

“We’re Going to Sing for You”

Garrett Myers Kim
Charlottesville, Virginia

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“Don’t be trapped in someone else’s dream.”

V of BTS

“Embrace your individuality and let your light shine!”

Jennie of BLACKPINK

“Even though the language is different, the music is the same.”

Kai of EXO

PROLOGUE

Nagasaki, Japan

1945

Note: Much of this little opening right here comes from a series of interviews I've been doing with Lauren Richardson—an academic from Australia who has devoted her life to “Pipokja”, North Korean victims of the atomic bomb. While this is largely based on the transcripts she gave me with survivors of the bombing, there are details missing—In short, excuse any moments where this feels too fantastical. Work in progress.)

Yoon Jae-Jo was Korean but not. Born in Japan to a pair of Korean conscripted servants, Yoon was technically Japanese. He studied at a school with the other children of conscripted Koreans, where he learned everything he would need to know to carry out his parents' jobs – manufacturing goods, food, weapons. And there was the obvious resentment for the Japanese that Yoon's parents' had passed down to him, but there was also the knowledge that he had never even seen the country that defined his role in the world – he was Korean in that he spoke the language (with his parents, only with his parents), and that his sister left when he was eleven to become a comfort woman for the Japanese soldiers, and that his eyebrows were wider, and that he could not go to the hospitals that Japanese citizens used, and that when people looked at him it was as if they were seeing through him, as if he wasn't there at all – in all other ways he was Japanese. And underneath the resentment was the desperate frustration—the knowledge that if it weren't for his parents he would be just as Japanese as the people who did not see him, the people who looked straight through him.

His parents became old and haggard, and the memory of his sister's face faded into obscurity. He took over his father's job transporting materials from factory to factory with a

wooden rickshaw with one wonky wheel – he had to position his body a little to the left for it to move in a straight line through the streets of Nagasaki.

He was seventeen, and in an average day he would walk twenty miles, dragging loads of sheet metal, of bullets, of plane propellers behind him, yelling out the same commands whenever he arrived, the same “last call” warnings at the day’s end. He thought of girls, sometimes, but mostly he thought about the war – his fear that the Americans would march through any day now, that the home nation he’d never even seen had already been reduced to rubble in the crossfire.

On August 6th, 1945, Yoon Jae-Jo was on the outskirts of ___ when he saw a bright light in the distance – an explosion that, in his mind, was likely just a larger ___ of the bombings he’d become familiarized with over the past few months. And despite the shivers Moon felt beneath his feet and the way the flash above the city seemed to linger in the sky, Moon also knew that the bombings did not excuse conscripted laborers from completing their jobs. Entire factories of them were turned to ash, brothels went down in flames over the sounds of crackling screams. And what Moon found as he got closer to Hiroshima was that the air took on a metallic smell – the air became thick, like wet paint drooping down atmosphere. The clouds looked hollow, he saw fire in the distance. When he reached the factory there was a group of workers standing outside, staring out into the torched horizon, at a silhouette in the distance – a rickshaw runner stumbling down the road, orange waves of heat changing his shape, shifting the length of his neck and arms, distorting his limbs.

“Who is that?” Moon asked. The men hadn’t notice his approach, but when he spoke they turned around. Somewhere around ten Korean men, a few Japanese, all of their cheeks bright red, roots of red veins branching out under the skin.

“Byung Lee,” one man said, his voice rough, grave. Moon lowered his rickshaw to the ground, watched the man’s feet crossing over one another, like the drunk soldiers that Moon had seen leaving the brothel on his way to work.

“He’s going to fall,” one of the Japanese men said, looking around at the group of them. “Somebody, go help him! Somebody go to him!”

But the crowd stood silent – staring into the distance, listening into the quiet, hearing echoes of imagined wails, pleas for help. The man in the distance stopped, dropped to one knee, and fell forward quickly. And perhaps it was the lack of sound when the man’s body hit the ground, or the repeated commands of the Japanese foremen, but seventeen-year-old Moon Gim ran past the crowd of men older than him, men who were old enough to remember a time before Japan, before being taken from their homes. He ran down the dust-covered road and felt his lungs working harder than usual, pumping in air that felt thick and dirty. And the closer Moon got to the fallen man the more details of the distant city he could make out. Piles of buildings like mounts of stone – a horizon of ash and dust, fires both small and enormous that danced across all directions. And again that smell, like napalm mixed with rotten eggs, rancid meat. He reached the man in the road, glanced at his empty rickshaw, the winding trail its wheels had made in the grey dirt.

“My friend,” Moon said, taking the man by the shoulders and flipping him onto his back, “are you—”

The first thing he noticed were the man’s lips – blackened like a frozen corpse, cracking at the edges, oozing blood and yellow and brown. The skin on his face was peeling off in pink, bubbled layers, like blisters, traveling across a burned scalp, preparing to burst, as if there was a fire beneath his skin. Moon inhaled the scent, took a step back, covering his mouth, working out

a gag. He looked to the other men in the distance, still standing there, watching him. And even more than the man's charred face – the burns and puss that Moon himself would experience in the coming days, weeks, months, years – Moon would remember the feeling of looking back towards that crowd in the distance, feeling a burst of elation over the praise he'd receive from the two Japanese men, the bravery they'd applaud him for, how separately he'd be seen from the other Koreans, the ones who chose fear over order. He grabbed both of the man's hands and squeezed at their warm palms as he lifted the man over his shoulders. And by the time he made his way back to the crew, back to that already defunct factory, the air had already burrowed deep beneath his skin, beneath the meat of his muscles and his bones. He had absorbed the air around him, breathed it in with deep, gasping gulps, sending particles into his lungs that ricocheted through his body, already glowing across generations, buried into the parts of him that carried the histories that came before him and the histories that come after. It was a virus that clung to lineage. It was a legacy of sickness that was invisible to the naked eye.

He dropped the man at the feet of the crowd, and when he looked up for their approval he saw gasps of horror, men retching at the smell of this soon-to-be-dead body. Moon let his eyes fall on the Japanese foreman from before, waited for the praise that he'd rewritten his life to earn. The foreman looked to Moon, and then let his gaze fall back onto the horizon, his eyes already redder than before.

“The rickshaw,” the foreman said, his voice stern and unfeeling, “you forgot to bring back the rickshaw!”

AUDITIONS

2017

“The star shines for everyone in the world, but in reality, it itself is surrounded in darkness.”

Tablo, Epik High

“Life is like a piano. The white keys represent happiness and the black represent sadness. But as you go through life, remember that the black keys make music too.”

Yongguk, BAP

“The distance between celebrities and fans should be the distance you stand from the heater during winter. If it’s too close, it’ll be too hot, but if you’re too far, it’ll be too cold.”

Jinyoung, GOT7

DREAM BOY

Gangnam, South Korea

While the others slept, Isaac practiced. He stood in the middle of the empty dance studio, wiping crust from his eyes, leaning down to touch one foot, then the other. Stretching the ache from his bones, gritting teeth as tightened muscle slowly released, turned to clay. He kept his eyes closed, breathing deep, shaking breaths.

It was 2am. Noon back home, but he needed to stop thinking like this – “home” vs. Korea. He brought his feet together and bent low enough that his head was between his legs, directed all his focus towards not passing out, towards the center of consciousness he could just barely see through the fog of fatigue, hunger, thirst, want, hope, fear, fear. He needed to free himself from the mindset of “home” vs. Korea. It did not need to be one or the other.

Isaac slowly brought himself back upright and felt the slow crawl of blood back to his head. He opened his eyes, waited for his vision to clear.

Across from him was a floor-to-ceiling mirror that spanned entire wall. There was a ballet barre that stemmed out from the glass, made from the same faded mahogany as the floor – worn and still semi-glossy under the room’s florescent lights. A big stereo against the right wall, a little cabinet full of hand towels against the left, sound absorbing panels plastered everywhere. The whole room had the faint smell of artificial cleaner – of Clorox and purple spray and sanitizer – but more than anything it had the stench of sweat, of hard work that had burrowed itself into the wood, into the glass. Jin, the most senior of the trainees, had once told Isaac that the dance

studio's mirror held "all the souls of the ones who don't make it. It bends the glass, fucks the mirror up. They're staring back at you from the other side, telling you you're ugly so that they don't feel so lonely. Dumbest ghosts ever but *geolughan ttong* can they dance."

Isaac considered this as he stared back at his reflection. The fuzz had cleared from his vision, and he took stock of his posture, of his body and jawline and hair. The boy staring back at him was tall – 6'1, long-legged and broad-shouldered with a thin, feminine neck. He had short, swooshy hair, light and airy with yesterday's leave-in-conditioner. High Korean cheekbones and a sharp jawline, threaded eyebrows, a nice right-angle of an American nose. There was the slightest hint of post-sleep bloat in the fat around his mouth, little pools of sodium he prepared himself to sweat out. He took a few steps towards the mirror, heard the squeak of his sneakers against the wood. Now, almost face to face with his reflection, he could make out the fatigue in his eyes, in his pale pale skin – a smear of purple under his lashes, the raised mounds of bags that grew larger every morning. A tired droop in his eyelids that almost made him look like a full-blooded Korean. Almost, but not quite. If he wasn't careful, if he continued spending night after night alone in this windowless box of a room, there would soon be wrinkles, lines, signs of age too severe for a seventeen-year-old pop-star.

"—the ones who don't make it. Staring back at you from the other side."

Isaac turned around, walked to the cinderblock of a speaker and turned it on. There was a sharp little *ding* as it connected to his phone, the electric buzz of static humming from its core. Isaac took his phone from his pocket, checked his email before queueing up the song. There was a message from Minnie with the subject line *SCHEDULE FOR 6/16/22*. Isaac opened it, read through each item while holding his breath.

6:00: MEAL

6:15: DANCE STUDIO GRP A/VOCAL STUDIO GRP B

8:30: BREAK
9:15: DANCE STUDIO GRP B/VOCAL STUDIO GRP A
11:30: PHYSICAL THERAPY W/ BYUNG-CHUL
12:30: FACE TRAINING/PHOTOSHOOT (ALL CONTESTANTS)
13:30: BREAK
15:00: DANCE STUDIO GRP B/VOCAL STUDIO GRP A
17:15: DANCE STUDIO GRP A/VOCAL STUDIO GRP B
19:30: CHALLENGE (ALL CONTESTANTS)
21:00: EOD / INDEPENDENT PRACTICE

Isaac's eyes widened at the all-caps "CHALLENGE". It was week four, and he'd already lost track of the days, of how long it'd been since the last elimination, since the last group of boys had gone home. There were twelve of them left, now. Two teams of six, and Isaac was the only mixed-kid, the only *happa* left. At the beginning there'd been two others – one "blasian" from Texas named Manny and a half-Indian Canadian named Zahir. For the first two weeks all three of them avoided one another, silently knew that there would not be room for all of them to end up in the final group. They also knew that, because of this, any performance of support would be immediately clocked as fake, so why even try?

Zahir left in the second week after numerous disagreements with the show's producers. They wanted to change his name from Zahir Malkani to Vinny Vengeance, first because they deemed his real name too similar to ex-One Direction member Zayn Malik, second because they feared their core audience wouldn't be able to pronounce the R in his name.

Manny had been one of the top contestants – aside from Jin, Isaac had viewed him as his top competition. Then, last week, there'd been a challenge round where they all had to go back and forth between singing in English and Korean, switching whenever the producers pressed a small red button. They'd had a guest judge that day – a small, nebbish little K-pop producer who'd worked on tracks with Era 1 luminaries like H.O.T. and Fly to the Sky. And when it came time for the judges to voice their results, the man had narrowed his sights on Manny.

“Can go again?” the man had asked, slouching in his chair. “Can just you?”

One of the producers had pressed the button,

And when Manny finished singing the man gave a polite smile, a little nod. Manny smiled back.

“Sounds too black,” the man said, “too much scary, too much. *Kkamdung-i*.”

In the days that followed Manny’s elimination, Isaac had been trailed by visions of his parents; his Korean father, his white mom. He imagined them watching him when the show premiered, yelling at their T.V. for him to jump to the other boys’ defense. In his dreams, the twelve eliminated contestants stalked him through the tubes of a McDonalds Playplace, thick with the smell of grease and fries. He could hear them army-crawling behind him, behind his little-boy hands grasping for an exit. He could hear cameramen outside of the tubes, banging fists against plastic, yelling for him to come out. In some versions of the dream, he made it to the exit, found his mom waiting for him with outstretched arms. Dream-Isaac would bury all ten of his fingers into the fat of her lower tummy, gripping her for safety.

“Hold on, pipsqueak,” she would whisper, “my little squeak.”

“Okay okay okay,” Isaac whispered. He closed his email, opened up the song they’d been rehearsing for the past week – “MILKSHAKE” by Korea’s newest sensation, HYPERBOYS. There was a charge that began to run through his body, up his legs and through his arms. His thumb trembled over the “play” button, his heart started to race in off-tempo bursts of triplets. This happened, when he woke up early to go rehearse, as if every cell in his body was rallying to announce their fatigue, their unwillingness to participate.

“Come on,” Isaac whispered, letting his finger drop onto the cold glass of his phone. “*Il-eona*.”

And the song began.

There were twinkling keys, the slight echo of a bass racing closer and closer through a sonic fog, a digital 808 building to a drop, to a terrible eruption of early-morning sound.

The screams of their dance instructor rang in his head, “It’s like a one, two, three, ta-TAK!” He slammed his left foot against the ground, followed it with a razor-sharp turn on the left heel. This last bit, this left-heel-turn, this was the move that Isaac had struggled with for the entirety of yesterday’s rehearsal.

“You detarded?” one of the producers had asked, pointing a small, boyish finger into Isaac’s chest. “You afraid of falling? You want to spend all day? All day, one move?” The camera had closed in on Isaac’s face, waiting to see if he would cry, if he would break in a way that would make for satisfying television. He’d maintained composure, though.

Isaac grit his teeth, caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror’s reflection. He already felt the first few sprouts of sweat beading on his scalp, climbing up each hair, and when he restarted the song and let the first few notes build into the opening drop and grit his teeth in anticipation of the opening jump he tasted the thick, copper taste of his own spit, the kind that comes up from the lungs after a sprint. He leapt into the air, kept direct eye contact with his reflection while his feet hit every mark. And over the line of C chords and the funky bassline and the techno distortion, Isaac read the dance moves like sheet music, passing like signs on a racetrack.

The song moved into the pre-chorus, building and building, pulling Isaac’s body along in a sequence of muscle memory, seconds away from the move, from the one two three ta-TAK twist turn kick. The instrumental went silent, the groups voices came together in perfect harmony.

“and I just wanna see you SHAKE—”

Isaac flung his left leg into the air, drove his heel down into the ground, moved his gaze from his face to his foot. And in the split-second before he turned his foot – as he felt his toes flex against sole – he saw some shift on his face, out of the corner of his eye. A flash of teeth and age, the shadows of crows feet waiting for him to let his guard down, the spirits of all those broken idols who came before. He looked back, gazed into his wide, frantic eyes. He shifted his foot, moved into the turn.

“SHAKE OFF ALL THE FEELINGS SHAKE OFF—”

Something slipped – he’d lifted his heel too quickly, put too much pressure on the edge of his foot – and there was the sharp, immediate blast of pain, shooting up from his ankle to his knee. His whole leg slipped then, sending him crashing to the ground, his arms still moving with the song, his jaw going slack at the pain. He landed on his left hip, felt the bone crash against the floor, felt his left arm lift to cover his face before it reached the ground.

And even though things went dark – even through the bolts of static rushing up his leg and arm, pulsing in time with the vibrations of the song, passing through the floor in staccato tremors – Isaac still felt his body half-moving along in muscle memory. His arms, his shoulders, still twitching to the song.

There was a long period where the song would quiet to a muted hum and then rise into a barrage of sound, and when Isaac finally opened his eyes the sharpness of the lights sent stars across his vision – slow, drifting blotches passing over his eyes like clouds. He opened his mouth and then closed it, became conscious of the vibrations against his cheek – he suddenly felt like his brain was rattling around in his head, felt the immediate need to turn off the song. He did not see his phone on the ground in front of him, and when he turned his head to look behind him

there was another jolt of pain, like some invisible force was pulling a string buried deep in his chest, yanking something out from his heart and lungs, trying to retrieve it from his mouth.

He opened his eyes, spotted his phone a few inches away. He flung his arm out, fastened his fingers around its corners, lifted it to his face and stopped the song. And when the room settled into silence and the floor and walls and mirror settled into stillness, Isaac heard his breathing. Dry and shaky. Withered.

He checked the time on his phone. He swallowed. He licked his dry, tired lips. There was still a layer of sleep on his tongue, a sour copper in his teeth. There was cold, tasteless sweat dripping off his upper lip, hanging off his eyelashes. He had fat in his cheeks, pain in his leg. He needed to push through this wall and every wall after. He was seventeen and he had dreams. It was around 3:30am. 1:30pm, back home. There were three hours before breakfast, likely two hours before others started crowding into the rehearsal room to get a head start on dance practice.

“Okay.” Isaac said. “*Il-eona.*”

And then there came a knock on the door, light and unmistakable. Isaac pushed himself up with his hands, sat on his butt with his legs sprawled out in front of him. He’d started formulating a game plan for the day – he would need to find a way to get out of dance practice that morning, he would need to find a way to step out and find painkillers, a doctor if it was really bad. He would need to apply heat and then ice, or ice and then heat. He would need to fake his way through the pain, give the leg a rest and time to heal without letting on that he was hurt. No whimpering, no tears. He was stronger than his body, he was stronger...

Three more knocks followed, and then the door opened. Isaac stared at the mirror, and for a moment his sleep-deprived brain thought the face that walked into the room was his own – smiling and alert and handsome.

“Ahh,” Jin said, “I don’t know why I knock, I forget that even though you can hear me, I can’t hear you.” He motioned to the soundproofing panels lining the walls and gave a long, drawn-out yawn, showcasing how smooth his skin stayed no matter how far it stretched. “I hope you didn’t yell for me to come in. Kim Doo-na will slice you up for that.”

“I’m already saying hello,” Isaac said, doing his best to look casual, unbothered. “She can tell when I’ve talked in my sleep, it doesn’t matter if I scream or whisper.”

Jin walked over to the stereo and squatted down before it in what Isaac’s father had always called “rice picker stance” – ass-to-floor, knees-to-chest. He had his fingers around the volume knob, slowly turning it lower and lower, revealing that what Isaac had thought was silence had been polluted with the buzz of the speaker.

“The static doesn’t bother you?” Jin said.

“I stopped noticing it, I guess.”

Jin stood up, walked over to Isaac and plopped down next to him. He stretched his legs out, leaned forward into a deep stretch.

“The dedicated one,” Jin said, smiling, “Mr. Can’t Stop Won’t Stop. Mr. Beast Mode, huh?”

Jin was the only born-and-bred Korean on the show with a passable “American” accent. It was a source of pride for him – he often bragged about the hours he’d spent in front of the mirror in his early days of training, building up the muscles in his tongue, familiarizing himself with every syllable. There was still the slightest hint in his R’s, though, as if there were some phonetic boundaries too perilous to cross.

“You know,” Jin said, “some of the other guys are up on the rooftop practicing together. Your group, mostly. I thought you’d be up there with them.” Jin shifted, got himself into a downward dog.

“I kept fucking up our rehearsal yesterday,” Isaac said. “Lee-jung kept having to pull me out of the group so that he could watch me do the steps alone. Everybody—”

“Ahhhh!” Jin said, turning to him with his hair hanging down, the blood rushing to his face. “I’ve been there! And they all sit against the wall and watch?”

“Next level humiliating,” Isaac said. “Next-gen humiliation.”

“You know, a few years ago, I had this one dance coach who would record us, and then if you fucked up he’d make everyone sit down and watch the video back ten times, *ten*, and you’d have to watch yourself make the same mistake over and over again. I cried once, and he recorded that too. Me and these ten other kids had to watch my face burst into tears ten times.”

“How old were you?” Isaac asked. Jin walked his hands towards his feet, straightened his spine until his whole body became a thin, unshaking triangle.

“Thirteen, I think. My second year.”

It had become clear to Isaac on his first day that Jin was the most experienced of the group, the standard for the others, the leader. He’d been scouted for training and development (what everybody here called T&D) when he was eleven. He’d left his home in the countryside, moved into a dormitory with other boys, and had spent the last seven years hopping between survival shows, casting calls. He’d made it to the final round for Stray Kids, Seventeen, GOT7. In the first week, almost everyone noted how much Isaac looked like Jin, how Isaac could be Jin’s “namdongsaeng,” his little brother. Unlike the others, Jin has already had the eyelid surgery, giving him a wide, western look that beautifully compliments the obvious Asian of his face. Through every little interaction they’d had with one another, Isaac always felt terribly conscious of the fact that Jin was born in Korea, that he didn’t need to prove himself. Last week, when the

producers had interviewed Isaac about which of his fellow contestants he thought should be left out of the final six, Isaac named Jin.

“Have you been practicing that move from yesterday?” Jin asked.

“The twist-turn thing, yeah.”

“Bison was saying they were hard on you yesterday. Said you weren’t watching what your teammates were doing.”

“And so I watch everybody else’s feet and then they tell me I’m not focusing enough on my own shit.”

Jin stood up, dipped into an almost-split and bent to touch each toe. Even watching this made Isaac place his hand on his knee, feeling around for the source of the dull, still-ringing pain in his leg.

“That shit…” Jin said, “that’s really what fucked me up when I first started. If you’re too good at dancing solo, you’re not working as a team. If you’re too good at dancing with a team, then you kind of just fade into the background. You gotta be part of the group, but you also gotta stand out enough that fangirls can pick you out as their favorite. You gotta stand out enough that the label can imagine you going solo after.”

“Assuming the group breaks up or something.”

Jin brought his legs together and gave a long, deep exhale. He walked over to the speaker, took his phone from his pocket.

“They always break up,” he said, staring down at the screen. “It’s the unspoken rule. You need to pretend it’s not, but all of us and all of them know it. Doesn’t matter if it’s some twenty-dude supergroup or five teenage girls, all it takes is for one member to get that little seed in their

brains, that ‘oh, maybe I’ll do better on my own.’ A little seed that grows into visions of being a solo artist, getting all the fans for themselves.”

And then Jin looked up at the mirror, then turned his head away from their reflections to look at him directly. It was the first face-to-face eye contact they’d had since Jin had entered the room, and something about it made Isaac feel uneasy. Jin cracked his neck, shifted his face into a severe, weighty expression that Isaac hadn’t seen him make before – as if what he was about to say was important enough that he could not deliver it through the façade of polite friendship.

“The thing is, we already have that seed, that solo seed. All of us.” He tapped his pointer finger against the side of his head. “Up here. Just a matter of whose sprouts up first.”

He bent down, turned the volume knob back up again so that the electric buzz sizzled through the air.

“Sometimes I can’t tell if you’re trying to give me advice or if you’re trying to big dog me,” Isaac said. Jin turned back to face him.

“This is an American expression? ‘Big dog’ you?”

“I think so. Maybe. I might be getting it wrong. I’m a little foggy.”

“You’re foggy because you’ve been practicing alone all night, right? Because you were waiting for someone else to wake up and find you and see how hard you work. Or maybe you want cameras to catch you limping out of here, to have proof that you want it the most. Because you want to prove you don’t need sleep like the rest of us. Because you’re big dog, because you’re most dedicated American.”

Then, just as quickly as it came on, the severity dropped from Jin’s face. He looked back towards the mirror, and when Isaac met his eyes Jin was smiling that same, casual smile from before. And for all the anxiety that conversations with Jin evoked in Isaac, there was a part of

him that liked the back and forth they had – the way every conversation felt like two rival actors slowly letting their performances slip, moving between respect and spite, ending up somewhere in the middle.

“*RUFF!*” Isaac barked. Jin jumped a little – just barely, a quick lift in his shoulders – and then he let his face shift into a full-mouthed, authentic laugh. Isaac felt the pain building in his leg, knew that he needed to apply heat and cold before the day started, before Jin and the cameras and everyone else trained their eyes on him.

“Mr. Big Dog, huh? Mr. *Kegogi*. Mr. Delicious.”

“I actually saw a *kegogi* place downtown the other day. I thought that was just made up.”

“Only old people eat that now,” Jin said. “We were scaring all the other countries away. People like dogs too much. I’m more of a cat guy myself.”

“Yeah?”

“Oh yeah. I don’t mind how stringy the meat gets – I kind of like the texture. Good with rice.”

Isaac was quiet for a moment, and then Jin burst into laughter.

“I’m fucking with you,” he said. “Do I look Chinese to you?”

They settled into a nice, pleasant silence. Jin unlocked his phone.

Do you wanna run this back with me? Practice your twist-turn?”

Isaac’s smile dropped – he felt himself scrambling to find an excuse that made sense.

“I’m actually gonna go see if the rest of my group is still practicing, see if all this practice made a difference or not. You said they’re up on the roof?”

“Up on the roof,” Jin said, pointing towards the ceiling. “Can you disconnect from the speaker?”

Isaac picked up his phone, broke his connection with the speaker and heard the little *beep* of Jin's phone taking control. He knew he had to move – that he should get up now, while Jin was staring down at his phone. There hadn't been a moment since his fall to test how his leg felt with weight on it, and he'd been so caught up in their conversation that he forgotten the sharpness of the pain, how quickly it had sent him crashing to the floor. And as he placed both his palms on the cold, uneven wood, Jin walked over to him, held his hand out for Isaac to grab.

"I got you," Jin said. "We're not solo yet."

Isaac looked down at his own legs, his feet. He focused his attention on the feeling in his left ankle – there was still the low, steady spark of pain near the bone, waiting for the slightest hint of movement to ignite.

"*Kamsahamnida*," Isaac said. He placed his hand in Jin's, brought his right leg up and drove his heel into the ground. Jin pulled him up, and as he brought his left foot up and onto the ground a deep and terrible pain shot itself up his bone and muscle, made his breath catch and stutter. And when he was up on both feet he found Jin's eyes, those big, white-boy eyes, staring back at him, searching his face. Isaac swallowed, felt sweat begin forming beneath his eyebrows, balanced himself on the right foot while fighting off the horde of screams building in his chest.

They stood like that for a moment, face to face, hand in hand.

"You good?" Jin asked.

"Just tired."

There was a moment of hesitation, as if Jin was measuring whether or not to say something. But then Isaac felt Jin's grip release from his hand. He turned away, took position in the center of the room.

“Tell them I said good morning,” Jin said. “If you don’t see me at breakfast, I’m down here in the mirror, dancing with the ghosts.”

Isaac nodded, and as Jin took out his phone to start the song Isaac made his way to the door, trying his hardest to mask his limp, letting his face twist in silent bursts of pain. The opening of the song started, the floor started to shake. And just as Isaac began to pull the door open, the music stopped.

“Ayo,” Jin said. Isaac turned around, shifted his face back into stability. “A few of us are gonna do lunch at my place, if you wanna join. I got one of those hydration things, it’s better than the shit they got here.”

“I’m down,” Isaac said. Even hearing about water made his mouth go rabid with thirst – made his nostrils go dry in that way where it felt like he could smell the withered bones under his skin, the organs and blood cells gone sapless with want. And the music was already blasting again by the time Isaac turned back around, and when the door fell shut behind him all the sound was swallowed up and gone. He was back in the dim, musty hallway of the converted office building he’d spent the past month living in. He dragged himself towards the end of the hallway, towards the elevators, where a pair of production assistants stood their morning. Tattooed and red-faced and chubby.

“Yoooo,” one of them said as Isaac approached. “Miguk look fucked up, so bad, right? So bad. Moooooost terrible.”

Isaac pressed the small, clear button to call the elevator.

“Yo, *honhyeol*,” one of the men said, “you are okay? You looking dying. You dying?”

Isaac got into the elevator, rode it back up to his room on the 14th floor, back to his dorm room. The room place was empty, but he could hear the faint sounds of his groupmates

practicing on the roof above him. This couldn't be true, though – they were up on the roof, five floors above him – it was likely the throbbing of his heart, his mind playing tricks on him. But he heard them, though. There was the slightest vibration in the floor, ten pairs of feet landing against the ground at once, falling between Isaac's careful steps to the bathroom, like odd and even numbers. He turned on the shower, closed the door behind him, and stripped off his cold, sweat-dampened clothes. The shower was already warm, and within seconds a steady cloud of steam began to rise up and over the clear, transparent curtain. Isaac stood in front of the sink, in front of the mirror. His stomach was flat, almost concave, with a staircase of riblets extending from his armpit down to his waist. He needed more definition – he was losing fat *and* muscle – it left him looking childlike, pre-pubescent. The reflection started to fog. His left leg was shaking, tingly at the knee. He brought his hand to the mirror, wiped away the mist so that he could get one last glance at his face. And in that one small window, Isaac saw somebody famous, somebody with a planet of talent inside of them that whines and cries and needs.

He stepped inside the shower, washed the dirt off his skin, held on to the walls for support, positioned his leg underneath the head of the water until it was all used up, until it went ice cold. And his mind wandered, letting his leg grow wet and shriveled, feeling the pain go from numbness to that place beyond numbness, that place where the eyes close and the mind goes somewhere beyond sleep, somewhere lower than unconsciousness. He pressed his back against the shower well, slowly lowered himself down to sit on the tile, felt the pain from lowering himself like a half-remembered song.

He closed his eyes, saw the faces of the men by the elevator eating burgers, placing fries beneath the bun. He remembered sitting next to his father at an airport, sharing a plate of fried rice. Sharing a spoon, spilling rice all over the carpet. *“It's like a crime scene, look at this. The*

Fried Rice Rascals, that's what they'll call us. We're zone six, remember that. Here, one more bite."

Over the steady stream of water, Isaac could hear the faint echoes of a sweet potato salesman that walked the streets every morning, pushing along a cart with a little bell on it. Or was this a detail his father had told him about childhood visits to Korea? How could that voice reach the 14th floor?

"Goguma!" the man yelled, ringing his bell in short, consistent triplets. "Sweet Sweet Sweet Sweet Sweet!" It's like the bell from recess – from the man who used to sell pickles back in elementary school, back in Ohio, back in fourth grade. Brown outline of scum, lining the corners of the shower, built up from generations of trainees. Three bright, consistent dings from the bell, from the pickle man, from a place far away from Korea, from one-two-three ta-TAK, from cameras, and the steam from the shower curls and braids and twines and Isaac is in fourth grade and even though he's only half Korean he's still the least white kid at the school, probably the least white kid some of them have ever met. He can sense this, little-boy Isaac – it's a small, barely there thing, but he can still sense it. He has a classmate named Ryan: blonde and blue-eyed and the fastest runner in the grade. Ryan's parents pack him cool shit for lunch like microwave bacon and pickles floating around in the same plastic bag, and he still has money to buy more from the pickle man and his little cart. Ryan and Ryan's friends play Boys Vs. Girls at recess and Isaac trails along behind them like a groupie, like a little fish feeding off their scraps.

"Hey, Hey," Ryan says, putting his arm over Isaac's shoulder, his little-boy shoulder. "You're Hong Kong kid, right? Hong Kong kid?"

And Ryan's arm over his shoulder brings with it that a bright, excited glow — like radiating fingers scratching an itch in his throat. Isaac pops into a kung-fu pose like he's seen Jackie Chan do in *Rush Hour*. Everyone laughs.

"*Fly Lice, Fly Lice,*" they say, and he chases them around, yelling it back at them, and even though he's eight he is not unaware that he are doing something racist, something dirty. But it's funny, too — it isn't just that Ryan and his friends are laughing, Isaac is laughing with them. He sticks out his teeth out and squint his eyes until the world is a thin, vibrating slice. He thinks of William Hung, of Long Duck Dong, of We Are Siamese If You Please. And Ryan gives him some of his pickle-juice bacon, teaches him new curse words, tells him which classmates are faggots, how Darth Maul is stronger than Count Dooku. Ryan invites him over to his house and he shows Isaac how he can play Red Hot Chili Peppers on guitar. They play Mario Kart and eat ham sandwiches and at dinner Ryan's parents argue about the best Bruce Willis movie.

"*Bruce!*" Ryan's dad says in a funny, high-pitched voice. "*Brucey Loosey!*"

But one night Isaac's dad is working late so he and his mother eat dinner while watching *The Simpsons*, and he let it slip that he and Ryan and the rest of his friends play a game where Isaac, Hong Kong Kid, chases them around the playground yelling Fly Lice Fly Lice Fly Lice. And the shift on her face is harsh and memorable: she closes her eyes for a moment, shoots a burst of air out from her nose.

"*Isaac,*" she says, furrowing her brow, "Isaac."

She leaves the room and when she comes back she's got the landline stretching from the kitchen back to the couch. She's got the phonebook, too. She sits him on her lap and he leans his head back against her chest.

“What’s Ryan’s last name?” she asks. And when Isaac tells her he feels like a bomb has dropped in his stomach, as if a secret he didn’t even realize was a secret has come unleashed. He listens, remembers. He listens to her breath quicken as she types into the phone, when she lifts it to her ear she speaks with a dark, venomous voice.

“Is This Ryan’s Mom?!?!”

Isaac lifts her shirt and hides underneath it, resting his head under one of her breasts.

“I Just Called To Tell You That Your Son Is A Racist!”

When he got to school the next day he stops at the water fountain and when he pulls his head up from the cold, shallow stream Ryan is standing there, looking down at the ground.

“Hey,” he says, “I just wanted to say I’m sorry. For calling you Hong Kong Kid. I’m sorry.”

“Oh,” Isaac says, wiping the wet from his mouth, “it’s okay.”

And as Ryan walks back to the classroom, Isaac overhears him mutter to his friends:

“His mom called my mom...”

And for the rest of fourth grade, for the rest of elementary school, people avoid Isaac. He never learns whether his father learns of this incident or not.

There was laughter from outside, and it drifted in and out of the memory, made both worlds close enough that they could touch. His leg was suddenly burning, not from heat but from the ice cold of the water. He shifted, made the slightest move to stand up, and the parallel world of memory and childhood drifted back into darkness.

“Isaac!” somebody yelled from outside the bathroom door. “We gotta get going! *Gaja!*”

He stood up, grabbed onto the shower’s lever for support, pulled himself up while turning the water off. Had he fallen asleep? His leg was purple, his dick was shriveled, his face felt tight.

There was about an hour until vocal rehearsals, three hours until dance. He had to figure out a way to sneak away, just this once, just to give his ankle a day to rest. The air still smelled like pickles, like summer heat steaming off a blacktop. Isaac listened for the bell of the sweet potato salesman, but there was only the half-heard conversations beyond the bathroom door, back with the other boys.

Each day with a group breakfast of salad and oatmeal and seaweed soup. They all ate together in the room where eliminations were announced, subconsciously marrying the act of eating with the fear of failure. The cameramen shot B-roll of their conversations, took whispered suggestions from producers, circled the boys with their bulky cameras.

Isaac sat with his team, chewing at the leaves of lettuce, rejecting the nausea that bubbled up in his stomach as he swallowed each bite. He reminded himself that he wasn't *really* going to vomit—that this was just a symptom of his diet. The top contestants were the ones who could perform with the bare minimum—with calorie deficits and carb-free protein bars, with carefully portioned hard boiled eggs, raw almonds to stimulate the burning of fat.

The door burst open and two of the show's producers, Kim Dongbak and Min-Joo walked in carrying clipboards.

It was a Friday, which meant that they were going to begin their day with a "Content Assessment"—a chance for everyone to take notes on the most relevant videos and moments from the outside world. These were the moments that caught hold, the moments that caught public attention, went viral, spread through the invisible wires in the air, illuminated teenage faces in darkened bedrooms, inspired comments and love and hate and transmitted all of that back to the source, wherever that may be.

“Good morning trainees,” Kim Dongbak said. The room echoed the greeting back to him with polite little nods, hands clasped together in mock-prayer. Isaac had seen enough survival shows before coming to the US to know that this part was important—the revery for the instructors, producers, judges. There would be cutaways when the show aired where contestants would express how intimidated they were; how handsome and renowned their handlers were. It didn’t take long for Isaac to realize that this was all an act— Kim Dongbak and Min-Joo hated the contestants because they were still in the window where becoming an idol was an actual possibility. The contestants hated them because they represented failure, hope that had gone sour and putrid through years of being passed over.

The two producers took a seat beneath a giant screen that hung from the ceiling, angled to loom over them like a solar panel.

“Okay,” Min-Joo said. The screen came to life with the *FAN-tasy Lab* logo: a shooting star bursting out from a sleeping girl’s head, traveling out of her window, up towards the sky. Each star coming together to form the show’s title. “Welcome to the end of week four. You all are the hardest workers, the good ones. Come on now, you all are the best. I love you. I love you.”

Kim Dongbak shot a glance to some PA with a clipboard standing behind one of the cameramen. They scribbled something down—a reminder to cut Min-Joo’s speech into less abhorrent English.

“Contestants,” Kim Dongbak said, groaning a little as he stood up from his chair. He was handsome, with features like an action figure. Isaac had watched videos of him and his group IN/SAME back in Ohio, back when K-pop had felt like a secret he could only share with strangers on the internet. “Who can remind me of Chairman A’s philosophy for GAJA?” Kim Dongbak asked.

A younger contestant from the other group stood up with his hands behind his back. This was a test, Isaac knew this was a test and still there was always one person stupid enough to fall for it.

“Sir,” the boy said, bowing his head, “Chairman A says that nothing is an accident. That there are no accidents for idols.”

Kim Dongbak gave a polite smile, and something in his expression made the acid in Isaac’s stomach curdle. At this stage in the competition, they were all aware that they were not supposed to speak before vocal warm-ups. Kim Dongbak’s closed-lip smile made it look like he took a sort of joy in tripping the boy up. “That’s right,” he continued. There was a lull in the room, a silence. Kim Dongbak scratched at his ear, adjusted the collar on his shirt, let the pursed smile melt into an expression Isaac hadn’t seen him make before—a face that made the man look tired, worn out. He snuck little glances over to the cameras, pulled a folded piece of paper out from the pocket of his blazer. He cleared his throat.

“Chairman A has asked me to read a message to you all. So.”

Any chewing or shuffling going on hushed itself into silence. Cameramen adjusted their shoulder-mounts, Isaac sat up a little straighter. Kim Dongbak ran his tongue over the top row of his teeth and began reading.

“Hello. Congratulations on making it to the end of your fourth week. As you continue your journey, I wanted to send a brief message that I have asked Kim Dongbak to share with you.” There was a pause in the reading before Kim Dongbak read out his own name, and Isaac watched his eyes shoot another look over to the cameras. He imagined the chairman watching from some dark, shadowy lair—a hivemind of camera footage and wealth and invisible control, collaged together from political thrillers and comic books.

“A successful fantasy is not something that happens by accident,” Kim Dongbak continued, furrowing his brow at the script. “Every idol is a fantasy, and every fantasy is created by an imagineer wielding spent tools with a careful hand, lurking above water, waiting to see if audiences will take the bait—if they’ll be reeled in. An audience—however small—is something that is earned. “Virality” is never an accident. There are coincidences, there’s good luck, but there are no accidents. Other labels—Geffen, HYBE, SM, YG—they toss a debut into the water to see if it’ll sink or swim. They’re operating under the belief that music is not an exact science—that there is no formula for audience engagement. And perhaps that’s true—perhaps it’s not science, but there is undeniably a formula; one that can change shape and sound at a moment’s notice. But this is not a formula that can change shape at its own will. This is a formula chained to the zeitgeist, to the Sidae Jeongsin, to the spirit of the era. That communal air we all breathe in and breathe out. If a song becomes a hit, it has granted us a glimpse of what we want, and what we want determines who we are. And it could be said that anyone capable of tracking this spirit—it’s rippled chemtrails through our plane—could predict the formula’s next shape, may even be capable of pushing the formula in a direction of their choosing.”

Kim Dongbak flipped the sheet of paper over, scratched at his ear again.

“I want to make a new formula. I want a music industry that is captor instead of captive, where the zeitgeist follows where art leads it, not the other way around. Music that produces the air instead of breathing it. I want to earn my audience. I want a culture that aspires to more than just growing and shapeshifting, a culture that aspires to be more than a chameleon. GAJA is not a label built for survival because we are not after survival. We want something more permanent; a center that might hold. And what do you want? Where is your audience? Whose air do you breathe?”

Kim Dongbak folded back up the piece of paper and placed it in his pocket. He looked up at the room of boys staring back at him, waiting for some indication of how they should respond.

“Chairman A,” he said, “is what separates GAJA from every other label. I will let his words be his words—I would only sully them with my own commentary. Isaac wished he could ask him to read the statement again—not only because of the years he’d spent reading about GAJA and the label’s anonymous chairman, but also because he didn’t feel like he could fully follow the speech. What was the distinction between ‘science’ and ‘formula’? What conclusions was he trying to steer them towards?”

“Okay,” Kim Dongbak said, “our Content Assessment. Our end of week four Content Assessment.”

Min-Joo pressed a button on a small remote, and the show’s logo dissolved back into stars. She pressed another button and three rectangles appeared on the screen, each full of shimmering question marks animated to look like constellations.

“This week,” Kim Dongbak said, “Sidae Jeongsin chose three moments that rose into the stars, three moments that captured our dreams.”

The bright, glowing face of Sidae Jeongsin appeared on the screen: a computer-generated manifestation of the collective consciousness, the zeitgeist, the “spirit of the era”. It was a face that was equal parts male and female, with blemishless skin, blue eyes, bangs that hung loosely over its eyebrows. According to the producers, this approximated what the “dreamers” of the world were looking for—a blend of all the top idols from around the world, all unified into one uncanny face. Isaac had spent the first few weeks studying its features, comparing them against his own. He looked more like the Sidae Jeongsin than the other contestants, but he imagined that

all of them felt that way. There were elements of all of them in there, in that algorithm of collective beauty.

“Let’s see the first moment,” Kim Dongbak said. The Sidae Jeongsin closed its eyes, disappeared and reappeared inside of the first box, clearing away the constellations of question marks to reveal the thumbnail of a music video. A number appeared beneath the rectangle: *4,203,301,985 views*. The sound of the video started playing through the room’s speakers—it was a new track from an Indian-American rap duo called “Bollywood & Broadway” or “B&B”. The video portrayed two teenagers (one white, one Indian) dancing around a high-school hallway in black leather trench coats, spraying their nerdy teachers with water guns. The two boys kicked open a classroom door where a group of teenage girls were being guarded by a stuffy old man in a tweed jacket and wiry glasses, and when they sprayed him with water all the girls cheered, dancing around in the water.

“She want my humpty-dumpty, mama ‘no-cho-cinco’

Don’t hit up me phone if you don’t fuck with this lingo

I flick me tongue, these bitches call me reptilian

Spray her in the face then I count up me millions”

A few of the boys took notes, held their hands over their mouths in complete focus.

“So this is a new that’s getting attention in America. The school shooter aesthetic gets headlines, and the video takes something scary and makes it fun and lewd. Like we talked about last week, Irish-style has become more popular this season, so you hear more and more artists replacing “my” with “me”. And more of that Latin influence with ‘no-cho-cinco’. This means ‘night five’ or ‘no five,’ which does not make sense.”

The video ended and the CGI avatar for the Sidae Jeongsin appeared in the second box, scattering the question marks to reveal a teenage white girl dressed like Indiana Jones, singing a heartfelt ballad between two live gorillas. She held her hand over her heart while the gorillas quietly crunched lettuce leaves.

Can't waste it

If you don't use it

Only one life to live

Make it count don't lose it.

Lemme sneak you a snack

Take your mind off the danger

Log off, touch some grass

Before we all become strangers

The video had 9,894,224,102 views. Min-Joo paused the video, just as one of the gorillas stopped his chewing to glance over at the girl.

“This is Julia Justice,” Kim Dongbak said. “She’s a zookeeper, decided to film debut video in a gorilla enclosure. Song is motivational-style balled, unplug-type. After they finished the song the gorillas killed her, ripped her up, smashed her. Video went viral. People making fun of her, people very sad for her. This is one we should avoid trying to imitate. Not good for anybody.”

Isaac stared at the screen, kneaded the tightness in his knee with his thumb under the table. He was looking for some hint of frustration in the animal’s eyes, some indication of what would happen when the cameras turned off. He’d seen the video a few days earlier, on one of his bunkmate’s phones. Someone had already spoiled what happened to the girl, so Isaac had watched the entire video with teeth clenched. He was not surprised the video had garnered so

many views. There was some terrible power in watching this girl, knowing her fate while she sang in ignorance. He did not need anyone to explain why the video was popular.

“*Jenjang...*” Kim Dongbak whispered, shaking his head. “Okay.”

Min-Joo clicked a button on the remote and the zeitgeist-spirit leapt to the third and final video. The 26,204,894,440 view count shimmered beneath its rectangle of question marks.

“This will not be a surprise,” Kim Dongbak said, exhaling a long sigh into the mic. “For the third week in a row, the most viral, the most dream-catching. Okay.”

The Sidae Jeongsin winked, made a little heart sign with his thumb and pointer, then dissolved into stars. The video started playing—the same one they’d watched at the end of every “Content Assessment”.

In shaky, handheld cell-phone footage, a teenage boy stood across from a piano, singing along to Beyoncé’s *Halo*. An older black man was playing the piano, head dropped low, nodding along to the song, and both the boy and the man at the piano were surrounded by a massive crowd of people—a circle of cell phones held out to record the performance. The camera shifted, revealed the fact that this was happening at an airport, in some high-ceilinged terminal that gave an echo to the boy’s voice. And it was an incredible voice—hearty and masculine, capable of shifting into a balanced falsetto without losing any of its power, hitting run after run, effortlessly gliding across scales. There’s a crack of thunder, and the camera tilts up to reveal a massive window above them, a dark, ominous cloud gaining closer, vibrating with electricity and danger. And there’s something else, too: a massive recreation of *Gollum* from the Lord of the Rings franchise hanging above them, reaching out for a fish. An airport in New Zealand, minutes before a tropical storm. Every stranded traveler gathered around this duo, pianist and singer, each of them leaning on luggage or partner or staff from homemade wizard costume. The song began

building, going from verse to pre-chorus, pre-chorus to chorus, ignoring the shockwaves of light in the window above them, the rain that began to crash against the glass.

And as the boy ascended into the final leg of the song he gripped at his shirt and squeezed his eyes shut and the person holding the camera zoomed in on him. Unmistakably half-Asian—maybe even half-*Korean*—beautiful and talented and dressed in a TSA agent’s uniform, a nametag dangling from his breast-pocket. The boy took a big breath in, opened his eyes and likely locked his gaze on the pianist, communicated some silent signal to really give power to the final note. The camera zoomed back out. The pianist leaned back, rocked his head forward as his fingers came down hard on the keys. The boy sang the lyrics in a tremendous scream of passion and talent and heart.

There was a flash of lightning, a crash so loud that it sent a shockwave through the entire crowd—all jumping or screaming in unison. The massive glass window above them shattered, sending rain and glass and wind down into the airport. The boy stopped singing, looked up, screamed out something as the Gollum above them snapped from the wires that kept it hanging from the ceiling, the high high ceiling, and the creature crashed down on the piano, on the pianist. Whoever was taking the video started running, and the video ended on the blurry image of feet rushing for safety.

“We’ve talked about it, we’ve already discussed,” Kim Dongbak said. He sounded annoyed, tired of discussing the same video for the fourth week in a row. “We have violence, we have big, theatrical storm. We have man getting crushed to death by scary elf monster. Hobbit. We have song everybody knows. Good, strong singing. Video feels like an accident, that’s the other part—coincidence, people like this. It’s in an airport, which is novel. But what’s the piece that keeps people coming back? What makes this video most *Fan-tastic*?”

The words seemed to curdle on Kim Dongbak's lips as he spoke the final line, the show's catchphrase. The boys were all silent, blinking up at the screen.

"Oh come on," Kim Dongbak said, "I won't tell your vocal coaches. Come on." He scanned each table, let his eyes fall on the boy who had spoken up earlier. "You, you've already talked today. Tell us why we like this video, this airport boy."

The boy stood up with his arms against his sides, gave a slight bow.

"Because nobody knows who the singer is," he said, "everybody wants to find him."

"*Ne,*" Kim Dongbak said, waving his hand, motioning the boy to sit back down. He brought the mic too close to his mouth, let his voice go electric with distortion. "*The mystery,*" he said, "audiences love it, they love mystery. Nobody knows who he is—everybody wants to know, they're watching again and again for clues and details, asking other TSA agents who he is, clues and details."

Min-Joo clicked the remote, and the screen turned off. Isaac snuck a glance at his phone—four minutes to vocal training, four hours until dance. His leg was full of cloudy, abstract pain that traveled up his thighs, wrapped around bone and pinched at every nerve. He took a final bite of salad, felt the moisture melt into his tongue.

"Maintain the mystery," Kim Dongbak said, standing up from his chair, "you need to be friends with audience—make them laugh, make them look at you like boyfriend, like the friend who helps you study for the test. Make them want to be like you, dance like you, look like you." He crossed his arms, looked across the entire room, met eyes with each boy individually. When he got to Isaac, he lingered just a few seconds longer, opened his mouth to speak and then thought better of it. He finished scanning the room, collected his clipboard from the ground in front of him.

“Remember that mystery has power. Knowing about gorilla strike before gorilla strike happens—that’s power, that gets attention. But real obsession only comes from curiosity, from not knowing. Protect your secrets—never give them away unless you have another mystery waiting, ready to take the old one’s place. Okay? Okay.”

The two producers both bowed to the crowd of boys, and Isaac stood up with everyone else to bow in return. Kim Dongbak checked his watch, whispered something to Min-joo. They walked out of the room, leaving a dense silence behind. The cameramen scuttled around them, sneakers squeaking against tile. They circled the boys, shot more B-roll of them eating their last few bites before the start of the day. They weren’t allowed to speak before vocal warmups. They had to preserve their voices.

THE ASIAN MIRICLE

Auckland, New Zealand

Sixty-eight-year-old Han-su Lee learned about the accident like everyone else. He'd been watching the news, waiting for the storm to pass, when the news anchor cut to some shaky iPhone footage from the airport. That was the worst of it – that he had to watch the footage with some geol-keo reporter doing commentary. Reading off cue cards with a thick New Zealand accent. And the terror of it all—of his son on television, of the glass breaking against the darkened sky—sent his mind retreating to its hiding place. The anchors voice got louder—sounded puffy and terrible, made him think of childhood, of the North, of snow numbing tongues, of snake bites, the years before fatherhood and war. When he was a boy, he'd been running around the woods with one of his friends, he couldn't remember the boy's name. Han-su had watched the boy stick his head down in a foxhole, looking for pups. A snake shot out from the darkness, bit the boy in the center of his left cheek, and while Han-su helped him back to safety he watched the boy's face balloon. He watched his eyes go glossy with fear and listened as the boy's vowels begin to melt together, curve at the edges in some unnatural twist of venom and tongue. The boy was dead before they reached their village, and he never saw a snake that ever looked remotely similar. It was back in the North, past the border, still unknown and undocumented by the chief architects of history. He thought of all the bugs and biology out there, thought about how knowledge – of a place, of a people – was once a privilege. That snake, his dead friend. They didn't exist outside of the North, and suddenly the memory began to feel like a

jewel in his mind – something fragile he had to protect. Because when he's gone all of those details – the snake the boy and the leaves beneath them – will descend into a place lower than obscurity. Like they never existed at all.

This is what New Zealanders had always sounded like to him. Like that boy puffing out of his skin.

...

He stood outside the bedroom for a few minutes, preparing himself. There was no light bleeding out from under the door, but he knew Juche was awake. He could feel it; a father-son frequency, a curse, a gift. It was like listening for birdsong – concentrating on a layer of perception that goes invisible without attention. He was certain that, just as he could feel Juche, Juche could feel him standing behind the door, focusing on the hot air flowing up and down his chest.

There was no more time for illusion, no more space for secrets. Thrown himself from a bridge, that's what he should have done – something simple and painless. Instead, he'd let his cock lead him around, let his heart fall for a woman, a white woman, almost young enough to be his daughter. The pregnancy, the first few years, waiting for the other shoe to drop. Building a boy out of a house of cards, prepping for an inevitable gust of wind to blow it all down.

And as he opened the door he saw Juche's head lift up a little – an arm reaching out from underneath a blanket to turn on a reading light clipped to his bedframe. He was in an old, baggy t-shirt, and his hair was flatted against the left side of his head.

That beautiful face, his beautiful boy. His special dude, his son.

“Can I come in?”

“Yeah,” Juche said. His voice was frayed, it lacked volume. Han-su opened the door a little wider and let his eyes scan across the room. It wasn’t like he had seen many examples of what a seventeen-year-old’s bedroom should look like, but he felt confident that they were likely different from his son’s. There were no posters on the wall, no pinned-up postcards from summer romances, no comic books or video games scattered across the floor. There were no crackers or sodas or diaries, no hidden drawers with secret dreams or buried resentments. There was a twin bed on a black bedframe with a tall, wooden headboard. There were two windows.

There was no music; no albums, no stereo, no iPod, no CDs, no mixtapes found in a locker with Sharpie-scribbled track lists, ink smudged with thumbprints. There were no instruments. There was no music. And yet.

“Your car,” Han-su said, stepping into the room, closing the door behind him, “I picked up your car, you know about that? It’s in our driveway, no damage at all. I thought it would be very bad and messed up very badly.” He reached Juche’s bed and sat down on its edge, heard the mini explosions of air pop through his knees as he bent his legs. He was slower now, noin-ui, geriatric. “I was scared about you,” Han-su said.

“I’m sorry,” Juche said.

“Yup.”

“I was scared for you. I was in the taxi to get your car and there are trees all over, all over the road. Let me tell you something.”

“I know, the roads are a mess.”

“I’ll tell you: I’m imagining you in that storm – I was thinking how the same wind that blew down the trees touched you in the face. You were expose.”

“I was exposed to the elements,” Juche said, blinking. Han-su placed his hand atop his son’s, looked deep into his eyes and felt a tremor in the signal, a psychic knocking. There was a time when the tremor had been a death-rattle; a throbbing pulse he’d carried in his head for years after the war. When had it gone away? How old was Juche when it returned?

“Who was at our door this morning?” Juche asked, although Han-su suspected his son already knew the answer.

“Some people. Wanted to talk about you to you.”

“How’d they find me?”

“I don’t ask, I didn’t ask. There’s video you on the news, on computers. All the time, they’re showing it. They probably found from the airport – airport maybe told them.”

He watched his son’s Adam’s apple rise and fall in his throat. A twitch at the corner of his mouth, a quiver between his eyebrows.

“I’m sorry,” Juche whispered, dropping his eyes down to the blanket, to the mounds of his knees. He sniffled – not the onset of a cry but the aftermath, and with every furrow of his brow, with every defused emotion, Han-su felt the edges of the room begin to spin, tear open. That was better – not spinning but curling, melting, like heat to glue, like a poster finally breaking free from the now-dry tape holding it upright.

“You don’t—” Han-su started, “you don’t need to...” He trailed off into silence, pinching the bridge of his nose with his thumb and pointer. Was this muscle memory? Some forgotten technique he would use to make the signal dim, to clog up the all the noise? He closed his eyes, saw little blurs and dots pass across darkness. *Not delusion*. He thought of both words, traced the path of each letter in his mind, first in English, than in Hangul.

“I’ll be right back,” Han-su said, gripping his son’s hand.

“Are you okay?” Juche asked.

“I’m just headache... What I want is some water and I also want a cookie, a cookie may help.”

“What kind of cookie?”

“I don’t... remember what we have. Not chocolate.”

“We have Krispies.”

“That’s good, that will be good.”

Juche got out of the bed and left Han-su alone in the room, in his son’s bedroom. He heard his son’s footsteps glide down the stairs, heard cupboard doors opening and closing, heard the ice machine wretch itself to life. By the time his vision cleared and the throbbing subsided Juche was already back by his side, holding out a glass of water and a bag of cookies. Han-su took a sip of water, cupped a cookie in both hands like a secret.

“There are things,” he said, wiping his lips on his arm, “I need to tell to you, okay? There are things I didn’t tell. I should have.” He lifted the cookie to his lips and took a small, quiet bite. An area where the New Zealanders had the Koreans beat, these cookies. Han-su had developed a belly in his first year – all that food he’d never been exposed to.

“I want to ask you,” Han-su continued, “I want to ask this. In your head, in your brain, what did you feel? When you were singing? Before the storm and the crash, what did you feel?”

A calm spread across the room’s floor, like dry ice slithering out from a cauldron. The look in Juche’s eyes changed from fear to relief – his father was putting it out in the open. His father was asking him about his head, his brain.

Juche swallowed. Han-su placed his glass of water on the floor, dug the base into the carpet so that it’d stay upright.

“It felt dizzy,” Juche said. “It felt good, singing. Everybody was looking at me, nobody had anywhere to go because of the delays, because of the storm, so everybody was there. And I like that song – it came on at the airport, sometimes. It’s older.”

“See The Halo,” Han-su said.

“*Halo*, it’s Beyoncé.”

“And you had audience, and that felt good. But you keep singing, what do you feel?”

“I had my eyes closed but I felt like I could see.”

“With eyes closed?”

“It wasn’t like I could *see* see – I couldn’t see the—”

“You can’t see...” Han-su motioned his arms, motioning to Juche’s audience. “You can’t see the audience.”

“It felt like I could see some other place. My feet were getting lightheaded, it was like when I was a kid, the Jason Mraz incident.”

“Other place.”

“And the song got more and more dramatic, and it was like I could *feel* their smiles, I could feel all of their smiles. It felt like I had this third sense, like I could feel when a note moved something in people, I could feel the build in the room as I went up to the final chorus, as I worked myself up the bridge.”

“Where is the bridge.”

“Not a literal bridge – it’s like the final bit before the last chorus.”

“And before the crash.”

“Before the crash it was like that new sense changed direction – I wasn’t locked in on what everybody else was feeling. It was like I had an extra eye that turned inward. Like all that attention to that other place moved towards... I don’t know how to explain—”

“But just try. Your eyes closed, you feel your brain-sense go inside, inside yourself.”

Juche was quiet for a moment, staring down at the glass of water on the floor.

“It was like I could feel the room’s temperature,” Juche said, “I felt like I’d put out feelers into the air and used the intel I got back to sing an ending that would be undeniable, an ending that would take all those little particles of joy and awe and attention and blow them up completely. Even my breath – I could feel it in the air. I could feel the air changing.”

“What did the air feel like? Cold?”

“No, it wasn’t a temperature. I opened my eyes a second before the crash because I took a breath and it felt thick – I don’t know how else to describe it.”

“The air felt thick, it felt full.”

“Yes.”

“And then the crash.”

“And then the window broke and the storm came in and the Gollum fell. And I thought of you. I thought of what you told me.”

“And okay. Okay. That is what I’m wanting to talk about. I didn’t, didn’t tell you. I didn’t tell you enough. Did it feel like the first time? Did it feel like when you sang as a kid?”

“I don’t remember,” Juche said. His voice was starting to quiver, and Han-su realized he was still gripping his son’s hand. He let go, gave the top of Juche’s hand a few little pats to let him know it was okay, that he didn’t need to get worked up.

“That’s okay, okay? That is okay...”

Han-su trailed off, let the room fall into silence. He considered what his son had said: the “thickness” in the air, the other world he could feel around him, how he could shift and change the atmosphere with nothing but his voice.

His beautiful boy. His Juche.

“My father, your grandfather,” Han-su said, shifting himself into a more comfortable position, getting both cheeks firmly onto the mattress. “He was a warrior. He fought off the Japanese, before I was born – he dug trenches, hid in trenches, in the dirt outside their village. He had a spear he carved – they all had spears, the trench men. And when the Japanese came to conquer and rape and kill my father waited in his trench like a spider, waiting. He could not see them, but he felt the Japanese horses galloping across the plain, felt their hooves shake the ground and the Earth. He said he could hear their neighing and he could hear the war cries of the Japanese, the swords being pulled from their sides, the sound of metal slicing through air. And when the dirt shook from the walls of their tunnel and the beasts leapt into the air to jump across the trench my father and all the other fathers shoved their spears into the sky, into the bellies of the horses, through their meat and skin and everything else they carried inside them. This was what he did, before the war. He defended, he defended his people, his place. He would tell me... He would tell me what it looked like. Japanese losing their balance against the blue sky – no clouds – giants atop beasts being toppled from below, from the underneath they could never see. The whale devoured by the shrimp. This was what he did, before the war.”

Han-su saw the memory in his mind, this memory that was not his own but his father’s, relayed to him in the few moments of closeness they shared throughout their many years of silence. Father’s face, the purpled leather of his skin, his cheeks. Hours laying in trenches, staring up to the sun, waiting.

“Where was this?”

“This was in the North. There was already a line, before the war. Do you know this? Do you know about the border? More Japanese came, I was only a boy, I don’t remember, don’t remember this. But women and children hid at a temple in the hills, men stayed behind to fight off the Japanese...”

A flash of memory: his mother, her face a blend of all the Korean women he’d known in his life, pulling a bloodstained bedsheet from a mattress. Han-su remembered how pink the blood looked – diluted with sweat or spit or cum or tears. A squat, rat-faced Japanese soldier giggling a *heh heh heh* as he laced his boots. Whispering something to Han-su with a wink, some Japanese phrase he couldn’t understand. Where had he watched this from? The doorway? The kitchen?

He was getting sidetracked, and he did not want to think about his father’s death. He took two cookies from their sleeve. Passed one to Juche.

“I think it was 1959, 1960, I don’t know. I was young, I don’t know. We lived close to DMZ, we could see the mountains in the distance, and your grandmother would hold me and point to where the temple was, the temple where she hid with the women, the children. I wanted to be like my father, like warrior. I young but very angry, I had hatred. Japanese, United States, United Nations... I didn’t even know much but it was in the air, it was something you could pick up even just by walking through it, just by living in that place. *Han*, do you know this yet? This word. *Han*.”

Juche shook his head.

“It’s Korean anger,” Han-su said, poking the cookie he still held into his chest. “From being conquered, being controlled. Being small, split up, used, tortured, raped, killed, killed. Han is feeling, passed down in blood, from breathing Korean air.”

“And it’s your name?” Juche asked.

“It what?”

“Isn’t your name Han?”

“Han-*su*. Difference. Different from anger-han.”

“Okay.”

“Okay yes but. But I was angry kid. I stomped I threw things. I did not believe in anything, but when people I knew started to die I got angry, I’ve told you this part. I’ve told you why I joined, why we’re here now. I was a refugee, I’ve told you that. And your mother... I’m telling this all wrong, again. I need to start over. I need to focus. My sweet Juche.

I did not believe in anything but by the time I was captured by the Americans I believed they were demons, agma. I believed they were invading to make a mockery of us, to make a mockery of President Rhee, that fool. You know this. But what I have not told you is what I think you need to know.

There was a program created by the CIA in the 1950s. The CIA is America — I don’t remember what it stands for. It’s their government. This project was called Project Bluebird. This was the first one, the very first of these projects. You understand, I can see on your face you’re understanding. Your beautiful face. We were fighting for something more than survival. We were killers with ingenuity, that’s what we said. We were killers who understood that we were at a disadvantage, that we had to be creative. We set mines, baited the south into coming north, abandoning their outposts, leaving them without cover... Digging hidden trenches, like your grandfather, like vipers in the grass... Like hidden vipers...

By the time China joined our brothers and sisters in the north, I was a pilot. Your old man, that's right. Your old man saw plenty of dogfights in that time, talented pilot. Even now, if you put me in the cockpit of one of those planes, Lord, I could fly. I still have that knowledge inside of me, it doesn't go away, it doesn't drift off like other memories. 'Beasts' were what the Americans called them, those jets, our planes.

I flew over the battle of the Chosin River, I rained fire on the enemy and retreated into the twisting, jagged rocks of the mountains, where enemy fighters would follow me to their death. They were not prepared for our territory, our mountains. They did not know how sharp the turns could be, how swiftly I could navigate that maze of rock and ice. I would slow when I knew there was an incoming wall of stone, accelerate quickly, bait the enemy into their own doom. I would emerge from those mountains and twist back to the Chosin, repeating the process over and over, over and over.

And the enemy retreated! The enemy retreated to Hungnam, a port town. I know these names mean nothing to you. These names mean less than nothing to you, and yet they are part of your history. Listen. Listen.

Hordes of our people came rushing from the nearby towns and valleys, hordes of North family. Terrified... They wanted to take part in the enemy evacuation, they were willing to betray our country to escape the war. This is the part where you must pay attention, Juche, because I can see your mind wandering. What I want you to know is that there are notions more important than escape. There are duties more important and survival. Those Koreans who ran to the UN troops for help... those are not Koreans. Those were not our brothers and sisters. Thousands upon thousands of men, women and children rushing onto American boats, trying to escape this harbor that was meant to be the wall we could press the enemy against, the trap they

could not escape from. Our own people rushed to their boats — we could not bomb those ships, we could not attack the harbor. I watched as my brothers turned back to our mountains. I watched from the clouds as they steadied their wings and flew back to safety, to defeat. And do you know what this American ship was called? This American ship that used our people as shields against our bombs, our fire, our fury. The American ship that our own people let carry them to live as puppets and prisoners? I could not speak English at the time but I knew the word Victory. I knew this word that had been plastered on all of their weapons, all of their flags and ships and vehicles. This ship had Victory written on its side and I did not turn my wings around. I did not slow myself as I watched this ship full of the people I thought were my brothers and sisters sail off towards the south. I felt the sun on my nose, I listened to the roar of my plane's engine. The land below me was covered in smoke and fire and desolation — littered with the bodies of soldiers that had tried to stop this evacuation. The Victory drifted further out into the water and I followed from above, quietly, silently.

My Juche, my sweet boy, I can see you're listening now, you're afraid of what your old man might have done, yes? You're afraid of the fury you can see in my eyes, remembering this. You're afraid of the idea of your old man hurting people, behaving like a weapon. I don't like the idea of lying to you about your history, about who you are, about where we come from. I want you to know that when I broke from the clouds and came down on that ship from the blue with those thick, trembling wings, I did not feel fear. I shot down on that ship, on those people, with all the anger and betrayal that I'd been building up for years and years. I rained chaos on them in a short, terrible burst, until I had passed over Victory and my bullets sent explosions rippling through the water. And there was a blast like nothing I'd ever felt — they'd got my wing, they'd taken me out with one exacting shot. And as I crashed towards the ocean — I will tell you — I

did not feel the tranquility we were promised by our generals, by the Great Leader. That raging ocean rushed towards me, and I felt the fear come on — the dam of my mind and soul broke open and the terror of death washed over me. And while I do not remember the crash I do remember the feeling of being pulled from that floating cockpit, of having white hands under my armpits, pulling me into that salty air.

The next time I woke up I was in a room. I was in a room and team of men were gathered around. They gave me a cup, motioned for me to drink. These were white men, Americans. You know your old man, you won't be surprised at this part. I slapped the drink from their hands — I was not going to drink American chemicals, some unknown potion. I knew at this point that I was their prisoner, that they would torture and degrade me until they got whatever information they were seeking. I did not know then that they were not interested in information, these men. Let me rephrase this: they were not interested in information about Korea, about our plans for the war. They were interested in information of the human mind — information on our very species. When they came back they had an IV with them, they stuck a needle — thank you, my son. Stuck. I am so close, now. I have gotten so much better, I believe. I can see you're listening. You're tired of my interruptions, I know. You're tired of my solitude, my hollow... I don't know how to say. You are tired of me. I will never hit again, you know that, okay? It will never, never...

I fell asleep in that room, where the Americans took me, and when I woke up the walls were shifting. I woke up and I was afraid, I remember the fear, even now. I remember a twist behind my eyes, like a rotten whirlpool. I remember everything was circling, circling. Men walked into the room with shifting faces, noses that would not stay still, teeth that formed rows and rows of teeth, stretching across cheeks and rushing back into their mouths. They moved like water does

— slow and flowing, without rigidity, without hesitation. They spoke to me in Korean, they hit me. They laughed, these men, these monsters. I believed in that moment they were monsters, of some sort. I believed they were demons, agma. That’s demon in our language, remember this. There were days when they hooked me up to machines and asked me questions in Korean, questions in English, hurt me if I failed. There were days where they would throw water in my face that did not feel like water, pour ants and spiders into the room and leave me there in the dark as they grew giant and deformed. There were days where hunger turned to nausea and nausea turned to fear. They were giving me hallucinogens. It went on like this until the end. End of the war.

They had ideas about what the human mind was capable of. They wanted to see if we could kill on command, they wanted to see if we could be activated. This happened to me, and it stayed with me, it made it in deep — they got to me like this. They got me good. And it is — look at me now, you need to understand this part — it’s inside you, too.

I have spent my life worrying that it is a curse on us, on the children you will have, that they will be activated, that their children will. That it is in our blood now. That when you were born you already had the materials to let them control you, to be used like a puppet, a weapon.

There is a reason I am telling you this now. My son, my Juche. My beautiful boy. There is a way. There is a way you can finish everything we started. You have a gift. You have a glorious gift.

Let me tell you about Project Bluebird.”

DREAM BOY PT. 2

Gangnam, South Korea

They were Group B, so they got to start with vocal training.

Isaac had already broken a rule by talking to Jin – they weren't supposed to speak for the first two hours after they woke up. This had been one of the first things their vocal coach, Kim Doo-na, had told them.

“You think I won't know?” she'd said, staring them down in that first week. “Every word you speak, it's a tiny little scrape in here, in *here*.” She stabbed her pointer finger against her throat. “If I start hearing excuses, if I hear that you boys are taking calls from parents or girlfriends when you wake up, I am going to scratch you so hard. I am going to scratch you so hard on the back or the chest and it is going to be so bad for you. Because look at this.” Kim Doo-na had held up her hand and showed the boys her long, jagged fingernails. “These dogs bark and these dogs bite, you know what I'm saying? I'm a scratcher, I scratch people. Don't make me do it. I don't really care, you know what I'm saying?”

She was a plump, frizzy haired woman who wore thick sunglasses. At first, Isaac had assumed she was blind, but a few of the other guys said they'd seen her without her shades on at a bookstore, getting a stack of romance novels signed by some teenage author.

“Bro,” Joey had said, “she was waddling, she was so excited. Her and a bunch of teenage girls. She had her hair in pigtails.”

But this morning she had her hair down, falling over her shoulders like dog ears – a perm long past its expiration date. Isaac sat against the wall with four of his groupmates – Joey, Buck-woo, Sen, Bison and FW, each of them handsome, Korean, and wildly experienced. At this point in the competition, Isaac was the only one who wasn't coming from a prior training program, indoctrinated when they were eleven, twelve.

Bison stood across from Kim Doo-na and her keyboard. She was playing the song they'd been practicing for the past week, an old Usher song, *Superstar*, full of complex, scale-traversing runs. It was the first song they were practicing in full-English.

"Let's try the intro again," Kim Doo-na said, adjusting her sunglasses. Bison fidgeted, swallowed a glob of spit. At fifteen, was the youngest of all of them, and he also had the worst grasp on English.

"*Ne*," Bison said, nodding to Kim Doo-na. "Ready."

She played the opening notes, lifted her left hand into the air, counted down from three and then pointed at Bison. He sang the long, aching *Ahhhhh* in a high falsetto, squeezing his eyes shut at he sang, lifting his hand to match the rise and fall of the notes, some affectation he'd picked up from too many music videos. Isaac watched the other boys write and rewrite the same sentences in English in their notebooks, practicing their penmanship.

Hello, it is nice to meet you. Hello, we are nothing without our fans.

"Stop," Kim Doo-na said, slamming her hands down on the keyboard. Bison's voice cracked, his eyes went wide. "Do you know about something?" she said, placing her hands in her lap. She cleared her throat in a low, phlegmy growl.

"Yes?" Bison said.

"Do you know how much time you're wasting for the rest of the team?"

Bison looked over to Isaac and the others, sitting against the wall. There was a quiver in his upper lip, a dam splintering with cracks behind his eyes.

“I know,” Bison said, doing a little bow to the group, “I say—”

“Go sit down with them, go sit for a second,” she said. Bison walked over the wall and lowered himself to the ground. Isaac put a hand on his shoulder, gave an almost silent “it’s alright man.”

Kim Doo-na stood up from her seat and walked around the piano until she was standing directly in front of them, like they were a group of schoolchildren in time out.

“Here it is,” she said, flexing her hand, flashing a glimpse of her long, sharp fingernails, “here is the thing. You boys, you are not all going to be able to sing, there is not a group where every member can sing as well as the best. But if you’re not lead singer, you have to be able to support the lead singer, and you can’t support others if you can’t support yourself, yes?”

Isaac’s heart started beating – the fatigue in his forehead announced itself in a quick moment of dizziness. It was the way her sunglasses fell on him when she said “lead singer”. Groups one and two were both designed to keep things fair. In the first week, they’d all been placed into tiers for their talents in singing, dancing, ____, and *star persona* – the only category where the rankings were kept secret from them. Isaac had landed in tier one for singing – the highest ranking possible, and while this had thrilled him at first it quickly became clear that this was just another factor isolating him from the other boys. It was when his excitement for being singled out paired with his desperation to fit in that he got the most lightheaded, the most pressure on his heart and breath.

“I’ve been practice.”

“You need to practice more.”

“I been practice more.”

“You can’t even speak English! You want to go on stage and have—”

“I can speak English!” Bison yelled. Kim Doo-na’s brow fell – her tongue moved behind her lips like a gopher burrowing under soft, fleshy earth. She let her hands fall. She flexed her hand.

“Come here, then,” she said, waving him forward. “Come here.”

Isaac could hear Bison’s breathing quicken – he could hear the shaking current the air.

“Here it is,” Joey muttered.

“I CAN SPEAK ENGLISH!” Bison screamed, pointing a finger at Kim Doon-na. His face had burst into a downturned sob, full of drama and anger. And then he was running towards the door, pushing it open with rough, heavy cries, and before he was out of sight all four cameramen sprinted after him, running out of the room, chasing him down the hall, their footsteps echoing down the stairwell until things went completely quiet.

Kim Doo-na held her face in her hands.

“*Babo...* How many times now?” she asked, looking down at the five remaining boys. “How many times does he do this?”

“In here or in dance practice?” FW asked.

“In here.”

“I think four?” Buck-woo said.

When Bison had had his first outburst at the end of the first week, Isaac had assumed it was the end of the boy – that the producers would throw a box of his stuff out on the street as a cautionary tale for the rest of them. But he was back rehearsal that afternoon, calm and composed, ready to keep going.

“That kid knows exactly what he’s doing,” Jin had told him. “He knows how you stay on these shows. Singing and dancing is great but drama makes more money – that kid is no idiot. You see how the camera guys chase him? On some Blair Witch shit, people eat that up.”

Kim Doo-na slouched back down behind the keyboard and waved for the five of them to come and stand in front of her.

“This fucking kids...” she muttered to herself. “Okay, okay. Harmonies, okay? Isaac first lead, then Sen, second verse. Joey, Buck-woo, FW, you do backup. Okay? Okay. Three, two, and. Go.”

Isaac started to sing. He let his voice rise out from his chest and not his neck, let his brow furrow, tasted plaque and tarter as the song dripped out from his mouth, wrapped itself around his teeth. And in the lead-up to the pre-chorus, something shifted in his mind, behind the darkness of his closed eyes. He felt the collective gaze from the other boys, from Kim Doo-na, their silhouettes, the vibrations of his own singing through each body, through the floor – like his voice was a sight that could leave his body and bring information back to him.

When Isaac finished, Kim Doo-na stared down at the keyboard in silence.

“Isaac,” she said, “two hours. You wake up, you don’t talk for two hours. Don’t be bad, don’t be sneaky. FW, Sen – you two look like you shitting yourself at high note. Face and voice are separate tools, remember this. The leg doesn’t have to do what arm does. Fix your face before scratching comes. Fix before I’m scratch you.”

Isaac stepped forward, closer to the keyboard, felt his legs moving before he could stop himself. Something glistened in the darkness of Kim Doo-na’s shades. He needed to get painkillers before dance practice, he needed an excuse to get away, even for half an hour. There were the tense, invisible little eyes of his groupmates behind him, staring needles into his back.

“Kim Doo-na,” Isaac said, bowing a little, a gesture that still felt unnatural, “we are thrown off without Bison. We need all six of us – we’re a bus missing a wheel, we’re off balance.”

Kim Doo-na’s shoulders relaxed a bit – the bus metaphor was something he’d picked up from her, back in their first rehearsal, and it was this relaxing of her shoulders that gave him the confidence to keep going.

“I know where Bison goes, when he runs. Give me, fifteen minutes, I can go find him. I can be fast, he’s not far, I know he’s not far. I know my part already, you know I know my part. *Jebal*. Please.”

“Ohhhh my god,” Sen said from behind him. Isaac turned around and saw that Sen and Buckwoo had their hands on their heads in exaggerated frustration.

“Why would it be better to lose two instead of one? He always comes back anyway,” Joey said.

“We need him for dance,” Isaac said, “we need to rehearse with all six of us.”

“We did the dance this morning,” FW said, his voice thick and low, “Bison knows his moves. You’re the one we need to practice with. You were missing wheel this morning.”

“I know my part,” Isaac said. “Trust me, I know my part. I practiced all morning.”

“Alone,” FW said. “*Solo*.”

Kim Doo-na played a high C note on the piano, sharp and bright, and all five of them turned to face her.

“You know where he is?” she asked, lowering her sunglasses, fixing her gaze on Isaac. Her eyes were thin, wrinkled slits, like a knife slashed through pale clay.

“*Ne*,” Isaac said, “I can get him back before dance. I can go find him.”

Kim Doo-na checked her watch, then pushed her sunglasses back up her nose. “Isaac knows his part,” she said, pointing a finger at the boys behind him. “You four, you stay, we go one by one. Isaac knows his part.” She positioned her hands on the keyboard, cocked her head to the doorway. And when Isaac was halfway out of the room, doing his very best to keep all his weight on his right foot, Kim Doo-na tapped her fingernail against the keyboard’s speaker. Isaac turned around.

“Isaac,” she said, “missing wheel is very bad. But more dangerous is car that thinks it can get on highway with one wheel, car that thinks its one wheel is better than the cars with six.”

None of the other boys were looking at him. From the doorway, the room seemed smaller – the florescent light above them looked dirty and cold.

“I’ll be fast,” he said. “I’m sorry I missed this morning,” Isaac said, bowing to the other boys. They all kept their eyes on the ground. “I won’t let you down.”

And as he pushed open the thick, metal door to the stairwell, as he held himself against the railing and shimmied down the three floors to the lobby, he thought of his groupmates’ eyes, trained on the ground.

...

Isaac used to live in Ohio, Isaac used to watch a video. There was a tall chain-link barrier between the people and security and it was raining. The security — hired middle-aged day players — wore bright yellow rain jackets with their hoods up, overwhelmed and unprepared. There were fingers grasping through the holes in the gate, joints and tendons grabbing at the air, sending ripples through metal. They were girls, they were fathers and brothers and mothers and

boys. The gate and its guards stood at the base of a steep, marble-white staircase, once used as a temple for prayer, and when the head security guard (a sun-dried, brittle-faced man) stood at the top of the stairs and looked down at the sea of screaming, desperate faces, at the writhing mess of bodies, he lifted a walkie to his mouth and announced it was time to let them in.

This is the moment that Isaac revisit over and over and over again, the moment that sent electricity to the parts of his still-developing brain that were ancient and ready — the moment when the gates began to open, when the first fan squeezed their way through a crack of an opening, pressing her elbows against one another, flattening herself into a form thin enough to break through. He would watch the faces of the security guards — their mouths widening as the crowd pressed against the gates, their hoods flying off in the chaos, how uncomfortable rain can look on skin in broad daylight. And then the crowd was running up the stairs, some of them like dogs, on hands and feet, some of them taking three, four stairs at a time in Olympian leaps. The moment that stayed with him though — that burrowed itself in his mind in a blanket of fear and desire — was when one girl shoulder checked another on the top of the staircase, sending the other girl stumbling backwards, missing one step, then another, until finally it was as if her body went boneless — she tumbled down the valley of steps, hitting every step until she flattened at the base of the staircase in a stampede of tiny leaping legs. His friends had sent him the video — it was going around his school as a “fail”, as a “you gotta see this shit hahahahaha”. But for all he’d heard about the video, he hadn’t heard anyone show even a slightest bit of curiosity as to who the crowd was there to see. So when he found that they were all there for a group called BIGBANG, when he learned that the same concert was available to watch through shaking cell-phone footage, he wanted to see. And before the video had finished loading, the fall and the stairs and the gate and the pained, terrified look on the security guards’ faces had paid itself with

the band, with the entire genre of music. He knew that this was a group that people could lose themselves for.

And what it felt like was that a dial had been turned to its limit and then forced to go further, bending metal, sending sparks flying in his twelve-year-old brain. What Isaac saw, huddled in his bedroom at night, were stars far more inaccessible than the Timberlakes and Beibers he had in his grocery stores, at his middle-school, on the internet. He would watch K-pop idols in music videos that were maximalist beyond what any American record label was willing to release, beyond what any American popstar could physically endure, all without breaking a sweat. He liked BTS, especially. He liked how they moved entirely in sync with one another, like they were all breathing the same inexhaustible bubble of enhanced oxygen, each of them beautiful that was not Korean because it was not human, because it was something else. There was a bit of the goofy, normal-guyness that all musicians seemed to have, clips of group members snoring during rehearsal, doing silly faces behind their manager's backs. But on stage, in their music videos, they did not pretend to be like everybody else, they did not pretend to be a goal anyone could aspire to.

Isaac's grandparents had been two failed entrepreneurs who spent their lives trying out scheme after scheme, eventually turning their six sons into a troupe of dancing, singing performers. They ended up as a short-lived *Jackson 5* knock off called "*The Cho Six*" (or "*The Chop Sticks*" to their drunken hecklers) that sang confidently nonsensical lyrics written in their father's broken English.

"Meets our levels of satisfaction? Not without less than mem-or-ab-ly out-STANDING!"

When Isaac's father met his mother, the German-Irish daughter of an ex-marine and a Catholic school teacher, he vowed that whatever family they made together would not have to suffer like his did – they would not raise children forced to compromise their identities, their personal, individual dreams, for the survival of their family. They would not raise a child that would be forced to pursue any dream other than their own. Isaac's mother agreed – there were

What became very clear after Isaac's birth in 2005 (he'd come out without any cries, without any sound at all. Just wide, coffee-colored eyes, blinking into his new world) was that, while their new baby would have the choice to pursue whatever dream he liked, his "having a dream" was non-negotiable. His father, resentful of the complete lack of choice he had in his childhood, supplied his new son with every possible option he could imagine. There were piano lessons, little league baseball teams, mini-film cameras, chess tournaments, watercolor sets, cooking classes (the only one to illicit even a semblance of interest in those first five years). His mother, mirroring the parenting style of her marine father and her Catholic school-teaching mother, made sure that each of Isaac's potential dreams were pursued with complete dedication. In her childhood, she'd witnessed her brother run away from home to live in Los Angeles in pursuit of a career in music, hoping to ride the ill-fated wave of 1980s yacht rock. On the days where Isaac would groan about practicing piano or chess or painting or writing (he was being pushed towards poetry the moment he learned the alphabet), his mother would sit him down in their living room and retrieve an old, wrinkled polaroid from a shoebox in her closet. Isaac still remembered the little hairs of peach fuzz at the polaroid's corners – as if time itself was slowly turning the thing organic.

"I was a teenager," his mother would say, as if each time she told it was the first, "and I hadn't seen him in over a decade – that's how it was in our house, he ran away and the unspoken

rule was that we weren't to speak of him again. But when I was eighteen, I did a cross-country trip to LA with some friends to tour colleges, and I tracked him down through a friend of his."

At this point in the story, she would place the photograph in Isaac's little boy hands, and he'd hold the picture at its corners like he was receiving communion. In the photograph, a large, bearded man sat on a couch with his head slouched over his shoulder, a small circle of drool pooling on his shirt. There were beer cans, sodas, bags of Doritos and boxes of pizza littered on the floor, but Isaac's eyes always landed on what was, in his opinion, the centerpiece of the photo: the man's pale, bulbous belly, hanging out over his waistband, his shirt riding up to his chest. There was the pit of his bellybutton – dark and hollow, the trail of hair curving up the slope of it.

"This is what it looks like to take the easy route," his mother would say, pointing hard into the picture. "This is what happens to people who aren't willing to *work* for their dreams."

And it worked, this picture. As Isaac got older, he was forced to look at the picture less and less. This was both because Isaac found the polaroid scarier than the prospect of "hard work", and also because, even as a child, there was a seed of pride in him that pulsed with life the further he got from the man in that photo, from his failure of an uncle. And if it wasn't his fat uncle he was escaping from, it was his noncommittal Korean grandparents, jumping from dream to dream, giving up when they failed to reap immediate rewards, exploiting their children for personal gain. And if there was a common thread between the belly-polaroid and the evil Asian grandparents, it was that what they'd failed to achieve was a dream of *music* – of song and dance, of rhythm and melody and performance – a dream that called to him with the challenge of succeeding where his elders had failed. At nine, he could already play an impressive catalogue of Schubert, Mozart, and Ravel on the piano, but it was singing he really enjoyed. He was talented at

piano, but it quickly became clear to his parents and everyone else that he was gifted at singing, *gifted*. Isaac loved the way a nice, clean string of notes felt building in his throat, emerging from his mouth in a smooth, prepubescent tenor. He liked closing his eyes while singing, the way his chest would prepare itself in preparation for a more difficult note – it felt like his ribs were reaching up towards his heart, like his lungs were taking in air, filtering out liquid gold.

But more than that – more than having a dream or losing himself in music or feeling talented and special or the adult lyrics he got to sing (*I Can See You, Brown Skin Shining In The Sun...*) or making his parents proud – Isaac loved being looked at.

By the time he turned twelve, Isaac had started to get the sense that his face was evolving into something special. Picture day became yearly points of reference for his rapidly changing features, changes he did not notice until staring his one-year-ago self in the face, comparing it against his reflection. He'd formed dimples in his cheeks – little indentations that pierced into his skin when he smiled. He'd barely started the slow limp through puberty when his face's baby fat all but melted away, leaving his jawline razor sharp, culminating in a chin that rode a fine line between cartoon villain and Harrison Ford. He grew thick, bushy eyebrows, a dark oval of lashes around his eyes, cheekbones that cast shadows under overhead lighting. And absolutely none of this went unnoticed for Isaac – the new, shifty way his mother's friends would look at him, the kindness he'd receive from passing strangers. What he began to like best, what he held close to his chest like a secret power bestowed upon him by God and God alone was the fact that his changing features were perfunctory to his actual dream – that, somehow, the years of practice and work and frustration while his peers were sucking pickle juice from plastic bags had manifested on his face, that they could all look like him if they worked as hard as he did. He'd begun experiencing the beginnings of sexual pride, too, but often he just acted like his looks

were unimportant to him, which he felt only made him more desirable. He turned fifteen, grew from his father's 5'9 to his marine grandfather's 6'2. He posted videos of himself singing to the internet, made social media accounts where he shared photos of himself posing like a model, like the hundreds of other boys aching to be discovered. He would get messages from strangers, sent out into darkness, bursting into light underneath the glass wall of his phone, banging to either be let out or let in. There came brands – brands that sent him products to use on video, *money* for spreading positivity. Cleansers and Moisturizers, phone positioned over his sink, water splashing up towards his face, Cerevae is your One Stop Shop for clean, blemishless skin. He got clothes that came from nowhere, clothes that fit tight and then clothes that fit baggy, chains that fell nice over the cliff of his collarbone, Leave-In Conditioner for his swooshy, shiny hair. Exfoliants, meal prep kits that took the Fuss out of Feasting, bags of salmon skin chips for Guilt-Free Snacking. Probiotic sodas he would sip from with the label facing the camera while assembling his outfit for the day before grabbing his guitar and playing a cover of a song by HYPERBOYS, a song about being out late with friends, dancing up nice and close to that stranger at the bar, going home with them, *You Can Take Me, You Can Take Me*, hopping back and forth between English and Korean, looking hard and deep into the not-quite-strangers he'd amassed over the past few years. Ending the song with the thumb-to-pointer-finger heart, closed-eye cute smile, the kind that the girls in the comments seemed to go crazy for. And if these not-quite-strangers could stay in his room after the videos ended, after the skincare was all washed away, after the clothes were taken off and he was alone with his naked, concave body, they would see his smile fade into a sharpened, far-off stare. It was not that he felt shame over prostituting himself for brand after brand – he'd worked hard to get to the point where he could get sponsorships or make money from social media. It was that, regardless of everything, he still felt no closer to his

dream. In the distance, beyond his room, beyond Ohio, beyond all the dumbass hemp-seed hicks, there was Korea.

“Posting videos of yourself singing, that I can understand,” his mother had said, shaking a tube of crescent rolls at him. “But do you really need to be recording yourself go off to Target? It’s alright to be proud of your body, but I don’t like all the weirdos that have pictures of my baby with his shirt off now. I don’t like imagining Pedophile Jack out there looking at your picture while he scrubs at himself in some Florida bathtub.” At “scrubs at himself” she’d started striking the crescent roll tube against their counter, sending an ooze of pastry seeping out the edges. Isaac thought of the way she would arrange them on the baking sheet, how he would distract himself from the shame by kneeling down on their kitchen tile, watching the dough begin to rise and brown through the oven’s glass. And then on a spring day in 2022, Isaac woke up to a message from across the world, from a stranger sent to deliver urgent, urgent news. He was sixteen years old.

FAN-tasy Lab was a show from before Isaac’s time. In the early 2000s, some record executives for SM and YG Entertainment came up with the idea for a survival show with the goal of finding the next major K-pop act. This was back during what’s now typically known as “Phase One” in K-pop’s evolution – a time when the songs were less focused on finding an audience outside of Korea, back before the genre had the power to shift a city’s economy with one show. And for a few years, the show had been a sensation. Now-fossilized acts like U+ME or SHYGUYZ had developed intense, invested fanbases through the show, but after its third year, it was announced that they wouldn’t be coming back.

Isaac was aware of none of this history when he received a message from a Korean talent scout, congratulating him on catching the attention of a worldwide search for a new season of the show. He'd skimmed the message, figured it was a bot or worse, and went back to online shopping. It wasn't until later, when he received a second message from the account, that he gave the thread his full attention.

“Mr. Isaac Park,

I have seen, and I can actively see, that my previous message has been read, so I would like to reiterate our interest in your account. To be clear: we at GAJA are formally inviting you to a pre-audition for the long-awaited new season of FAN-tasy Lab, a survival show aimed at discovering the next major idol in K-pop. This competition will consist of twenty contestants from around the globe, and if selected, you will spend five months at GAJA headquarters in Seoul filming the upcoming season. Again, I have seen that you have read this message, and yet you do not deem this worthy of a response. It is a privilege to be selected for this program, and there are many young, physically attractive (visually appealing..) young people that would happily take this opportunity if you would rather post middling dance videos and selfies that accrue sub 500 likes. Please write me back at your earliest convenience, and I will respond with details for our Pre-Auditions that will be held in New York, NY at Electric Lady Studios on March 11th at 2pm Pacific Time.

Best,

Kim Changbin”

“The desperation here is startling,” Isaac’s father said, reading the message with the phone held three inches from his face. “The ‘*visually appealing..*’ is particularly seedy. Why do I feel like this is porn?”

“I’ve verified everything,” Isaac said, shifting his weight back and forth between each foot, breathing hard, labored breathes. His parents were lying in bed, and when Isaac stormed in holding his cell phone in the air like a pipe bomb they were each already half asleep.

“Let me see,” his mother said. She took the phone and mouthed the words as she read, shifting her mouth into an increasingly severe grimace the more she read. When she finished, she tossed the phone back to Isaac, as if it’d been burning her hand.

“Obviously the same of the show is awful. But is there actually a record label named ‘GAJA’?”

“Yes!” Isaac said, going to *Kim Changbin*’s verified profile, pulling up photos of her posing at GAJA headquarters with HYPERBOYS, the biggest K-pop group to come out of Korea since BTS. “It means, like, ‘let’s go’ in Korean.”

His mother looked at the photo, scrolled around a little bit, and handed the phone to Isaac’s father.

“I’m sorry,” she said, “and I realize this is racist.”

“Here it is,” his father said.

“But I don’t know how the hell you tell these boybands apart. They all look the same.”

“It almost hurts my eyes, the all caps of it all…” his father said, handing the phone back to Isaac. “Okay so, this very rude talent agent wants you to audition to *maybe* be a part of a show where they can kick you off out of nowhere?”

“Like X-Factor,” his mother said.

“It’s a survival show,” Isaac said, “they’re huge in Korea. Stray Kids came from one of these! This could genuinely change my life, this could change all of our lives!” They stared back at him

– his dad blew a little bit of snot onto his hand. “It’s my *dream*,” Isaac said, and he watched them both perk up a little at this, if only behind their eyes.

“Give us a day to think on it,” his father said. “I mean an audition is one thing. But flying off to Korea...”

“Yes,” his mother said, “we’ll talk about it in the—”

“You know Koreans are schemers, right? Do you know about the Nigerian Prince? They stole that, they stole that from us. Koreans were doing that scheme for years.” He turned to Isaac’s mother, lowered his head to look at her from over his glasses. “Do kids still know about this? About Nigerian Prince?”

“*I don’t know*,” his mother muttered.

“I told you,” Isaac said, “I’ve already verified all this.”

“You could tell your mother that you got a message from Lucy Liu, she’d take one look at the woman’s photo and believe you. We all look the same to her,” his father said.

“Oh come on,” his mother said, laughing, smacking his father across the chest. He looked to Isaac with a mischievous look on his face, like this was a vein of humor that he found particularly funny.

“You know granddad still calls me Chinaman?” he said, shaking his head. “A Korean War vet, you would think the man would know the difference.”

“Oh don’t start on that.” Isaac’s mother had burrowed back beneath the covers, “He didn’t even serve.” She popped her head back up like a meercat, yelled: “No Koreans harmed in the making of my beautiful baby.”

“Is ‘Stray Kids’ spelled out like a scream or is it spelled normally?” his father asked.

“Normally.”

“When I see all caps I’m like ‘why are you threatening me? What’s the big idea?’”

...

When Isaac had first arrived in Korea, he’d stayed in Gangnam, an area that aligned with the idea of Korea he’d held inside of him for the past decade. It was the Seoul he’d seen in movies—in television, in music videos, in mukbangs and walking tours and vlogs where couples gave the viewer an inside look at what day-to-day life was like there.

The three cameramen who had chased Bison out of the building were chain smoking outside of a 7/11. They had their cameras sitting on the sidewalk – one of them, the most ragged and red faced of the group, was using his as a makeshift chair. When they noticed Isaac limping across the street, they choked laughing, coughing out little puffs of smoke, holding onto each other for balance.

Isaac got to the sidewalk, avoided eye contact with any of them, hobbled into the 7/11. He stood at the counter, staring at a teenage girl in a facemask. She was sitting on a stool, completely hunched over, watching another angle of the “Airport Boy” on her phone.

“*Ne,*” Isaac said. The girl looked up and did a double take, dropping her phone, muttering a nervous apology as she bent down to find it. When she came back up she stared down at the pile of travel-sized painkillers on the counter, then looked back up at Isaac.

“*Mul pil-yohaeyo?*” she said, gesturing towards the wall of water bottles in the back. Isaac shook his head, pushed one corner of the pile towards her like an indecisive bank robber.

His mother’s voice in his head, the warning about his liver, about Ibuprofen on an empty stomach. He poured about eight of the little red pills in his mouth, built up enough saliva on his

tongue that he could get them all down. He missed Advil, Ibuprofen. Taking them out of an adults wrinkled palm, convincing himself he could feel the pills' crusts snap apart in his stomach.

“Ohhhhhhkayyyyy” the cameramen said as he emerged from the shop, tucking the rest of the pills into his back pocket.

“Which way?” Isaac asked them. The men muttered something to each other, took on a more serious tone.

“Yo, bro...” the shortest of them said, gesturing towards Isaac's leg. A little bit of cigarette ash flew onto Isaac's foot. “You good bro? You leg? Do you leg?” The man took another puff, blew smoke from his nose. “Challenge, today. *Dojeonhaji maseyo*. Don't—”

One of the other cameramen, a big, broad-chested man, smacked the short one in the chest.

“That way,” the bigger one said, pointing to an alley near the end of the street. “Doggie again. Animal shop.”

“*Kamsahamnida*,” Isaac said, and they all broke into laughter again. And when he turned down the street and reached the alley with the animal café he took one last look back at the cameramen. They were still laughing, stomping out their cigarettes. Only the shorter one still had his eyes trained on Isaac. Blank faced and still.

Despite seeing videos of the cafes back home, Isaac hadn't gotten around to checking any of them out in the week before orientation. Mass produced auto-playing clips of American tourists sipping their coffee while a raccoon or a sea otter lay sleeping on their laps. Bubble-text and goofy music overlaying the various exotic animal cafes available in Korea—comments that said look, look over here. Look how different, look how strange and adorable and unlike the monotony and predictability you get everywhere else. Pictures from tourists who got the perfect photo—a baby kangaroo sitting on your lap, watching along as you type, wide-eyed and alert.

Yes, they can really jump that high. No, he did not think my paper was very good lol #korea #onlyinkorea #animalcafe #joey #coffee #cute.

The animal café was located in a three-story building next door to an already-full soup shop. Isaac stood in the street, staring at the metal ladles floating in their pots, the steam rising up from rows and rows of businessmen sitting on the floor, ties thrown over shoulders. He could smell the flavors in the air—the redness on the faces of the men as they slurped and tapped away at their phones.

“*Jamkkanmanyo.*” A small, hunchbacked man stepped in front of Isaac, shaking his head and muttering to himself as he ascended the staircase. The flares dissolved from Isaac’s vision, and he noticed that a number of the businessmen in the soup shop were staring back at him. How long had he been standing there, sniffing into the air? He readjusted his focus to the cartoon animals plastered on the building, holding an arrow with a “3” on it pointing up the stairs. This was one of the things Isaac loved about Korea—the lack of rhyme or reason as to what sort of experiences a building could hold, the floor-to-floor variety of shops designed to be replaced whenever the next trend takes the crown. The first floor was a recently-closed boba tea spot, a sign on the door that roughly translated to “thank you but we’re gone.” The second floor was either a plastic surgery clinic or a hair salon. Through the glass, Isaac could see the little hunchbacked man sitting in a waiting area below a poorly photoshopped picture of Anne Hathaway with an afro.

Isaac hadn’t even reached the top of the staircase by the time the smell hit him. It was like a rotten petting zoo—images of children leaping from blocks of hay and wiry donkey hair flashed through his mind. There was a shoe rack by the door, and Isaac immediately spotted Bison’s \$500 sneakers positioned next to a pair of half-demolished flip flops. The door had a small

rectangle of a window, and Isaac peered at an obese Golden Retriever, splayed out on the ground like he'd been shot. Inside were a series of little cubicles fenced off with child-proof safety gates, all empty save for the one in the back where Bison sat.

“*Ne,*” an employee said when Isaac walked in. It was a tiny Taiwanese man with a scrunched up face, blackheads scattered across his button-nose. He motioned to a menu of drinks—coffees, teas, juices—and then he pointed to a wall of mugshots for each animal they offered. Isaac ordered a juice, pointed to a photo of an otter with the name “MARIO” written underneath.

“*Ne...*” the man said again, and then disappeared behind a door. If Bison had noticed him walk in, he seemed entirely unbothered by his presence. He was sitting on the floor in one of the little octagons, face to face with a raccoon that sat stock-still in front of him.

Isaac had just assumed that “Bison” was a Korean name that he was just mishearing as the English word. “Bi-son Kim” or something. It wasn’t until the second week—when he first dramatically ran out of rehearsals—that Isaac heard the producers addressing a “Cho-sin Park”, yelling into walkie talkies for the squad of cameramen to keep up with him, to get as much footage as they could before bringing him back.

“Why do we call him Bison?” Isaac eventually asked Jin.

“He said he likes animals, and his snoring sounds like a cow moo.”

“That’s it?” Isaac asked.

“It’s an animal and it’s a better name than Cow.”

“Bison,” Isaac yelled. The raccoon looked over to him, blinking up at the ceiling for a moment before turning back to resume the staring contest. Bison simply held up his hand, gave a little wave. The employee came back holding a little otter in a towel and shoved it into Isaac’s chest.

“Okay,” the man said, “you pay at the end. Pay by how long.”

“Can I go sit with my friend?” Isaac asked, pointing to where Bison sat. The man grunted and went back to wherever he’d gone to retrieve the animal. Isaac looked down at the otter in his arms. It squeaked a little, rubbed a paw at its nose, closed and opened its little black eyes. He crossed the room, passing the golden retriever. The dog growled without opening its eyes. Grey muzzle, big name tag. Lisa.

“The fact that you’re rocking bare feet in here is crazy,” Isaac said, opening the safety gate to step inside of Bison’s little zone. “Why didn’t he make me go into one of these? Why is this place even open this early?”

“Coffee,” Bison whispered, “it’s coffee shop.”

“It smells like hoof.”

“Not to me.” The otter went entirely still in Isaac’s arms as he got closer to the raccoon. He held it close, tried to give some sign that he’d protect it.

“I think it’s time to mosey on back,” Isaac said. “Time to get on out of here. We’re already missing the first bit of dance rehearsal.”

“Bro,” Bison said, maintaining his eye-contact with the raccoon, “he’s like you, he’s a mix. He’s a mixed breed coon.”

“First off you can’t call it a coon, that’s a hard no on that.”

“Okay.”

“And second there aren’t different breeds of raccoons. There aren’t raccoon mutts. They aren’t like dogs.”

“This one is named Valentina. She’s from Brazil.”

There was a crash from back in the other room—the sounds of cages slamming, some screech Isaac didn't recognize, then silence.

Both of their phones buzzed in their pockets, and it was like a spell was broken. The raccoon leapt off its feet, scuttled about the floor on all fours. It opened its mouth like it was barking but no sound came out.

“Schedule change,” Bison said, looking down at his phone. He held it out for Isaac to see. At first he felt a burst of relief—their dance rehearsal had been cancelled—he'd have more time to rest his knee, and the sector of his brain that had been trying to figure out how to get out of rehearsal quieted into a low hum. Bison was smiling.

“Rest day,” Bison said, “rest day.”

They paid while the raccoon stood on two legs, staring back at them from behind the gate, expressionless and still. When Isaac handed the otter back to the man he sniffed the thing's head, as if he was sussing out its condition. And as Isaac and Bison walked out back into the stairwell—as they tugged their socks over their dirt-brown soles—Isaac snuck a glance through the door's window, watched the man carry the otter into that back room. He caught a glimpse of shaky florescent lights, wiry cages, cardboard boxes stacked up to the ceiling. The entire walk back, Isaac imagined the otter gliding through a river, floating on its back, making an island of its tummy.

Note: the scene that follows this one is not yet finished, and I did not want to include it in its very rough form. It largely acts as the climax to this whole reality TV section. Isaac and Bison go back for the end of week “Challenge”, and it's revealed to be a dance marathon. Isaac goes far longer than he should, he becomes delirious and his body gives out on him. He's kicked off the show.

The Invisible Hand (1st DRAFT, July 22nd, 2017)

By Rayya Ahmed

Tommy Almond is a man of contradictions. He is a twenty-nine-year-old Korean-American man, born in New Mexico to a family of revolutionaries, who has spent almost the entirety of his life working in the American entertainment industry. He's tall – hovering around six-three, with the sort of bone structure typically reserved for soap operas and Calvin Klein ads. His voice is a deep, low baritone., and he speaks with what many contemporary linguists often refer to as a “blaccent”. The history of his family and his ascendance into the industry giant he is now can only be assembled in pieces, and the gaps in these details are vast and ridiculous in scope.

Despite all of this, Almond held the music industry (and, in Almond's opinion, the American economy) in the palm of his hands for the entirety of the early 2000s. From 1999-2010 years, Almond produced and wrote thirteen #1 singles (topping American and International Billboard charts), won two Grammy awards (although he has not attended the ceremony once), and has some of the biggest names in music offering millions to work with him.

“I've seen him do it, I've seen him do that shit in like five seconds,” said past collaborator, wil.i.am. “I've watched this dude close his eyes and go ‘here's the version of your song that's a hit.’ And he'll get on keys and play our exact chords from memory and then change that shit to the point where it sounds legendary. And you hear your own

song played back to you, the Tommy Version, and you're just like 'Damn, we got a hit on our hands.'”

For wil.i.am's group, *The Black Eyed Peas*, Almond played an integral part in their total domination over the hearts and minds of American youth. Their singles, *I Gotta Feeling*, *Boom Boom Pow*, and *Meet Me Halfway*, were all co-written and co-produced (the “co” production credit is up for debate, depending on who you ask) by Almond, and their record-breaking success has only furthered the belief long-held by industry titans that he has a savant-like ability to write hit after hit.

“He's like a Quiji board,” said frequent collaborator Mariah Carey, “am I thinking of the right thing? A Quiji board? Like that thing where he makes you feel like you're moving the thing with your hand but really like, he's the one moving it. He's locked into some other place, I'm so serious. That run I go on in *We Belong Together*, the dadadadadadadadadada, that was all Tommy. The chorus was all Tommy. He just closed his eyes, told me and my people to be quiet, and then he stands up and sings the whole melody. Right there, on the spot. And he just points at me and goes ‘song of the year.’”

It's tempting to believe that Almond has a clairvoyant sixth sense for writing Billboard hits. It's tempting to believe that there are individuals born with and almost supernatural talent for achieving the impossible again and again (Almond himself seems to both reject and actively endorse this idea). And when listening to the now-vast catalog of music that Almond has had a hand in creating, it's undeniable the there is a quality to each of his tracks that appears to transcend pattern or logic. There are no “trademarks” of a Tommy Almond song – no signature melodies that could tip a listener off to his involvement. There is instead a variety and versatility that borders on the chaotic – an ability to switch between forms and genres and cultures and sounds with unrelenting

ease. Listening to hours of Almond-produced tracks, I found my head nodding back and forth, my foot kicking in rhythm, bypassing commands from any intellectual or conscious part of myself. In the taxi from the airport to my hotel, one of GAJA's newer songs started playing, a HYPERBOYS track. It wasn't until the song ended and my foot stopped moving that I realized I'd been dancing along to music I could barely even hear – whispers in the air that moved my body to act without intent, without reason.

What I came to understand after a weekend with Tommy Almond is that his true gift does not include a Mozart-level ability to access an unlimited well of art and feeling. What Almond does possess is the ability to assess the cultural landscape with complete anthropological clarity. It's a foresight that is typically seen in stock traders, market analysts and actuaries – a strategic brilliance in predicting where the music industry is headed and understanding where it's been.

I spent my first night in Korea attempting to practice this same degree of insight: reading and researching in an attempt to understand Almond's past (and potential future) before our dinner the following afternoon. I leaned against the rickety Hilton headboard, splayed the biography of Almond's grandfather in front of me, looking for connections, for patterns – tracking the movement of his story. And Almond's story is one that begins long before his firing from *The Mickey Mouse Club* in favor of a twelve-year-old Justin Timberlake (his resentment of Timberlake is vicious). To understand Tommy Almond and his “musical strategy”, one has to go back to August 6th, 1945, to the day the United States dropped an atom bomb on Hisoshima.

Almond's grandfather, Yoon Jae-Jo, was the founder of the now-infamous 1970s terrorist organization *The 10,000*, named after the reported 10,000 Korean victims of

America's nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki (it is today reported that upwards of 70,000 Korean citizens died in these attacks.) At twenty-two, Yoon was a conscripted labor worker in Japan, and in his memoir/political manifesto *10,000 Strong, 10,000 Win!* he describes witnessing a bright, blinding light before feeling his skin burning from his face, his legs going sharp and numb.

"Maggots hatched on my face....," writes Yoon, "scabs overcame my lips, my eyes... I couldn't see, I was a corpse... a walking corpse."

The Korean survivors of the bombings received no medical assistance from Japanese hospitals (written off on racial grounds) and were also turned away when returning to Seoul, faced with a Korean government ashamed of their very existence.

"They want nothing to do with us, that's it. That's what it is... They want us to disappear."

By the end of 1946, Yoon's body was riddled with radiation poisoning and his face was left distorted, half-melted. He decided to start a movement with the intent of directing public attention.

"We cannot be invisible, that was my quest. We will show you the true face of Korea, Japan, America. There will be no pretending. There will be transformation, like the cicada... There will be what we are and what there is. They will look into our eyes and see themselves."

The "how" of how the organization ended up in New Mexico is vague—Yoon's own memoir contradicts itself numerous times. What we know for sure is that *The 10,000* ended in smoke and flame, its members killed or scattered from an accidental (or deliberate fire) that destroyed their compound, leaving behind a series of questions without answers.

I met Tommy Almond at his house just outside of Kaesong city. It's a modern, trendy piece of real-estate: blocks of polished wood colliding with glass and steel, evoking past and future in the smallest of details.

I knocked on the door and heard him approaching from the other side – loudly laughing through a story he was telling in Korean. He opened the door with a phone against his head, did not look me in my eyes, and motioned for me to come in with his free hand. He closed the door behind me, held up a finger to indicate he would just be a moment (he still hadn't so much as glanced up from my shoes) and walked back down the hallway, leaving me alone in the entrance to his house. He was tall. He had short, neatly combed hair that looked damp with pomade, and he wore a big, boxy black T-shirt tucked into dress pants. The walls were completely bare, save for a framed letter written in Hangul that I could not read.

Tommy turned around when he realized I wasn't following and finally met eyes with me. He lowered the phone from his ear and waved me into the kitchen with a big, full-toothed smile. As I walked down the hallway I caught the first whiffs of our meal in the air – grilled meat, sugar, garlic. Passing into the kitchen felt like entering a different house – the room's ceiling was immeasurably high, to the point where I found myself trying to recall what the house looked like from the outside, whether or not I was within some architectural illusion. The middle of the kitchen was a large square island with a full Korean barbeque grilling station – there were two plates already positioned at the edge of the table, so I took my seat at the chair closest to the doorway. The room was empty, and I could hear Tommy mumbling Korean into his phone from the next room

over. I waited for a few minutes, listening, staring out the wall-sized window at the other end of the room. I could see the DMZ from my seat – the mountains of North Korea, the waves of heat made the horizon look like a mirage.

There was the scraping of metal, and the door to my left swung open. The man who entered the kitchen was not Tommy, and if he noticed me jump at the sight of him he did not say anything. The man's face was sunken, deformed – I could tell he was Korean, but mostly from his eyes, which were largely untouched by whatever defect he'd been born with. Both ends of his lips rose up into high clefts, almost reaching his nostrils, giving him the expression of a growling dog. His nose and chin were both twisted and flat, and his neck tilted down to his left shoulder, making him look shorter than he was. He wore a chef's outfit, complete with an apron of knives and a tall white hat. He had a slight limp to his walk; his left foot dragged across the tile, just barely enough to notice. I swallowed as he approached me, and when he placed a handful of small dishes in front of me – kimchi and dried fish and peppers – I thanked him.

“Banchan,” he said, keeping his eyes locked to the floor. He gave a slight bow, blinked a few times, then walked out of the room, leaving through the door he came in from. I looked down at the food in front of me and felt embarrassed over the little jump I'd given when he'd entered the room.

The front door to the house opened again, and I turned in my chair to see Tommy walking into the foyer, giving a final burst of laughter before placing the phone back into his pocket, locking eyes with me, and clapping his hands together.

“Ah!” he said, his voice echoing through the house.

“Hello,” I said, getting up from my chair, extending my hand. He took long, gracious strides from the hallway to the kitchen, and when he finally reached me and placed his

hand in mine I met his gaze: he had light-brown eyes and long lashes, with the kind of face that seemed to house thick layers of muscle between skin and bone. He had a slight scar on his jaw, a cut, like a tiny white river in his skin.

“I have to share something with you,” he said, placing his other hand on top of mine.

“May I start recording first?” I asked.

“No, this is just for you, not for the article.”

He closed his eyes, furrowed his brow.

“Seldom has a stranger come there to Korea, from Iraq or another country, and left it afterwards. So healthy is the air there, so pure the water, so fertile the soil, and so plentiful all good things.”

He opened his eyes, analyzing my face.

“That’s from a famous Iraqi historian,” he said, letting go of my hand, motioning for me to retake my seat. “I just thought you might fuck with that.”

“Thank you, yes, that’s a lovely quote,” I said.

I sat back down and Tommy took the seat next to me, scooching his chair forward to press himself against the island’s counter. The chef came back out with a few trays of meat, and before I even noticed the glare from the sun he crossed the kitchen to lower the blinds, just enough to block out the now-piercing light of sundown. I took my tape recorder from my bag (beaten, chipped, continent-crossing) and placed it in front of us.

Note: This is Garrett: I’m going to change this from a transcript to normal dialogue.

TA: I have to tell you, the sizzling will probably mess with the recording.

RA: It should be okay, we have audio engineers that can help transcribe if I'm not able to.

TA: Ah, perfect. And you eat meat, correct?

RA: Yes, I do.

TA: I'm trying to go absolutely insane here. On this food, right here.

Almond begins placing slices of meat onto the grill, pouring us both little cups of soju.

RA: How long have you had a private chef?

TA: He's family, believe it or not. My cousin. He had three businesses fully crash and burn so I told him I'd fly him out here. The cooking is him earning his keep.

Almond raises his glass of soju and I do the same. We each take a small sip and he moves to continue flipping the meat.

RK: I wanted—

TA: I read – and I'm sorry for cutting you off – but I read that your parents had a similar arrangement when they left Iraq. Your father was a chef, right?

RK: He was – it was a similar situation. There was a British diplomat who went crazy for his restaurant, in Kabul.

TA: And he flew them out, helped them immigrate, right? So that he could have your father's food all the time?

RK: I take it you're a longtime fan.

TA: I like your essays, yes. I like your work for *People*.

He moves some of the meat to my plate and we begin eating.

TA: The *Vanity Fair* stuff, too. I'm being so serious right now, I found it all moving.

RK: I'm sure the investigations into Brad Pitt's hairline really helped prepare you for this interview.

TA: They did, actually. I feel like I understand you, after reading those.

RK: You felt like—

TA: And I should understand you if you're trying to understand me, right? That's what communication is. That's how we make something together.

RK: What about me do you understand after reading those?

TA: I saw my own career mirrored back at me, the same career path we all end up traveling.

RK: And what path is that?

TA: The path of making content for people who look nothing like us! Doing this with the promise that once we work long enough we'll be allowed to get to the good stuff, but that *that* career is only for the ones who prove they can take orders first. But. But...

RK: But?

TA: But here's the thing I actually loved about reading your articles – and if I'm projecting here, you can just tell me, seriously. But the other part of it was that these were not profiles written by someone who ended up being good at making the content for the people who look nothing like you. These were articles written by somebody who, I believe, enjoyed writing those silly little profiles. I doubt you enjoyed writing those pieces as much as you enjoy where your career went next, but I suspect you feel the red, potent shame over this enjoyment. And a tender piece of your mind – if you're anything like me -- will always wonder if you found joy in it because you like gossip and celebrity and American culture *or* if you found joy in it because you were writing about the people you always wanted to accept you, the group you always wanted to be a part of. And now

you write articles about war and empire and you have been championed but championed as one that can now never join their ranks. But our talent for impressing them, that is always there. That will always be there.

I nod, furrowing my brow, taking a bite of food in attempt to slow things down, get back on track.

RA: I've interviewed a number of the artists you've collaborated with – the Black Eyed Peas and Mariah, mostly. And everything they had to say corroborated this notion that you're a sort of magical, hit-making machine. That you can pull what the public wants out of thin air.

TA: Yeah. That narrative caught a lot of wind this summer.

RA: And I actually have it on good authority that we're not the first outlet to come trying to get an interview from you.

TA: *Burps*

RK: *Silent*

TA: No, you're not. And I'm flattered, obviously. But I think it's fucked up that I spend the first half of my career trying to be in the spotlight and getting kicked out every door. And now that I'm trying to work behind the scenes – that's when people come knocking. I get rushes of the whole resentment-desire thing, you know? Also, I just gotta say, really impressive what you're doing to the gochujang there.

RA: You're saying you feel resentment over the dismissal you faced trying to be a solo artist?

TA: I'm saying – well I'm trying to say two things. First is that I'm resentful of the fact that, now that I'm putting out music essentially through the avatars of the artists I write and produce for, people are acting like I'm the second coming. It's not like I made some

massive switch-up as a musician since then. The only difference is that it's not a Korean dude on the album cover anymore. That's all that changed.

RA: And the second thing you wanted to say?

TA: The second thing is that I also feel this insane sort of desire being fulfilled that makes me feel so good, sickeningly good. It's kind of sick, is what it is.

RA: Well I'm interested in something you just said – this notion that your music hasn't changed. There are little to no recordings of any of the songs you were trying to release in your early twenties. If you were putting out music today, would it sound like the songs you write for Mariah? Black Eyed Peas? Kelly Clarkson? In my opinion, your work with those artists succeeds because of how well you can identify what sounds work with each artist's style. It's a sort of curation, maybe. I guess what I'm saying is that an album containing all your greatest hits as a writer-producer would make for a chaotic listen.

Almond lets out a loud, boisterous laugh, slapping his hand down on the counter. The chef walks back into the room and replaces empty side-plates with new dishes.

CHEF: Banchan.

TA: Kamsahamnida.

CHEF: *Mumbles*

TA: Okay, you have a good point there. I guess what I'm actually trying to say is that my *ability* hasn't changed. What's changed is the level of reach I have.

RA: You're saying you can reach more people as a producer.

TA: I'm saying that I'm not limited by persona or individuality as a writer-producer. If I told the Black Eyed Peas we're gonna follow this album up with country or death metal, they'd look at me like I was crazy. And I would be! To suggest something like that!

Because they have their thing, and they can shift and grow and “evolve” all they want but

they will always be married to the persona they've built for themselves. They will always be one thing.

RA: Now this gets to something interesting, I think. Because of course it's not like you're 100% of these artists' careers – they're still up there dancing and singing and recording the tracks themselves.

TA: For the most part.

Almond winks at me here, I'm unsure what this implies.

RA: But what you're implying is that you're transcending this single-minded idea of what an average listener thinks an artist can be, that by puppeteering these albums into existence you're able to reach a wider audience than you'd ever be able to as a recording artist. But that doesn't seem to allot much space for the musicians themselves. Don't they have autonomy here? People don't look at a picture of Mariah Carey and go "There's the fun, poppy side of Tommy Almond."

TA: They do! They're their own entities – I don't even work on every album with most of my artists, and I certainly have never worked with anyone to build that persona or fanbase from the ground up. What I'm saying is that there are a lot of sides to me that I get to explore through genres I probably wouldn't be able to write in if I were the one singing.

RA: Like Shakira's last album, for example.

TA: Yes—well that was different. Sometimes all it amounts to is the fact that I've taken account of where the industry is going and I feel like I can get there before anyone else does. I can find little trends and carve out a path to get to whatever sound the industry is heading towards.

RA: Like playing the stock market, sort of.

TA: I mean, not really, but I do get what you're saying. It's about understanding collective consciousness, you know? Taking the pulse. What you're referring to with this stock market comment, I've had people tell me that before. But that's different. This is bigger than that. This is politics, American morality, sex, fashion, you know? It's like I was saying -- for most artists, an audience wants you to be one thing. You create a character and then any divergence from that character takes hordes of PR teams and music videos and fucking underwear campaigns to tweak. But people are not stable like that. You think The Beatles would be The Beatles if they ran around in fuckin' suits for thirty years? You think Kanye West changes up his style every album for fun? Artists come to me because I've got my fingers on the pulse. I'm listening, you know what I'm saying? A Marxist-Leninist guerrilla group is killing its way through Columbia and Shakira skyrockets to the top of the charts. This Black Eyed Peas album, it's a reaction to Bush, to Iraq – it goes all the way back to Y2K. There's a growing fatalism among people in this country – and why shouldn't there be? But, again, take this Black Eyed Peas project for example. I was like “what if you took the optimism of disco and the anarchy of post-war Europop and told audiences like, ‘so the world is ending, might as well fucking dance our asses off before the party ends,’” you know what I'm saying?

RK: I'm curious to hear how your family history influenced the way you look at the world. And I don't mean “the way you look at the world” in an existential sense, I'm more referring to the way you write music based off of geopolitical trends and conflict. Part of me suspects this is not the sort of skill you pick up out of nowhere.

TA: First off, you don't have to say things like you “suspect” something, you can just ask me. I'm an open book.

RK: I didn't mean it in any sort of accusatory way. It's a figure of speech.

TA: I know I—hey, listen, I didn't mean that in some angry-celebrity sort of way. I wasn't trying to call out you.

RK: It's alright, sincerely. Do you think your family influenced the way you look at the world?

TA: I mean how could they not? It wasn't a normal childhood by any standard. We were handing out flyers by Los Alamos, screaming into microphones. You obviously know all about the stuff they were up to.

Almond is quiet here for a moment, giving a half-smile and then letting his face drop into thought.

TA: They wanted me to go to LA. I could sing, that was the whole thing that set me apart. I could sing. I mean obviously now I'm like "Thank fucking Christ", but back then I was drinking the Kool-Aid. My family's whole thing was that we were trying to practice the whole "Juche Ideal" and really *believe* that there was no hierarchy of power within the community. So being the only one who looked different and "normal" was hard on my little-kid brain. I wanted to be like everyone else.

RA: The similarity I'm hearing here – between your music and your family – is this de-emphasis on the individual.

TA: My grandfather always said that you change individuals through *collective*, not the other way around. That's what I was trying to say with the stuff about "moving between genres", how I wouldn't be able to do that as a performing artist. The more fluid you are, the more people you reach.

RA: I get that – I see the relationship there. But I also imagine it could work the opposite way – that when you're making an album, this physical thing people can buy, you're also looking at people less like individuals and more like a collective, a group of

buyers. But it's not a collective in the way that your grandfather rallied for: it's a collective as a means to individual capital, to profit. The only *change* taking place is a financial one. Perhaps this gets into a different conversation, which is whether or not changing the financial situations of a few individuals is still changing lives in the way your grandfather intended.

TA: Yes! Exactly! You're completely right -- at a certain point we're manufacturing what people want. There are tons of record executives out here -- I've talked to them, they're out here -- that believe you can tell more about someone through what they buy than who they vote for. And who controls what you buy? Well, in 2009, my answer would be celebrities. And who controls the celebrities? Well. Well.

RA: But, again, this belief doesn't allow for a lot of autonomy, does it? What about the idea that music moves people because it's art, because it can make us feel things?

TA: Nobody does *anything* unless they feel something. We're saying the same thing, I think. We're both saying that if you can make someone feel something artistic and beautiful and full of *feeling*, and then point to an image of a person and say "That guy. That guy made you feel that way," and then have *That Guy* tell their audience to go buy a fuckin' coat, then there's a decent chance the listener will go out there and buy that fuckin' coat.

RA: Okay, it's obvious that music is a political force in your eyes. Or at least it has the potential to be a political force. But -- and forgive me for my bluntness here -- but what's the point? Is there a goal behind the music that extends beyond making millions of dollars? Your music is undoubtedly effective, and I know you don't write the entirety of the lyrics, but we're talking about pop music. If these songs can be played *everywhere*

and be loved by *everyone*, doesn't that imply that any kind of artistic message has been completely diluted? I realize this is a leading question, but I'm curious.

TA: The goal is to get to a point where I'm not making music off of "predictions" anymore — I wanna stop living like a dog catching and retrieving. The dream is that the order can be reversed: that I can eventually write and produce music so strong and effective and *perfect* that the opposite happens: where the music is the force informing the political and social landscape, not the other way around. Because just based off your question, I'm getting the sense that you're just as tired of all this as I am. You correctly pointed out that everything I write and make is, in a sense, completely iterative, and even though I do that better than everyone else that doesn't mean I'm the only one doing it. What you're noticing in my process is the issue with the entire music industry right now: a complete and utter lack of imagination for anything genuinely *new*. When's the last time you heard a completely new genre? Rap and techno got big in the 80s, but that was almost thirty years ago. It's not unreasonable to me that people are aching for something *new* without even knowing they want it. The way I make music — like you said, it's like I'm tracking market trends — this can only last for so long before people get bored, you know? My dream is to be at the forefront of the next wave of music.

Tommy is quiet for a moment. He's sitting up straighter than he was when we first sat down. His "blaccent" has dissolved into a deeper, weightier tone — I do not know which voice is performance.

TA: People want to give themselves over to something — music, love, anger, dance. But how do you give yourself away to something without losing the part of yourself that makes decisions? How do you become part of something larger without forgetting how

to decide for yourself? What's the point of changing the way people think or feel if they're just being manipulated into those ideas and feelings in the first place?

RA: I'm not trying to psychoanalyze you. But I have to imagine that some of these questions you're raising here stem from your family, from your grandfather. When did you first hear about what really happened? With the fires? With your uncle?

Almond dramatically dumps a mound of sliced beef onto the grill, sending sparks of oil flying through the air, an explosion of sizzle drowning out my voice.

TA: It's like not even eight yet. Would you like to walk?

He motions to the window.

RA: To the DMZ? I have a problem with big, empty spaces. Countrysides. I realize that I sound insane.

TA: I can't blame you – we've all got our phobias. I used to have a problem with elevators.

RA: How'd you shake that one?

TA: I got trapped in one once, like eight years ago. I was there for hours, me and this old white lady. Doris Bonan. Exposure therapy, basically.

RA: So you're saying I should go skydiving or something.

Tommy laughs at this, stands up from his chair. I follow his lead.

TA: I'm not saying that at all. If you told me to run into a burning building I'd probably tell you to go fuck yourself.

RA: You have a phobia of burning buildings?

TA: Flames in general.

RA: And yet you have this entire Hibachi grill to eat in front of every night.

TA: Okay, watch the racism Ms. College Grad. Nobody's making no onion volcanos on this thing.

...

We spent the rest of the evening walking down the long, winding street that leads up to Tommy's house. Over the course of our walk, I learned that his chef is named "Yoon", that Yoon is Tommy's biological cousin, that Yoon lives in Tommy's house, and that Yoon's deformities are a result of their grandparents' exposure to radiation, that the bomb still lingers in their DNA, manifesting in all of their family's children, in their future children's children.

"And you were the only one born unaffected?" I asked.

"Physically, yes," he said. "That's not to say that I wasn't affected, though."

I wanted to push further on this, but we were almost back to his house, and in the distance I could see Yoon waiting in the driveway, my bag dangling from his hand.

"Tomorrow," Tommy said, "you should come by earlier, I can show you the studio. The stuff we were talking about earlier – the whole idea of music as something completely iterative – I wanna show you what all that mental masturbation has led me to."

We reached the driveway, and Yoon held out his hand, passing me my bag. In the darkness, his features looked brushed clean, and his eyes shimmered off the distant streetlights. They did look like family, standing across from one another.

“Thank you,” I said.

“Of course,” Yoon said, bowing again, looking me in the eyes this time. His voice was as accent-less as Tommy’s, and it had a lightness to it that made him sound young, child-like. I turned back to Tommy, shook his hand. His palms were cold and smooth, and when we finished shaking he pulled his hand away slowly, letting each finger graze against my skin. There was a flirtation to it, an intentionality in his eyes.

“I’ve only just started,” Tommy said, “but tomorrow I’ll show you the beginnings of the new sound I’m working on. It’s still early, but already, it’s not like anything you’ve ever heard before. It’s sonically Korean, like *authentic* Korean. That’s all I’ll say right now.”

I had spent a few months in Seoul when I was younger – a study-abroad program that took us through Japan, Korea, China – so I was relatively familiar with Korean pop-music.

“I’ve heard some of that before,” I said, fishing for my keys in the cave of my bag. “It’s good – good for dancing.”

I felt the metal of the car keys in my hand, looped my finger through the ring, pulled it from the bag. I unlocked the car, which made its headlights briefly flash into the darkness, illuminating the street, the driveway, Tommy’s face. And in that small pocket of light, I saw his furrowed brow, his lip curved, ever so slightly, like he was preparing a growl.

“Thank you again,” I said, “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

I started my way to the car, and just before reaching the door Tommy called out to me.

“That’s not Korean music!” he yelled. I shouted back some confirmation that I’d heard him, a *Sounds good!* or *Okay!*, and then I got in the car and drove away. I turned the radio off and sat in silence, thinking over the details of our conversation. The road was empty, the moon shone across the vast expanse of desert.

PIPOKJA

Note: this is a section from later in the book, from the beginning of Part II. I like this section, despite its opening craziness, and felt it might give a portrait of where the book is heading. This takes place a year after everything you've read so far.

Tommy tried starting with a memory. Two boys lost in the New Mexican desert, racing each other, themselves — dodging shadows, nightmares. Their lungs dry with smoke, cheeks still rosy with heat. Enduring fear and sweat and quivering muscles in the dark.

He changed his mind, decided to start earlier.

There were two boys, sleeping through a house fire.

Splintering wood, shifting beams. The thunder of bulbous, racing flames. Tommy and Yoon, eight-year-old cousins, sleeping with their toes curled and cold beneath a blanket. It took Uncle Min bursting into the room and shaking them by the shoulders to finally wake them.

“*Gaja,*” their uncle hissed. “*Jikeum baro gaya dwae.*”

Uncle Min lifted them from the mattress and carried them under his arms, digging sharp, jagged fingers into their skin. He ran with them, out of the bedroom, down winding hallways, through smoke and haze and crackling ember, ignoring the cries for help that echoed through the walls. Tommy held his breath and watched Yoon cough and choke underneath their uncle’s other arm. And when they emerged through the house’s blackened entrance Uncle Min dropped the

boys to the ground, retched the smoke from his lungs. The outside world was dark and completely empty, save for the horses screaming and thrashing in their stables.

Uncle Min stumbled to the row of vans that sat opposite the house. Tommy and Yoon sat frozen where he'd dropped them, watching the flames reflect off each van, feeling the heat creep up behind them.

"Gaja! Gaja gaja gaja!" Uncle Min yelled. He tried calling to them again, but he broke into a cough and lost his balance, stumbled a little. The boys ran to him, kicking dust and dirt into the smoky air. Uncle Min helped each of them into the passenger's seat and they sped off into the desert. Tommy and Yoon held their heads out the window, felt the acceleration and wind rage against their necks as they watched waves of fire dance over their home. And when the car ran out of gas and the flames became a spark in the distance, their uncle yanked the key from the ignition. The boys sat in silence and watched him exhale steam, mumbling to himself.

"Nagaseyo, nagaseyo," Uncle Min said. He ushered the boys out of the car. The air smelled charred and thick with ash, despite hours of driving. Uncle Min knelt down to the earth and pulled each boy close. He pressed his thick, prickly jaw against their foreheads.

"Tommy-ya, Yoon-Dae-ya. Nan do-ra gal-kke. Woori chatgo itgetta. Aedeuli o-di itnunji morugetdago halke. Naega kkeudulege noneun bul-eh ta jugeottago halkke."

He pulled back and took one last look at them, at Tommy, at Yoon. Yoon was crying and breathing weak, shivering puffs of air into the night. Tommy was not crying. He was focused on listening to the tunnels of wind in the air, to the buzz of light humming off the moon.

"Jom doh gaya dwae," Uncle Min said, pointing into the distance. *"Busseu chatgo Caeliponia-kkaji tago ga. Tommy-ya."* He pressed a shaking palm to Tommy's chest, cupping his voice, bringing it to the surface of his skin, right against the wall of bone.

“Miguki nee moksori ggok al goya.”

Tommy stared back at him, memorized every inch of his face. The folds of his uncle’s eyelids were so thin and tight that Tommy thought they looked like slashes from a knife, exposing hints of twinkling pupil underneath.

“Go,” Uncle Min said. *“Go.”*

Both parties broke apart, running in opposite directions. Uncle Min went back the way they came, gasping for breath, bone-dry and fatigued. Tommy and Yoon ran toward the horizon, away from home, away from *“Pipokja”*, Los Alamos, signs and flyers, hysteric deformities, the lust for nuclear reparation that had driven their family to madness.

And as the sun rose over the desert, the memory of this moment — of this final goodbye with Uncle Min — became infested with color and melody from experiences that did not belong. The stars faded into the bluing sky, exploded in flashes — pops of cameras, hands pointing and flailing behind them; songs from his LA years sprouted up from cracks in the ground, spewed pumping bass and 808s and La La La La La’s that sent terrible colors and rhythms dissolving into the sky like geysers, like sparkling veins of *fun*. The air grew dense, filled up with forty-two years of music, songs, scrapped concepts, insipid lyrics. The clouds morphed into young, aching mouths, all singing Tommy’s successes and failures in harsh, screeching clarity. There were clouds of teen heartthrobs and feuding girl groups and fading pop stars and lips cracking into smiles. And even after opening his eyes — even after returning to the grounded safety of his studio — Tommy still saw a pink, glowing hue in the air. He swallowed, took deep breaths, waved away the noise and residue of memory, cleared space for future.

There’d been something off about his tea that morning — too much caffeine — filling his mind with clutter where there should only be imagination. The echoes of music and color from

that other place began to soften into faint whispers, and then finally went silent altogether.

Tommy blinked back into reality, reestablished himself in the dim nightlight of a room. He sat in front of a mixing console, staring down at its checkerboard of blinking light. There were rows upon rows of dials; lines of switches and dime-sized buttons. Beyond the console was a thick wall of sound-proof glass, the barrier between the small room where Tommy sat and the recording booth. The small, padded box behind the glass had a microphone stemming out from its cushioned walls, suspended in the air, listening, listening. The recording booth was lit with a vintage, golden light, and its glow traveled through the glass, reflecting off the mixing board's silver — every spiraled, meticulous screw. Tommy licked his lips and tasted mushrooms and radish and thyme lingering on his tongue from breakfast, sour in a way that made him wonder how long he'd been sitting there.

He pressed a small, square button in front of him, spoke into the little dots of a receiver.

“Yoon,” he said.

“*Ne,*” Yoon said, already behind him. Tommy jumped — the surprise sparked one last flash from their childhood: riding a stuttering Greyhound through Nevada, singing *All My Loving* to each other when they felt scared. *And While I'm Away, I'll Write Home Every Day...* He turned around and found Yoon sitting on the long, velvet couch that lined the wall behind him.

“*Mianhae.* I've been back here, I wasn't trying to scare you.”

“How long you been sitting there?” Tommy asked.

“Few hours. I was trying to get you to help me find my inhaler, but you were passed out.”

“I wasn't sleeping,” Tommy said. He rolled his chair over to Yoon, and the movement of the chair's wheels sent acoustic vibrations through the line of guitars hanging on the wall. He picked

up Yoon's bag from the floor, started digging around in it. When he grabbed hold of the inhaler he tossed it into his cousin's lap.

"I needed that shit like thirty minutes ago," Yoon said. "Found it in the dance studio."

"*Jenjang.*"

"Imagine if I'd died while you were asleep right in front of me. You're dreaming up pop songs for Americans and I'm over here, fully dead. *Bukkeuleoun jul al-ayaj.*"

"I told you, I wasn't sleeping," Tommy said. "I was thinking of us, in the desert. With Uncle."

Tommy felt Yoon's energy shrink at this. There was a shift in the room, like the slowing of some invisible heartbeat, pulsing away on a grid of perception just beneath theirs.

"Ahh," Yoon said. "Did you get anything? Any music, I mean."

"I couldn't concentrate," Tommy said, "I can't hear their voices yet, not the way I need to."

Yoon's two fingers scratched along the arm of the couch, catching waves of fabric under his nails.

"Stop that," Tommy said, pointing to his hand. "I can't with that sound."

Yoon stopped, blinked a few times. He was slouching in a way that made his mangled, concave body look like it'd been chopped in half, reattached backwards. There were days where Tommy would look at Yoon's body and want to cry — days where he would stare into the mirror and feel the same pangs of guilt over his beauty that he felt as a child. And then there were days where his cousin's deformities would fill him with a sharp, overwhelming rage — the same sort of rage that came over him when artists cried about "exhaustion," about feeling "burned out," "overworked," "fatigued." A lack of courage to break themselves in half — to rebuild themselves into something better than before.

“While you were off in your ‘other place,’” Yoon started, clearing his throat, “I was thinking — we should take the line about America out of Moonshine’s new single.”

“First off,” Tommy said, “I told you, we’re not naming the group *Moonshine*. We’re not naming them after anything that makes people think of prohibition. What line are you referring to?” Tommy mentally skipped through the song’s lyrics, the months of precision he’d put into choosing each and every word.

I’ll fly your way,

Cause you’re my home.

Can’t help myself,

When we’re alone.

Miguki gidaligo issda,

And I’ll wait too,

I’ll change the world

‘Til I’m with you.

“Hold up,” Tommy said, “you’re talking about the ‘America is waiting’ line? The one in Korean?”

“Yeah,” Yoon said. He grabbed the inhaler off his lap and took a long, airy puff from it.

“Why do you wanna change that line?” Tommy asked. “Too loaded?”

“Nothing like that,” Yoon said. “It’s meant for American audiences. They aren’t gonna know *mi-guk* means America.”

“You’re saying they’re just gonna hear *gook*.”

“I’m saying they’re just gonna hear *gook*,” Yoon said. He stared scratching his nails across the arm of the couch again. They’d been disagreeing more since the move from Seoul to the

countryside. It had been a year of arguments about group size, names, song titles, choreographers. Tommy knew that Yoon's anxiety stemmed from how close they were to the finish line, that he was just terrified of the whole thing crashing down. Tommy knew this, but it still pissed him off to have his instincts questioned.

Yoon coughed, cleared the mucus from his throat.

“Sprinkling in a few shakes of Korean doesn't change who the song is for.” Yoon said. “Our Korean audience doesn't have a problem with English. Most of the time they sell better, you said so yourself.”

Tommy felt the room's heartbeat like a deep, pounding vibration, shaking loose all the acid that usually remained dormant in his mind. A rush of memories passed up his neck, over his eyes, through the grooves of his brain — fire and explosions and murder and sessions in front of the mirror, practicing his L's and R's, curving his tongue against the backs of his teeth.

“Also,” Yoon continued, “you just told me that we can't call the group Moonshine because it's an American liquor. You wanna make K-pop, you wanna keep the K. I get why that's important right now. But for this group specifically, we need to know exactly what lane we're in. We can't pick and choose when we wanna cater and when we wanna flip the script.”

“Says who?” Tommy asked. He felt his tone of voice shifting tongues — gravel collected at the base of his throat, his Adam's apple shook downward like a fishing pole getting its first bite. His *Korean* voice.

They both went quiet then, listening to each other's breathing. Tommy scratched at his chin, took notice of how quickly he'd ramped up into anger. He felt his own hypocrisy, cold and hollow in his throat, creeping through his lungs. He swallowed, felt his Adam's apple shift back into its normal position.

“First off,” Tommy said, “Moonshine isn’t an American liquor, it’s just the word for the type of — for the way it’s made, or something. I’m sorry for crashing out on you — it’s been an annoying night, I couldn’t concentrate.”

Yoon nodded at this, furrowed his brow in understanding.

“I’m not trying to ‘keep the K in K-Pop,’” Tommy continued. “The whole reason we’re doing this is to get the K *out* of there. The little bit of Korean we splice in... it’s just another tool, it’s a temporary tool. Americans respond to the fact that we’re a unique, ‘exotic’ market. Koreans respond to the fact that we get the stamp of approval from Uncle Sam. The whole reason we found these two boys is so that we never have to think like this again. We’re close, now. We’re close to the end. Music influencing the culture, not the other way around.”

Yoon was silent. His eyes trailed to the recording booth behind Tommy.

“I think we’re saying the same thing,” Yoon said. “You’re the *gaejasig* who said that we can’t change the rules if we don’t play the game. There are plenty of lines in that song you could swap to Korean, the rhyme scheme is already pretty bulletproof.”

“I’ll think about it,” Tommy said, taking a deep breath in through his nose, speaking through the exhale. “I can barely focus today as it is, I can’t get riled up right now.”

Yoon nodded at this. He met eyes with Tommy, and for a few brief seconds they shared each other’s gaze — silently reestablishing the power dynamics in the room. Yoon broke and looked down at the floor. The pulse faded back into obscurity.

“Why were you thinking about New Mexico?” Yoon asked.

“Looking for inspiration,” Tommy said. “I was looking for sounds I might have missed.”

Yoon was quiet for a moment.

“I don’t remember a lot of sound. I remember being scared, but I don’t remember much else.”

“You were too busy crying,” Tommy said, immediately regretting the joke. He tried to pivot — tried to change the conversation. “So,” he said, “what’ve our boys been up to?”

Yoon pulled a small, white earbud out from the thin wall of hair draping over the left side of his head.

“Talking,” Yoon said. “They’re in Juche’s room. They had a heart to heart about Isaac’s eating disorder — he talked about taking water through an IV before shoots. Calorie counting, all that.”

“*Joh-eun*,” Tommy said, nodding his head, “What about Juche?”

“Juche started talking about his family a little. I cut the stream off for a few minutes when he started talking about his father. I didn’t think the audience was ready to hear about Project Bluebird yet, it’s still early days.”

Yoon stopped, waited for Tommy’s reaction. Tommy nodded his head, gave a quick thumbs up.

“Everything back online now?”

“Everything’s back online now. They’re showing each other the songs they’ve written.”

“And how many streams?”

“Right now a little over six and a half million. I’ll put all the stats together once they go to sleep.”

Tommy sat up, nodded his head in excitement. He imagined the two boys, Isaac and Juche, sitting in the dark together, divulging the stories of their lives. He could hear their voices... but

only as faint echoes — shades of color that were still too thin to paint with. The music wouldn't come until their voices were ingrained in his mind — until he could conjure them at will.

“G’head and call them in here,” Tommy said, motioning toward the door. “I’ll see if I can squeeze some vocals out of them.”

Yoon nodded his head and picked up his little bag. He stood up, slowly, balancing himself on the arm of the couch, and Tommy watched his knees knock together as he hobbled out of the room, shutting the door behind him.

Tommy closed his eyes, listened, began to hear things. He heard the hum of artificial air, the electric buzz beneath the mixing board. He heard melodies and chords and infinite ways to arrange them. He heard the countries and cultures that each sound came from, their histories and worth. He heard a future where his imagination is no longer limited to the sounds he’s heard before; where there is music that leaves language and classification and every conceivable boundary charred and steaming in its wake. And before he drifts back into that other place — before he returns to scouring the scenes of his life for music, for song, he makes a mental note to take Yoon’s advice, to change the line to English, *America is waiting*. And beyond the recording studio and mixing board, beyond Tommy’s office and the maze of hallways and rehearsal spaces and ring lights and kitchens and board rooms, two boys sat in a bedroom. Both in their twenties, both half-Korean, both startlingly beautiful. A duffle bag sat near the doorway.

It was a room that communicated a minimalist, almost dystopian level of wealth: shelves of drinks and liquor backlit by dim, golden light. A king-sized bed with a thin, mahogany frame. A wall-sized window, showcasing a moonlit view of the sprawling northern mountains beyond the DMZ, like fossilized giants splitting clouds in two. The American one, Isaac, sat at a small desk across from the bed — his feet propped up on another chair, stretching to touch his toes. He was

chiseled and malnourished in the way that all models-turned-popstars are — so startlingly beautiful that he looked almost alien, statuesque. He'd moved to Seoul from Ohio with dreams of celebrity and fame; latent fantasies of being accepted, feeling “*Asian*” enough for real Koreans.

The second boy, Juche, lay quietly on the bed, staring up at the ceiling. He was a year older, twenty-four, from New Zealand. A more classic sort of handsome; tender and approachable, like a racially ambiguous old-Hollywood movie star. His hair hung down past his ears, and he had an accent that sent his vowels curving upward, reaching. There was a quiet, European intensity to him — the product of a childhood where he was raised to fear his own voice.

There was a knock at the door, and the two boys stopped their conversation. They yelled out a *deul-eooda* and Yoon entered, slowly, greeting them with a sincere, warm smile. Juche and Isaac both liked Yoon, trusted him more than Tommy, who they both still found strange.

“Tommy wants to record some vocals with you two,” Yoon said. There was a bit of phlegm in his throat, but he'd wait to cough until he was alone. Yoon had found, over the years, that their artists feared throat colds more than anything, and he didn't want to scare them. The boys exchanged glances with one another and stood up, stretching their limbs, already humming the vocal warm-ups they'd been learning. Yoon let his eyes wander the room, took notice of the view from the window: the sharp, distant mountains of the DPRK. He felt a phantom taste of the wine they used to sell at the border — the bitterness, like gasoline. The little pebbles at the bottom.

Yoon held the door open, observed each boy's features as they passed into the hallway. He still felt a skepticism about them — he couldn't bridge the gap yet between Tommy's plans for them and how impossibly *normal* they both were. They were less polished than the fourteen-year-old dance prodigies they usually scouted. They were talented singers, but they did not have

the training to work in sync as partners. Isaac's facial expressions while singing were too forced, too internet-sexy, and Juche's made him look like a deer in headlights, somehow both terrified and unconcerned. And above all else, they were mixed, halfies, *foreigners*. It was a gimmick they'd tried before, to middling effect. And before Yoon left the room — before he walked the boys down the long, stone hallway to the recording studio — he turned his head to look again at the horizon, at the North Korea beyond. He looked to the desk where Isaac sat, then made a quick glance to the corner of the room, the one opposite the two boys. And in this corner of the room was a painting, a painting of a bird, a magpie. The magpie was painted flying up to her nest, carrying a stack of twigs, a few leaves, a rock. And within the dark-brown detail of the magpie's would-be nest was a small, miniature camera. And on the desk across from Juche's bed, within the end of a yet untouched-pen, there was a camera. And by the window and the headboard, too — there were cameras, four in total. And each of these cameras had long, winding tails of wire that traveled back to a single, unifying computer. And this computer sent the footage and sound from these cameras, these small little cameras, into a space without language; a space where frames upon frames were translated into data, retranslated back into video, streamlined into homes, bedrooms, unwrinkled hands pressing thumbs into glass, opening up a portal to that other place of watching, of distant observation, leaving comments of praise and critique and budding-adoration and curiosity and Oh God the way isaac brushes his hair out from his forehead! and Oh God Juche's voice y'all I can't even sleep right now I can't and Oh God it's lowkey inspiring as fuck to see these two dudes get thrown into this and help eachother through it like fr i'm already tryna see them live Oh God juche's story about his dad im not crying UR crying lol OhGod I would let these boys use me like a goddamn wheelbarrow Oh God The Fact That They're Literally So HotHa

hahahaHAhahahA HaOhGodOhGodOhGod we stan isaac

Like for Team Juche idon't even like Kpop and

here I am and I hav SATs tomorro oopsie

#kpop #kpopboys #sweetboys #OhGod

Ummm TapHEREforan exclusive deal

on Oh God like what you see? Real,

live girls @ www.asOhhhhhhhGod

100 years from right now they'll

be digging up white skeletons

in awe because everyone will

be slant eyed beigeoid mutts

like Oh God I was going

to k*ll myself tonight

but isaac saved me.

Do they know we

can see them??

Do they even

know we're

here?