffany bent her head down. "Thank you, sir."

The Dean chuckled as he saw how polite Tiffany was being. "So, tell me. What brings you here? To our school?" He flipped through the papers, stopping on the page where the background information was written.

Tiffany had rehearsed her answer for this question plenty of times before but right now it seemed lost. "To be honest, I really don't know myself. I guess it's the fact that I wasn't able to finish school." She paused. "I've always enjoyed school, but life surprisingly had others plans for me."

"You mean when you joined showbusiness?"

"Ah, yes." Tiffany stopped shortly, suddenly remembering Taeyeon and the girls who were far away, "Anyways, my family and I really believe that education's important. So, that's why I'm here."

The Dean looked at Tiffany closely, curious of the split second of wistfulness he had seen on Tiffany's face. "And you're not at all disappointed that your career's over?"

Tiffany smiled. "I'd be lying if I said I wasn't, sir." He smiled back.

Meanwhile, several miles away, Taeyeon and the rest of the girls, with the exception of Sooyoung and Yoona who were still on vacation, were having a few drinks after dinner. They had set up a small party in their kitchen, out of utter excitement about the news their manager had brought them earlier that day.

"Take a bite!" Hyoyeon held up a slice of left over pizza in front of Seohyun's face. "Just one little bite!"

Seohyun closed her eyes in defense. "But you already bit on it—"

"Tch! Excuses, excuses!" Hyoyeon laughed. "It's really good." She put the slice of pizza on Seohyun's plate.

"I'm really excited for this!" Sunny nudged Seohyun. "Your piano skills are amazing!"

Seohyun smiled sheepishly. "I'm excited too!"

"We all have to be present when you guys debut!" Yuri turned to Taeyeon. "Front row seats!"

"No! I can't have any of you distracting me!" Taeyeon looked at Yuri. "Don't even think about it."

Yuri smirked. "Fine." Taeyeon stood up and looked at the clock behind her. She quickly made her way towards the phone and stared at it. Nervously, she picked it up, and punched the dials.

"Hello?"

"Hey."

"Taeyeon!"

"Yup, it's me."

"Hey! What are you guys up to?"

"Oh." Taeyeon turned her head to look at the commotion going on in the kitchen. "Nothing much—just drinking." She tried to contain the budding excitement in her.

"Sooyoung and Yoona's back?"

"Not yet." Taeyeon stared at the wall in front of her. "Fany—!"

"No, I don't want ketchup!" Tiffany's voice trailed off for a second. "Sorry, me and Jessi are just about to have lunch." She spoke directly again on the mouthpiece. "You were saying?"

"Fany, guess what?" Taeyeon couldn't help but smile now. "It's about me and Seohyun."

"What? What happened?"

"Guess!"

Silence and Tiffany gave up. "I can't think of anything right now."

"Fine." Taeyeon gave in. "Me and Seohyun are going to be singing together! Oppa dropped by this morning to tell us that we're going to debut as a duo!"

"Are you serious? Taeyeon! Oh my!"

"Yes!" Taeyeon heard screaming on the other line. "I can't believe it too!"

"Jessi! Taeyeon and Seohyun are going to be a duo!" Tiffany relayed the news immediately. "Yeah! A duo!" she spoke again, "Taeyeon, this is wonderful! I knew this was going to happen sooner or later!"

Taeyeon chuckled. "They want to make use of her piano background."

"That's perfect! She's been dying to use it, now she can!"

"I know." Taeyeon smiled and looked down at her feet. "So, when are you and Sica visiting?"

"I don't know." Tiffany's voice dropped. "We just had our interview awhile ago. It was nerve-racking."

"Oh? How'd it go?"

"It went—okay." Tiffany guessed. "They said they'd call us in a week."

"No worries. I'm sure the both of you did fine."

"I hope so."

Taeyeon paused, lingered. "Fany, I miss you. It's been so hard without you."

"Aw, I miss you too. Is everything okay? Anything wrong?"

"No, nothing's wrong." Taeyeon chose her words carefully. "It's just that—"

"That?"

"Nothing, I just really miss you—," Taeyeon retreated. "That's all." She didn't think she could say anything about the distance between them and how difficult it was to contact one another lately.

"I love you."

"I love you too," Taeyeon replied, thinking of when Tiffany would visit. "Anyways, that's all. Go eat lunch. I don't want you starving yourself."

Tiffany laughed. "Ha! I've been eating like Sooyoung these days."

"Right."

"I'm serious!"

"I'd have to see it to believe it." Taeyeon looked behind her. The girls were teasing Seohyun to drink another glass. "Enjoy your lunch."

"Get some sleep, okay?"

"Yeah, I'll sleep soon. Eat a lot, okay?"

"Okay—"

"Yeah—"

"Taeyeon?"

"Hmm?"

"I love you."

"I love you too." Taeyeon smiled to herself, trying to imagine what Tiffany looked like then and there, "I'll talk to you soon."

"Okay, bye." Tiffany's voice cheered up a little.

"Bye." Taeyeon put down the phone first, letting out a heavy sigh after she did. For some time now, she had been trying to tell Tiffany that she felt she was losing her, but she never got around to doing so. What was stopping her? She walked back to the others who were in the kitchen.

The phone call that Tiffany and Taeyeon had at that moment was clear evidence on how they were starting to lose communication with each other. It should've been easy, for Taeyeon to tell Tiffany that the distance between them was taking its toll on her, but she couldn't and the unspoken words stifled her again. Each day that had passed, each minute they had spent less and less, ever since they had physically separated was like a dagger to Taeyeon, digging the wound deeper and deeper, with need being the only thing that stopped it from piercing through.

Perhaps, it really was need. Need was what Taeyeon missed the most from Tiffany since the latter had left; Tiffany's need of her presence and Tiffany's need of her love. Because lately, judging from the way Tiffany had been acting the past few weeks, that notion about Tiffany was being erased, slowly replaced by a Tiffany who was distant, by a Tiffany who could stand for days without talking to Taeyeon, a Tiffany that Taeyeon found hard to adjust to.

Was it plainly the lack of attention? The mere lack of time? But even if it were, Taeyeon wouldn't have accepted that for an answer. She knew she was stronger than this, smarter and more in control of herself, but even that she was starting to doubt. Unfortunately, the days that followed after that attempt, that failed attempt at opening up, were just as constricting, and Taeyeon struggled on, not knowing when she would finally burst.

In a blink of an eye, December had come upon the girls and the holiday rush was present in everyone. The Christmas trees, the bright twinkling lights, the sound of Christmas carols, and the cold frigid nights only reminded Taeyeon that this was a holiday that was best spent with loved ones. She continued to mope around in her room one evening, clearly not in the mood for merry-making. Sunny walked in.

"Taeyeon."

"Yeah?"

"Look at you." Sunny eyed her from head to toe.

"What?"

"Just—," Sunny grabbed for the mirror on Taeyeon's dresser, "look."

Taeyeon looked at her reflection as Sunny held the mirror in front of her. She didn't know what Sunny was getting at. "I'm looking."

"Taeyeon, look how much weight you've lost." Taeyeon noticed the sharp curve of her jaw. "Look!"

She continued to stare at the mirror, finally noticing the almost-permanent circles under her eyes against her pale skin.

Sunny sat beside Taeyeon on the bed. "Taeyeon." Taeyeon snatched the mirror from Sunny's hands and hid it under her blanket. Her eyes twitched and she took a deep breath, trying to hold herself from exploding. Her eyes watered in betrayal.

"Taeyeon." Sunny hugged Taeyeon when she had seen Taeyeon suck in a deep breath, the kind of breath that held the tears in. "Are you okay? Hey." She looked at her intently.

Taeyeon's lips quivered, as if in haste judgment whether or not she should give in to the pain she had been holding in all this time. "No—," she cried and covered her face with her hands.

Sunny quickly hugged Taeyeon and let her cry in her arms. She had been keeping watch over Taeyeon ever since the latter considerably ate less and less and was almost always in a glum mood. She couldn't even remember the last time she had shared a hearty laugh with Taeyeon.

"You're a really strong person. I know you can get through this." Sunny soothed Taeyeon, as if she knew what was hurting her. Taeyeon hadn't said anything, but it was obvious anyway. What hurt her was Tiffany. Sunny remained silent.

Taeyeon continued to cry in Sunny's arms until she felt she couldn't cry anymore. She had been crying for an hour straight, and she could feel her eyes sting painfully from the tears, from the hurt, and from the lack of sleep altogether. Everything was crumbling down and she didn't know why it suddenly was. For all she knew, she held securely in her fist that miserable pathetic feeling she'd been fighting since Day 1, Day 1 without Tiffany. She didn't want to admit that she was losing this battle with herself.

Pride had also been blinding. It coaxed her into believing that she still had strength in the face of this one-sided adversity. But was it really one-sided? Taeyeon apparently had no one to blame but herself.

They say that the one who loves the least is in control of the relationship, Taeyeon dismally recalled this, and continued to cry. She had never cried so much for someone and for the lack of a specific reason in her entire life. Sunny stayed by her side, not wanting to bring up what Taeyeon might have wanted her not to.

"I love her." Taeyeon mumbled from Sunny's arms.

"I know you do."

Taeyeon closed her eyes, relieving some of the painful stinging that came from them. "It's not that I want to make her feel guilty for neglecting me." She tried to speak clearly, "or that I'm the one who's giving more in this relationship but—," she fought off a tear that threatened to fall, "I don't know. It's just so hard without her here. I miss her so much."

"Taeyeon—"

"I'm going crazy."

"You're not."

Taeyeon looked straight at Sunny. "I feel so pathetic."

Sunny held Taeyeon's stare. "Taeyeon."

"Do you know how many times oppa scolded me today? I can't even sing."

"Taeyeon."

"Sunny, I don't know what to do—"

"Listen to me, you're a strong person. You can get through this."

"I miss her so much." Taeyeon buried herself in Sunny's arms. She wished it was Tiffany's.

Sunny debated with herself. Should she or shouldn't she? She couldn't stand seeing Taeyeon destroy herself like this. "Taeyeon-ah. I hope you won't take this the wrong way, but maybe it's time you thought of Tiffany's place in your life—where she should or shouldn't be standing."

Taeyeon didn't want to acknowledge it, but she knew what Sunny was trying to say. "I'm okay," was all she responded.

Taking the hint, Sunny stopped. "Do you want some water?"

Taeyeon shook her head. "Sunny, thank you but I want to be alone right now."

Sunny stood up. "Yeah, get some sleep," she agreed. She walked towards the door.

"Thank you," Taeyeon called after Sunny. Sunny smiled back, protectively, as if what had just happened wouldn't be spoken of. She closed the door and rested on it after she did.

In times like these, it was hard not to take sides and Sunny was determined not to. Tiffany and Taeyeon were both her sisters, two people she didn't want to see hurting each other. But what was going to happen to them if they continue like this? Sunny didn't know the other side of the story so she resolved to find some answers for herself. She went to knock on Yuri's door.

XXIX. Support

"Come in!"

"Hey." Sunny wasted no time. "We have to talk."

"What's up?" Yuri sat up on her bed and closed the magazine she was flipping through. "Did something happen?"

"Taeyeon just had a break down."

"Is she okay?" Yuri's voice was full of concern. "What happened?"

"She didn't say anything." Sunny sat beside Yuri on the bed. "But we know the reason why."

"Oh." Yuri understood. "Is she okay now?"

"I hope so."

"Poor Taeyeon." Yuri furrowed her eyebrows in concern. "All that crying is only going to stress her even more."

"How's Sica doing?" Sunny interrupted Yuri's thoughts.

"Sica? She's doing fine," Yuri responded. "Really busy, but other than that, fine. Why? What about her?"

"Nothing, I just thought that if there's a way to figure out what's up with Fany, then it'd be through her."

"I talked to her awhile ago," Yuri remembered. "She said she and Fany were all stressed and busy with packing and their papers. They're going to be moving in their dorm soon."

"Are they visiting for the holidays?" Sunny asked worriedly. She badly hoped they would.

Yuri clicked her tongue. "Uh, yeah—about that—," she began, "I don't think they are. I asked Sica about it and she said they weren't sure. A lot of things still need to be settled, I think."

Sunny cursed in her head. "This doesn't look good." What was Taeyeon going to say? Was it the reason why she cried?

"I know. Taeyeon's only going to be more miserable with this."

"Do you think that's the reason why she cried?"

"Probably, but that's just what Sica said. Plus they weren't sure yet."

Sunny slammed her hand down on the bed. "How can they not be sure?"

"I don't know." Yuri shrugged. "But really, I think they've got their hands full right now. Sica tells me all these stories about snooty people on campus, how her parents are driving her nuts with work—"

"How's Fany doing?" Sunny interrupted Yuri again. "Did she mention anything?"

"No, not really." Yuri pondered. "I'll make sure to ask her next time."

"Yeah. I don't mean to meddle in this but I can't have Taeyeon continue acting like this."

"Yeah." Yuri agreed. She stood up. "Come on. I'll call Sica now."

Downstairs, it was silent with only the four of them at home. Hyoyeon and Sooyoung were away with their respective families, while Yoona and Seohyun were upstairs in their room, fast asleep. The eerie darkness of the house and the lone light turned on from the kitchen ceiling made Sunny anticipate more for some answers. They waited for Jessica to pick up on the other line. It was near midnight and so they were sure Jessica was awake and would answer.

"Hello?"

"Sica!"

"Yul!"

"Are you busy right now?"

"Nah, not really but later I'm going out. Why? What's up?"

"It's about Taeyeon and Tiffany." Yuri looked at Sunny. Sunny nodded for her to continue.

"Taeyeon and Tiffany?"

"Yeah, we're not sure but it seems they got into a fight."

"A fight? What about?"

"That's why we called. Me and Sunny were hoping you knew."

"No, I don't know anything. Wait, what happened anyway?"

"Well, Taeyeon cried, no, wait, she had a breakdown awhile ago," Yuri corrected herself when Sunny mouthed the word breakdown for her to relay. "How's Tiffany?"

"I'm not with her right now."

"Yeah, but the last time you were together, how was she?"

Jessica paused, trying to recall if there had been something off in Tiffany's actions. "We were together the other day. She was fine. I mean, a little stressed but she's okay. No crying or anything."

"Hm." Yuri raised her eyebrow at Sunny. "She's okay?"

"Yeah, but she's kinda stressed."

"Fany's stressed?" Yuri passed on the information to Sunny who stood beside her, listening closely.

"Yep, her dad's been a little tight on her. I don't know why but ever since we arrived, he's been keeping her close to him, always taking her out to meet people, see places—"

"Meet people?" Yuri felt that one stood out from the rest, "You don't mean—?"

"No, no, meet people as in his friends and their relatives."

"Ah, for a second there—" Yuri heard Jessica laugh.

"Don't worry. If Fany's being set up, I'd be the first to know and I'll tell you immediately."

Yuri smiled. "So she's just really busy now?"

"Yeah, school hasn't even started for us and I'm regretting it already," Jessica complained.

Yuri laughed. "There you go again."

"What?" Jessica stammered. "I can only take so much."

"So, wait, Fany's really okay? Not moody or anything?" Yuri went back to the topic. "She hasn't said anything about Taeyeon at all?"

"No, she hasn't said anything." Jessica answered after a few seconds. "Hey, sorry but I got to go. I'll call you again, okay? I'll talk to Fany about it."

"Okay."

"Aw, I miss you!" Jessica reminded her. "The people here are so—I dunno. I don't get their humor sometimes."

Yuri chuckled. "You just got used to mine."

"Yeah." Jessica laughed. "Anyways, tell the girls I miss them."

"Sure."

"Okay thanks! Bye!"

"Bye!" Yuri put down the phone. She turned to Sunny and shrugged her shoulders. What was happening to Taeyeon and Tiffany?

Meanwhile, when Jessica put down the phone, she hurriedly finished the house chore her mother had asked her to do and immediately hailed a cab to head for Tiffany's house which was a few blocks away. In the car, she mulled over what Yuri had just told her, that Taeyeon had been having breakdowns lately and wasn't herself at all. She didn't lie that she didn't know anything, but she did think that Tiffany appeared less cheerful the past few days, though it wasn't completely obvious. Jessica went straight to Tiffany's room when she arrived.

"Hey, Jessi." Tiffany greeted Jessica who went inside the room without knocking, "what's up?" She was lying down on her bed listening to her music player.

"Are you and Taeyeon okay?" Jessica went straight to the point, her eyes noticing a small pile of tissues on the floor. "Did you guys fight?"

Tiffany sat up. "We're okay—why?"

"Yuri called me awhile ago. She said Taeyeon had a breakdown. She and Sunny are worried."

Tiffany looked at Jessica, not reacting like she already expected the news. "Is she okay now?"

"I dunno." Jessica studied Tiffany's response. She thought that Tiffany would have overreacted when she said Taeyeon had a breakdown. "Is everything okay?"

Tiffany kept quiet, as if she were considering to open up or not. "I-I don't know."

Jessica reached out to pat Tiffany's hand. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." Tiffany thought of what to say. "We've been fighting a lot lately. And whenever we talk, it's like she's distant? Cold?"

"Hmm?"

"I mean, it's different." Tiffany confessed. "It feels different."

Jessica began to worry. "You don't love—?"

"No, no." Tiffany shook her head. "I still love her. I always will."

"But?"

"But there's nothing I can do right now."

"I don't understand." Jessica tried to follow Tiffany's train of thought. "What do you mean?"

"You know how I've been pretty busy lately, right? Daddy's already killing me with all the work he wants me to do in this house." Jessica nodded. "That's why I can't always be on the phone. I'm trying my best. Really, I am."

Jessica sighed. "Fany, it's okay," she said when she saw Tiffany about to cry.

"She's not the only one hurting too, you know. If I could have my way, I'd be with her right this minute." Tiffany began to sob. "I miss her so much, Jessi. But I can't do this."

"Do what?" Jessica began to worry again. It seemed to her that Tiffany wanted to break up already.

"I can't give her the time and attention she needs." Tiffany said through sobs. "We're two different people. We're living our own lives. I want her to understand that."

"Fany—"

"I love her. I still very much love her. But I hate seeing her like this."

"She just really loves you." Jessica tried to comfort her. "I mean this is a long distance relationship. Problems like these are normal—"

"I know."

"It's okay." Jessica handed a piece of tissue to Tiffany. "This is just a phase."

"I hope so." Tiffany thought of Taeyeon and how much she missed the old her.

Three months had passed, down this road of their long-distance relationship, and it had drastically affected Tiffany and Taeyeon. What was shocking how distance easily caused problems for them when they were so sure that their relationship would remain strong. Probably trust was what Taeyeon lacked the most without Tiffany by her side, and understanding, on the other hand, was what Tiffany failed to do during the times Taeyeon turned to her for company and attention.

It was hard, it was hard for both sides to see where the other was coming from when their emotions foolishly justified that they had the right to feel the way they did, because after all, one couldn't control their feelings, or fall in and out love whenever they liked.

In the weeks that followed, Christmas only bitterly passed by, and Tiffany and Taeyeon were still stuck in a rough patch. Their phone conversations had remained awkward, stiff, forced, as if they were both anticipating when the other would just finally break it off, but they held on.

Tiffany and Jessica were unfortunately unable to visit during the holidays, because of scheduling problems, and it was saddening, especially for Taeyeon, who had really hoped that she would be able to see Tiffany again after so long. The problem with hoping was that, though it helped one move onwards, with having something to look forward to, there was also the risk of disappointment when the expectations that came with hope weren't met.

Taeyeon continued to crash, down the rocky jagged depths of her helplessness. She needed to keep it together, to fight off her neediness and clinginess, but it was futile. She loved Tiffany so much, and it was all that mattered.

By now, rumors of the company's suspension being lifted were being spread, and the girls were busy preparing themselves for it. Their manager had arranged plenty of preparations for this, particularly for Yoona, Yuri and Sunny. Hyoyeon had been hired by their company underground a few weeks back as one of the consulting head choreographers. Sooyoung had come and gone, from Europe all the way to Japan, she was all over the place learning new things and being a part-time model.

Meanwhile, Taeyeon and Seohyun's debut as a duo were delayed because their company protested against it. Negotiations for their return to the company were carried out, and from the looks of it, concluding from their manager's news, they were apparently bought back, signed to debut under the same company, under the same marketing strategy.

"Unni, I'm nervous." Seohyun fidgeted in her seat. "It's next week! I can't believe it's next week!"

"Don't be." Taeyeon smiled from across her at the dining table. "You prepared hard for this."

"I hope I don't forget anything. Maybe I should practice some more."

Taeyeon laughed a little, trying to hide her own nervousness. "No, rest your hands. You've played the piano too much for today." Exactly a week from now was their big day, their anticipated debut back in the industry. Much work and publicity had been made to build up the hype of their return, and most people were, in fact, excited. Taeyeon's vocals were top-notch and it suited well with Seohyun's. Their live practices had been given utmost priority by their manager to ensure that their talent really showed.

"I hope the fans will receive us well," Seohyun said.

"Let's just do our best." Taeyeon smiled. "That's all we can do." She felt unconfident for the first time in her career.

It was the middle of the day, on the 2nd week of January, and they were the only ones home. Their manager had instructed that they get plenty of rest and to prepare themselves for their return. Taeyeon was worried as she thought she hadn't practiced her vocals enough. The problems with Tiffany the past months had been too distracting and worse, it plagued her at the worst possible times. Though Tiffany had always assured her of her support, Taeyeon's will helplessly kept itself back, unable to mentally focus on her career's next big step. She needed Tiffany by her side, and the instability of their relationship, it seemed, had only made that need hungrier. Taeyeon was just as out of it as ever.

The phone rang and Taeyeon stood up to answer it. She expected it would be their manager or one of the girls. "Hello?"

"Taetae!"

"Hey!" Taeyeon said in surprise. "I thought you were going out today." It was Tiffany.

"Yeah, something came up and daddy had to leave."

"Ah."

"How are you? Are you nervous?"

"Yeah. Super."

"Aw, come on. I know you'll do well."

"Thanks." Taeyeon sat on the floor and leaned against the wall. "How are you?" Her heart beat fast. It was odd how she felt nervous talking to Tiffany, even if they knew each other so well.

"I'm okay. You?"

"Like I said, nervous." Taeyeon laughed a little. Hearing Tiffany's voice calmed her, but at the same time, it scared her too whenever they talked. It was as if their conversations had already ended before it even started.

"Oh yeah." Tiffany laughed too. "I'm sorry. I really wish I could be there."

"I know."

"You know I'm your biggest fan," Tiffany said affectionately. She tried to shower as much support as she could. "I'm the president of your fan club!"

Taeyeon chuckled. "Well, you're not being a good president," she teased.

"What? I so am!" Tiffany defended herself. "It's not my fault I'm the only member."

"Right. Sorry, sorry, I forgot my voice has lost its magical touch."

"I know you'll blow them away. Kim Taeyeon always does!"

"Okay, now you're pulling my leg." Taeyeon revelled in the light conversation they were having. The unspoken frustrations they still suffered had gotten the best of them most of the time.

"I'm not!" Tiffany laughed. "Why would I lie to the person I love? Hmm?"

Taeyeon couldn't help but smile. "I dunno. You tell me."

"Taeyeon."

"Yeah?"

"I love you."

"I love you too."

"So much."

Taeyeon continued to smile. "I wish you were here."

"I know." Tiffany voice dropped. "I'm really sorry I can't."

"It's okay." Taeyeon brushed it off. She didn't want to let Tiffany's absence on her big day get to her, although it obviously did.

"I'll ask Yoona and Yuri to scream in my absence." Tiffany giggled. "You'll have to allow them to let loose."

"No!" Taeyeon protested. "I'll get distracted! Not those two!" She laughed. Hearing Tiffany's voice like this was precious, lovely and enthralling, that Taeyeon wished she could hear this voice everyday.

They continued to talk for a few hours, letting time pass by them for all they cared. This conversation was exactly what their relationship needed to keep going, to push away the problems that had been building between them. Taeyeon appreciated the fact that Tiffany had set time for her, however little, despite how busy she was. Tiffany, on the other hand, was grateful that she was able to carry out this conversation without the weak and needy Taeyeon coming out.

Waking up to a new day, to the unknown future, felt scary to most people who didn't know what to expect. But little did they know that it was more terrifying for those who did know what tomorrow would bring, that eventual tomorrow of a death, of an end, of a goodbye. Unfortunately, Taeyeon was one of those people.

From the very start, she had always known that she and Tiffany could never really be together. It was just a matter of time, for Taeyeon, it was just a matter of time before someone couldn't give, couldn't risk, or couldn't sacrifice anymore—and she was completely convinced she wouldn't be that person.

XXX. Debut

"Are you alright?" Their manager handed Taeyeon a bottle of water. "Smile! You look unhappy. Sweat and weeks of hard effort were pouring off Taeyeon's forehead. She was sitting nervously in front of her dresser, make-up being applied, her hair curled, when their manager appeared.

"I feel like I'm going to be sick." Taeyeon pinched her palms to control her nerves. Her dark eyebags had magically disappeared with the make-up. "Is Seohyun ready?"

"Yes, she's getting dressed."

Taeyeon closed her eyes, breathing deep, concentrating on calming down. Tiffany's smile was the first thing her mind had thought of. "Fany—"

"Are you sure you're alright?" Their manager walked closer to inspect Taeyeon. He was worried that Taeyeon might be too tense to perform. "Were you able to sleep last night?"

"I'm okay." Taeyeon smiled a little. "I'm okay. Don't worry." She clutched the fabric of the make-up apron on her lap, trying to stop her hands from trembling.

"Relax." Their manager tried to help. "You'll pull this off. You and Seohyun have been practicing this for weeks." Taeyeon just smiled, recalling the mistakes and blunders she had made during those practices. She felt her stomach turn over again. How hard could this be?

Taeyeon continued to wait, fidgeting and sweating in her seat, until the hour she and Seohyun had been anticipating for nearly a month came. It was nerve-racking, the thought of singing in front of an audience again, especially when this performance would dictate how their new careers would go. The pressure was too much, and it made Taeyeon more restless just sitting there, waiting. She thought of Tiffany and how much she wanted to hear Tiffany wish her luck, to tell her that things would go smoothly. They hadn't talked yet today.

"Seohyun." Taeyeon turned to her. "Do you have your phone with you?"

Seohyun reached for her bag on the dresser. "Here, unni." She handed the phone over. Taeyeon looked at the screen and sighed. She punched the dials. The ringing she heard made her heart jump with each beat, her mouth dry and her tongue twisted. "Hello? Fany?" She bit her lip after the last word.

"Taeyeon! I've been trying to contact you. I can't reach your cell."

"Fany, I'm scared."

"Don't be! You can do this! Fighting!"

Taeyeon couldn't stop her heart from beating her chest into a pulp. It was probably bruised already, with all the pressure and nervousness that boiled down together. "I wish you were here."

"I'm sorry, I really wish I could be there."

Silence and Taeyeon felt each tick of the clock that turned run after her. "I'm scared, I'm nervous, I want to cry." Taeyeon was about to cry. She didn't know why, but for some reason she felt that something wasn't right, like she was going to commit a mistake later.

"Fighting! Your voice is going to blow them away! Show 'em!"

A knock on the door and Taeyeon almost jumped in her seat. "Taeyeon? Seohyun? 10 minutes." The stage manager quickly disappeared as soon as he called them.

"Fany!" Taeyeon cried out for the last time. "It's time!" She stood up. Her knees wobbled.

"You can do this! Fighting!"

"Can I really do this?"

"Of course you can!"

"I think I'm going to be sick."

"Taeyeon, relax. Just breathe deep. I'll be praying for you!"

Another knock and Taeyeon felt herself cornered with nowhere to go. "Fany!"

"Fighting! I—"

Their manager appeared and pulled Taeyeon by the arm. "Let's go! We can't delay a single minute."
"Wait—!" Taeyeon protested, trying to put the phone back to her ear. She wanted to say and hear those three words before she performed. "Hello?"

"Taeyeon! Go!"

"Fany—" Taeyeon felt the eyes of their manager on her, waiting. She couldn't speak those words. "I'll talk to you later."

"Bye! I love you!" Tiffany said from the other line. "Fighting!" Taeyeon closed the phone shut and followed their manager. She was uneasy as ever.

Noisy murmurs and the sound of clapping thundered as soon as Taeyeon and Seohyun appeared on stage. Seohyun walked towards her place in front of the piano, holding the piece she had played countless of times before. Taeyeon followed her slowly, careful with the steps she took, because she felt she was going to trip any minute.

Once they had taken their positions, the lights dimmed and the cameras began to roll. Taeyeon could feel her throat cave in and her stomach drop lower than it really could. She held on tightly to the microphone, gripping her nervousness to it, determined to deliver what was expected of her. She looked down in front of her, to the audience, to the front where the girls were clapping and smiling. Her eyes lingered to two empty seats at the end of the row, the seats Tiffany and Jessica were supposed to be on. She inhaled a deep breath, thinking of Tiffany. Her mind went blank.

The stage manager at the side of the stage raised his hand and the cue was given. Microphones were turned up, adjusted, and Seohyun began to play the opening notes, her fingers lithely moving. Everyone strained to hear clearly the soft melodious sound coming from the piano, completely rapt by the gentle emotion that played in their ears.

A few seconds into it and Taeyeon was supposed to start singing, but she just stood there, frozen, panic fortunately hidden. She had forgotten her cue and now she was lost on how to enter, the lyrics in her mind swirling madly. Their manager grimaced from behind the curtain, dreading how the performance will continue when it had already started the wrong way.

Seohyun continued to play, adjusting, cleverly looping and blending the notes over to make sure the song still sounded natural. She looked at Taeyeon from across the stage, waiting for Taeyeon to start singing, but Taeyeon wasn't singing. What was happening? Leaning in closer to the microphone, she sang the opening lines for her to save their faces.

As soon as Taeyeon heard Seohyun's voice, she snapped back into composure, and turned her head to look at Seohyun. She walked to her, on the side of the stage, and positioned herself there. The cameras could only follow. This wasn't how the performance was supposed to go. Taeyeon looked at Seohyun, opening her mouth, grateful that the lyrics in her head cleared up for her to follow. Their voices blended well.

Halfway into the song, their manager and the girls still held their breath. They were confused on what had just happened, on what happened to Taeyeon. This really wasn't herself.

As the song came to an end, the audience hooted and cheered, and the girls let out a sigh of relief. Those short five minutes of watching, of waiting for the next accident to happen, was torturous. If Taeyeon and Seohyun hadn't been able to save their performance, then the same flames of disappointment and frustration would burn them just as much. This performance was theirs just as it was Taeyeon and Seohyun's. They were still a group this way.

"Unni." Seohyun stood up and hugged Taeyeon who looked like she was about to have another breakdown. "Unni!" She was so grateful that the years of piano practice under her belt had saved them, "It's over! We did it!"

"Seohyun—," Taeyeon buried her face. "Thank you."

"Unni." Seohyun looked at Taeyeon, concerned over what had just happened. "What's wrong? What happened to you?"

"I-I blanked out," Taeyeon mumbled. She couldn't believe it.

"Unni, it's okay—it's over! We did it!"

"Seohyun—" They walked down to the side of the stage and headed towards their dressing room.

Their manager and the girls had already gathered ahead, bouquets of flowers in their arms for the amazing performance. It was nothing short of amazing, even to those who knew that the song wasn't supposed to have played out that way. Sooyoung hugged Taeyeon immediately once she saw her enter the room. "Taeyeon!" The girls joined in on the hug.

"Taeyeon." Their manager came forward, his face caught in the middle of being strict and kind. "What happened out there?"

"I-I forgot the lyrics." Taeyeon bent her head. She was already harshly beating herself up.

"Aish," was all their manager said. He hugged Taeyeon. "I told you to get plenty of rest. You look like you didn't get any at all."

Taeyeon cried in their manager's arms, surprised that he didn't scold her. "Oppa—"

"Well, get dressed and pack your things." Their manager released her and hugged Seohyun too. "I'll deal with the management on what happened."

"Thank you." Taeyeon could only mumble. She wanted to cry and disappear.

The thoughts of Tiffany that rushed into Taeyeon's mind during the performance had probably pushed Taeyeon a little too far this time, but Taeyeon admittedly didn't want to blame that part on her. She had only thought of how much she needed and missed her love, and how that moment would have meant so much more if they were all complete. Taeyeon cried silently in the car at how things had gotten out of hand, out of control, spiralling helplessly in different directions. She was being swallowed by Tiffany's absence, by her irrational emotions, and yet she still held on. Taeyeon needed to wake up.

In her room, she locked the door and cowered behind her blankets. The winter winds howled outside her windows and the icicles that formed on the ledges barred her in. She didn't want to talk to Tiffany, to Seohyun, or to anyone at the moment. Taeyeon needed to talk to herself first.

"Sunny." Yuri looked down on the dining table. The girls had gathered in the kitchen, worrying over how Taeyeon had gotten off the car and ran straight to her room once they had arrived home. "What are we going to do?"

Sunny leaned back on her chair, just as clueless as they all were. "I don't know. Should we tell her?"

"Maybe we should consult with Sica first." Hyoyeon suggested from her seat.

"Okay." Yuri stood up and disappeared to get the phone.

"I think we should tell her," Sooyoung quietly said. "She has the right to know."

"But unni, this isn't our business," Yoona raised her point, "I don't think we should be meddling."

"We're not meddling," Sunny defended Sooyoung. "We're just looking out for Taeyeon." Yoona pursed her lips in agreement. Seeing Taeyeon miserable all this time without Tiffany had made her feel she was a useless friend.

Yuri appeared again, sitting back down on her seat in the middle of everyone. "Hello? Sica?"

"Yul! How'd it go??"

"Sica—"

"Did the audience cheer loudly?"

"Sica, something happened—"

"Huh?" Jessica raised her voice in alarm. "What happened?"

"Taeyeon had a little trouble." Yuri looked around her. All eyes were on her. "She forgot the lyrics and if it weren't for Seohyun, the performance wouldn't have turned out the way it did." Sooyoung patted Seohyun on the back. They were all grateful the performance was saved.

"Huh? Why?"

"Taeyeon's locked herself up in her room. She won't come out."

Jessica sighed. "—you guys think Fany has to do with this, don't you?" she asked before Yuri said it first.

"Yeah."

"I don't know. Fany's been pretty out of it lately too. I don't know why but I've never seen her *dead* for this long."

"Dead?" Yuri relayed the information to the girls. "What do you mean?"

"Well—that eyesmile? I haven't seen it in awhile." Jessica explained. "Seriously. Whenever I talk with her, it's like I'm talking to a wall. I thought she's just moody, but I guess it's deeper than that."

"I see."

Sunny tapped Yuri on the shoulder. "Let me talk to Sica." Yuri handed the phone over. "Hello?"

"Sunny?"

"Sica, Taeyeon's been crying a lot. She hides it, but I hear her at times."

"Oh." Jessica's voice dropped. "How long has this been going on?"

"Awhile," Sunny estimated. She was sure this matter wasn't anything recent. "Does Fany ever talk about Taeyeon?"

Jessica paused. She deliberated whether or not she should tell what she knew. "Not always." Taeyeon's friendship was just as important to her as Tiffany's was, but what if Tiffany didn't want to share their problems? She had always been a little private with her relationship with Taeyeon. Tiffany only blew off steam at Jessica when she couldn't take it anymore. The stress from a new environment, the pressure from her father, the frustrations of maintaining a long distance relationship, the preparations for school—Tiffany dealt with a lot of things. She couldn't handle them all at the same time.

"She opens up from time to time, out of the blue. Nothing specific though," Jessica hesitated revealing what she guessed and concluded from Tiffany's actions lately. "But it's like she wants to—," she paused, hoping she was wrong, "break it off."

XXXI. Test

Tiffany didn't have to guess why Jessica had appeared in her room uninvited and unannounced once again. She knew why. Jessica had always gone to her whenever news of Taeyeon reached her, news that Sunny and Yuri shared over the phone for the past months. She didn't look up when Jessica walked over to her and asked her what was going on. She didn't hear the questions Jessica threw at her over the mess of her room, the trash and tissues on the floor, why the music was loud enough to make someone deaf. Tiffany heard nothing.

"Fany—?" Jessica snapped her fingers in front of a lifeless Tiffany who was on the floor. "Hey."

Tiffany looked pale and sickly, as if she had suffered the same sleepless nights Taeyeon had been having. Under her eyes were dark circles, her cheekbones appeared more prominent, and the fringes on her forehead unfashionably covered the brightness of her eyes. Tiffany looked like she had been ran over by a ten wheeler truck, only it was worse, because she was being run over by what she knew was coming. The end.

"Fany—?" Jessica hugged Tiffany. "Come on, talk to me." She finally broke her silence on how Tiffany had been acting all this time. She had never once asked about her and Taeyeon because she respected their privacy, but this time, it seemed, she needed to step in.

Tiffany looked at Jessica. "What happened?" she asked, waiting for the onslaught that was about to come her way. This was just one of the many times that the news Jessica was about to give would kill her. She knew she was guilty of how miserable Taeyeon had been, but what could have she done to help? Taeyeon needed to help herself.

"She almost ruined their performance," Jessica said. "She forgot the words and Seohyun had to step in to save it."

"What—?"

"Good thing they managed, good thing they were able to." Jessica helped ease the blow of the news. Tiffany set out a sigh of relief. "Thank goodness for Seohyun!"

"Yeah."

"And Taeyeon?"

Jessica looked at Tiffany, her eyes saying the same word she had for the last month. "—crying."

Tiffany sighed heavily, her own tears threatening to spill. Every time she heard this, that Taeyeon was crying because of her, because of her absence, it hurt her. It hurt her to the depths of her heart, but what was hurting going to help? She knew that Taeyeon was losing herself, helplessly losing herself in this relationship, but could she let Taeyeon go? Tiffany began to cry uncontrollably.

"Fany—," Jessica hugged Tiffany again, "It's okay—just let it out—"

"Jessi—," Tiffany sobbed furiously, "what am I going to do? I don't want to let her go—"

"I know." Jessica patted Tiffany's hair. "I know you dont."

"I didn't think it'd be this hard."

"No one did."

Tiffany bit her knuckles. The tears that flowed choked her. "I don't think I can."

"Then don't. Fight for it," Jessica encouraged. "Hold on."

Tiffany looked at Jessica, her eyes brave and unyielding. "But we both know this isn't right anymore. Things have gotten way out of hand. Who knows how she'll be in her future performances? We're lucky that Seohyun was able to save it!"

Jessica remained silent, afraid to instigate anything. "Fany—"

"I love her. I really do," Tiffany declared to herself, "but maybe—that isn't enough." She continued to cry, with Jessica comforting her. Could she have the heart to let Taeyeon go for her own good? Before it destroyed Taeyeon completely?

Tiffany had never thought that they would reach this point in their relationship. She had always thought that she and Taeyeon could go the distance, to overcome the odds against them, but ever since Taeyeon had become an entirely different person, her hopes wavered. Taeyeon was always moody and depressed, and whenever they talked, instead of making the most out of the little time given, it was wasted on one pushing the other away, silence, and other frustrations.

Tiffany continued to cry in the broad daylight.

In Jessica's arms, Tiffany sank and drowned in her dark thoughts, blindly trying to find a way out. She didn't know why, but she feared the voice that was growing louder and louder inside her head, that letting Taeyeon go was the right thing to do. This situation wasn't just a mere test of their love anymore, because in fact, Tiffany and Taeyeon hadn't even passed the first test of all—the test of their selves.

Tiffany had dived head first into this relationship without thinking of the consequences it would also bring Taeyeon. She had already put her through too much, waiting, sacrificing, lying to the others, and now to see Taeyeon self-destruct because of her, because of what they had, it was plainly the last straw. Love wasn't supposed to destroy people.

On the other hand, Taeyeon loved too much that she easily gave up herself, her entire being. Most of her time and priority had been poured to Tiffany, that when Tiffany wasn't there anymore, the physical distance between them had caught her off guard. Though she tried her best to fight it, to remain strong and rational, it sadly wasn't enough. Love started personal battles too.

Tiffany wiped her tears away and waited for the clock to tick evening. It was still a long eight hours away but, strangely, thinking, finding and putting the right words together had warped it faster than it should have.

She reached for the phone.

XXXII. Phone

Taeyeon awoke in the middle of the night with her heart racing. She had fallen asleep crying and thinking of Tiffany. The performance several hours ago haunted her, how she could have messed up like that, but she had it coming, considering how hard it had been in the past months for her to pull her mind together. She was lost, easily distracted and dragged into her depression. It was sickening.

Crying could have been as easy as breathing, and as bruised as she felt, Taeyeon still insisted that her love for Tiffany was unconditional. Did that sound foolish just as it was impossible? Maybe, but to Taeyeon, it wasn't. She refused to admit it.

She lied on her bed, letting time pass by, because time didn't seem to matter anymore. Darkness became dawn, and dawn became morning, and just like that, Taeyeon had survived another night without Tiffany. She got out of bed and went to the phone. She needed to set things straight.

When the phone rang as she held it in her hand, she could have sworn she felt her heart being strangled for a second. There was only one person who would call this early in the morning.

Nervously, she answered it. "Hello?"

"Taetae—," Tiffany answered from the other line. Her voice was strained, hoarse and heavy, and Taeyeon could only guess why.

"Fany—"

"I heard about what happened—"

"Yeah—" Taeyeon looked down at her feet. There were no excuses to what had happened.

"Taeyeon—"

"Fany—," Taeyeon felt herself tearing up already, "I miss you." She needed that voice to bring comfort and assurance.

"Taeyeon—"

Silence.

The ticking of the clock behind Taeyeon hypnotized her for a second. "We need to talk—," Tiffany finally answered.

Taeyeon sat on the floor and leaned back against the wall, their conversation making its anticipated turn. "Yeah, there's something I want to say too." She heard crying immediately. "Fany—"

"Taeyeon—," Tiffany continued to sob, "I love you." Taeyeon let her own tears fall. She argued with herself she couldn't let Tiffany go. "You know I do."

"I love you so much it hurts me to see you like this." Taeyeon remained silent, the words not registering in her mind. "Depressed and miserable, this isn't you." Tiffany had stopped crying, but Taeyeon continued on, crying in silence and in bitterness to what had become of her. She didn't put any blame on Tiffany.

"It kills me to know you're having a hard time," Tiffany continued. The silence coming from Taeyeon seemed to have been her permission to go on. "—because of me, because of us—how can we continue like this?"

Tiffany's voice faltered, "I have to let you go." She barely got the words out. Taeyeon slumped into the wall, not knowing what to say. She had seen this coming, but now that the moment had come, she wished it would stop piercing through her depths like it was limitless, because it wasn't. Taeyeon stopped crying.

"Taeyeon—"

"Taeyeon—?"

"—thank you for everything we've been through." Tiffany tried to swathe as much affection she could in the silence that enclosed them, but it was hopeless—Taeyeon had closed herself up to Tiffany's

words, not exactly in anger, but in self-pity that she couldn't let Tiffany go, when it was the right thing to do.

"Do you still love me?" Taeyeon weakly asked, numbness setting in.

"Always have and always will."

"But it's not enough."

"Taeyeon—"

"Stupid, so stupid." Taeyeon muttered to herself. She felt like the biggest fool.

"No, you're not stupid."

Taeyeon angry's tears had formed again. "I am. I feel so stupid for believing in this."

"I love you—I never regretted a single minute with you."

"Why are you doing this?" Taeyeon tried to scream, but it only aggravated her tears. "Why? Tell me! Why?"

"I don't want to do this," Tiffany spoke in between her sobs, "I just have to."

"No! You don't understand!" Taeyeon tried to fight it. Did she even understand where Tiffany was coming from?

"Taeyeon, trust me—without me, life would be a lot easier." Tiffany tried to be firm. She couldn't let a single speck of hesitation get in the way, otherwise the courage she had gathered would break.

"No!" Taeyeon stammered. "I love you!"

"Please don't make this any harder," Tiffany begged, "the more I talk to you, the more I'm torn. More than half of me wants to take it all back, take everything I've said back, but I've decided. I have to stick with that—I'm sorry."

Taeyeon knew this was just as hard for Tiffany; Tiffany was only doing the thing she never had the guts to do. To let the other go for their own good. But why was it so hard?

"Maybe in the future we can still be together—" Enough, Taeyeon had heard enough. She didn't want to hold on anymore, it angered her that Tiffany was giving her false hopes. How could they still be together in the future if they were letting each other go now? Taeyeon stood up and rammed her fist to the wall.

"Okay," was all Taeyeon responded and hung up.

XXXIII. Heartbreak

XXXIV. Beginning

Alone in the dark I'm sitting and thinking of what became of us, of what we had, if I'm doing the right thing, still. Tell me, if you were in my position instead, if we had switched places, would you have done the same thing? Or would you have selfishly held on, cursed the overwhelming odds, and just continued to watch from the sides how this love destroyed everything it wasn't supposed to?

There aren't any words for it, how it ends, how the heart shatters into a million tiny shards of broken dreams and hopes. No words are enough to describe the agony and despair, the eventual bitter tomorrows that are still coming with this heartbreak.

If I stayed, if I had chosen to stay and fight, to stand my ground, you would have let me go anyway. You know you would, we both do. But I love you so much that I let it happen, I let it happen just like that.

I want to let you go, finally, I want to, and though I know it may not be easy, I still want to.

XXXV. Bravery

"Wait! I'm not ready," Tiffany panicked.

"You can do this." Jessica patted Tiffany's back. "It's just one night."

"But what if something happens? What if she shouts at me?" Tiffany paced outside the girls' dorm, "Worse, what if she ignores me?"

Jessica sighed. "There's nothing you can do but to respect that," she reminded.

It had been six months since Tiffany and Taeyeon separated. Since then all forms of communication between them have been cut, completely severed until their wounds could let them talk to each other without hurting. Jessica and Tiffany had flown in the other day for a short vacation and to visit the girls. They've been gone for a long time, but to Taeyeon, it didn't matter that they were.

Taeyeon fidgeted nervously in her seat as she waited for the doorbell to ring. She had been preparing herself for a week for this planned dinner. When Yuri and Sooyoung had told her that Tiffany and Jessica were visiting, all her attempts at moving on were seemingly flushed, washed down the drain now that she was going to see Tiffany again, finally.

Outside, Tiffany continued to sweat out her nerves on Jessica. She didn't have the courage to ring the doorbell. They've been standing outside the dorm for nearly ten minutes already. She didn't think she was ready to see Taeyeon face to face after everything that happened. Tiffany wanted to run away.

When the girls had first learned of Tiffany and Taeyeon's breakup, they tried to remain as neutral and helpful as possible for both parties, even if they felt that a breakup over the phone was harsh. They knew that Tiffany only did what she had to. After all, how could that have been easy? To let someone go because you loved them enough?

The six months that had passed between them were far from easy. Taeyeon wondered how she had even survived the ordeal, that first week, that first month, when she was so sure she could die of the pain she felt, but work fortunately had been kind enough to help her live, at least on a daily basis. It was hard but taking things one day at a time helped and she somehow managed.

For Tiffany, it was a different story. She had fallen into a deep depression the first two months, losing weight, sleeping all day, going over and over on what she had done. She let Taeyeon go, but she desperately wanted her back. Would Taeyeon still accept her?

Sadly, going back to school hadn't been enough to keep Tiffany preoccupied from her thoughts of Taeyeon, but having Jessica with her helped, and by the fourth month, she too somehow managed to wake from her depressed state. She was determined to hold on, although secretly, until Taeyeon said the words she dreaded to hear. That she didn't love her anymore.

The last words between them had been vague, full of hope and what-ifs. Taeyeon had only merely agreed to what Tiffany said last, that maybe they could still be together in the future, when their lives would hopefully permit it.

Perhaps that was the strongest thread that pulled them back to each other, that they never fell out of love in the first place.

Tiffany exhaled and rung the doorbell. She decided that she would know what to do when she was there already, learn it on the spot. There was no use fretting over the possibilities. She didn't even know what to expect. The door opened and she instantly smiled.

Behind the door was Taeyeon, looking better than the time Tiffany had last seen her at the airport, beautiful and happy. Tiffany smiled and on impulse she walked forward to hug her, but she stopped midway.

"Oh. Hey—" Taeyeon hesitantly raised her arms, not sure if she should hug Tiffany. A part of her wanted to, but a bigger part warned her to be cautious instead. She smiled. "Fany."

"Taeyeon—" Their stare lingered, immediately sensing the warmth and familiarity of each other's eyes.

"It's good to see you," Taeyeon awkwardly said. She turned to Jessica to save herself. "Sica!"

"Taeyeon!" Jessica hugged her. Taeyeon's gaze was cast down, avoiding Tiffany's eyes who watched her hug Jessica. "You look great!"

Taeyeon smiled. "You too."

"Sica!" Yuri appeared and hugged Jessica. "What took you guys? Was traffic heavy? Fany!"

Jessica shook her head. "Yuri! Look at you!" she gushed.

Yuri laughed. "Liking my hair, I see." She flipped the soft wavy curls on her shoulder in the air.

"I told you you should've kept that hairstyle a long time ago!"

Yuri pulled Jessica inside the house. "Come on, let's go inside!" Tiffany and Taeyeon remained outside. They appeared perfectly nervous and uncomfortable, the short distance between them not helping. Taeyeon smiled weakly and followed Jessica and Yuri inside the house.

Standing there, Tiffany wondered how she was going to approach Taeyeon, now that the latter appeared wary and guarded. She was grateful that Taeyeon had even looked at her when she expected the opposite to happen. Her heart plunged with her longing. She knew she still loved Taeyeon. She was sure of it when their eyes had met.

"Fany-unni!" Seohyun and Yoona ran. "Unni!"

"I missed you guys!" Tiffany hugged them and waved at everyone else who were in the kitchen. "Sooyoung!"

"Fany!" Sooyoung dropped her plate and walked over to Tiffany.

"Aha! It's our mushroom!" Sunny exclaimed behind Sooyoung.

Tiffany laughed. "You guys haven't changed at all!" She eyed everyone in sight. Her stare stopped at Taeyeon who was sitting already around the dining table with Hyoyeon.

Hyoyeon hurriedly finished murmuring at Taeyeon who listened intently. "Fany!" Hyoyeon screamed and stood up, leaving Taeyeon sitting alone.

"Hey!" Tiffany hugged Hyoyeon. She panicked on where she would sit later, when she and Taeyeon had always used to sit beside each other.

"Guys! Let's eat!" Yuri called out from the kitchen. Jessica stood close by.

The girls headed over to the dining table, taking their respective seats. To Tiffany's surprise, Sunny had taken the seat beside Taeyeon, which meant that she had to take Sunny's seat which was across, and not so coincidentally directly, opposite Taeyeon's. Tiffany slowly sat down, careful not to look straight in front of her.

"Dig in!" Sooyoung began to distribute servings. Yoona held up her plate.

"Unni! How's school?" Seohyun turned to Tiffany. "Do you have a lot of assignments?"

Tiffany nodded. "Yeah, a bit. But it's been fun." She smiled. Taeyeon listened in on their conversation, despite talking with Sunny, her ears still heard everything.

"I want to visit your campus!" Seohyun said. "Promise to give me a tour next time."

Tiffany patted Seohyun's hand. "Of course! You'll like it there. The library's pretty big."

Seohyun smiled. "That's good, unni."

Not surprisingly, the six months that had passed the girls altogether hadn't changed their bond. They were still the same old family they were, lively and cheerful, full of laughter and jokes. If one hadn't known about what had happened with Tiffany and Taeyeon, they could have sworn that nothing was wrong, that everything blissfully stayed same.

Though Tiffany and Taeyeon were careful of their actions, cautious of what they said and where they looked, they both knew they couldn't let this opportunity pass. They hadn't set things straight between them and there were plenty of things that needed to be said, that needed to be asked.

Taeyeon herself needed to know the answers to her questions. Did she still or didn't she anymore?

"What? Why didn't you tell me about this?" Jessica gasped at Hyoyeon who apparently had a secret admirer.

Hyoyeon smirked. "Tell you about what?" she innocently asked.

"Oh rub that cheeky smile off your face!" Sooyoung slapped her on the shoulder. "I can't believe I'm still single!" she complained. The girls laughed at her.

"Yah! That's because you're so tall!" Sunny teased.

"Yah! You're not tall but you're single too!" Sooyoung teased back.

"We're cursed! We're doomed to be single forever!" Yuri exclaimed. Tiffany felt her stomach churn at what Yuri had said. It wasn't too long ago when she was happily taken, in fact, being with Taeyeon were some of the happiest days of her life.

"Except me!" Hyoyeon snickered. Everyone except two girls whined in envy. Another two girls remained quiet, letting out only an occasional smile or laugh throughout the entire conversation.

"Heh. Whatever." Sooyoung took a bite of cake and appeased her dissatisfaction with it. "At least I'm not the only one." She eyed Sunny as if she meant the latter would be the last to get married.

"I'm happy for you!" Jessica playfully punched Hyoyeon on the shoulder. "You're all grown up!"

After dinner and dessert, the girls had dissolved into smaller groups. Sooyoung, Jessica, Sunny and Hyoyeon remained in the kitchen talking and gossiping. Yuri, Yoona and Seohyun were in the living room watching television, while Taeyeon had disappeared unnoticed. Tiffany wondered where she was. She looked for her upstairs, checking their rooms, not sure if she was ready to talk to her.

Outside, the same gentle winds that passed during Taeyeon and Tiffany's memorable night together in the garden nearly a year ago blew against the trees. Taeyeon sat on the stone bench, looking up, admiring the crescent moon. It helped her sort out her thoughts, whether or not she should talk to Tiffany. Tiffany didn't seem to have changed, but too many things have happened, that it was hard not to look at her the same way again. Taeyeon worried whether or not she was losing time.

"Hey." Taeyeon almost gasped; the faceless voice she yearned to hear the past months grew nearer.

Taeyeon turned her head slowly. "Hey," she responded. Tiffany sat beside her, a considerable distance separated them.

The crucial seconds that followed, of what one would say, of who would start the conversation, almost made Tiffany want to cry. She swallowed her fears. This wasn't the time to be afraid. "Taeyeon, I—"

"It's okay," Taeyeon interrupted. "It's okay." She smiled weakly.

"I—"

"I'm not angry." Tiffany remained silent, on the edge of her seat guessing what Taeyeon meant to say. "I really missed you—I'd be lying if I said I didn't." Taeyeon's eyes were clear and sure. "I'd also be lying if I said I didn't love you anymore."

"I—"

"But I've decided—I'm letting you go for real." Taeyeon's eyes pierced Tiffany with those last words.

"Taeyeon, wait!" Tiffany reached out for Taeyeon's hand. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry that I hurt you before—"

Taeyeon didn't pull away from Tiffany's hand. She smiled weakly again. "You only did what you had to."

"Taeyeon—"

"I'd never have the guts to let you go. I can't—" Tiffany rushed up and kissed Taeyeon. Their lips parted and for brief second, it relieved them of the pain. It was short, but it hit Tiffany deeply. She remained frozen in place when Taeyeon abruptly pulled away.

"Fany—," Tiffany could see Taeyeon's eyes begin to water, "I'm sorry."

Tiffany's tears fell before she had even realized she was about to cry. "I love you! Can you give me another chance?"

Taeyeon closed her eyes. "I don't want to get hurt anymore."

"But—"

"It's not you. I just don't think I'm ready to give this another try—"

Tiffany grabbed Taeyeon's hands. "I'll wait for you. No matter how long it takes."

"Fany—"

"I know this is my fault. At least give me the chance to fix it," Tiffany began to sob, "I don't want to let you go again."

Taeyeon leaned in to hug Tiffany. She hugged her tight, trying to stop their words from breaking them further. "I don't want you to wait for nothing."

"I'm not."

"I can't make any promises."

"You don't have to."

"Let's just," Taeyeon stuttered, "see what happens—you have school and I have my work—I don't want us to get hurt again when we're not ready." Tiffany tried her best to stop crying.

"It hurts me whenever I make you cry." Taeyeon wiped Tiffany's tears away. "Let's stop crying, hmm?"

"But—"

"This isn't goodbye—you know I still love you but I'm just not sure if that's enough."

Tiffany regained her composure. She didn't blame Taeyeon for having her hesitations and doubts. There was no one to blame for what happened with them. Nobody could have gotten out of that situation without getting hurt, or getting as little as a bruise. Tiffany and Taeyeon got their hearts broken, but it didn't mean that it couldn't be mended.

Tiffany put on the same brave accepting face she had always shown. "I'll wait for you. I'll wait for you to come back to me," she agreed.

Epilogue

Sometimes I think about what would have happened if I had done anything different, if I wasn't so scared, or if I didn't disappoint you, us. I know I've made a lot of painful decisions, decisions that hurt you, but I don't regret any of it, even if it cost me more than I would have let it. Being with you were some of the happiest days of my life, and letting you go, the day I let you go, was one of the hardest.

All of our memories, they're still with me. I kept them because I haven't forgotten how it had given me more than life and love, more than enough reasons to be happy. I love you. I still wonder why it's you, you who deserve someone better.

It's been a long walk, that bend, and everyday I wonder at how long it has been, how hard it has been. But then eighteen months seem so short, so little time for me to have waited for you, now that you're finally back in my arms.

Finally, back to me.

Author's Notes

Wow. Words aren't enough to describe how ecstatic I am that I've finally finished this, all 68000+ words! Really, there were so many times I wanted to quit because I felt I wasn't connecting with most of my readers, especially silent ones, and that maybe I was pissing a lot of poeple off with the drama going on. But here we are, it's finished, and if you're reading this now, it was one helluva roller-coaster ride, yes?

To be honest, I wasn't a hard TaeNy shipper when I started this. I guess that helps explain why I had the guts to break TaeNy's hearts as early as Chapter 5. Traffic Thinking was supposed to be just a one-shot, an experiment, but thanks to my first readers (you know who you are) it became so much more. Really, without you guys, the story wouldn't be where it is now.

The story and the characters—I'll let them speak for themselves. Every line stands for something in the story, whether it was subtly written or not. The POV in Chapter 22 and 34 is Taeyeon's, the latter one dated on the 5th month of their breakup. The epilogue is Tiffany's, dated the day she and Taeyeon got back together. The 9 segments in Chapter 23 is Taeyeon's, Sooyoung's, Hyoyeon's, Yoona's, Yuri's, Seohyun's, Jessica's, Tiffany's and Sunny's, respectively. Chapter 33 is really an empty chapter.

I want to thank my commenters and my beta, Ling (aka lingoo), for all the support and encouragement, I'm glad to have met all of you. :) Last but not least, God, because He gave me the words to write this.

TaeNy is REAL. Nuff' said.

TRACKLIST

I wote some chapters with specific songs in mind, just thought I'd share them.

Chapter 5 – Sway by Bic Runga
Chapter 6 – 23 by Jimmy Eat World
Chapter 8 – Best of You by Foo Fighters
Chapter 10 – Terrified by Katharine Mcphee
Chapter 25 – You're Beautiful by James Blunt
Chapter 28 – Somewhere Only We Know by Keane
Chapter 31 & 32 – Already Gone by Kelly Clarkson
Epilogue – River Flows In You – Yiruma

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