



You Mean Yes

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3:09am

Embrace

Everyday Love

Hesitation

Lionheart

Lips

Love Letter

Love Me Back To Life

Ne Me Quitte Pas

Rêveur (there is a tomorrow)

Steps

The Monster

Taeyeon x Tiffany

HR

3:09am

Taeyeon stared at the red numbers for a little while longer. They carried much weight, being such a familiar sight, and her eyes focussed so much on their LED existence that she wondered if they might blind her.

Then she flicked her gaze away. It trickled a short distance from the alarm clock, and landed on Tiffany's back. Her long hair was messy, tossed about, her face turned towards Taeyeon, her cheek pressed into the pillow. The slow, even strokes of her breath ghosted over the knuckles of her hand which curled near her chin.

Taeyeon shifted to coil on her side, and watched the rhythmic movement of Tiffany's breathing. It was a warm night, the room was stuffy, and the soft thin sheets only came up to just above the curve of Tiffany's lower back.

She compared the sight of a peaceful Tiffany to the situation they were in an hour earlier, after Tiffany landed face first on the bed with a tired sigh, when Taeyeon stopped massaging her shoulders and slipped her hands elsewhere. The crease between Tiffany's eyebrows was lesser, the muscles in her jaw relaxed, her breathing unfettered, the beats of her heart slow.

Her skin glowed, glistened ever so slightly, in the light of the robotic numbers on the other side of the bed.

Taeyeon lifted her head. She leaned forward. The scent of Tiffany's skin met her, and she stilled for a moment so that she could be absorbed into the warmth that reached her from Tiffany's body. Her mouth grazed the curve of Tiffany's shoulder, bottom lip catching and rubbing.

The most delicious taste.

She closed her eyes briefly, and pulled away. She lay on her side again, staring at Tiffany.

Taeyeon knew she would not get enough sleep.

The tips of her fingers moved, traced the protrusion of Tiffany's shoulder blade, following the corner, the solidity of Tiffany's flesh and skin anchoring Taeyeon's touch. There was so much warmth.

Taeyeon closed her eyes, letting her finger trail along the bumps of Tiffany's spine.

She stopped when she reached the edge of the sheets, and spread out her hand wide to cover Tiffany's back as much as she could, the contact spreading an ebbing heat along her hand. Then she opened her eyes again.

She tightened the muscles of her hand slightly, as if to clutch Tiffany in her palm and hold her. Tiffany's body stirred as she breathed, inflating and deflating; slowly and absently, now taking Taeyeon with her.

Her gaze fixed. She didn't blink. She wondered. Tiffany's eyelashes were just long enough to touch her cheek. One side of her mouth was a tiny bit slanted, the muscles softer.

The mirror corner of Taeyeon's mouth curved.

Tiffany woke. Half. Her eyes opened slightly; blearily she blinked at Taeyeon and made a soft noise. Taeyeon just smiled. Tiffany reached out, gripped Taeyeon tightly and tugged. Taeyeon shifted, and was blanketed in Tiffany's embrace.

Numbers flickered. 3:09am. Taeyeon and Tiffany slept.

Embrace

She was back in prison, or the place she considered as such, the house with open doors, and she almost couldn't cope with it. Almost. But there was something about walking in that building, stepping through the old-fashioned tidy living rooms with the lingering cigar smoke and the spoken words that hung from the ceiling lifeless now, and there was another thing about being able to do it without feeling afraid at all. The place stopped being a prison when she left – not her prison any more, at least – and the words that hurt her before had now done their duty and faded. The eyes that drew tears from her heart were gone. And they would never come back.

The doors were open because she didn't know what to do with it. The house. She didn't really want it. She wished it never existed in the first place.

In the muted silence, she strolled. Her rubber soled sneakers were quiet on the carpet. It used to be luxurious, thick fibre, so soft and warm in winters when she would smile at the feeling of her bare toes upon it. It thinned over time, a little worn, a little forgotten. Other things had pressed down on it too hard, stifling its comfort. She kept her shoes on, and the scuffs of dirt she left on it gave her no feeling at all.

Her bedroom was the same as it had always been. They hadn't removed anything or moved any of it. She could dump an imaginary backpack on the ground by her desk and throw herself down onto the dense covers of her bed, and sigh, and be back in high school with her frown.

She could. But she couldn't.

There were messages on the answering machine by the phone in the hallway. The blinking red light caught her eye and she frowned. There was no reason to call this place. There was no one to talk to here.

"Hey, Taeyeon?" a voice huffed, lilting with uncertainty. "I, uh, I don't know if you remember me, I'm Tiffany Hwang. I- I heard about what happened. With your parents. I'm so, so very sorry for your loss. And... well, I know a little something about what you feel right now. Probably. So, um, calling this number was a long shot..."

Taeyeon drifted a short way down the hall as Tiffany's voice fluttered through the house. There were pictures on the wall in dusty wooden frames. No brightness. Only tense indifference. They had taken down the pictures of the happiness that once they shared.

"... and I don't know if you'll even hear this, but I just wanted to – well, I just wanted to talk to you, I guess."

She ran the tips of her fingers over the glass covering a black and white photograph. Traced the lines of the flowing white dress, tapped the grey rose in the lapel of a black tuxedo, and smothered the smiles because she couldn't bear to look at them.

"Taeyeon."

She halted. The care in that voice. The emotion, tenderness and sentimentality, made her eyes go wide. She turned, searching. And she remembered it was only recorded on the answering machine that was out of her sight. Tiffany.

"Taeyeon," her voice repeated, "please talk to me. I think we both need it. We can just talk about... oh, I don't know, we can talk about what you want to do with your parents' house, if you want, but I just. I need to see you. I miss you," and her voice broke.

Taeyeon closed her eyes. She listened to the amplification of Tiffany's shaky inhale.

"You remember me, right?" the whisper barely made it out of the machine. "I always wonder if you've forgotten me."

The muscles of Taeyeon's lips twitched briefly. She didn't need to say a thing.

"Call me, or – or just come over. I still live with my father. He's... he'd like a visit from you. Um, okay, well, I should go. You know where to find me."

There was a click and a little whirr, and then it moved to the next message. Taeyeon didn't have a chance to let it all sink in – and there was so much waiting to be absorbed – before her lawyer spoke.

"Ms Kim, hello again. You said you would be at the house for a while so I thought I'd call you there. I just wanted to remind you of the deadline for finalization on your option to sell the house to your father's business partner. He is eager to take possession of the property. He called my office twice this morning just to enquire about your decision. We've discussed it, I know, and I've given you my advice,

but please make a decision before Friday so that we can commence proceedings before the weekend. Thank you.”

Nothing followed the final click. Taeyeon sighed. She looked around, not really seeing her surroundings, and wondered if she wanted to sell the house to the new director of her father’s company.

He was keen to have it, because he knew exactly what kind of profit he could get out of it in auction, and letting him have it would be by far the quickest solution. She could call her lawyer right now, tell him she wanted to do it, and it was only four o’clock so she would have enough time to go to his office and sort out the terms, and it was only Monday so the whole thing could be finished within a few days – she could leave soon, and never have to come back.

She didn’t want the place. She didn’t want to be there. So why couldn’t she just throw it away?

Opportunities arose for her escape since she arrived a week earlier to arrange the funeral, until now as she stood in the house that she received in the reading of the will a few hours ago. She could leave. But she didn’t seem to be able to do it.

She pressed the buttons to erase the messages, resisting the rising thoughts of Tiffany and her words, and she walked out to her car.

She zoned out completely as she drove, the mechanical movements of her body keeping the car moving forward at a moderate pace and stopping at the red lights. Sometimes the corners of her eyes would snag on the scene outside. There were a few people out, walking along the chilly grey pavements, some laughing with friends in a way that steamed their breath, and others digging their faces into scarves and day-dreaming about hot chocolate. The season was getting colder. Taeyeon liked it. She liked the bite of frost in the morning to nip her out of bed, and swathing herself in a thick blanket at night.

Winters in this place were more than some biting frost and chilly pavements. There would be snow, and when she was about fourteen there had been so much snow that she almost couldn’t walk. The frozen fluff came up to her knees. She remembered pouting at her legs – or what she could see of them – as she stood only a block away from her house with four blocks left in her journey to school. Other kids had rushed past, playing snow games with each other or curling up their shoulders and wishing they could move faster. At least they were moving. And it looked less like a struggle, the way the taller kids strode steadily through the snow.

Except for that one girl, whose height was similar to Taeyeon's. A couple of inches didn't make enough of a difference in the snow sea. She ploughed along, doggedly determined to make it to school on time and in one piece. She didn't even seem to mind her soaking pants, and her shoes had to be full of slush. She just needed to get there.

Taeyeon had watched her make her way down the street, until they were level and the other girl stopped. They blinked at each other, equally surprised.

"Are you okay?" the girl asked.

"Eh," Taeyeon said. She glanced down at her legs again, and then at the girl's. "I'm okay. How about you?"

The girl shrugged. "I'm okay."

They stared. Taeyeon gestured at the girl's backpack, which hung haphazardly on one shoulder.

"Need help?"

The girl smiled. It was just a small curve of her lips, and Taeyeon knew she had a whole range of expertise when it came to smiles. "No, thanks. Do you need help?"

Taeyeon shook her head. "Nah, I'll be all right."

"You're Taeyeon, right? I'm Tiffany."

Taeyeon nodded. "From Bio. Yeah. Hi."

"Hi," Tiffany rebounded, and her smile grew a few notches. "So are you just hanging out here for fun, or what?"

"This is the hottest scene in town, didn't you know," Taeyeon replied, and beneath her confidence a light warmth brushed over her cheekbones.

Tiffany shoved at the snow with her knee. "Yeah. So hot."

The warmth flared into heat and spread along Taeyeon's face. Maybe it was the embarrassment of struggling with the snow, or the lameness of her wit, or maybe it was the way she had noticed how Tiffany's knee was accentuated through her thin, ice-soaked skinny jeans. In fact, it was probably the

sudden fascination with the bones of Tiffany's knee, the way she wanted to examine its sharpness closely, that made her blush so deeply.

"Wanna walk to school together?"

Taeyeon had blinked. "Sure." And then she looked away sheepishly. "Uh, it might take a while though. I'm kinda slow."

"That's okay," said Tiffany, and she grinned an almost-full grin at last. Taeyeon's heart skipped so many beats she paled at the thought that she might drop dead right there. "We'll be fine."

Now Taeyeon drove for hours, thinking and trying to stop herself from thinking and then thinking again about why she was thinking and why she was trying to stop herself from thinking. She parked at the hotel where she was staying, and got out of her car.

She stared at her shoes in the dim light that was about to become dark, and then she got back in the car and drove away.

It didn't take long to reach Tiffany's house.

Her feet crunched over the familiar gravel walkway, her fingers trailed over the rose bushes that lined the path, and she took a breath of the fresh air that she enjoyed so much when she was younger.

High school. She tried to forget it. For a long time, she tried to forget everything that ever happened to her in her whole life. She wanted to start anew, completely, without a past. And of course, it didn't work. Every time she blinked, every time her shoe touched the ground on the way to Tiffany's front door, she remembered.

There was a small smile on her face when Tiffany came to answer the ring of the doorbell.

For a moment, Taeyeon saw juxtaposition. Tiffany at age sixteen, her new school uniform neat but for the loosened tie and top button, frozen in a beaming grin, laughter waiting to burst – and Tiffany at age twenty-three, her pyjamas worn and comfortable, tired face stilled in surprise, questions slowly welling up.

"Taeyeon," she said. An exact echo of the recording on the answering machine but with so much more impact.

“Hi,” Taeyeon replied, her voice sounding far away to her own ears. She cleared her throat, bringing herself back. “Uh, sorry to bother you so late. I didn’t really realise what time it was.”

Tiffany blinked. Her lips were parted slightly as she stared. Taeyeon could glimpse the edges of Tiffany’s white teeth. Tiffany seemed to be holding her breath at first, and then a small “hi” coasted out on an exhale.

“Come in.”

The house was slightly different. The CDs that lined the rack in the corner of the living room had more acoustic and classical music, the DVDs in the shelf by the television had more art films, and the newly ringed stains on the coffee table were from actual coffee mugs, right next to the memories of cold sodas and ice cream.

Taeyeon sat down on the couch she used to spill popcorn on. Across from her, Tiffany lowered herself onto her father’s armchair, and crossed her arms nervously over her stomach.

Taeyeon took a deep breath, thinking of what she wanted to say, all the things she needed to discuss. She held that breath for a while. And then she let it all out, and said, “I miss you too.”

Tiffany didn’t meet her gaze, looking instead at the floor. A tiny smile played across her lips. She relaxed in her seat and started to play with her fingers.

“Thank you,” she whispered. “So, how are you? How’ve you been?”

Taeyeon smiled. “Two very different questions. I’m okay now. But after I left, everything was pretty bad.”

Tiffany looked at her. It was that look. That look that showed she was tapping into the pain in the air. The way her eyebrows tilted up a little and drew together, and her lips parted slightly, and she seemed to be sitting on the edge of her seat, ready to go to Taeyeon. The sight of her warmed Taeyeon’s chest.

Taeyeon took a deep breath. “My parents didn’t speak to me ever again. Which was fine by me, most of the time. It gave me time to accept myself, which turned out to be pretty hard. I mean, I thought I already accepted myself, but everything... everything just seemed completely different. I spent a lot of time thinking about you, too.”

Their eyes met.

“You know it was you, right?” Taeyeon asked softly. She closed her eyes for a moment before opening them again. “It was you.”

Tiffany bit her bottom lip. “Yeah, I know. I knew then, too. I wanted to see you before you left, but I just couldn’t do it. When I heard what everyone was saying about you at school, I wanted to run to your house. Somehow I knew you would be curled up in your bed, covering yourself, shaking with tears, because after all, your parents had just broken your heart. You thought they loved you unconditionally, and all of a sudden there was an obstacle. What they saw as an obstacle. A problem. Reason enough to send you far away from their warm hugs.”

Taeyeon got up suddenly, and knelt on the floor in front of Tiffany. Her eyes glistened as she looked up into Tiffany’s face, and after a moment of awkward hovering, she took Tiffany’s hands in her own, absorbing the ripple of electricity that reached her.

“Something I’ve always wondered,” she murmured, “could you tell me... On the day I told my mother, I intended to tell you, not her. What would you have done after I told you?”

“What would you have told me, Taeyeon?” Tiffany said. Her gaze, sharp and intent, melted into Taeyeon’s. “What exactly would you have said?”

Taeyeon, at age sixteen, was nervous. She fiddled with her own hands, she fiddled with her clothes, she fiddled with bits and pieces of everything around her. When she fiddled with the button in the car door that made the window whizz up and down, her mother clicked her tongue and snapped, “Don’t do that, please.”

Taeyeon wiped her palms on the fabric of her school uniform. She fiddled with her tie, loosening it and inhaling deeply.

“Um,” she said loudly, and then softened her voice. “Um, I need to tell you about something.”

They reached the school, and the car’s brakes squeaked as they stopped. Her mother glanced at her watch.

“Can it wait? You’re already late.”

Taeyeon looked out at the school, the students trickling into buildings, and sighed. “Yeah. Of course. Thanks for giving me a ride. I’ll see you after school.”

She wandered towards her class, fiddling with the strap of her backpack. She had been so close to saying it right then and there, which was not in her original plan, and after a few deep breaths she decided that it was better to stick to the plan, otherwise she might not get a chance to see Tiffany if her parents reacted badly. And that would be stupid, she scoffed. Tiffany first. After all, she had the most right to know.

The teacher's half-hearted scolding when she walked in a few minutes late just washed over her, and she was already eyeing Tiffany who sat on the other side of the room and winked at her. Finally she sat down next to her, and beamed at her.

"Can we go off campus for lunch?" she whispered. She didn't know the name of Tiffany's perfume, but she knew it used to belong to Tiffany's mother, and that Tiffany would always become quiet and go to another place in her mind when she thought of her mother. "There's something I need to tell you."

Tiffany smiled, a glint of anticipation reaching her eyes. "Sure. Now pay attention before you get scolded for real."

Taeyeon did pay attention, but not to the teacher. She paid attention to the way Tiffany's hair fell over her face as she leaned forward to take notes, the curve of her nose when she raised her face to watch the teacher writing on the board, the slight tension in her spine as she worked on the sheet of math problems they were given, and the relief that relaxed her body when she finished it.

The sight of Tiffany's expression, proud of herself and her hard work, pushed Taeyeon's heart over a few beats. She knew it all so well.

They went down the road and got ice cream at lunch time, and sat on the low wall by the school gates with their shoes barely brushing the pavement.

"So, what's up?" Tiffany asked. She wiped absently at the ice cream at the corner of her mouth. Her glinting gaze was trained on Taeyeon. She was ready.

"Um," Taeyeon hummed for a long moment. "I didn't really plan the exact words here."

They stared at each other. Tiffany laughed briefly and shoved Taeyeon's shoulder playfully.

"Come on, what's going on?" she asked, grinning. "Just tell me."

Taeyeon's breath hitched in her lungs. Her mind raced as fast as her heart. The muscles of her fingers

clenched and unclenched, and she gulped air quickly. Tiffany's smile dimmed, a light crease formed between her eyebrows, and she rested a hand on Taeyeon's knee.

"What is it, Taeyeon?" she murmured. "You can tell me. Just do it."

Taeyeon fell into Tiffany's brown eyes, the warmth and comfort engulfing her. She found herself moving, shifting towards Tiffany, and they sank into a hug. Their hold on each other was loose, unmoving. Taeyeon could feel Tiffany's heartbeat.

"Tell me," Tiffany repeated. "In three, two, one..."

"I'm completely, madly in love with you, Tiffany." The words slipped from her mouth as simply as that, rolling over her tongue and ducking between her teeth, brushing over her lips. "I'm so in love with you, I get dizzy. I'm in love with you."

Now Taeyeon rested her head on Tiffany's knees, tracing the curve of Tiffany's knee cap with the tip of a finger, remembered the way it had strained against the sodden jeans the first day they talked. She felt the heat of Tiffany's body against her cheek, and she closed her eyes.

"I love you."

Silence. Tiffany didn't move at all. Taeyeon breathed slowly.

"Do you want my honest answer?" asked Tiffany. The vibration of her words reached Taeyeon's cheekbone. "My complete honesty?"

Taeyeon nodded, rubbing the softness of Tiffany's pyjamas against her skin. "Yes. I always want honesty from you."

Fingers ran through Taeyeon's hair, a light touch that carried tenderness behind fingertips.

"I would have panicked. For a long, long time I would have freaked out and said a bunch of crazy stuff while I tried to figure out what was going on in my head and in your head. I would have thought a lot about you, a lot about me, and a lot about everyone else. But you know what? That was exactly what I ended up doing when you left."

Taeyeon's head was raised by Tiffany's hands on her jaw. Tiffany moved their faces close, so close that they could have kissed.

“I knew how you felt about me,” Tiffany said. Her eyes were flowing with emotion again, and Taeyeon read every little muscle on her face. “I knew how I felt about you. I knew how everyone else felt about you, and me, and the possibility of us. And I would have freaked out, and I would have hurt you, and I would have kissed you.”

Taeyeon smiled. She pulled her head away, and looked at Tiffany. “I see.”

“What are you going to do with your parents’ house?”

Taeyeon stood up and turned away. “Sell it. My father’s business partner wants it. I’ll make the arrangements, and then I’ll leave. And I’ll never come back.”

“I see.”

“How’s your father?”

“He’s.... He’s the same. He would like to see you before you go. He might not have much time left for clarity.”

Taeyeon gazed up at the ceiling. “He still remembers only the kid who walked his daughter to school in winter, huh?”

“Yeah.”

“What would he have done, if I had stayed? If you had freaked out and hurt me and kissed me?”

Tiffany stared at the carpet, wiggled her toes in its fibres. “Maybe he would have been upset. Maybe not. To him, we’re always just kids, still trudging through the snow. I’ll never be able to leave this place.”

Taeyeon nodded. “I know. And I’ll never be able to stay.”

She turned around. They watched each other for a moment. Tiffany stood up, and stepped closer to Taeyeon.

“Couldn’t, could’ve, would’ve,” she said. “Let’s try something new, now. We’ll be fine.”

Tiffany hugged Taeyeon. It was a fluid movement. She took her sleeves and pulled her closer, and slid her hands over Taeyeon’s shoulder blades, one upwards to the back of her neck, her other arm cradling

Taeyeon's waist. She leaned her chin on Taeyeon's shoulder, nose nuzzling the warm skin of Taeyeon's neck.

Taeyeon took a deep breath, feeling like her lungs were going to burst. Her mouth moved on its own, bearing a wide grin. She wrapped her arms around Tiffany as tightly as she could, as if she could squeeze them together forever. Every curve and softness of Tiffany's body touched her own.

"I loved you," Tiffany said. "I was completely, madly in love with you. It made me dizzy. I wanted to talk to you. And now, I miss you."

Taeyeon closed her eyes. In the rear corner of her mind, she was back in the winter of her fourteenth year, tripping in the snow, listening to Tiffany's laughter that was as bright as the sun they couldn't see. And she was fiddling with her backpack on the last day she saw Tiffany, psyching herself up to tell Tiffany the truth. Honesty.

"Here," she breathed. "This is what I always wanted. Since the day I blushed when I talked to you. I just wanted this embrace."

She shifted, adjusting her hands, gripping Tiffany with her fingers. Tiffany still wore the same perfume. She took a deep breath, feeling the way Tiffany's breathing matched her own and moved against her own lungs.

"Thank you."

Everyday Love

It had been less than a week. Taeyeon still fell asleep at night in a cocoon of unshed tears and her dreams were full of memories. What else could she do? There was no escaping from it, and she didn't even want to leave. After all, in her own little world, she could still love Tiffany every day.

She sighed, slouching in her seat at the bar, and tapped her glass against the counter to get the bartender's attention. At the sight of her dark eyes, haggard face, and permanently downwards-curving lips, the bartender raised an eyebrow.

"Don't you think you're being a little over dramatic?"

Taeyeon frowned, as if all the pain of the world was being heaped on her shoulders again. "No."

The bartender rolled her eyes. "It's not like she's dead or anything. Besides, she is literally on her way home at this very moment. Aren't you happy?"

Taeyeon dropped her head to the bar and didn't answer. She lay face-down, her forehead against the cool wood, and huffed again. It was the night before Tiffany's plane landed, finally bringing Tiffany back. As far as she was concerned, that was way too long and the edge of sanity was awfully close without Tiffany. She tapped her glass on the counter again and ignored the reluctant grumbling from the bartender who filled her glass.

"You're the most depressing friend ever," the bartender remarked. "I thought you came here to support me at my new job, now all you're doing is moping around and crying because your girlfriend has been gone for a few days."

Taeyeon turned her head to glare. "You don't know what it's like, okay? We're almost never apart for this long. I miss her."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever. Save it. Actually, that's a good idea. Store up all your depressing, negative vibes and dump it all on Tiffany when she gets back. That'll be a nice welcome, won't it?"

Taeyeon sat up, narrowing her eyes. "What are you trying to say?"

"I'm saying that you should spend your time getting ready to give her the best welcome home ever,

rather than sitting around under a cloud of melancholy because it's been two weeks since you last saw her."

"Two and a half," corrected Taeyeon, but the wheels in her head already started turning. "Best welcome home ever, huh? It is almost Christmas, too."

She turned around in her seat, leaned back against the counter, and looked up at the ceiling thoughtfully.

They moved into their apartment in a December, she recalled, when an icy white carpet of snow decorated the grounds of the town they had recently made their home. They weren't prepared for a real Christmas yet, their living room without a tree and their walls lacking decoration; in fact, all they had in those days was a bed, a laptop, and some food, but Taeyeon remembered it as one of the greatest times of her life. Why? Because she had the warmth of her soul mate to wrap around her when the nights seemed too cold to handle, and she had the most beautiful smile in the world to greet her every morning.

"Oi!"

The bartender poked her sharply in the back of her head. She turned, looking shocked, and rubbed the sore spot.

"What do you want?" she asked grumpily.

The bartender held out her hand, flat. "Money, money, money. Those drinks weren't free, you know. You gotta stop daydreaming about your soppy love story and give me some cash."

Taeyeon pouted. "You're so mean to me."

"Were you or were you not gazing blissfully at some rose-tinted little thought bubble that showed a sequence of tender and loving moments between you and Tiffany some time during a past December?"

Taeyeon chose to remain silent. She gathered some money and shoved it towards the bartender, and was met with a smirk.

"Exactly. And foolish love-sick idiots like you need a good poke in the skull every now and then."

Taeyeon sighed. "I don't know what to do. I want to give her the best welcome home ever, but how do I

do that?”

“Listen, Taeyeon. One thing I know you’re capable of is showing Tiffany what’s in your heart. Does that give you a few ideas yet?”

The blank stare of reply was all that Taeyeon could think to show.

“Wow, I knew you were slow but this is unprecedented. You’ll figure something out, I’m sure, but go do it somewhere else, okay? You’re ruining business here.”

Walking along the crunchy pavement outside, Taeyeon found herself remembering the tingling of her palm when she held hands with Tiffany. She clenched and unclenched her fingers, clicked her tongue exasperatedly, and let out another dispirited sigh.

It would be physically impossible to show Tiffany what was in her heart – unless she took it literally, in which case Tiffany would probably be disgusted and Taeyeon would be dead – but Taeyeon knew exactly what was in her heart that she wanted to show Tiffany. Love. A whole lot of love, and it was there for Tiffany and because of Tiffany. But how could she possibly show that satisfactorily? All her ideas right now didn’t seem enough, didn’t convey her feelings well enough. She needed something big, something spectacular, something overwhelming to show exactly how much their love meant to her.

Then she realised something. Her mind had wandered over every moment she had spent with Tiffany, every morning, afternoon, evening, night that they were together. And she realised something spectacular, something overwhelming, the thing that had completely taken her heart. What she loved most about Tiffany – it was a tough competition – was the fact that their love happened every day. She could feel Tiffany’s love all day and all night, every day and every night. It was an ingrained part of her life. No matter where she was or where Tiffany was, she felt that incredible love.

Taeyeon smiled. She had a few new ideas for how to show Tiffany what was in her heart, and she would show her every day.

Tiffany returned to their apartment with exhaustion in her bones, eyes already closing as she dreamed of drifting off to sleep. She dumped her luggage at the door, dragged herself down the hall, paused for a moment as she remembered to remove her shoes, and almost walked into the wall as she made her way into the living room.

“Tae?” she called out, voice heavy with weariness.

“Be right there!” came the reply from the kitchen. “I’m making you some hot chocolate before you sleep.”

Tiffany smiled, and closed her eyes as she dumped herself face-first onto the couch. She breathed out a deep sigh and let her mind and body relax completely.

There was nothing she loved more than spending every day with Taeyeon in her heart.

Hesitation

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Taeyeon spends a lot of her time just standing by the riverbank, completely still, and watching as the water makes its way past her. She can hear the birds singing their days away. She can feel the breeze plucking at her hair, brushing her cheeks. She can stand on the hard, dry ground beneath her feet and take a deep breath. She can watch as life passes her by.

The first time she had felt this empty was in the summer, a few years ago, in the middle of the day. She had been sitting in her house, her eyes tracking the movements of the figures on the TV screen. Her ears had been met with the music and someone else's voice. Her mind had been filled with the song and hopelessness of regret.

Another life passed her by.

Taeyeon doesn't like to talk much. Sometimes she thinks maybe she's afraid of what she will say. She doesn't want to say things that are misunderstood, or just not expressive enough. She wants words to count, and to really convey what she's feeling. She uses words together with her emotions. She doesn't like lies.

A lot of people don't understand Taeyeon at all. She has maybe three close friends at any given time throughout her life, and feels that too many more friends will make it harder for her to convey the increased emotions. So she stands by the river, alone. She thinks about things.

She thinks about that time a few years ago when she had been two steps away from the doors to the building where a competition was being held. She thinks about how she stood there, shaking, with clammy hands and jelly for muscles, staring at the door handle as if it were on fire. There were sounds from the other side, the voices of young girls just like her, eagerly exposing their hearts for the world. She had been frozen there and listened as song after song was sung and hearts bled.

Taeyeon thinks about the exact moment when she had turned around and started running. She had gone away from the building, around the corner, down streets and roads and paths through parks, running and running, almost falling into the river. That day, she had collapsed onto her knees by the riverbank, and she had seen her own tears in the body of water before her.

Taeyeon sighs. She zips up her jacket. She stuffs her hands in her pockets. Futile, pointless actions, not intended to stave off the cold but rather to bring her back to the present. She thinks now about the books and papers waiting impatiently for her on her desk at home. She thinks about her never-ending schedule of tests, exams, tasks to be completed for her academic future. She gazes at the moving water, and relishes the feeling of standing still.

Eventually, with the memory of running still ghosting in her mind, she turns and slowly makes her way home.

It's been years since Taeyeon sang. The moment she ran from her dream, she locked her voice away deep in the depths of her heart and only let it out for a few words every now and then. After all, she thinks to herself every time she drags herself home, what good could singing do for her now?

The pen feels heavy in her hand as she leans on her desk. Her eyes read the words on the paper; she knows it's asking her something but does she care? No, she decides, but then again there's not a lot she does care about anymore, so she shakes her head, reads the question again, and mechanically begins to write a response.

Taeyeon goes to sleep in the early hours of the morning, time already pushing against the hour when she will wake up and go to school. As soon as her head rests on the pillow, she closes her eyes tightly and disappears into the darkness.

Then there comes the moment every morning when Taeyeon lies on her back and stares at the ceiling. She tries to make herself get up and go on. She tries and tries and tries. After a while she lets a few tears escape, and in return her body agrees to move.

An envelope from an American university is lying on her desk, still unopened even days after its arrival. Taeyeon runs her fingers over it in the early morning light. It's all she can do to strive for academic achievement. She knows most of her classmates are attempting to get into Korea's top-level universities, but an American university would be considered almost better by her family. And that is the main driving factor for Taeyeon; she does what is best for her family, since she couldn't do anything for herself.

The envelope is open and the letter lies in her hands. She reads it slowly and deliberately to make sure her English skills don't fail her. She takes a moment to reread a few words – *accepted*, *arrival*, *accommodation*, *fall term* – and even checks some of them in her dictionary to be absolutely sure of

their meaning.

The paper once again lying on her desk, Taeyeon sits down on the chair and gazes down at the dictionary still in her hands.

She flips through the pages absently, and stops in the section marked *H*. Her fingers trace the letters, and she repeats one word over and over in her head in the silence surrounding her.

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1

Tiffany Hwang is the only girl in the knock-off 60's diner, and it doesn't bother her one bit. There are three guys at her table, laughing along with her and buying her sodas. A couple of other guys in the place have glanced in her direction and smiled in response to her smile. She already knows she's not the least bit "interested" in any of them, and she knows they know that too deep down, but they're nice guys and she's having a good time so this time she doesn't worry about sending the wrong signals.

"So, you looking forward to starting at USC in the fall, Tiffany?" one of them asks in a friendly manner.

She grins. "Totally! I can't wait. It's going to be so much fun!"

One of the other guys lets out a playful chuckle. "Sure, Tiffany. Law is *so* much fun."

She slaps him lightly on the arm and they all laugh together – she ignores the jealous glances from some of the other guys. "Well, sorry for being such a nerd, then," she jokes.

Tiffany's phone beeps and she checks the message. Of course it's from her father, asking if she will be home in time for dinner. She glances at the time and types a quick reply for him. Then she turns her irresistible eye-smile on her companions and begins to stand up.

"Sorry guys, I'll be heading home now," she says in her normal friendly tone and the boys complain half-heartedly but let her go – because after all they're willing to do anything for her.

Tiffany sighs contentedly once she's alone outside. She walks over to her little car, her heels clacking

on the sidewalk. She daydreams about starting her Law degree at the University of Southern California in a few months, feeling an undeniable excitement at finally getting closer to one of her dreams.

Dreams, she thinks to herself as she drives home, dreams are silly sometimes. She used to want to be a singer – she scoffs – but that never happened. She fiddles with the stereo of her car, connects it to her portable music player, and plays a Korean pop song for the sake of nostalgia. Her attachment to her Korean heritage isn't very strong, but she reminisces about that year when she got hooked on Korean pop music like the song she listens to now. Her father had recently suggested going to South Korea on a family vacation, and she wonders if it would be nice there.

“Do you know if there's a Korean club at USC?” her father asks as they eat together at the dining table.

Tiffany shrugs. “I don't know. Why, do you want to join?”

Her father gives her a playful glare. “Ha, ha. You sure are a funny kid. No, I was thinking it might be nice for you to join. You could make some friends.”

“I don't think making friends will be a problem, Dad, you know me.”

“Yeah, yeah – my daughter, the queen of socialising.” He rolls his eyes and gives her a grin. “Still, it would be an easy way to form connections. If there isn't one, maybe you should create one? There's bound to be Koreans there. And hey, maybe it'll look good on your record, huh?” He winks.

Tiffany smiles at her father's antics. “Okay, Dad. I'll see.”

She does see, in her first week at USC, that there's a well-established club for international Korean students and is well aware that she doesn't fit into such a club. Her eyes scan over the rest of the list of student organisations and she wonders how many Korean-Americans there are just like her.

“Ah, excuse me?”

Tiffany is surprised by the heavily-accented voice from her left. A petite Asian girl, presumably the same age as her since it's unlikely that anyone younger would be around, blinks at her with an awkward smile.

“Do you know,” the girl says, “where I can find the leader of the Korean International Student Association, please?”

Tiffany really enjoys listening to the girl's accent, and feels strangely fascinated by the turn of her words and the way the letters move in her mouth. The girl blinks at her again.

"Oh," Tiffany says. "No, I don't know, sorry... I walked past the Student Union building earlier, in that direction?" She points to her right. "Maybe there's someone there who will know."

The girl looks in that direction before giving Tiffany another smile and a polite bow. "Thank you very much. Have a nice day."

And she's gone, into the crowd of other students milling around. Tiffany watches her go, happily thinking about the way the girl talked. She wanders into the Student Union building later, looking for someone with some kind of informational authority whom she can talk to about starting a club, and she sees the girl again, talking in Korean with a tall young man who is probably the person she was looking for earlier.

Tiffany's Korean skills are not good at all, but she finds herself hovering in their direction as she looks around the room, picking up a few words of the girl's voice.

"I didn't know this place would be like this," the girl says quietly, sounding almost sad. "Three strangers have already asked me out on a date without even knowing my name."

"It's okay, Taeyeon," the young man answers, looking almost amused and placing a comforting hand on her shoulder. "Americans are like that. Come; let's have lunch."

He turns Taeyeon in the direction of the front door but stops as he sees Tiffany nearby. A flash of recognition passes over his features and she realises he's one of the guys from the diner.

"Tiffany!" he calls out in a friendly tone. "How nice to see you. What's up with you?"

"Oh, hi," she replies, whipping out an eye-smile in lieu of his name. "I was just looking for someone. How have you been?"

"Good, good," he says. "This is Taeyeon, one of our international students from Korea. You two are the same age."

Taeyeon gives her the same awkward little smile and another polite bow. "Hello."

"Hi, Taeyeon," she says kindly, and holds out her hand. "I'm Tiffany Hwang."

Taeyeon looks at her hand and takes it, completing the hand-shake with a little curve of her lips.

“Hwang?” she asks, looking up at Tiffany’s face. “Are you Korean too?”

Tiffany nods slightly. “Yeah. Well, Korean-American. I grew up here in the States.”

The young man chuckles and she’s reminded of his presence. “Poor Tiffany barely even speaks Korean anymore, her pronunciation is quite atrocious.”

Tiffany blushes but smiles good-humouredly. “Sad but true. So what are you studying here, Taeyeon?”

“Business Management.”

Tiffany grins, not at all because of the boring subject matter of Taeyeon’s degree, but rather because of the way Taeyeon pronounces the words. Taeyeon seems taken aback by her bright response and looks away awkwardly.

“Taeyeon’s parents own an optical store back in Korea,” the young man says conversationally, and Tiffany is once again reminded of his presence. “They’re quite proud of their daughter’s intention to take care of the business with her older brother so that they can retire early.”

Taeyeon seems annoyed with this random splurging of information about her life, but she lets it pass. Tiffany is strangely drawn towards the girl, and finds words tumbling out of her mouth without deciding first.

“Are you guys doing anything right now? Come have lunch with me!”

The young man is, of course, immediately pleased by the offer, and Taeyeon politely follows along as they set off to find a place to eat.

Tiffany is convinced she will show Taeyeon some true-blue American food, which makes Taeyeon look dubious but complacent, and they’re a few steps away from a great burger place when a ringtone plays.

“Hello?”

With a shocked look, the young man is called away to the vet. His dog is in a critical condition and he waves goodbye to them as he jogs back to his car.

“You’ll have fun with Tiffany!” he shouts to Taeyeon and disappears.

Taeyeon blinks at Tiffany, who gives her a warm smile, and they carry on. Tiffany talks incessantly about America, filling Taeyeon with so much information about the people, places, food, movies, music, books and TV shows that she is met with a blank stare most of the time. It doesn't seem to her that Taeyeon has bad English skills, so she attributes the reaction to the massive influx of new information, and decides to slow down.

"So, what made you choose to come to America, Taeyeon?" Tiffany asks after she orders some classic American burgers for them both.

"Hmm, America," hums Taeyeon, fiddling with the condiment bottles laid out on the table. "Well, it seems nice here. And, the university is good. Right? It's good, right?"

Tiffany nods happily. "Yeah, I think it's pretty good. You'll like it here, Taeyeon. What's it like in Korea?"

Taeyeon looks thoughtful. "You've never been there?"

"Not yet. My father suggested we go there sometime soon. Which part of Korea are you from? Is it a nice place?"

And so Taeyeon talks about her hometown and various Korean tourist attractions while Tiffany absorbs the sound of her accent and gazes at her.

"America is different," Taeyeon remarks quietly, her eyes on the table as she progresses to fiddling with her fingers. "Not the same as Korea."

"Is this your first time away from home?"

Taeyeon nods.

The waitress arrives with their burgers and Taeyeon eyes the food with some mild trepidation.

"I have had some American food before, in Korea," she says, "but I am still not used to it, at all."

Tiffany giggles. "Eat up, Taeyeon!"

Tiffany talks more about growing up in America as they eat, telling Taeyeon all about the nearby beaches and what she does for fun with her friends. Taeyeon blinks at her again.

“How much free time do you have, Tiffany?”

It's the first time Taeyeon has said her name, and she enjoys hearing it very much. By the time she's stopped chewing enough to answer, she's also had a chance to remember what the question was.

“I don't know, I never really think much about it,” she answers contemplatively. “I guess I have enough. Why, does it sound like I have endless free time?”

Taeyeon shakes her head firmly. “No, not that. I am just used to continuous study. What are you studying at university?”

“Law,” she says, wiping her fingers on a napkin as she finishes her food. “My parents wanted me to do Business, like you, but I'd much rather do Law.”

Taeyeon nods but stays quiet. As they have both finished their food, Tiffany asks for the bill and they split the cost.

“How much did you already know about America before you came here?” Tiffany asks curiously as Taeyeon holds the door open for her.

Taeyeon thinks for a moment. “I knew they speak English here. And I read some American books in school for study. But they are quite old books. I saw the film ‘Legally Blonde’ recently.” At this, Taeyeon gives Tiffany an almost playful smile. “You remind me of the girl in that film.”

Tiffany blushes and laughs. “I've heard that a lot, ever since I started thinking of studying Law.”

Suddenly Taeyeon is staring at her and Tiffany doesn't know why so she keeps her own eyes in the direction they're walking. When she glances at Taeyeon again, the girl is looking around her with interest as if she had not been staring.

“If you ever need any help, Taeyeon,” Tiffany says, “or you just want to hang out again, I'll be here for you. Okay?”

Taeyeon blinks at her and smiles. “Thank you, Tiffany.”

Tiffany finds out that Taeyeon is staying in the dorms and laments about how she is trying to convince her father to let her stay in the dorms too. She makes Taeyeon pinky promise to tell her all about dorm life so she can use the information to sway her father, and they say goodbye with happy smiles as they

part ways.

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2

They don't have a lot of time for each other but when they can, they get together and talk about America and Korea as they try different foods. Tiffany loves talking, and she loves how Taeyeon listens to her talk and then she talks, which gives Tiffany the much-enjoyed opportunity to listen to how Taeyeon talks.

She encourages Taeyeon to come with her to the nearest beach after their classes have finished for the day. They've become closer over the course of the two months since they met, so Taeyeon's awkward little smile is less awkward around Tiffany, and the tension in her shoulders that Tiffany notices sometimes is reduced when they laugh together.

Tiffany locks the car with her hand that isn't clutching her towel, sunscreen and sunglasses. Taeyeon stretches her petite frame after the car ride, even though it wasn't very long, and gazes out at the ocean right by them. Tiffany smiles at the sight of Taeyeon breathing in the fresh air with deliberation. She steps over to her as she pockets her car keys, and brushes her arm along Taeyeon's forearm to take a loose hold of her hand.

Skinship is a common thing in Korea, Tiffany knows that, so she doesn't think twice before doing something like this and Taeyeon doesn't act weirdly in response. A couple of times Taeyeon has nonchalantly wrapped her arm around Tiffany's lower back or rested her hand on her knee as they talked, and once Taeyeon rested her head on Tiffany's shoulder – though she's sure the feeling she got of Taeyeon inhaling her scent was probably just her imagination.

Taeyeon follows Tiffany's eager tug and they make their way down to the sand and sea. They've slipped off their shoes already, supporting each other over the dunes and laughing already for no apparent reason.

"Sandcastle?" is the first suggestion from Taeyeon. She's giving Tiffany a grin with a playful glint in her eyes, which makes Tiffany giggle and eye-smile without realising.

Taeyeon stares at her again. This has only happened a few times since that day when they met, and Tiffany has just gotten used to it. She thinks maybe one day she'll ask Taeyeon why she stares at her

sometimes, but she's in no hurry to find the answer.

"Sure, let's start with a sandcastle," Tiffany says, diverting Taeyeon's attention to the sand beneath their toes immediately.

"I hear it's easier with buckets," says Taeyeon conversationally, crouching down and running her fingers through the sand. "And those small shovels."

Tiffany joins her, letting her towel and sunscreen land on the beach and putting her sunglasses on her head, not over her eyes.

"It should be okay if we try well. The important thing is water!"

Taeyeon glances over shoulder at the great body of salt water, and back at the sand in front of them. "Should we go close, or bring water here?"

In the end, their sandcastle looks more like a lump of damp sand, but they're quite pleased with it nonetheless, after the effort of positioning it at a perfect distance so that they could carry water from the sea to their castle with minimal spillage and maximum productivity.

It's getting close to sunset as they lie on their backs on Tiffany's towel and gaze up at the sky.

"How about this... 첫사랑니? Do you know it?"

Tiffany frowns. "*Sarang-ni*? Isn't that your wisdom tooth or something?"

Taeyeon nods in affirmation. "It is the first wisdom tooth, but is also used to mean first love."

Tiffany turns her head to face Taeyeon. "Huh? How does that work?"

"It is said that the pain of the wisdom tooth is like the pain of first love," Taeyeon replies, turning her head to face Tiffany too.

"Hmm," Tiffany hums thoughtfully, looking back up at the sky.

Taeyeon's eyes stay on her face, tracing her features in side profile. Tiffany's hand reaches over and takes Taeyeon's, lacing their fingers together, and she closes her eyes at the feeling of their contact. They've recently started discussing the Korean language every now and then, after the first few times that Taeyeon found it hard to express herself satisfactorily through English.

“Do you know 한? It is a concept, a kind of feeling.”

“*Han?*”

“Yes. It is like... a deep, deep sadness. Resentment. Pain. Despair. Overwhelming. Eternal.”

Taeyeon shifts her body, moving closer to press against Tiffany, laying an arm over Tiffany’s waist, resting a cheek on her shoulder.

“It’s not something that can be overcome easily,” Taeyeon murmurs. “Not through revenge. There is no definite outlet for the feeling.”

Tiffany opens her eyes. She moves a hand to gently hold on to Taeyeon’s arm across her waist. She softly strokes Taeyeon’s skin with her thumb.

But Taeyeon doesn’t say more. Tiffany wants to know what happened to the girl that would bring her this feeling, but she won’t ask. Taeyeon shifts her body again, cuddling closer to Tiffany. She closes her eyes and once again Tiffany gets that feeling that Taeyeon is inhaling her scent – and once again she’s sure it must be her imagination.

The sun is getting closer to the horizon.

“Do you have a Korean name?” Taeyeon asks quietly as they lie together.

Tiffany laughs briefly. “Yes but please don’t use it.”

Taeyeon smiles and opens her eyes to look at Tiffany. “What is it?”

Tiffany sighs. “Okay... it’s... Miyoung.”

Taeyeon hums contentedly. “Miyoung. Eternal. Beautiful.”

Tiffany knows Taeyeon is staring at her again, and she knows her heart is suddenly racing. She keeps her gaze on the sky above, trying not to look at Taeyeon.

“Beautiful,” Taeyeon whispers again. “아름다운미영아...티파니에쁘다...에쁘니...”

All that Tiffany can think right now is that this could be considered blatant flirting. She knows if any guy was doing this, cuddling with her on the beach and whispering sweet words in her ear in a foreign language, she would consider it a definite advancement. But she’s not sure what to think of Taeyeon.

She knows Korea isn't as open about sexuality as America, but despite what some people are convinced of, gay people do exist there. Is Taeyeon gay? She has no idea. She's lost. If Taeyeon is gay maybe Taeyeon doesn't even know Taeyeon is gay. She enjoys the feeling that Taeyeon is giving her right now. A thought strikes her – is *she* gay?

Suddenly Taeyeon sits up and moves away. She runs a hand through her hair and keeps her eyes on anything other than the girl next to her. She's almost catching her breath and the way her chest is thudding with the force of her heartbeat is concerning her. Quickly, she decides to pretend nothing happened.

"Let's go home," she says, and stands up.

The event does nothing to discourage them from skinship, and Tiffany links arms with Taeyeon when they return to the dorms at the university. She still hasn't managed to convince her father to let her live at the dorms, but she feels she's close to getting him to be more open to letting her go there in the future. After all, her degree is long enough. Her second best option she is striving for is to move into the dorms for her second year.

Taeyeon lets Tiffany into her room, neatly hanging her room key on the hook by the door. It's not Tiffany's first time there, and as is her nature, she's comfortable enough to toss her belongings onto Taeyeon's desk and flop onto Taeyeon's bed. Taeyeon shuffles around, places her phone on the desk, rearranges the things on her desk to better accommodate the position of Tiffany's stuff. Then she sits on the edge of her bed, and leans back on her hands. If Tiffany moves her legs slightly, she'll brush against Taeyeon's fingers.

"How's your course going?" Tiffany asks.

"It's fine."

After a moment of silence, Tiffany sits up and hugs Taeyeon from behind, loosely wrapping her arms around Taeyeon's waist and resting her chin on Taeyeon's shoulder.

"Can I see you again tomorrow?" Tiffany murmurs.

Taeyeon leans her head back against Tiffany's shoulder, facing the ceiling, closing her eyes. "Sure. After 3. Don't you have that family dinner tomorrow night? Cousins?"

"Yeah," says Tiffany. "Hey, do you wanna come? Meet my family?"

“Family...”

Tiffany hears the tone in Taeyeon’s voice and turns her head slightly. Taeyeon is gazing up at the ceiling absently, thoughts returning to a certain house in South Korea. Tiffany just watches her as she thinks. When she notices her hand is softly stroking Taeyeon’s stomach, she pulls away and gets off the bed.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, okay?”

She grabs her things from Taeyeon’s desk and leaves the room. Taeyeon looks at her receding back and stays looking in that direction even when the door is closed.

-

3

Tiffany’s father absolutely adores Taeyeon. It makes her want to roll her eyes when she sees the way he looks at her like a proud father. Meeting Taeyeon is like an opportunity for him to get in touch with his Korean side after being Americanised for so long. He can still speak Korean, though he’s a bit slow these days, and they have a pleasant conversation before switching back to English at the sight of Tiffany’s expression.

Taeyeon is extremely polite. Not only to Tiffany’s father – already a bit more than the usual respectfulness towards elders – but also to Tiffany’s two cousins who are visiting. They’re both actually younger, one year and two years younger, but she treats them with a polite distance, even when they all play Monopoly together after dinner.

It is revealed that Tiffany’s real name is Stephanie – the name on her birth certificate. It is also revealed that after Tiffany’s mother died, Tiffany started to use the name her mother liked instead of the name on her birth certificate. Taeyeon catches herself staring at Tiffany after hearing this, and looks away quickly before Tiffany’s father notices.

“So, Taeyeon,” says Mr Hwang conversationally as he helps to set up the board game, “What’s your plan with your qualification? Aiming for any of the big global corporations?”

“No, sir,” Taeyeon answers, letting Tiffany rearrange the money in front of her. “I’m going to take over

my parents' business, with my older brother – an optical store in my hometown.”

Mr Hwang raises his eyebrows. “Interesting choice for a young woman who was even willing to go all the way across the world to study. You don’t want to see the world, make some big impact with your degree before you settle down in your hometown?”

Taeyeon’s eyes stay on the board between them. She takes the dice Tiffany hands her without looking up.

“No, sir.”

She doesn’t say anything more on the subject, and Tiffany claps her hands together to start the game. It goes on for a long time, as Monopoly tends to, and Tiffany’s cousins pointedly eye the way she interacts with Taeyeon throughout the game. She gives them a look, making a note to explain to them about skinship in Korea compared to the general habits of Americans so that they can stop acting like she and Taeyeon are all over each other. It’s not even much by American standards, she thinks – tucking Taeyeon’s hair behind her ear, running her hand down Taeyeon’s arm, Taeyeon’s hand resting on her knee every now and then, playing with Taeyeon’s fingers.

Mr Hwang seems to understand, despite his initial frown, his memories of childhood in Korea putting his thoughts to rest. Instead, he warmly considers Taeyeon his newest daughter, smiling at her and even inviting her to stay the night when the game finally finishes late. But Taeyeon has an early class so Tiffany gives her a ride back to the university.

They share a hug in the hallway in front of Taeyeon’s door, holding each other for a long time.

“Thanks for coming, Tae,” says Tiffany, already smiling. “I hope you had fun.”

“I did have fun,” Taeyeon responds sincerely. Her hand runs up and down Tiffany’s back before they break their embrace. “Your father seems like a good man. And your cousins are... amusing.”

Tiffany chuckles. “They can be a bit intense at first. And you thought I was loud, right?”

They keep looking at each other for a little while, smiling and staying close.

“Do you really have an early class tomorrow or were you just being polite?”

Taeyeon grins. “Yes, I do have an early class. And I know your class starts when mine finishes. Let’s do

something the day after tomorrow. I'll show you how to make a kimchi omelette."

Tiffany eye-smiles and anticipates the stare Taeyeon gives her. "That sounds great!"

She hugs Taeyeon again, clutching her tightly, and swings her side to side gently with her body.

Taeyeon's hands move over her back, softly stroking her spine.

Tiffany closes her eyes, tilting her head into Taeyeon's shoulder, and squeezes the girl.

"Goodnight, Taeyeon."

"Goodnight, Tiffany."

It's not much later into the night, as Tiffany settles down in her bed, that a message comes through on her phone. It's from Taeyeon, which does not surprise her at all.

I consider America to be an adventure. I don't need to plan more adventures in my future. One planned adventure is enough, don't you think?

Tiffany purses her lips thoughtfully. She types a reply. *I've always believed that the best adventures are the ones that catch you by surprise.*

Taeyeon's answer comes fast. *What kind of adventure do you dream of?*

Tiffany closes her eyes, leaning back into her pillow, and thinks about her dreams. After a while, she turns back to her phone. *I used to dream of being a singer. Some dreams turn out to be quite silly.*

That's another reason not to plan an adventure, because sometimes plans just don't work.

She lies there in the darkness of her room and waits to hear what Taeyeon thinks. It takes a long time, and she wonders if Taeyeon is asleep now and if she should do the same. Her phone screen lights up as she ponders.

I had the same dream. But dreams are not pre-made to come true. Planned adventures require a first step to be taken. Applying to the university or opening the door to an opportunity to prove one's worth as a singer. It takes courage to take that step. Hesitation kills dreams no matter if the adventure is planned or not. Goodnight, Tiffany.

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4

Taeyeon asks Tiffany about the etiquette required when strangers ask her out on a date. She's not

interested in any of them, and she doesn't react well to their chosen methods of approach, but she doesn't want to be rude as she has no reason to dislike them. She knows Tiffany gets more than her fair share of offers on a frequent basis.

"Just say no thanks," Tiffany responds, eyes still on the pad of paper she's writing on. She's lying on her stomach on Taeyeon's bed, kicking her legs in the air behind her, chewing on the tip of her pen every now and then as she works on her essay.

Taeyeon swivels around in her desk chair. "No thanks? Just like that? No, thanks. No thanks! No thank you. Inflection?"

Tiffany sighs, letting herself be distracted from her work, and turns to Taeyeon. "Ask me out."

Taeyeon blinks. "Tiffany, are you free for coffee sometime?"

"No, thanks!" Tiffany eye-smiles, a certain eye-smile that Taeyeon has noticed she uses primarily on males.

"But is that really enough?" Taeyeon asks curiously, edging closer to the bed.

"Well, you basically offered to buy me coffee," Tiffany says, looking back at her paper and twirling her pen. "So, I say thanks for the offer of free coffee but no thanks. Or on another level, you've offered me your company for a time, so I say thanks for the opportunity to get to know you but no thanks. Get it?"

Taeyeon looks thoughtful. "But saying that won't work for everything. Sometimes they ask differently. Like... Tiffany, you are gorgeous."

Tiffany blinks in surprise. The way Taeyeon pronounces the word 'gorgeous' completely throws her mind off course. She looks back at Taeyeon who is regarding her with a serious expression. "Huh?"

"Isn't that statement also regarded as an expression of romantic interest or attraction? Would the words 'no thanks' still be appropriate with such a situation? Imagine I'm a total stranger, and I come up to you after class and tell you how beautiful you are."

Tiffany stares at Taeyeon. Then she puts her pen down, sits up on the edge of the bed, and takes Taeyeon's hands in her own.

"Thank you so much for your kindness," she says. "And you leave as soon as you can. Not too rude,

but not giving the impression of interest. Okay?”

Taeyeon sighs but nods. They sit there, still holding hands. Tiffany absently fiddles with Taeyeon’s fingers and moves their hands around.

“I like your hands,” Taeyeon murmurs.

Tiffany smiles shyly. “Thanks. Yours aren’t all that bad either.”

They both laugh lightly, looking at each other briefly before looking away again. Tiffany detaches their hands and moves forward to envelop Taeyeon in a tight hug.

And even though they both close their eyes, Tiffany is absolutely sure of it this time when Taeyeon tilts her head slightly in Tiffany’s direction and takes a deep breath. She opens her eyes again, turning her face towards Taeyeon.

She is amazed to find that in her thoughts at that it would feel totally natural for her to move even closer to Taeyeon and kiss her.

She hesitates, then moves closer and kisses Taeyeon on the cheek. Taeyeon freezes, frowning and keeping her eyes closed. Tiffany decides to take a risk and do it again, lingering for longer on the smoothness of Taeyeon’s cheek. Taeyeon relaxes slowly. Tiffany returns to her previous position, tightening the hug.

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Taeyeon starts to think about kissing Tiffany. She’s only seen kissing in movies, and doesn’t know how to actually do that kind of thing personally. She did have that one chaste lips-closed peck with a boy in middle school, but she does try not to think of it as a real kiss since it was so unlike anything resembling the action. Taeyeon notices Tiffany’s lips seem quite good for kissing, as if they are soft to the touch and warm and – dare she think it – maybe a little flexible if they were to be tugged between her own.

Tiffany starts to notice Taeyeon staring at her more and more, and wonders if there’s something on her face all the time. The girl’s eyes latch on to her mouth quite often and she remembers the new lip gloss she’s started using. Maybe it’s the difference between the watermelon gloss she used to have and the

peach gloss which now shines her lips. She conveniently does not see the time when Taeyeon stares and stares at her lips before biting her own bottom lip intently.

Taeyeon has absolutely no idea what is going on in her mind. Never would she have imagined herself sitting in a university dorm room in America, sharing a small bed with a gorgeous Korean-American girl, watching a pirated film on a laptop screen and spilling a few un-popped popcorn kernels on the blanket. Nor would she have imagined that the film portrayed the love story between two women with absolutely no depression about repression or forbidden secrets.

“Their lives are so normal,” she remarks half-way through the film.

Tiffany glances at her and smiles almost slyly. “Yes, they are.”

And Taeyeon never would have imagined that during the kiss scene she would suddenly realise she’s staring at Tiffany.

Tiffany meets her attentive gaze, and they find themselves staring at each other without a single word exchanged between them.

Then the film is over and Tiffany is surfing through her laptop. Taeyeon fiddles with the now empty bowl of popcorn and then suddenly puts it on her desk right next to the bed. She lies on her stomach next to Tiffany, in the same position, and leans her chin in her hands as she watches what Tiffany is doing on the laptop.

“So, Taeng,” Tiffany says conversationally, shifting closer and snuggling – almost rubbing – against Taeyeon’s side. “Do you have a boyfriend in Korea?”

Taeyeon shakes her head. “No. Do you have a boyfriend here?”

“No. Otherwise I would have mentioned him already, you know how I am,” Tiffany laughs, and rests her head on Taeyeon’s shoulder blade, her laptop forgotten. “How many boyfriends have you had?”

Taeyeon thinks back to that boy in middle school, and answers, “None.”

Tiffany shifts her head, turning to face Taeyeon’s side profile and moving her lower body ever so slightly closer to Taeyeon’s. “Really? None at all? No geeky teenage boy holding your hand at the movies and awkwardly kissing you on the cheek once?”

“Not really,” says Taeyeon, fiddling with the fabric of the blanket. “There was a boy who kissed me, but I didn’t date him. How many boyfriends have you had, Fany?”

Tiffany closes her eyes, turning her head again to press her face into Taeyeon’s shirt. She really likes it when Taeyeon calls her Fany. No one else has access to that nickname.

“Four,” she mumbles. “None of them were serious.”

Taeyeon raises an eyebrow. “Not serious? So, you had four geeky teenage boys holding your hand at the movies and awkwardly kissing you on the cheek once? That kind of not serious?”

Tiffany grins into the fabric of Taeyeon’s shirt, and moves her body definitely closer, pressing comfortably against Taeyeon. “Yes, just like that.”

Taeyeon is surprised to feel the words that are said in Tiffany’s currently husky voice have some strange effect on her body, sending a ripple down her spine that surely did not go unnoticed by her American friend.

“Well, some of them did kiss me on the lips a few times,” Tiffany remarks quietly.

“Oh.”

Taeyeon looks up at the ceiling as they lie together in companionable silence. Then she rests her body on the mattress, causing a small shift from Tiffany who stays attached to her shoulder blade.

“They were so wrong,” Tiffany whispers, her eyes still closed. “Those kisses. They just felt... off.”

“Off,” Taeyeon echoes, distracted by the incredible warmth of Tiffany’s lower body pressing against her hip.

“How did your kiss feel?”

Taeyeon turns her head to the side, facing the direction where Tiffany lay. Her lips are close to Tiffany’s forehead, and she moves her head back slightly.

“It wasn’t even a proper kiss.”

“A proper kiss.” Tiffany opens her eyes and tilts her head to look at Taeyeon. “How do you know what a proper kiss feels like, then?”

Taeyeon shrugs, watching the way Tiffany's head moves with her shoulder. "I don't know. I just know that couldn't have been one."

"Then," Tiffany shuffles even closer, rubbing quite definitely against Taeyeon's side, "how do you *think* a proper kiss feels?"

Taeyeon's heart is beating very hard, and she knows Tiffany can feel it with hand that's resting on her back just between her shoulder blades. Their eye contact goes on for a long, long time.

"Warm," Taeyeon murmurs. "Soft. Supple. Sensual."

"Taeyeon," Tiffany breathes. "Tae."

Tiffany sits up, leaving coldness on Taeyeon's side from the sudden lack of heat. She runs her hands through her hair, mussing it slightly, her eyes flicking around the room as if searching for something else to do. Taeyeon sits up much slower, her gaze still on Tiffany.

"America is really different," she mutters, looking away at last. "I feel different here."

She's wrapped in the comfy embrace of Tiffany, sweet, soft Tiffany, and reciprocates immediately. They both close their eyes and lean their heads on each other's shoulder.

"I'm glad you're here," Tiffany whispers.

Taeyeon just nods in reply, feeling their shared body heat flowing into her veins. After a moment of silence, Tiffany begins to move. She's inching closer and closer to Taeyeon, and slowly shifts onto Taeyeon's lap, a knee on each side of her hips. The moment she lowers her body to rest on Taeyeon's thighs, Taeyeon's breath catches in her throat.

The warmth is incredible, unlike any warmth Taeyeon has experienced. No blanket or heater or anything had provided her with this intense heat melting onto the skin of her thighs. Her breathing speeds up and she tightens her fingers against Tiffany's back.

Tiffany notices Taeyeon's reaction, and shifts even closer to almost press her pelvis against Taeyeon's midriff. She presses her face into Taeyeon's neck, feeling the same incredible warmth there that Taeyeon feels from her lower body.

Taeyeon's hands begin to move, so slowly down her back that at first it seems like they're slipping because her muscles have turned to jelly. But then they reach her lower back, by the hem of her t-shirt

and the edge of her jean shorts, and Tiffany feels the distinct texture of nails against her.

By the time Taeyeon's palms come to rest on Tiffany's behind, they've both noticed that the lines have long been crossed.

Taeyeon is aware of the part of her mind that wants to pursue the warmth radiating from Tiffany's centre, and it's that part which moves one of her hands along the side of Tiffany's waist and slides her fingers to Tiffany's inner thigh.

The gasp that escapes Tiffany's lips is enough to muffle Taeyeon's thoughts. She has no idea what's going on in her mind at all. She never would have imagined that she would slip her fingers past the waistband of a girl's shorts in pursuit of the incredible warmth there. She never would have thought that she would push her forehead against a girl's collarbones as she looked down, barely glimpsing the slow movement of her wrist.

Tiffany moans. She moans more than once, sometimes short and staccato and sometimes long and drawn out, moving with Taeyeon's fingers. Her breath washes over the skin of Taeyeon's neck and Taeyeon closes her eyes as heat totally envelops her.

She never would have imagined that she would touch a girl like this in the small bed of a dorm room in an American university.

And she never would have imagined the sensation of feeling her head tilted by Tiffany's fingers and the softness, the warmth, the supple movement of Tiffany's lips with her own as the euphoria takes over.

Afterwards, they lie on the bed, half-heartedly tangled together, staring into space.

"Was that really sudden," Tiffany ponders, "or has it been building up for a long time?"

Taeyeon shrugs, glancing at the way Tiffany's forearm moves along where it rests on her shoulder. "I'm not even sure what happened yet," she murmurs.

Tiffany turns to look at Taeyeon. "Sex happened, Taeyeon," she says bluntly. "We had sex."

Taeyeon just stares at her blankly. Tiffany snuggles closer; she lays her head on Taeyeon's shoulder and rests her arm on Taeyeon's waist.

"Don't think about it yet," Tiffany whispers.

Taeyeon complies, hugging Tiffany and inhaling her scent. They fall asleep together even though it's only mid-afternoon and the sun is still bright.

Taeyeon is the first one to wake up. It's midnight, and Tiffany has shifted her body half on top of her. She feels Tiffany's breath once again on the skin of her neck, calmer and slower than the first time. And that's when she suddenly realises; she had sex with a girl.

Sex. Well, she didn't know a lot about sex or so she thought, and she certainly didn't know about sex between two girls. But she had touched Tiffany and kept touching her and they had kissed, so she was pretty sure it was enough to qualify as some kind of sex anyway, just as Tiffany had so blatantly stated. Tiffany groans and tosses around in her sleep, her body moving against Taeyeon's before settling again. It takes Taeyeon back to the moaning, the friction of their earlier actions and she absorbs the warmth of Tiffany's body for a moment.

She thinks back to what had induced her to move her hands over Tiffany's body. Oh yes, that part of her mind. She checks her thoughts and finds that part of her mind is focussing quite a lot on the feeling of Tiffany's curves against her own. She thinks back to the way Tiffany had shifted to straddle her, a move which no doubt woke up that part of her mind.

Taeyeon's hand is caressing Tiffany's body, moving along to Tiffany's behind. She lets her palm rest there again, and curiously cups the body part. Tiffany makes a tiny, near silent noise in her sleep, absently. Taeyeon squeezes Tiffany's behind gently, and thinks about it. She's holding a girl's butt. It's the first time she's touched anyone like this.

Tiffany stirs, muttering, "Mmm, Tae," and limply takes hold of Taeyeon's wrist to move the hand away but doesn't move it very far before drifting back into her sleep.

Taeyeon takes note of the new position of her hand, just below the curve of Tiffany's behind, and decides she quite likes having her hand there, the edge of her index finger brushing against the mound of Tiffany's flesh, slipping beneath her shorts.

Then Taeyeon notices how she's getting so used to it, touching Tiffany like this, finding out what she enjoys. It's as if she's intending to touch her like this more, and it makes her wonder what exactly she is going to do from this point on.

Dating a girl would not go down well, but with whom? Random strangers, yes, but not just in South

Korea, there were still some close-minded people in America too. Her family? She wonders. They would be shocked, disapproving, but they would never really stop loving her, she felt that.

Dating Tiffany... Taeyeon had never dated anyone at all. Would it be much different from being friends with Tiffany – apart from the kissing and presumably sex? They would have different expectations of each other perhaps, and a new way of looking at each other.

Taeyeon slips her other fingers up Tiffany's shorts and gently, briefly massages her there. Tiffany's spine curves in response, slightly, digging her hips into Taeyeon, before her body falls in place again.

Where would their relationship go? Where does any relationship go? Would she marry Tiffany, since it was legal somewhere in America? Does she even want to get married at all? She's never considered things like marriage and children, finding it hard enough to focus on the present most of the time with the regrets of her past looming over her head.

Taeyeon snags a nearby blanket, folded because it's too hot for more than one, and carefully lays it over their bodies with her free hand. Tiffany murmurs appreciatively, a content smile curling her lips, and presses her face into Taeyeon's neck.

Taeyeon lets herself dissolve into Tiffany, and drifts into sleep again.

When Tiffany wakes up, it's almost dawn and she's still in her sleep-haze. She stretches, rubbing at her eyes, yawning lengthily, completely unperturbed by the body half-pinned beneath her even though it's certainly a new experience. She rests her elbow on the mattress beside Taeyeon's shoulder and cups her chin in her hand, watching Taeyeon's face.

She's well aware of the hand on her rear, fingers quite comfortably beneath her shorts. She shifts her body, rubbing against Taeyeon once, pressing her hips into her.

Taeyeon's hand moves, covering more of Tiffany's sensitive skin and tightening into a grip. She turns her head a few times and slowly opens her eyes, bleary but waking. Her other hand comes to rest on Tiffany's waist, and as she wakes up her gaze lands on Tiffany's lips and her hand shifts higher to come into contact with other sensitive skin.

Tiffany moves, closing her eyes and resting her forehead on Taeyeon's shoulder as her body comes to fully cover Taeyeon's. Her legs slip to the sides of Taeyeon's thighs and they're both reminded of a similar position.

Taeyeon is letting her body react without interference from her thoughts. Her hand cups Tiffany's breast and she listens to the catch in Tiffany's breathing. She runs her fingers down Tiffany's torso and up her shirt to do it again, eliciting a soft whimper.

Tiffany reaches a hand between their bodies to undo her own shorts, sliding down the zipper and tugging at them. Taeyeon removes the hand from Tiffany's behind and pulls her shorts down more. Tiffany is eager for contact, shifting her hips, and Taeyeon finds herself cupping Tiffany's centre. Her thumbs move together, rubbing and pressing on Tiffany's soft body.

The sound Tiffany lets out is new, a small cry with a hoarse finish. Her hips move again and she fits her body closer to Taeyeon's. Taeyeon moves her hands, one going from Tiffany's front to her lower back, and the other starting to rub and clench in a rhythm. Tiffany clutches at Taeyeon's wrist but not in an attempt to pull her away. She moves her lower body at a complementary tempo. Her head tilts to rest her chin on Taeyeon's shoulder so her breathing is even louder.

Taeyeon's eyes are drawn to the now more accessible stretch of Tiffany's neck. She halts her hand, listens to the ensuing whine from Tiffany, and then moves her lips to brush against the skin of Tiffany's neck. Tiffany's grip on her wrist tightens as she does it again and again.

Teeth graze against skin at the same time as fingers enter underwear. Tiffany can barely control herself anymore, feeling as if she's becoming tenser and tenser. Taeyeon's teeth tug at her neck again and she gasps.

Then Taeyeon's fingers touch her, and she moans shakily.

It's the first time Taeyeon will do what she's about to do. She knows exactly what she wants to do right now, and it will be more than she did yesterday, and very far from anything she had ever imagined she would do.

Taeyeon's fingers trace the outline of Tiffany's centre and they both feel a shudder down their spines at the feeling of wetness there. Tiffany rocks her hips, moving against Taeyeon's hand, and they rub together for a while.

Then Taeyeon cups her firmly and tilts their bodies, rolling slowly until Tiffany's back is against the bed. She looks up at Taeyeon and their eyes meet.

Taeyeon looks down at Tiffany's body, her shirt in disarray and the underside of a breast visible as her

chest moves up and down. She looks even further down, at the sight of her hand in Tiffany's panties.

She rests her body completely on Tiffany's. With her free hand, she unzips her own pants and moves them down. Tiffany tugs with her, pulling them away. Taeyeon slowly, gently removes her fingers from Tiffany's underwear, sliding her hand along Tiffany's waist. Then she presses her pelvis against Tiffany's and absorbs the heat again.

"Tae..."

There's still too much between them, keeping their warmth apart. Taeyeon rakes her nails along Tiffany's skin and peels away her underwear. Tiffany slowly does the same to her. They move to come into contact again and Taeyeon lets out an exhalation of something like relief as the full force of Tiffany's heat finally reaches her.

"Fany... ah..."

Tiffany's eyes are closed, her mouth open slightly, and she moves her lower body against Taeyeon's. Taeyeon catches up, grinding with her and hearing her own breathless little moans matching Tiffany's.

"Taeyeon... Taeyeon..."

Taeyeon wants to go faster, much faster, so she spreads her own legs a little more and Tiffany's spread with her. She rushes her movements, feeling Tiffany's hands scrape along her back and her nails clutch at her skin.

But it's not enough yet, she wants to do something more. Her hand moves to Tiffany's centre again and her fingers only hurriedly trace her outline. Tiffany bites her bottom lip and crosses her arms over Taeyeon's back to bring her closer. Fingers move, and keep moving, and move deeply and her moan goes just as deep.

Taeyeon's hand moves slowly at first, a little clumsily, until she gets used to feeling Tiffany from the inside and moves faster and faster.

The sound of Tiffany's breath right now, gasping and catching with every move of her fingers, is the best sound Taeyeon has ever heard. She presses her face into the bed right next to Tiffany's head and listens to her newly found addiction.

"Tiffany... Fany, Fany..."

Tiffany feels ready to explode just from the sound of Taeyeon's voice right now, and she feels her spine curve to press her body upwards. She rubs against Taeyeon, moving with the decisive actions of the fingers inside of her. Her chin tilts back, her eyes roll upwards and a strangled breath escapes her throat.

"Taeyeon... ah—"

And her breath is shot from her lungs, her body stiffens as a shock goes through her, and then she melts with a little mewling sound.

Taeyeon shifts a little more, pulling her fingers out of Tiffany and just cupping her centre again, quite comfortably. Her own body stops shuddering as she recovers from the incredible sound of Tiffany reaching her climax.

They catch their breath. Tiffany presses her thighs inwards, pushing Taeyeon's legs together and wrapping her own legs around her. Taeyeon slips her hand up, along Tiffany's midriff, and then off her body where it goes to mirror her other hand's position on the mattress. Their pelvises are together again, their warmth so utterly connected even if they were apart.

"Was this really sudden...?" Taeyeon whispers, her lips brushing against Tiffany's jaw.

Tiffany reaches up a hand and brushes Taeyeon's hair over her shoulders, turning her head to place a kiss on the newly exposed neck.

"I don't know, Taeyeon," she answers softly.

"I think this all escalated pretty quickly," Taeyeon murmurs. "We haven't even talked about this."

"Do you want to talk now?"

"No," she says. "I don't know what I want."

Tiffany's breathing slows down.

"I want you, Taeyeon. I want you."

They rest together for long moments, then Taeyeon starts kissing Tiffany's jaw. Short, simple pecks, moving along her skin. Their lips meet slowly at first, but when the kiss has deepened their mouths pick up the pace.

“Wait,” Tiffany breaks the kiss, pushing Taeyeon off of her.

Taeyeon rolls onto her back beside Tiffany, as if she had been expecting it, and pulls up her underwear and pants. Tiffany sits up, reaches for her own underwear and puts it on. She stays upright, not looking at Taeyeon, even when Taeyeon reaches over and softly strokes her spine.

“Taeyeon, are you gay?”

Taeyeon blinks, the movement of her hand stopping. “I don’t know. Maybe. I’m just Taeyeon.”

“Have you ever done this with a girl before?”

Now Taeyeon frowns. She sits up and turns Tiffany’s head to face her. “No. What are you asking?”

“It’s just... You seemed like you knew what you were doing.”

“So I seem experienced? I’m not. I just do what I want to. I want to touch you, Tiffany.”

Tiffany looks away, moving Taeyeon’s hand away from her face. “So now you know what you want?”

Taeyeon is silent. Eventually she sighs and speaks again. “I don’t know. Maybe I know. I want to touch you more, and kiss you more. But I don’t know what’s going on in my head. I’m just following my body. So maybe I know what my body wants.”

“Well, stop.”

“Huh?”

“Stop letting your body do what it wants. Don’t you get it, Taeyeon? I don’t want us to be friends with benefits. And don’t blink at me like you don’t know what it means, we talked about it last week when you saw that movie in the store. I-I don’t know if I’m capable of dating a girl, but... we just... we need to stop having sex.”

Taeyeon watches her intently before responding. “I’m sorry, Miyoung. I shouldn’t have gotten so carried away. Can we be friends?”

Tiffany immediately turns and envelops Taeyeon in a warm, tender hug. “I got carried away too. You know the saying ‘It takes two to tango’? It’s not like I didn’t want to do it. We just need to cool down. Friends.”

And just like their friendship before this all happened, Taeyeon has no qualms about resting her hands on Tiffany's lower back as they hold their embrace for a long time. The fact that her hands are just on the very edge of inappropriate is just a remnant of the situation.

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6

They're both quite good at pretending nothing happened. Taeyeon does notice herself being a little more touchy-feely with Tiffany, and makes an effort to curb that. It's three weeks later when Tiffany's father insists that she invite Taeyeon over for dinner again. He plans to make kimchi and bulgogi for old times' sake and would love to hear Taeyeon's review of his cooking. Taeyeon, naturally, says yes right away.

She's already soaked by the storm raging outside when she arrives, and Tiffany fusses over her with a towel and a mug of hot tea. Mr Hwang is slaving away in the kitchen, apparently making a bit of a mess as he strives to achieve his goals, as Tiffany chattily informs Taeyeon while finishing off the task of drying her.

Taeyeon couldn't care less what Mr Hwang is up to in the kitchen, because Tiffany is going quite slowly with the fabric of the towel over the skin of her neck. She sets the mug of tea on the coffee table next to Tiffany, who's perched on the edge of it so she can face Taeyeon while she dries her off.

Taeyeon's hands gravitate smoothly to Tiffany's lower back.

Tiffany only bites her bottom lip briefly at the contact before ignoring it. But Taeyeon is persistent. She moves Tiffany closer by her hips, causing their legs to fit together like puzzle pieces, her knee brushing against the inside of Tiffany's thighs and Tiffany's knee doing the same to her.

"Taeyeon," Tiffany hisses, moving the towel away and glaring at her. "What the hell are you doing?!"

Taeyeon blinks. It's the first time she sees Tiffany so mad. But her hands aren't put off, and she runs her fingers over Tiffany's thighs and back again to settle lower than their original position.

"Taeyeon, what are you -" Tiffany pulls Taeyeon's hands away and pushes at her shoulders to create distance. "Other than the fact that we're not supposed to do that anymore," she hisses at the girl, "my father is right in the next room! Did you become some stupid hormonal pubescent boy, huh? Can't you keep your hands to yourself?!"

Taeyeon stares at her blankly. Tiffany swears at her in Korean and storms out of the room.

Mr Hwang notices nothing different between his daughter and her friend as they all eat together later, and this is because nothing is different. Tiffany has gone back to normal, though Taeyeon is sure there's something maybe a bit lighter in the way she touches her, and the dinner goes on like anything else.

The rain is still almost dangerously heavy outside when it's time for Taeyeon to leave, so this time when Mr Hwang insists she must stay the night, she agrees. He leaves Tiffany to help her out, reminding her of where the spare bedding and futon is since they don't have a guest room, and wishes them a goodnight.

The lights in Tiffany's room are dark for less than an hour before Taeyeon lifts Tiffany's blanket and slips into bed with her.

Tiffany sighs resignedly. "You really are like a teenage boy, huh?"

Taeyeon's hands run along the curves of Tiffany's body slowly before she rests her arms around Tiffany's waist and presses against her back. "It's okay, sleep. I'm not after sex."

Tiffany sighs again. "I can't believe you even just said that. What are we doing, Taeyeon? We used to be strangers, then friends, now we're like this."

Taeyeon nuzzles her face into the crook of Tiffany's neck from behind and places a soft kiss there. "Shh. Don't think about it yet. Sleep. I'm here."

Tiffany closes her eyes and they drift into sleep together while the storm rages on outside the window.

When Tiffany wakes up, she finds Taeyeon staring at her. She huffs, annoyed, and wiggles her body as she pushes Taeyeon away with one hand.

"What do you want, weirdo?" she mutters, still sleepy, and yawns.

Taeyeon watches her rubbing her eyes. "What do I want..." she murmurs.

Tiffany blinks at Taeyeon who has moved to press against her body again, from the front this time. She lets Taeyeon kiss her, unwilling to think about things. The kiss is sweet in the first moment and develops into firmer, more determined movements of Taeyeon's lips on hers. Before Taeyeon pulls away, she takes Tiffany's bottom lip between her own and tugs it, satisfying herself with its elasticity.

They stare at each other again.

Then Tiffany huffs again and runs a hand over her face as she wiggles her body away from Taeyeon and stretches. Taeyeon rests her chin on her crossed arms, lying on her stomach, and runs her gaze over Tiffany's body.

When Tiffany stops moving she lies on her back with her head turned away from Taeyeon and her arms left stretched above her head. She starts wondering how long it would take Taeyeon to start touching her, then admonishes herself for thinking so lowly of her friend's self-control, and then wonders why she was wondering in the first place when she was so sure it shouldn't be allowed to happen.

"Taeyeon?" she whispers, still not moving, keeping her head facing away.

"Hmm?"

"Do you love me?"

Taeyeon is silent for a long time. Eventually Tiffany hears the sound of shifting from her side of the bed. Taeyeon rests her body on top of Tiffany comfortably, nuzzling her face into Tiffany's neck again and taking a deep breath.

"I think so," she answers. "I don't know how this kind of love feels, but I don't recognise what I'm feeling for you. I think it's love."

Tiffany exhales, wrapping her arms around Taeyeon. "Aren't you scared?"

"I am. But I'm not sure what I'm scared of."

Tiffany closes her eyes, and together they are absorbed by the warm morning silence.

It's four days before they touch each other again. Tiffany comes into Taeyeon's dorm room at a time when she knows the girl will be there. She dumps her stuff on Taeyeon's desk even though Taeyeon's working there, flops herself on Taeyeon's bed, and muffles a scream of frustration in Taeyeon's pillow.

Taeyeon just stares at her for a moment, her pen still in hand even though the book she was writing in is buried beneath Tiffany's purse. Then she puts the pen down and sits on the edge of her bed.

"What's up?"

Tiffany groans. “Life sucks, Taeyeon.”

Taeyeon is trying not to go closer to Tiffany. It’s been days since she’s seen her. Her eyes are tracing every part of her body.

“What happened?”

“My father thinks he knows everything!” Tiffany punches Taeyeon’s pillow. “He’s such a self-righteous, close-minded —” Whatever Tiffany was about to call her father is morphed into another muffled scream of anger.

Taeyeon doesn’t hold back anymore. She reaches forward, lightly places her hand on Tiffany’s lower back. Like a feather, she brushes her fingers up Tiffany’s spine. Tiffany tenses at first, but loosens up completely by the time Taeyeon’s hand reaches between her shoulder blades.

“Talk to me about it,” Taeyeon says softly.

Tiffany takes a deep breath. “He just... He’s going on some business trip to New York. He knows I’ve wanted to move into the dorms for ages, but when I suggested I do it before his trip so I won’t have to be home alone, he said it’s unnecessary. He wants to get my sister to come live with me while he’s away, which would just inconvenience her since she’s going for her PhD at Berkeley, you know?”

Taeyeon hums in acknowledgement. She moves. She straddles Tiffany’s behind and puts both hands on Tiffany’s shoulders. With tender, deliberate movements, she massages Tiffany’s muscles.

“It just kills me how he doesn’t even listen to me,” Tiffany continues, calmer and quieter. “He doesn’t consider my suggestions at all.”

“When does he leave?” Taeyeon murmurs, her fingers moving over Tiffany’s back.

Tiffany moans a little, tries to muffle it into a small squeak. She’s almost totally forgotten about the problem, her anger has dissipated, and she really, really enjoys the feeling of Taeyeon touching her.

“In a month,” she breathes.

“Maybe you can still convince him,” Taeyeon says.

Her hands stop suddenly. Tiffany tenses in anticipation of Taeyeon’s next move.

Taeyeon reaches up and gently moves some of Tiffany's hair to expose the back of her neck. Tiffany closes her eyes, and arches her spine to raise her neck ever so slightly. Taeyeon looks down at her. She's given Taeyeon permission, wordlessly, to kiss her neck, and Taeyeon takes a moment to absorb the fact that Tiffany wants her to touch her.

At the feel of Taeyeon's lips brushing against the skin of her neck so lightly she can barely feel it, Tiffany lets out a little noise. Taeyeon's lips come back, brushing again before pressing firmly.

Suddenly the door opens. "Hey Taeyeon do you have -"

Taeyeon jumps away from Tiffany, rolling onto her butt on the mattress, and they both snap their heads to face the new arrival. Taeyeon's next door neighbour in the dorms is blinking at them with wide eyes and her jaw dropped.

"Wow Taeyeon, I didn't know you have a girlfriend," she says, sounding surprised. "You never tell us anything about yourself."

Taeyeon and Tiffany stay silent, still frozen in shock. Taeyeon thinks back to the position they were in; her on top of Tiffany, hands resting on Tiffany's lower back, her mouth pressed tightly to the skin of Tiffany's neck as Tiffany arched her back.

It was no surprise that her neighbour had assumed Tiffany was her girlfriend.

"Um," the neighbour says awkwardly. "Well, sorry for interrupting. I was just wondering if you have a spare pen I could borrow, but I'll just figure something out. See ya!"

She leaves hurriedly, snapping the door shut behind her. Taeyeon knows that by morning everyone she associates with on campus will have heard the girl's story about walking in on Taeyeon and her girlfriend being intimate.

The thought doesn't bother her much. Her neighbour studies biology, so she wouldn't have recognised Tiffany, and no one would know it was her.

Tiffany, on the other hand, is thinking about the word 'girlfriend'.

Taeyeon shifts closer. She takes hold of Tiffany, pulls her up into a sitting position and turns her head to face her. She gently caresses Tiffany's cheek and kisses her sweetly before saying a single word.

“Tiffany,” she breathes, her mouth still on Tiffany’s, brushing their lips together.

“Taeyeon,” is all Tiffany squeezes out before kissing Taeyeon deeply. Her hands come up to cup Taeyeon’s face, her fingers in her hair and her thumbs pressing into her cheeks.

They kiss intently, lips moving together confidently. Tiffany introduces her tongue into the equation, causing Taeyeon to rake her nails along Tiffany’s waist and grip her tightly. She slows the kiss down so that she can feel every part of Tiffany’s tongue and mouth with her own.

Tiffany listens to the little exhalations of breath bursting from Taeyeon’s mouth whenever there’s a little gap in the joint of their lips. She leans forward into the kiss, feeling Taeyeon push back slightly to keep them mostly upright. When they get closer to needing to breathe, Tiffany slows the kiss and they tug at each other’s lips before pulling away.

Tiffany wraps her arms around Taeyeon’s neck and keeps their faces close together as they catch their breath.

“Fany,” Taeyeon whispers, nudging her nose against Tiffany’s cheek. “Will you be my girlfriend?”

Tiffany pulls away, looking surprised. “You’re asking me to be your girlfriend?”

“Yes.”

Tiffany completely moves away, creating space between them and crossing her hands in her lap, looking down thoughtfully. “I never thought you would ask. I mean... you just seem to be coping with all of this much easier than I am, and I... Taeyeon, what would happen if we were girlfriends?”

Taeyeon moves closer, kissing her. “We would do what people in relationships do. Figure out how to survive life together.”

“Why are you so confident about this?!”

Taeyeon just kisses her again and again, cupping Tiffany’s face in her hands.

“I learned a long time ago,” she murmurs between kisses, “that hesitation brings regrets. I’ve waited, and I’ve thought about it slowly. Miyoung, I want you.”

At that moment, Tiffany realises that she can’t possibly say no. She wants Taeyeon too. She wants to be with Taeyeon, wants to date Taeyeon, wants to be in a relationship with Taeyeon. She wants to kiss her

and hug her and touch her. Tiffany wants to let herself fall in love with Taeyeon. And so she does.

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7

Taeyeon always takes a long time to dial the numbers when she's calling home. Her finger moves slowly over the buttons, as if she's expecting the phone will blow up in her hands when she presses the next one. She feels kind of empty inside when she thinks about talking to her family, but she thinks it might just be because Tiffany has shown her how it feels to be warm and everything else is a bit colder.

"Hi," she says when her mother answers the phone.

"Ah, my Taeyeonie!" her mother squeals delightedly. "How are you, my daughter? How's school? Is life in America going well? Tell me, have you found some places with good food? Not that American stuff, real food! And I hear it's cold over there, are you wearing enough warm layers?!"

Taeyeon rolls her eyes. "Yes, omma, I'm taking care of myself very well. School is fine. I'll email you my most recent grades later. How's appa?"

"Oh, he's fine, nothing interesting has happened here since you left, Taeyeonie," her mother says dismissively. "Your brother and sister are fine too. We want to hear about you! Are there any nice Korean boys there? It would be wonderful if you could find a boy there, Taeyeonie, those boys are such hard-working, driven young men with promising futures."

Taeyeon sighs, and decides to get on with it. "Omma, are you sitting down? I want to tell you something important."

"Oh? Alright, let me just turn down the heat on the stove here." There was the scraping sound of a chair being moved as her mother sat down. "What is it, Taeyeonie? Is something wrong?"

"No, nothing is wrong. I want to tell you about a wonderful girl I met here; her name is Tiffany Hwang. Miyoung. She's Korean-American, she's my age, and she's doing a law degree. She's been a great help to me, showing me what America is like and helping me with my English. She's been my best friend."

"That's lovely, dear," her mother says warmly. "It's always nice to have a friend to help out in a strange land."

Taeyeon takes a deep breath. “Yes, omma. Well. Miyoung is really great. She’s smart, beautiful, funny, hard-working, kind... omma; I’ve fallen in love with her. She’s my girlfriend.”

There is an excruciatingly long silence on the line. Taeyeon starts to wonder if the phone cut off, then she hears her mother take a shaky breath.

“What?”

Taeyeon steels herself. “She’s my girlfriend, omma. We’re dating. We’re in love with each other.”

“What?”

Taeyeon closes her eyes. “Omma, please, do I have to repeat myself or are you just in shock? I love her, I love Tiffany Hwang Miyoung and she loves me. She makes me so happy, omma. She’s the light in my darkness and she means a lot to me.”

Her mother lets out a long breath. “Are you sure? Are you sure this isn’t just a phase and you’ll go back to liking boys later? Please, Taeyeon, I just want you to be sure. I don’t want you to make a mistake with this girl.”

“I’m sure, omma. I’ve never had feelings like this for a boy. I’ve never had feelings like this at all. And these feelings I feel with Tiffany... These are the best feelings I’ve ever felt. I don’t want to have regrets because I let her go, omma. I asked her to be my girlfriend and she said yes.”

Her mother is silent again for a long time before speaking. “What’s her family like? Traditional or Americanised? How have they reacted to this?”

“She lives with her father. Her mother passed away when she was younger. Her father is still in touch with his Korean side, but I don’t think I would say he’s traditional. We haven’t told him yet, but we’re telling him tonight when I go to their house for dinner. He’s been asking me to teach him your kimchi fried rice recipe, omma. I think he’ll really like it, it’s my favourite, and it always reminds me of you. Listen, omma, you might find this hard to accept, and I’ll understand that completely. But I want you to remember, I love you all and I miss you very much. You’re my family.”

Her mother sighs. “Okay, Taeyeon. Let me think about this for a while. You’re right, I do find this hard to accept, and I don’t know how your father will react. I’ll call you.”

And there comes a click, followed by the dial tone. Taeyeon listens to the sound of it for a while, her

eyes still closed.

A jingle of keys from outside her door snaps her back to reality and she opens her eyes, puts the phone down, and runs a hand through her hair.

Tiffany latches on to her back and gives her a warm hug once she's dumped her things on Taeyeon's desk again.

"Hi," she murmurs.

Taeyeon turns and cups Tiffany's face, covering her face with light kisses. She kisses her firmly on the lips, inhaling deeply, and then nuzzles her nose into her cheek as she pulls her closer.

"Hello," she whispers.

Tiffany tightens her grip around Taeyeon's waist. "What's up? Is something wrong?"

Taeyeon kisses her cheek again before trailing down to her neck and nibbling there. Tiffany cranes her neck to make herself more accessible.

"Tae?" she murmurs.

"I told my mother about us," she answers, pausing momentarily in her actions. "I need you."

They're a little late to Tiffany's house.

It's raining again when they've finished dinner. Tiffany and Taeyeon have been shooting each other furtive glances all night, wondering when was the right time to tell her father. Now Mr Hwang was peeking around the edge of a curtain and eyeing the rain critically. They both knew he was about to invite her to stay the night, but if they told him and he didn't react well it could get even worse.

So they stay silent, staring holes into each other as they made their way up to Tiffany's room.

"When will we tell him?" Taeyeon asks in a low voice as soon as Tiffany closes her door.

Tiffany leans her forehead against the door, her hand still on the doorknob, and closes her eyes. "I have no idea."

Taeyeon steps up behind her, pulling their bodies together with hands on Tiffany's hips, and then she

wraps her arms around Tiffany and rests her head on her shoulder. They don't say anything more, enjoying the warmth in silence.

They're leisurely kissing each other with Tiffany's back against the door later when Taeyeon's hearing sharpens at the little sounds Tiffany is making. Her mind ponders on the existence of Mr Hwang. She pulls away from the kisses for a moment.

"What about your father?" she whispers. "He might hear."

Tiffany circles her arms around Taeyeon's neck and gives her a quick peck. "You're right, let's just go to sleep."

Taeyeon gives her one last peck and they find themselves kissing intently again, lips glued together and moving. Her hands slip down the back of Tiffany's shorts and Tiffany's nails rake down her neck and shoulders. Taeyeon lets out a definite little moan at the shared contact. They stop kissing, hands slowing down and lips parting.

For a while, they just stare at each other.

"God, we're such hormonal teenagers," Tiffany breathes.

Taeyeon grins. "That's very true."

They make it into bed at last, ready to sleep, and switch off the lamp on the bedside table. They curl together naturally, and play a brief tickling game with muffled giggles before settling down in each other's arms.

The curtains aren't quite thick enough to eliminate every bit of light from the streetlamp outside, though they do a good job, and Taeyeon's eyes are drawn to Tiffany's collarbones, visible in the dimness.

She gazes at the shape of the bones, the way the skin looks so soft and flexible.

Her teeth graze along Tiffany's neck, biting at her collarbone, tugging lightly at the skin there. Tiffany's gasps are sharp, her fingers snatching at Taeyeon's shirt. Taeyeon is nipping at Tiffany's neck and collarbones continuously, her mouth moving over her girlfriend's skin.

It's not long before Tiffany's managed to tug Taeyeon's shirt over her head and her own follows suit.

Her body writhes as Taeyeon kisses and bites and sucks on her neck. Taeyeon places her body between Tiffany's legs and starts grinding immediately, barely taking a breath before continuing her ministrations on Tiffany's neck.

Tiffany moans lowly. She doesn't know what to do with herself, getting distracted by Taeyeon, and as she feels more moans leak from her throat, she clutches her hands over her mouth.

Taeyeon slows down slightly, her hips stopping their movements, her lips turning tender. She traces a line of kisses along Tiffany's neck before pulling away Tiffany's hands and kissing her on the lips.

"I love you," she whispers, lips brushing over Tiffany's as she kisses her again and again. "I love you."

Before Tiffany has a chance to catch her breath and respond, Taeyeon is taking her kisses down Tiffany's body, all along her neck and chest and stomach. She quickly and smoothly moves Tiffany's pyjama shorts out of the way. Tiffany's eyes widen in shock and her breath catches in her throat as Taeyeon reaches her destination. Tiffany throws her hands onto her face, wrapping her mouth shut as she begins to make sounds.

It's hard to stay quiet when her climax comes, but Tiffany tries her best, craning her neck and lifting her upper body off the mattress for a moment. She bites down on one finger and clenches her eyes shut tightly. The only noise she makes is a strange little whine; before she collapses onto the bed again and lets her body turn to mush.

Taeyeon lifts her head, rests her cheek on Tiffany's stomach, and takes a deep breath. After a moment she moves up, planting little kisses along Tiffany's skin, and settles herself on top of her, her face nuzzling into Tiffany's neck. Tiffany wraps her arms around Taeyeon and grips her tightly.

"I love you," she whispers into Taeyeon's hair.

They fall asleep together. Tiffany is the first to wake, feeling incredibly well-rested, and finds herself curled around Taeyeon from behind. She blearily glances at the alarm clock on her bedside table and upon seeing the early time, she snuggles tighter against Taeyeon and closes her eyes again.

Taeyeon makes a humming sound. Everything is quiet for a while until she shifts and makes the same humming noise again. Tiffany opens her eyes and pulls back her head to look at Taeyeon.

"Tae?"

“Fany-yah...” Taeyeon murmurs.

Tiffany smiles at the Korean mumblings that come from Taeyeon in her sleep.

“계속...사랑해 주세요...”

Tiffany stares at Taeyeon as she becomes quiet again and drifts deeper into her sleep. The bed creaks slightly as Tiffany shifts them both, squeezing Taeyeon closely tighter. Taeyeon grunts, and wakes up, taking a deep breath as she departs from her slumber.

“Miyong-ah?” she mumbles.

“Taeyeon, I love you.”

“I love you too...”

“Taeyeon...”

“Hmm?”

“Taeyeon... I hope I will love you forever.”

Taeyeon waits a moment before turning around to look at Tiffany. “Was I talking in my sleep?”

“Yes. I just want you to know... Your nightmares will never happen.”

Taeyeon smiles weakly and gently caresses Tiffany’s cheek. “Thank you,” she whispers. “Thank you.”

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8

“여보, can you get my calculator for me? It’s in my bag right next to the bed.”

“Did you just call me your ‘honey’?” Tiffany asks as she hands over the calculator with a grin.

Taeyeon blushes slightly, but answers calmly. “Yes. Yes I did.”

Tiffany plants a big fat kiss on Taeyeon's cheeks, fully equipped with a hum and a smack of her lips as she pulls away. "I love you," she whispers.

Taeyeon swiftly turns her head and captures Tiffany's lips, delivering her own deep kiss.

When she pulls away, Tiffany licks her lips happily before she pushes Taeyeon's chair so she's facing away from the desk and straddles her lap smoothly. Taeyeon grins, dropping the calculator on the desk and holding on to Tiffany's rear to keep her in place.

"Using that term... You wanna marry me, 자기야?" Tiffany whispers.

She keeps her face incredibly close to Taeyeon's, almost kissing her but not quite, with her arms around Taeyeon's neck and shoulders. Then, with their mouths almost touching, she slowly reaches out with her tongue and traces Taeyeon's bottom lip.

Taeyeon lets out a wordless noise, her hands clenching at Tiffany's flesh, before she melts with a whimper.

Tiffany pulls away just a little, eyes glinting. "What did you say?"

Taeyeon kisses her first, moving forward quickly and wrapping Tiffany's lips in a passionate kiss. Her hands slip up Tiffany's shirt, holding on to her lower back, and slide down again until her fingers are hooked onto the waistband of her pants. When she breaks the kiss, she doesn't even pull away.

"I'm so in love with you, Fany," she mutters. She kisses her again, and again. "I..." she looks like she wants to say something, staring into Tiffany's eyes for a long while, before she lays a sweet, tender kiss on Tiffany's lips. "I love you."

Tiffany's playful glint is gone, replaced with something more serious, swept up in a different feeling.

"I love you," she echoes.

Taeyeon kisses her repeatedly, quickly.

"Taeyeon," she breathes, the words washing over their joined mouths. "What were you going to say?"

Taeyeon slows to a stop, nuzzling Tiffany's face. "I don't think I should say it."

"Why not?"

“I might scare you away.”

Her words confirm what Tiffany had been thinking. Tiffany leans back a little, taking Taeyeon’s face in her hands.

“I want you to say it.”

“Are you sure?”

Tiffany nods.

Taeyeon moves her hands over Tiffany’s back, feeling the smoothness of her skin. She leans her head forward to press her lips to Tiffany’s collarbone, and slowly plants a trail of kisses down her chest to the centre, where her heart is.

“Miyong, I want to marry you.”

The pressure on her chest increases and Taeyeon starts to seriously kiss Tiffany’s skin, moving upwards again. As she reaches the point just by the curve of Tiffany’s jaw and starts biting and sucking, Tiffany reacts strongly. She gasps, rolls her hips forward, clutches at Taeyeon and presses them together.

Taeyeon slides one hand to Tiffany’s chest to cup one breast. She squeezes it gently before quickly unlatching Tiffany’s bra and slipping her hand beneath the fabric to cup Tiffany’s bare breast wholly. Her fingers start a slow massage as her mouth on Tiffany’s neck shifts to give her a soft kiss on the lips.

Taeyeon can hear her favourite sounds again. Tiffany’s breathing is heavy, accentuated with uneven, irregular little moans. Her lower body is rocking back and forth slightly, unconsciously. The chair creaks with her movements.

Suddenly Taeyeon stops. Their eyes meet, Tiffany’s confused. Then Taeyeon slowly, painfully slowly, caresses Tiffany’s neck and cups her face with one hand. Her other hand runs over Tiffany’s chest, stomach, and unbuttons her pants, all while she maintains their locked stares.

Tiffany lifts her hips when Taeyeon starts to put her hand down her pants, making access easier, and stays slightly raised as Taeyeon’s fingers settle there.

Taeyeon holds Tiffany firmly in place, keeping their eyes together. Even when she so slowly rubs Tiffany, she maintains their contact and trains Tiffany’s head to face hers.

Tiffany's hips begin to move with the rhythm again, and Taeyeon lovingly watches the movements of Tiffany's face as she makes those sounds again.

After a while, she takes them a step further.

She hears that familiar whine that always leaks from Tiffany at this moment. It's her favourite of all the sounds bar the sound of Tiffany climaxing and crying her name.

She curls her toes in the carpet and shifts her legs slightly to provide better balance as Tiffany rocks with the movement of her hand.

Their lips meet again in a casual kiss, before Taeyeon goes back and takes Tiffany's bottom lip between her own for a lengthy suck followed by a pop and a moan.

"Do you wanna marry me, 여보?" Taeyeon whispers.

Tiffany's eyes are half-lidded but locked on Taeyeon's face as she moves. "Yes. Yes, yes, yes, oh god Taey-"

Taeyeon's fingers move faster, bringing the series of high-pitched yelps and moans that she was expecting. She smoothly brings Tiffany to her climax, relishing every atom of the moment. Tiffany finishes it all with a long, drawn-out moan and a sigh.

"Taeyeon," she breathes, resting her cheek against the side of Taeyeon's head. "Taeyeon."

Taeyeon turns Tiffany's head to her again and delivers a detailed, tender kiss to her mouth. After a while, Tiffany relaxes fully and climbs off Taeyeon's lap. She straightens her clothes as she stands, and Taeyeon watches her silently.

Tiffany leans down for one last quick peck before she wanders away and flops herself down onto the bed. Taeyeon's eyes track her every move, and she leans forward in her chair to rest her elbows on her knees.

"What?" Tiffany asks after a while.

"Nothing," Taeyeon responds. "Except basically, we both just said that we want to marry each other when we've only been dating for a few weeks."

Tiffany looks away. "Yes, we did."

Taeyeon stands and goes to sit on the edge of the bed. She reaches out and rests her hand on Tiffany's thigh.

"It's okay, Fany," she says quietly. "I'm not trying to pressure you or anything. I just think we need to talk."

"About what?"

"About what happens when it's time for me to go back to Korea."

Tiffany doesn't say anything for a long time. She stares at the window, even though the curtains are drawn and it would be too dark to see anything outside anyway.

"I'll just say my piece first then," Taeyeon says quietly. "I can't stay in America. My family is very important to me, and they need me. And I'm not sure I would want to live anywhere other than Korea, at least not yet. I want to spend more time in Korea."

Tiffany turns over, lying on her side with her back facing Taeyeon, and curls into a little ball of silence.

Taeyeon lies down next to her, curving against her back, and wraps an arm around her waist to pull her tight against her.

"I know you can't come with me to Korea, either. You wouldn't be able to work as a lawyer there, not when you're not fluent in the language and studied the law of another country. I could never ask you to give up that dream, and I would never let you give up."

Tiffany starts crying in earnest, letting out the emotions she had been holding back. Taeyeon holds her closer, covering her body warmly, and closes her eyes.

"We still have time," she whispers. "We still have a long time."

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9

While the topic of Taeyeon's departure is no longer discussed, they decide to try telling Tiffany's father again. It's two days before he leaves on his business trip, and Tiffany opens the door for Taeyeon when

she arrives. They smile slightly at each other as Taeyeon removes her shoes and Tiffany takes her hand to lead her to the living room.

Mr Hwang looks up in surprise before greeting her warmly. “Hello, Taeyeon! Came back for more of my wonderful cooking?”

Taeyeon grins. “Your food is perfect, Mr Hwang, especially when I’m feeling homesick. It’s like being back in Korea again.”

Her words make him chuckle. “You’re good at flattering your elders, Taeyeon. Oh, I assume Tiffany has told you about my business trip?”

Taeyeon blinks, and nods. “Yes, sir.”

He eyes their joined hands before continuing. “I know she’s upset that I’ve asked her sister to come look after her, and I’ve been thinking about her opinions for a while now. She’s right; it’s unfair of me to ask her sister to come all the way here to look after her. And she is technically an adult now, but I don’t feel comfortable leaving her alone in the house. She wants to move into the dorms and that’s something we can talk about later, but I’ve decided on something else while I’m away on this trip.”

Taeyeon glances at Tiffany and sees from her confused frown that she was not informed of this.

She meets Mr Hwang’s eyes again. “Yes?”

“How about you come and stay here?”

They blink at him in shock.

“She can’t go stay with you in your small dorm room, and this way you can have a bit of a break and maybe feel more at home in a real house. What do you think?”

Taeyeon and Tiffany glance at each other briefly, their eyes telling each other all sorts of things, before Taeyeon looks at Mr Hwang and nods.

“That sounds great, Mr Hwang.”

They disappear to Tiffany’s room soon after and huddle together by the closed door to whisper.

“What do we do now?” Tiffany frets. “If we tell him now and he gets angry, he won’t let you stay with

me. I really want you to stay with me, Taeyeon...”

Taeyeon holds her hands. “I know. This is a really good opportunity. It’s okay; we’ll just tell him when he comes back. Okay?”

Tiffany smiles at her and kisses her softly. Then she tugs on her hands to lead her to the bed and they sit down.

“Tell me about your regret, Taeyeon,” she says quietly, her eyes sharp and focussed. “That big regret that showed you how dangerous hesitation can be.”

Taeyeon takes a deep breath and exhales. She turns her body away from Tiffany, and leans back on her hands. Her face looks up to the ceiling and she ponders for a moment.

“I liked singing. I liked it a lot. It was pretty much all I did during my free time as a kid. I knew early on that it was all I wanted to do in my life. I didn’t want to sit in some boring office punching keys on a computer or falling asleep in meetings – I wanted to soar on the wings of my voice. Well, the time came when one of the biggest entertainment companies in Korea sent a scout to a singing competition in my area. Everyone went nuts. This was a chance to turn singing into a career, a life. So I practiced and practiced and fretted about my chances; I knew I had a good voice but it takes more than that to be a professional. And, you know, the fear didn’t really set in until I was almost there. With every step I took towards the venue, the thoughts washed over me, wave after wave of doubt and terror. Sure, I wanted to sing as a job, and I wanted it to be my life, but I kept thinking that this wasn’t right. Someone would take it from me. If it became my job then I would have a boss and my boss could ruin everything at any moment. I would be taking my greatest love and leaving it in someone else’s hands.”

Taeyeon straightens up and looks down at the floor.

“And I was afraid of leaving my voice in someone else’s control, because what if they thought I wasn’t as good as I thought I was? It would crush me. People who knew things about the business would listen to me and it would turn out that I wasn’t actually good at all. My dream would be destroyed, one way or another, in that instant that I stood before them and sang. So I ran away, and I never looked back, and I don’t sing anymore.”

“But why?” Tiffany asks. She scoots closer and wraps her arms around Taeyeon’s waist. “Why did you stop singing? You could have kept it as a hobby.”

Taeyeon smiles slightly and shakes her head. “No. It was all over. Every time I opened my mouth, the pain would appear and I would feel lost and confused. I just couldn’t do it anymore. I couldn’t make myself sing.”

Taeyeon purses her lips together tightly and breathes deep. Tiffany traces the outline of Taeyeon’s mouth lightly, with the tip of her index finger, and places a soft kiss on the corner of her lips.

When Tiffany pulls back, she bites her bottom lip as if she wants to say something, her warm brown eyes flickering to Taeyeon’s gaze. Then she just leans forward again and kisses Taeyeon slowly.

“I’m scared,” she whispers hurriedly into the kiss. “I’m scared of telling my father about us. And I’m scared about being scared to tell him. I don’t want to lose you because I’m hesitant to – to say to him, dad I’m in love with Taeyeon, to talk to him about our relationship, I don’t want you to leave me because you already told your family and I’m scared.”

Taeyeon brings her arms up and circles them around Tiffany’s shoulders, gently stroking the back of her neck with her thumbs. “Shh, it’s okay, it’s okay. I’m here. And I’ll still be here for as long as I can. Just calm down, and take your steps with me. Okay? I told you, now we’re in a relationship, we’ll figure out how to survive life together.”

Tiffany stares at her for a long time, feeling the way her heart was beating faster and the way it felt as if she was being lifted up further and further with every moment she spent with Taeyeon. She had never felt such a strong feeling with anyone, and she’s scared but excited because one thing she knows for sure is that every day is happier than the one before and it’s all because of Taeyeon.

“Let’s go tell him,” she says firmly, standing up. “Come on.”

She grabs Taeyeon’s hand, pulls her along behind her, and a grin grows on her lips as they make their way back to the living room. Her father lowers his newspaper, and eyes her curiously when she stops in front of him with a big smile on her face and her fingers interlocked with Taeyeon’s.

“Dad,” she says, “I’m in love with Taeyeon, and she’s my girlfriend.”

His lack of reaction is downright terrifying for Taeyeon, who meets his quiet gaze with wide eyes.

“She makes me happier than anyone or anything in my life,” Tiffany continues, still smiling brightly.

“And she’s absolutely amazing. She’s one of the best people I’ve ever met, and it’s incredible to me

how she has learned a lot from life's difficulties. I was scared to tell you, dad, because I didn't want to lose either of you. But Taeyeon taught me a little something about hesitation, so I'm not hesitating anymore."

And it was true, in the way she was speaking, that Tiffany was confident and strong and clear. Taeyeon squeezes her hand and echoes her smile for a moment, looking at her.

Mr Hwang doesn't do anything for a moment. Then his newspaper rustles as he folds it and puts it neatly to one side. He leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees and weaving his fingers together. He looks from Taeyeon to Tiffany to Taeyeon, and finally settles on Tiffany.

"Well," he says, and clears his throat awkwardly. "I wonder, Miyoung, if you remember that time a few years ago when you wanted to be a singer. You begged me to help you pursue your dream. And I thought to myself, no way am I letting my little girl throw herself into that world. Because I knew you would be good enough to rise to the top faster than a shooting star, and I was afraid for you because the top is a dangerous place to be in that world."

He takes a deep breath, glancing at Taeyeon again for a moment before locking eyes with his daughter.

"Similarly, I'm afraid for you now," he says in a frail voice. "I know what it's like to be in love, and I know gender is hardly an ingredient to falling in love. So don't get me wrong; I know Taeyeon is a great person, but I can't say I'm exactly ecstatic here. This is another thing that makes me fear for you. The world is changing but not fast enough for my taste. Sure there are people who aren't affected by the prejudices and so on, enough progress has been made for there to be a few people like that, but there are still many getting caught in the crossfire. I'm worried. I don't want you to be prey to those situations."

Tiffany comes closer to her father and settles on her knees in front of him, letting go of Taeyeon's hand to take his hands in her own. "Dad, I know what you mean. And I was scared you would let your fear for me get in the way again. But Taeyeon... Taeyeon means something deeper to me. When I'm afraid, I go to her, and she makes me feel better and she helps me to stand straight and carry on. Honestly, we haven't been dating long, but we've had this connection since the day we met and it just keeps getting stronger every day and taking me with it. So I understand that you're afraid, and I'm scared too, but I can do this with Taeyeon. We can figure out how to survive life together."

Mr Hwang sniffs for a moment, before letting go of his daughter's hands to wipe his eyes and make his

expression firm again.

“You’re growing up, my little girl. Your mother would be proud to hear you say things like this. And if she were here right now she would tell me that it’s that time. That time that she warned me about when you were just a baby. It’s time for me to let you go so you can live your life.”

He stands up and stops in front of Taeyeon.

“You,” he says sternly. “Are you the one who told my daughter all that sappy stuff about figuring out how to survive life together? That kind of sweetness is hard to come by these days. Don’t give her diabetes.”

He turns and wraps Tiffany in a tight hug, ignoring Taeyeon’s baffled expression behind him.

“I’m not done with you two yet,” Mr Hwang says to his daughter in their embrace. “But I want you to know that I won’t stop you this time. You’re right. The world is a dangerous place, but there are times when hesitation is even more dangerous.”

He lets her go, takes his wallet from his pocket, and stuffs some bills in her hands. “Go get us some ice cream or something.”

Tiffany eyes her father for a moment, smiling at him, and takes the money and Taeyeon’s hand and leaves her father alone.

They’re walking down the street, intertwined hands being swung happily by Tiffany, when Taeyeon speaks up.

“So... he’s okay with it?”

Tiffany laughs briefly. “He’s sort of okay with it. He’s a pretty sensitive guy, you know, so he’s probably crying a bit right now and that’s why he asked us to leave. He’s just letting it sink in that I’m not a kid anymore.”

Tiffany stops and turns to Taeyeon. She pulls Taeyeon into a hug and sighs. “He’s letting me be with you.”

Taeyeon returns the hug, tightening her arms around Tiffany’s waist, and closes her eyes before pressing her face into Tiffany’s neck.

“Good.”

They don't let go of each other's hands when they reach the store to buy ice cream. It feels different for Taeyeon, just like everything in America has felt different, to be holding hands with her girlfriend as they hover by the freezer to choose ice cream. She pecks Tiffany on the cheek, earning a wide smile in return that she effortlessly echoes.

And it's good.

-

10

They're playing games on Taeyeon's new gaming console and rapidly descending into a wrestling match over laughs and accusations of cheating, when Taeyeon's phone rings. She reluctantly pulls away from Tiffany, quickly jabbing the pause button on her controller in defence of the mischievous glint in her eyes, and answers the phone.

“Hello?”

“Taeyeon, it's your mother.”

Taeyeon freezes. “O-Omma?”

“Yes. Hello. I know it's been a long, long time since we've talked.”

Taeyeon lets out a slow exhalation. “It has been almost eleven months, omma. I... I was starting to think you wouldn't talk to me again.”

She hears a shaky breath on the other side of the phone. She reaches out for Tiffany, grips her arm tightly, but doesn't look at her yet.

“Omma, do you want to talk?”

“Yes. I'm just not sure what to say. I tried to think of something, a little speech, but I find myself still speechless after eleven months.”

Taeyeon gulps, and closes her eyes. “Yes, omma.”

“Are you still with Miyoung?”

“Yes, omma. And we’ve told her father. He’s learning to accept us.”

“I told your father, a couple of weeks after you told me. He asked why you hadn’t called in so long and I told him what you had said.”

“And what did appa say?”

Taeyeon feels the warmth of Tiffany wrapping around her, the comforting slow breaths on the back of her neck. She leans into the touch, and waits for her mother to answer.

“We don’t... understand. We just don’t understand why you would do something like this.”

Taeyeon clenches her eyes even tighter shut and grips the phone. “And what exactly do you think I’m doing, omma? I’ve fallen in love and I’m in a relationship with the person I’ve fallen in love with. You don’t understand that? And if you can’t understand why I would be in a relationship with the person I’m in love with, then I’ll explain it to you. She makes me happy, omma. She keeps me warm when everything around me is cold, and she’s my shining light when it gets too dark. I love her, and I want to keep her by my side.”

“How long have you two been dating now?”

“Almost eleven months, omma.”

Her mother takes a few deep, even breaths before speaking again. “Listen, Taeyeon, we want you to understand something. We, all of us, your family, we love you very, very much. We know how hard it was for you, after you decided not to be a singer, and we know you’ve been learning from that incident for years. If you’re even half as happy with her as you were when you used to sing, then we do understand. We understand your happiness very well. We just don’t want you to lose yourself.”

Taeyeon laughs briefly. “Omma. Your words are close to expressing my deepest fear. In a sense, I didn’t want to be a singer because I didn’t want to lose my voice, and then I lost my voice. But it’s different. Tiffany – Miyoung – she’s different. With her, I didn’t lose myself. I gained myself, and her.”

There’s a long silence on the line. Taeyeon opens her eyes and shifts to kiss Tiffany on the cheek. Their

eyes meet, both filled with concern, as they wait for Taeyeon's mother to speak.

Her mother sighs. "Okay. Okay, I understand."

"Really? Omma?"

"Yes, I understand. Taeyeon... you're my precious daughter. I don't want to lose you. I may not approve of your relationship in some ways, but I approve of your decision to follow your heart. I'm still struggling. We all are. We still have a lot to talk about, and a lot to think about. But I've told you since you were a baby; if you're happy, I'm happy, deep down in my heart. I love you, my child."

Taeyeon finds herself grinning. Tiffany wipes the tears from Taeyeon's cheeks, mirroring her smile even though she didn't hear those words.

"Thank you," she breathes, looking at Tiffany. "Thank you, omma. I love you all too."

She hears a sniff before her mother mumbles a goodbye and hangs up. Taeyeon lets the phone fall from her hand and pulls Tiffany closer to squeeze the life out of her. Tiffany returns the embrace with as much enthusiasm, and presses her face into Taeyeon's hair.

"She's trying," Taeyeon whispers. "She still loves me, and she understands that you make me happy. She's going to try."

-

100

Taeyeon takes her time, slowly walking out of the plane and down the terminal tunnel all the way to the luggage collection area. She waits, watching suitcases float past her, until she sees her own and carefully removes it from the conveyer belt. She whips out its handle and listens to its wheels on the hard floor as she leaves.

Two steps away from the door, she stops. It's a big glass door, but it has markings and signs on it so she can't see much beyond it. She steps to one side so that others can go past, and she lowers her suitcase

so it lies flat on the ground. Then she kneels down beside it. She runs her fingers over the zip of the small front pocket in the fluorescent lighting of the building.

She pulls out an envelope, its edges a bit crumpled because it's a little too big for the front pocket of her suitcase and it has had to travel all the way across the world with her without being opened.

She picks at one corner of it with her fingernail, and finally opens it.

The only sound she can hear is the rustling of papers as the words are revealed in front of her.

She reads the first line before suddenly stopping. She quickly pats all the pockets of her jacket and jeans before finding her little pocket dictionary that she prepared for this occasion. Just like her acceptance letter to the American university, she wants to make sure that she definitely understands every word of this letter even though her English skills are beyond the need of a dictionary.

Dear Miss Kim, well that much she could understand easily but she reads it again anyway. *It is our pleasure to accept your application for this position with our organisation.* And so on, and so forth, and she reads everything a few times over and checks a few words in her little pocket dictionary, right there on the sticky floor of the American airport.

And then she smiles. She stuffs everything back into her suitcase, zips it up, and stands. She tugs it along with her as she steps through the door, and when she sees Tiffany she doesn't stop for even a second before running to her and flying into her arms.

They hold each other tightly for a long, long time.

"Hello," Tiffany whispers, her breath tickling the back of Taeyeon's neck.

"Hi," Taeyeon responds, and lightly kisses Tiffany's ear. "I missed you."

"I missed you too."

"And guess what?"

"What?"

"I love you."

Tiffany giggles, squeezing her even tighter. "I love you too."

“And now rapid-fire information: The optical store is going well, my parents are retiring and my brother is taking over. My mother wants to bring my little sister to come visit me next summer and see the sights. I’ve spent every day and night of the past year thinking about you. And I got the job.”

Tiffany shifts so that they look at each other. “You got the job?”

Taeyeon grins. “I got the job. I have a job here now. I have a job here, and I have my girlfriend here, and I’m finally here.”

Tiffany kisses her, firmly pressing their lips together for a long time. “You have a life here. *We* have a life here, together. Right?”

“Yes,” Taeyeon whispers, holding her even closer and answering without hesitation, “Together.”

Lionheart

The costume they gave Taeyeon made her itch, and it was too big, and it looked shabby. What kind of a lion had such a threadbare mane, meek little tail, thin frail paws? She decided she didn't like it. And the way it scratched against her arms, unprotected by her short-sleeved shirt beneath, she was ready to rip it off and go find something more interesting to do with her time. After all, there was a new ice-cream store just across the road, and no bossy girl from the class next door could keep her from exploring it!

But the bossy girl from the class next door was awfully good at keeping her there even when the costume made her feel like choking because it was tight only around her neckline and nowhere else. This was because the girl was really, really pretty – not that Taeyeon paid mind to such things, but an eye-smile like hers was a sure-fire killer any time.

She didn't stop thinking of the activity as frivolous and boring though, however sweetly that girl plied her words and made her stay. Taeyeon seemed like the most bored lion in history, yawning rather than roaring even when it was time for her only line in the production. Her act of a big lazy housecat drew a pout from the bossy girl from the class next door and Taeyeon briefly reconsidered, tried again.

“Roar!”

“What, you can't just *say* roar, you have to *roar*.”

She changed her mind again. The whole thing was stupid.

“I can say whatever I want, I'm a lion!”

“Lions can't even say anything in the first place! Just roar, Taeyeon, please!”

And there went the look again. This girl, Tiffany Hwang Miyoung from the class next door, really was capable of managing anything. She was the best director's assistant in the school and she knew it, proud of her title and it showed in the way she always walked with her head held high and that incredibly happy smile on her face.

Taeyeon lost the little power struggle again, and sighed.

“Rooooaaarrrr...”

“... Saying it slower doesn't count as a roar, Taeyeon.”

Taeyeon grumbled under her breath and looked elsewhere. The nearby tree scuttled away in fear, its sneakered feet squeaking over the wooden stage floor.

“Grrr.”

”Taaeeeeee.....”

The whining started. Taeyeon was well acquainted with the whining. Tiffany would equip a special pout, rise to a higher tone of voice, increase the rate of her blinking, and rotate her body a few degrees one time counter-clockwise and once clockwise. Taeyeon had studied her technique well in her year-long research into the high success rate of Tiffany’s requests.

She narrowed her eyes. She was determined not to fall victim to the powers of a siren like Tiffany.

“Grrroar.”

Tiffany huffed in protest, and Taeyeon allowed herself a triumphant smirk, thinking she had won this one. She stood up straighter, crossed her arms over her chest and uncrossed them again when the itchiness got worse as a result of her movement. She scratched absently at her furry arm with one paw as she waited for Tiffany’s next move.

Tiffany sighed and looked disappointed.

Taeyeon’s eyes widened. Throughout all her research, from the beginning of her existence within Tiffany’s friendship levels, out of all of her eye-witness accounts and personal experiences of interactions with Tiffany, never had she encountered this kind of reaction. Something was wrong with Tiffany! She impulsively reached out, grabbed Tiffany’s cheeks, and moved her head side to side.

“Are. You. Oh. Kay?!”

Tiffany blinked.

“Can. You. Hear. Me? Blink once for yes, twice for no, three times for oh my god Taeyeon you dork!”

Tiffany grinned. She put her hands over Taeyeon’s paws and moved them away from her face.

“Taeyeon, you are a dork,” she stated. “And those paws feel kind of icky on my skin, don’t do that again. What the heck are they made of?”

Taeyeon bopped her on the head playfully and shrugged. “Made of love and popsicles. You seem kind

of down today.”

The nearby tree had shuffled closer again, and bumped into Tiffany to get her attention. There followed a series of awkward tree stump movements and a strange high-pitched whining noise from within the wood.

“Okay, go to the bathroom, we’ll finish this scene later when the director comes back,” Tiffany said, waving at the tree with a smile.

When they were alone, Taeyeon tugged at her tail and let out a little mewling sound. “I’m the cutest lion in the world; we don’t need anything else in this play. We can just do a couple of hours of me sleeping on stage, the parents will love it. Best high school play ever. We’ll rake in those spare-change donations, buy a spa pool in time for the swimming tournament. Are you going to tell me what’s bothering you or should I guess?”

Tiffany reached over and fiddled with Taeyeon’s mane, running her hand through the artificial hair, styling it into something perhaps a bit too fashionable for the everyday lion. Taeyeon rubbed at the black-painted tip of her nose with a paw as she let Tiffany take her time to answer. One of the other things she had picked up from her research was the way Tiffany behaved when she wanted to say something important.

“You are the cutest lion in the world,” Tiffany murmured, ruffling Taeyeon’s mane into a mess again.

“You must have the heart of a lion, Taeyeon.”

Taeyeon hummed in acknowledgement. “I am rather awesome, yes. Been watching Wizard of Oz? What’s with the interest in a lion’s heart?”

“Courage.”

“Courage? Tiffany, you’re the most courageous person I know. What’s going on? Did something happen?”

Tiffany just made a strained noise in her throat and leaned forward to wrap her arms around Taeyeon. Taeyeon reciprocated the embrace immediately, and a frown was etched on her brow. Tiffany was always the bright, positive, upbeat one, the one who was so endlessly friendly and happy. Something had to be really bothering her.

“Talk to me, Fany...”

Tiffany squeezed her. “I’m really going to miss you.”

Taeyeon’s eyes widened and she pulled away from Tiffany, taking her by the shoulders and staring at her. “Huh?! I’m right here! What are you talking about now?”

“I’m talking about after high school, Taeyeon. We won’t be going to the same university, mine’s in another city.”

“After high school? Wait, you already know which university you’re going to?”

“Don’t you? Taeyeon, it’s our last year here, haven’t you been thinking about what to do?”

“Well, no, I guess I’ve been too busy thinking about...” *Thinking about you.*

Tiffany sighed again. Taeyeon’s heart fell, she was really starting to hate the sound of Tiffany’s sigh and she knew there had to be something she could do to stop it. But the sad look in Tiffany’s eyes rendered her frozen.

“Listen, Taeyeon, I know this isn’t really the best time, I mean sometimes I can barely even look at you in that lion costume and keep a straight face, but I think I should tell you something.”

“Of course, you know you can tell me anything,” Taeyeon said immediately, and she reached out to take hold of Tiffany’s hands but remembered her icky paws and just kind of hovered her arms awkwardly for a moment before lowering them and fidgeting.

Tiffany took a deep breath and looked her in the eyes. “Taeyeon... I like you. Very much. Like, *I likelike* you.”

Taeyeon stared blankly. “Few too many likes there, Fany. What?”

“I really like you, Taeyeon! I like you as more than a friend, okay?!”

Taeyeon gasped. “You do?!” She beamed, and clapped her paws together, and did a victorious fist-pump without being able to make an actual fist because of her costume. “Man, this is the best news I’ve ever heard!”

“Uh...?”

She waved her paws in a soothing action. “It’s okay, Tiffany. I’ve had a crush on you for ages. I

realised during my research that I'm kind of a little bit in love with you and I want to date you. But wow, I must have made a big error in my thesis deductions because I totally thought you only saw me as a friend!"

Tiffany gave her the kind of look that said "are you seriously being like this right now" and Taeyeon coughed sheepishly. Then she grinned again, leaned forward, and kissed Tiffany on the cheek.

"I really like you too, as more than a friend, Fany," she said proudly.

Tiffany smiled widely, which made Taeyeon feel relieved to see her signature eye-smile again, and blushed a little. After a moment of grinning at each other stupidly, she became serious again.

"But Taeyeon, that's the problem. I won't be seeing you again after this year..."

"Tiffany," Taeyeon started, and stopped. She yanked at her lion costume, pulling it off with a struggle. "Hold on a minute," came her muffled voice as she tried to wiggle out of the thing. "I'll be with you in just a sec."

Tiffany watched in amusement until Taeyeon was free of the costume and taking big gulps of air as if she had been trapped in an underwater cave. She still had the painted-on nose and whiskers.

"Okay. Now, where was I?"

Taeyeon stepped forward and laced her fingers with Tiffany's. She locked her gaze on Tiffany's face and spoke seriously.

"Tiffany, I will follow you to your university at any cost. Extra studying? No problem. More money? I can get some. Smarter brain? I can fake that. Cuter face? Well that won't be necessary, I'm the cutest. I want you to know, I'm prepared to do whatever it takes to be with you."

She pulled Tiffany into a hug and they melted into each other.

"And I wouldn't have been able to be like this if you hadn't had the courage to tell me how you feel," she murmured. "I'm a coward without you. You're the one with the heart of the lion. But I won't make you wear that costume, it's really itchy and pathetic-looking."

Tiffany tightened her grip on Taeyeon, closed her eyes, and smiled contentedly. "Thank you Taeyeon. You are the cutest lion ever. You still have to roar in the play though, dating the director's assistant will

not get you any favours.”

“Oh, I see how it is. Well, let me tell you, I’ve really been holding back, I have some super roaring skills, I’ve just been hiding them for fear of exposing the world to a power it is not yet ready to experience. I’m really so awesome -”

A thump followed and a little squeak from Taeyeon.

“Lions can’t talk, Taeyeon. Just roar, okay?”

And Taeyeon did roar, though it was not quite as powerful as she had promised – she said she was holding back for the safety of the precious children in the audience – and in the end the play was almost two hours of Taeyeon being a cute lion because she kept walking on stage when it wasn’t her turn (though it was clear she did this mostly so that she could wink at Tiffany and say “rawr”).

The costume wasn’t even itchy anymore, and as Taeyeon stood backstage peeking at Tiffany in the front row of the audience, she completely forgot how weak the lion costume was. She was thinking not of a lion’s mane, or tail, or paws, but of a lion’s heart. She felt like the strongest, most courageous lion in the world, and Tiffany made her so.

Lips

“It’s her.”

“Woah, what’s she doing here?”

“Hey watch out, she’s coming this way.”

A sly smile curved the corners of Tiffany’s lips. Her heels clicked against the smooth hard floor beneath her as she walked through the bar, passing the people who whispered and stared. Locks of her hair flowed over one shoulder as she flicked it out of her face, exposing the bare skin of her shoulders revealed by her sleeveless top. A sharp intake of breath from someone nearby made her smirk.

“Afternoon.”

She sat down at the little table in the corner, shifted her chair closer to it, and kept her eyes away from the person sitting opposite her.

“Good afternoon, Ms Tiffany,” came the reply.

The waiter was by her side in less than a minute, whipping out his notebook and grinning. She spoke before he could even breathe and ordered a glass of pineapple juice. It was just past four o’clock. Tiffany removed her sunglasses, flicked them shut and lay them on the table, and dumped her purse onto the empty chair next to her. She sighed and ran a hand through her dark red hair.

“Let’s be quick,” she said.

“Of course, Ms Tiffany.”

An envelope was placed on the table and pushed towards her.

“An invitation. Your father would like you to attend his wedding on December the 1st.” Tiffany eyed the envelope and clicked her tongue. She crossed her arms over her chest. “Right, right. Well I’ll be there. And?”

The waiter arrived with her pineapple juice. She knew acknowledging him would make it more likely that he would hang around, so she immediately lifted the glass to her lips and finally raised her gaze to

see the person seated across from her.

Seohyun was flipping through a folder in her hands, skimming through the pages, her face perfectly composed in utmost serenity. She wasn't a cold person, in fact she was cheerful and friendly, but she had some amazing internal balance that meant she could be like this, so straightforward and simple about professionalism.

The waiter awkwardly shuffled away.

"Three people have responded to your advertisement in the newspaper," Seohyun continued. "One who calls herself Taeyeon seems most suited for your needs."

"And why is that?"

"She wrote in her email – and I quote – 'I know a lot about lips and I would like to see yours'."

Tiffany almost choked on her juice. "What?! Is she some kind of pervert?"

"Apparently she gets that a lot."

Tiffany set down her glass and ran a hand through her hair again. "Oh, I see, she's eccentric, huh. One of the more socially awkward artists."

"Perhaps. The way she worded her response suggests that she understands your intended concept very well. She would like to base the artwork on your lips, which would work well to keep your designs close to your identity as a designer while developing your original ideas."

"Hmm. Okay, set up a meeting."

"No need."

Tiffany jumped at the new voice from right next to her and almost fell off her chair when she came face to face with a stranger. Literally this person was a few inches from her face and staring at her so intently she thought she might explode.

"What the f-"

"I'm Taeyeon," she said, giving a friendly smile even while her eyes were still too wide for comfort.

"You must be Ms Tiffany. I can tell by your lips."

“Oh wow. Wow. Yeah, you gotta be Taeyeon.”

Taeyeon’s smile became a grin and she finally backed off. She waved cheerily at Seohyun, and then gestured at the waiter who was lurking not far away.

“Hey can I get a bottle of beer? Do you have Cass Fresh? Thanks.”

Taeyeon sat down in the other free chair, and looked at Tiffany again.

Tiffany blinked.

“I have to go,” said Seohyun, snapping the folder shut and standing. “That’s all we needed to talk about, Ms Tiffany.”

Tiffany reached out in the manner of a confused tourist who had become trapped in quicksand in the jungle, but to no avail as Seohyun left swiftly and without glancing back at either of them. Tiffany lowered her arms and turned to look at Taeyeon, who was accepting her bottle of beer from the waiter.

“So you’re sure you can do this?”

Taeyeon took a sip of her beer. “Absolutely.”

Tiffany eyed her for a moment. Then she sighed and got settled again. “All right, let’s start talking and doing some sketches. Did you bring your stuff?”

She hadn’t brought all of her stuff, but she pulled a ballpoint pen from one pocket and collected a swab of napkins. Over the course of a lengthy one hour and twenty minutes as well as three bottles of Cass Fresh and two glasses of pineapple juice, they produced almost thirty ink-smudged napkins showing various artistic sketches and fashion designs.

“Do you ever get overly conscious of your lips?” Taeyeon asked curiously, nursing her nearly empty bottle and gazing at Tiffany. “I do sometimes. You just suddenly realise there are these things, part of your face, that are moving when you talk and just kind of *there*, you know? That happens to me sometimes.”

Tiffany looked dubious. “Are you a druggie?”

“What? No! I get high on life, thank you very much.”

“Oh, you’re one of those,” Tiffany said dismissively.

“Yeah, I’m one of those. How about you?” Taeyeon leaned closer and lowered her voice. “What do you get high on, Ms Tiffany?”

Tiffany glanced at the smirk on Taeyeon’s face and echoed it briefly. Then she leaned forward, locked eyes with Taeyeon, and whispered, “I don’t get high. I make high.”

Taeyeon’s smirk faded, but not into a look of shock or nervousness like Tiffany had expected. Instead, something else appeared, something she didn’t recognise.

“You know, the thing about lips is,” Taeyeon murmured, “they’re so sensitive. Your bottom lip can tell the difference between all kinds of textures. Food, liquid, glass, plastic, cosmetics...” Her stare dropped on to Tiffany’s lips. “...bare, naked skin.”

Tiffany swallowed, keeping her eyes trained on Taeyeon’s face.

“And that’s what makes kissing so wonderful,” Taeyeon continued. A grin tugged at the corner of her mouth, briefly revealing a flash of a white canine tooth. “Sensitive meets sensitive. Senses connect. And that’s how fireworks are made.”

Tiffany let out a long breath. She sat back in her chair, fiddling with the straw of her empty glass, and smiled.

“You’re quite a smooth talker.”

Taeyeon grinned. “Thanks.” She straightened up, and finished off the last little bit of her beer with a swig. “Well, I’m off. Your assistant has my number, so just call me when you need me again.”

She grabbed her jacket, which was hung over the back of the chair, and got up to leave. Tiffany watched her exaggerated wink before she disappeared, and her lips slowly formed another smile. She traced her finger over one of the sketched designs in front of her.

“I’ll definitely call you, Taeyeon.”

Love Letter

Life without you is really boring.

Somehow no one else has noticed, but the sky is really grey when you're not around.

And no matter what season it is, you make the weather seem incredibly perfect when you're here.

You are truly beautiful and I'm in love with you.

Tiffany took one look at the words and hammered her finger onto the backspace key. She watched the little black letters disappear from the screen in front of her and felt her heart drop further and further with the growing emptiness of the blank pixelated paper.

Writing a love letter was not easy. For some foolish, hideous reason she had thought she would be able to just write down her thoughts, let them all out, verbalise her feelings. What had she been thinking?

The frustration reached a boiling point and she burst, letting out a little stream of madness through the keyboard. The sight of aoshboailygsfoILUSBLahsdkuavsdkahbsdLIABSCKASA on the screen gave her a fleeting sense of satisfaction, as if it was an actual achievement to go nuts on the keys. With a sigh, she erased the gibberish and tried to focus.

Love. Well, that's a start, she thought, and she typed the word *love* at the top of the paper.

Okay. Love. Love.... Taeyeon. She added the new word to the row.

Love Taeyeon. That seemed like an instruction. And she already loved Taeyeon, so, feeling like she might as well do it, she added the letter I.

I love Taeyeon.

She stared.

Tiffany is clearly a genius. She felt a bit better, adding that sentence to the fray. It was true, after all, she thought with a healthy dose of pure sarcasm.

Roses are red, violets are blue, I'm really tearing myself up over writing this love letter to you.

And hey Taeyeon, did you know, Tiffany is actually in love with you, too.

She squinted. She cringed. She shook herself thoroughly.

She went onto Google and typed 'How to write a love letter'.

Listening to romantic music while writing, dimming the lights, penning expressions of favourite

memories and wishes for the future. Tiffany grimaced. The examples of love letters they gave were not particularly interesting. She could imagine Taeyeon reading something like that and being nice about it but not particularly amazed.

She closed the search.

Her fingers hovered over the keys again as she returned to the document. Sure, handwriting would look better, but she had no idea what to write first so she had decided to type out the draft before spending time crafting the visual presentation.

And none of that made any difference now, as the only component to her electronic letter was the blinking of the cursor on the first line.

She blinked.

You blink repeatedly when you first wake up in the morning, she typed. A little flutter of eyelashes, a deep breath, a yawn as you squeeze your eyes shut again, and then three slow blinks as you get your brain functioning.

When you see me, you stop blinking. Every time. I've never once seen you blink just after your gaze reaches me. Instead, your lips curl into a little smile that my own mouth is drawn to echo. I love your smile, and I love you for giving me my smile.

She narrowed her eyes at the paragraphs on the screen. But, before she let herself contemplate it too deeply, she decided to keep typing and just delete it later.

You used to think that I didn't like you in the way you liked me. You would stare at me from the other side of the room – I noticed you, by the way, I felt your eyes on me every time – and always when you were looking at me you would get a ridiculous, dreamy look on your face.

Well, maybe it wasn't such a ridiculous look after all. I've never told you this, though you've asked, but that look on your face was what first made me think of you even when you weren't near. You could see your dream, right there in front of you, and it must have been wonderful to be so close. But why did you assume I would never feel the same?

Taeyeon, I've loved you for longer than you realise. Longer, even, than I can know for sure.

And Taeyeon, I'll love you for a time that is beyond measure for either of us.

Oh, have I mentioned this? Your very being is truly beautiful, and I am in love with you, further than my soul can see even though it reaches there.

Tiffany stopped. She hesitated. She read through everything she'd written and it made her want to squeal and burn up in embarrassment. Would she actually let Taeyeon read this kind of thing from her? These words, associated with her, in front of Taeyeon. The very thought of that scenario made her insides curl up. How could she ever possibly tell Taeyeon something like this? She could never let Taeyeon see what she'd written, ever.

But as her fingers moved to erase the words and close the document, something made her hold back. The letters caught on to the edges of her eyes, pulled her to read them again and again. Her mind was racing and her heart was thudding, and she could practically feel her blood flowing through her veins.

Giving this letter to Taeyeon would be the bravest thing she had ever done. Braver than standing up to bullies as a child, braver than talking back to her father as a teenager, braver still than the time she lashed out at a thief who had tried to steal her purse.

This would be the act of baring her heart to the one she loved. It was a terrifying, horrifying thought that sent fire through her bones and made her hands shake uncontrollably.

With a slow movement, she clicked print.

Her eyes met Taeyeon's. She gave her the letter.

"I love you, Taeyeon."

Love Me Back To Life

“You’re getting too thin these days. Here, eat.”

Tiffany looked up at the friendly face. She managed to whip out a tiny shaking smile.

“I’m fine.”

Her phone went off and its vibrations nearly sent it off the edge of the table in front of her. Ignoring her surroundings – especially the living aspect – she took it in her hand, thumbed the screen, and pressed its chilled surface to her ear.

“Hello?”

But there was no one there. No voice came, no soft sound of breathing, no city rushing in the background. The line went dead after three seconds ticked by slowly and silently, only counted by Tiffany. She lowered the phone, returning it to the table, and patiently crossed her hands over each other beside it.

Not long ago, or maybe it was centuries ago by now, the call would have been different. A light voice would have asked if she wanted to go have lunch at a new restaurant, or would tell her that the bouquet of flowers she received at work came with a bonus at home. Even recently, she would have put down the phone and put up walls around her heart as the soaked-up tears made it swell. But the tears had all broken through her barriers now, and washed away the strain, the way her muscles contracted, the way her stomach clenched, when her thoughts turned to somebody that she used to know. So she sat, gazing into space, letting her mind’s eye freely see somebody where somebody used to be.

“Just eat.”

The voice came again. She absently turned her unfocussed gaze back to the friendly face, which now had grimly pursed lips and pitying eyes. She sighed, letting her breath be emptied from her body and letting her mind once again see somebody that she used to know.

“I’m fine.”

She pretended not to hear what people said when they stepped away from her, around a corner, to whisper their concerns. She acted as if the snatched sentences didn’t enter her thoughts. As if she never

knew that they all thought she was in a hopeless state, waiting for nothing, trapped in a rut, no longer moving. She didn't know that a certain somebody was just being cruel, calling her, making her think there was something left.

Tiffany picked up her keys from the little bowl by the door, her lips twitching for a moment as she remembered how a certain somebody had reacted when it had first appeared in her house – “Really, Tiffany? That's such a cliché!” – But it had been said with a delighted glint. She loved things that were considered a cliché, because they had become so clichéd that no one did it anymore, which made them special once again. Somebody had loved that stupid clichéd little bowl for her keys. Somebody had loved her.

Tiffany closed the door behind her, cutting off the words “she needs to get out more” that were being said inside the house between people who spent entirely too much time there themselves. She zipped up her jacket and made her way down the path to where her car had frosted on the side of the road. It was hard to open the door, as it was every winter, and she gave the handle a yank that she had perfected over the past two years of living with it.

The drive to the studio was quiet, as expected. She hadn't bothered to turn on the heater. It would take so long to rattle into life that by the time the weak waves of heat started to be released, she would already have reached her destination. Out of the corners of her eyes, she saw the empty streets, the dark shop windows, the street lights flickering on.

Pulling into the parking lot, she noticed an unfamiliar car parked in one of the spots against the building's white exterior. A reflexive frown settled on her brow and she manoeuvred her car to park beside the stranger. The windows of the car were blurred with frost, much like her own car's windows, so she stepped out and leaned closer. With the edge of her jacket's sleeve, she rubbed at the glass, peering as it slowly became clearer.

“Um, can I help you?”

Tiffany spun around, her sleeve sliding off the window causing a squeal, her exhalation of surprise visible as her breath reached the cold air. She was met with the curious expression of a good-looking girl.

“O-Oh, sorry... Is this your car?”

The girl nodded, still looking at her curiously. “Yes. Can I help you with something?”

“N-No. Sorry.”

Tiffany shuffled away from the car awkwardly, making her way to the entrance of the building while shooting half-glances at the girl. She was petite, wrapped in a faded duffel jacket, her caramel-coloured hair tied in a loose ponytail. The girl watched her go, still with that same expression of curiosity on the features of her youthful-looking face.

Tiffany shut the door behind her and took a deep breath, pocketing the access card that had allowed her entrance into the building. She wondered what the girl was doing there.

The dance studio was usually not very popular at that time of the evening, when it was turning night, and especially not in winter. She would know; she had always been one of the strongest campaigners for not going to the dance studio on such cold, dreary days. Somebody always had to drag her there, which had always amused Tiffany as that particular somebody was so lazy the rest of the time. But then she had found out exactly why that certain somebody had been so eager to go to the dance studio as often as possible, and that wasn't amusing at all.

The lights in the main practice room were still on and she guessed that the girl who had just left had forgotten to turn them off.

At first Tiffany had not liked dancing at all. She wasn't good at it. She could learn the moves as well as she liked, but her body just wouldn't move right all the time. She wasn't horrible, but she didn't quite satisfy her own standards. It had been almost two years of trying to move like their dance instructor when she found that somebody, in particular, wasn't all that keen on her attempts to copy, preferring the original instead.

Tiffany slipped a CD from the rack against the wall and opened the stereo's disc tray. There was already a disc inside and she frowned again. The girl she had met outside must have been very forgetful. There was no case for the disc, which made her frown even more, so she delicately placed it on top of the rack before entering her CD.

She let the first track play and stretched her shoulders absently as she made her way to stand a few feet from the wall-length mirror. She thought of her membership contract with the dance studio, which would expire soon if she didn't renew it, and she thought about whether or not she would want to

renew it. Her eyes traced her reflection, and she sighed. Her jacket fell to the floor and she began to stretch in earnest.

Dancing reminded her of the circumstances of her own broken heart, but it also made her forget everything around her, even just for a little while. And even if she wasn't exactly the best at dancing, it had become a part of her life now.

She didn't notice the figure stopping at the door. She didn't hear the rustling of the faded jacket as the girl leaned against the doorway and crossed her arms. She didn't sense the curious gaze examining her as she moved with some warm-up dances.

The girl smiled to herself, her eyes retaining the light of curiosity. She watched until Tiffany made her first mistake, and kept watching with interest as Tiffany repeated the same move and tried and tried again until she got it right.

She spared a glance for the clock on the wall. It was getting beyond late. Time had passed already, the same songs running over and over through the speakers of the stereo as the CD spun on repeat.

The girl stretched her own muscles, which were stiffening after standing against the doorway for so long. She shook her head at her own behaviour and shot another curious look at Tiffany. Then, with another little smile, she turned and left again without retrieving her CD, making a mental note to tell the new dance instructor that she had forgotten it.

As Tiffany drove through the darkened streets much later, she decided to turn on the heater for the first time in an age. A long drive around would give it time to warm up, and give herself time to try stopping her thoughts.

With very little idea of where she was and where she was going, Tiffany drove through the city for as long as she could. She slumped in her seat when the car came to a standstill and stared at the red haze of the stoplight through her slightly fogged-up windscreen. Idly, she wondered if it was time to go home.

But home was so much colder.

The haze turned green, leaving Tiffany awash in the light. She blinked, but didn't move. There was no one else in the area. She slowly absorbed the solitary state of her presence before eventually shifting her car into gear and moving on.

Her eyes were drawn to a lit-up sign further along the street; a deeply black background bearing a bright blue border and the word *Night*. It was simple, basic, and subtle. She pulled over beside it. *Night* was a nightclub of sorts. It was dim and dusky inside, with jarring bass-heavy music and writhing, alcohol-filled bodies on the dance floor. Tiffany made her way around the edge of the mass and reached the bar, which had a dark wooden surface littered with damp drink coasters and peanut crumbs. The bartender gave her a charming smile which she barely registered before turning back to watch the dancers from her new point of view.

A few of the people seemed to have actual skill with dancing, but her eye travelled to a familiar-looking girl not far away, who was holding a video camera and focusing it on one dancer in particular with a look of concentration on her face.

Tiffany frowned.

It was the girl she had bumped into at the dance studio earlier. Tiffany followed the direction of the girl's focus and watched as the dancer switched into a routine with steadily increasing difficulty that she performed flawlessly. The people around the dancer moved back and watched her dance, whooping and clapping at the surprise performance.

Tiffany turned her gaze back to the girl, who was grinning proudly. She guessed they knew each other. With a frown, she turned to the bartender and finally ordered a drink.

The dancer finished her set, and was applauded by those around her. A few clapped her on the back and she was beaming as she thanked them, and handed out what seemed to be business cards. Before long, she went over to the girl and high-fived her happily.

Tiffany paid no mind to it, staring into the liquid of her drink, leaning on the bar with one arm. In her mind, she replayed what she had seen of the dancer's performance, the techniques and stages of the routine. She wondered if she was willing to risk trying it herself next time she went to the studio.

"Hi."

The voice came from beside her, and she looked to see that girl again, smiling at her.

"Um... hello," she replied uncertainly.

"My name is Taeyeon," the girl said, holding out her hand, still wearing that smile. She seemed perfectly at ease introducing herself to a stranger in a nightclub.

Tiffany blinked and took the hand, shaking it lightly. "I'm Tiffany. Nice to meet you."

Taeyeon's smile widened. "Tiffany. That's a nice name. I'm pleased to meet you, Tiffany. Did you see my friend dance?"

Tiffany nodded slowly, wondering what Taeyeon wanted from her. "Yes. She's very good."

"She's the new dance teacher at the studio where I saw you earlier today."

Tiffany raised her eyebrows. "Oh, I see."

Taeyeon moved to lean against the bar, facing her and crossing her arms across her chest. Her peaceful smile stayed on her face much like the look of curiosity from the first time they had seen each other. Tiffany looked away, unsure about making eye contact, and toyed with her glass again.

"You seem unhappy."

Tiffany's head shot up again, staring at Taeyeon. "Excuse me?"

Taeyeon seemed to realise the impact of her behaviour.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to overstep the boundaries here," she said quickly. "I just noticed it seems as if you're lacking something in life. I hate seeing someone feeling empty and hopeless. No matter how creepy it makes me seem right now."

"Well, I'm afraid it's a little too creepy for me, Taeyeon," Tiffany said, straightening up from her position. "I should get going."

Taeyeon looked disappointed, and stood up properly too. "I'm sorry, Tiffany. I guess that was a little too forward."

She tucked a lock of her caramel-coloured hair behind one ear and her expression became thoughtful as she regarded Tiffany again.

"Give me another chance?" she asked quietly.

Tiffany hesitated, taken aback and uncertain of what Taeyeon wanted or how to respond.

Taeyeon stuck her hand out again, still looking thoughtful.

“Hello stranger, I’m Taeyeon,” she said. “I noticed you from across the bar. Have you ever been to the dance studio on the other side of town? It just so happens my friend and I are here tonight doing some publicity for it.”

Tiffany regarded the girl solemnly. She waited for a while to see how long Taeyeon would stand there in that exact position. She took a sip from her drink, and eyed their surroundings deliberately. Then she took Taeyeon’s hand, giving it a light squeeze, and said, “Okay, Taeyeon, be creepy.”

Taeyeon smiled. “You know the great thing about nightclubs like *Night*? It’s a whole other world. We don’t know each other, but we can get to know each other. You can talk to me because you need someone to talk to, and I can listen to you because I want to hear what’s going on in your mind. And then we can go back into our other, separate worlds, feeling less empty.”

They watched each other quietly, and Tiffany slowly let go of Taeyeon’s hand. She leaned against the bar again, with her back to it this time, and held her drink as she watched the other people in the club with feigned interest to make it seem like Taeyeon’s words had not affected her in the slightest. She was aware of Taeyeon beside her, ordering a drink from the bartender, and sipped her own drink as she glanced at the girl from the corner of her eye. A new smile was on Taeyeon’s face.

Here Tiffany was, in some random nightclub in a part of town she did not know, talking to an overly friendly stranger, about to open up about the bleeding of her heart. She gulped down the rest of her drink, set the glass down on the bar, and turned to Taeyeon.

“Okay, Taeyeon,” she said firmly. “We’re in that whole other world now, right? Well, I feel like love is not as great as people think. It hurts, and it lies, and it changes. There’s nothing there in the end.”

Taeyeon regarded her quietly for a moment, her expression serious.

“You’re right.”

Tiffany blinked. She was used to people telling her it wasn’t like that and that she would feel better soon. “What?”

“You’re right,” Taeyeon repeated, giving her a small smile. “Love is not as great as many people think it is. It is wonderful and it is agonizing, and sometimes it does go away and sometimes it was never really there. But that is also the nature of life, and that doesn’t automatically stop us from living. Love hurts but we don’t stop loving.”

Tiffany frowned. “But I *want* to stop. I don’t want to be in this place anymore, Taeyeon.” She felt the tears well up in her eyes as her walls crumbled in the middle of *Night*. “I don’t want to be hurt like this again.”

Taeyeon stepped closer, and put her hand gently on Tiffany’s shoulder. “No one wants to be hurt, Tiffany. I said love is like life, but there’s one difference. When you die, it’s impossible to be brought back to life. But when love has died and you feel like you’ve died with it, you can be loved back to life.”

Tiffany just stared at Taeyeon. The atmosphere of the bar slowly crept back into her awareness, the heavy music thudding in her head, the happy drunken people’s shouts and laughter assaulting her ears, the heat of so many bodies in one space smothering her. She felt Taeyeon’s hand squeeze her shoulder and saw the caring look in her eyes.

“Do you need some fresh air?” she asked kindly. “We can go outside. Or you can. I promise I won’t try anything.” She grinned sheepishly.

Tiffany smiled faintly at the look on Taeyeon’s face. “No, it’s okay. I mean, I’m not afraid of you, Taeyeon. Let’s – Let’s go outside for a while.”

The cold night air was a relief, washing over her and making it easier to breathe. Goosebumps rose on the skin of her bare arms and she thought of her jacket, lying discarded in her car because she had known it would be warm in the nightclub. She was still aware of Taeyeon beside her, as they stood outside the building in companionable silence, listening to the muffled sounds from the nightclub and the distant noise of passing cars. Feeling Taeyeon’s eyes on her, Tiffany turned to face her. She was looking thoughtfully at the way Tiffany hugged herself to keep warm and it made Tiffany wonder if the girl was about to offer her own thin jacket.

“Is it really possible to be loved back to life when love hurts?” Tiffany asked quietly.

Taeyeon’s eyes moved to meet hers, and a gentle smile appeared on her lips. “That’s just how love is. It’s incredibly complex, yet so simple; hurtful, yet healing; and absolutely, utterly ridiculous. Yes, love can bring you back to life when love has killed you.”

“I find that hard to believe,” Tiffany replied, sighing. “Thanks for trying to make me feel better, Taeyeon.”

Taeyeon raised her eyebrows. "I know it's hard to believe. That doesn't make it impossible."

The doors of the nightclub opened and a gaggle of people burst out, laughing uncontrollably with each other. Taeyeon and Tiffany made room for them to pass. After she watched the group stagger along the street, Tiffany turned her attention back to the girl beside her and chuckled bitterly.

"Forgive me for thinking your opinion is a bit naïve," she said. "I guess I just can't believe it no matter how possible it may be."

Taeyeon just smiled silently. She slipped her hands into her pockets and tilted her head back to stare at the dark, empty sky above them, where the stars would have been visible were it not for the so-called light pollution of the city. She took a deep breath, and let it all out in a sigh.

"You know what?" she murmured, closing her eyes. "Those stars up there are exactly what I mean. The stars are always shining but we don't see them until it's very, very dark. If we're in a place like this where they're hard to see, then we need to change our position. And if we don't look up at the sky, we never even stand a chance of seeing them."

She opened her eyes and looked at Tiffany.

"Do you get what I mean? When you're hurting like this, that's when you can see what love really is, but you have to look at what's there."

Tiffany blinked and craned her neck to look up at the sky. She remembered what it was like to see the stars, glittering and mysterious and beautiful, so far away and yet feeling so easy to reach at any moment. It had been a long time since she had seen the stars, and she wondered if they were still there.

"I miss them," she murmured absently. "I miss seeing the stars, Taeyeon."

A gentle hand touched hers, warmth entwining with her fingers, and she turned her head to see Taeyeon's smile.

"Come with me, Tiffany," she said. "Let me show you the stars."

Standing on a hill outside of the city and holding hands with Taeyeon as they looked at the bright galaxy above them, Tiffany thought that perhaps it was just because she had been in another world that she was now feeling so light, and soft, and content. She almost didn't recognise the feeling anymore. But her burden had been lifted, no longer pressing down on her shoulders, and that somebody she used

to know no longer had a place in her mind's eye. Instead, she turned her gaze to Taeyeon, who quietly, peacefully stood beside her. That night, she saw the stars again, she saw life again, and she saw love.

Ne Me Quitte Pas

The rain beating on the windows made no difference to the dry feeling in the air, the staleness and emptiness that crept along its path into Tiffany's heart. The sun could have been shining and it would not have warmed her to her bones, icy from the words that moved like a blizzard's wind.

Words like *love, pain, tears, break, agony, passion, devotion, despair, love, love, love*. Always love, thrown into every space, pushed and prodded into places it was not going of its own accord.

Her sight became locked on the lips that spurred the storm; they moved with the body they belonged to, away from her, back and forth, momentarily blocked by hands that swept over them to dry the strained out tears. Idly, she wondered how long this would go on for. Her heart was tired and no longer felt like moving.

"I'm so hurt."

The phrase had been said before, and would be said again, with its own hope that time would grant it meaning again.

"Why do we keep going on like this, Tiffany?"

Reasons had shown themselves briefly before sinking away, behind some haze that made it hard to focus, difficult to see through again. There was a reason they kept going, and there was a reason feeling fell away with each step.

The storm stopped. With an exhalation of human breath, the tension was no longer prodding at her, and the dry air slackened and fell.

"You can't even say anything anymore," a resigned voice noted, quietly, emotionlessly. Stating a fact.

"Look at me." The whisper arrived.

Tiffany noticed, absently, her gaze was on the window, watching the rain drops run along the transparent glass. The air had lifted with the whisper of simple words.

"Look at me."

Fingers that were cold at their tips brushed against her chin, taking a gentle hold to guide her sight. She

met the eyes that traced her face; saw the twisting spark of inconstant desperation, the continuously fluctuating presence of those feelings.

The kiss had some warmth. It gave a tingle to her lips, not unlike pins and needles from trying to move something that had been still for far too long.

“Let’s just forget the past. Start again,” Taeyeon said.

Her gaze was soft, but empty. It was a rote response. Forget, again, forget.

“I will give you everything,” Taeyeon whispered, her lips moving to brush along Tiffany’s cheek as her fingers stayed on her chin. “I will do anything for you. Until after my death, I will show you the world that is yours by my love.”

Her other hand traced the line of Tiffany’s jaw, the touch sending a thrill through Tiffany’s body similar to the reaction to a speedily fluttering moth nearby.

“There is always hope.” Taeyeon’s hand stroked her hair so softly she barely felt it. “It’s never too late.”

The kiss happened again, harder, pressing the tingle to her lips. The pins and needles rippled until they faded, and she was left with nothing.

“I shouldn’t ask why,” said Taeyeon. “It always ruins everything.”

Tiffany’s arms moved mechanically; she didn’t realise that she wanted to spread her hands over Taeyeon’s shoulder blades and push her closer until the action had been automated. The lips met hers again, lacking the tingling of feeling, but the kiss moved and shifted and stirred in search of fire in the darkness.

Her fingers clawed down Taeyeon’s back, tightening. She gripped the cotton fabric and tried to grab onto what she used to find in the person before her.

“This has happened before,” Taeyeon muttered. “But it didn’t last. You understand that, right? Just because it seems hopeless doesn’t mean we won’t recover again.”

The salt of Taeyeon’s tears gave flavour to her lips, and the shakiness of her breathing gave trembles to the kiss. They kept kissing, touching, pressing against each other, for those glimpses of sparks, the

haphazard feelings that they found and lost and found again with their movements.

It frustrated Tiffany now and again, deep down where clarity played games with her. There was something there, in her heart, where Taeyeon used to be stapled. It flickered, and disappeared and reappeared, and she could never be sure what it was. She thought she knew love.

The rain continued its beat on the window, trying to make something out of a mystery, falling from the sky to reach the earth without reason.

“Don’t leave me.”

Rêveur (there is a tomorrow)

Even after making the decision to grab Tiffany's hand and pull her away from the altar, Taeyeon found herself still in her white-cushioned seat, her insides quivering and her palms sweating in clenched fists. Her gaze was fused to Tiffany's veiled face, trying to trace her familiar beloved features, trying to spot the tears wetting her soft skin. Taeyeon knew Tiffany was going to cry. They had talked about it three days earlier, holding each other and hoping time would no longer pass.

"I'll be a mess," Tiffany had said matter-of-factly. "They'll have to scoop me out of an ocean of tears when they try to give me to him."

Taeyeon let her eyes slip to the floor beneath Tiffany's feet, imagining a puddle there. A small voice in the back of her mind gave a faint laugh of half-hearted amusement at the thought, and she finally admitted to herself that it was time to hurry up and do what needed to be done.

The droning voice of the preacher was muffled in Taeyeon's ears as her heartbeat shook her whole body. She clenched her eyes shut and took deep breaths, earning some concerned glances from those around her, before her eyelids flickered open and she locked her stare on Tiffany's face again.

Taeyeon tripped over her own chair and three others in her row, accidentally hit an old lady with the purse dangling from her flailing arm, and more or less shoved Tiffany off balance, but somehow she managed to get a grip on Tiffany's hand – albeit it a clammy grip – and yanked her along on a stumbling, bumbling run out of the church.

Tiffany's wedding dress rustled loudly as they ran. It was the only sound in the church besides their laboured breathing, until they heard the voice of Tiffany's father booming "What the-" and then that was cut off as they reached the outside world. Taeyeon tried to run across the gravel in her heels without twisting her ankles, but Tiffany didn't waste such time and kicked them off immediately, ignoring Taeyeon's concerned look at her bare feet on the stones.

"It's really not important right now, Taeyeon," she gasped as they sped across the ground.

They hit the pavement, reaching the deserted street, and came to a sudden halt. Taeyeon tried to catch her breath, and Tiffany did the same while tugging her veil off her head with her free hand. Taeyeon

looked down at their interlaced fingers and couldn't stop the smile that reached her lips. It had seemed impossible to hold hands with Tiffany ever again.

Tiffany briefly attempted the impossible task of making her dress manageable for running and hurriedly glanced over her shoulder at the church. Very soon, some rather unhappy people would storm out of that small building. She turned her head and met Taeyeon's gaze. Time seemed to slow for a moment as she saw Taeyeon's smile and felt the gentle squeeze on her hand. She took a deep breath. For a moment, everything seemed as close to perfect as it had ever been.

Then the doors of the church slammed open. Taeyeon and Tiffany didn't look in that direction, taking off immediately, heading to the nearest corner and skidding around it. Taeyeon let her shoes drop off her feet as she scuffled, and picked up the pace. They flew down the street, feeling the pressure on their lungs, the fluid movement of their limbs, and the strange grins that spread across their faces as they made it further and further away.

They rounded another corner and Taeyeon spotted a bus that was coming towards them. She tugged on Tiffany's hand and pointed down the street, then waved at the bus to signal it when they were almost at the bus stop.

It was a scramble to find some money, while Tiffany continued to glance in the direction they came from, as they stood in front of the tactfully silent bus driver. Finally Taeyeon found her money squashed in the corners of her purse, and they settled down in the very back of the empty bus. Taeyeon peered through the windscreen ahead as the bus started moving, eyeing the suited men who were sprinting down the street. As the bus passed them, she kept her eyes on them through the side windows, and was very happy when they did not even spare a glance at the scuffed old bus that tottered along the street.

She met Tiffany's stare again, and felt a feeling spread through her being that sent tingles through her nerve-endings as those warm eyes curved.

Taeyeon and Tiffany were free. Freedom involved intertwining their fingers, and holding each other in a lengthy embrace, and sharing a kiss while grinning like maniacs.

And as it turned out, freedom also involved sitting on a low wall outside of the bus centre building in their formal attire, avoiding the strange looks they received, and flicking through a map of bus routes while dipping fries into tomato sauce and swaying their bare feet back and forth.

“How about here?” Taeyeon suggested, pointing at a blue dot.

Tiffany shook her head. “Too close. And we’ve gone there before, so they might think to look there.”

Taeyeon brought the map closer to her face again, intently examining each line and dot. Tiffany watched her, a faint smile on her face, before taking another one of the fries. She dipped the tip in the tomato sauce and held it up, using it to poke at Taeyeon’s lips.

Taeyeon took a bite of it without looking away from the map, pretending to stay straight-faced when she felt like beaming. Tiffany laughed at her attempt to stay cool, which was foiled by the pleased blush that had appeared on her cheeks, and she finished the rest of the fries by herself. She leaned on Taeyeon, wrapped her arms around the petite body, and closed her eyes with a happy sigh as they shared warmth in the slowly fading sunlight.

“You know what,” Tiffany said suddenly, without opening her eyes or stirring at all, “let’s just get on any random bus going out of the city. Don’t look at the name of the route or any indication of the destination.”

Some nearby buses rumbled to life. Taeyeon considered the proposal for a moment. Then she neatly folded the map and tossed it onto the ground beside them nonchalantly.

“Let’s go!”

Upon reaching their destination – a small indiscriminate town far, far away – in the middle of the night, Taeyeon and Tiffany were well aware of their bare feet, and the lack of coverage provided by their formal dresses. They stood, shivering, at the bus stop, and gazed around at the darkness that now surrounded them.

With a sigh, Taeyeon squinted down the street at some distant lit-up signs.

“Hotel Rêvasser. Well, the name is French...What does that sound like to you; shady or fancy?”

Tiffany’s teeth chattered as she followed the direction of Taeyeon’s eyes. “Could be either, really. How much money do we have?”

A brief flick through the notes and coins in Taeyeon’s collection and a grimace when presenting her credit card left them with thoughtfully pursed lips. They shared a glance.

“Shady or not, let’s take a gamble.”

“Do you think they sell socks?”

They discussed which kinds of socks they would like to get as they made their way down the street. It was a quiet night, and they held hands as they strolled, casual despite the pressing cold air and unfamiliar surrounds. They didn’t contemplate much further than that.

The hotel, as it turned out, was not shady but it was not exactly fancy either. It was small, cosy, and clearly not high-end. Taeyeon flicked out her credit card. Tiffany yawned, politely hiding her mouth with her hand. The desk clerk took half a look at the wedding dress and bare feet and popped a bubble with his gum, blinking slowly.

“Just the one night?” he asked.

Taeyeon glanced at Tiffany, who raised her eyebrows in response. They both shrugged, and turned back to the desk clerk.

“Let’s make it two nights for now,” said Taeyeon, and he nodded in response.

The mini fridge had little packets of nuts in it – mixed peanuts and almonds – and a few tiny cans of different flavoured soda. Taeyeon huffed and pouted, considering her options before grabbing a diet soda and flicking the door of the mini fridge shut while she got up. As she popped the top, the bathroom door opened and she turned to see Tiffany stepping out with her head covered by a towel.

“Should we just skip dinner? I’m exhausted and we don’t really have any money,” Tiffany said, voice muffled by the towel until she lowered it and sighed.

Taeyeon was grinning at her, soda halfway to her mouth. Tiffany raised an eyebrow.

They had decided to push the credit limit on Taeyeon’s overused card just a little more with two shirts from the souvenir shop in the hotel, which the clerk kindly opened for them without question. Tiffany’s grey extra -large was meant to cover as much of her as it could. The edge reached to just above mid-thigh, and this fact made Taeyeon very appreciative of the shirt, which also had ‘*rêveur dans un rêve*’ written in the perfect position on Tiffany’s chest.

Tiffany rolled her eyes and flung the towel onto Taeyeon’s head, covering her. Taeyeon yelped and started struggling with it.

“Fany!” she whined. “I almost spilled my soda!”

“You weren’t listening,” Tiffany copied her whining voice. “I said we should skip dinner. Are there even any restaurants that deliver this late at night?”

Taeyeon tossed the towel away, shrugging, and finally took a sip of her soda. “We probably could’ve found something. But you’re right; I’m not really hungry either. Let’s just go to bed.”

“Yeah,” Tiffany yawned. She felt Taeyeon’s eyes on her again as she made her way over to the bed, and added, “Let’s *sleep*.”

She heard Taeyeon sigh and mumble incoherently, bringing a smile to her face as she climbed into bed. She fluffed her pillows intently before settling on her back and letting her muscles relax, sighing contentedly. Out of the corner of her half-closed eyes, she watched Taeyeon move around the room, picking up the towel she discarded and hanging it tidily on the towel rack, finishing off her soda in a quick gulp and tossing the can in the recycling bin, folding their dresses neatly over the back of the small armchair. Her new shirt, white with a charcoal-style sketch of a lion on the back, covered her a bit more than Tiffany’s, its edge almost brushing against her knees.

Finally, she was done. She turned off the main light at the switch by the door, and the room was plunged into darkness. Tiffany moved to flick on the bedside lamp, but before she got to it Taeyeon already bumped into something and hissed a curse. She limped towards the bed when the dim lamp shed some light, and her pout made Tiffany giggle.

“Don’t laugh,” Taeyeon complained. Her feet were cold against Tiffany’s legs as they tangled together under the blanket.

Tiffany just beamed at her. It didn’t take long for Taeyeon’s pout to turn into a smile, her frowning brow clearing. She reached over and turned off the lamp. They wrapped their arms around each other, pressing together, and adjusted to the warmth.

“I had a really good day today,” Tiffany mumbled into Taeyeon’s shoulder.

Taeyeon laughed briefly, muffled by Tiffany’s shirt. “You make it sound like we just went on a picnic date or something.”

Tiffany shifted her leg slightly into a more comfortable position, thigh over Taeyeon’s hip, and wiggled a little. “Well it wasn’t exactly a conventional date, no, but I quite enjoyed it in the end.”

“Good,” Taeyeon murmured. She moved her arm so that she could stroke the back of Tiffany’s neck with one hand. “I love you.”

There was silence for a while as Tiffany tried to fight off drowsiness for a while longer, and then she muttered, “I love you too,” and fell asleep. Taeyeon grinned widely, trying not to laugh out loud, and squeezed Tiffany one last time before closing her eyes. She dozed off with the smile still on her face.

Tiffany briefly woke a short while later and murmured, half-asleep, “We forgot to buy socks.”

Taeyeon just grunted, still asleep. They both settled into their dreaming again.

In the morning, Taeyeon was the first to wake. Tiffany’s soft snores hummed against her ear, and she bit back a smile. Tiffany would get annoyed if Taeyeon brought this up in conversation later, as she always did, but she did so enjoy teasing Tiffany about her snoring. While Tiffany considered it one of her unattractive traits, Taeyeon found it absolutely adorable and it made her want to squeal and squish Tiffany in a tight hug.

Tiffany snorted suddenly, turning her head away, and shifted her body. Her mouth fell open slightly, turning her snores into measured breathing. Taeyeon watched her, lips curved. The sight of Tiffany fast in a deep sleep was the best way to start the day. And she could think of a few ways to carry on the goodness, too.

She rolled her body on top of Tiffany’s, letting her muscles go loose so she pressed down onto her with all her weight. She counted down in her head – 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 – before Tiffany jerked awake and yelped, “Bwa wha? What the – Taeyeon?”

Taeyeon laughed, and pushed her palms against the mattress on both sides of Tiffany as she raised herself. She gave Tiffany a quick peck on the cheek, and then on the lips, and said, “Good morning!”

“Ugh, I told you not to wake me up like that anymore,” Tiffany whined, giving Taeyeon a slap on the butt with one hand, and then she rubbed her own face as she woke up more. “I’m gonna get a heart attack one of these days.”

“Mmm,” Taeyeon replied, kissing the soft skin just under Tiffany’s chin a few times.

Tiffany stretched a little, muscles thrumming with the move, before settling into the bed and sighing. “What time is it.”

“I dunno,” Taeyeon answered disinterestedly. Her lips brushed over Tiffany’s skin, took hold of the curve of her jaw. “It’s morning.”

“I can see that,” Tiffany stated. She circled her arms around Taeyeon’s petite waist, pulling her closer.

“Well then,” Taeyeon said.

She kissed Tiffany full on the mouth, slowly and intently stroking every millimetre of her lips with her own. The sound of their breathing was interrupted briefly by the creaking of the bed as Taeyeon shifted her hips, and it made them both giggle.

“Shall we,” Taeyeon tugged at Tiffany’s bottom lip, “dance, milady?” Her hand brushed over Tiffany’s hip, moving up along the side of her torso, stroking her ribs.

Tiffany rolled her eyes, slipped her hands under Taeyeon’s shirt and said, “That was so lame. You suck.”

They moved slightly, and Taeyeon grinned widely at her remark. “Yes, I certainly do.” She winked, causing Tiffany to burst into laughter and tug her body closer.

“Well then,” she whispered, and kissed Taeyeon.

Tiffany was dancing as she brushed her teeth when Taeyeon stepped out of the shower later. Their eyes met in the mirror and Taeyeon wore a heavily judgemental expression while Tiffany shot her a tooth-paste smirk and poked her tongue at her.

“And you call *me* a dork,” Taeyeon scoffed, raising her nose in the air because she was clearly more dignified. She started to wrap the towel around herself, and then she suddenly pounced on Tiffany from behind and enclosed her in the towel too, like a blanket over their shoulders.

Tiffany exclaimed, “Hey!” and immediately struggled against Taeyeon’s hold, making her laugh evilly. “You’re getting my shirt all wet!”

Taeyeon nipped at Tiffany’s earlobe and gave her a satisfied nod in the mirror’s reflection. “All is well with the world, then.”

Tiffany let out a brief laugh. She finished brushing her teeth and bent forward to wash out her mouth, Taeyeon still latched on to her back. When they straightened up again, Tiffany sighed wearily as if she was cursed forever, and Taeyeon kissed her on the neck. She pushed her chin into Tiffany’s shoulder

and stared at her as if she was examining Tiffany from a hiding place.

For a while, they watched themselves in the mirror. Tiffany started to sway them side to side, leaning her head on top of Taeyeon's.

"I can't believe we did it," Taeyeon murmured. "We finally got away from those people."

Tiffany closed her eyes. "Yeah. I can't believe it either. And what are we going to do now? We can't go back, but we don't have any clothes or money or a place to live. We need to tell our bosses we're not coming back, and we need to get new jobs wherever we settle."

Taeyeon smiled. She closed her eyes too, and she pressed her mouth against Tiffany's shoulder. "We're going to settle somewhere."

"First things first," Tiffany said, her tone professional. It was time to make things happen. "We should call our friends, and our bosses. And you should call your landlord. Let's get things sorted out back there, and then we'll take a look around town, shall we?"

Taeyeon let go of Tiffany, and started to dry herself with the towel. "Let's."

It took them half the day just to attempt the first step of the plan. Their friends were, understandably, under the impression that they had gone nuts and their plan was impossible. After much discussion, during which at one point they were asked if they were on drugs because they sounded so calm, their friends grudgingly accepted the situation and agreed to help them tie up loose ends. Taeyeon's landlord was not impressed with her declaration of abandonment, but since she arranged to have her things moved into a storage facility by a friend, he had no choice but to let her go. Their bosses, on the other hand, were absolutely furious and threatened to sue. When those calls ended, they put the phones down – Taeyeon's cell phone and the hotel phone for Tiffany – and decided to avoid thinking about that for the moment.

"I suppose one day we will have to go back after all," Taeyeon mused. "I'll need to go sell all my things in person, I can't possibly ask anyone else to do that."

Tiffany sighed heavily, and threw herself backwards onto the bed. "I guess. I'm kinda glad I was still living with my parents. Okay, now we need to sort out some clothes. We can't go out in shirts or formal dresses. How are we supposed to get some clothes, and with what money?"

Taeyeon flopped down beside her, and they stared up at the ceiling.

“Let’s max out my credit card,” she suggested. “And that’s my only idea. Lol.”

Tiffany cringed. “Please don’t start speaking in text language again. It was painful enough the first time you did it.”

Taeyeon just shrugged and smiled. They lay together in silence, thoughts drifting into blissful emptiness. After a while, Tiffany’s breathing became laced with a hint of a snore, and Taeyeon turned her head to see her sleeping. She quietly got off the bed and grabbed a towel to wrap around her waist. Wearing the shirt and towel, she gave her hair a quick run-through with her fingers and snuck towards the door. Tiffany wouldn’t be keen on the idea of Taeyeon going out in just a towel and shirt, but they needed clothes so Taeyeon took her chance to look like a weirdo.

She did max out her credit card, as per suggestion, and she brought back a mediocre supply of shorts and shirts and two pairs of sandals after chickening out and ducking into the souvenir shop instead of going in search of a real clothes store like she intended to. The hotel clerk was not at all fazed by her appearance and gave her a discount on the clothes, most likely out of pity.

Tiffany was playing a game on Taeyeon’s phone when she entered the room, and she barely glanced up to acknowledge her when the clothes were dumped next to her on the bed.

“You’re going to use up all my battery,” Taeyeon observed. She slipped off the towel and grabbed a pair of shorts. “I don’t have a charger.”

Tiffany shrugged. “Least of our worries, tbh.”

Taeyeon froze with one leg still in the air. “Wow. You’re right, it is painful.”

“Ikr,” Tiffany said. She finished her game and tossed the phone onto the mattress, then started picking through the clothes. “This is what you got? You went all James Bond secret super-spy on me just to go to the souvenir shop downstairs and get unfashionable, ill-fitting atrocities with cheesy one-liners on them?”

Taeyeon zipped up her shorts and nodded. “Yep. That’s why you love me.”

Tiffany eyed the way Taeyeon’s too-big shirt was caught in the zip and sighed. “Yep. That’s why I love you.”

“Still wanna go check out the town?” Taeyeon asked over her shoulder as she went to get another soda out of the mini fridge. “Hey, wait... did you eat all the nuts while I was out?”

“Maybe,” Tiffany mumbled.

“Maybe what?” Taeyeon looked at her. “Maybe you still want to check out the town or maybe you ate all the nuts while I was out?”

“Meh,” Tiffany responded, rolling around on the bed. “What’s with all the questions, geez. Is it illegal to eat nuts now. Come on, help me choose an ugly shirt and we’ll go check out the town.”

There was a hiss as Taeyeon cracked open a can of soda. She took a sip as she stepped over to the bed. With two fingers, she picked up a shirt, draped it neatly over Tiffany’s head, and stepped back to admire the look.

“And that,” Taeyeon concluded, “is why I love you.”

They took note of the memorable points in the area around the hotel so that they didn’t get lost as they wandered idly down the street. Tiffany fidgeted with her clothes for a while, trying to make them look at least a bit cute, and laced her fingers with Taeyeon’s as they looked around.

“Let’s spend the last of my cash on ice cream,” Taeyeon suggested, eyes twinkling as she gazed at an ice cream shop further ahead. “I think it’s a good investment for our future.”

“Help, my lover is a five year old,” Tiffany muttered. “Hey, you forgot to get socks earlier. Again.”

“Meh,” Taeyeon responded, and dragged her into the ice cream store.

Taeyeon’s hands were sticky from ice cream residue when they left the store, and her pockets lighter, but they held hands anyway as they continued their exploration.

“So, what are our criteria for a settling-down place?” Taeyeon asked. “Big town, small town, nice people, mean people, many clothing stores, many options for random fun, places to work, places to sleep?”

“Big, nice, many, many, yes, yes,” Tiffany answered absently, craning her head to look further up ahead. “Does that look like an ATM to you?”

“Yeah but we can’t do anything with an ATM,” Taeyeon said.

“No, but an ATM means a bank and a bank means my bank account.”

“Uh, maybe. If it’s the right bank. And you have no identification.”

“Just watch,” Tiffany replied, and she pulled Taeyeon along to the bank.

It took some negotiating, and a phone call to the branch in their home town where Tiffany knew the branch manager personally, but eventually she was granted access and immediately transferred all of her money to Taeyeon’s bank account. They withdrew some cash and left the bank with smiles on their faces.

Tiffany swung their arms as they walked, looking undeniably pleased with herself.

“Now we can really get the plan into action,” she said happily.

“And go back for more ice cream,” Taeyeon added, steering them in that direction. “Honestly, since when is one cone enough for a fully grown adult human.”

“Fully grown adult,” Tiffany echoed blankly.

“Yes,” Taeyeon said. “Yes, fully grown. Adult. Thanks for saving us from my broke-ness, by the way. I knew having a rich girlfriend would come with some benefits once the over-controlling parents were out of the way.”

“Mmhm,” Tiffany answered. She was eyeing a nearby clothes store with perceptible eagerness. “Let’s ditch the ice cream for now and go get some *real* clothes.”

Hours later, they trudged back to the hotel, laden with bags and their stomachs full junk food. They checked out the other hotels on the street, which was clearly the tourism centre of the town, as they passed, and criticized their options.

“What would you rank our current hotel?” Taeyeon asked, shifting a bag to her other hand.

“Three out of five. The mini fridge only had a few nuts and sodas in it, and they don’t even do room service. I mean hello? That’s just unacceptable.”

“I quite like it, though,” Taeyeon said. “The clerk is nice. Did I tell you he gave me a discount on the clothes? And he didn’t even check you out when you were in your dress. A man needs a lot of self-control or homosexuality to keep from openly gawking at your physical assets.”

“That’s where the three comes from – and because he didn’t check you out either – and they lose two for lack of food.”

“How about that place we saw on the corner? It looks pretty luxurious, and now that we have your piles and piles of money safely in our possession, we could totally go rock-star on their honeymoon suite.”

Tiffany snorted as she slid their hotel card key through its slot. “Somehow I can’t imagine you willingly breaking other people’s possessions for absolutely no reason.”

Taeyeon pouted, following her into their room. “I totally could. I’m really badass, you know. Well, you do know, you’ve slept with me.”

Tiffany laughed briefly. She dumped her bags onto the bed and turned to cup Taeyeon’s cheek with one hand. “Oh, honey. Let’s not go there.”

Taeyeon gasped. “What is that supposed to mean!”

Tiffany grinned and kissed her on the lips sweetly. “Hush now, baby. Let’s try on our new clothes.”

Much later, as they curled up with each other in bed, Taeyeon turned her head so that her face was no longer pressed into Tiffany’s chest and she whispered, “By the way, you snored last night.”

“I did not!”

“Did too.”

“Did not!”

“Did too. And that’s why I love you.”

“Pfft! Don’t even try that with me, buster. You don’t love me for my snore.” She tried to squirm away from Taeyeon, but was locked in a tight embrace.

“Yes I do,” Taeyeon whispered happily. “I love your snore very, very much.”

“Ugh, you are insufferable,” Tiffany grumbled. They cuddled closer, drifting off in their warmth and comfort with each other, and Taeyeon was almost asleep again when she heard Tiffany whisper, “And that’s why I love you.”

She turned her head again; keeping her eyes closed, and murmured, “I like this. Let’s settle here.”

“Await the results of my thorough analysis,” Tiffany said immediately. “Then we’ll talk. Now go to sleep.”

Taecheon complied, after giving Tiffany a quick kiss in the dark.

They ended their first full day of freedom contented, as dreamers finally in the dream they had been dreaming for so long.

Steps

Taeyeon didn't waste time cleaning the table. She stacked the smudged shot glasses and picked them up in one hand before taking the bowl of pretzel crumbs and adding it on top of the stack. Balancing carefully, she tugged the cloth from her half-apron's front pocket and began the equally delicate manoeuvre of wiping the table while avoiding the dark red hair of the lightly snoring woman whose cheek was pressed against the wooden surface.

She had passed out a while ago, stopping mid-sentence and fluttering her eyelids before clonking onto the table. Whatever she had been talking about must have drained the last of her energy, considering the physical requirements of exasperatedly waving arms and recovering from falling from chairs, and the emotional requirements of wailing about some man who apparently would not recognise a woman who was not a whore if she bit him on the ass. Taeyeon had considered this briefly, contemplating the nature of a woman who went around biting men on their posteriors, before deciding the statement was logically flawed.

With one last glance at the woman's sleeping, slightly drooling face, Taeyeon took the remnants of the woman's last round of shots and devoured pretzels to the bar. It was long past closing time and even the other staff had gone home, fed up with waiting for the woman to wake up. Taeyeon had taken responsibility for her; somewhat believing that it was possible to wake her up. This conviction had been mistaken, as the woman was far beyond any human contact.

Taeyeon dried the last shot glass, now clean, and added it to the collection of others. She gave a brief whistle as she tossed the cloth over her shoulder, not bothering to check if it landed in the little laundry basket behind the bar because she knew it always did.

She made her way over to the dozing woman. She stood by the table. She crossed her arms.

"If only my telepathic powers could work on demand," she said sadly, tilting her head to one side. "I'm pretty sure that's the only way to wake you up, lady."

She reached out and poked the woman on the shoulder. The response came in form of a snort and renewed snoring.

"Or is that telekinesis?" Taeyeon wondered. "Maybe telekinesis would help."

She poked the woman on the shoulder again and didn't even get a snort this time. With a sigh, she straightened up and crossed her arms over her chest once again, regarding the unconscious woman like a Rubik's Cube.

"Let's see now. If I was drunk and asleep in a strange bar, what would wake me up?"

Taeyeon spent several minutes pondering the hypothetical situation before deciding it was once again logically flawed because alcohol made Taeyeon go all funny in the tummy so she would be in hospital getting her stomach pumped rather than sleeping in the bar.

Having reached this conclusion, Taeyeon decided to push the woman off the chair and see what happened.

A loud ringing stopped her before she had put her strength into the push, causing her to jerkily paw at the woman's shoulder as she jumped in shock. Her eyes traced the source of the ringing to the large, expensive-looking handbag on the floor. Sensing an opportunity to leave the woman in someone else's care, she pounced on the bag.

After much struggling with the bag, finding out a flap was actually just for decoration, yanking the zip in a way that made it jam rather than cruise open, sticking her hand inside only to be jabbed by some massive bunch of keys and finally almost ripping the bag in half out of desperation, Taeyeon located the cell-phone which was smothered in a pink cover.

Fearing the end of the potential call before it had even begun, Taeyeon almost broke a nail trying to open the pink cover and smeared her thumb all over the screen in all the possible ways that could answer a touch-screen phone call.

"Hello?!" she screamed, pushing the phone against her ear only to realise it was upside down, which made her scramble to turn it around and drop it and try to pick it up only to drop it again before she finally, at last, answered the call.

"....Hello?" came the voice from the phone. "Tiffany? Are you okay?"

"Um, yes, hello, this is Taeyeon," stated Taeyeon. "The owner of this phone is kind of passed out here and I was -"

"Oh my god, did she just go get drunk again?! I *told* her that wouldn't help! She could've at least told

me!”

“Uh, yeah, but I was hoping that -”

“Look, don’t let her know how much she drank when she wakes up, okay? Finding out always makes her even more depressed.”

“Well, okay, but do you think you could -”

“Oh and make sure to take her shoes off before too long, her feet always kill her when she wakes up with them on.”

Taeyeon glanced at the unconscious woman’s feet. Noticing the exact height of the pink heels, she raised her eyebrows and was not the slightest bit surprised that such things would hurt. She shook her head, focussing back on the phone call.

“Could you just —”

“Anyway if she’s not going to be meeting me tonight then I guess I’ll just find something else to do,” there came a sigh.

“Ah but -”

“Tell her to call me back, okay?”

“Okay, um-”

But the mysterious caller had hung up some time after the letter “k” left Taeyeon’s lips and Taeyeon was left staring into space.

“Aha! I can call back!”

She took the phone away from her ear and eagerly looked at the screen. However, the screen had locked after the call ended and Taeyeon was faced with a small wall of numbers. With a dejected sigh, she gently closed the cover of the phone and safely stored it in the ruffled-looking bag.

She stood up again and dusted herself off before turning to face the woman again.

“Either you do this a lot or your friend is a bit of a frenemy,” she commented, accepting the sound silence that followed.

The woman even stopped snoring.

Taeyeon frowned and leaned closer, looking at her face.

“So, Tiffany, right?” she mumbled.

Quietly, she brushed a lock of hair from the Tiffany’s face. The woman was still sleeping, and it didn’t seem like she was any closer to waking.

Taeyeon smirked suddenly. “Hey there sexy, what’s a place like you doing in a girl like this?”

Then there was the sound of clapping and light wheezing as Taeyeon cracked up laughing, rolling on the floor.

A murmuring sound came from Tiffany, who shifted in her chair.

Taeyeon jumped up, eyes locked onto the woman. Tiffany shifted again, bringing a slow hand up to half-heartedly run through her hair. The other hand pushed against the table and she made herself sit up with difficulty, slumping backwards in the chair.

Taeyeon gazed at Tiffany’s face. The woman had fallen asleep again, sprawled over the chair, lips parted and arms hanging limply by her sides.

“So close,” Taeyeon whispered. “Why isn’t there a spell for waking up drunken ladies?”

Briefly imagining the world of Harry Potter with the addition of such a spell, Taeyeon released a little giggle. Then turning serious again, she looked at Tiffany.

“Sadly, Tiffany, I am short,” Taeyeon began. “I’m only saying this because I know you’re not listening. So anyway, I can’t carry you anywhere. And no, I’m not calling you fat.”

Taeyeon ran her eyes over Tiffany’s figure and silently declared that ‘fat’ was certainly not a word she would use to describe Tiffany’s body at all.

“Maybe the invigorating scent of Colombian coffee will rouse you from your slumber.”

With hope, Taeyeon produced a fine cup of coffee and placed it strategically so that the caffeinated fumes would envelop Tiffany’s senses. She waved her hands a little, blowing the coffee breeze a little stronger towards Tiffany.

To her delight, Tiffany stirred and blearily opened her eyes.

“Ugh, gross.”

And Tiffany clenched her eyes shut again and fell off the chair.

Taeyeon rushed to her side, helping her sit up again.

“Are you okay?” she asked worriedly.

Tiffany had a hand on her head, squinting around, and turned her squint to lock on to Taeyeon at the question.

“Uh, I don’t know,” she replied. “What...Who are you?”

Taeyeon grinned. “My name is Taeyeon. You’re Tiffany.”

Tiffany squinted even more, if it was possible, and looked a little lost. “Um...?”

“Oh, your friend called a little while ago. I didn’t catch her name. She says you should call her back and she seemed rather disappointed that you were unavailable to hang out tonight.”

Tiffany groaned, letting herself fall back onto the floor and covering her face with her hands.

“Whatever. What time is it?”

Taeyeon consulted her Toy Story watch. “About half past three in the morning.”

Tiffany groaned again. “Great.”

They shared a silence for a moment and Taeyeon’s muscles started to ache from her half-crouching half-kneeling position. She settled herself cross-legged on the floor and gazed at Tiffany.

“So, now that you’re awake, will you be able to go home?”

Tiffany sighed. “I guess.”

She parted her fingers to look at Taeyeon and a smile tugged at the corner of her mouth.

“You look like such a kid. Who did you say you were?”

Taeyeon smiled, well accustomed to that comment. “I’m Taeyeon. I work here.”

Tiffany raised herself onto her elbows and regarded Taeyeon with that half-smile.

“Really? Well, thanks. For hanging around and letting me sleep here. And answering my phone, I guess.”

“Well, I had hoped your friend might be able to come get you, but she didn’t seem to think I might be a serial killer or something. Which is an okay perception to have of people generally but I would have thought in this situation it was a tad flippant. Is it that I sound like a kid over the phone, just like how I look like a kid?”

Tiffany grinned. “You don’t sound like a kid to me. You’re funny, Taeyeon. I heard your little pick up line, by the way. Cute.”

Taeyeon blushed. “Oh, um... Sorry about that. I’ve just always wanted to say that to a gorgeous girl in a bar. Figured it would be a nice change from the usual pick-up lines they must get.”

“It was,” Tiffany said softly. “I like it. Thanks.”

Taeyeon looked anywhere but at Tiffany, finding herself feeling nervous. “Should I call a taxi for you or something?”

Tiffany shook her head, starting to get up from the floor. “No, it’s fine. I recently moved in to a place at that apartment block right around the corner.”

“Oh,” said Taeyeon, jumping up. “Well, let me walk you home. I, um, I live there too.”

Tiffany grinned, a genuine full grin that made her eyes curve into lines and she clapped her hands together happily. “Great!”

Walking with Tiffany made the darkness easier to bear. Taeyeon noticed the difference, the way Tiffany made everything brighter and more fulfilling. Not that she had ever been displeased with her environment, but Taeyeon found something new in the way Tiffany hopped every now and then and smiled as she talked about the stars and cooed at a stray cat that ran across the road.

It was nice.

There was none of the anguish Tiffany carried with her when she entered the bar to drink herself away.

Whatever had been plaguing her, it seemed forgotten as she walked down the block with Taeyeon. Sweet Taeyeon, who laughed at her jokes and paid attention to what she said and just calmly walked beside her with her backpack hanging over one shoulder and her Toy Story watch glinting in the light of the streetlamps.

“So how long have you lived around here?” Tiffany asked, running a hand through her hair and adjusting the strap of her handbag.

Taeyeon thought. “Must be almost five years now.”

Tiffany looked at her, surprised. “Five years? But then, you must have moved here right after high school!”

Taeyeon nodded. “That’s right.”

“To the very same apartment where you’re living now?”

Taeyeon smiled. “Yes, that’s the one.”

“Sorry, I’m just surprised... Those apartments aren’t expensive but they aren’t cheap either. Do you have roommates or something?”

“I had two. One moved out a while ago and the other is in New York for a couple of years.”

“Oh, wow... So you’re alone now?”

Taeyeon gave her a sly look. “Yes, I am. You sound like you’re about to case the joint.”

Tiffany laughed. “It’s not like that. I live alone too. We should hang out some time.”

Taeyeon took a long look at Tiffany as they neared the apartment building. This woman had gone from drunk and unconscious to bright-eyed and cheerful at an impressive rate. She thought of what had driven her to drink, and what her friend had said that made it seem like this wasn’t the first time she had been in such a situation.

“Yeah,” she said, cutting through her own lazy thoughts. “We should hang out.”

They reached the lobby of the apartment building and stood together by the elevator, waiting for it to arrive.

“Thanks again, Taeyeon,” Tiffany said softly. “If it wasn’t for you, I hate to think what could have happened to me.”

Taeyeon cocked her head to one side. “It’s no problem. And there’s no need to make it sound like you were in some terrible danger.”

Tiffany grinned. “Still. You saved me. Thanks for helping me out.”

She pulled Taeyeon into a light hug. Taeyeon was startled, but found her arms loosely reciprocating the move anyway. It wasn’t that she was unused to this kind of contact, it was probably more the fact that Tiffany was really warm and soft and comfortable. In her mind, Taeyeon decided it was definitely most likely to be the best hug she had experienced to date.

The elevator arrived and Tiffany pulled away, and Taeyeon smiled.

“What floor are you on?” Tiffany asked, hand hovering over the panel of buttons.

“Third floor.”

Tiffany’s eyes widened in surprise. “No way. Third floor? I’m on the third floor too...”

Taeyeon frowned curiously. “Really? Wow... Why didn’t I ever notice you moving in?”

“It’s a pre-furnished apartment so I only had a few boxes... huh, what a coincidence.”

She gave a little laugh and jabbed at the third floor button. They stood next to each other as the doors closed and jointly eyed the numbers above the door as the elevator moved.

Taeyeon suddenly remembered again that the woman she was talking with had been passed out less than an hour ago, and she examined her from the corner of her eye. Tiffany was still smiling slightly, gazing up at the numbers quite happily. She stood straight and didn’t seem drunk anymore at all. Taeyeon raised her eyebrows in wonderment, just as the elevator came to a standstill. She thought perhaps Tiffany did get in these kinds of situations all too often.

They stepped out of the elevator and realised they were going in different directions down the hallway. Stopping, they faced each other again.

“Well, then, I guess this is goodnight,” said Taeyeon. “It was nice to meet you, Tiffany.”

Tiffany grinned. "It was nice to meet you too, Taeyeon. Thanks again for your help."

"No problem," Taeyeon answered, and she meant it.

Looking after Tiffany had been quite a task at first but she had no regrets about deciding to take responsibility for the woman's safety when it became such an interesting little adventure. They stood together under the pale lights of the hallway and shuffled a little on the beige carpet.

"We'll hang out again, right?" Tiffany asked, still grinning.

Taeyeon nodded. "Of course."

Taeyeon gazed down at her scuffed Converse sneakers and felt her lips curling into a little smile. She felt Tiffany's eyes on her. Neither of them was going anywhere.

"Unless," Taeyeon began, glancing up at Tiffany again, "Unless maybe you'd like some hot chocolate. To help you feel better."

Tiffany's eyes curved with her response. "I think that would be very nice."

Taeyeon blinked as she unlocked her apartment door and flicked on the lights inside. At some point, her mind reminded her that the person she was holding her door open for was a stranger she had met in a bar; but Taeyeon didn't feel that way. It was nice to be with Tiffany, therefore she went ahead and showed her where she could leave her bag and her shoes, and led her to the kitchen.

"So, where did you go to university?" Tiffany asked, as they sipped on their hot chocolate, leaning against Taeyeon's clean white-topped kitchen counter.

Taeyeon shook her head. "I didn't."

Tiffany raised her eyebrows, watching Taeyeon blow a little air onto her hot chocolate before taking a sip. Taeyeon noticed and gave her a smile.

"When I moved here, I needed to work full time to afford it, even with my room-mates," she said nonchalantly. "I was never particularly interested in going to university anyway, so I felt no loss."

"Oh. So, where did you work? Always at that bar?"

"No, I've only worked there for a year now. When I first came here I worked in a pet shop, then a book

store, then a café, then a hotel, and finally the bar.”

“Wow, that’s quite a list.”

Taeyeon chuckled. “I like it. Sticking with the same job for too long gets boring for me. How about you? What do you do and what have you done?”

Tiffany took a quiet sip of her hot chocolate before answering. She stared down at the floor for a while and absently noticed Taeyeon’s kind patience.

“Well, I’m working at that big advertising company a few blocks away, managing the accounts,” she started, tucking her hair behind her ear as she spoke. “But, um... It isn’t really what I want to do. I don’t know what I want to do. I studied Business at university, but I don’t really know why I did that either.”

She laughed briefly, then bit her bottom lip, and took a gulp of her hot chocolate a little too fast. She gasped, almost choking, and felt the burn on her tongue from the drink. Taeyeon was suddenly by her side, holding out a glass of water, a tea towel in her other hand, and a determined expression on her face that made Tiffany want to crush her in a hug.

With a sheepish look, Tiffany drank the water gratefully, letting Taeyeon take her mug from her hand and gently wipe the tiny droplets of hot chocolate from where they had spilled onto her arm.

“It’s okay,” Taeyeon said softly. “Not everyone knows what to do.”

Tiffany examined Taeyeon’s face, taking in the peaceful expression and restful gaze, and felt her heart make a strange little extra-hard thump.

“Thanks,” she said, her eyes curving up again as she smiled. “Thanks for everything, Taeyeon.”

Taeyeon reflected the smile. “No problem, Tiffany. No problem at all.”

They stood in the hallway again, this time on the other end of it, by the door to Tiffany’s apartment. That side of the hallway had the token potted plant, huddled in the corner with its big greenish leaves. The apartment building was quiet, which was natural considering it was almost dawn, and Taeyeon watched as Tiffany put her key in the lock and turned it, but didn’t open the door.

“We should exchange numbers,” said Tiffany. “I really... I liked spending time with you, Taeyeon.”

“Me too,” said Taeyeon. “Next time we hang out, I look forward to finding out more about you.”

Tiffany looked down. Her immediate thought was that Taeyeon probably wanted to know what had happened that led to their meeting; what man had affected her in such a way that she wanted to drink to no end.

She bit her bottom lip, thoughtful. Then she kept her gaze on the carpet as she spoke.

“Um, he’s a guy from the company where I work,” she said quietly. “He’s the head of the department. He’s a really charming guy, really, but... apparently I’m not good enough to even be seen with him. He just played with me. And I’m such an idiot for believing everything he said again and again, for believing in the future he painted for me. God, I’m so stupid.”

Taeyeon gazed at the woman in front of her, who was letting her heart leak out little by little. She reached out and put a comforting hand on Tiffany’s arm, giving her a gentle squeeze and a warm smile.

“He’s the idiot,” she said. “He’s stupid, for playing with you, and for wasting a chance to be with you. I may not have known you very long and met you in a bar when you were unconscious, but even I can see you’re better than what he thinks of you and you deserve to be treated better.”

She moved her hand away again and shuffled awkwardly.

“So, um, don’t drink so much anymore,” she said. “It’s dangerous, you know? And he’s not worth it.”

Tiffany looked at Taeyeon with shining eyes that had not shed their tears, and grinned.

“It seems like I’m going to spend a lot of time thanking you, Taeyeon,” she remarked. “You’ve helped me once again. I never thought I would end up spilling my problems in front of someone I’ve just met.”

Taeyeon laughed. “I think it’s safe to say that we’re friends now, Tiffany. Now give me your number and go to sleep, you’ve had quite a night and I don’t understand how you’re even standing right now.”

As Tiffany collapsed on her bed a short while later, she thought of how different she felt after that night, and how memories of that man’s smirk was replaced with Taeyeon’s kind smile and the continuous cute look on her face.

Taeyeon had barely set her head down to rest when she was woken by the sound of raucous banging on her door. Or at least, it seemed like it had been no time at all and it seemed like the banging was a

barrage of buffalos when in fact it was almost noon and someone was politely knocking on her door. Despite having had nothing to drink, Taeyeon often felt like an invalid when she woke up in the morning, always wishing she could have slept longer, and today was no different; in fact, staying up until almost dawn no doubt worsened her state.

She blearily made her way to her front door, bumping her shoulder against the doorway of her room, hitting her knee on the coffee table in her living room, and stubbing her toe against her shoes by the door.

She clawed at the locks on the door and eventually managed to get them unlocked.

The short blonde-haired girl on the other side raised an eyebrow at the sight of Taeyeon slumped against the door with her eyes almost totally closed.

“Can I help you?” Taeyeon slurred.

“Ew,” commented the girl. “Are you just waking up? It’s almost noon already, you know.”

Taeyeon huffed. “Cool. Is that all?”

The girl clicked her tongue. “It’s me. Sunny! Remember? Your bestest friend in the whole world?”

Taeyeon cracked her eyes open a little further and examined the person giving her a sarcastic smirk. She straightened up a little and huffed again.

“Nope, have no idea,” she answered carelessly.

Sunny rolled her eyes and slapped her on the shoulder. “Whatever. I’m back from New York for a month. Super surprise!”

Sunny spread her arms wide and gave Taeyeon a radiant grin. Taeyeon stared blankly at her best friend and only briefly glanced at the mental image of Tiffany’s radiant grin in the back of her mind. At another time she may have tried to compare the two, but in her half-asleep state she was pretty certain no one could compete with Tiffany.

She shot up, standing up straight and her eyes snapped open. Memories from the night before came rushing back and she found herself smiling, remembering that she had made a new friend who even lived on the same floor as she did and had the best smile and gave the best hugs.

Sunny let her arms fall to her sides. “Did something just bite you on your flat butt or did you finally realise how much you missed your sexy, hilarious, genius best friend?”

Taeyeon looked at Sunny. She waved a hand dismissively and stepped aside to let her in, watching as her best friend shook her head sadly and dragged her sleek black suitcase inside.

“You’re still a weird one, I see,” she commented, throwing herself onto the couch and kicking off her shoes. “How are you, kid?”

Taeyeon picked up Sunny’s scattered shoes and neatly placed them beside her own pair before joining her on the couch and flopping her legs onto Sunny’s lap. Sunny grimaced and tried to push them off, leading them into a playful tussle that ended with pinching each other really hard and hissing in pain before laughing.

“You shouldn’t call me a kid, you know,” Taeyeon said. “You’re more childish than I am.”

Sunny scoffed. “Oh please. You still have that Toy Story watch, right?”

Taeyeon pouted. “So? It’s a good watch. Buzz is really good at telling time.”

“And the Despicable Me pillow?”

“Those Minions are a really good shape for a pillow...”

“And the Harry Potter toothbrush?”

“It’s really funny to brush my teeth with a Firebolt, you know!”

Sunny grinned. “You are a kid.”

Taeyeon shrugged. “Not everyone thinks so, I’ll have you know.”

“Sure, maybe people who’ve only known you for less than a second might think that.”

Taeyeon gave Sunny a shove. “Actually, people who’ve hung out with me for as much as two hours know that I’m not a kid.”

Sunny glanced at her friend, who was smiling quietly to herself and staring at her own hands. Her jaw dropped; she pushed at Taeyeon’s shoulder and then moved to latch on to her, putting her in a headlock

and making her squeal.

“What the heck -”

“You met someone, didn’t you?!” Sunny exclaimed, almost strangling her.

“Could you not kill me pl-”

“You almost never make new friends of your own free will!”

“You’re really suffocating me yo-”

“I leave you alone for three months and you make a new friend?!”

“I can’t actually breathe so-”

“This is a momentous occasion! You have to tell me everything!”

“But I can’t speak bec-”

“I bet it’s a girl, you suck at making friends with boys!”

“Hey that’s not re-”

“She has to be a total dork otherwise how would this happen?!”

“Not really-”

“Where did you meet her, at the toy store?!”

Sunny guffawed loudly at her own joke and Taeyeon took the opportunity to have a little sulk before removing herself from her friend’s grip. She crossed her arms across her chest and moved to sit at the opposite end of the couch.

When Sunny finally stopped laughing, she moved over to Taeyeon and put her arm around her slumped shoulders.

“Okay, tell me all about her.”

Taeyeon shook her head. “No. You’re too mean.”

Sunny grinned and gave her a squeeze. “Come on, kid, don’t be like that now. You know I have to tease you, it’s my duty. I have a responsibility, a moral obligation to-”

“Okay, whatever, just stop,” Taeyeon interrupted. “You’re killing me here.”

She gave Sunny a particularly hard pinch on the hand that hung off her shoulder, watching triumphantly as her friend hissed and retracted her arm. In response to the subsequent death glare, she poked her tongue out in victory.

“Her name is Tiffany,” said Taeyeon, leaning back against the arm rest of the couch. “She was in the bar last night, and got a bit too drunk. By closing time she was still passed out at her table so I let everyone else go home and said I’d take care of her.”

Sunny looked dubious already. “This is how you met? Last night, while she was wasted?”

“Yes, but... Just listen, okay?”

Sunny shrugged and let her continue.

“So when she finally woke up, it turned out we lived in the same building so I said I’d walk her home. She’s really nice, you know, and she’s the one who told me I don’t sound like a kid, even though I look like one sometimes -”

“Wait, she actually told you that you look like a kid? Ha! I like this girl.”

“Shut up. Anyway, we talked and when we got here it turned out she lives on the same floor. So, we hung out for a while and she’s really cool and I’m not lame and if you tell me I’m a cute kid I will punch you in the gut.”

Sunny grinned. “Well, you said it, not me. So, you made friends with some random drunken lady from the bar? I am really surprised and confused.”

Taeyeon smiled to herself. “She’s really great, Sunny. I had a good time getting to know more about her.”

Sunny narrowed her eyes at her friend. She shifted closer again and gave Taeyeon a few deliberate pats on the head.

“You better be careful, kid, you’re actually growing up.”

Taeyeon frowned. “Just because I managed to make friends with someone without you forcing me to?”

Sunny smirked. “Something like that. So, she’s that great, huh? I would hazard a guess that she’s quite pretty.”

“She’s gorgeous! So beautiful, and when she smiles her face lights up and her eyes curve into these lines and -”

“Okay, kid,” Sunny interrupted. “Calm yourself. Introduce me to her while I’m here sometime.”

“Sure.”

Sunny took a long look at her best friend, making Taeyeon shift a little and look confused. Then she pulled her in for a tight hug and sighed.

“I’ll get back from New York and you’ll be all grown up,” she muttered. “What will I do? Who will I bully and prank and torture and tease -”

“Yeah okay, geez. Leave me alone.”

Sunny broke the hug with another grin and got up from the couch to stretch intensively. “Anyway, I’m all cramped from flying, so I’m going to go lie down. My room’s still the same, right?”

Taeyeon nodded. “Yeah. And I swear I didn’t touch your spare DS, as promised in accordance with your death threats.”

Sunny looked smug. “Excellent. I shall now retire, peasant. Try to at least get out of those fluffy teddy bear pyjamas at some point today, okay?”

She skipped away to her room, cackling, and left Taeyeon to sulk on the couch.

A hesitant knock sounded on the front door and Taeyeon looked up curiously. She glanced at the clock on her wall and supposed it wasn’t really weird to have a visitor after noon.

Tiffany gave her a bright smile as soon as the door was open, and she smiled even more when she saw Taeyeon in her teddy bear pyjamas.

“Good afternoon, or should I say good morning?”

Taeyeon followed Tiffany's eyes and remembered what she was wearing. A blush rose on her cheeks and she cleared her throat.

"Hi," she said. "Um, sorry about the pyjamas, I kind of slept late."

"Understandable. I only woke up a couple of hours ago myself... Anyway, um, are you busy?"

"Not really. I don't have work until six so I was intending to lie around like a bum and eat all day."

Tiffany laughed. "I don't blame you."

How Tiffany was even able to be up and beaming and happy was a mystery, but then Taeyeon realised the change in her own demeanour from her usual morning blob. Another look at Tiffany's face set off a spark in Taeyeon's chest that she guessed must have been fuelling her.

"Do you want to do something?" Taeyeon asked, shuffling absently. "Or something?"

"Something or something, huh? Tough choice."

Taeyeon looked away and laughed briefly. "Sorry..."

Tiffany gave her a gentle look. "Don't be so awkward, Taeyeon. I'd love to do something. Is there anything you have in mind?"

"Well, it's around lunch time so how about we go get some food?"

"Sounds great. You won't be wearing those teddy bear pyjamas, will you? Bit of a daring fashion choice but then again, it might become the next trend."

Taeyeon laughed, tugging at the sleeve of her pyjama top. "I'll go get changed. You can come in and wait if you want?"

"Sure."

Watching Tiffany walk in and move around as if she was there all the time made Taeyeon smile. She noticed Tiffany's curious glance at the new pair of shoes.

"Remember that room-mate I told you about? She's back from New York for a surprise visit."

"Oh? That's great. Is she here now? I'd love to meet her!"

“She’s resting right now. Maybe after we have lunch we can come bother her, I would love to do that.”

Tiffany giggled. “We should do that.”

Once Taeyeon had changed into less of a fashion statement, they made their way down the hall and took the elevator. Tiffany was more than happy to spend the time chatting about how her friend had reacted when she finally called her back after waking up, and the way the conversation had mostly regarded the abandoned friend’s tragic fate of having to watch a really bad 80’s movie on TV since her best friend ditched her to get drunk. Taeyeon laughed and expressed her continued amusement at the friend’s lack of concern about Tiffany’s safety.

“Oh, she’s alright really,” Tiffany said quickly. “Jessica’s just a little... Well, she doesn’t do so well with expressing her feelings unless it’s a really big deal. But I know she cares about me. Leaving me at the bar last night... Well, maybe that was her little revenge for not being able to spend time with me lately because of...that guy.”

Tiffany looked down at the floor as they reached the doors leading out of the building’s lobby. Thoughts of that man made her steps falter and she became distracted as she remembered all the reasons why she had gone to the bar last night.

Taeyeon put a hand on Tiffany’s shoulder and gave her a warm smile. “Well it’s okay now. So, where do you want to eat?”

Tiffany returned Taeyeon’s expression. One good thing that had come out of her experience at the bar was her new friend, and no matter how bad she was feeling about that part of her past, the enjoyment of spending her present with Taeyeon brought her back.

Shaking her head, she brushed the thoughts away for now. Shooting another grin at Taeyeon, she lightly took hold of her hand and tugged her out of the building.

“I know a great place!”

Taeyeon wasn’t sure if it counted as a date or not, but by the fifth time they went out together she was pretty sure it was a date. In fact, she was pretty sure she could have counted all their outings as dates and that they were dating each other, which kind of freaked her out because they had all five dates in the space of two weeks and that seemed fast – perhaps too fast, considering they were only thinking of each other as friends just a short time ago – but then again they were moving fast since the moment

they met. Not to mention the confusion, the insecurity, and some more confusion. Was Tiffany always okay with dating girls? All Taeyeon knew about her dating history was the man who played her and broke her heart. And if she was okay with dating girls, why would she be dating Taeyeon, whom she clearly (in Taeyeon's opinion) outranked in every way? And were they even really dating or was this something else completely?

She replayed every moment of their time together so far. She opened the door for Tiffany at the café three times, Tiffany looked down shyly while she laughed fifteen times, Taeyeon touched Tiffany's arm eight times, Tiffany brushed a lock of her hair behind her ear twelve times, and flirting – how much of their conversations could be considered flirting? And their body language must have been sending messages – Taeyeon's head was spinning and she remembered why she didn't find it easy to make friends. Her brain thought too much.

Taeyeon eyed Tiffany out of the corner of her eye. They were in the cinema theatre, a film running on the screen without Taeyeon's attention, the flickering of the light casting playful shadows on Tiffany's features.

Obviously she wouldn't mind if they were dating, if she just took it so lightly, but she had gotten to know Tiffany quite well by now and there were a few things that worried her.

"Tiffany," she whispered.

Tiffany didn't hear, staring at the movie.

"Tiffany," Taeyeon whispered again.

Tiffany frowned, turned her head but kept her eyes on the screen for a while longer, and then met Taeyeon's gaze. "What?"

"Are we dating?"

Tiffany leaned closer. "What? I can't hear you."

"Are we," Taeyeon started, and she paused for a moment to move her mouth next to Tiffany's ear, "Are we dating?"

"Um," said Tiffany. She moved away, eyes wide, and said again, "Um."

Taeyeon's eyes widened in response, echoing her expression, and she said, "Uh, wait, I, uh...."

"Um," Tiffany repeated. "Yes?"

"Y-yes?" Taeyeon stuttered. "Yes, what yes? You mean... yes?"

"Yes." Tiffany blushed so hard the redness was almost visible in the dim light.

They stared at each other for a long time. "Okay," Taeyeon said. They looked away again, turning back to the movie.

Taeyeon tried to calm her racing heart. She started out with the intention of asking all the questions necessary to clear up the situation, but the effect of Tiffany's first answer completely threw her off and left her with heat creeping up her neck and the constant need to swallow nervously. So they were dating. Taeyeon was dating Tiffany. Tiffany was dating Taeyeon. She brought a hand to her face and tried to cool her cheeks. She cleared her throat subtly and straightened her spine.

She sat there feeling giddy for the rest of their date. She had no idea what the movie was about, who those people were, what they were doing, how it ended – she just kept thinking about Tiffany. There were a few things that she knew she needed to consider, all those questions that still needed answering, but holy cow she was dating Tiffany. Tiffany whom she only met two weeks ago, but Tiffany nonetheless. Suffice it to say she was pleased.

They held hands as they walked home from the cinema, shy and light with their touches, and grinning like idiots.

"I can't believe you just asked me directly like that," Tiffany giggled. She tucked a lock of hair behind her ear and bit her bottom lip as she looked at the ground beneath their feet. "I was going to bring it up on the way home."

"Ah," Taeyeon replied, nervous, "Well actually I made a list of things I needed to ask you, and once I make a list it's easier for me to just get into it."

"A list?" Tiffany looked up, curious. "What's on the rest of the list?"

"Uh," Taeyeon hesitated, casting her eyes upwards as she went through the list again. "Why me?"

"Pardon?"

Taeyeon met her eyes again. She stopped walking, Tiffany stopping with her, and took Tiffany's other hand too.

"Why, out of all the billions of people on this planet, are you willing to date me?"

Tiffany blinked at her. Then she frowned. For a moment Taeyeon panicked – what if Tiffany herself hadn't considered this and the question just made her realise that Taeyeon was beneath her notice – and her grip on Tiffany's hands tightened. Tiffany glanced down at their hands at this action, and gave Taeyeon a gentle smile of comfort.

"Relax, Taeyeon," she said warmly. "Let me answer you. I'm not *willing* to date you. You make it sound as if I can barely stand to look at you. I actually *want* to date you. I want to be standing here right now, looking into those quiet, thoughtful eyes of yours as the light evening breeze sends shivers down my spine and your slightly sweaty palms spread warmth along my hands."

Taeyeon blushed self-consciously. Her eyes darted away for a moment in embarrassment. "Sorry about that."

Tiffany smiled. She leaned forward, barely giving Taeyeon a chance to avoid her if she wished, and she kissed her on the corner of her lips.

"Don't say sorry," Tiffany murmured, moving back slightly. "I'm still thanking you all the time, you know."

"I won't feel the need to say sorry if you don't feel the need to say thank you," Taeyeon said. "Deal?"

Tiffany grinned. "Deal. Now what was on the rest of your list?"

They started walking again, fingers more tightly entwined. Taeyeon brought up the confusion surrounding the apparently inconsistent gender dynamics in Tiffany's relationship habits, and Tiffany hesitated before telling Taeyeon about the first girlfriend she ever had. Her first year of university was stressful, alien, lonely. The cute girl whom she paired up with for her first project was funny, friendly, comforting. She thought long and hard about what she was feeling, who she was feeling it for, what it meant for herself and her future, and decided she needed the warmth the relationship gave her. The girlfriend cheated on her in the second semester, Tiffany cried and figured life was pretty much over, and then she realised she could still have her future so she picked herself and went on. She didn't look at girls the same way as she did before her girlfriend made her think so much, and she cast her eye over

the boys again and found something similar there.

The apartment building was warm, the heat filling them up after their stroll in the growing coldness outside. They kept smiling at each other as they rode the elevator to their floor, and Tiffany pulled Taeyeon in for another little kiss when they stopped in the hallway.

“See you tomorrow?” she whispered, staying close.

Taeyeon kept from fainting. “Yeah. See you tomorrow.”

They saw each other every day, and at first it was awesome and then it was great and then it was sentimentally rewarding and then Taeyeon started to get worried. Something was different. Something didn’t feel right. Something made her concerned and a little bit afraid.

She thought back to their conversations about Tiffany’s past relationships. The most recent, the man from work, was a total jerk who toyed with her and threw her away as if she was nothing, while she was heavily invested and emotionally dependent on the relationship. The two boyfriends before him dumped her for being ‘clingy’ and the girlfriend from university cheated on her.

Taeyeon pondered. She contemplated heavily. Her mind raced over it all almost violently. The patrons sitting by the bar ducked out of the way as she swept it with her cloth, the arc of her movement entirely too furious for its purpose. Nuts went flying.

“Calm down there, Genghis.”

Sunny brushed away fragments of nut and seated herself on a stool. She regarded Taeyeon curiously.

“Trouble in Paradise?” she inquired. “You know, you should have introduced her to me ages ago; it’s almost time for me to go back to New York. I could have provided you with a thorough assessment which would no doubt have saved you some time and grief, judging by the pained expression on your face. Thinking of your lover?”

Taeyeon stared at her for a moment. Then she threw down the cleaning cloth and leaned over the bar to grip Sunny’s shoulders.

“You have to help me,” she breathed. “I don’t know what’s going on. I think... I think... I think Tiffany may have *issues*.”

Sunny rolled her eyes. “You have no idea how hilarious it is to hear you, of all people, saying

something like that.”

Taeyeon looked undeterred. She let go of Sunny and started pacing behind the bar. A patron called for a refill and she poured the vodka on his Blackberry. He didn’t even know how to react, and she went back to her pacing.

“I just,” Taeyeon began. “I just. I feel like she’s really. She’s really intense. You know? I mean, we met and I walked her home and we bonded over her tragic breakup and regrets about life decisions and all of a sudden we’re friends, and we started hanging out a lot, and two weeks later we were definitely in ‘dating’ mode, and now it’s been another two weeks and I just, I just feel like it’s all going really fast.”

“Taeyeon,” Sunny said, getting off the stool. “Wow, dude, just calm down for a second, okay? Come on, let’s go talk in the store room.”

Taeyeon followed obediently, plucking off her half-apron and tossing it over her shoulder. The Blackberry man barely dodged it, and still didn’t know how to react.

Sunny closed the door behind them and crossed her arms over her chest as she regarded Taeyeon quietly for a moment.

“Do you remember how much I teased you when you first told me you and Tiffany were dating?” Sunny asked.

Taeyeon blinked, and nodded. “Yeah. Annoying. What’s your point?”

Sunny sighed. “I don’t want you to get hurt, Taeyeon. You mean a lot to me. You’re my best friend – no, you’re my family. I’ve got to keep you on your toes sometimes. You don’t exactly get out much, and I know how much a relationship can stress you out, and I know you know that too, which often makes it harder for you to be sure when there’s a real problem. So I want you to do one thing for me. Okay?”

“Okay,” Taeyeon replied slowly. “You’re not going to make me dance on the bar and sing ABBA songs again, are you? Because you said that would ‘keep me on my toes’ too.”

Sunny rolled her eyes. “No, this is serious now. Listening?”

“Yes.”

“Taeyeon, please just take this relationship with Tiffany one step at a time. Okay? Don’t think about speed, or intensity, for now just think to yourself about each step that you are taking with her. One step at a time. Then think about how you feel about each step, and the step after, and what steps you think you are going to take or want to take. And *then* you think about how fast you’re stepping, how deep your steps go. Get it?”

Taeyeon huffed, and looked away as she thought about it. “I guess. Think about each step, right? I can do that.”

Sunny watched her for a moment. She stepped forward and took Taeyeon by the shoulders.

“That’s my girl,” she said, smiled, and hugged her. “Now go talk to Tiffany about everything you’ve been thinking about, okay? Talk to her about every step.”

Taeyeon panicked briefly at the thought of confronting their problems, the fear of losing Tiffany snaking around her chest. Then she made herself calm down and returned Sunny’s hug. “Okay.”

They held each other for a while.

“How about you sing ‘Dancing Queen’ tonight?”

The memory of dancing on the bar and singing ABBA’s ‘Dancing Queen’ still haunted Taeyeon later when she was cleaning up after closing time. Somehow, Sunny was eternally capable of talking Taeyeon into doing ridiculous things, and sometimes she hated her for it and sometimes she loved her for it. As she dialled Tiffany’s number and asked if she could stop by when she got home, she took a moment to appreciate Sunny’s ability to talk her into doing ridiculous things like discussing her thoughts and concerns. Then she picked up the scrap of paper with a phone number on it, lying on the floor behind the bar where it landed when Blackberry guy threw it during the second chorus, and decided forcefully to remain neutral on the subject of Sunny for a while.

Tiffany was blinking away sleep when she opened the door, smiled drowsily, and pulled Taeyeon into a tight hug.

“Hey,” Taeyeon murmured, circling her arms around Tiffany’s waist as they stood in the doorway. “I didn’t realise you were sleeping.”

“It’s okay,” Tiffany whispered. She squeezed Taeyeon. “I’m happy to see you.”

Tiffany tugged Taeyeon inside, barely allowing her to close the door and kick off her shoes, and pulled her along to the bed where they fell onto the mattress and she wrapped her in a warm, comfortable embrace. Taeyeon found it easy to drift off towards sleep, as they lay in the dark stillness with only each other's touch and breath. But something started to nibble at the back of her mind, and she remembered that they were meant to have a big serious talk about their relationship.

She rolled onto her back, separating her and Tiffany slightly, and turned her head to look at her girlfriend.

"We need to talk about something that's been bothering me a bit," she said softly, eyes tracing Tiffany's face in the dimness.

Immediately, Tiffany froze, her body tense. She blinked, and looked worried.

"Did I do something wrong?" she whispered. Her fingers grasped Taeyeon's shirt and she swallowed nervously. "Please don't break up with me."

Taeyeon softened immediately. She pulled Tiffany closer, holding her gently. "No, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to make you freak out. You didn't do anything wrong. I'm not breaking up with you. I... I just want to talk to you about something. It-It's not really easy for me to talk about some things, especially if I've been thinking about it a lot; it's hard for me to have conversations about it. But I want to be honest with you, and be more open about what goes on in my head."

Another step.

Tiffany sniffed quietly and held onto Taeyeon. "Okay. What's on your mind?"

"Don't you think we're moving a bit fast?"

Tiffany shifted so that they could meet each other's eyes. They examined each other in silence. Then she burst into tears.

"I knew it," she sobbed, "you want to break up, don't you? I'm sorry, I'm so clingy, they all say that. I'm just so stupid."

Taeyeon panicked. Tiffany was shaking with sobs, wailing about how she would never be loved and kept screwing everything up, and Taeyeon wasn't sure how to make her stop. Clearly it wasn't what she meant – she just wanted them to talk about whether or not the speed was likely to cause problems and if

they could be prepared for it. She didn't mean to make Tiffany think she wanted to end their relationship. But, considering Tiffany's past relationships, Taeyeon wasn't surprised that she was so convinced that Taeyeon wanted to leave her. And that was exactly one of the things that she was afraid would become a problem if they rushed into the relationship.

Sunny's advice came back to her. The steps were the most important; then the speed and depth. This was a step they were taking in their relationship. Taeyeon opened up to Tiffany about her thoughts and feelings; Tiffany was (sort of) facing her abandonment issues. This was a crucial step for them if they wanted to continue. They could take this step together, and take it well, and then they could worry about how their speed might be dangerous. Once they took this step, Taeyeon thought, perhaps the danger of their speed would actually lessen. Now they just needed to step.

How?

"Uh," Taeyeon hummed. "No, Tiffany, that's not what I mea—"

"I knew this was too good to be true," Tiffany wept, "it always—"

"Tiffany, that's not—"

"Too clingy, too intense, too desperate—"

"Whoever said that stuff is a jerk, they're all just jer—"

"I knew no one could ever possibly love me."

Taeyeon was stunned. The gears in her head turned, and turned, and stopped and turned again. Tiffany sniffled and cried a little more. Taeyeon's silence finally got weird and she looked at her again.

"Taeyeon?" she wondered hesitantly.

"I love you, Tiffany," Taeyeon said. Her voice was firm, her tone determined. "Don't you ever say stuff like that again. You can be loved, and I love you. You're very lovable, you know."

Tiffany stared. "But didn't you just say we're moving too fast?"

"A bit fast," Taeyeon corrected. "I wasn't complaining. I was just saying that I've been thinking about how fast we've been going, and it has worried me somewhat, because I'm scared of screwing up this relationship — *me* screwing it up — and losing you. So, I wanted to know what you thought about it."

Tiffany blinked. Taeyeon smiled.

“I don’t want to break up with you, Tiffany. I want to focus on the steps we take together.”

Tiffany swooned. She never expected to hear such words directed at her. Her exes were jerks, Taeyeon was right, and she had no reason to think she would ever find someone who wasn’t a jerk. But she thought back to what Taeyeon asked her when they talked about dating, when she asked why Tiffany was willing to date her, and her answer. And she realised how similar their feelings really were. Neither could understand how the other could possibly deign to stoop to their humble level, and Tiffany for one always had a niggling feeling that it was too good to be true. She was all too ready to believe Taeyeon was leaving her, exactly as the others had.

Yet here they were. And Taeyeon had just said those three words that didn’t usually make an appearance after only two weeks of officially dating.

Taeyeon realised it too. “I don’t want to freak you out again,” she said hurriedly. “I do love you, but I know that’s another step we need to take together in the future sometime. So I’m not asking you to marry me or anything. I just want you to understand that you are worthy of love, and it’s happening with us.”

Tiffany just kissed her. She couldn’t think of a way to verbally express her feelings yet.

Steps? She could think about those all day long now. Taeyeon and Tiffany’s steps.

The Monster

“This is not what I wanted.”

Tiffany leaned back against the grey brick wall, relying on its harshness against the thin fabric of her clothes. With her eyes squinted slightly to fend off the icy, biting breeze, she glowered at the building on the other side of the street.

“I didn’t want this.”

She ran a hand through her hair, feeling the way the strands fell again to brush against her pale, cold neck. A sigh racked through her chest. Her eyes slipped shut.

“But I guess this is what the monster wants.”

She laughed a brief, bitter sound. And with a single sudden push, she moved on, crossed the street, and entered the building.

“Morning, Tiffany,” greeted the first voice of the day. Her lips cracked, shaped a smile which she knew seemed charming and friendly, and she half-bowed half-nodded in reply. The process continued; greetings bled out from her as she made her way along.

“Aren’t you cold?”

Her body swivelled, her blank eyes met the curious gaze of another. “What?”

Taeyeon gestured in the general direction of the outside world. “It’s cold today. You’re barely wearing anything suitable for this weather. Aren’t you cold?”

Tiffany blinked. Her eyes curved as her cheeks did too, giving the most disarming and relaxing smile she could. “Oh, I’m fine.”

Taeyeon’s gaze was sharp, and assertive. She didn’t buy it. She never did. No matter how many of any smiles Tiffany whipped out, no matter how much it seemed true, Taeyeon knew Tiffany’s monster, and she showed that she had one of her own behind those eyes.

Tiffany turned and walked away.

“I know you think I’m crazy,” she had said once, “You can call me crazy all you want, but that’s nothing. I’m just friends with my monster, that’s all.”

And there was only ever silence in answer.

“Stop holding your breath, Taeyeon. You can’t save me.”

There was always someone waiting for her when she left the building. Many people, in fact. A small crowd stood off to one side, gawking and whispering and sounding shocked to be in her presence. She could almost hear their hearts racing from where they stood. Then there were the two or three who stood on the other side of the street, boring into her with dark stares from wide eyes. They were the ones who would be waiting for her at her apartment building by the time she got there. One of them would be in the row of cars that always hugged the back of her vehicle.

That would make the monster grin and puff its chest proudly. Look at this, it would say, look at my subjects worshipping me. It would strut around like she did when she was on stage. The stage was the monster’s kingdom. They love me, it would whisper, they all love me.

She flashed her fans a beaming smile and slammed the car door shut after her.

The key was jammed into the ignition and she tugged at the seatbelt with one hand, and then the front passenger door clicked open and Taeyeon flopped into the seat. She gave a wave outside and shut the door. In the muffled stillness in the car, Tiffany didn’t move as she looked at Taeyeon questioningly.

Taeyeon took a breath before meeting her eyes. She smiled. “Hi. Wanna have dinner tonight?”

“Not particularly, no,” Tiffany replied. She buckled her seatbelt and turned the key.

“Aw come on, just for a while,” Taeyeon persisted.

Tiffany looked at her again, frowning. Was that a glint she saw in the corner of Taeyeon’s eyes? Was she up to something mischievous again? Or was this just the familiar paranoia that trailed in her monster’s wake. She sighed.

“Fine, whatever,” she conceded. “Where?”

“At your place,” Taeyeon said as she buckled her own seatbelt.

Tiffany blinked, surprised. “I doubt I’ll have anything to cook with. You wanna pick something up on

the way?”

“Nah, it’s fine, I’m sure we can dig something up at your place,” Taeyeon said, turning her eyes to look in the side mirror. “Let’s go before they try to take advantage of your unmoving car.”

Tiffany scoffed, but she eyed the people outside and drove the car onto the street. She knew Taeyeon thought a lot more about the chance that one of those twinkle-eyed fans would lash out in a manner more harmful than their intention, and even though Tiffany knew the risks well enough, she didn’t let it bother her all the time like Taeyeon did. Perhaps her sedation came from the monster’s pacing, back and forth behind her gaze.

At the red light, Tiffany let the car slow to a stop, and she curled her hand on the gear shift in anticipation of moving again soon. She didn’t like driving a lot, in the sense that it wasn’t something that entertained her, and something about the boringness of it all just got to her. Impatience bubbled away inside her as she listened to the imaginary sound of seconds ticking away in her head. She sighed.

Taeyeon reached for her hand, fingertips lightly and slowly tracing the ridges of her knuckles.

“How have you been lately?” she asked, and her voice was as soft as her touch. “We haven’t talked in a while.”

“I’m fine,” she replied curtly, eyes drilling a hole into the robotic red light ahead. “Busy, as usual.”

“Yes, I’ve been hearing a lot about your work,” Taeyeon said.

Tiffany glanced at her and saw the small smile that curved the corner of her mouth. She turned her head back to the light. Taeyeon’s hand moved, sliding along Tiffany’s skin to twine their fingers together loosely.

“You always work so hard,” Taeyeon murmured, switching her gaze to Tiffany’s face, eyeing the line of her jaw.

Tiffany made a small sound of acknowledgement in the back of her throat. The light flickered to green, and she shook away Taeyeon’s hand so that she could change gears faster.

“How about you?” Tiffany asked.

“How about me what?” Taeyeon returned, her head back and her eyes closed.

“Taeyeon, you can’t expect people to tell you how they’re doing and then be unwilling to grant them the same courtesy. How are you?”

One shoulder shrugged half-heartedly. “I’m fine. I’m just the same old Taeyeon.”

Tiffany had no reply to that. She wasn’t so sure. In many ways, Taeyeon was still the same Taeyeon she had known for so many years, who could see right through her into the core of her soul and had done so many times already, but she knew something was different, and if it wasn’t Taeyeon then it had to be something about the connection between them. She knew Taeyeon liked her in a way that was nowhere near as simple as that word made it seem. There was a complexity that there didn’t always used to be. Several layers deep within their relationship, where the monster had not yet been able to reach, Taeyeon was doing something new. And perhaps at times Tiffany got a slight fluttering feeling that it could be exciting, too.

But, as always, there was the monster. And a change in the connection she had with Taeyeon would not be appreciated by the monster at all. Tiffany saw very little space between herself and that monster, and it had been so for a long time before Taeyeon.

Taeyeon locked their fingers together again at the next red light, and Tiffany thought that maybe Taeyeon really was trying to break free of her own monster. Or perhaps she already succeeded.

She thought so even more when Taeyeon stepped up behind her while she was looking into her fridge, and wrapped her arms around her waist and leaned their bodies together. Having the warmth of another person pressed against her own body was not something Tiffany was completely unfamiliar with, but it was not something that she experienced often, either. She had slept in the same bed with Taeyeon before and woken up from her exhausted sleep to find limbs everywhere. She and Taeyeon had shared the same simple skinship that others had. And yet there was a difference here, again, with the way Taeyeon’s palms brushed over her hips and her fingers curled against her stomach.

“What are you doing?” Tiffany asked quietly. Her monster tensed, and so did she.

“All you have in your fridge is an avocado,” Taeyeon remarked. Her voice was unusually close and it took Tiffany a moment to adjust.

Her mind began to influence her to move away, and then her mind let her sink into Taeyeon’s hold, and then the monster tried to pull her, and then the monster’s grip slipped.

And then Taeyeon turned her around and kissed her. There was no pause, no intense look, barely even a breath – she just brought their mouths together and hugged Tiffany’s lips with her own. Her thumbs brushed over Tiffany’s lower back, spreading some warmth through the thin fabric of her shirt, and she pressed her lips tighter against Tiffany’s.

“Just focus on me,” she murmured, and the vibration of her speech reached Tiffany’s mouth.

“Mmm,” Tiffany said for some reason that she was not aware of. Her eyes were still open and she looked at Taeyeon’s face, everywhere in her vision, before closing her eyes and frowning slightly.

“Focus on me,” Taeyeon repeated. And then she began to really kiss her.

For a time, it was as if the monster was gone; there was Taeyeon, there was Tiffany. Taeyeon rubbed and tugged at Tiffany’s lips with her own and her fingers stroked Tiffany’s back. Tiffany took a deep breath, shuddering, and felt as if she was inhaling Taeyeon. Her hands clutched at Taeyeon, pulling her closer, curling her arms around her body tightly. She imagined for a moment that Taeyeon was where the monster used to be, and she pressed their bodies together and desperately wanted Taeyeon to be inside her soul.

Taeyeon didn’t pull away when Tiffany cried. She dragged her lips over the corner of Tiffany’s mouth and up along her cheek, and she kissed the tears, taking the wetness into her own mouth. Her hands spread flat and strong against Tiffany’s back, fingers pressing along her spine between her shoulder blades and lower, anchoring her and holding her there.

“I love you,” Taeyeon breathed as if the words escaped her heart with the exhalation of her lungs. The warmth coated Tiffany’s skin. “You are not your monster.”

Tiffany pushed herself against Taeyeon first, shaking, and then she pulled herself away. Her eyelids fluttered open, and her gaze was solemn. Taeyeon met her eyes with her own quiet earnestness, and they both knew what the other was struggling with.

Tiffany’s monster returned, and its heaviness sunk into her, and she got a feeling in her heart much like the realization that her life had just ended. She shook her head, and she blinked; there was the monster, there was Taeyeon. Both were causing her to fight against the world and against herself – but one wanted the power and the fame and the acknowledgement of the world’s attention and adoration, and one wanted her.

Tiffany closed her eyes, and Taeyeon held her, and the monster goaded.

She whispered, “This is not what I wanted.”



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