

How an Incident Within BTS Reminded Me of the Korean Fable “The Tiger’s Whisker”

“BTS: Burn the Stage”: encore review of Episode 4

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It has been eight years since BTS released their YouTube Red docu-series, “BTS: Burn the Stage.” In 2018, I reviewed each episode weekly, before retiring them. Since then, readers have periodically asked if I would share them again, especially now as we wait for the septet’s much-awaited comeback this year. I am happy to oblige.

FWIW: These encore posts will not replace any new newsletters. Rather, they are supplemental.

☆☆☆ (out of ☆☆☆☆)

The argument between two members of BTS was hyped up as being a shocking revelation in the previews. But for anyone who has a sibling — or who has ever been in a serious relationship — speaking the uncomfortable truth is par for the course. Arguments often aren’t about what you’re addressing at the time, but rather all the little things that have built up to make you reach that boiling point.

What was more interesting to me was watching Jin and V dig deep to get to the real issue.

On the surface, their bickering was about their different approaches to a song's choreography. As the two defended their outlook, it was obvious they had reached a point where they knew they should stop talking, but couldn't — even though they knew they were upsetting each other.

At this point, I thought about “The Tiger’s Whisker,” a Korean fable that speaks about patience and kindness. Those traits were always there. Jin and V just needed to find a way to channel them.

Their argument really was about respect, or a perceived lack thereof. For Jin, the eldest, he said his smiles and corny Dad Jokes were often at the expense of his own pain, which he kept to himself so that his bandmates weren't affected by his sadness. And for V — the second youngest — he wanted his wishes to be taken seriously, rather than dismissed as afterthoughts.

There is a Korean word called 참아, which loosely translates to *endure*. It's something Koreans do to keep the peace. I've heard my mother use the word often, to describe why she didn't call people out for their selfishness or disrespect.

But for me, doing so eats away at my bitterness and I would rather let it all out. That said, I, too, often 참아.

Official Trailer | BTS: Burn The Stage



One of the questions Westerners have about Koreans is, “Why are they always asking how old I am?”

What may be viewed as nosiness is actually based on etiquette. Koreans want to know if you are older than they are, so that they can address you with the proper level of respect. It is considered rude to address a senior as a peer with 반말 (which literally means using half words — or half the respect).

For instance, I have never addressed my older siblings by their names. I have always called them oppa/오빠 and unni/언니. When I introduce them to my friends, I actually feel weird saying their names out loud, because ... *maknae*. I am the youngest sibling.

The age hierarchy is delicate in BTS, because while Jin is RM’s elder by two years — a fact that would make him the de facto leader in some other settings — RM was the first member picked for what would become BTS; and he has always had the distinction of being its leader.

In this fourth episode of “Burn the Stage,” respect and responsibility play crucial roles. BTS has just finished their successful shows in Brazil and are now in New York City doing press. As the only member who’s fluent in English, RM does all the interviews with reporters who don’t speak Korean.

In other words, he does all the press.

“I’m going to die,” he says, jokingly, after leaving an interview.

But Jin speaks the truth when he says, “RM has been suffering a lot.”

Most reporters, myself included, want to speak to the leader of the group. British and American singers have told me this can be exhausting for them, because while their bandmates are out sightseeing and having fun, they have to talk to the press, where they are asked the same questions all day long. On the one hand, that’s part of the game they have to play. On the other, it’s boring.

When I interviewed ¹ RM ², he said, “It can be tiring, because my brain doesn’t think automatically in English. Actually, I feel quite a bit of pressure, because I want to answer correctly. In 2014, I knew my English was not so bad, but I had no confidence in talking directly to an English-speaking reporter. I had to do a short interview with, I think, Reuters from France. I was so nervous. I practiced memorizing three sentences for two hours.”

In the video below, you can see that RM is exhausted from interpreting for his bandmates. J-hope sees this and takes his mic away, and motions for the interpreter to do his job. ³

@yoonjimeow



yoon's luv ☐☐ on Instagram: "the way jhope took the mic from ..."

Before headlining their show at the Prudential Center — a 19,500-seat enormodome in Newark, New Jersey, where superstars such as Pink, Bruno Mars and U2 have performed — RM reminds his bandmates that this venue is much larger than what they've played before, and that they need to adapt to the space so that they're not engulfed by the stage. Within a year, they would be headlining in stadiums.

When V asks Jin to pick up his pace during a song so that the physical space between the two of them is more equitable, Jin bristles at his request. On any another day, the conversation may have gone differently. But with minutes before showtime and everyone already on edge, they two get into a lowkey argument about who needs to do what.

While the others nervously watch the two friends fight, RM steps in and lays it on the line: “What do you think you’re doing? We can’t solve this right now. We can’t say who’s right or who’s wrong. Get your heads on straight. Our fans have lined up for days and are waiting.”

At that point, Jin extends an olive branch and apologizes, but V is still visibly upset.

Suga says it best when he says that fighting isn’t such a bad thing. He argues with his mother all the time, he says.

It’s true. You often argue with the people you love the most, because there is comfort in squabbling with someone *safe*. Even if they disagree with what you are saying, they will *hear* you and you both know the relationship won’t be severed.

During all the drama, there was an unintentional moment of comic relief. As Jin and V argued, Jimin quietly sat on the sofa brushing his teeth.



Apologies for the craptacular screenshot, but I love a man with great dental hygiene!

After the concert, the band members gathered together late at night at their hotel to settle things. If you were to read their body language, you can tell that V and Jin are still bothered, but they worked through the issue.

They enjoyed a moment of levity, joking that fighting over choreography is a step up from how they used to argue over who got more food. Laughing, J-Hope recalled how he once threw a banana at Jungkook, saying, “Eat it all, you little bastard!”

Suga: “If we’re not in the right mood, we can’t take a joke as a joke.”

RM: “We need to know when to back off. That doesn’t mean you’re losing if it’s for the sake of the team.”

There is a Korean fable called “The Tiger’s Whisker.” It’s the story of a young woman, whose husband returns home from war, angry and broken. Desperate to get back the kind man she had married, she asks a village elder to help her. He says he can guide her, but only if she can bring him the whisker from a live tiger. She is shocked by the request, but says she will do it. Every day for months, she goes to feed the tiger, eventually winning its trust and cherishing their friendship. When she asks the tiger for a whisker, he allows her to cut one off. She returns to the elder with the coveted whisker. He examines it and throws it into the fire, telling her that the whisker isn’t the important element to saving her marriage. Rather, the patience and kindness she exhibited to the tiger is what her husband needs, too.

The memory of this childhood fable popped into my head as I watched the group resolve their differences. Their patience and kindness were always there. They just needed to find a way to channel it.

Airdates: The eight-episode series premiered on March 28, with the finale airing on May 9, 2018, on YouTube Red. You may read more of my reviews of “BTS: Burn the Stage” here: [Episodes 1 & 2](#); [Episode 3](#).

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As for what will be my first newsletter of February, I'm currently working on a reported piece that I hope to publish early in the upcoming week. You'll be notified by email and/or the Substack app when it goes live.

Enjoy your weekend, everyone!

- 1 My interview with RM for my news syndicate, Tribune Content Agency.
- 2 I interviewed RM to share his thoughts on Tablo for my Rolling Stone exclusive.
- 3 I'm not sure how difficult it is for professional interpreters, but when I have to go back and forth for a prolonged period between Korean and English — interpreting for people who understand one, but not the other language — my head literally feels like it will split open.

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