I'd Rather

TaeNy

Part I

I slowly opened my eyes as the incessant ringing of your phone woke me up from my slumber. Your hand slid off my stomach as you got up to pick up the call. I pulled the blanket closer to me trying to keep your warmth in the cold morning air.  
  
“Hello? Mr Lee...Yes...Good morning...Yes, I do understand...Yes, I do know that it’s due...Mr Lee I’ll assure you I’ll send the money over before the end of the month...Yes I know I said that too last month, but I did send it before the month ended!...Yes, I’m sorry Mr Lee...Yes I’ll make sure it won’t happen again...”  
  
You set your phone down and slid back into bed. Your hand ended up on my stomach again, underneath my shirt. You pulled me closer and pressed yourself against me till I could feel your soft breathing on the back of my neck.  
  
“TaeTae, was that your landlord again?” I mumbled.  
  
“Mmm.”  
  
“Your rent’s due?”  
  
You hesitated and sighed before replying me, “Mmm.”  
  
“TaeTae, let me help.”  
  
You tightened your hold on me, patting my stomach gently, “Baby, we talked about it. I can handle it, okay?”  
  
I put my hand on top of yours and slid my fingers in between, giving your hand a slight squeeze.  
  
“But Tae—”  
  
I gasped when you kissed my favourite spot, effectively interrupting me, and you slowly trailed kisses down my jaw before ending with a soft peck on the corner of my lips, “Let’s not talk about this now, okay baby. Go back to sleep, hmm?”  
  
“Taey—”  
  
You leaned over and captured me fully on the lips, lingering a little longer before slowly pulling away, your breath tickling me as you spoke.  
  
“Baby, I’ll handle it.”  
  
I turned around fully and immersed myself in your brown eyes. They were soft, warm, gentle, and yet behind that veil, there was turmoil. I knew you couldn’t handle it, and I hated it that you always acted tough in front of me.  
  
“TaeTae, at least let me help you a little,” I said quietly as I caressed your cheek.  
  
You just shook your head and planted a kiss on the bridge of my nose, “Baby, we talked about this before. Go back to sleep, it’s too early in the morning to wake up.”  
  
There was a tone of finality in your voice, and I grudgingly complied as you pulled me into your arms, and I placed my ear on your chest as you hummed my favourite song.

\*

I stepped out of the shower to the sound of the front door slamming and keys jingling as it hit the counter. I hurriedly pulled on my shorts and one of your shirts before padding into the living room. I saw you slouching on the loveseat, your head resting against the back of the sofa and your eyes closed. I crawled onto your lap and hugged your waist, letting my head rest on your chest to hear your heartbeat.  
  
“How did it go?” I asked quietly.  
  
You lazily wrapped your arms around me, resting your interlocked fingers on my hip. You planted a kiss on the crown of my wet head and rested your chin against it.  
  
“Not good...” you said, your voice reverberating into my ear.  
  
“What happened?”  
  
You scoffed. “The other songwriter wasn’t even half as good as I was. The producer chose her just because she is the niece of the CEO, and the damned producer just wants to be on the big guy’s good books.”  
  
I snuggled closer to you.  
  
“I’m sorry about that...”  
  
She rubbed my arm gently.  
  
“What are you sorry about, it’s not your fault.”  
  
“I wish I could help you...”  
  
“What are you talking about? You’re helping me just by being with me in my arms, like this,” you patted my butt.  
  
“Yah Byun Taeng.”  
  
You chuckled, “I really mean it,” and gave me another kiss.  
  
I lifted my head up and looked into your eyes.  
  
“TaeTae, I know you do, but you can’t go on like this. If your songs aren’t selling, what’s going to happen to you? You can’t continue living your life like this—not knowing what’s going to happen in the future without a stable income. At least let me help you with your rent?”  
  
You closed your eyes and shook your head before leveling your eyes with mine.  
  
“Baby, you’re my girlfriend. I can’t let you do that.”  
  
“Precisely why I’m your girlfriend that’s why I can!”  
  
You gave me a peck on the lips and smiled. You used to smile wholeheartedly, but now it’s restrained, filled with frustration. I hated seeing you like that.  
  
“Baby, no means no.”  
  
I laid my head on your chest again and mumbled quietly, “What happened to your dream of becoming a singer?”  
  
“It’s a dream baby, just a dream...” you sighed.  
  
I clenched my jaw. I didn’t want this for you. I wanted you to realize your dream, and do what you love with passion. Not suffer.  
  
I planted a soft kiss on your collar.  
  
“I love you.”  
  
“I love you more.”

\*

“Hello?”  
  
*“Stephanie.”*  
  
I sat up when I heard the voice on the other side of the line.  
  
“What do you want?”  
  
*“Six months is almost up.”*  
  
“And?”  
  
*“Your deadline is due. What is it going to be?”*  
  
I chewed on my bottom lip as I thought of my options. I can’t delay it anymore.  
  
“I’ll take it.”  
  
*“Good, I thought so. You’re booked on the next flight home in three days.”*  
  
My phone slid off my hands as the line went dead, and I let my tears run freely down my cheeks.

-  
  
*I thought sometime alone,  
Was what we really needed*  
  
-

“Taeyeon...” I whispered.  
  
“Yes baby?”  
  
“I...”  
  
You tightened your arms around my waist, pulling me closer. My heart raced and I felt your breath tickle my ear.  
  
“What is it? Is something bothering you?”  
  
I shook my head. “It’s just that...”  
  
You tilted your head in curiosity and stuck your lower lip out, looking at me with your puppy eyes. I took a deep breath and prepared myself for what I had to say as you brushed my fringe aside, tucking it behind my ear.  
  
“You know you can tell me anything right?”  
  
I stared into your deep brown eyes and all I saw was love. You always looked at me with so much love in your eyes.  
  
“Taeyeon... I... I don’t think it’s working out between us.”

-  
  
*You said this time would hurt more than it helps...  
But I couldn’t see that.*  
  
-

“Fany please,” you pleaded.  
  
I shook my head as I grabbed my clothes off the shelf and stuffed them into my luggage. My hands stopped moving against my will suddenly. When I looked up, I saw your fingers gently grabbing onto my wrist. I pulled and you held onto to it tighter, yet tender enough not to hurt me. I wriggled and you pulled me into your embrace. You took my hands and placed them on your shoulders, before placing yours on my waist.  
  
“Baby, please don’t leave. We can work this out. Hmm? What’s wrong with me? I’ll change. I’ll do anything for you baby. Just tell me. Don’t leave me like this. What am I going to do without you?”  
  
I shook my head. “No Taeyeon, nothing’s wrong with you. The problem is me. I... I don’t love you anymore...”  
  
I saw the fleeting desperation in your eyes.  
  
“We-We can change that. Am I not spending enough time with you? Give me one more chance baby. One more chance, and I swear I’ll—”  
  
With a finger to your lips, I silenced you as you continued to gaze into my eyes. I knew you were searching for a glimmer of hope. I shook my head again.  
  
“It just doesn’t feel the same anymore Taeyeon. I don’t feel the same around you like how we first met. People change Taeyeon; I just happened to have a change of heart.”  
  
With you rendered speechless, I pried your hands away from my waist and zipped up my luggage, taking it down from the bed and lugging it out the door.  
  
“This may be the last time I see you. Goodbye Taeyeon.”

-  
  
*And so I left the one I loved at home to be alone,  
And I tried not to believe if this one thing is true;  
That I’m nothing without you.*  
  
-

“Here we are Ms Hwang.”  
  
“Thank you Driver Park.”  
  
“With pleasure Ms Hwang. Shall I bring the luggages up to your room?”  
  
“Yes please.”  
  
I stepped out of the black limousine onto the gravel in front of the foyer of my father’s Los Angeles mansion. I took a deep breath, savouring the Californian air. It smelt different from the Korean air that I was used to. The double front doors opened and I staggered back a few steps with a weight latched onto my waist.  
  
“Unnie! You’re back!”  
  
I laughed and patted my sister’s head.  
  
“Seohyun ah, you’re getting taller.”  
  
She beamed, “Of course! Unnie, at this rate I’m going to be way taller than you,” she grabbed my arm and proceeded to drag me into the house, “Come on! Daddy’s waiting!”  
  
My heels clacked against the marble floor as my sister led me to my father’s study, chattering excitedly. She was happy to see me again, so was I, but with each footfall, I dreaded the moment I had to see my father again.  
  
The heavy smell of cigar and nicotine greeted me as the door to the study opened. My eyes found my father sitting behind his desk, his reading glasses perched on the edge of his nose as he flipped through stacks of papers.  
  
“Daddy,” I cringed.  
  
“Stephanie! I’m so glad you’re back!”  
  
He stood and gave me a hug. I forced a smile.  
  
“Seohyun, wait outside for a moment will you? Daddy and I have to talk.”  
  
“Okay unnie.”  
  
The moment the door clicked, I turned to my father and glared at him.  
  
“Keep your end of the deal.”  
  
The man sneered. “Of course.”

-  
  
*And then I met someone,  
And I thought she could replace you*  
  
-

I walked through the corridors, holding my schedule in front of me, glancing up at the signs above the doors checking for my classroom. I didn’t see what was ahead of me, and bumped into someone.  
  
“I am so sorry,” I said as I bent down and helped the girl gather her papers, “I wasn’t paying attention.”  
  
The tanned girl laughed it off as I handed her papers over.  
  
“It’s all right. Are you new here?”  
  
She held my hand gently and pulled me up. Her soft, gentle touch reminded me of you.  
  
“Yes I am.”  
  
“My name’s Yuri. Kwon Yuri.”  
  
I took her outstretched hand into mine and I smiled.  
  
“Stephanie. Stephanie Hwang.”

\*

The sound of the doorbell ringing made its way to our ears.  
  
“Stephanie.”  
  
“Yes, Daddy?”  
  
“Those must be my guests. Just in time. Can you go down and entertain them for a bit? I’m just finishing up my work here. He’s a close business friend of mine Stephanie, and I think he has brought his daughter over too. A pleasant girl she is. I want you to meet her.”  
  
“Yes, Daddy.”  
  
I stepped out of the study and walked down the marble staircase, stopping short at the sight that greeted me in the foyer of my house.  
  
“Yuri?”  
  
“Stephanie?”  
  
I hurried down the stairs and gave her a hug.  
  
“Stephanie, what are you doing here? Are you Mr Hwang’s daughter?”  
  
“Yes I am,” I giggled.  
  
She smiled and gestured to the man standing slightly behind her. “Stephanie, this is my father, Mr Kwon. Daddy, this is the girl I met in school that I was telling you about.”  
  
I offered my hand to the businessman. “Good evening Mr Kwon. It’s nice meeting you.”  
  
“Ahh, I finally meet Stephanie. My, my, you are most certainly beautiful. Yuri definitely wasn’t lying about that.”  
  
“Thank you Mr Kwon,” I gave him my best smile, and Yuri blushed.  
  
“You’re just like your mother. Gentle and kind. Your father never stops talking about you.”  
  
“Thank you again Mr Kwon,” I said as I dipped my head. “Shall we proceed to the dining hall?”  
  
“Of course, of course. I can’t wait to know about the girl my daughter has been talking nonstop about. Conversing over dinner would be wonderful.”

-  
  
*We got along just fine,  
But we wasted time, because she wasn’t you*  
  
-

Three long years passed, and there wasn’t a day I didn’t think about you.  
  
It was late in the evening. We had dinner at my house with my father. He definitely has taken a liking to Yuri, and now we’re taking a walk in the park, enjoying the evening breeze. Yuri slid her hand down my arm and reached for my hand, entwining her fingers with mine. We took each step slowly; we had all the time in the world.  
  
“You know, we’ve been together for three years now, and I don’t know what’s your dream.”  
  
“My dream?”  
  
Yuri nodded and looked at me.  
  
“Yes, your dream. What did you aspire to be when you were young? A lawyer? A doctor? No, no, no. That can’t be right. I wouldn’t have met you at business graduate school if you wanted to be a lawyer or a doctor. Entrepreneur?”  
  
I laughed, wholeheartedly. Yuri can be such a dork sometimes. Just like you.  
  
“Why do you want to know anyway?”  
  
She shrugged and made a face.  
  
“Curious.”  
  
“Okay...I’ve...always wanted to sing.”  
  
She raised an eyebrow.  
  
“Sing?”  
  
“Mmhmm.”  
  
She chuckled, “So why were you in a business graduate program at USC?”  
  
“... My father.”  
  
She nodded her approval and we continued to walk in silence.  
  
“Sing for me,” she suddenly said.  
  
“Really?”  
  
She nodded again.  
  
“What do you want me to sing?”  
  
She shrugged again. “What do you want to sing?”  
  
I bit my lip in contemplation and looked at the sky. I took a deep breath, and began.  
  
스쳐가나요...우리의 사랑은...가슴 아픈 추억인가요...  
돌아서네요..그대의 마음은...눈물로도 잡을순 없나요...  
Did it pass by...Our love...Is it just a heartbreaking memory...    
It's turning around...Your heart...Can't I catch it with my tears...  
  
My love 사랑해요, 사랑해요...그대 듣고 있나요...  
My love 잊지 말아요...지우지 말아요...우리의 사랑을...  
My love I love you, I love you..Are you listening...  
My love...Don't forget...Don't erase...Our love...  
  
나의 눈물이 그대 보이나요 하루하루 그리워합니다...  
가슴 떨리던 그대 입맞춤도 이제는 추억이 됐나봐요...  
Can you see my tears. I long for you every day  
My heart beat when we kissed but now it's all a memory  
  
My love 사랑해요 사랑해요 그대 듣고 있나요  
My love 잊지 말아요 지우지 말아요...우리의 사랑을...  
My love I love you, I love you...Are you listening  
My love Don't forget Don't erase...Our love.  
  
매일 난 그리움 속에 하루를 버티는데 그댄 어딨나요...  
내가 미안해요 미안해요 그댈 잊지 못해서...  
My love 돌아와줘요..떠나지 말아요..내 곁에서 제발...  
Everyday I long for you. That's how my day goes by. Where are you...  
I'm sorry I'm sorry that I can't forget you...  
My love come back to me...Don't leave my side, please...  
  
The last note rang in the cool night air. My sole spectator clapped her hands and whooped before taking my hand into hers again. I giggled. Dorky, just like you.  
  
“That was a beautiful song,” Yuri said. “Korean too. Did you hear it when you were there a few years back?”  
  
I pushed out my lower lip. “I’ve heard it before it was released. It’s my favourite.”  
  
“What’s the title?”  
  
“I love you.”  
  
She nodded in approval. “Who sang it?”  
  
“A close friend of mine who’s a songwriter and singer.”  
  
“I bet she’s a good songwriter...and singer too.”  
  
“She is...”  
  
We lapsed into a comfortable silence as we sat down on a bench. My head found her shoulder and we ended up staring at the sky, admiring the stars. I couldn’t help thinking about us, wondering if you were looking at the same star-filled sky as me.  
  
I shifted my gaze downwards and looked at Yuri’s fingers intertwined with mine. They were warm, but they didn’t fit my hand perfectly like yours. Yuri’s fragrance was calming, but I prefer yours. Yuri’s shoulder was broad, and I felt safe with her, but I felt safer in your arms.  
  
“I love you Stephanie Hwang.”  
  
I felt Yuri’s lips pressing against my hair, and I closed my eyes shut, holding back the tears threatening to fall, willing time to pass.

-

*We had a lot of fun,  
Though we knew we were faking;  
Love was not impressed with our connection built on lies, all lies*  
  
-

I sat in the passenger seat of the car, blindfolded. I could hear the wind whipping past outside. We were on a highway to somewhere.  
  
“Yuri, where are you taking me?”  
  
“You’ll see.”  
  
I swear that tanned girl was smirking.  
  
We finally stopped and Yuri opened her door. I heard the crashing of waves; we’re at the beach. My side of the door opened and Yuri gently took my hands, supporting me as she carefully led me out of the car.  
  
“Yuri, can I take off my blindfold now?”  
  
“No, not yet,” she whispered.  
  
“Why not? I already know where we are.”  
  
She shushed me, and I complied. She held my hand, and her free arm supported my waist as she led me down a flight of stairs. We stopped, and she told me to lift up my feet as she took off my sandals. She slowly led me forward again, and I finally felt the fine grains of sand wriggling themselves in between my toes. We stopped again, and her hands left me.  
  
“Yuri, what’s going on?”  
  
I was swept off my feet and the next thing I knew, I was screaming as I flew in the air and plunged into salt water. I broke the surface and pulled my blindfold off, finding Yuri snickering next to me. I smacked her.  
  
“Yah! Kwon Yuri!”  
  
“Yes...?”  
  
She raised an eyebrow mockingly, a smug lopsided grin slapped onto her face. With her guard down, I splashed water at her and tackled the tall girl into the water.  
  
“How dare you *throw* me into the sea?!”

\*

*I giggled and spread my arms out as I ran along the shoreline. I could feel the wind in hair and the sun’s warmth on my face. It was bliss.  
  
A pair of arms circled my waist and a chin rested on my shoulder.  
  
“You like the beach Fany-ah?”  
  
Like an overexcited kid, I bobbed my head. I turned around and gave you a peck on the cheek.  
  
“Thank you for taking me to the beach TaeTae. I love it.”  
  
You grinned sheepishly, and took my hand.  
  
“Come on.”  
  
We ran into the water, challenging the wave head on. I squealed. The water was freezing, but you were warm. You pulled me closer and we went out further into the sea—far enough to have our own privacy, and close enough to the shoreline to be safe.  
  
You suddenly let go, and I yelped as my head went under water. I kicked. My head broke the surface and shouted.  
  
“Kim Taeyeon! Y—”  
  
Whatever protest that my mind came up with was burned when I felt your warm lips on mine. You slowly pulled away, and I licked my lips. The taste of you mixed with salt was tantalizing. I needed more, and you willingly complied as you leaned in for another kiss.  
  
The water was on my side today, staying on top of  you was easier as I straddled your waist. You cupped my nape, your other hand on the small of my back, moulding our bodies together. I took your face into my hands and craned my neck as we moved our lips against each other. I’ve never felt so alive. I wish it would never have to end. When we finally parted, I panted my declaration of love.  
  
“I love you.”  
  
“I love you more.”*

\*

The dining hall was filled with the sound of silverware tinkling and the boisterous laughter of my father together with Yuri’s.  
  
“I hope I get to do business with you, Yuri. I’m sure it would be enjoyable.”  
  
“Of course, Mr Hwang. My father and I would like nothing more than a partnership between Hwang Corps and Kwon Enterprises.”  
  
“Oh please don’t call me Mr Hwang. Daddy will do, Yuri.”  
  
“Oh no no, how can I—”  
  
My father raised a hand.  
  
“I insist. Besides, you’re like family already! Do drop the formalities.”  
  
“If you wish, Daddy Hwang.”  
  
As the conversation went on, I couldn’t help but feel that something was off with my father.  
  
“Stephanie dear! You haven’t said anything all night.”  
  
“There is nothing much to say,” I said quietly as I chewed.  
  
“Nonsense!”  
  
From the corner of my eye I could see Yuri smile.  
  
“Daddy Hwang, it’s okay. I think Stephanie’s tired today.”  
  
“Oh yes, of course. The trip to the beach must be tiring for both of you.”  
  
I’m glad Yuri’s with me tonight. Dinner proceeded without further incident, until my father decided to ruin it again.  
  
“Oh, I almost forgot. Yuri, your father called me today,” he began, “and we were discussing about your engagement party.”  
  
I froze and glared at my father incredulously.  
  
“Engagement party?”  
  
“Why...yes...! Have you not told her about it Yuri?”  
  
Yuri bowed slightly.  
  
“Yes, Daddy Hwang. I was thinking of telling her tonight, after dinner.”  
  
“Oh, I didn’t know. I’m sorry for ruining the surprise you had in mind, Yuri.”  
  
Yuri laughed naturally. “No, no, it’s okay Daddy Hwang. It’s good this way too.”  
  
“Well then, Yuri, Stephanie, congratulations on your engagement.”  
  
“Thank you for giving us your blessings, Daddy Hwang.”

\*

I slammed my bedroom door shut and was engulfed in silence. I needed to do something—scream, shout, break something; anything. I stomped over to my work desk. I grabbed the perfectly framed family picture and threw it onto the ground. This was what happened to my family 10 years ago when my mother left this world—shattered and broken.  
  
I screamed. Amidst the rage, I thrashed my room, and ended up crying in one corner of my shower, shivering and clawing at the thin fabric separating my fingers from my skin, and ultimately, the pumping organ underneath, somehow hoping that the cold water could do something to numb the pain in my chest.  
  
I didn’t know how long I was in the shower, or when Yuri came in, but the cold downpour stopped and I felt her slip her arms behind my knees and my back, lifting me out of the tub soaking wet. She held my shivering frame close to her as set me down on the rug and toweled me down.  
  
“You shouldn’t do that,” she said softly. “You’d catch a cold.”  
  
She gently rubbed the towel against my head, moving slowly downwards, making sure she covered every inch of my body. When I was dry, she handed me a fresh set of clothes.  
  
“Here, change into these.”  
  
I took the clothes from her and she turned around, allowing me to change. She spoke again only when the rustle of clothes died down.  
  
“Stephanie, are you done?”  
  
“Yes...”  
  
I tiptoed and wrapped my arms around her broad shoulders. She bent down and held my thighs as she piggybacked me to our bed. She tucked me in, turned off the lights, and climbed into bed next to me. I turned to face her, and she pulled me onto her, letting me use her shoulder as my pillow as she held me close, her other hand rubbing my back. She rested her cheek on my head and sighed.  
  
“Stephanie...tell me what’s wrong.”  
  
I buried my face into her neck and let one hand rest on her toned stomach. She took it and guided it around her waist, patting it slightly when she was satisfied.  
  
“I can’t help you if you don’t tell me anything Stephanie,” she murmured. She took my silence as a consent to continue. “Tell me what you were angry about.”  
  
I shook my head, burying my face further into her neck, and spoke into it, muffling my voice, “Yuri, not tonight, please.”  
  
Yuri kept silent for a long time, and I would’ve thought that she had fallen asleep if she hadn’t spoken.  
  
“It’s that songwriter friend of yours, isn’t it?”  
  
“...What are you talking about?”  
  
“There was a reason why you wanted to stay in Korea,” she began with confidence, “and it was because of your songwriter friend isn’t it?”  
  
I kept quiet, afraid of my voice betraying my façade if I spoke. She held me closer to her.  
  
“Stephanie, you know I’m right...”  
  
I sat up and looked at her, barely making out her silhouette under the moonlight filtering through the window.  
  
“How did you know?”  
  
Yuri was now up, facing me as she took my hands.  
  
“Your smile—you’d have a sweet, genuine smile on your face on the rare occasions where you talk about her. And your eyes, they’d turn into crescents when you smile, and they’d sparkle. That,” she poked my nose playfully, “is how I know. Plus, you hardly show anyone your eye smile.”  
  
I hung my head and screwed my eyes shut. The guilt towards Yuri and the painful reminder that I could never be with you was like a knife that stabbed through my heart and lodged itself there. My cheeks were wet, and when I spoke, my voice quivered.  
  
“Yuri...I’m so sorry...”  
  
She pulled me onto her lap and pushed my head against her shoulder as she raked her fingers through my hair.  
  
“I want us to be real Stephanie...” she began quietly, “...aren’t you going to give us a chance?”  
  
“I can’t forget her Yuri...I...can’t...” I choked on my words as tears began streaming down my cheeks.  
  
Yuri held me and kissed me, starting from my collar, leaving wet trails as she continued up my neck, and then my jaw, before gently capturing my lips.  
  
“Let me help you Stephanie,” she breathed. “Let me help you forget her. Give me a chance to prove to you that I love you more.”  
  
I closed my eyes and she gingerly cupped my neck, pulling me closer to her. Our lips touched, and she slowly moved her lips against mine, her tongue grazing my lips lightly. She slipped her cool hand underneath my shirt, I opened my mouth in surprise as my breath hitched. And as her tongue began exploring me, I screwed my eyes shut and responded to her, pretending that she was you.

\*

“Steph, tell me why I’m letting you go to Korea all by yourself again.”  
  
I laughed at Yuri’s anxiety and squeezed her hand.  
  
“Because I want to visit my friends before I get married.”  
  
“But why can’t I go with you?” she pouted.  
  
“Because you can’t leave your work. You have an important board meeting.”  
  
“Yes I can! I’ll just ask Sooyoung to handle the company’s affairs for a few days and attend the meeting. Nothing’ll go wrong.”  
  
“Yuri, I’ll be fine. Stop worrying,” I patted her arm.  
  
We stopped in front of the gate, and she looked at me disapprovingly.  
  
“Stephanie, how can I not worry?! I’m leaving you in a country alone! And—and—”  
  
“Yuri! I’ll be okay. It’s not like I haven’t been to Korea before. I stayed there before, remember?”  
  
She whined, and I had to reassure her again.  
  
“Yuri, relax, I know my way around, I won’t get lost.”  
  
She still had the look of disbelief.  
  
“Do you trust me?”  
  
She reluctantly nodded, and I rewarded her with a kiss on her cheek.  
  
“I’ll be back before you know it.”  
  
“I hope so.”  
  
“I will.”  
  
If only I had the heart to tell Yuri the truth—that I wanted to relive our memories, one last time, before I let you go, forever. And I needed to believe that I love Yuri; that I don’t love you anymore.

-  
  
*So I’m here ‘cause I found this one thing is true:  
That I’m nothing without you*  
  
-

I walked down the street a block from our apartment, to the cafe we used to go. The chime jingled as I pushed the door open. The cafe was empty, as usual—there weren’t more than two occupied tables at a time. We loved it. I walked over to the back and sat myself down at the corner booth. We claimed that it was ours, and we even made our mark on it.  
  
“Hello there, welcome to Soshi Cafѐ! What can I get for you?”  
  
“Just a cup of cappuccino please.”  
  
“Sure, I’ll get that right out for you.”  
  
The waitress smiled and left. I gazed out of the window, looking at the people walking by, some huddling together, others linking arms, the rest holding hands. I looked down and stared at my own palm, trying to remember how your hand felt like in mine. It’s scaring me how I’m starting to forget you—how your touches felt, how your hugs made me warm, and how your kisses made my heart flutter.  
  
“Here’s your cup cappuccino, miss, without milk foam.”  
  
I looked down to my brown cup of coffee and looked up at the smiling waitress, “How did you know I didn’t want the milk foam in it?”  
  
“I remember you used to come here with your girlfriend, and you’d always order a cup of cappuccino without milk foam.”  
  
I couldn’t help but smile.  
  
“You have really good memory.”  
  
She bowed, “It’s part of our service. Please enjoy your coffee!”  
  
I wrapped my frozen fingers around the warm cup and took a sip. I let the hot liquid run down my throat and warm up my insides. You used to complain to me that I could never appreciate coffee, because coffees were meant to be drunk bitter, not sweet. We’d continue arguing, and we’d end up talking about anything and everything we could think of. Especially our future, how we promise we’d always be there for each other, and how one day you’d make me yours.  
  
The chime jingled breaking me out of my reverie. I glanced towards the entrance and froze. It was Sunny.  
  
Sunny was the one who told us to get together. She was your best friend. I couldn’t let her see me here. She’d tell you.  
  
I gulped down the last of my cappuccino and placed some money on the table. I hurriedly gathered my bag and slid out of the booth. I kept my head down, letting my long fringe cover my face, and hoped that my sunglasses was enough for Sunny to not recognize me.  
  
Luck wasn’t on my side. While weaving between the tables, I bumped into her. I bowed and apologized. I quickened my steps towards the door and prayed that she didn’t see my face.

\*

I walked down the familiar corridor, reminiscing the times where you’d chase me down the hallway in a race, picking me off the floor and slinging me over your shoulder as I squealed and kicked my feet in the air. I don’t know how you with your small frame ever managed to do that, but every time you did, I’d laugh ingenuously. I was happy.  
  
I stopped in front of the brown door that opened to our apartment, and wondered what I was doing standing in the middle of the hallway staring at a door I didn’t have the keys to. I lifted my hand and ran my fingers along the grooves of the wood, struggling to recall the layout of the apartment and the times we had spent in it, somehow hoping that a touching a part of our past could rekindle the memories.  
  
I sighed and gave up, letting my arm drop to my side. I turned around to walk away when the door opposite opened and an old lady stepped out. She looked at me and her eyes twinkled.  
  
“Hello Halmeoni,” I greeted as I bowed.  
  
“Why hello there my dear. I haven’t seen you in a long time.”  
  
“Y-Yes Halmeoni. You still remember me?”  
  
Her lips curved into a warm, grandmotherly smile and she slapped me playfully on my arm.  
  
“Of course! How can I forget you? You and your girlfriend were such darlings.”  
  
“Thank you Halmeoni,” I bowed shyly.  
  
“Speaking of which, where is your girlfriend?”  
  
“Um, she’s not here today.”  
  
“Oh is that so? Why, she left me the keys to your apartment...three years ago I believe. She told me she’d be back, and asked that I keep an eye on it since she’s away. She stays here only during the summer now. That was the last time I saw you too my dear. Did something happen between the two of you?”  
  
I tilted my head slightly and smiled apologetically. She merely smiled and searched for something inside her purse, finally pulling out a keychain. She took my hand and dropped the set of keys in my open palm, folding my fingers over them. I furrowed my eyebrows.  
  
“Halmeoni, what...”  
  
The old lady embraced me in a hug.  
  
“You’re Stephanie am I right?”  
  
I nodded, “Yes, yes I am.”  
  
“And your girlfriend I believe is...Taeyeon? Kim Taeyeon? That wonderful singer with a beautiful voice?”  
  
“... Yes,” I answered in wonder.  
  
The old lady grabbed the fist with the keys and held them in her hands, patting them gently.  
  
“You know Stephanie, during the summer, sometimes she’d come home late at night, exhausted and lost, and she would leave hours later with red eyes, but more determined than when she came. The mellow-next-door-neighbour, human Taeyeon, and the on-screen dorky entertainer Taeyeon are two different people. But they both have one thing in common: a part of them is missing. When Taeyeon comes here, she finds that something, that spark of light in the darkness that guides her, even if it only lasts for that long,” she said, pinching her thumb and index finger together, squinting to emphasize the effect.  
  
I furrowed my eyebrows some more and shook my head.  
  
“Halmeoni, I don’t get it...”  
  
“Silly child,” she began, and glanced down to the glinting diamond ring on my fourth finger before leveling her eyes with me again, “you’re lost too.”  
  
I opened my mouth to say something, but it hung slack as I tried to make sense of what she was trying to tell me. She jerked her head towards the door and smiled encouragingly.  
  
“I hope you find whatever it is that you’re missing my dear.”  
  
“B-But Halmeoni—”  
  
She smiled again and took her leave. I stood in front of our apartment, thinking of what she said. My mind was screaming. I couldn’t do this. I shouldn’t do this. I shouldn’t be here in the first place, lying to my fiancee. She didn’t deserve this.  
  
My body refused to listen to the reasonings of my mind. My hand pushed the key into the lock and twisted it. The mechanism clicked. I waited a while before I pushed the door open, stepping into nostalgia. I stood in the middle of the living room, closing my eyes and taking a deep breath to fill my lungs with your fragrance that lingered in the stale air. I had forgotten how soothing it was.  
  
I padded into the only bedroom in the apartment and stopped in front of the bed. I climbed onto it and laid on my side. I stretched my hand out, feeling the empty space next to me, trying to remember how your arms felt around my waist, how your warmth felt, and how your voice sounded when you lullabied me to sleep. I missed us.  
  
The diamond ring on my fourth finger caught the sunlight streaming through the window, sparkling radiantly. I twirled it around my finger as tears began to blur the brilliance of the rock in front of me. It was a reminder. A reminder to me that I would never—could never—be yours. I hated that. Yuri was so much like you in many ways—the innocent smile, the gentle caresses, the caring thoughts, and the soft kisses—but she wasn’t you. She was a looming presence that pushed you aside. But you weren’t just a memory in my mind; you were a tattoo on my heart. I realised it now. As much as I wanted to run back into your arms, Yuri didn’t deserve to be treated this way—betrayed by her own fiancee for a forbidden love.  
  
I jolted up as I heard the front door slam. The pounding of footsteps gradually grew louder as it made its way to the bedroom. I stood up alarmed, and you burst into the bedroom, holding onto the doorframe for support, breathing heavily. My breath was caught in my throat. Seeing you like this made me fall for you all over again.  
  
Gone were the long beautiful brunette tresses; you had cut it short and bleached the tips blonde, your fringe sweeping across a side of your forehead.  
  
I wiped the ugly tear streaks off my face and tried to control my voice, acting calm.  
  
“T-Taeyeon, what are you doing here?”  
  
You continued to stand under the doorway, boring your eyes into me as I gazed into your mesmerizing brown orbs. My heart was hammering against my ribcage, threatening to jump out, and my breathing became shallow.  
  
“Why...why are you panting, Taeyeon?”  
  
You took a step forward, slowly walking towards me.  
  
“Because I’ve been running,” you said in between breaths.  
  
I missed your voice.  
  
“Why were you running?”  
  
You took another slow step forward.  
  
“I was running to find someone.”  
  
I instinctively took a small step back.  
  
“Did you find that person?”  
  
You continued to stare into my eyes and your breathing finally steadied.  
  
“Yeah. She’s standing right in front of me.”  
  
By now, you were an arms length away, and I struggled to restrain myself from closing the small distance between us to have you in my arms again.  
  
“How are you lately?”  
  
Your voice was soft when you spoke. “I’m fine.”  
  
I massaged my forearm, forcing myself to clam down and think of a way to get out of the situation.  
  
“Well uh, that’s good, and it’s good seeing you again Taeyeon. I’m sorry for invading your house. You must be busy with all your schedules and stuff, I’ll take my leave.”  
  
I turned around and grabbed my purse on the nightstand, putting down the house keys on the table, “Here are the keys. The Halmeoni next door gave it to me. I’m sorry again for entering your house without your permission,” I said hurriedly and sidestepped you, making a beeline for the doorway. I wasn’t fast enough and I ran into your arms instead. My memories failed me, but my body remembered how safe it was to be in your arms, ignoring my mind as it told me to run.  
  
“Why did you leave?” you breathed into my ear.  
  
I pushed my arms against your shoulders as I thrashed around, fighting to break free of your tight grip.  
  
“Let me go.”  
  
You shook your head and asked again, “No. Tell me, why did you leave?”  
  
“I said let me go.”  
  
You kept quiet and just held me even when began pummeling you with my fists, and I finally gave up.  
  
“I shouldn’t have let you walk out of the door three years ago. I don’t know what I did, I’m sure you had your reasons for leaving, and I can’t blame you if you turn away from me. I can only prove the things I say with time. I love you Fany... I love you. Please,” your voice cracked, “don’t leave me again...” you tightened your hold on me, afraid I would escape,”...don’t.” The last word came out as a chocked whisper.  
  
I squeezed my eyes shut and clenched my jaw. I tried to push you away again, and your hand found mine as you slipped your fingers between them. Your finger grazed the ring and you froze. You slowly pulled away and shifted your gaze to my hand.  
  
“You’re...”  
  
“Engaged, yes. Now let me go.”  
  
I pushed you again and this time, I was successful. I stomped towards the front door, leaving you alone in the bedroom. I opened the door only to find it forcefully slammed close and myself pinned against it. I managed to turn around and shove you away. I acted on instinct. I raised my right hand and I backhanded you. A crimson line began to form across your cheek, the red a stark contrast to your milky skin.  
  
“Don’t touch me.”  
  
For the second time in my life, I left the one that I loved at home alone. Broken.

Part II

I ran. I left your house, and I ran. I didn’t want you to catch me again. My legs burned, and my lungs were screaming for air, but still, I ran. I needed to get far away from you. I don’t know how long I ran, or where I was going. I let my legs take me wherever it wanted to go.  
  
When my legs finally gave up, I fell onto the gravel, and the tears that I held flowed freely down my cheeks. I gritted my teeth and brought my hand to my chest. My heart was pounding against my ribcage as it strained to pump blood to my muscles, but the pain was nothing compared to the old scars that had torn open.  
  
My mind is telling me I love Yuri, but my heart’s beating for you. Seeing you again made my heart throb. They say that letting go the second time is always better. Easier. They were all lies. My chest feels like it’s cut open, my heart ripped out, crushed and left to bleed. And I remembered the time when it was still whole.

-

*I kicked the pebble on the ground as I strolled along the bridge, taking in the fresh evening air of my home country. I looked up at the darkening sky and took a deep breath. This is it; this is my new beginning.*  
  
*I continued to walk aimlessly as the sun began to set, and pulled my jacket closer as the warmth from the sun began to dissipate. I took the stairs down the bridge and walked along the gravel path running parallel to the Han River. I stood on the rocky embankment and closed my eyes, listening to the flow of the water. The sound of running water was soothing.*  
  
*A tingling sensation creeped its way down my spine as a drop of rain fell, and more came. Soon after, it became a heavy downpour. I cursed. I looked around, and there wasn’t any shelter nearby, except for that alcove underneath the bridge. Carefully hopping from one rock onto another, I made it to the edge and jumped onto the ledge of the alcove, the bridge overhead shielding me from the rain.*  
  
*I zipped up my jacket in the growing cold and pulled myself up the niche set in the alcove and sat down, rubbing my hands together to generate some heat. I hugged my knees and surveyed the area, admiring the graffiti on the cement walls. When I turned to look at the back wall, something in the hole in the corner caught my eye. I stood and went over cautiously. I took out my phone and used it as a flashlight as I tried to see what was in the cavity—papers, a whole stack of them, rolled up and stuffed into the hole. I pulled the whole stack out and blew off the dust and dirt before making my way back to the mouth of the niche where there was more light to examine my newfound treasure.*  
  
*I began to flip through the pages and I soon realised that they were lyrics and scores. Tons of them, unfinished. I stopped at a page filled with words inked with beautiful handwriting, and boldly written on the top of the page were the words ‘ I Love You’. The rest of the page were full of lyrics and notes. I fell in love with the song, and in my excitement, I read the notes and tried to sing it.*  
  
*Halfway into the second stanza, your voice startled me.*  
  
*“Hey.”*  
  
*I jolted in shock and I found your kid-like eyes looking at me curiously as your head hovered above the edge of the niche.*  
  
*“H-hello. You scared me.”*  
  
*You tilted your head to the side, a pout starting to appear on your face.*  
  
*“I did? I’m sorry about that,” you apologised as you pulled yourself up.*  
  
*You walked over towards me and peered at the piece of paper in my hands.*  
  
*“You have been reading through my work I see.”*  
  
*“You wrote all these?”*  
  
*You took a seat next to me and clapped your hands together, brushing the dirt off them.*  
  
*“Yep. What do you think about them?”*  
  
*“I love it.”*  
  
*“You like this one the most huh?” you asked, pointing to the title on the page.*  
  
*“Yes.”*  
  
*You turned to look at me with a playful grin.*  
  
*“You have a beautiful voice.”*  
  
*I tilted my head to hide the blush as my heart began to pound and my face beginning to heat up.*  
  
*“Thank you.”*

-

I looked up and I found myself staring at the Han River. My legs had taken me to where I had met you the first time. My mind has forgotten, but my body and my heart remembers.  
  
I dug my fingernails into my flesh and let out a primeval, guttural scream. I screamed for my heart that was no longer whole. I screamed for a forbidden love. I screamed, for my first love.

\*

The elevator ‘dinged’ and I walked out of the luxurious lift, making my way towards my hotel room. I slid my card key into the slot and the mechanism clicked. When I opened the door, there was someone else’s shoes in the hallway leading into the bedroom. It wasn’t mine because my heels were at least three inches high.  
  
I walked down the short corridor and saw Yuri standing in front of the sole desk in the room, a folder in her hands. She was in her dress pants and dress shirt, her blazer hanging over the back of the chair. She looked up when she heard my footsteps and she smiled, closing the folder and placing it on the desk before closing the gap between us in five strides. She hugged my waist and placed a chaste kiss on my lips.  
  
“Surprised?”  
  
“Yuri... What are you doing here?”  
  
She pulled away and pouted.  
  
“Is that the first thing you say after not seeing your fiancee for three days?”  
  
I chuckled.  
  
“Sorry. I missed you,” I lied.  
  
She poked my nose.  
  
“That’s more like it. I missed you too.”  
  
She locked her fingers behind my back, and I rested my hands on her shoulder.  
  
“Are you meeting with your friends this evening?”  
  
“No,” I shook my head, “why?”  
  
“Good, cause I want you to meet my grandmother.”  
  
“We’re having dinner with your grandmother?”  
  
She nodded like an overexcited child.  
  
“Mhmm.”  
  
“What time?”  
  
She looked at her watch.  
  
“In an hour or two.”  
  
“Okay.”  
  
Yuri bent down and took a closer look at my face. I turned to the side and let my fringe cover most of my face. I didn’t want her to see my swollen eyes.  
  
“Are you tired Steph?”  
  
“A little.”  
  
Yuri jerked her head towards the bed.  
  
“Go take a nap. I’ll wake you up when it’s time for dinner.”  
  
I nodded and crawled underneath the covers. Yuri grabbed a stack of papers and climbed onto the bed next to me. She was going to read her reports in bed. She always does when I take a nap. She tucked the blanket under my chin before giving me a kiss on my cheek.  
  
“I love you.”  
  
I gave her a tired smile.

-

*The bed shook as I sneezed and shivered. I sniffed and pulled the blankets closer to my body, clutching my pillow tightly. The side of the bed dipped and you pulled down the covers slightly to take a peek at me.*  
  
*“How are you feeling baby?”*  
  
*“Ugh,” I grunted and wrinkled my nose, getting a sigh as a reply.*  
  
*“Why did you walk under the rain? You could’ve called me to pick you up.”*  
  
*“But you were in the middle of a meeting,” I said with my nasal voice.*  
  
*“But that doesn’t mean you can walk under the rain!”*  
  
*“I’ll just take a day off training and I’ll be fine TaeTae.”*  
  
*“You’re as stubborn as ever,” you sighed.*  
  
*“Yah, you’re supposed to make me feel better.”*  
  
*“And you’re not supposed to just take a day off training. Take the next three days off.”*  
  
*“I can’t! I need to practice for my showcase! It’s in two weeks!”*  
  
*You glared at me, and I shriveled underneath the covers.*  
  
*“Okay, I’ll take three days off training.”*  
  
*“Good,” you declared and placed a kiss on my brow. “I’m going to call your coach and tell him you can’t come for singing practice all right? Now go back to sleep. I’ll wake you up when it’s time to eat your medicine.”*  
  
*You stood up to leave, but I grabbed your hand and pulled you back.*  
  
*“TaeTae...”*  
  
*“Yes baby?”*  
  
*“Don’t go.”*  
  
*“I’m gonna call your coach all right? I’ll be back.”*  
  
*I wrestled with my drooping eyelids as you made the call. I didn’t want to fall asleep without you next to me. You finally ended the call, and climbed into bed next to me, pulling me onto you, tucking my head underneath your chin and held me close.*  
  
*As I drifted off to sleep, lullabied by your steady heartbeat, I hear you whisper your everlasting confession.*  
  
*“I love you.”*

-

The cold wind blew, and I buried my hands in my coat pocket and bounced on my feet, trying to keep myself warm waiting for Yuri to finish her phone call as we waited outside the restaurant.  
  
“Yes... That’s right... Oh and Sooyoung, make sure to leave that report on my table the morning I come back... Yeah... Is there anything else? No? Okay, I trust you to take care of things for me... Uh huh... See you.”  
  
She flipped her phone shut and stood next to me, rubbing her hands down my forearms.  
  
“Feeling cold?”  
  
“A little.”  
  
She wrapped her arms around my shoulder letting me bury my head in her warm neck, turning around so that her body was blocking the wind from me. She rubbed my shoulders trying to generate some heat. It was only the beginning of fall, but I felt cold for some reason.  
  
“Better?”  
  
I nodded my head against her chest and basked in Yuri’s warmth.  
  
“Thank you...”  
  
She continued rubbing me, till she stopped abruptly and she turned around, her arms leaving me. It felt cold again.  
  
“Halmeoni!”  
  
“Aigoo my Yuri! Look at how tall you are!”  
  
“Halmeoni! I’ve always been this tall.”  
  
“Aish! Who’s that girl behind you?”  
  
I peeped from behind Yuri. I was hoping what my eyes were seeing was an illusion, or maybe I was in some sort of dream. I blinked, and Yuri’s grandmother was still there, looking at me expectantly. She was the halmeoni living opposite your apartment.  
  
“H-Halmeoni...” I stepped out from behind my fiancee and gave her a proper greeting, granting her a deep bow.  
  
“Yuri, is she your fiancee?”  
  
“Yup,” she chirped, and side hugged me. “Halmeoni, this is my fiancee Stephanie. Steph, this is my grandmother.”  
  
The old lady came up to me and held my hand. She patted it gently like she did when I met her earlier that day.  
  
“Did you find what you were looking for, my dear?”  
  
“I...”  
  
“Wait,” Yuri interjected. “Halmeoni, you’ve met Stephanie?”  
  
“Why yes...” she said, a bewildered look on her face. I swear our neighbour was good at acting. “I met her this morning, and she came up to me asking me if I saw her lost handphone somewhere.”  
  
“Oh, what a coincidence.”  
  
“Come Yuri, Stephanie. The both of you must be hungry waiting for this old woman. And I can’t wait to get to know your fiancee better Yuri.”  
  
She led me into the restaurant, her eyes glinting with a hidden knowledge, and she smiled wittingly at me.

\*

By the end of dinner, Yuri and I were leaning back in our chairs, stuffed and deliriously tearing. Her grandmother was hilarious, constantly making us laugh and embarrassing Yuri in the process with stories about her ridiculous antics as a toddler.  
  
I shook my head and clucked at Yuri as she buried her face in her hands, “My my Yuri. I didn’t know you were such a naughty kid.”  
  
“Ugh, please...” she groaned. “Halmeoni, why did you tell Steph that story?”  
  
“Well... I thought I’d share something of your childhood with Stephanie. You were so adorable.”  
  
I burst out laughing again.  
  
The waitress knocked on the door and entered our private dinning room, walking up to Yuri confidently and bent down to whisper into her ear. Yuri perked up and whispered her a soft, “Yes.”  
  
I looked at Yuri’s grandmother and she shrugged.  
  
“Yuri, what’s going on?”  
  
She gave me a lopsided grin and said, “You’ll see.”  
  
Yuri had a mischievous twinkle in her eyes. All of a sudden, the lights in the room went out and the door opened. There were flames floating in the dark and a chorus of angelic voices singing a birthday song.  
  
The lights came on again and I saw a small strawberry tiramisu cake in front of me with two large candles and seven small ones. I turned to look at Yuri and she stood up pulling me along with her, giving me a hug and a peck on the lips.  
  
“Happy birthday Steph.”

*-*

*I woke up to the sun’s rays shinning through the blinds covering the window. I turned away from the light and buried my face into the pillow. Today was Saturday. It was too early to get up. I cracked my eyes open to look at your face, and I saw you on your side, propping your head up with your fist, staring at me.*  
  
*“Morning baby.”*  
  
*I smiled groggily and pulled you closer, pressing my nose against your neck. I took a deep breath, trying again to etch the memory of your scent into my mind. No matter how much I breathe in, I never get enough of it. It was addicting, and I want to wake up to it every morning.*  
  
*“Morning TaeTae,” I mumbled.*  
  
*You slipped your arm under my neck and wrapped it around my shoulders, and began loosening the knots in my hair with your hand, gently stroking my head.*  
  
*“Baby, do you know what day it is today?”*  
  
*I nodded my head tightly and relaxed on your shoulder. It was a better pillow. You pressed your lips against my brow.*  
  
*“Happy birthday baby.”*  
  
*“Thank you.”*  
  
*I kissed the hollow of your neck and settled back comfortably on your shoulder again. I could stay like this all day, in your arms. I don’t care if we’re not doing anything. I just needed you by my side.*  
  
*“Where do you want to go today?”*  
  
*“... Nowhere.”*  
  
*“Don’t you want to go out and have fun?”*  
  
*“Who said you can’t have fun at home?” I murmured.*  
  
*“How, tell me.”*  
  
*“Like this.”*  
  
*I sat up and grabbed my pillow before turning around to whack you on the head. The look on your face was priceless.*  
  
*“Oh no you did not...”*  
  
*I stuck a tongue out at you mockingly.*  
  
*You had this sinister look on your face, the one that told me you were up to something. You grabbed me by my waist, lifted me up and threw me back onto the bed on my tummy before pinning me down and began tickling my sides as I squealed.*  
  
*“Kyaaa! Tae... Hahaha! Ah! Stop! Stop!”*  
  
*“Who started it?”*  
  
*“Hah! Hah! Okay! Okay! I’m sorry I’m sor—! Aaaahhhhhh!”*  
  
*I jerked as she began to attack me again. And as you continued, I began kicking wildly and squirmed as I tried to wriggle out from underneath your body. I managed to kick you and you yelped as you lost your balance. I scrambled away from underneath the covers and off the bed, running out of the bedroom before you could catch me.*  
  
*We looked like two crazy idiots playing catch in your small apartment. The ruckus we were making was disturbing our neighbours, but we didn’t care. I rounded the coffee table and tried to side step you to run back into the bedroom, but your hand shot out and caught me around my waist.*  
  
*“Noooo!”*  
  
*“Yessss.”*  
  
*You picked me up in a firefighter's hold and hauled me back into the bedroom as I continued to struggle and scream. You laid me down on the bed and I tried to escape, but your strong hands pulled me back and held me in your arms.*  
  
*“You’re not going anywhere missy.”*  
  
*I squirmed and screamed, twisting and turning my body just to get away from you.*  
  
*“TaeTae! Please! I’m sorry okay! I’m sorry!”*  
  
*“Uh huh.”*  
  
*“Aahhhhhhhh!”*

*-*

Yuri held my hand as she held the door for her grandmother and stepped out into the bustling street.  
  
“Thank you for dinner my dear Yuri.”  
  
“Aww, it was nothing Halmeoni. We wanted to spend time with you.”  
  
“Aigoo, you’re such a good granddaughter.”  
  
“Aish Halmeoni, I’m just doing what a granddaughter has to do.”  
  
Yuri’s phone rang and she hastily picked it up after seeing the name on the screen.  
  
“Sooyoung, what is it now... They rescheduled the meeting?... So when?... Tomorrow?... Aish, okay I got it. Thanks.”  
  
Yuri looked at me apologetically.  
  
“Sorry Steph, Sooyoungie just told me that our client just rescheduled our meeting and it’s tomorrow. I need to get some paper work done back at the office. I’ll send you home with Halmeoni, okay?”  
  
“Okay.”  
  
Yuri never knows how to stop when it comes to work. Neither did you.

*-*

*I opened the door to our bedroom silently and stuck my head in. I saw you sitting at your desk tapping your pen against a piece of paper impatiently.*  
  
*“TaeTae...”*  
  
*You stopped your tapping and smiled at seeing me standing in the doorway.*  
  
*“Hey baby...”*  
  
*I padded over and wrapped my arms around your shoulders, letting you rest your head on my stomach. I leaned over slightly and saw the piece of paper filled with notes, intonations and crossed out words all over the place.*  
  
*“Can’t get it right?”*  
  
*“Mhmm.”*  
  
*“And you have a headache now.”*  
  
*A grin crept onto your face as you placed your hands above mine resting on your chest.*  
  
*“My baby knows me well.”*  
  
*“Of course I do.”*  
  
*I grabbed your hand and pulled you out of the chair, dragging you along towards our bed. I guided you to lie down, and you rested your head on the headboard as I climbed onto you and straddled your waist.*  
  
*“Close your eyes.”*  
  
*You complied as I pushed my thumbs against your temples gently, rubbing them slowly in circles.*  
  
*“You should stop stressing yourself out.”*  
  
*You rested your hands on my thighs and sighed in satisfaction as I moved my fingers to the back of your head.*  
  
*“I don’t mind constantly stressing myself out if you give me good massages like this every time I have a headache,” you hummed.*  
  
*“Hmph. Don’t get used to it.”*  
  
*You grabbed onto my wrists and held my hands as you propped yourself up on your elbows, staring at me with a glint in your eyes.*  
  
*“I’m thankful and happy that I have you. I don’t need anything else.”*  
  
*“Pfft. Don’t start getting cheesy on me.”*  
  
*You grinned and leaned forward to graze your lips against mine softly.*  
  
*“You know you like it,” you breathed.*  
  
*“I hate it when you’re right.”*  
  
*You grinned wider and leaned forward further to lock our lips together. I moved back slowly, only allowing you to peck my lips sporadically. I finally let you press your lips desperately against mine as you kissed me hungrily. You lowered yourself down onto the bed, pulling me down with you. You ran your tongue along my lips as you cupped my neck and pulled me closer. I placed my hands on your shoulders and pushed myself up before you could slip your tongue in. You gave me one last peck and finally conceded defeat.*  
  
*“I hate it when you tease me,” you huffed.*  
  
*“You’re supposed to rest. You have a headache.”*  
  
*“I don’t have a headache anymore,” you said too quickly, and tried to get up to kiss me again. I pushed you back down onto the bed.*  
  
*“Oh really?”*  
  
*“Uh huh.”*  
  
*I let you kiss me again and pulled away just when you tongue grazed my lips. You groaned.*  
  
*“You have a song to compose.”*  
  
*“I know. But I need some inspiration,” you purred as you stared at my lips.*  
  
*I cupped your face and leaned down to give you one long kiss before pulling away slowly.*  
  
*“You don’t need inspiration. You need to rest. You know you can’t compose when you’re tired.”*  
  
*You pouted like a kid who didn’t get her candy. I giggled, crawled off the bed, and gave you another kiss on your temple.*  
  
*“I love you.”*  
  
*“I love you more.”*

-

Yuri dropped us off at her grandmother’s apartment and she left for the office with the promise of returning as soon as possible. A pregnant, awkward silence hung in the air as we climbed the stairs with me trailing behind Yuri’s grandmother. Yuri’s grandmother ambled up the steps, taking it one at a time. I held onto her arm and smiled at her.  
  
“Let me help you Halmeoni.”  
  
“Why, thank you child.”  
  
We continued to take the next flight of stairs in silence. When we started on the last flight of steps, she spoke.  
  
“So Stephanie, has Yuri been treating you well?”  
  
“Yes, she has, Halmeoni.”  
  
She chuckled.  
  
“Is she favourable?”  
  
“She is very favourable, Halmeoni,” I said.  
  
“Are you in love with my granddaughter?”  
  
The question caught me off guard.  
  
“Well... Yes... I do love your granddaughter, Halmeoni.”  
  
“No child. Are you *in* love with my granddaughter?”  
  
For the second time that day, I furrowed my eyebrows, trying to find out what Yuri’s grandmother was trying to say to me. We climbed the last step and she turned to me, giving me a knowing smile and patted my hand that was on her arm.  
  
“You’ll understand, my child.”  
  
We turned the corner and walked down the corridor to the apartment in silence. I racked my brains. What was the difference between loving and being in love? Weren’t they the same?  
  
As Yuri’s grandmother took out the keys to her apartment, the door opposite hers flung open and you stumbled out. I caught you before you fell.  
  
“Taeyeon? Taeyeon, what’s going on?”  
  
“Fannnyyy...” you slurred.  
  
“Taeyeon did you drink?”  
  
I struggled with your weight as you swayed and chuckled.  
  
“Ffaaannyyy... Youuu came baaaaacckk...”  
  
I grunted and I grabbed you by your waist, shifting your weight as I let your cheek rest on my shoulder. I glanced down and saw blood running down your knuckles.  
  
“Taeyeon, what happened to your hand?”  
  
By now you were blabbering gibberish and cackling maniacally, waving your hand in the air groggily.  
  
“Come on, bring her in.”  
  
I slung your arm around my shoulder and hauled you into our neighbour’s apartment. Yuri’s grandmother closed the door behind me and directed me to the guest room.  
  
“I’ll get the first aid kit.”  
  
“Thank you Halmeoni.”  
  
I laid you on the bed and brought you legs up. I took the blanket at the end of the bed and covered you with it. I sat at the edge of the bed and took your bloodied hand in mine. The blood had almost dried and I cringed at the number of cuts on your knuckles. Exactly what did you do to yourself?  
  
“Here’s the first aid kit.”  
  
“Thank you, Halmeoni.”  
  
“Do you need me to help you dear?”  
  
“No, it’s okay. I can do it myself. Thank you, Halmeoni.”  
  
Yuri’s grandmother squeezed my shoulder reassuringly and left. I opened the kit and started disinfecting your cuts, grimacing at the amount of blood that transferred onto the cotton. I bandaged your hand and took another piece of cotton to disinfect the cut on your cheek.  
  
Your eyebrows knitted together and you began tossing around, a whimper escaping your lips. Then you began clawing your chest and thrashed about, a pained expression on your face. I grabbed your shoulders and tried to hold you in place.  
  
“Don’t go...” you said through gritted teeth as tears began streaming down your cheeks. “Don’t leave...”  
  
You let out a choked scream and curled into a ball. I cupped your face and I hissed, jerking my hands away. You were burning. You must’ve gotten the fever after drinking, and now you’re having a fever-induced nightmare.    
  
I took your face in my hands again and tried to calm you down.  
  
“Taeyeon! Taeyeon listen, it’s me... It’s me...” I whispered into your ear.  
  
You stopped thrashing, but you were still fisting your shirt. I placed my hand over yours and coaxed you to let it go as I wiped the tear streaks away with my other hand.  
  
“Taeyeon... I’m here... I’m here... I’m not going anywhere okay? I’m not going anywhere...”  
  
You finally calmed down and your body reacted to my touch, your head leaning into my palm, trying to feel if it was real, afraid it would disappear anytime. Your breathing started to slow down and I heard a faint whisper.  
  
“Stay...”  
  
I took your bandaged hand and held it to my chest as I brushed your fringe off your clammy face. You never liked alcohol. You wouldn’t even touch it. But now as I watch you sleep serenely, I wondered just how much you drank.

-

I heaved a deep sigh and shifted my body, sinking my head deeper into the pillow. I didn’t want to get up. I hadn’t felt truly rested in a long time, and I just wanted it to last. Through the small crack in the bedroom door, I heard muffled voices. I could make out Yuri’s voice, but the other was inaudible. As my mind started to wake up, I began to remember the night’s events—you getting drunk and falling sleep in Yuri’s grandmother’s bedroom. I sat up and found myself on the bed, the blanket draped over me, and you gone.  
  
The voices in the living room grew louder, and more heated as I threw the blanket off and made my way towards the growing commotion.  
  
Just as I opened the door, I saw Yuri grab onto your collar and slam you into the wall.  
  
“Say something damn it!”  
  
“Yuri!”  
  
Yuri whirled around, but kept her grip on you.  
  
“Steph, you’re up. That’s good.”  
  
“Yuri, what’s going on?”  
  
My fiancee turned back to you, barring her teeth, seething with anger.  
  
“She tried to take advantage of you when you were asleep.”  
  
I took a step forward and tried to stop her from hurting you further.  
  
“Yuri she di—”  
  
She screamed, “Steph! Stay where you are!”  
  
I looked at you and you stared back at me forlornly. Yuri shook you.  
  
“You took the deal. You bloody took the deal! You’re supposed to leave Steph alone! You already got what you wanted didn’t you?! Huh?!”  
  
Yuri slammed you into the wall again and you winced.  
  
“Yuri stop!”  
  
“No! You stay where you are! I’m not done yet!”  
  
“Yuri!”  
  
“Look at me,” Yuri demanded.  
  
You shifted your gaze from the floor to stare at me. I could only look on helplessly.  
  
“Damn it! I said look at me!”  
  
Your head whipped to the side as Yuri punched you in the jaw, and you fell to the floor.  
  
“YURI!”  
  
Yuri pulled you up roughly by your collar and slammed you into the wall again.  
  
“YURI! THAT’S ENOUGH!”  
  
“You took the deal, and you got your fame. You have everything you wanted. You knew Steph’s father was the CEO of Hwang Entertainments all those while didn’t you? Huh?! You just used her to get what you wanted, and you got rid of her at the same time didn’t you? Didn’t you?!”  
  
Yuri pulled you down and brought her knee up, burying it in your abdomen.  
  
“What else do you want with her?! Haven’t you toyed with her feelings enough?!”  
  
I stormed over to Yuri and pulled her away from you.  
  
“YURI! I SAID THAT’S ENOUGH!”  
  
“But Steph—”  
  
“Save it Yuri. I don’t want to hear it.”  
  
I knelt down and cupped your cheeks.  
  
“TaeTae, are you okay?”  
  
You shoved my hand away and leaned against the wall as your picked yourself up.  
  
“I’m fine.”  
  
You grabbed your jacket on the back of the dining chair and wore it, before giving Yuri and I a full ninety degree bow.  
  
“Thank you for you help. Sorry to have bothered you and your grandmother. Congratulations on your engagement, and marriage. I wish the both of you well.”  
  
You kept your head down and saw yourself out. As I stared at your retreating back disappearing behind the door, Yuri grabbed me gently by the shoulders and bent down a little to look me in the eyes.  
  
“Steph, did she do anything to you when I was away?”  
  
I shifted my gaze upwards to look at Yuri.  
  
“Yuri, what were you thinking?”  
  
“What do you mean what was I thinking? She tried to take advantage of you and I was protecting you!”  
  
“Taeyeon, would never, take advantage of me,” I emphasized each word slowly.  
  
Yuri’s mouth thinned out into a grim line and she shook her head.  
  
“I don’t trust her.”  
  
“Do you trust me?”  
  
Yuri hesitatingly admitted, “... I do.”  
  
“Then why don’t you trust me that Taeyeon wouldn’t do anything?”  
  
“Because it’s Taeyeon!”  
  
“What do you know about her, Yuri?!” I screamed.  
  
Yuri, opened her mouth and promptly closed it again, knowing that she had no grounds to judge Taeyeon on. I continued.  
  
“So you met someone for the first time and right there you decided that she’s a lecherous \*\*\*\*\* and that she’s taking advantage of me?!”  
  
“But...”  
  
“But what, Yuri?” I snapped.  
  
Yuri raked a hand through her hair and heaved a frustrated sigh.  
  
“I don’t get you, Steph. She took advantage of you three years ago,” she argued, “and she knows you’re engaged to me, and she still wants you. Don’t you find her selfish Steph? Shameful? Don’t think I don’t know about the deal. I know everything, Steph.”  
  
I stalked up to Yuri and looked her in the eye.  
  
“How do you know about the deal?”  
  
“I heard our fathers talking.”  
  
“You aren’t supposed to eavesdrop.”  
  
“Look, that’s beside the point. The point is that your dad told my dad that Taeyeon contacted him, and she proposed a deal for him. He wanted you back in LA, she wanted her fame. So your dad did the most logical thing a father would do—give Taeyeon what she wants in exchange for his daughter.”  
  
Yuri must have believed another one of my father’s lies. You knew nothing about the deal.  
  
“You weren’t there when it happened, Yuri. You know nothing, and stop making assumptions.”  
  
Yuri threw her hands up in the air and growled in frustration.  
  
“Steph, listen to me. Can’t you see what she’s doing? That woman has got you blinded!” Yuri reasoned, her face contorting in anger. “Even an idiot knows that you sacrificed your happiness for her fame, and she still took the deal. I don’t think someone like that deserves you!”  
  
“Yuri, stop it! I was the one who took the deal! I made the decision on my own! Taeyeon has nothing to do with this!” I shouted.  
  
“No! Y—”  
  
“Yuri, that’s enough.”  
  
Halmeoni’s voice broke the tense air between Yuri and I, and I wondered how long she had stood there hearing us argue. Had she been there when you left too?  
  
“Halme—”  
  
“I heard everything, Yuri,” the elder woman interjected, “and you’re wrong.”  
  
“... Halmeoni, what do you mean?”  
  
“Stephanie, your father owns Hwang Entertainments right?”  
  
I nodded slowly.  
  
“Yes... Hwang Entertainment.”  
  
“Taeyeon is signed with Soshi Entertainment.”  
  
In the pregnant silence that ensued, Yuri spoke first, “Halmeoni... What you’re saying is that...”  
  
Yuri’s grandmother nodded grimly.  
  
As the news sank it, I turned to look at Yuri. She had her jaws clenched and her fingers curled into fists. She knew—she knew that my heart still belonged to you, and she knew that she’d never win this battle. The past three years I had been with her—our courtship, our engagement, everything—were in vain. I took a small step towards hear and reached for her hand.  
  
“Yuri...”  
  
“Go.”  
  
I stopped and tilted my head in confusion.  
  
“Yu—”  
  
“I said go,” she repeated herself as she looked at me with defeated eyes. “Go before I change my mind.”  
  
I looked at Yuri’s grandmother and she jerked her head towards the front door. I pulled my engagement ring off and placed the warm, diamond-adorned band on the dining table.  
  
“I’m sorry.”  
  
I brushed past her and dashed out of the front door.

-

I ran up the familiar gravel path and dashed towards the end of the pathway, hoping to see your petite frame sitting on the rocky embankment staring at the stars, but there was no one. I rushed over to the bench that we claimed was ours, and it was empty. There was only one other place where I could find you—the alcove underneath the bridge.  
  
I slowly climbed down the embankment, carefully placing my foot on the rocks, and jumped onto the ledge of the alcove, grateful for the low tide. I tiptoed and peered into the small niche in the alcove wall, wishing that I’d find you leaning against the cement wall, one leg stretched out, the other crossed over your knee, like how you’d always sit. But that too, was empty. I turned to leave, racking my brains, wondering where you could be.  
  
There was a bright flash of light and something in the corner caught my eye. I pulled myself onto the niche and made my way towards the back wall. Something pink was sticking out of a corner hole in the wall—the same place where I first found your unfinished songs. I grabbed the box and carefully pulled it out, careful not to damage the already worn cardboard. I brushed the dirt off the top of the box and gingerly opened it.  
  
On top was a folded paper, my full name written on it in your beautiful handwriting. I unfolded the note and two silver chains fell into my hands. I held it up to the faint moonlight and saw the lock and key gently swaying in the breeze. I cradled it in my hands as I read the scribbled note.  
  
It seems like you’re doing well moving on, and it looks like it’s about time I moved on too. Yuri seems like a nice girl. She loves you. She can give you a good life. At least you won’t have to sacrifice anything anymore. The two necklaces in the envelope with this letter was for your birthday. I hope you’d give the key to someone who loves you. Have a good life, Fany. I will love you, always, and forever.

TaeTae

I looked inside the box, and it was filled with Polaroid pictures of us together, a whole pile of them. The last was my favourite—a picture of us kissing when you took me by surprise one day. It was perfect.  
  
Tears had made it way to my eyes and fell onto the note, smudging the ink.  
  
It’s my fault you’re the way you are today, and it’s my fault that you left. I should’ve known. I see it now. Now that you’re gone, my heart feels like it has been wrenched and twisted, and this sick bile forcing it’s way up my throat as I realise what I made you go through. Was this how you felt? This debilitating despair of not being able to do anything to bring you back. You were just... gone. Was this what you went through?  
  
I fingered the two necklaces and looked out the niche, admiring the bright city lights, as I thought of where you could be.  
  
There’s only one person in the world I love, and there is only person in the world who has my heart. This key would belong to you, and you only. Until the day this key is hanging around your neck, I will wait for you; the day I have you back in my arms.

Part III

The raven dabbed the powder gently on her chin and forehead before picking up the brush on the dressing table and began to apply the blush on her cheeks. Despite the make up, the worry lines still showed on top of the traces of anxiety underneath the beautiful smile.  
  
She closed her eyes, heaving a sigh as she brought a hand to the cool necklace hanging on her neck, offering a silent prayer.  
  
“Stephanie?”  
  
She looked up and saw the bartender poking his head out of the small gap between the door and the threshold, the pounding music pouring into the dressing room.  
  
“Are you ready?”  
  
“Yeah, just give me a sec.”  
  
“Sure thing.”  
  
The door closed with a soft click and the pounding reduced to muffled thumps. Stephanie reached inside her purse and pulled out the necklace she always carried around with her. She held it up to the light and the key sparkled.  
  
*Can you hear me TaeTae? This is for you. I love you.*

\*

The blonde at the bar pulled her cap lower and sipped on whisky in her hands, the ice clanking against the glass as she set it down on the coaster. The band on the small stage had just finished their gig and there was a roar of applause, whoops, and whistles as the band walked off the stage just as the lights went out. She took another sip of the alcohol and leaned against the counter, swirling the brown liquid in her glass.  
  
The audience settled down and a spotlight shone towards the centre of the stage, bathing the beautiful woman sitting on the stool in white light. The shadows hugged her curves perfectly, and her red tube dress glittered under the spotlight, contrasting her smooth creamy skin, her black tresses cascading down her exposed shoulder. She flipped her hair to one side and smiled, holding the mic to her mouth. The blonde at the bar sucked a shallow breath and held it.  
  
“Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to The Dublin,” she said, her velvety husky voice filling up the now still air of the bar. “I’d like to dedicate the next two songs to my one and only love. Today is our sixth anniversary. I hope you enjoy it.”  
  
The beautiful girl on the stage sang, and the blonde stared. It has been too long since she has seen that face, that smile, those eyes, and heard that voice. And for just the next few minutes, she just wanted to bask in the comfort of it. There was nothing else in the room, just her, and her love on the stage.

-

Taeyeon fingered the crystal glass in front of her as she sat at the counter, wondering. The gigs had long finished, the rowdy audience had long left, and the only people remaining were just the bar regulars and the bartender. The seven minutes of Stephanie singing had come and gone. Taeyeon remembered nothing but the sorrow in her love’s eyes and the last lines of the songs.  
  
*I’d rather have bad times with you than good times with someone else*  
  
The blonde threw her head back and gulped down the last of the whiskey in the glass, grimacing as the alcohol burned the back of her throat. She slapped a hundred dollar bill on the counter and slid off the stool, staggering towards the front door, out into the cool night and into a small alleyway. She leaned against the brick wall, and allowed herself to slide down onto the asphalt, her head between her knee, her face flushed and hot.  
  
A jagged streak of lightning snaked across the sky followed by the clap of thunder. The downpour of rainwater came soon after, and Taeyeon lifted her head towards the dark sky, savouring the feeling of cold water pelting against her skin.  
  
*I’d rather be beside you in a storm than safe and warm by myself*  
  
Taeyeon closed her eyes and allowed streams of hot tears to escape her eyes. The rain did nothing to wash away the guilt on her heart, and the whisky did nothing to dull the ache that came with it.

-

She had a full bottle of whisky; she was drunk. Nonetheless, Taeyeon stumbled down the street, leaning a palm against the concrete wall for support. She shoved her free hand inside her jacket pocket, clenching the cold, metal ring in her hands as she ploughed through the heavy rain.  
  
*I’d rather have hard times together than to have it easy apart*  
  
Under the temporary shelter of a shop’s canopy, Taeyeon pulled out the ring and stared at the minuscule pink diamond embedded in the middle of the metal heart.  
  
*She sighed into the soft lips that gently pressed against hers as she slowly leaned back onto the loveseat, her tense body gradually relaxing between Stephanie’s legs. Stephanie had guided her hand around her waist while she slowly snaked her hands up Taeyeon’s arms, smoothing it along her shoulder, before crawling up her neck to entangle themselves in her hair. They shared one long passionate kiss before Stephanie lingeringly pulled away. She licked her lips and smirked as she leaned her forehead against Taeyeon’s.*  
  
*“You know TaeTae, one day, you could just propose to me with me sitting on you like this,” Stephanie began, softly, “and I don’t care if you don’t have a ring. I’d gladly say yes.”*  
  
*Taeyeon took a deep breath and tightened the arms around the younger girl’s waist, pulling her closer, trying to minimize the already-diminished space between them. It was always the case with any couple; their bodies pressed against each other was never enough.*  
  
*“That’s one pathetic proposal. What’s a proposal without a ring?”*  
  
*Stephanie giggled as she massaged the back of Taeyeon’s neck.*  
  
*“Then we’re one pathetic couple. Not that I mind,” she said and deliberately pecked Taeyeon’s lips. “I just need you.”*  
  
*Taeyeon snorted softly and smirked.*  
  
*“Cheesy.”*  
  
*“*Your*cheesy girl. I think your cheesiness is rubbing off on me.”*  
  
The blaring of a horn jolted Taeyeon back to reality and she quickly crossed the road. She adjusted her cap and looked for the road signs, making sure she was going the direction before continuing on her way.

-

Her head throbbed with each step she took, and she stopped momentarily, hissing in pain as she massaged her temples.  
  
*I’d rather have the one who holds my heart*  
  
The after effects of the alcohol was killing her, but she thinks she’ll be killed when the shattered, pumping organ in her chest stops beating if she doesn’t continue walking.  
  
*“TaeTae...”*  
  
*“Yes baby?”*  
  
*“What made you want to become a singer?”*  
  
*Taeyeon rested her chin on the younger girl’s shoulders and shrugged even though Stephanie couldn’t see it.*  
  
*“I don’t know. I feel happy when I sing. It’s my life.”*  
  
*Stephanie held onto the hands resting on her stomach and leaned into Taeyeon’s embrace.*  
  
*“So... Other than wanting to sing... What else do you want in life?”*  
  
*Taeyeon shrugged again.*  
  
*“You.”*  
  
*The younger girl twisted her body a little, enough to look at Taeyeon’s side profile as she allowed a smile to creep onto her mouth.*  
  
*“Really?”*  
  
*Taeyeon tightened her arms around Stephanie and gripped her hands reassuringly.*  
  
*“Yep.”*  
  
*Stephanie’s shy smile evolved into a sly grin as the thought of her next question.*  
  
*“I’m actually wondering... Which comes first—me, or music—since you’re constantly trying to compose your songs and ignoring me all the time.”*  
  
*Taeyeon pouted.*  
  
*“I don’t ignore you.”*  
  
*“Yes, you do.”*  
  
*Taeyeon sighed and snuggled closer into Stephanie’s neck, taking a deep breath of her flowery scent.*  
  
*“Music is my life. You are my heart. Life is nothing without the heart. That’s how important you are to me.”*  
  
*“You know I was joking when I said you ignored me all the time right?”*  
  
*“Of course I do. But I would’ve said it anyway.”*  
  
*Stephanie turned and kissed the shorter girl’s temple.*  
  
*“I love you.”*  
  
*Taeyeon craned her neck and planted a kiss on the back of the raven’s smooth jaw.*  
  
*“I love you more.”*  
  
The rain had finally stopped, and Taeyeon pulled on the glass doors. She stumbled into the apartment lobby dripping wet, her sneakers squishing with each step she made towards the elevator. She stretched her hand out in time to stop the doors from closing and stumbled in.  
  
*My love, come back to me*  
  
She jabbed the button repeatedly and slumped against the wall, massaging her temples again.  
  
*“TaeTae...”*  
  
*“Hmm?”*  
  
*“Will you ever leave me?”*  
  
*“No.”*  
  
*“Promise?”*  
  
*“Promise.”*  
  
*And she sealed it with a kiss to the nose.*  
  
The elevator doors slid open and Taeyeon walked out onto the familiar corridor. She held onto the plastered walls and squinted through blurry eyes looking for the right apartment number. She stood in front of the gold-lined brown door, in front of her old apartment that she sold, and brought a shaking hand to the intricate wood. She closed her eyes as the memories played out on the black screen. Her heart fluttered, and she dropped onto her knees, crying for the bittersweet memories.  
  
Taeyeon scratched the wood, and a muffled, “Who’s there?” sounded from behind the door.  
  
Realising her mistake, she picked herself up, wiping away her tears as she walked briskly towards the stairs—the elevator would take too long to come up. She rounded the corner and began to dash down the steps, ignoring the faint echo of Stephanie’s voice in her head calling out to her.  
  
Taeyeon stepped out into the cold night and walked faster when she heard the slapping of shoes approaching. She didn’t want to get into trouble. She didn’t know where she was going, she just wanted to get out of there.  
  
“Kim Taeyeon!”  
  
She stopped mid-stride, shocked that the current resident of her old apartment knew her name. That was impossible. Unless... *Fany?* She shook her head. The alcohol must be playing tricks on her mind. She shoved her hands into her pockets and continued walking.  
  
“Kim Taeyeon! Will you just stop walking and turn around?!”  
  
This was the third time this voice called her name; it couldn’t have been inside her head. Taeyeon slowly turned around, and she found herself looking into Stephanie’s melancholic, tear-filled eyes.  
  
“Fany...?”  
  
Stephanie ran towards her, and Taeyeon stumbled back several steps, catching the younger girl in her arms.  
  
“Stop running away!” her voice trembled.  
  
“Fa-Fany...”  
  
“Stop running away.”  
  
Taeyeon gaped.  
  
"Wh-What are you doing?"  
  
Stephanie held on to her tighter.  
  
“Please don’t go..."  
  
"W-Wait..."  
  
Taeyeon reached behind to disentangle the arms that were locking her in position, but the interlocking fingers were unrelenting.  
  
"No... don't..."  
  
"I... I can't..."  
  
"I don't want to lose you again..."  
  
"Why are you doing this?"  
  
"I lost you once to my stupidity..." she gritted her teeth and gulped, "I'm not going to lose you a second time. I'm not going to let that happen again. I... I want to make things right."  
  
"But... I... Can't..." she choked.  
  
She finally pried the pair of hands behind her apart, and pushed Stephanie away.  
  
"I... can't..." she said, trying to convince herself. "I'm sorry..."  
  
She twisted her arm out of Stephanie's grasp and turned around.  
  
"No, Taeyeon, wait!"  
  
Taeyeon felt Stephanie grab her wrist and yank her back. She squeezed her eyes shut and kept her head down. She didn't want Stephanie to see her cry.  
  
"Taeyeon, look at me?"  
  
Taeyeon clenched her fist and turned her head to the side. Stephanie cupped Taeyeon's cheek, gently coaxing her to look up.  
  
"Taeyeon, please?"  
  
Taeyeon fixed her jaw and braced herself to look into Stephanie's deep, brown eyes.  
  
"Taeyeon, I'm not with Yuri anymore; I broke our engagement."  
  
Taeyeon's head throbbed and she pulled away. She took a step back and shook her head, something she regretted doing because the whole world began spinning.  
  
"I know."  
  
"How...?"  
  
"Tonight..."  
  
"Taeyeon... Taeyeon, I’m sorry—for leaving you, for hurting you, for making you become who you are now. I'm sorry," she sobbed, "I should've known."  
  
Taeyeon glanced at Stephanie's right ring finger. The diamond ring was gone.  
  
"Why... Why now?"  
  
Stephanie’s face twisted in confusion.  
  
"Taeyeon... What do you mean?”  
  
“Why now?” She looked at Stephanie and swallowed. “Why not four years ago? Why can you only see it now?”  
  
Stephanie took a step forward.  
  
“Taeyeon, I—”  
  
Taeyeon mirrored it. Shaking her head again.  
  
“Why didn’t you see? Why did you think I loved music... More than I loved you? Why...? Why do you understand, only now?”  
  
“Taeyeon...”  
  
“Why did you sacrifice our love... For something that can never exist without you? Why?”  
  
Fresh tears began pouring out of her eyes and her heart felt like someone plunged a knife into it. She was afraid that if she pulled it, she’d bleed herself to death.  
  
“Taeyeon, I’m sorry.”  
  
Taeyeon rubbed her chest hard, hoping that it would make the pain go away. She closed her eyes and cried harder.  
  
“Do you know how much it *hurt*?” she choked the last part out, her voice breaking.  
  
Stephanie’s warm hand enveloped her ice-cold one, squeezing it gently.  
  
“Taeyeon, I’m sorry... I’m so sorry... Please forgive me...”  
  
Taeyeon clenched her hand till her knuckles turned white.  
  
“N-No...”  
  
“Taeyeon *please*, please give me one more chance; give me one more chance to make it right...”  
  
Taeyeon continued to sob, and Stephanie gently placed her free palm on Taeyeon’s milky cheeks.  
  
“Taeyeon, please. I’m begging you.”  
  
The plea was soft in the dead of the night, but Stephanie heard it nonetheless.  
  
“Don’t leave me again... Don’t...”  
  
Stephanie sighed and smiled in relief as she guided Taeyeon’s head to rest on her shoulder stroking it gently.  
  
“I won’t leave you again... I’m sorry...”  
  
Taeyeon pressed Stephanie’s palm flat against her chest over her beating heart.  
  
"I missed you so much," she sobbed.  
  
"I missed you too TaeTae. I missed you too..."

\*

Taeyeon watched as Stephanie slept, her chest rising and falling steadily with each breath. She slowly ran her fingers between the dark, silky tresses, starting from the temple, ending when the layers thinned out, fanning them on the white pillow. She repeated the process again, quietly and gently.  
  
Stephanie stirred; Taeyeon stiffened, her hand stopping awkwardly at the edge of her hairline. Stephanie shifted and draped her arm around Taeyeon’s waist, opening her eyes blearily. Taeyeon found herself staring into a pair of mesmerizingly soft brown eyes that glittered underneath the faint moonlight filtering through the bedroom window. Stephanie smiled lightly.  
  
“Why aren’t you asleep?” she whispered.  
  
Taeyeon shrugged and continued brushing her fingers through her hair.  
  
“I like to watch you sleep.”  
  
Stephanie shifted closer to her and shoved her nose into her neck, taking a deep breath.  
  
“Am I that fun to watch, sleeping?”  
  
“Mhmm.  
  
Stephanie shifted back and placed her hand on her cheek.  
  
“What’s bothering you?”  
  
She lied as naturally as she could.  
  
“Nothing...”  
  
Stephanie grabbed onto her hand and weaved their fingers together.  
  
“You’re bad at lying, you know?”  
  
She kissed the hand.  
  
“I know.”  
  
“TaeTae...”  
  
“Baby, go back to sleep.”  
  
“But—”  
  
“No buts. Sleep. Now.”  
  
Stephanie crawled onto her, kissing her collar before resting her head on her chest.  
  
“I’m not leaving you. I love you.”  
  
She kissed the crown of the raven.  
  
“I love you more.”  
  
She rested her interlocked fingers on the small of Stephanie’s back and watched her fall back to sleep, letting her listen to her heart that was beating for her.  
  
*Don’t leave me.*

-

6 Months  
  
Taeyeon walked across the underground parking lot, easily finding her car in one corner and walked towards it. She unlocked the Audi and slipped into the lush interior of the R8. She took the bluetooth earpiece on the dashboard and fitted it inside her ear before pushing her key into the ignition, making the engine purr to life. She took out her phone and dialed the first number on the speed dial, waiting patiently as the call connected.  
  
*“Hello?”*  
  
“Hey Baby.”  
  
*“TaeTae...”*  
  
She could imagine Stephanie smiling in her head as the word rolled off her tongue.  
  
“I just finished my meeting, and I’m done for the day. Want grab some dinner? Are you done with your work?”  
  
*“Hold on.”*  
  
There was the chaotic shuffling of papers and Stephanie’s muffled voice as she dismissed her secretary.  
  
*“I should be done. How long are you going to take to get here?”*  
  
Taeyeon looked at the clock on her car screen.  
  
“Twenty?”  
  
*“Okay. I’ll see you soon TaeTae.”*  
  
“See you soon Baby.  
  
She took the earpiece off before putting the car in gear and drove off.

\*

She pulled into the lobby of the office building and stepped out of the car when the valet opened her door.  
  
“Good evening, Ms Kim.”  
  
“Evening Jinki.”  
  
“Here to pick Ms Hwang up?”  
  
“Yes. Just park my car a little further down. I won’t be taking long.”  
  
“Of course Ms Kim.”  
  
Taeyeon walked into the lobby and the receptionist stood to greet her. She nodded in acknowledgement and pressed the lift button. She stepped into the lift she pressed for the highest floor of the building. The doors slid open and Taeyeon walked onto the marble floor of the lush office space. It was almost five, but people were still busy with piles of paper on their desks. Stephanie’s secretary was at her desk outside her office. She stood and bowed, moving to pick up the phone to tell her boss of her girlfriend’s arrival. Taeyeon waved her hand in disapproval.  
  
“I’ll just slip in and surprise her.”  
  
The secretary smiled again.  
  
“Sure.”  
  
“Thanks.”  
  
Taeyeon held onto the doorknob and cautiously turned it, opening the door slowly to poke her head in. She saw Stephanie at her desk, eyebrows furiously furrowed together, her eyes darting back and forth as she read a document. She stepped into the office and closed the door softly behind her. Stephanie didn’t even look up. She stayed there a little longer before finally deciding to speak.  
  
“Hey Baby...”  
  
“TaeTae? When did you come in?”  
  
“Just. You were busy reading that document.”  
  
“Oh. Sorry.”  
  
“It’s okay. Not done yet?”  
  
She sighed. “No.”  
  
Taeyeon walked over to the sofa in the office and sat down.  
  
“Okay. Take as long as you want. Wake me up when you’re done.”  
  
“Okay.”

\*

Taeyeon woke up to a warm weight on her lap, and wet lips on her neck. She groaned and shifted herself to accommodate Stephanie better, and she kissed the sleeping girl fully on the lips. Taeyeon opened her eyes to see Stephanie smiling.  
  
“You’re awake. Finally.”  
  
“Are you sitting on me in your skirt and suit?”  
  
Stephanie dug her fingers in Taeyeon’s blonde locks.  
  
“What are you thinking byun Tae?”  
  
“Well, I was just thinking, that, well, you know, that— mmmph...”  
  
Stephanie took Taeyeon’s lips in her own and kissed her, seductively.  
  
“Pervert.”  
  
“You haven’t even listened to what I have to say!”  
  
“I don’t have to.”  
  
“But— mmm...! Baby... Wait...”  
  
Stephanie stopped and huffed frustratedly.  
  
“What.”  
  
“We’re in your office.”  
  
“So?”  
  
“What if...”  
  
“It’s almost six, everyone would most probably have gone home by now, and I’ve locked the door already.”  
  
Stephanie grabbed Taeyeon and kissed her again before she could protest again.  
  
“But— mmph... Fany... Baby... Can we... Not... Mmmm...”  
  
Stephanie parted her lips and deepened the kiss hoping to shut her up.  
  
“... Baby... Dinner...”  
  
Stephanie pulled away and glared at Taeyeon. She gulped.  
  
“Really Taeyeon? This is the first time I hear you reject a make out session.”  
  
“Well, it’s uhm, not that I want to, but... I’m hungry.”  
  
Stephanie laughed.  
  
“You’re such a kid.”  
  
“Hey.”  
  
She gave Taeyeon one last kiss and got up, grabbing her purse as she let Taeyeon tidy herself.  
  
“You owe me when we get home.”  
  
“Yes ma’am.”

\*

She gave her menu to the waiter and leaned on the table.  
  
“Well, how was work today?”  
  
“The usual boring stuff.”  
  
“Yeah?”  
  
“Yes. Well, the company just started. It would be awhile before things pick up.”  
  
“Mmm.”  
  
Taeyeon sipped her wine as she pondered on her question.  
  
“Hey Baby, I was wondering. Why did you agree to help your dad? You know, even after everything...”  
  
“I hate my dad, for what he did to us. He’s selfish, but when my mom passed away, I promised her that I would take care of my dad. I mean...”  
  
Taeyeon leaned forward and held Stephanie’s hand, brushing her thumb across the knuckles.  
  
“I understand.”  
  
“Don’t get me mistaken. I can never forgive him for what he did to us.”  
  
“It’s all in the past. It’s okay.”  
  
Stephanie gripped Taeyeon’s hand.  
  
“TaeTae, I’ll never leave you again.”  
  
“I know. And I promise I won’t take off again too.”  
  
Stephanie smiled, relieved.  
  
“I like your necklace by the way.”  
  
Taeyeon looked down at the key dangling on her neck.  
  
“I like yours too.”  
  
Stephanie giggled and fingered the lock resting on her chest.  
  
“How was your meeting today?”  
  
“Finally got some stuff down. Basic details,” Taeyeon shrugged. “Just a general timeline and a rough sketch of a schedule. Nothing much confirmed yet.”  
  
“So when are you going to release your comeback album? It’s a comeback after more than a year and a half, it better be good.”  
  
“Have you no trust in my singing and songwriting abilities?”  
  
“Of course I do.”  
  
“Good. You better.”  
  
“Aren’t you going to get real busy soon?”  
  
“Soon. But you know I’ll make time for you.”  
  
“Don’t tire yourself out.”  
  
“I won’t.”  
  
The waiter came with their food, steaming hot.  
  
“Come on, let’s eat.”

\*

Taeyeon unlocked the door to their new apartment and let Stephanie in. She took off her shoes and by then, Stephanie plopped herself on the leather couch, unmoving.  
  
“TaeTae, I’m stuffed.”  
  
“Come on, get off the couch and go shower.”  
  
She turned her head away.  
  
“No.”  
  
Taeyeon sat down next to her on the edge of the seat.  
  
“Oh come on, don’t be such a baby.”  
  
“But I am. I’m *your* baby.”  
  
“Baby...”  
  
“See.”  
  
“Fine. Come on you big baby. Shower time.”  
  
Taeyeon plucked her arm off the couch and pulled her up, taking her arms and wrapping them around her own shoulders before slipping her hands under Stephanie’s thighs to pick her up. Taeyeon stood, grunting.  
  
“Damn, you’re heavy.”  
  
“Yah!”  
  
“Oww, Baby... My ear... They’re precious you know. And I’m already giving you a piggyback ride, don’t scream.”  
  
“Kim Taeyeon, you owe me.”  
  
“Yes ma’am.”  
  
Taeyeon slowly put her down inside the bathroom.  
  
“Hurry up and shower.”  
  
Taeyeon turned around to close the door, but Stephanie was crossing her arms, tapping her foot impatiently on the tiled floor, glaring at her.  
  
“What?”  
  
“You owe me.”  
  
“Y...es, I do...”  
  
“Urgh. Why are you so clueless.”  
  
“Wha...?”  
  
Stephanie pulled her by her collar and kissed her fervently, slamming her against the door.  
  
“Ahh, so this is what you mean.”  
  
“What else do you think I meant?”  
  
“Well... I... Ahh... You know...”  
  
“Oh just shut up.”  
  
Stephanie crashed her lips against Taeyeon’s and slid her arms inside her jacket, pulling it off, proceeding to unbutton her blouse next.  
  
“Baby... Hot... Or cold shower...?”  
  
“Cold.”  
  
Taeyeon fumbled with the shower knob and they stumbled in.

\*

Taeyeon closed her eyes, sinking into the pillow, Stephanie on her lap, tracing her fingers on her face.  
  
*Don’t leave my side, please...*  
  
“Baby...”  
  
Stephanie kissed her lips lightly.  
  
“Yes TaeTae?”  
  
“I was wondering...”  
  
Stephanie ran a finger teasingly down her nose, brushing a thumb across the soft lips.  
  
“About...?”  
  
“Us...”  
  
Taeyeon opened her eyes and looked up at Stephanie, who leaned in, putting her weight on Taeyeon’s tummy, propping her forearms on either side of her head. When she spoke, her warm breath tickled Taeyeon.  
  
“What about us?”  
  
Taeyeon held the younger girl by her waist.  
  
“Baby, will you marry me?”  
  
Stephanie smiled.  
  
“You’re not kidding,” she stated. “Must I answer you?”  
  
“Well, it *is* a rhetorical question, but I still want to hear it.”  
  
Stephanie kissed her.  
  
“*Yes*, TaeTae. Of course it’s a yes.”  
  
She stifled a moan when Stephanie’s teeth scrapped against her lips as she fumbled with the ring in her hand, struggling to grab onto Stephanie’s, slipping the ring onto her ring finger blindly. Stephanie pulled away, panting.  
  
“You still remember how I wanted you to propose to me.”  
  
“I’d never forget.”  
  
“And you got a ring too.”  
  
“It was your favourite.”  
  
Stephanie twisted the ring around with her thumb, admiring the cool band.  
  
“Perfect fit.”  
  
“Of course.”  
  
“Tiffany&Co?”  
  
“Tiffany&Co.”  
  
Stephanie laughed and brushed her fingers through Taeyeon’s soft blonde hair.  
  
“Did I tell you how much I love your short, blonde hair?”  
  
“Nope, but you just did.”  
  
“Good. Don’t change it.”  
  
“If my baby wishes so.”  
  
Stephanie giggled and kissed Taeyeon again.  
  
“I love you.”  
  
“I love you more.”

Epilogue

Stephanie lifted her head of the chest of her steadily breathing wife and looked out the window. A flash of lightning streaked the sky, followed by the rumble of thunder. She glanced at Taeyeon sleeping soundly next to her and kissed her temple lightly. She threw the covers off and hurriedly  slid off the bed, soundlessly slipping out of the master bedroom. She heard the faint wail of a toddler and hurried. She rushed to the end of the hallway and opened the door.  
  
“Mummy!”  
  
Stephanie turned on the small table lamp next to the door and rushed towards the bed, picking up the crying child hugging tightly onto her plushie. She bounced the toddler gently, rubbing a hand soothingly up and down the toddler’s back.  
  
“Shh sweetie. It’s okay... Mummy’s here. Shh, stop crying...”  
  
The toddler sniffed and latched onto her mother’s neck.  
  
“Mummy, I’m scared.”  
  
“It’s okay sweetie...” she snuffed the toddler. “Mummy’s here... There’s nothing to be scared about...”  
  
The toddler on the other bed, awoken by her sister cries, began to wail too, clutching tightly onto her plushie.  
  
“Mummy! I want Omma!”  
  
“Sweetie... Omma’s—”  
  
“My sweetheart looking for me?”  
  
“Omma!”  
  
Taeyeon came into the room and scooped the other crying toddler into her arms, soothing the child down.  
  
“Omma, I’m scared too.”  
  
“It’s okay sweetheart, Omma’s here...”  
  
The two mothers carried their children, calming them down as the storm continued to rage outside.  
  
“Omma, can we sleep in your room tonight?”  
  
Taeyeon looked at Stephanie.  
  
“Mummy, can we? Please?”  
  
“Of course, sweetie.”  
  
Stephanie walked out of the children's’ bedroom, the toddler in her arms resting her head on her shoulder, yawning. Taeyeon followed after, turning off the lamp in the room, the toddler in her arms already drifting off to dreamland. They went into their bedroom and placed the two slumbering children side by side, each hugging their own stuffed toy. Taeyeon and Stephanie climbed into bed, encasing their children in a protective shell. Taeyeon reached over and Stephanie found her hand above the covers.  
  
“Go to sleep, Baby. You have a meeting tomorrow morning.”  
  
Stephanie smiled sleepily.  
  
“Goodnight TaeTae.”  
  
Taeyeon leaned over and placed a chaste kiss on her wife’s forehead.  
  
“G’night Baby.”  
  
-  
  
Taeyeon woke up and squinted when she tried to open her eyes to the blinding sunlight streaming into the room. A thud and a muffled ‘ouch’ made her sit up groggily. She looked next to her and found the two children still sound asleep. She kissed both of them on their cheeks softly and slid out of bed. She yawned and strode into the walk-in closet, not surprised it was a mess.  
  
“TaeTae, I can’t find my blouse.”  
  
She leaned on the cupboard and crossed her arms, one foot over the other.  
  
“Where did you put it?”  
  
“I don’t know!”  
  
“Which blouse are we talking about?”  
  
“The pink one!”  
  
“Oh, that one.”  
  
It was amusing to her, watching her wife running around in...  
  
“Taeyeon you byuntae stop looking and help me find it!”  
  
She looked around and chuckled. She walked up to Stephanie and pulled her by her bare waist, giving her a kiss.  
  
“Good morning Baby.”  
  
“TaeTae I don’t have time for this! I’m going to be late!”  
  
Stephanie was about to walk off again but Taeyeon held her in place and raised a warning finger.  
  
“You’re not going anywhere. And stay calm.”  
  
“But TaeTae ho—”  
  
Taeyeon reached up onto the top shelf and pulled down a pink blouse. She unbuttoned it, pulled it on for Stephanie, and began to button it from the bottom up.  
  
“Oh...”  
  
“Know what skirt to wear with this?”  
  
“Uhm...”  
  
Taeyeon left the top button loose and reached out again to grab a grey skirt on another shelf.  
  
“Here.”  
  
“Thank you TaeTae.”  
  
“Mhmm.”  
  
As Stephanie began pulling on the skirt Taeyeon walked to the drawer and took out a pair of cuff links.  
  
“Oh TaeTae! I need cuff—”  
  
Taeyeon grabbed onto Stephanie’s wrist and pushed the cuff links through the loops, smoothing them out when she was done.  
  
“There.”  
  
“Thank you.”  
  
Stephanie kissed Taeyeon’s cheek in gratitude and dashed out of the closet. She sighed and grabbed the blazer in the cupboard. Taeyeon walked out and down the stairs. Stephanie was already at the front door of their townhouse, pulling on her heels.  
  
“Baby, you forgot your blazer.”  
  
“Oh, right.”  
  
Taeyeon held her by her arms to stop Stephanie with whatever she was doing.  
  
“Baby, relax. Take a deep breath.”  
  
Stephanie closed her eyes and breathed out through her nose and mouth.  
  
“There, feel better?”  
  
“Think so.”  
  
“Do you want me to send you to work?”  
  
“The kids are gonna cry if you’re not home.”  
  
“The kids are not gonna wake up anytime soon.”  
  
“It’s okay, I can drive myself.”  
  
“Okay Baby. Drive safe.”  
  
“I will. I’ll be back to help you with dinner.”  
  
“Okay.”  
  
“Oh and the kids—”  
  
“Don’t worry Baby. I know.”  
  
“Thank you.”  
  
Stephanie gave Taeyeon another kiss and closed the front door.  
  
“Ommaaa...”  
  
Taeyeon turned around and saw her youngest daughter clutching onto the hand of her bear, dragging it behind her, the other hand rubbing her sleepy eyes.  
  
“Yes, sweetheart?”  
  
“Where did Mummy go?” she pouted.  
  
“Mummy has work today, sweetheart.”  
  
“But Omma, I want Mummy...”  
  
Why you little playah...! You were looking for me this morning!  
  
Taeyeon picked her up and climbed the stairs.  
  
“Mummy will be back soon.”  
  
“Really?”  
  
“Yes, really. Does Jinri want to wake Juhyun up with Omma?”  
  
“Uh huh.”  
  
Taeyeon snuffed her cheek.  
  
“That’s my girl.”  
  
-  
  
There were three soft knocks on her office door, and without looking up from the document she was looking through, she told the person to come in. There was the patter of steps and Yuri found herself being pulled away from her desk.  
  
“What—”  
  
“Omma!”  
  
The small girl grabbed onto her knees and flailed her legs in the air as she struggled to climb the chair onto her mother’s lap. Yuri helped her up and the small girl wrapped her arms around her mother’s neck.  
  
“Hello there my little pumpkin.”  
  
“Sorry Yul, she said she missed you.”  
  
Yuri looked at her wife standing prettily in front of her desk and smiled.  
  
“It’s okay Yoong.”  
  
“Are you done with your work?”  
  
“I just have this last document to look through, but I can do it tomorrow.”  
  
“Okay.”  
  
Yuri shook the child in her arms teasingly.  
  
“Ready to go Sica baby?”  
  
The child merely pouted and buried herself in her mother’s neck, promptly going to sleep.  
  
“I wonder whose genes she got. I don’t recall any of our family members loving sleep so much.”  
  
“I have no idea.” Yuri stood and took Yoona’s hand, her other arm cradling Jessica gently. “Come on, we’re going to be late going to the Kim’s.”  
  
-  
  
Taeyeon folded the last dumpling, placed it in the bamboo steamer and closed the lid.  
  
“Kids!”  
  
Juhyun and Jinri came running into the kitchen, engrossed with tagging each other. Taeyeon caught Juhyun running past her and she squealed as her mother lifted her into the air tickling her.  
  
“Ommmaaaaaaaa~!”  
  
“What did I say about running around huh, huh, huh!”  
  
Juhyun squealed again and giggled as Taeyeon put her down.  
  
“Jinri come here.”  
  
The younger of the two did as she was told and stood next to her sister. Taeyeon knelt down in front of them to match their eye level.  
  
“Kids... What did I tell you about running around in the house?”  
  
“No playing tag in the house,” they said in unison.  
  
Taeyeon nodded. “Yes yes, and why is that so?”  
  
“Because Omma doesn’t want us to get hurt.”  
  
Taeyeon nodded again. “Yes yes—”  
  
The doorbell rang, interrupting Taeyeon. She held up a warning finger.  
  
“Don’t—”  
  
The twins looked at each other and screamed, “Mummy!” before dashing for the front door.  
  
“—run.”  
  
Taeyeon hung her head in exasperation and buried her face in a hand.  
  
“Ugh.”  
  
She shuffled to the kitchen door and leaned on the doorframe as she watched the twins tackle her wife, each hugging a leg. She chuckled at the sight of Stephanie struggling.  
  
“Welcome home, Baby.”  
  
“Thank you TaeTae. Kids, can you let go of Mummy now?”  
  
“No! I want Mummy to carry!”  
  
“Me too! I want Mummy carry!”  
  
“But I can’t carry the both of you at the same time.”  
  
“Who wants Omma to carry?”  
  
“Me!”  
  
Stephanie picked Jinri up and went upstairs to change. Juhyun ran towards Taeyeon, and Taeyeon swung her up.  
  
“All right my little pumpkin. Let’s set up the barbecue in the backyard.”  
  
“Yay!”  
  
Just as they turned around, the lock on the front door twisted open and two people barged into the hallway.  
  
“KIM TAEYEON!”  
  
Taeyeon winced at the sound and let Juhyun down who was squirming in her hold. As soon as the toddler’s feet touched the ground, she took off in the direction of the newcomers.  
  
“AUNTY SUNNY! AUNTY HYOMIN!”  
  
“Juhyun ah!”  
  
Juhyun ran into Hyomin’s open arms and the older woman scooped her up, bouncing the toddler on her hip.  
  
“Hello Sunny, Hyomin,” Taeyeon greeted, giving them a mock salute.  
  
“Kim Taeyeon, come here and help me!”  
  
Taeyeon winced again and rubbed her ears.  
  
“Sunny please, keep the tone down. Fany’s loud enough. My ears are precious.”  
  
“Kim Taeyeon I heard that!” Stephanie screamed from the bedroom.  
  
“Urgh, why does she have super bionic ears...”  
  
“I heard that one too!”  
  
Taeyeon shook her head and chuckled.  
  
“Come on Sunny, I’ll help you with those bags.”  
  
“Finally! My arms are about to die here!”  
  
She took the bag of drinks from Sunny and led her into the kitchen setting them on the countertop.  
  
Through the glass doors of the door separating the living room and the kitchen, Taeyeon saw Hyomin playing with Juhyun, the woman tickling the toddler and making faces at her. Taeyeon smiled.  
  
“How are things with Fany and the kids?” Sunny asked, taking a bottle out. Taeyeon joined her in arranging the drinks, and preparing the cups.  
  
“We’re exhausted, especially when they wake us up in the middle of the night. But all’s good. We’re happy.”  
  
“That’s good...”  
  
“How ‘bout you and Hyomin? How are things progressing for you two?”  
  
“We’re okay.”  
  
“Yeah?”  
  
“Yeah.”  
  
“Anything...certain about the relationship?”  
  
“I don’t think we can live without each other.”  
  
Taeyeon took a clear bowl from one of the cupboards and opened the fridge.  
  
“Is that a good thing or a bad thing?”  
  
Sunny took a large bottle out of the plastic bag and set them down on the counter.  
  
“What do you mean?”  
  
Taeyeon took the basket of ice in the freezer and dumped them all into the bowl.  
  
“As it is Sunny, as it is.”  
  
“What about you. Do you think you can live without Fany?”  
  
“No!”  
  
Taeyeon accidentally slammed the drawer too loudly after taking out an ice shovel for the bowl.  
  
“Is that a good thing or a bad thing?”  
  
“Of course it’s good.”  
  
“Well then, that’s my answer for you.”  
  
Taeyeon set the bowl down on the bar and leaned against the counter just as Sunny finished unpacking all the drinks.  
  
“Sunny... Thank you... For everything...”  
  
Sunny turned towards Taeyeon and hugged her.  
  
“Anytime Taeyeon, anytime. What are best friends for?”  
  
She smiled and squeezed her best friend’s arm reassuringly.  
  
“If you ever have any problems, or if you and Hyomin ever need help, just ask, okay?”  
  
“I will, Taeng, I will.”  
  
“Good. Because I owe you for the many years of mopping around and being my confidante.”  
  
Sunny laughed as Taeyeon opened the cupboard underneath the sink to get the paper cups.  
  
“Sure you owe me. I’ll keep that in mind.”  
  
“Omma!”  
  
Taeyeon looked to see her youngest daughter rushing into the kitchen and running straight to her, tugging on her pants. Once she toddler caught her attention, she stretched out her arms, asking to be carried.  
  
“Hup... Up you come. Where are your manners? Say hello to Aunty Sunny.”  
  
“Hello Aunty Sunny...”  
  
“Hello my little pumpkin,” Sunny said, and tickled her chin. The toddler shied away.  
  
“Aigoo, you’re so cute.”  
  
“Where’s Mummy?” Taeyeon asked, shaking her daughter side to side gently.  
  
“Upstairs.”  
  
“Did you come down without letting Mummy know?”  
  
The girl looked down at the tiled floor guiltily.  
  
“Jinri ah, Mummy’s gonna be wondering where you disappeared to.”  
  
“But but—”  
  
“Tae Tae! Did you— Jinri! There you are!”  
  
“See, what did I tell you,” she whispered in the toddler’s ears.  
  
“Hey there Sunny! How are you?”  
  
She came and gave the petite woman a tight hug.  
  
“Hey Fany, I’m good, how are you doing?”  
  
“Good.”  
  
“Good to know. Taeng, do you need help with anything else?”  
  
“Yeah, I haven’t set up the grill. Can you and Hyomin help me with that?”  
  
“Sure,” Sunny agreed. She bent down a little to look at Jinri and she smiled. “Does Jinri want to come with Aunty Sunny to set up the grill with Juhyun and Aunty Hyomin?”  
  
“Okay!”  
  
And Jinri reached out for Sunny and Taeyeon let go once her arms were tightly latched onto her best friend’s neck. Sunny opened the kitchen door to the living room and turned around to give her a wink when Stephanie wasn’t looking. Before she could even react to it, a pair of arms circled her neck and Stephanie had pushed her against the kitchen island, pinning her against it with her hip and kissed her softly on the lips.  
  
“Hello there, tigress. How was the meeting today?”  
  
Taeyeon wrapped her arms around Stephanie’s waist and pulled her close.  
  
“Boring.”  
  
“Part of the package isn’t it?”  
  
“Unfortunately.”  
  
Stephanie kissed her again.  
  
“You miss me that badly?”  
  
“Yes.”  
  
“The meeting was that horrible?”  
  
“Yes.”  
  
The doorbell rang and Stephanie pulled away growling in frustration. Taeyeon laughed and pecked her lips.  
  
“You can have me all you want later. Now come on, we don’t want to keep the guests waiting.”  
  
Taeyeon laced their fingers and pulled Stephanie to the front door.  
  
“The door is open! Come on in!”  
  
The knob turned slowly and the couple reached the front door just as the guests stepped in.  
  
The tanned woman put the squirming girl in her arms down onto the floor, after which the toddler immediately took off for the back of the house.  
  
“Sica be careful!”  
  
Yuri shook her head as she looked on, her daughter jumping up and down impatiently in front of the sliding glass doors, waiting to be let out into the backyard to be reunited with her playmates.  
  
“Yuri!”  
  
“Stephanie,” she acknowledged.  
  
Stephanie broke away from Taeyeon and gave her ex-fiancee a hug, moving on to Yoona to hug her too.  
  
“It’s been such a long time, it’s so good to see the both of you again! And Jessica is so big already!” Stephanie said.  
  
“I know. The twins too,” Yuri replied.  
  
Taeyeon, unlike her wife, opted to shake hands with the taller couple instead.  
  
“Yuri, Yoona.”  
  
Yoona bowed slightly, and Yuri acknowledged her with a curt nod.  
  
“Taeyeon, nice seeing you again.”  
  
“Same here.”  
  
This wasn’t the first time they had met after the incident; they met three years ago, when the twins were just a year old. Even though Stephanie’s father didn’t approve of her, he couldn’t ignore the fact that he had two grandchildren—twins, flesh and blood of Stephanie—and as much as he doesn’t want to admit it, Taeyeon made it possible. He had persuaded Stephanie to take a break from work and take the kids on a vacation in Los Angeles for a month. They ran into Yuri and her wife, Yoona, whom Yuri married a year before they met, along with their adopted daughter Jessica, two then, at the park when they were having a picnic. The kids were inseparable after.  
  
“You want something to drink?” Taeyeon asked, gesturing for Yuri to follow her as Tiffany and Yoona began to move to the living room to continue their talk.  
  
“Sure.”  
  
Taeyeon took two glasses and scooped ice into them, pouring some juice into them and handed a glass to Yuri.  
  
“Thank you.”  
  
“Welcome.”  
  
They leaned against the counter and sipped their drinks, and they watched. They watched their children run around the backyard, screaming and laughing, bright smiles on their faces as Sunny and Hyomin tried to calm them down. Their wives were talking animatedly with each other on the sofa, bubbling about the new spring collection of clothes at the mall.  
  
“I think I’m going to have another hole burning through my wallet again.”  
  
Taeyeon laughed and agreed.  
  
“Why did we marry them?”  
  
“Because we love them?”  
  
“Do we love their love for shopping?”  
  
Yuri smirked and sipped her drink.  
  
“... No.”  
  
“That’s what I thought.”  
  
They shared a round laughter.  
  
“How have things been, Yuri?”  
  
“Things have been a little hectic at the office, new branch, new employees, fresh set of rules...” she sighed and shook her head, “It’s a lot of work.”  
  
“I can imagine. But that means good news, doesn’t it? Business is going well for the company to be branching out into Korea.”  
  
“Father wants to experiment with an international branch, but yes, business is going well.”  
  
“That’s good.”  
  
“How ‘bout you? I heard your album’s doing really well. You have another one in the works too, according to the rumors, is that true?”  
  
“I do have plans for another album, but I’m thinking of putting it off for a few years. I want to spend more time with Fany and the kids. I don’t want to miss out on their childhood; I want to be there for them.”  
  
“Me too. Yoong took a hiatus from her acting activities to take care of Jessica. I want to get the company running and fully functional as soon as possible so that I get to spend time with Jessica.”  
  
“Don’t worry, it’ll work out.”  
  
“I hope so.”  
  
The doorbell rang again and Taeyeon set her cup down.  
  
“Door’s open!”  
  
Taeyeon walked out of the kitchen and stopped at the sight of the person standing in the hallway. Stephanie had told her that she invited her father to the gathering, but she had never expected him to turn up. He is a busy man, after all. Asking Stephanie to bring the kids to America didn’t necessarily mean that he accepted her, fully. To willingly come to her house all the way in Seoul, Korea is an amazing feat in itself.  
  
He turned towards her and Taeyeon met his piercing gaze. She bowed politely.  
  
“Evening Mr. Hwang.”  
  
He gave her a stiff nod.  
  
“Taeyeon who’s— Daddy!”  
  
“Hello Stephanie.”  
  
As father and daughter reunited in a hug, Seohyun trailed in behind her father, greeting Taeyeon and Yuri who had appeared behind the host with a bow.  
  
“Hello Taeyeon unnie, Yuri unnie.”  
  
“Seohyun ah!”  
  
The youngest of the adults was engulfed in a hug by her sister and sister-in-law, and she stumbled with the weight.  
  
“Stephanie unnie,” she greeted after being released.  
  
“Omo Seohyun ah! You’re so big already!”  
  
Seohyun bowed her head and blushed.  
  
“Unnie, I’m not a small girl anymore.”  
  
Stephanie laughed and side hugged her sister. Taeyeon smiled.  
  
“Well, since everyone’s here, shall we start?”  
  
-  
  
Dinner was boisterous. The house was more alive than usual with the children screaming and running around as the adults prepared the rest of dinner. Taeyeon was at the grill most of the time with the occasional help from Sunny. Seohyun and Yoona took care of the children, while Hyomin was alternating between helping Taeyeon and Sunny with the grill, and helping Seohyun and Yoona take care of the children. Being the only two people who knew Mr Hwang, Stephanie and Yuri sat down with him and they caught up.  
  
Throughout dinner, Taeyeon avoided Mr Hwang as much as possible. Not because she hated him, but because he still despised her. Yes, she helped make him have grandchildren possible, but they were Stephanie’s flesh and blood, and by extension, his flesh and blood. She was more than content now that Stephanie’s relationship with her father was getting better, and he loves the kids. That's important.  
  
"Taeyeon, I'll do the dishes, you go keep the guests company."  
  
She shoved Stephanie lightly to the side with her hip, and began washing the dirty plates.  
  
"I'll do it. You go keep your dad company."  
  
"But you've been doing all the work all day."  
  
"But I think you should spend some time with your father after not seeing him for quite a while."  
  
"TaeTae, you need to spend time with him too. You know he's all right with you now."  
  
Taeyeon shook her head.  
  
"Baby, you know he still doesn't fully approve of me-"  
  
"But at least he approved! Even if it's just a little."  
  
Taeyeon put the plate down and washed the soap off her hands.  
  
"Baby, yes he approved—it's just an acknowledgement of the fact that I am your wife. Nothing less, nothing more. I might as well be invisible when I'm around him. He doesn't even spare me a glance whenever I'm around. What's important is that he loves the kids, and that's all I'm asking for."  
  
Stephanie wanted to say something, but she couldn't think of any. She felt guilty for putting Taeyeon through all the pain and hurt that she had to go through all these years.  
  
She gave Taeyeon a kiss and said, "TaeTae, thank you."  
  
Taeyeon pulled Stephanie close and she kissed her again.  
  
"I went through a lot to get here today, to have you back in my arms like this. Even if I have to endure this for the rest of my life I'd gladly do it for you."  
  
She pushed Stephanie by the hips and turned her around, guiding her towards the living room where everyone was.  
  
"Now go and spend some quality time with your father before the both of you start getting too busy for each other again."  
  
"But Tae-" she resisted.  
  
Taeyeon pushed her harder and said, "No buts. Go."  
  
Stephanie turned around and stopped Taeyeon in her tracks. She looked into Taeyeon's warm chocolate eyes and said the next sentence in the most sincere way she could.  
  
"TaeTae, thank you, and I love you."  
  
Taeyeon gave her another chaste kiss on her lips and pushed her again.  
  
"I love you more. Now go, don't keep your father waiting."  
  
Stephanie left reluctantly for the lively living room with more encouragement on Taeyeon's part, and Taeyeon went back to the dishes.  
  
Deep down in her, Taeyeon had a small spark of hope, a hope that they would be one, big happy family. Nothing stopped her from hoping that she could be with Stephanie again, and nothing is stopping her again now. So Taeyeon would hope, for now.  
  
"TaeTae."  
  
Taeyeon turned around and saw Stephanie at the entrance of the kitchen. She rinsed the plate she was washing and wiped her hands dry.  
  
"Fany? I thought you were gonna be in the living room, what's wrong?"  
  
Taeyeon moved towards her wife and took her warm hand in her cold ones.  
  
"Baby?"  
  
"TaeTae, my... father wants to talk to you."  
  
"Huh?"  
  
On cue, Stephanie's father appeared along the hallway, two juice glasses in hand, beckoning her to come with him.  
  
Taeyeon squeezed Stephanie's hand reassuringly and left to follow Mr Hwang, but Stephanie held on to her.  
  
"TaeTae, I know I said that daddy's all right with you now, and that he approved of you, but I'm still scared."  
  
Taeyeon smiled warmly and patted Stephanie's hand, reassuring her again.  
  
"Baby, I told you, I'm not gonna let anything get in our way again. It's going to be okay."  
  
Stephanie was doubtful, but she trusted Taeyeon, and she let her go.  
  
-  
  
Taeyeon quickened her steps to catch up with Mr Hwang, and she found the man at the back porch, hidden from view from the living room. He set one cup down on the small table and sat down on the wooden chair.  
  
"Taeyeon, sit," he said as he gestured towards the chair.  
  
Taeyeon sat down and faced him.  
  
The house Taeyeon bought was slightly elevated on a small hill, and Mr Hwang admired the lights of Seoul's city down below. It was a little further away from the city, but the scenery was beautiful.  
  
"Relax, Taeyeon. You don't have to be so tense. Have a drink."  
  
"Y-Yes sir."  
  
Taeyeon took the cup on the table and sipped the cold juice.  
  
"The view is beautiful from up here."  
  
"Yes sir, it is."  
  
He sighed and leaned back into the chair.  
  
"You made a good choice with this house."  
  
"Thank you sir."  
  
Mr Hwang took one last gulp of his juice and set the cup down on the table. He turned towards Taeyeon and looked her in the eye.  
  
"Let me just go straight to the point, Taeyeon."  
  
Taeyeon sat up straighter in her chair and gulped. What was he going to say?  
  
"I have never approved of you getting together with Stephanie," he said.  
  
Taeyeon took a deep breath and prepared herself for what came next.  
  
"I never thought that a mere singer and songwriter like you could ever be..." he trailed off as he tried to think of the word to say, "... good enough, for my daughter--take good care of her, make time for her, spend time with her, or love her enough with your busy schedule. But," he raised a finger and crossed his legs, "I've never seen Stephanie this happy my entire life."  
  
Mr Hwang took his cup and stood up to admire the view of the city lights once more. Taeyeon stood too and chose to stand next to him. He drank the juice and turned towards her again.  
  
"I'm sure by now you know that Stephanie lost her mother when she was little."  
  
He stopped and waited for Taeyeon's acknowledgement before continuing.  
  
"She was a very... bright girl... Stephanie. Although she had lost her mother at such a young age, she always smiled. Deep down, she grieved, no doubt, but she had always smiled. And she had such a beautiful heart, just like her mother... she looks just like her mother."  
  
Mr Hwang said the last part of his sentence so quietly that she had to strain her ears to hear him.  
  
"You have to understand, Taeyeon. Stephanie was my only family left, other than Seohyun. I... I didn't want to lose her."  
  
He leaned on the wooden railing, and the only sounds surrounding them were the rustling of the leaves as the wind blew gently.  
  
"After... after my wife passed away, I was a wreck. Then, I didn't think about it, but now... now, I feel guilty. I wasn't a good father then. I drowned myself in work and alcohol, and I would always come back home drunk. Seohyun was young at that time, she barely knew anything. But Stephanie... it affected Stephanie, a lot, although she didn't show it."  
  
He took another sip of his drink.  
  
"So Stephanie left home, came all the way here to realize her dream of becoming a singer. I kept tabs on her, and then one day I got the news that she got together with you, and even moved in with you, an orphan in the harsh world struggling to make ends meet. How could this person ever give my daughter a good life?"  
  
Taeyeon looked up to see Mr Hwang staring at her. She met his gaze and it pierced through her, as if searching for something deep within. She felt exposed.  
  
"I did everything I could to make her come back. I made a deal with her. I'm sure you're no stranger to this."  
  
"No sir, I'm not."  
  
He raked a hand through his greying hair and sighed.  
  
"And then, that's when I realize, those three years of her being apart from you, she wasn't truly happy. And I also realize, that she has grown up. She wasn't the young girl who used to come running to me whenever I would come home from work anymore. She grew up faster after her mother's death. She had to, for Seohyun's sake."  
  
Taeyeon spared a glance behind her and saw everyone else in the living room smiling, laughing, and making lots of noise as the played a game.  
  
"So then I realized, that I needed to let go."  
  
Taeyeon turned to face Mr Hwang again, and the man was looking at the scenery in front of him with wistful eyes.  
  
"My daughter is all grown up, and she knows what's best for herself. She can make her own decisions now. I can't make her stay in LA, when the place she wants to be is in Seoul."  
  
When he turned towards her again, his eyes were gentle and full of understanding. Taeyeon guessed that was how he must've looked like before his wife moved on.  
  
"You know Taeyeon, our parents didn't approve of us too."  
  
Taeyeon didn't quite understand what Mr Hwang said.  
  
"Excuse me sir?"  
  
"My wife and I, our parents didn't exactly approve of us."  
  
He stared nostalgically into the distance and smiled at his own thoughts.  
  
"Especially Cathrine's parents, they wouldn't even let me see her. Cathrine wouldn't even back down, and she fought for us. One day, when our parents saw our resilience, determination, and love for each other, they gave up and let us get married. But I didn't see, I didn't see that what I was doing to Stephanie was the same thing our parents did to us. But Stephanie fought, just like her mother, and she never gave up."  
  
"But—"  
  
"But she took the deal and left you here? Because she loves you. Part of the deal was that I would help propel you to stardom if she came back, and that was what she did. It broke her, I saw it, but she loved you so much and she wanted to see you achieve your dreams so much, she sacrificed her dream so you could achieve yours.  
  
"And then you wonder, what did she fight for when she left you. Don't you think so, Taeyeon?"  
  
"How..." Taeyeon wet her lips and cleared her throat, "how did you know, sir?"  
  
"I've been there before Taeyeon, I know. She fought, Taeyeon, she fought with all that she had. She never let the love in her for you die, never. I could see it in her eyes. She fought a battle to keep her love burning for you Taeyeon. And she fought a good fight."  
  
Taeyeon nodded blindly and stared into the distance.  
  
"I hope you would forgive my daughter for what she did, and I can only hope that one day you would forgive me for what I did to the both of you."  
  
"If I dare ask, Mr Hwang, did you and your wife forgive your parents?"  
  
Mr Hwang smiled.  
  
"We did."  
  
"I don't see any reason why we wouldn't do the same thing Mr Hwang. I'm sure although she has said otherwise, deep down inside, I believe she would forgive you."  
  
"Thank you, Taeyeon, for giving my daughter a good life, and for letting me have two, wonderful grandchildren."  
  
Taeyeon chose her next words carefully.  
  
"Fany... she would've loved to see you happy again sir, and I would do anything to make her happy."  
  
Mr Hwang smiled, and Taeyeon thought that he had such a fatherly smile.  
  
"Dad? TaeTae?"  
  
Stephanie poked her head out of the door and invited herself onto the porch when neither she nor Mr Hwang said anything. Taeyeon stretched out her hand and Stephanie held on to it tightly, moving to stand close to her wife.  
  
"What were you guys talking about?"  
  
Mr Hwang shrugged.  
  
"Nothing much. What brings you out here Steph?"  
  
"Well, everyone's playing games inside, and they were wondering where you two were, so I thought I'd come get you guys."  
  
He heaved a big sigh.  
  
"I'm too old for those games. I think I'm just gonna head in and get some more juice and watch them play."  
  
Stephanie laughed.  
  
"Okay daddy."  
  
Mr Hwang excused himself, and there was just her and Stephanie. As soon as Mr Hwang disappeared from sight Stephanie pushed Taeyeon back into the chair and wrapped her arms around her  neck as she sat on her.  
  
"How did it go?"  
  
Taeyeon hugged her wife and buried her face in her wife's chest.  
  
"It went better than expected," she mumbled.  
  
Stephanie let Taeyeon rest on her as she ran a hand through Taeyeon's still blond locks.  
  
"What did he say?"  
  
What did he mean by what he said? Taeyeon wondered.  
  
"I—"  
  
"Taeyeon! Fany!"  
  
The couple looked up to see Hyomin in the door way, oblivious to what they were doing, too hyper and excited from the adrenalin of the game.  
  
"Come on! What are you guys doing here! You're missing out on all the fun! Everyone's looking for you!"  
  
With that, Hyomin disappeared as fast as she appeared. Taeyeon chuckled.  
  
"Well?"  
  
Taeyeon looked at Stephanie's inquiring stare and feigned ignorance.  
  
"Well what?"  
  
"Kim Taeyeon, you know what I'm talking about."  
  
Taeyeon gave her a peck on the lips and said, "I'll tell you later baby."  
  
Stephanie hesitated fora split second, but agreed. She figured that Taeyeon still needed time to process whatever just happened with her father.  
  
"Okay."  
  
Taeyeon gestured for Stephanie to get off.  
  
"All right, let's go. We don't want to keep everyone waiting."  
  
-  
  
It was late, and the children were half dozing off at the drawing table and the adults were dead tired after playing the board games. Jessica was completely knocked out, her head resting on her drawing. Jinri kept rubbing her eyes and Juhyun was struggling to stay awake, her head bobbing back and forth as she held a crayon in her hand, trying to colour on the piece of paper in front of her.  
  
Jessica didn't even stir when Yuri picked her up from the chair and Yoona took Jessica's drawing.  
  
"Come on Jinri, it's time for bed," Seohyun said as she picked her niece up. The toddler yawned and wrapped her arms around her aunt's neck, promptly falling asleep.  
  
Stephanie took the crayon out of Juhyun's hands and carried her up from the chair. The other twin struggled, but it was futile.  
  
"No! Mummy! I want to finish my drawing!" she said, yawning.  
  
Stephanie rested her daughter's head on her shoulder and patted it gently.  
  
"It's way past your bedtime sweetie, you can finish your drawing tomorrow."  
  
Juhyun kicked as hard as she could and whined.  
  
"Mummy~! I want my drawing!"  
  
Taeyeon took the drawing off the table and slipped it onto Juhyun's stretched out hands. She relaxed the moment she held on to it and stopped struggling. Stephanie turned around and mouthed a thank you to Taeyeon.  
  
"You're welcome," she whispered.  
  
Stephanie and Seohyun took the two children upstairs to put them to bed, and Taeyeon headed towards the front door to send the guests off. Yuri and Yoona with a sleeping Jessica left first with a promise of getting together again someday for dinner. Sunny and Hyomin were next at the door, and Taeyeon hugged both of them.  
  
"Thanks for helping me clean up the house."  
  
Sunny waved a dismissing hand.  
  
"It's fine. Thanks for having us over."  
  
"You can come over anytime you want and hang out, or help us take care of the kids. They love you to bits and pieces."  
  
"Hahaha! All right, I won't bother you anymore. Go get some rest Taeng."  
  
"I will, thanks Sunny."  
  
The couple got into Sunny's car and waved as they drove off into the night. Taeyeon closed the door, and turned to see Mr Hwang standing in the hallway, grabbing his coat from the coat hanger.  
  
"You're leaving already, Mr Hwang?"  
  
"Unfortunately. I have a business meeting tomorrow morning, I need to get some sleep."  
  
Taeyeon moved aside to let Mr Hwang put on his shoes.  
  
"Mr Hwang, if you don't mind, you can spend the night here. I'm sure Fany or I can send you tomorrow for you meeting."  
  
"Thank you Taeyeon, but I have some reports I left back at the hotel that I have to read before tomorrow. Besides, Seohyun's already staying here for the night, I don't want to bother you anymore."  
  
"Oh, okay."  
  
Mr Hwang opened the door and stepped into the cold night. The driver was already waiting for him on her driveway, and she trailed behind him as the driver opened the passenger door. He got into the car and Taeyeon bowed.  
  
"Have a safe trip Mr Hwang."  
  
What he did next surprised Taeyeon. He clasped her shoulder and squeezed it gently.  
  
"Stop calling me Mr Hwang, Taeyeon. Abeoji will do."  
  
Taeyeon's throat went dry at the gesture as she struggled to call the man tore her and Stephanie apart by an intimate name she never imagined she would call him.  
  
"Y-Yes... A-Abeoji."  
  
He patted her shoulder twice, firmly, and got into the car.  
  
"Wait! Daddy!"  
  
Stephanie came running out from inside the house to the side of the car, and Mr Hwang rolled down his window.  
  
"Daddy, you're leaving already?"  
  
"I need to get back to the hotel. I have some reports to read before tomorrow."  
  
"Okay."  
  
"Goodnight Steph."  
  
"Night Daddy."  
  
He rolled the windows up again, but stopped halfway.  
  
"Oh, Taeyeon?"  
  
"Yes, Abeoji?"  
  
Taeyeon ignored the incredulous look Stephanie was giving her, choosing to hold her hand instead.  
  
"Do you remember the last thing you said just now?"  
  
*I would do anything to make her happy.*  
  
"Yes sir, I do."  
  
"Can I take it as a promise then?"  
  
"You have my word sir."  
  
"Good. I trust you to take good care of my daughter."  
  
“Yes sir.”  
  
He rolled up the window and the driver pulled out of the driveway. Taeyeon pulled Stephanie close and walked to the house, hand in hand.  
  
"TaeTae?"  
  
"Yes baby?"  
  
"What did you and Daddy talk about?"  
  
Taeyeon was silent as she trudged up the driveway, and Stephanie started to get worried.  
  
"TaeTae?"  
  
"Baby, do you wanna go for a walk?" Taeyeon asked.  
  
"Sure..."  
  
They took the cobbled side path to the back of the house, and Taeyeon sat on the swing, pulling Stephanie on top of her. Stephanie wrapped her arms around her neck, and she wrapped her arms around Stephanie's waist. Taeyeon swung them slowly, and Stephanie kissed her as she dug her hand into Taeyeon's hair.  
  
"Did something bad happen TaeTae?"  
  
"No," she breathed.  
  
"Then what's wrong?" Stephanie whispered.  
  
What was wrong? The talk went well didn't it?  
  
"Nothing..."  
  
Stephanie let Taeyeon hold her, and Taeyeon was thankful for the way Stephanie was stroking her head soothingly.  
  
"Baby."  
  
"Yes TaeTae?"  
  
"Your father told me everything."  
  
"What did he tell you?"  
  
"Everything. Everything from why he didn't approve of me to your decision to go back to LA and his reasons for making you do so."  
  
Stephanie didn't stop stroking her head, and she found solace in Stephanie's chest.  
  
"And then what happened?" Stephanie asked softly.  
  
"He asked... if I could forgive him, for what he did to us."  
  
Stephanie cupped her cheek and brushed a thumb across her skin.  
  
"TaeTae, I know I said it before that I can never forgive him, but..."  
  
Taeyeon pressed her hand against the palm on her cheek.  
  
"It's okay. I don't see a reason why you shouldn't if he's willing to change and make up for his mistakes."  
  
"Thank you TaeTae."  
  
She smiled and tucked a tuft of stray hair behind Stephanie's ear.  
  
"Anything for you baby."  
  
A strong gust of wind blew, and Stephanie shivered in her hold.  
  
"Let's go back in. It's getting cold out here."  
  
When they got back into the house, they found Seohyun in the kitchen, snacking on some fruits.  
  
"Hello Unnie, Taeyeon unnie."  
  
"What are you up to Seohyun?"  
  
"I haven't eaten enough fruits for the day, so I'm eating them now."  
  
Taeyeon chuckled. Typical Seohyun.  
  
"Would you like some Unnie? These apples are really sweet."  
  
"Sure, I'll try one."  
  
Stephanie took a slice of apple and tasted it, feeding Taeyeon another slice.  
  
"Mmm, they're really sweet."  
  
"I'm glad you like them Taeyeon unnie."  
  
Taeyeon gobbled the rest of the slice and took another slice of apple.  
  
"Seohyun ah, Taeyeon and I are tired, your stuff are already in your room right?"  
  
"Yes Unnie."  
  
"You know where the stuff are, right?"  
  
"Yes Unnie, don't worry."  
  
"All right."  
  
Stephanie gave Seohyun a hug and patted her head affectionately.  
  
"I'll see you in the morning."  
  
"See you Unnie, see you Taeyeon unnie."  
  
"Night Seohyun, sleep tight."  
  
The couple left and headed up the stairs. They stopped by the twin's room, and seeing that they were sleeping soundly, they closed the door silently and went into their room.  
  
"TaeTae, I'm gonna take a shower."  
  
"Okay."  
  
Stephanie walked into the bathroom, and Taeyeon followed after her.  
  
"TaeTae, what are you doing?"  
  
Taeyeon smirked and pushed her gently against the sink, kissing her.  
  
"Helping you," she said in between kisses, her hand busy feeling Stephanie's soft skin underneath her shirt.  
  
"But TaeTae... aren't you... tired...?"  
  
They pulled apart for a moment as Taeyeon finally managed to pull off Stephanie's shirt.  
  
"Baby, I did all the work today, don't you think you should make it up to me?"  
  
Stephanie smirked and began kissing Taeyeon again, pushing herself off the sink as she pressed Taeyeon to the door, closing it shut. Taeyeon felt Stephanie's burning touch against her skin as her hand slid down her neck, down to her chest and began to unbutton her blouse. She shivered when she felt Stephanie's hot breath in her ear, her husky voice ringing in the air.  
  
"With pleasure."

THE END