Oh, How The Mighty Fall (in love)

by Madd4the24

Summary

For Seokjin, the rules for being a doctor in gang territory were simple: keep his clinic open at all costs, treat his patients with care, watch out for his brother Jungkook, and most of all, avoid the thugs. The last thing he expected was to get caught up in a gang war, or to find himself falling for Bangtan’s leader, Rap Monster. And in a world where rules are everything, sometimes breaking them can mean the end of everything.

That is, if his heart doesn't kill him first.

Notes

Hello, Hello, and welcome to the gang! AU that just wouldn't leave me alone until I wrote it ... all 170,000+ words.

First and foremost, please take heed that while this is by no means a terribly dark story, we are dealing thematically with people who are not nice, and do bad things. Most of these
characters exist in shades of gray, and morality is more of a suggestion, than anything else. There are some chapters and sections in this story, particularly towards the end, where it might get a little graphic, depending on how squimish the reader finds themselves. There's some violence here, and cursing. Anyone particularly sensitive to descriptions of these things, firstly shouldn't be reading gang!AUs, and also probably doesn't want to read this one.

Next, this is the standard warning I give with all my stories. I'm a character writer. I find characters more interesting than anything else, and I focus on them. There's plenty of plot to go around, but this is a story about characters, their relationships, and their flaws, and how they evolve and change over time. I'm asking readers to get emotionally involved with these characters, and care about them. If this isn't something for you, or you'd prefer something lighter, give this story a pass.

Lastly, this story updates on Sundays. I try to be very consistent and do my best to not miss updates unless there's a very good reason. So rest assured, this story will be finished, and in a timely manner.

If all of this sounds good, then read on!
On the day Seokjin’s life changed drastically and irreparably, he endured a particularly painful luncheon with his father.

Seokjin, for the most part, considered himself to be a respectful and obedient son. As the firstborn, he shouldered a great deal of responsibility to be successful and to be something his father could brag about to his coworkers. He made sure that his youth was filled with studying, good grades, extra circular activities, learning to play an instrument, and a hefty stack of college acceptance letters by the time he was seventeen.

He was, to the best of his ability, the perfect son.

But his father was a particularly hard man to please, and nothing Seokjin had ever done felt like enough. To say his father was overly critical was an understatement. Approval was rarely given, and compliments almost never. Seokjin couldn’t actually remember the last time his father had said he was proud of him, or even the last time he’d been told something positive. And the pressure, at least in his teens, had driven Seokjin almost crazy.

Seokjin had an ulcer by sixteen, hair falling out by seventeen, and by eighteen he went away to college to save himself more than anything else.

And college had been like a haven to him. Classes has been unbelievably hard, and his internship had taken all of his spare time. But he’d only had see his father on the weekends, he’d cultivated important friendships, and for once in his life, he’d gotten to do exactly what he wanted.

Becoming an adult, short of having served his military requirement, had freed Seokjin and unburdened him.

Still, when his father called, Seokjin went.

It was something he didn’t think he’d ever overcome, or how he felt like a child sitting across from the man, listening to his criticisms.

“--could have been something special. Wasted opportunity, that’s what you are.”

Seokjin tapped a finger gently against the condensation on his water glass. The sun felt warm and comforting on his skin, and though he'd never say it to his father, he was glad that they’d been seated on the terrace and not in the cramped restaurant. The outdoor table afforded him a wonderful view of the cityscape around them, full of activity and life.

“--paying attention, Seokjin?”

Seokjin straightened up. “Yes, of course.” He hadn’t seen his father in nearly two weeks, a decent stretch if Seokjin was being honest. But it probably meant his father had little patience with whatever he wanted to say, and less time to sit waiting around for Seokjin’s full attention.

“Oh?” his father asked, a gray eyebrow raised.

“I believe you were lamenting on my poor career choices,” Seokjin told him, a little too flippantly if the way his father’s eyes narrowed, meant anything.

“Watch yourself,” his father snapped, then drank from his own glass of water.
Seokjin sighed and sank a little in his seat. “I’m a doctor, dad. I don’t understand why you’re so continuously upset.”

More than being a doctor, he was a young one at that. He’d graduated high school at seventeen, had a bachelor’s degree by twenty, and started his residency six months after that. At twenty-four Seokjin didn’t think it was presumptuous or prideful to say he was above the curve, and far ahead of his peers. He’d worked hard for what he’d achieved, and he’d achieved a lot.

“It’s not your career I take issue with,” his father replied right away. “It’s what you’re choosing to do with that medical license of yours.”

Of course it was. Seokjin had known that from the start. He’d known it since before he’d finished his residency program and been a full-fledged doctor. His father had absolutely expected him to go on to bigger, brighter things, and not wallow in obscurity--if treating the poor and financially disadvantaged was what he meant.

“Shutting yourself up in that thing you call a clinic.”

Seokjin wanted to roll his eyes, but held back. And instead he replied respectfully, “I’m very proud of where I am in my profession, dad. I’m proud of how I’ve gotten my practice up and running, and of the people I have supporting me.”

“The three room shack you call your practice. It’s lunacy, Seokjin. You could be established at the best hospital in Seoul. But look where you are instead.”

Seokjin saw their waitress heading towards their table, a wide tray with their lunch perched on top.

“It’s not about the prestige for me,” Seokjin said quickly, tightlipped. “It’s not about the money, either.” It was about helping people who needed it. It was about doing his absolute best to be a good human being, and giving where he could, and saving lives if at all possible. And it didn’t feel like that was something his father was ever going to understand, let alone accept.

His father sighed as the food was put down in front of them. “All that time spent training meticulously under Doctor Lee. All those years wasted honing a specialty.”

Seokjin looked down at the food, observing its perfect presentation and likely delicious taste. His father was already cutting into his slab of beef when Seokjin posed, “What do you think this meal will cost you?”

His father’s hand froze, knife in hand. “What?”

“I’m going to assume that you’ll use your work expense card to pay for this meal. You won’t pay specifically, but in general terms, this meal is going to be expensive, correct?”

His father, who’d always been one to brag about the good things he could afford, gave a hearty nod. His chest puffed a little as he said, “You should understand, Seokjin, what you receive is reflective of what you’re willing to give in exchange. Fine dinning doesn’t come cheap.”

Once more, Seokjin eyed the beef. When he’d been young, and living with his father, they’d enjoyed a hearty meal of premium beef at least once a week, and certainly eaten well the other days. Now that he was on his own, most nights he ate ramen. He could have spent his spare money on better food, but anything he didn’t put into his household expenses, he could put back into his practice. And Seokjin was very aware of how important the first few years were going to be.

“My point,” Seokjin said, picking up his own steak knife, “is that anyone who can afford to eat here,
can afford the best medical care possible. Look around, these are the people who can go to the private hospital of their choice and receive the best care South Korea can provide.”

His father gave a sound of agreement. “And no doubt these are highly educated, dedicated and hard-working people. Don’t they deserve to be medically cared for?”

“Of course,” Seokjin agreed, “I believe anyone and everyone deserves dedicated medical care. However, most of these people are a reflection of their circumstances. The people who can afford to eat here, at least the majority of them I’d wager, were born into families with educated parents. They mostly likely came from homes that valued and prized education, as well. And most certainly had money. There may be a few exceptions, but with a winning combination of being born in the city, into affluent families, and with all the opportunities in the world, the people who can go to these private hospitals, can do so because of circumstance.”

“Please,” his father sighed out, “don’t pretend that only the rich can afford preventative or lifesaving health care.”

“Their chances of being diagnosed and treated are much higher than anyone who makes less in a week than what this meal will cost us here and now.”

Again, his father gave a disappointed sigh. “Five years of preferential treatment from Doctor Lee, specialty training and promises, and you throw it all away to be piteous and charitable.”

Seokjin risked a smile. “I told you, I’m not a doctor for the recognition or the money. I only want to save lives, and by not working in the fancy hospital that you think I should be at, I get to see a clientele that desperately needs me. I get to provide for them low cost preventative care, and I am going to save lives, dad. I’m going to save lives that would be overlooked by people who have the mindset about the poor that you do.”

Seokjin startled and visibly flinched as his father’s heavy hand came down on the table, rattling the silverware, plates, and glasses. Around them people looked and Seokjin felt his face heat.

“For god sakes, Seokjin,” his father hissed at him, “you could have been the best oncologist of your generation. You could have worked with the newest equipment, learned the latest techniques, made a great deal of money, and been the center of medical journals for decades. You could have had it all.”

“I do,” Seokjin challenged back, feeling his stomach flop painfully, his appetite gone. “I get work alongside people who care more about our patients than anything else, in a relaxed environment, catching diseases before they progress too far to be stopped. My patients can’t get to their local hospitals for frequent screenings, dad, and they can’t afford them, either. But they can come to me and I can do something for them, and they can still afford to feed their children afterwards.”

His father’s hands were shaking, and it was how, more than the loud explosion moments earlier, that Seokjin knew he’d truly infuriated his father.

“Jonghyun is a fantastic surgeon,” Seokjin said softly. “And I was blessed he agreed to come aboard my practice. He’s established enough to have his own at this point. Yunho is probably the best orthopedist I’ve ever seen, and in nine months Hongbin will finish his residency and we’ll have a pediatrician. Dad, the wide range of services we can offer is only growing, and quickly at that. We’ve got four nurses on the payroll, two receptionists, and—”

“Seokjin.”

They lapsed into an uneasy silence.
Then finally Seokjin said, “I’m not giving up what I have, dad. Not even for your approval.”

There was the oddest flicker of something across his father’s face before he said, “I don’t like where you work—that part of Seoul. It isn’t safe for you.”

Was that …. Seokjin could scarcely believe that it was possible his father was concerned for his safety.

“I need to be close to my patients, and that isn’t at the high end of town,” Seokjin said carefully. “But I have mace, and I am careful. I don’t take risks.”

Now his father looked truly pained.

And it took Seokjin a second to realize why, and then a second more to feel truly regretful.

“Nothing is going to happen to me, dad. I don’t—”

“I need your help,” his father cut in expertly, eating once more. “I need you to talk to your brother.”

Seokjin asked unexpectedly, “Is everything okay with Jungkook?”

The only thing Seokjin regretted, as he tried to pull as far away from his overbearing and impossibly demanding father, was leaving behind his precious little brother. When they’d been younger, all they’d had was each other, and there wasn’t anything Seokjin wouldn’t do for him. But leaving home had meant leaving Jungkook.

“He’s insisting he move into a dorm,” Seokjin’s father snorted. “It’s ridiculous. The university is fifteen minutes away from the house.”

“Oh,” Seokjin eased out.

He wanted to ask his father if it was really such a surprise that Jungkook, who had always been more rebellious that Seokjin, would want to move out the second he was capable of it. And like Seokjin, university was obviously going to be the escape in mind.

“He’s eighteen, dad,” Seokjin said, taking his first bite of his meal. It was good, especially compared to ramen. “And all of his friends are probably going to live in the dorms. He just wants to fit in with them, and really, this is a typical thing with eighteen-year-old boys. Eighteen is right around the time teenagers, and boys in particular, start wanting to support themselves.”

“Nonsense,” his father said quickly. “You lived at home.”

“For my undergraduate program,” Seokjin reminded. “And only because I was seventeen when I started it. I moved out for my residency and all the training I received after my initial degree.” Jungkook wasn’t the type, either, to be held down or kept in one place for long. He was always moving, always doing, and he lacked all of the patience that seemed engrained in Seokjin.

“I don’t think I’ll be able to convince him,” Seokjin said honestly, and not just because he wanted Jungkook to be free. Free to be his own man and make his own mistakes and learn and grow.

Seokjin’s father barked out, “Bah, it’s a terrible idea. You always kept in line, your brother isn’t the same. If I let him go off and live in the dorms he’ll fall in with the wrong crowd. He won’t keep to his studies. He’ll start downhill and won’t recover.”

Seokjin cut in with a fake, shocked voice, “He might even, dare I propose it, become a liberal arts
major."

His father went pale and demanded, “Are you trying to give me a heart attack, Seokjin?”

In a reflexive move, Seokjin’s own had came up to his heart. “No.”

His father eyed him for a moment, then asked in a rough kind of way, “Are you keeping up with your medication?”

Seokjin cracked another smile. “I very much wouldn’t be sitting here, talking with you if I weren’t.”

“Good,” his father said, and it was probably the closest his father would ever come to keeping up with his health and caring for him. Seokjin wasn’t a ten-year-old anymore. He wasn’t the poor, pathetic boy clinging to the side of a hospital bed, gasping for air as his heart beat irregularly. And he wasn’t the kid who was scared he’d go to sleep and never wake up.

“Talk to your brother,” his father urged. “He needs to stay at home and study well if he’s going to make it into law school.”

It was suddenly Seokjin’s turn to snort at the absurdity of the statement. “Jungkook isn’t going to be a lawyer, dad. You know that, even if you don’t want to admit it.”

“He will if he studies hard enough.”

Seokjin continued, “He doesn’t like to study. He doesn’t care about law. He’s not academically minded at all. I don’t know what he’s going to do with his life, that’s up to him and the coming years to determine, but I’d bet anything in the world that he won’t be a lawyer. It doesn’t matter if he lives at home or stays in the dorms. He doesn’t have the dedication or the interest.”

As if he was conceding some great defeat, his father eventually said, “An accountant then.”

Seokjin laughed loudly, feeling it deep into his chest as his heart stuttered a little. “That might be even less likely. Jungkook’s always hated numbers.”

His father had always desired, long before Jungkook had shown no affinity for school, and longer than Seokjin had known he was going to be a doctor and save lives the same as his own had been saved, that at least one of his sons continue on in the family business. His father had wanted one, preferably both of them, to become civil servants and work for the government.

“Look,” Seokjin said, as a means of appeasement, “I’ll speak to Jungkook. We’re supposed to be spending the day together on Sunday.”

His father said quickly, “See if you can’t drag the boy to church for once. He could do with little faith.”

If there was anything Jungkook was less likely to achieve than a law degree, it was have an avid interest in religion. Seokjin wasn’t religious in the slightest either, but he did a better job of hiding it from his father than his younger brother did. Jungkook was just too wild of a child not to flaunt the things that set him apart from their father.

Once more Seokjin said, “I’ll speak to him about the possibility of remaining at home at least for the first couple of years he’s at college, and maybe even about the possibility of him taking his degree seriously. But I’ve never been able to control Jungkook, and no matter how hard you try, you won’t be able to, either.”
“No,” his father said solemnly, setting his knife down. “He’s too much like your mother. He’s her child in every way. There’s nothing of me in there.”

Maybe the stubbornness. Seokjin’s father and brother were both exceptionally stubborn.

They finished the rest of their meal with minimal talk. Seokjin listened to his father complain about interagency squabbling. Seokjin made mention of a lecture of biometric diagnostics he was interested in attending later on in the month, and then they simply enjoyed the atmosphere for what it was.

When Seokjin got to his feet twenty minutes later, the meal finished, he didn’t hug his father. He didn’t even shake the man’s hand. Instead he said, “You should come to the clinic some time. You should come and see what I’ve managed to do. I’m proud of it, even if you can’t understand why. It’s not a fancy hospital, and it’s not an exclusive and expensive practice that I’m sure your friends all attend when they need to take care of something. But it’s a good start to what I want it to be some day, and if you come by, I’ll give you a tour.”

Seokjin wasn’t going to hold his breath.

“Talk to your brother,” his father said in response, putting his jacket on despite how hot Seoul was in August.

“We should make a deal,” Seokjin said, patting his pocket for his bus pass. His preference for public transportation in a congested city like Seoul was another thing that set him aside from his father who always had a car at the ready, and from Jungkook who’d been stealing their father’s cars for joyrides since he was fifteen. “If I get Jungkook to stay at home for a couple of years, you should get my clinic a new air conditioner.”

“Charity doesn’t keep the building cool, does it?” Seokjin bit back a more harsh retort. “It’s simply old,” he said. “And there’s a lot of delicate equipment that needs to be kept at a specific temperature. Not to mention a lot of my patients can’t afford air conditioning at their residences. I like to give them some comfort when they come to see me, at least in some way.”

His father fitted the buttons back into place on his jacket and offered, “You should consider raising your prices.”

Seokjin shot him a deliberately provoking look and said, “Some of my patients pay me however they can. I got a live chicken before. I suppose I could ask for two next time Ms. Kim needs a new pelvic examination.”

“Funny,” his father said, in a way that said he thought the opposite.

They parted quickly after that. His father headed to the black sedan that was government issued, and Seokjin went instead to the bus stop. In twenty minutes, he expected to be back at his clinic, seeing his next patient of the day, putting his father from thought until the following week.

The clinic that Seokjin called home—quite literally as he lived in the small, one bedroom apartment above it, was a building that had certainly seen better days. It needed a new paintjob, something that one of Seokjin’s patients had promised him would be started within the week, and it needed a few basic repairs that Jonghyun’s friend Minho had claimed he’d do free of charge the first chance he got. Truthfully, it didn’t look particularly inviting from the outside, but Seokjin didn’t think that was a bad thing. If anything, it kind of acted like a deterrent to any punks in the neighborhood who had any bright ideas about robbing the place.
Robbery was Seokjin’s biggest fear. If they lost even a single piece of expensive equipment in the clinic, Seokjin was certain they couldn’t currently afford to replace it. Most of it was second hand, and a lot of it was on its last leg, but all of the machinery was integral to day to day activities.

It was a real fear that led to bars on the windows, double locks on the doors, and a portion of the month’s expenses going to a protection fee.

A protection fee.

It was disgusting to think that Seokjin had to pay a different set of thugs money to keep the more unorganized ones away, but at the moment he didn’t have a choice. He needed the protection, his patients needed it, and if his practice was going to make it out of the first five years, it had to avoid devastating robberies.

There were moments, and Seokjin was having another as he headed up the walkway to the clinic, spying a shady looking figure across the street watching him, that Seokjin truly despised his father’s stinginess. Even a fraction of a donation would do wonders for the practice, and his father who hoarded money and only spent it when he had something to show off or someone to impress, had plenty to spare.

His father had proven he had the money by trying to bribe Seokjin into a position at a nearby hospital in the oncology department. Seokjin tried not to think about what a million won would do for his clinic.

He could improve hours, actually. That was his real goal. He hated having to open so late and close so early. More money would allow him to bring on more doctors, extend hours, and not have to turn patients away.

Even with the air conditioner failing, the moment Seokjin was across the threshold and into the main reception area, he already felt better. He could hopefully cool down quick enough to be ready to take his first afternoon patient comfortably.

“Doctor Kim!” an older woman waiting in the receptionist area called to him, waving happily when he finally spotted her.

He called back, “You’re looking gorgeous as usual, Mrs. Park.” She was one of Yunho’s regulars, but Seokjin did his best to remain on personal terms with the patients that came around frequently.

“Kim Seokjin,” the secretary at the front desk, Yoona, said with arms crossed when he was nearer, “can you please not flirt with the patients?”

“I can’t help it,” Seokjin said, turning to wink at the elderly woman. “If the pretty ones keep coming in, I can’t be held accountable for my behavior.”

In the waiting area, the older woman blew him a greasy kiss.

“Anything happen while I was out at lunch?” Seokjin asked before he cut back to the employee only area, moving to her side of the work space.

She slipped him a written note on pastel pink paper that Yoona used as if all other kinds of memo pads offended her. Color coordinated were her pink nails, the pink barrette in her hair, and the impossibly pink high heels she wore on her tiny feet.

Im Yoona was the kind of girl that Seokjin had worried about from the start. She’d more than proven herself as a competent secretary, and was probably even overqualified. Not to mention she had the
kind of personality that brightened the clinic, and she was impressive with her punctuality. But she was also incredibly beautiful, someone who obviously hadn’t grown up in the area, and a walking target to the kind of degenerates that came out mostly at night, but also during the day at times. More than once Seokjin had taken her home personally and then doubled back.

Seokjin secretly hoped that one day Yoona would bring in a huge, intimidating man, and introduce him as her boyfriend. Yoona was a spitfire, but there was nothing quite like brute physical intimidation to get others to back off.

Seokjin scanned the paper quickly, his eyes flying over Yoona’s perfect handwriting, and he felt a flush of joy. “Victoria called.”

Yoona nodded. “Miss Song wants you to call her back tomorrow afternoon, our time, but it sounded to me on the phone like she was very interested in the position.”

Seokjin let himself breathe out happily, “Victoria Song is a gifted neurologist. Since her fiancé is going to be in South Korea for a year, I reached out to her through a mutual friend. If we have any luck at all, she’ll be willing to put in at least a few hours a week here. We could do so much more with a neurologist.”

Yoona gave him a thumbs up. “Your next patient has an appointment scheduled in half an hour. Exam room three.”

“Thanks,” he told her, then headed back to get ready.

When Seokjin had been young, after he’d managed to survive just enough to truly consider that he might make it long enough to go to medical school and be the doctor he’d always dreamed of becoming, he’d imagined filling his dreams with a packed schedule and little time for rest. He’d never, not even for a second, wanted to be the kind of doctor who saw a single patient a day, only did special consultations, and didn’t extend his reach as far as it could go.

So now, to be that busy doctor, was a dream come true.

He’d just always hoped the conditions would be better.

“You look depressed,” Jonghyun said hours later as Seokjin watched one of their summer interns escort Yoona out of the building. The last of the patients had gone home twenty minutes previous, and with only one more nurse left on the floor, it wouldn’t be long before Seokjin was alone.

“I had to see my father today,” Seokjin said, shoulders falling.

Jonghyun raised an eyebrow. “Tried to guilt trip you about your life choices?”

“Like clockwork.”

Jonghyun signed off on the last of the paperwork in front of him and then set the chart in the designated wrack for the next day. “There is such a thing as masochism. You don’t have to put up with that to be a good son. I think you forget that.”

Seokjin confessed, “I think he likes seeing me struggle. I really do. It’s the only explanation I can find for how often he reminds me that I could have a posh job at a hospital in about half a second if I just say yes.”

He was quiet for at least a minute, standing shoulder to shoulder with Seokjin, then Jonghyun said, “I know this place doesn’t seem like much right now. And honestly, we’re kind of holding it together
here with duct tape. But it won’t always be like this. We won’t always struggle. I don’t know if you can see where this place will be in ten years, but I can.”

Seokjin gave him a careful look. “You plan to be here for the next ten years?”

Jonghyun smiled at him. “I was hoping that sometime in the next five or so years you’ll want a more permanent partner. My name would look great up there on the sign next to yours.”

“Why?” Seokjin asked, not certain in the least. “You’re so gifted. You’re truly one of the best set of hands in Korea. You could be anywhere, doing anything. You could be taking on the most challenging surgeries. But you’re here, sometimes treating upset tummies.”

Heels clacking quietly on the floor indicated the last nurse was behind them before she bowed respectfully and slipped out the front door.

Jonghyun challenged back, “Why aren’t you at that posh hospital?”

Seokjin felt flushed with pleasure. “Because it’s not about the money or recognition.”

With a pat to Seokjin’s shoulder, Jonghyun said, “I’ll see you tomorrow. Gallbladder removal. Exciting stuff.”

Seokjin was grinning widely as he followed Jonghyun to the door and locked it behind him, setting the security alarm.

For the next several hours Seokjin busied himself with paperwork at the small office to the back of the building that he shared with Yunho. There was a thorough cleaning service that came in the morning, but for the rest of the night Seokjin fully expected to be alone. That meant paperwork, ramen, and then maybe a little light reading before bed.

His life wasn’t terribly exciting, Seokjin recognized, but it was fulfilling, and it was the one that he’d chosen.

Around an hour after midnight, with Seokjin’s eyes starting to feel heavy and his tablet dimming from going idle on the medical journal he’d been browsing, he heard something that had only reached his ears once before.

Seokjin heard the security system going off.

He rolled from his bed immediately, stumbling until he got his feet underneath him a second later, and then he was making a mad dash for the stairs.

When he reached the bottom he swung wide, swiping up a nearby baseball bat, and then leveled it up.

His ears were ringing wildly with a piercing sound but he didn’t let himself stop.

He would defend the clinic. The clinic and his patients were everything. No matter what, he wouldn’t let anything happen to his home without a fight.

“Whoever you are,” he called out sharply, “you’d better get lost! That alarm means the police are on the way, and I’m armed!”

He slapped on the main hallway lights but he couldn’t tell where the breech in the alarm system had come from. He had no idea if his intruder was behind him or to the front of the clinic. His only
chance was to get a jump on whoever it was, or scare them off completely.

“The police!”

The police likely would come, but it would be a while. The crime level in the area was quite high most nights, and that meant a lot of police weren’t available right away. The alarm, more than anything, was meant to indicate that attention had been drawn.

So all Seokjin had to do was make sure that the intruder knew he knew he were there, and that eventually the police would be along.

“I mean it! Get lost!”

Something heavy thumped in rapid succession from the front of the clinic and Seokjin started forward. He’d never been particularly brave or athletic or physical. He wasn’t sure he could hold his own against one person, let alone a group of them. But there was no other alternative. And he had to set an example. He had to let everyone else in the neighborhood know that they couldn’t make an easy mark of him. No one was going to steal from his clinic and get away with it.

He could hear muffled voices ahead of him and Seokjin held the bat more securely as he took heavy steps.

“I’m not--”

He broke off suddenly at the sight of three men. Three. An impossible number to deal with.

And if he had three intruders in his clinic that provided cheap medical services to people who desperately needed it, what the hell was he paying protection money for in the first place?

One of the men was injured. That was what Seokjin managed to realize as his heart thundered in his chest painfully, making him feel light headed and short of breath. In fact, the room was starting to spin around him and he wasn’t sure if he was swaying on his feet or merely his vision was starting to go. They were all precursors that he needed to calm down, and quickly.

Blood. Seokjin could see blood soaking the side of one of the men. He was barely on his feet, his knees bowing out, and there was a second man practically holding him up. The second of the two didn’t look much better, with a spectacularly impressive bruise across his lower jaw that would lead to even more extreme swelling in a day or so.

“We need help,” the man supporting the other up said roughly, voice strained like he’d been yelling or screaming. “Are you a doctor? We need a doctor.” He hefted the slumped man up a little and said, “He’s been shot.”

In his panic Seokjin looked down to his own plain blue pajamas.

“Hey!” the third man snapped, cutting in between the two injured ones. The third looked roughed up, but no worse for wear. “He asked you a question!”

“Y-yes,” Seokjin managed to choke out, but he lost his grip on the baseball bat and had to lean on a nearby wall. He heard the bat clatter to the ground as he saw the gun.

The third man, security in his grip, held a small, black pistol. And it was aimed at Seokjin.

“I …” he was having even more trouble breathing and there were spots in his vision now.
The third man, punctuating his words carefully, snapped out, “You save him. Now.”

“The clinic isn’t--”

“Now!” the man thundered, gesturing down to the gun. “Or I’m not going to be heartbroken about emptying this into you.”

It was a risk, but if Seokjin didn’t do something soon, he was going to pass out. And he didn’t doubt that the short but fierce man really would shoot him. Several times. So he turned on heel, the baseball ball on the ground, and dashed for the nearby break room.

He heard shouting after him but he didn’t pay it any mind. The world was seemingly melting in front of him as he threw open a cabinet drawer so hard that the contents spilled onto the floor. Then he was on his hands and knees, ripping open the emergency pill bottle and dry swallowing an obscenely large pill.

“What’s wrong with you?”

Gasping for air, Seokjin looked up to see the man with the gun in the doorway. And the gun was still pointed at him, too.

Seokjin ignored him, instead closing his eyes, hoping desperately that his heart would calm on its own, his breathing would even out, and that he wouldn’t pass out and make for a large, still target.

“--hear my friend when he said--”

Seokjin dug his fingers into his hair. Breathe, he told himself. Breathe and remain calm.

He jumped sharply when warm, gentle hands rested on his back, tugging him into an odd, almost uncomfortable hug.

What the hell was his attacker doing, hugging him?

“Jin!”

Seokjin blinked his eyes open sharply at the familiar voice.

He gasped out, “Jungkook?”

He had to be hallucinating. That was the only way his younger brother was in front of him, crouched on the floor amidst the chaos, looking at him with a worried expression and blood smeared across his forehead.

“He hurt?” Jungkook demanded, and it certainly sounded like Seokjin’s brother.

“He hurt?” Seokjin managed to get out, but thankfully he was starting to feel a little better. His chest wasn’t so tight and he didn’t feel as if he were seconds away from a heart attack. “You …hurt?” He could only see the blood on his baby brother’s face.

“No,” Jungkook was quick to tell him, tugging him into a much more confident hug. “Jin, I’m so sorry. I’m sorry. I didn’t think this would happen. I didn’t think about your heart at all.”

“Is he a doctor or not?” the man with a gun demanded.

As Seokjin steadied further, he saw Jungkook give a confident nod and say, “My brother is the best doctor I know. Get Rap Monster to one of the examination rooms and I’ll have Jin there in thirty
seconds.”

“He better be good,” the man with the gun said, but then he was darting away to follow orders.

Seokjin grabbed hard to Jungkook’s sleeve and demanded, “What’s going on?”

“Is the code to the alarm still mom’s birthday?”

Before Seokjin could respond Jungkook was on his feet and headed from the room. He shouted over his shoulder, “You just keep breathing. I’ll be back in a second and I’ll explain everything!”

The moment Jungkook was gone, Seokjin bowed over more fully, hands braced on the ground as he sucked in the last of his uneven breaths.

He didn’t know what was going on. He didn’t know why there were unfamiliar men, some wounded, who’d broken into his clinic at one in the morning to threaten him with a gun. And he didn’t know why his brother seemed to know not only what was going on, but know the men as well.

But Seokjin was going to find out. Because nothing happened to his clinic as long as he was around, and that included people dying on his watch.
Chapter Two

His ears were still being assaulted by the shrill of the alarm by the time Seokjin regained his senses. He was a little panicked, and a lot confused, but he could feel his nerves evening out, and his main priority was now the bleeding man who was being moved to one of the examination rooms.

A man who was likely a thug of some kind.

As Seokjin lifted himself squarely to his feet, he wondered if that meant somehow Jungkook was a thug. He was associated with these men, and only criminals had guns outside of the military. But that was a connection that Seokjin didn’t want to believe, especially since his brother was so young and had so much potential. Seokjin couldn’t bear to see him burdened by a life of crime, and to see him become a degenerate was a heart wrenching thought.

But he had to focus. Even if the man who’d been shot was a criminal or a thug, or whatever, he was still an injured party. And to a doctor, the only thing that mattered was the injury, and not the person it belonged to.

Seokjin didn’t go after his brother. Instead he careened down the hallway towards the sounds of men arguing, and shouldered his way into an examination room that his new patient was currently bleeding all over.

“I can’t treat him here,” Seokjin said firmly, eyeing the man Jungkook had given orders to. The gun was out of view now, but probably not far from reach.

“What?” the gruff man demanded, sharing a quick look with the man with the impressive bruise on his face. “I thought you were a doctor--”

“Your friend,” Seokjin cut in sharply, “he’s been shot, correct?” He didn’t wait for a response to say, “I take it none of you have any medical training? Can you tell me if the bullet is still lodged in him? If the wound is being complicated by any excess bleeding, damaged organs, or--”

The man who’d been shot groaned terribly.

Quickly, Seokjin pushed up the sleeves on his pajamas and said, “I need you to bring him with me to the operating room at the back. It’s sterile and will have all the equipment I need to save his life. Unless you’d like him to bleed out here in a room that mainly has cotton swabs and tongue depressors?”

“Where?” the man with the bruised jaw asked, already reaching for the gunshot victim. “Where is that room?”

“Follow me,” Seokjin snapped out, and then he was running ahead to get the single operating room ready to go.

For the most part, Seokjin and his fellow doctors worked towards preventative health care. It was their main goal, with a few exceptions, to treat minor illnesses before they became major ones. Seokjin tried to make his clinic cheap enough and welcoming enough that patients would come frequently, and he and his colleagues could catch diseases early on.

Once in a while they needed to conduct a minor surgery or two, and Seokjin kept the small operating room in pristine condition for any medical emergency that might require it. He could handle a
gunshot wound, especially if the victim had made it this far.

“You,” Seokjin said, rallying his courage, looking to the man who’d pulled a gun on him. “Street thug, don’t bump your friend into anything. Think of him like a delicate vase that’s already cracked. Too much jostling could do more damage than the bullet.”

The man glared at him. “Jimin. I have a name.”

Frankly, Seokjin didn’t care what the man’s name was. Just that he did as he was told.

“Move,” Seokjin urged.

“What do you need us to do?” Jimin asked as he and the others came through the door behind Seokjin, flipping on lights and helping their friend onto the operating table.

The alarm finally cut out and Seokjin breathed some relief.

“Get his clothes off,” Seokjin commanded, washing his hands carefully and thoroughly at the nearby sink. “All of them except for his underwear. I need to be able to see the wound clearly, but don’t touch it.”

“He’s bleeding,” the unnamed man stated, laying the nearly unconscious one down on the table. “I don’t want to take my hand off the wound. You have to keep pressure on it, right?”

“It’s an abdomen wound,” Seokjin told him. “He hasn’t bled to death yet, despite you moving him all around, so that is a very good thing. You can let off the pressure now and take a step back.”

“Jin!”

Seokjin was getting his first look at the wound when Jungkook came skidding into the room, sweaty and breathing hard.

“Not now,” Seokjin said, placing a tentative amount of pressure on the wound. The hole looked clean, the placement was as good as it got, and a few seconds more Seokjin was able to determine the bullet had gone completely through. The fact that it wasn’t still lodged inside was likely the reason the man was still alive. “I’m busy.”

The wounded man groaned again, eyes opening wider than before, but with a delirious haze.

“Sir,” Seokjin said, feeling blood gush out warmly over his gloved fingers, “my name is Doctor Kim. You’re at my clinic and you’ve been shot. I am going to help you. I will take care of you. But I need you to listen carefully to me, and do as I say.”

A flurry of movement caught Seokjin’s attention, and when he next looked up at his brother he could see another, suspiciously dangerous looking man standing next to him, leaning up to whisper in his ear something.

“Do any of you have basic medic training?” Seokjin asked, looking from face to face.

There were only headshakes in response, and Seokjin knew there was no way he could wait to call in any kind of assistance. Let alone, how could he explain it?

“Jungkook,” Seokjin said sharply, wiping the bullet entrance clean to get one more look at it before he assessed any possible internal injuries, “take your new friends and leave. I need to concentrate.”

“Jin--”
Seokjin shot him a dark glare and his brother stiffened and paled.

They’d called him a Tasmanian devil when he was a resident. Seokjin was good natured and well-mannered by default. He was kind and gentle to his patients, respectful to the nurses, and always thankful for his life and what he had. But in the operating room, when there was a life to save, he was critical, harsh, and above all else, unflinching. There was no room for niceties in the operating theater, and it was the only place in the world that Seokjin was aggressive.

“You,” Seokjin said, narrowing his eyes at Jimin. “You get out too. You especially get out.”

“Doctor,” the man on the table moaned out, one of his bloodied hands reaching up for Seokjin’s pajama sleeve.

“You’re going to be okay,” Seokjin told him again, giving him a soft smile. “I promise you. I’m a very good doctor, this isn’t the first bullet wound I’ve treated, and you’re going to be okay. I’ll take care of you.”

The man’s hand felt back limp as Jimin demanded, “Why should I leave?”

Ignoring him completely, Seokjin turned to the man with the bruised jaw and asked, “What’s your name?”

The man hesitated, something that was awkward and unsettling to Seokjin, before he said, “V.”

Seokjin balked, “Your name is V?”

“How dare you speak to me like that!” Jimin cut in.

“Your name is V,” Seokjin said, nodding across the room. “You’re now my nurse. See that surgical tray over there with the blue tarp? Bring it over, but be careful not to touch anything but the side handles. It has sterilized surgical tools for an operation that’s supposed to take place in about nine hours. I need to inspect the wound and clean it up before I can pack it and seal it. I need those tools.”

V, who looked young like Jungkook, and out of place with the others, moved quickly to get the items requested.

“Stop making chitchat and save his life,” Jimin cut in.

“V,” Seokjin said, nodding across the room. “You’re now my nurse. See that surgical tray over there with the blue tarp? Bring it over, but be careful not to touch anything but the side handles. It has sterilized surgical tools for an operation that’s supposed to take place in about nine hours. I need to inspect the wound and clean it up before I can pack it and seal it. I need those tools.”

V, who looked young like Jungkook, and out of place with the others, moved quickly to get the items requested.

Jimin shouted, “I’m talking to you!”

“Don’t snap at my brother like that!” Jungkook’s own voice rose.

And then the new comer, whoever he was, interjected, “Stop fighting, all of you!”

Seokjin turned to Jimin and looked in straight in the eyes. “Do you know why you have thirty seconds to get out of my operating room?”

“Go ahead and tell me.”

“Because,” Seokjin said, muttering a thank you to V when he deposited the tools at his side. “Because you’re the idiot who pointed a gun at me. You’re the idiot who, instead of asking nicely if I could save his friend’s life, demanded that I do so. Because I don’t like you. Because I don’t like violence. And because this is a clinic where I treat people and take care of them, and you are making it very difficult for me to want to do that. Now, your friend is laid out on my operating table, bleeding out from a gunshot wound. Do you want to stay here and be an ass, or do you want to leave now and let me work? Fifteen seconds for you to decide.”
Seokjin turned fully away from him then, and instead concentrated on the wound.

It was only the shuffling of feet, and then the quiet shutting of a door that alerted Seokjin that he was alone with the victim and Nurse V.

He was able to work in relative silence for a few minutes before V asked, “Is he … do you think he’s going to be okay?”

The trepidation in V’s voice was almost endearing in its uncertainty. Seokjin was used to reassuring people and comforting family members, so it was easy for him to say, “Your friend has a lot going for him. He’s young, fit, appears to be in good health, and if one is going to be shot in the abdomen, this is a good place for it to happen.”

The victim had passed out moments ago, and Seokjin knew that was a godsend. He didn’t have an anesthesiologist on hand, couldn’t possibly call for one, and more basic pain medication was something that would have to wait until Seokjin could get a better sense of the patient’s vitals.

“Also,” Seokjin said, this time giving V a reassuring smile, “the bullet went through and through. In and then out. And it did so in a clean trajectory. If that hadn’t happened, your friend probably would have bled to death before you even got him to me.”

V frowned. “How come?”

The subject was so close to home, but Seokjin refused to be anything but professional. “When a bullet goes through and through, in one side and out the other, it makes it much easier for a doctor to not only assess the damage, but also repair it. When someone is unlucky, and depending up on the circumstances around the shooting, the bullet can do one of two things. Either it can remain whole in the person and bounce around, damaging organs and various other things, or it can break apart as shrapnel and lodge everywhere.”

“And Rap Mon he didn’t … that didn’t happen to him?”

“No,” Seokjin said confidently. Then his mouth turned down and he asked, “That isn’t really his name, is it?”

V looked panicked.

“That’s his thug name?”

When V remained staunchly quiet, Seokjin shrugged and said, “I think you should know that my surgical skills are going to save this man’s life tonight. But for me as a doctor, what I do is more than simply or clinically treating someone. I bond with my patients. I comfort them and make them feel like they’ve got a lifelong friend looking out for them. For the moments they’re with me, and maybe after, they are my friends. And do you know how that starts? It starts with a name.”

V shook his head. “You shouldn’t--”

“You broke into my clinic at one in the morning,” Seokjin said, eyes narrowing. “You set off my alarm, no doubt broke something, dragged your bleeding friend all over the place, you’ve forced me to contaminate an area that another doctor planned to use to help someone else, and you can’t tell me a name that I can use to comfort my patient with?”

“It’s not that I don’t want to,” V said, worrying his bottom lip with his teeth, “Jungkook always says what an amazing doctor and brother you are, but--”
Wheezing a bit, and startling them all, the patient on the table rumbled out, “Kim … Nam … Joon.”

“Ah,” Seokjin said, peering up at his patient. “So he has a name. Namjoon.”

Kim Namjoon was an odd-looking man, not overly handsome like Seokjin had seen before, but there
was certainly something appealing about him. He was the kind of person who looked like he had a
magnetic personality, and looked a force to be reckoned with. He looked to be the kind of person
Seokjin liked best, which was interesting, and he was now even more determined to see him to
recovery.

“Namjoon,” Seokjin spoke once more, “I don’t know if you heard me earlier, but I’m your doctor.
I’m taking care of you. I’ve inspected your wound, and while you most certainly need a blood
transfusion, of which I do not have at this clinic, I think you’re going to make a full recovery with
enough time. You are going to be okay.”

“Blood?” V asked quickly. “He needs blood?”

“Most certainly,” Seokjin said. Then he was surprised by how hard Namjoon grabbed his hand and
squeezed. He turned to V and wondered, “I don’t suppose either of you know what blood type he
is?”

Without saying a word V jogged quickly to the door. He popped it open to speak to someone on the
other side.

Trying to keep his face as easy and friendly as possible, Seokjin leaned closer to Namjoon. “I don’t
know if I even want to ask how this happened.”

Namjoon hissed through his teeth in pain before saying, “Disagreement.”

Seokjin gave a thin laugh. “A disagreement with guns?”

Namjoon winced, and for the next few minutes they worked in silence.

V was back in the room by the time Seokjin started on the stitches that would hold everything
together.

“Just a little while longer,” Seokjin promised as he threaded the needle through Namjoon’s skin. “I
know this hurts, but honestly, I’ve seen grown men cry over things less than this. You’re doing
well.”

A smile that was all teeth greeted Seokjin as Namjoon said, “Gotta … impress …my hot doctor.”

“You’re so greasy,” Seokjin teased him. “You’re lucky I like greasy. It’s one of my character flaws
that I find greasy endearing.”

Namjoon said assuredly, “Best … doctor … ever.” He was gasping for air, fighting through the pain,
and Seokjin was only more impressed by the fortitude being displayed.

For fifteen minutes Namjoon endured stitches being applied to his already inflamed skin without pain
medication or a numbing agent. Through it Seokjin talked to him about the much worse gunshot
wounds he’d seen, how much worse it could have been, and how he was confident that Namjoon
was a very lucky person.

A quick check of Namjoon’s blood pressure satisfied Seokjin enough to finally say, “Okay, now you
get your reward.”
“Lollipop?” Namjoon asked, sweating profusely across this nearly naked body.

Seokjin hadn’t allowed himself to look much before, but the muscle definition was impossible to miss now. Namjoon, before his brush with death in the form of a bullet, was likely a perfect male specimen. Toned legs, developed arms, and a strong, wide chest, probably drove countless people crazy with want.

Seokjin hadn’t had a date in five months. He hadn’t had sex in almost a year. And Namjoon flirting with him, dangling about like a piece of meat, was not helping.

For the most part, Seokjin considered himself married to his occupation. But some nights he went to bed lonely and in want of companionship. Namjoon was a reminder of sorts that he was young, and he should have someone, and that he couldn’t live forever in the small apartment above his clinic alone and without a partner to share his life with.

Nor should he want to.

“This is a local,” Seokjin said, producing a syringe, and filling it with a carefully measured dosage of liquid. “It’s not the strongest stuff I could give you, but something tells me you don’t want to be completely dead to the world, unable to defend yourself if trouble comes knocking.” Seokjin paused, giving Namjoon a suspicious look. “I know you won’t be bringing any more trouble to my clinic, though, right?”

Namjoon cracked his eyes open and gave a weak shake of his head. “No, sir.”

“Then this,” Seokjin told him, “will provide relief from what must be an excruciatingly painful throbbing in your side, and help you sleep. But you’ll still have your senses should you need them.”

V tensed up, having been silence since he returned, and Namjoon caught Seokjin’s wrist sharply before he could administer the syringe.

Seokjin asked plainly, “You don’t want the pain relief?”

He could see the conflict on Namjoon’s face. Seokjin could see the uncertainty and the panic and the hint of fear.

“I’m a doctor,” Seokjin told him evenly, not pulling his wrist back in the least, despite the almost painful grip Namjoon had on it. “That means, above all else, that I help and protect people. You are my responsibility as long as you’re under my care, and I won’t let anything happen to you. That is my promise to you, and you should be aware, I don’t make promises I can’t keep. I haven’t broken one yet, and I don’t expect to start with you.”

Slowly, almost excruciatingly so, Namjoon’s hand released on his wrist.

“You’ll feel better with this and a little rest,” Seokjin promised, then slid the syringe tip into the crook of Namjoon’s elbow gracefully. “Trust me.”

Namjoon gave a small nod before his eyes closed and he was out.

Gently Seokjin snapped his fingers, and when Namjoon didn’t react, he told V, “He’s going to be fine.”

V nodded and replied, “Blood is on the way.”

Eyes widening, Seokjin asked, “And did you break into a different clinic to acquire it? Or the local
blood bank? Because that is absolutely not something that--"

Before he could finish the door burst in and Jungkook rushed out, “Jin! The police are here!”

Seokjin whipped off his bloodied gloves at once, giving a worried look down to Namjoon’s still body. “Figures they’d pick tonight to be the one time they make it here within an hour of an emergency.”

Uncertainly, Jungkook asked, “What are we going to do?”

There was a lot implied in that simple sentence. Seokjin knew at one that whatever his brother was mixed up in, whoever Namjoon or Rap Mon was, it wasn’t good. And the police were a complication that could possibly endanger everyone.

Seokjin was certainly going to rip his brother a new one at the first chance he got, but he wasn’t going to let anyone else hurt him. He wasn’t going to let Jungkook be in danger, and he wasn’t going to expose him to the police.

And then there was Jimin to consider, with his gun. The clinic couldn’t afford a shootout, and Seokjin couldn’t let anything happen on his watch that endangered people, including his patient on the table.


Seokjin brushed past Jimin and the newly arrived man with his eyes straight ahead.

“Hey!” Seokjin called out, a forced happy smile on his face the moment he saw the first police officer, baton in hand and flashlight shining through the unlit reception area. “My name is Kim Seokjin. It’s my alarm that went off.”

Of the two police officers, the one at the lead looked the most agreeable, so Seokjin directed his attention towards that man.

“What caused the alarm?” the first police officer asked.

Seokjin ran a hand across the back of his head as he fabricated, “You know the neighborhood. I imagine it was only a matter of time before someone decided to test the waters and attempt to break in. As you know, there is a lot of valuable equipment in here.”

The second officer eyed him. “And where are the assailants now?”

Seokjin shrugged. “I think the alarm scared them off. That alarm would scare me, especially if I were just looking for a quick steal.”

Palms sweating, Seokjin knew whatever the look on the second officer’s face meant, it wasn’t good. He certainly didn’t look convinced. And it was highlighted when he reached for a small pad of paper and read off it, “Why did it take you … nine minutes to enter the code to the alarm, after two failed previous attempts.”

“Nerves,” Seokjin told him, never so thankful for the medication pumping through his veins at the moment, helping to keep him calm. He forced another laugh. “I mean, I got the system installed just in case, but a part of me never expected to actually hear it go off and be confronted with proof that someone was attempting to break in.”
There was perfect silence behind him, and Seokjin, who hardly believed in god, was praying desperately that none of his brother’s … associates, made a sound.

“So,” the first officer continued, “you heard the alarm, came down stairs, discovered that the perpetrators had run off, and that’s it?”

Nodding Seokjin told him, “I guess I’m lucky, right?”

The second officer raised an eyebrow. “Do you need us to call an ambulance for you?”

“Ambulance?” Seokjin frowned. “I’m a doctor. I don’t think I need an ambulance.”

The officer gestured to him. “You’re injured, aren’t you? Bleeding?”

Seokjin’s eyes darted down to his sleeve and he saw for the first time where Namjoon had grabbed him. Against his blue pajamas were streaks of blood. And there were more splashes of blood, too, proof that he’d been sewing someone up.

“I’m not bleeding,” he said slowly, thinking frantically for an excuse. “I was just … this is a clinic. I was cleaning. One of the doctors performed a surgery earlier. Our cleaning service doesn’t come until the morning. I was getting a head start on it.”

“In your pajamas?”

“I have insomnia. Cleaning helps.”

Now the first officer looked suspicious and he said quietly, almost so that Seokjin had a hard time hearing him, “Is everything okay?”

And now the police clearly thought that whoever had broken in was forcing him to put on a front.

“Oh, no, everything is fine!” Seokjin put up his hands defensively. “I’m just tired and shaken and upset all at the same time. I swear, officers, everything is fine.”

The second officer shook his head and said certainly, “We’re going to need to take a look around.”

Seokjin bit his tongue nearly hard enough to draw blood.

Seokjin followed behind the two men as close as he dared as they searched the clinic. And they were thorough, too. They opened all office doors, all examination rooms, and even the storage closets that held the extra supplies they used during business hours. And all the while the officers crept closer to the operation room, Seokjin worried he wouldn’t think of a reason to keep them out in time.

“This is the operating room,” Seokjin said darting in front of them when they reached the last room in the clinic, and the only that remained with a closed door. “Like I said earlier, that’s where a surgery occurred earlier today.”

The second officer pointed out, “Where you claim you received those blood stains?”

Seokjin was certain he nodded a little too forcefully, and then the officers were pushing past him to the room where certainly Namjoon and the others were hiding.

“Well,” the first officer said after a moment, hands on his hips, “it looks like everything checks out.”

Seokjin blinked in surprise at the empty room.
Empty.

How the hell was it empty?

The first officer patted his partner on the shoulder and said, “One of these days your suspicions are going to pay off. But not today.”

The second officer looked sour. Seokjin still couldn’t believe the room was empty. All of the evidence was still there, from the blood on the floor to the used tools and the bloody bandages. But it also looked like Seokjin had claimed, and that there’d been a surgery in the room earlier. His lie held up, even in the face of the truth, and he knew from the way the offices were shuffling away, that they believed him.

“I’m sorry you had to come all the way out here,” Seokjin said, trailing after them to the front door.

“Don’t worry about it,” the first office said in a good natured way. He gave Seokjin a dismissive wave. “We’re more than happy to come and check out any possible threats to this place. You’re doing the neighborhood a great service. This is the least we can do in return.”

The second officer stopped them short and pointed to a small, side door barely in sight. “What about that?”

Seokjin thumbed towards the door as nonchalant as he could manage. “That’s the stairwell that leads to my apartment above the clinic. You’re welcome to search it too, if you want.”

The officers shook their heads and continued towards the front door.

The moment they were gone and the door was shut behind them Seokjin choked out a gasp of air and leaned against it.

“You nearly blew it,” a voice behind Seokjin stated.

“Are you serious?” Seokjin demanded, spinning around to glare at Jimin. “I just saved your asses from the trouble you likely brought down on yourselves, to my clinic which is supposed to be the very opposite of trouble. Be thankful I didn’t turn you over.”

Jimin, who was even shorter than Seokjin had first assumed he was, still managed to look intimidating and threatening as he crossed his arms and narrowed his eyes. “You wouldn’t give your brother up.”

“Maybe I would if I thought it would get him in trouble long enough for my father to snatch him away from you and put him into a reformatory school in China.”

“Jin?” Jungkook called from behind Jimin. “Everything okay?”

Seokjin did his best to glide past Jimin without so much as a glance, to get to Jungkook. “Where’s Namjoon?”

“Excuse me?” Jimin demanded still at the front door. “Why does he know that name?”

Seokjin leveled an angry finger up at his brother. “I expect you to have a very, very good explanation for bringing this to my doorstep—and for being involved yourself. And I will want to hear that story, likely with several bottles of soju to go along with it. But right now I need to know what you did with my patient. My patient, I should tell you, who needs to not be moved barring an
“This was a necessary thing,” Jungkook insisted. “We thought we’d be okay in the back room until the cops started searching the clinic. And we were counting on them not searching your apartment. We had to move Rap Mon up there.”

“Take me to him,” Seokjin insisted right away, and was climbing stairs a second later.

Seokjin found that Namjoon had been placed on the only soft surface available in his small, one bedroom apartment located above the clinic. And that happened to be his bed. It was the first time Seokjin had had a boy in his bed in quite a long time, and it wasn’t exactly the way he wanted it to happen.

But for the most part Namjoon was still sleeping comfortably. His wound looked good, there was still no sign of a fever, and he looked fine for having been carried up steep stairs and moved so quickly after being sewn up.

“Well,” Seokjin said, now aware that he had all of the men in his thankfully clean and tidy bedroom, “everything looks fine. I think, if he gets the blood transfusion that he needs, he’ll recover just fine, and quickly at that. I don’t expect any complications if the wound remains free of infection, and he can go home to rest as soon as tomorrow.”

The only unnamed man, the most recent arrival, asked, “Tomorrow? You want him to stay tonight?”

Seokjin asked, “And who are you?”

The short boy thumbed at himself and said, “Suga.”

Seokjin had to fight to roll his eyes as he stated, “It’s one ridiculous nickname after another.”

“Jin,” Jungkook said, almost at a whine.

Seokjin asked his brother, “What’s your nickname? Seagull?”

Jungkook scowled.

“He needs to stay with me tonight,” Seokjin said definitively to them all. “Whether he sleeps here or down in the clinic, he shouldn’t be moved any more than he has to. I want to watch him for any possible signs of a developing fever, too.”

V asked, “What about when the other doctors and nurses start arriving?”

Seokjin reasoned, “Yoona is the most punctual of all the nurses. She’ll be here at six-thirty. And Jonghyun has a consult at seven. You can take Namjoon out just before that. It’s not long from now, but enough time for me to be sure that he’ll recover on his own without needing further medical supervision.”

Jimin told them, “J-Hope said he’ll be here in ten minutes with the blood. V, you’ll stay with--”

“Listen,” Seokjin said, and he felt as if Jimin was the kind of person who would crawl under his skin and never fail to irritate him. “This is my home and my clinic. I’m Namjoon’s doctor, and I’m going to tell you all how it’s going to go.”

Jimin’s head cocked in almost an impressed manner.

“My stupid brother,” Seokjin said pointedly, “will be staying with me tonight so that I can lecture
him for the next five hours. Because if I’m not going to get any sleep, he’s going to suffer as well. My new nurse, Nurse V, will stay here as well. He’ll hand me the blood, he’ll run errands if I need them for Namjoon, and he will be the only one other than my brother that I have contact with. The rest of you can prowl around outside, or go home, or go steal candy from babies if that’s what you do. But you’re going to leave and you won’t come back until tomorrow morning when you take Namjoon to rest at his place. If there are any questions or concerns about this, feel free to take them to someone who cares. My clinic, my rules.”

The silence that followed was satisfying.

Then Suga, the one with the most laughable nickname, told Jungkook seriously, “I thought you said your brother was one of the nicest people on the planet?”

Jungkook ran a hand through his hair. “He is, when he’s not busy being someone’s doctor.”

On Seokjin’s bed Namjoon shifted a little, murmuring in his sleep.

Seokjin said to Jimin, “You take your gun and your hoodlum friends and leave now, please. You can come back at six-thirty.”

Jimin, in a touching, almost affectionate way, brushed his hand against V’s arm and said quietly, “If you have any problems, you call right away. I’ll be nearby.”

“I’ll make some coffee,” Seokjin said when Jimin and Suga were gone. He made his way to the kitchen attached to the living room and reached for the coffee machine.

Collapsing down at the kitchen table, Jungkook bemoaned, “You’re going to be really mean when you lecture me, aren’t you?”

Seokjin called over his shoulder, “Don’t you think I should be? I just found out my little brother is associated with a group of hoodlums that I can only assume comprise a gang of sorts. And this after I spent my lunch hour in the company of our father, listening to him complain about what a letdown I am as a son, and how he’s scared that you’re going to follow in my footsteps and become a disappointment as well.”

Jungkook winced. “You had lunch with dad today?”

“Every Wednesday afternoon when our schedules permit it,” Seokjin said. Then he called out, “Nurse V, please get the mugs in the cabinet next to you. On your left.”

V gave him an incredulous look. “I don’t think I like it when you call me nurse.”

“Tell me your real name, the one your parents gave you, and I won’t call you my nurse.”

Jungkook smothered a laugh behind a hand as V said, “To my left?”

The blood arrived less than ten minutes later, and after Seokjin started the transfusion for Namjoon, he was more comfortable leaving him to sleep away the early morning hours.

“Now,” Seokjin said, filling three coffee cups when the machine beeped to indicate it was ready. V took his in a hasty retreat as he hurried to Namjon’s side, and Seokjin sat across from his brother at the kitchen table. “I want you to tell me exactly how you fell in with these men. I want to know what you’re doing hanging out with people who get shot, and you’re going to explain to me calmly and very convincingly why you don’t think I should go straight to dad, tell him everything, and have you shipped to a reformatory school in China.”
“Because I hate Chinese food?” Jungkook offered. He took a careful sip of the coffee, and then made a repulsed face, commenting, “Ugh, I forgot you drink decaf only.”

“Talk,” Seokjin demanded, and he wasn’t going to let Jungkook go until he had all the answers.

“You’re not going to like it,” Jungkook warned.

Seokjin told him plainly, “Somehow, I already figured that.”
Chapter Three

“Don’t you think instead we should talk about how you almost had a heart attack tonight?”

Seokjin narrowed his eyes at his brother. “You’re attempting to distract me.”

But then he wasn’t so sure, because Jungkook looked absolutely serious and worried as he insisted, “Oh, we can talk about all the things you want to know in a second. I’m fully prepared for that lecture, I have readied myself. But Jin, you almost … it looked like …”

“Your friend,” Seokjin said tersely, “the one with the gun, he startled me.”

He could still recall the feeling that had overcome him the moment he’d seen the gun. The fear had made his skin feel sticky, and the lightheadedness had come right after.

“Jimin,” Jungkook said with a sigh. “That’s my fault, Jin. I’m really sorry. I was back with J-Hope. I told Jimin and V to go ahead, to take Rap Mon to you, because I knew you were the closest, safest place to get him treated. I also knew he had a gun, but I didn’t think he would pull it on you. He’s just high strung. He was running high on adrenaline. We almost lost Rap Mon. We almost lost someone we’d do anything for.”

Seokjin sighed. There was never an excuse for bringing a weapon into a house of healing. But instead of fighting the matter, he told his brother, “I can tell all of you care very much for each other. I believe you when you said your …. friend pointed that gun at me out of desperation.”

Angry, Jungkook said harshly, “He still shouldn’t have. I told him the only person here at this time of night was my brother. I told him. He knew it was you. He could have shot you. Your heart could have…”

“It doesn’t make me weak, you know,” Seokjin pointed out calmly. He raised his coffee mug to his lips and enjoyed a long drink. “I’ve had plenty of time to come to grips with my limitations.”

“I saw you on the floor, gasping for air. I thought you needed an ambulance.”

Seokjin shook his head. “I managed to find my medication in time.” And since then his nerves had calmed fully, and there was only the barest remnant that his heart had strained so terribly it had almost given out.

“It’s my fault you needed it!”

The bedroom door cracked open and V’s head poked out slowly, a confused, worried look on his face.

“It’s all right,” Seokjin assured, waving a hand at him.

“Okay,” V said quietly.

When he was back in the bedroom with Namjoon, Seokjin said to Jungkook, “I think we both know that the condition of my heart has nothing to do with you. In any case, what happened tonight could have happened at any other time. I’m afraid it’ll start happening more frequently, too.” He cracked a sad smile.

Blinking slowly, Jungkook inferred, “It’s getting worse?”
“Maybe,” Seokjin offered. “I feel the tension and pain more frequently now. The medication … it
doesn’t seem to be as effective. I go to my cardiologist every couple of weeks and she doesn’t think
…” Seokjin broke off, and after a moment’s pause, asked instead, “Who are these people you’ve
brought into my clinic?”

Jungkook rushed to say, “I only brought them here out of desperation. Before this I made sure they
knew your clinic was absolutely off limits. I didn’t want to get you caught up in anything.”

“Caught up in whatever you’re caught up in?”

Seokjin’s brother was eighteen now, on the verge of becoming a full-time college student, and most
certainly not the little boy who had held his hand compulsively for almost a full year after their
mother’s death. But now, as he hung his head and fidgeted nervously, Seokjin found it almost
impossible to consider him an adult.

“Who are they?” Seokjin asked one more time. “Obviously they’re a gang of sorts. I’m not an idiot.
But what I’m asking is which of Seoul’s many gangs have you brought into a house of healing?”

Voice strained, Jungkook said finally, “Bangtan.”

“Jesus.”

Seokjin felt like crumpling. He folded forward, bracing his forearms on the table, and demanded
harshly, “Are you an idiot, Jungkook?”

Seoul had, at any given time, and depending on what was happening on a street level, a dozen
prolific gangs. There were at least a dozen organized groups of hoodlums running around, causing
trouble, getting into fights, extorting people, and making it harder and harder for Seokjin to take care
of the people around him.

“You probably think so.”

“I’m starting to know so.”

Bangtan. More specifically, the Bangtan Boys. Bangtan Sonyeondan.

In terms of territory rights, Seokjin’s clinic didn’t fall in their boundaries. They were much further
out, on the fringes of Seoul and near the more industrial areas. And while Seokjin didn’t know
specifically the kind of trouble they preferred to get into, and each gang had a preference, Seokjin
knew they weren’t anything to write off.

“Bangtan,” Seokjin said again, as if he could barely believe his brother’s stupidity.

“They’re not that bad!” Jungkook said defensively, and Seokjin wanted to reach across the table and
slap the back of his head.

Seokjin said in a pointed, sharp way, “They are a gang of hoodlums. You, who has had every
opportunity for greatness, grown up affluent and with all the advantages one can hope for, have no
place associating with little boys who run around creating chaos. Hurting people!”

“Bangtan doesn’t hurt people!”

“You’re an idiot if you think that!”

Again, their voices rose so sharply that Seokjin could hear V moving around in the bedroom. But
this time he didn’t peek out, and Seokjin was more than glad for it.

Hissing quietly at Jungkook, Seokjin asked, “Do you even know whose territory you’ve brought Bangtan into? Do you know who runs these streets here?”

Jungkook gave a shaky nod. “The same people who shot Rap Mon, beat the crap out of J-Hope, and told V that they were going to drop him in the river with cement shoes.”

Seokjin hurried to finish his coffee. His nerves couldn’t handle this. He couldn’t afford to get worked up again, but talking with his brother was aggravating and worrying and it was making him anxious.

Jungkook said softly, “Bangtan really are different. They’re about keeping their streets clean and safe for their community. They’re not like the others. I wouldn’t fall in with people who hurt other people, not when my big brother taught me that the most important thing in the world is helping others. I’m with Bangtan because they care about people.”

Seokjin wanted to believe Jungkook. And the way the gang members had talked to each other, looked at each other, and worried after each other, did seem to indicate a sense of selflessness and maybe even family. And Namjoon … his wasn’t the face of a killer.

Seokjin had been expose to all kinds of people since opening his clinic. He thought he was pretty good at spotting the kinds of people who were innocent, and the ones that were only pretending to be. Namjoon had the kind of face that didn’t make Seokjin feel uncomfortable or worried. And Seokjin’s intuition was rarely wrong.

But a gang member was a gang member, and illegal behavior was illegal behavior.

“How did you end up with them?” Seokjin asked. He would have given anything for a second cup of coffee, but at one he’d already reached his limit of the day, even with it being decaf. Everything else for the rest of the night needed to be water, especially with his earlier scare.

Jungkook gave an almost helpless shrug to his shoulders. “I’ve been …restless the past couple of years. I’m not like you, Jin. You’ve known what you wanted to be since we were kids, but me? I’ve never found that thing I’m good at. I don’t have a special talent or anything like that. I don’t have the dedication and drive and interest that you do.”

Seokjin frowned, then asked, “You don’t want to continue on with your schooling, correct?”

“No really,” Jungkook said almost bashfully.

“But you still applied to college. You did that well over a year ago.”

“Have you tried saying no to dad?”

Seokjin grimaced. Of course, of all the things that they knew best as brothers, it was the sheer force of their father’s will and determination. What he said went, and he controlled the flow of money completely. If Jungkook wanted to have access to their family’s money in any way, he would have been required to attend college, and maybe that was the real reason he’d agreed to it.

Wringing his hands, Jungkook said, “I told dad I’d go to college to buy myself time to figure out what I wanted to do.”

“He thinks he’s going to make you into a lawyer,” Seokjin said, “or an accountant.”

Jungkook snorted.
“I know,” Seokjin laughed.

With a little more seriousness, Jungkook said, “I went down into Bangtan’s territory about eight months ago. I knew graduation was coming up, and I only had a little time before it happened, and before dad figured out quickly enough that I wasn’t going to college like he thought and I’d said. I wasn’t looking to join a gang at the time, Jin. Stop looking at me like that. I was looking to get a job in freight.”

Seokjin pulled back. “A job in freight.”

“I have a couple of older friends who work at the shipping yard. They graduated a year ahead of me and I kept in touch with them. I told them about dad, about not knowing where I wanted to go or what I wanted to do, and they said they could get me a job at the shipping yard. They said I could make money, figure things out, and maybe even get transferred outside of Seoul if I wanted something new. I had a couch lined up to sleep on and everything. I thought I had it figured out.”

Feeling flushed with shame, Seokjin asked, “Didn’t you think you could come to me with this? I’ve always supported you, Jungkook. I have always encouraged you to do what makes you happy. I would have done my best to shield you from dad.”

“I know you would have,” Jungkook rushed to say, voice going pitchy. “You’re the best brother a guy could hope for. But I knew then, and I know now, when dad finds out, it’s going to be like the North Koreans are invading. It’s going to be really, really bad. I didn’t want to put you in a bad place between us. I didn’t want dad coming down on you, too.”

“Hey,” Seokjin said, and now the urge to smack his brother had passed, and all he wanted to do was hug him. “You are my baby brother. It’s my job to protect and shield you however I can, and I’d do it gladly. You can always come here, Jungkook. You will always have a place with me. You don’t need to join a gang.”

Jungkook cracked a smile. “I told you, I didn’t exactly set out to join Bangtan, it just kind of happened. And yeah, I’m not even technically in yet. Soon, but not yet.”

Seokjin got to his feet and placed his empty coffee mug in the nearby sink. He retrieved a water bottle instead from the refrigerator and asked, “Then how did it happen?”

“That shipping job,” Jungkook said. “I was talking with the supervisor for the night shift about getting to start part time as soon as I graduated when a couple of guys showed up and started causing trouble. A lot of the guys working at the time took off, but I stayed to help fight and defend the place.”

Twisting the cap off the water bottle, Seokjin couldn’t help saying, “You’ve always enjoyed fighting a little too much.”

When they’d been younger, much younger, in the years following their mother’s death, Jungkook had gotten into all kinds of fights. He was the first to jump in if an opportunity was presenting itself, and the last to be pulled away once he was in it. Jungkook wasn’t especially inclined towards violence, but Seokjin thought he used it as a way of managing the anxiety and tension in him. It was obvious Jungkook didn’t fight to hurt others, he simply fought to feel better.

“Bangtan showed up a little after that,” Jungkook added. “Rap Mon was really impressed that I’d stayed to watch the backs of the other guys, even though I didn’t owe them any loyalty. And when he heard I needed a job, he gave me an option. He said I could have that shipping job, he’d make it happen, or I could become a runner for Bangtan and a full member in half a year or so.”
Seokjin leaned back against his kitchen countertop. “You’re going to have to let me know what a runner is. I’m not familiar with gang terminology and colloquialisms.”

Jungkook rolled his eyes. “It just means I ran errands for Bangtan for the first couple of months. I took things where they needed to go, passed on messages, did small stuff, and built up some loyalty. I never honestly thought it would be more than that. Then a couple of weeks ago Rap Mon pulled me to the side. He said he liked what he’d been seeing from me, said I was the kind of person he’d been looking for, and told me he was eyeing me for something more--something better than just being a regular member.”

Seokjin really didn’t like the sound of that.

“Jin,” Jungkook said hopefully. “Bangtan isn’t like the other gangs. They care about helping people. They care about keeping control of the streets and making sure people are as safe as they can be. I want to be a part of that. I want to know that because I’m willing to do the hard stuff, kids can play outside, and girls can walk down the street without having to worry about being hassled or worse.”

His fingers were wet where they clutched at the water bottle, and Sokejin didn’t doubt for a second that Jungkook believed what he was saying. But things were rarely so cut and dry. And Jungkook probably hadn’t seen half the things the gang did just yet.

“So, you’re going to join?”

“You want me to say no,” Jungkook said knowingly. “But I am. Rap Mon is someone I respect. I respect what he’s doing, too. Most of the other gangs, including the ones around this area, push drugs. They extort people and they pretend to help people while just hurting them. Jin, I couldn’t be a part of something that hurts people. Even if you can’t believe in Bangtan, can you believe in me?”

The water bottle was easily set to the side and Seokjin made his way to his brother’s side. He tugged him up into a hug.

“I trust you, Jungkook. I have always trusted you and your judgment. What I don’t trust is the people around you who will attempt to take advantage of your good heart.”

Jungkook clutched tightly to Seokjin. “Rap Mon isn’t the kind of person. He just isn’t, and you’ll see.”

This wasn’t something Seokjin could support. He couldn’t possibly support the idea that his little brother had gotten himself involved with a gang and essentially painted a target on himself. And their father hadn’t even found out yet. It would be a thousand times worse when he did.

But neither did Seokjin think he could control Jungkook. His little brother was his own man now, and that simply meant accepting and respecting his choices.

Giving him a small push, Seokjin said, “Go take a nap on the sofa. I’m going to check in on Namjoon.”

“Oh, wait.” Jungkook caught the sleeve of the shirt he’d put on to replace the blood stained one. “Can you … maybe you shouldn’t call him that.”

“His name”? Seokjin raised an eyebrow.

“It’s not … he goes by Rap Mon for a reason.”

Seokjin nearly crossed his arms in defense. “He personally told me his name, Jungkook. And I refuse
to call you or any of those other boys by their ridiculous nicknames. Only a coward hides behind a false name.”

A dark expression crossed Jungkook’s face. “That’s not why they have nicknames. That’s not why I’ll get one. It’s to protect the people who care about. It’s to protect anyone who helps us, and that’s why you can’t say anything about Rap Mon or his real name. There are at least half a dozen gangs that would do anything for that kind of information and where it would lead them.”

“Who am I going to tell?” Seokjin asked with a grin. “Don’t worry.”

“I do,” Jungkook said honestly. “I worry a lot.”

“Go rest,” Seokjin said, pushing at him again. “I’ll send my faithful nurse out to rest with you. I’m sure Namjoon will be perfectly fine without a bodyguard. I’m certainly not going to hurt him, and I have every bit of confidence that your scary, gun wielding thug friend is standing outside in the nearby alley right now, salivating over the first hint of trouble.”

Jungkook trekked his way to the comfortable sofa that had a small but nice television across from it. “Jimin’s just protective. We’re his family. Bangtan is everything to him.”

Seokjin leveled a finger up at Jungkook. “Protective or not, you tell him to never bring a gun in this clinic again. If he does, he’s the one who’ll end up shot next time.”

Jungkook gave a visible gulp and Seokjin was satisfied.

“I don’t think I should leave,” V said once Seokjin was in the bedroom, observing the almost completely drained blood bag and the stable vitals of the sleeping man in his bed. “Just in case.”

“Do you know the specific warning signs to look for in case the patient becomes distressed or his vitals drop?” Seokjin asked in almost a distracted way, moving to lift open the window across the room for a bit of summer air. “Do you, Nurse V?”

V was silent for a minute, then said cautiously, “He’s our leader.”

Seokjin let all of the fight fade from him. “That’s what Jungkook implied. Therefore, I know he’s important to you. I won’t let anything happen to him. You have my word as a doctor, and as a man.”

“It’s not just that he’s important,” V pressed. “He’s the glue that holds us together. Without him, I don’t think we could manage. We need him way more than he needs us, and the people who depend on us, need him. He’s our leader in every possible way.”

Seokjin looked back to Namjoon on the bed. “Does he …” He wasn’t sure how to get the words out right, or if they should even be said just yet. “Does he take care of my brother? Watch out for him?”

Looking rock steady, V promised, “Rap Mon didn’t even want to bring him in for a while. He thought Jungkook was too young and he didn’t want to risk him. But none of us could deny the asset he seemed to be, and the wonderful kind of person he is. He makes us all a little better, and Rap Mon knew we needed that. But yeah, Rap Mon watches out for him. He looks after him, makes sure he doesn’t get put deliberately in the way of trouble, and protects him.”

Seokjin challenged, “Jungkook was there tonight, though, when he was shot. That’s putting my brother in the way of trouble.”

V shook his head. “Jungkook wasn’t there. Not when the shooting happened. He was the lookout when the … exchange went bad. But you’d better believe Jungkook came in like an avenging angle
and saved us all. He was just enough of a distraction for us to get Rap Mon out of there. And more than that, if Jungkook hadn’t convinced us that you’re a great doctor and trustworthy, Rap Mon might have bled out before he got help.”

“You realize the trouble you might be bringing down on my clinic?”

Seokjin wondered if V was around the same age as Jungkook. He didn’t look much more than eighteen or nineteen, and certainly not old enough to be running around with dangerous men and guns.

“We didn’t have a choice. When someone you care for has their life on the line, you do whatever you have to.”

After a moment of hesitation, Seokjin nodded towards the door. “I’m serious. Go relax with Jungkook.” But then he frowned and stepped closer to V, reaching long fingers out for the man’s jaw.

V flinched visibly, but to his credit held still as Seokjin looked over the rapidly spreading bruise on his chin.

“You’re lucky, too,” Seokjin deduced, releasing his chin. “This is a massive bruise, and the impact radius is more than impressive. You probably should have broken your jaw from the looks of it.”

V brought his own fingers up to the area. “Hurts like hell.”

Carefully seating himself on the edge of the bed and reaching for Namjoon’s wrist to take his pulse, Seokjin said, “Go to my bathroom first. It’s the only other room up here. I have regular painkillers in there. Get a couple. And for god sake, if you have any trouble speaking, swallowing, or talking over the next few days, come see me.”

Looking stunned, V asked, “You want me to come back here?”

Seokjin raised an eyebrow. “Yes, so I can treat you, should complications arise.”

V gave a bashful smile and headed to the door, admitting, “I was pretty sure that at some point you were going to tell all of us to get the hell out and never come back.”

The steady, reassuring thumps of Namjoon’s pulse did a lot of ease Seokjin.

“I’m a doctor,” Seokjin reminded. “So even when I don’t like the circumstances surrounding the people I’m treating, I still do it. That’s what being a doctor means. So if you have any problems, you come back and I’ll deal with them. I’m here to serve the public, and no matter what you do outside of here, you are still a member of that public.”

V gave him an odd look.

“What?” Seokjin asked, feeling a little uncomfortable.

“Jungkook,” V eased out, cracking open the door. “He said you were a special kind of doctor, and an even better person. I didn’t know what he meant until now.”

V slipped out of the room and Seokjin wondered what it meant that he was starting to like the weird collection of boys in Bangtan more and more.

Except for the one with the gun.
“Looks like it’s just you and me,” Seokjin told Namjoon as things fell silent again.

He dragged the chair at the desk nearby to the side of the bed and sat on it gingerly. Seokjin reached for the nearby tablet he’d abandoned when he’d heard the alarm first go off, and despite his heavy eyelids, started back up reading the article where he’d left off.

For several times over the next few hours Seokjin routinely took Namjoon’s temperature, checked the wound for infection, and monitored his vitals.

But then, sometime after three, he closed his eyes and lost the fight with alertness that he’d been battling for a while.

Seokjin jerked awake sometime later in a panic. Something was buzzing nearby, the bed next to him was empty, and it was still dark outside.

Fumbling for his phone on the nearby bedside table, Seokjin saw that he was receiving the customary warning text from the cleaning company that they were minutes away from deactivating the alarm code and entering the building.

The damn cleaning service. Seokjin had forgotten that before Yoona arrived, before Yunho and Jonghyun showed up to see their first patients, the cleaning service they employed made a complete sweep of the entire building.

And the bed was empty.

In an uncoordinated and embarrassing way, Seokjin stumbled his way out of the bedroom and into the living space of his apartment, only to find that Jungkook and V were both missing as well.

There was no sign of a struggle of any kind, so Seokjin was inclined to believe that they’d all left of their own accord. But Namjoon shouldn’t have been moved so quickly, not without a few more hours to rest, and how it had all happened with Seokjin next to the bed was a bigger mystery. Maybe he had just been that tired. He hadn’t had a full night’s sleep in months and he often managed only a few hours at a time.

Faintly Seokjin could hear the alarm deactivating downstairs and he forced himself not to panic.

Part of him, anyway, hadn’t really expected the Bangtan Boys to hang around any longer than necessary. This wasn’t their territory, they were in danger every second they remained, and they were also putting the clinic in danger.

Seokjin ran a heavy hand through his hair and took one more deep breath. Then he reached for a nearby robe, slid it on and headed downstairs to greet the cleaning company and explain away the sudden appearance of blood in the clinic.

“Maybe we should consider getting some kind of security,” Yunho said the second Seokjin told him about the false break-in. Lying, for Seokjin, had been the only option. Professionally Seokjin trusted his colleagues in every possibly way, but with the safety of his brother on the line, lying was the only course of action.

Nearby, with a chart open for review, Jonghyun interjected and asked, “What exactly did you expect to pay this potential security with, Yunho? Lollipops and Hello Kitty Band-Aids? That’s what we have the budget for. As it is, we might need to all take a pay cut very soon to make our expenses.”

“What we need,” Yunho grumbled, “is some kind of financial assistance. We need government funding, charity, or something. We can’t continue to provide for the community if we’re barely
making back enough to cover the electricity.”

The worst part was, their projected costs for the next few weeks already put them over budget by a significant amount. It seemed as if word was getting around more quickly about the services they offered, and there was a downside to that. It was Seokjin’s ultimate dream to provide health care for anyone and everyone, but even he understood that if they didn’t find a way to bring more money in, they’d be in danger of closing their doors.

“I’ll ask around,” Seokjin promised, giving Yunho a firm nod. “My father works for the government. It’s not exactly his department, but I’ll ask about what kind of tax breaks, funding, or provisions we can apply for. Maybe there’s something out there we’re not seeing. And if worst comes to worst, I’ll take a complete pay cut.”

Jonghyun gave him a sad look. “We deserve to be able to provide for the community and still make a living.”

Yunho shot at him, “It’s easy for you to say. Your boyfriend brings home more in a month than we make in a year.”

“That’s an exaggeration,” Jonghyun argued back.

Seokjin wasn’t honestly so sure. And he also knew for a fact, not that he thought Yunho did, that Jonghyun’s boyfriend, Kibum, was a good part of the reason they’d been able to get so much equipment in so quickly at the start. Kibum, though he preferred to be called Key, had put a massive amount of money into their clinic, and asked nothing in return. He wasn’t even named as a benefactor. But every quarter, when Kibum made his annual donation, Seokjin thanked him personally with a bottle of his favorite wine. Very, very, very expensive wine.

“I still think we need to consider security of some kind,” Yunho interjected again, even as Yoona gestured to them and tapped her watch. She was more than a receptionist most of the time, and Seokjin wasn’t sure how they’d get on without her if ever something like that came to pass. “We’re ruined if we lose anything in here, and it’s dangerous for Seokjin.”

Darkly, Jonghyun asked, “What’s the point of paying for protection, if any thug in the neighborhood thinks he can make an easy target out of us.”

“We can worry about that later, too,” Seokjin said firmly, taking a step back. The only thing he wanted to do was curl up in a dark corner somewhere and get a couple extra hours of sleep. But considering he had a consultation in less than ten minutes, he knew that would have to wait. “I suggest we all get back to work.”

“I suggest we get a gun,” Jonghyun said, and even Yunho looked agreeable to the notion.

“No guns,” Seokjin told them roughly. “No guns ever.”

“Think about it,” Jonghyun called after him.

It would be a cold day in hell, Seokjin vowed, when he let another gun come into his clinic.

As predicted, the rest of the day flowed steadily, if a little slow, but the familiarity and the routine helped settle Seokjin. He saw his patients, logged updated medical charts, made important phone calls, and by the end of the night he had apologetic text messages from his brother.

He sent back a few angry ones of his own, demanding that his brother call him, or better, come over. But he wasn’t holding his breath. If his brother had run off so quickly without bothering to wake
him, it probably meant he wouldn’t be back for a while.

“Seokjin?”

At the sound of the day’s late shift receptionist, Lizzy, Seokjin looked up to see her smiling face. One of the nurses, Raina, was standing next to her. Nana, the third member to the trio of girls that seemed to go everywhere together, was out sick with a cold.

And behind them, Jonghyun was pulling off his tie, making himself look almost instantly more casual as he said, “We’re going out for drinks afterwards. Come with us.”

Seokjin gave an almost forlorn look around. “I still have so much work to do.”

Jonghyun said, “Key is back in town for ten days before he flies out to Milan for his next fashion show. How about you bite the bullet, come see him for a while, and drink some soju for a few hours with us.”

“Okay,” Seokjin found himself saying almost right away. Kibum was a good friend, Seokjin hadn’t seen him in some time, and honestly, he could do with a drink. “Let me shut everything down and lock up.”

Their group didn’t go far, only a few blocks away, but Kibum was already there waiting for them, having secured a table and a round of drinks.

“To you poor suckers,” Kibum demanded, raising his own drink high, something frilly and fruity looking, and something obviously not soju. “Wasting your lives way working hard and getting nothing in return.”

Jonghyun rolled his eyes good naturedly, a firm arm around Kibum’s shoulders, and told him, “What we consider getting something in return and what you do, are two completely different things.”

Kibum insisted, “You’re lucky I’m a sucker for losers who like to help other people more than themselves.”

Jonghyun snuck a small, appreciative kiss to his cheek in between drinks of soju.

Lizzy and Raina laughed into their hands and even Soekjin smiled. It wasn’t often he got to go out with his colleagues and employees, but he truly liked them all. Better than that, he liked spending time with them, and maybe he was working too hard if he couldn’t remember the last time they’d all gone out.

“—telling Key during my lunch break how we need to get some kind of financial assistance for the more hefty medical procedures our patients need, and basic operating costs that are only growing.”

Seokjin blushed madly as he caught the tail end of what Jonghyun was saying. He endlessly appreciated the donations Kibum made to their clinic, all the while complaining about wasted money but never holding back, but Seokjin was at least a little ashamed that they needed the donations of Kibum’s type. Seokjin had always known that a clinic of their type would need a few sponsors, but he wanted them to be sponsors who truly cared about the cause, and not just a person who cared about a specific doctor.

Trying to sound confident, Seokjin told Kibum, “We’re going through a couple of options right now, thinking things over. We’ll figure something out. Even if I have to start pawning things, I’ll find a way to keep the clinic open.”
That was his name on the front door. It was his pride and his ability as a doctor on the line. And he was not giving any of it up.

Kibum tapped his chin with one hand, and held his long stemmed glass in the other before stating, “I got an invite from a friend of mine about a hospital gala being held in a couple of weeks.” Kibum waved a dismissive hand. “It came from and old friend, so not going wasn’t an option beforehand, but I’m actually going to be out of the country by the time it rolls around. How about you take my invitation instead, go get greasy with all the guys with deep pockets who’ll be in attendance, and get yourself a couple of more interested investors.”

“A hospital gala,” Seokjin repeated slowly.

Kibum nodded. “It’s an anniversary party of some sort, seriously, it sounds boring. But if I went it would be as a favor to my friend. If you went, not only would you know what everyone was talking about, but you could plead your case to anyone and everyone who’ll listen. It’s not ideal, but hey, if you can get one person to write a check to the clinic, isn’t it worth going?”

“I’ll go if you want,” Jonghyun volunteered, shrugging his shoulders.

“No.” Seokjin said firmly. “I started the clinic, it’s my responsibility to make sure it stays open.” He bowed gratefully to Kibum. “I’ll accept the invitation. Thank you.”

Kibum winked at him and took a drink. “Now all you have to do is find a date.”

Seokjin’s eyes widened. “A date?” He had possibly squeaked that out.

“It’s a gala,” Kibum said in a pronounced way, as if he thought Seokjin was suddenly hard to hearing.

Lizzy reached out to touch Kibum’s arm gently and said, “I’ve been working at the clinic the longest, almost a full year, and I’ve never seen him show an interest in a single person.”

“No,” Raina cut in decisively, “there was that caterer about nine months ago, and I swear he made heart eyes at that one podiatrist.”

“Funny,” Seokjin said blandly. His fingers curled around his cup of soju.

Kibum nudged him under the table. “But really. You have to have a date.”

Seokjin’s stomach bottomed out. That, he decided, could be a problem.

Several hours later Seokjin was most certainly the least drunk of his friends as he watched Jonghyun and Kibum flop themselves ungracefully into a cab. Lizzy and Raina had taken the one moments earlier, and as Jonghyun waved to him, Seokjin was left alone.

It was the middle of August now, almost to the end, and even the nights were hot. So to Seokjin it was a small favor that he could make the short trek back to the clinic, only a couple blocks, without freezing to death. And because of the sticky heat, Seokjin was more inclined to think that people would be less hesitant to bother him.

And as if by a godsend, he made it to the clinic without interruption, and in good time. He hadn’t been lying when he’d told the others that he still had a lot of work to do. He was overbooked for the next day, needed to shuffle appointments around, make at least one more nagging call to his brother, and figure out what he was going to do about getting an anesthesiologist. The clinic had had one, part time, for a few months a while back. And most of their business at the clinic didn’t require one.
But more and more Seokjin had been sensing a need, and though they didn’t have the budget, they had to have one.

Now also on his mind was the gala. It was absolutely the best opportunity possible to gain funding that the clinic desperately needed. But a date?

Where the hell was he going to get a date?

Sighing heavily, Seokjin slotted his key into the front door and pushed it open.

Then he promptly froze.

He knew for a fact that as he’d left, being the last person out of the clinic, he had set the alarm. He had punched in the buttons correctly before pulling the door closed behind him. So why wasn’t the alarm going off now to signal the perimeter had been breached.

There was no alarm and that was a problem.

With shaking fingers Seokjin reached for the light switch on the nearby wall. And he was blinking sharply when the reception area lit up.

There was a lump in Seokjin’s throat at the truly terrifying sight of a half a dozen men filling his waiting room. And they weren’t Bangtan.

No, this was something much worse.

One of the men got to his feet with a sweeping, graceful kind of way. He stretched in an exaggerated show, drawing out the tension, and then cocked his head towards Seokjin.

“It’s not the first of the month,” Seokjin said quickly, hating how uneasy he was immediately.

“Oh, that,” the man said, and the others were rising from their chairs in an intimidating way. “That’s not what I’m here for.”

“Then …”

“Doctor Kim,” the man said, taking several steps forward. “We need to talk about the company you keep.”

Seokjin pressed back against the door feeling trapped.

“Or rather,” the other man said, “the company you help.”

“Help?”

The man took a few more steps, and then Seokjin was almost nose to nose with Lee Howon, Infinite’s enforcer who went by Hoya gleefully while he broke noses and snapped fingers.

“We need to have a little talk,” Hoya said, and he reeked of danger in the way that Seokjin feared most of all. “You’re going to tell me all about the late-night visitors you had last night, and then I’m doing to decide what to do with you.”

“I don’t know--”

“Don’t,” Hoya said sharply, his tone becoming much more threatening, “think about playing me for a fool. I know who was here last night. Now I want to know why. Because I think you know full
well where your loyalties ought to lie, and what will happen if I think for a second they don’t.”

Hoya pressed further into Seokjin’s personal space and Seokjin had no idea what would happen next, only that it probably wasn’t going to be good. Whenever anyone from Infinite came around, it never was.

“I assume you’ll answer my questions now?”

Seokjin breathed deeply, then gave a nod.

A smile stretched its way out across Hoya’s face. “Good. Very good. Let’s get started.”
Chapter Five

It was like this:

You had to either be completely oblivious, or incredibly stupid not to understand who owned the area.

Seokjin had grown up in one of Seoul’s most affluent neighborhoods. He’d gone to private school, and rarely been exposed to the underbelly of the city. But even he, at least vaguely, had known about the gangs. And he’d heard rumblings of Infinite.

Infinite.

All the gangs were a little different, with specific ways of running things, different rules, and methods of operation. The last thing Seokjin had wanted to do was get into bed with any of them, but more specifically Infinite and its reputation. But the rent on the building for the clinic had been more than reasonable, it was in the perfect location, and Seokjin wasn’t scared to stand his ground if he had to.

But Infinite.

They weren’t like what Seokjin had heard about Bangtan, and not just from his brother, or about Super Junior or SNSD or even the fringe gangs like Sistar and Vixx.

Infinite was headed by a strict, staunchly territorial and no-nonsense man named Kim Sunggyu. Seokjin had met him, and his right hand man, Jang Dongwoo on several occasions, and absolutely not known what to think right up until he realized the depth and severity of the danger he was in.

And that was before Seokjin had even been exposed to Lee Howon, who was Sunggyu’s enforcer, and Nam Woohyun, who rumor had it shared Sunggyu’s bed and his affinity for punishing people who stepped out of line.

Seokjin paid a tithe to the gang, a monthly increment for so called protection, but more for his own from them than anything else. And there was absolutely no getting around it.

Howon, who almost exclusively went by Hoya, had often remarked about his attractiveness. No doubt at the first missed payment Seokjin would end up disappearing from public view and cycled into the rumored prostitution ring they handled. Seokjin understood that to be a fate worse than death.

And now he had Hoya sitting across from him, looking absolutely relaxed, if a little too pleased, holding Seokjin’s wrist in one hand and tapping out an odd tempo with the fingers on his other. They’d migrated to the kitchenette just a few minutes ago, and Seokjin’s guests were certainly making themselves at home.

“Relax,” Hoya said, all sly and coy as if he didn’t understand what would happen next if it went bad for even a second. “I’m just going to ask you a few questions about the guests you’ve decided to keep, and if you answer honestly and correctly, nothing bad will happen.”

Behind them Seokjin could hear Hoya’s men rummaging through the cabinets, likely eating whatever they could find.

“Like the kind that break in and startle me?”
“Like those.”

Seokjin gave Hoya grimace. “The same that eat my food and prowl around like thugs behind me?”

Hoya suddenly looked less pleased. But a second later he was called out, “Myungsoo, search the place. Take the men. Sungyeol, you stay.”

Feet shuffled on linoleum.

“Now,” Hoya continued, his attention back on Seokjin, “would you believe me if I told you we’re been having a termite problem as of late? All kinds of vermin that doesn’t belong has been seeping into this territory, and naturally, Sunggyu is worried.”

Seokjin wanted to snort--maybe so hard he gave himself a nosebleed.

Hoya added. “These snakes and rats are slipping between our fingers whenever we try to catch them, and making things very difficult for everyone. Recently, we were certain we had a cap on the problem. Until, as fate would have it, they gave us the slip one final time.”

“I don’t know what this has to do with me,” Seokjin said carefully. “Other than the fact that I pay your boss a significant amount of money to make it safe for me to have this clinic. I pay, every month, exactly on time, and I never miss a payment. I’m never short and I rarely have grievances. Wouldn’t you say this is true?”

Hoya ignored his question and instead posed, “These rats ran away, leaving a bread crumb trail of panic and blood, and do you know where they ran to?”

Oh god.

Suddenly Seokjin understood.

“What I really want to know,” Hoya said, his fingers pressing almost painfully into the pulse point on Seokjin’s right wrist, “is why Bangtan ran right to your clinic? And did you treat their wounds?”

His heartbeat was thundering so bad in his head that the thumps were almost enough to knock him off balance.

“I don’t have any idea what you’re taking. Honestly. Bangtan?”

Hoya made a clicking sound with his tongue, something that was likely supposed to sound disappointing, but only came out gleeful. “Was I not clear enough with you before? Lying is naughty.”

Then Hoya was squeezing even harder. He was crushing Seokjin’s wrist in a matter of seconds, causing significant pain. Seokjin refused to cry out in pain, but the grip was nearly unbearable.

“I’m not lying,” Seokjin grit out.

“Then you’re saying that you didn’t have late night visitors?”

There was no way he wasn’t going to bruise. And worse than that, Seokjin’s chest was aching something fierce with his heart overworking itself.

“That’s not what I’m saying at all.”

He forced himself to stop and take several deep, even breaths. He needed to be calm. He needed to
be smart. He couldn’t afford to mess up.

“Then,” Hoya said, and his grip finally relented enough that he could probably feel Seokjin’s pulse again, “Go ahead and tell me about what we both know I’m talking about.”

Seokjin nodded down to his wrist and gave Hoya his most scathing look, refusing to cower. “If you’re attempting to discern whether I’m telling the truth or not, taking my pulse won’t work.”

Hoya chuckled. “It hasn’t failed me before.”

“But were you trying to monitor the heartbeat of someone with a heart condition?”

Looking past Hoya, Seokjin told the man who’d remained behind, “I have medication in here, if you want to check to be sure. I have a heart condition that often causes my heartbeat to be irregular. It had nothing to do with whether I’m telling the truth or not.” He looked back to Hoya. “But by all means, continue holding my hand if that’s what you truly want to do.”

Hoya release his wrist with a grimace and Seokjin spied the red, agitated skin immediately. He was right. It was going to bruise, and then he’d have a hell of a job trying to explain the finger sized bruises.

“Tell me about Bangtan,” Hoya commanded. “And know that my patience and cordiality is gone.”

“I have no idea who Bangtan is,” Seokjin said swiftly, “other than the things I’ve heard about them. And when men broke into my clinic and set off my alarm, I had no idea who they were until much later. Yes, there were people who broke into my clinic, that much is true. But it’s not like I sheltered them. I’m not stupid. This clinic belongs to Infinite, not Bangtan.”

“You treated them?”

“One had some bruising,” Seokjin relayed, as if having to think about it. That was V. Not that Seokjin was going to tell Hoya anything, but V had been the one with the facial bruising. He’d had the bruises that were so bad it was a miracle he hadn’t broken his jaw. Someone had punched him nearly hard enough for it to happen, and Seokjin was willing to bet if it wasn’t Hoya who was responsible, then it was one of his men.

Hoya looked skeptical. “Only bruising?”

Seokjin relayed, “Another one had a gunshot graze. Nothing serious. It honestly just took off some of his skin and he bled a little, but it was nothing. They weren’t too worse for wear. But yes, I treated them.”

Hoya leaned back in his chair and turned to share a look with his companion. “Out of the goodness of your heart in the early hours of the morning?”

“No,” Seokjin said wryly, “because they had a gun and they pointed it at my face.”

Now Hoya looked more interested. “They forced you?”

“I understood what would happen if I refused to help their men. That’s right around the time I found out who they were.”

“What happened next?”

Seokjin shrugged. “I treated them, they warned me that if I said anything to anyone about them being
there, they’d come back, and then they left. They went out the back.”

The other man, one who looked a little less intimidating than Hoya, but not by much, pressed, “Why didn’t you report this immediately to us?”

He threw back, “Why isn’t Sunggyu keeping Bangtan out of this neighborhood?”

Hoya’s hand slammed down so hard on the table that the nuts and bolts holding it together rattled. Seokjin jumped too, and knew he’d overstepped.

Slowly, Seokjin told them, “It’s the first of the month in a couple of days. I planned to tell Sunggyu then. I honestly didn’t think it mattered if I ran to you with this yesterday, or four days from now. They were gone the second they vanished into the night. They weren’t injured badly, and they had too much of a head start. Plus, I have my clinic to think of. I need to prioritize my patients and their safety.”

Once more Hoya’s fingers were tapping on the table, more like a nervous tick than anything else, and Seokjin waited. He waited for Hoya to think his words through, and to decide if they were based in a lie, or truth.

“You think they’ll come back?” Hoya asked.

“Probably not.” Seokjin forced a dry laugh. “They threatened me with a gun, but I was particularly nasty in telling them where they could shove that gun.”

Jimin. Jimin had had the gun. Jimin, who hadn’t smiled once, had had an attitude the entire time, and seemed mean and callous and probably ruthless. The guy that Jungkook said was that way because he loved the men of Bangtan, considered them to be family, and was overprotective.

Now Hoya chuckled.

“My bottom line is this,” Seokjin told Hoya. “I care more about my patients and this clinic than I do about gangs and territory. But I’m also not stupid, and my loyalty is to Infinite. If Bangtan comes around again, or if I know anything that can help, your number will be the first I call. Because like I said, I love this clinic, and Infinite owns this clinic.”

The words tasted like ass in his mouth. Seokjin wasn’t one for vulgarity, but truly, they tasted like ass. Infinite, like all the other gangs (maybe even Bangtan, Seokjin didn’t know) were bullies. Infinite liked loyalty, platitudes, being feared, and having absolute control.

This was not Infinite’s clinic. Infinite didn’t own the building, they didn’t own the doctors or nurses, and Infinite didn’t own Seokjin.

Even if he had to say they did, didn’t meant it was true.

“I’ll talk to Dongwoo,” Hoya said, getting to his feet. “He’ll decide how to handle things.”

Everything, Seokjin knew, went through Dongwoo before it reached Sunggyu. And Dongwoo was an odd one. He was kind of terrifying in how he was always smiling, always making a joke out of things. And he didn’t seem like he was capable of taking anything seriously, let alone being a gang leader’s right-hand man. But for all he appeared to be, Dongwoo was certainly a force to be reckoned with. Seokjin would never mistake Dongwoo as docile or not a threat.

Hoya strolled towards the front door and Seokjin followed after him, watching the rest of Hoya’s men fall in line. Of course they hadn’t found anything. No doubt they’d searched everywhere, and
looked for the tiniest it of evidence that Seokjin was a defector of some sort, but there was nothing to actually be found.

“You’ll be hearing from us,” Hoya said by way of parting, then he was through the door and Seokjin was shutting it after him.

Seokjin leaned against the closed door with a shudder, sucking in breaths of air, very aware of how close he’d come to the kind of situation he wouldn’t be able to get himself out of.

He’d done his absolute best to protect Jungkook and Bangtan as best he could. He’d lied about a lot of things, including how badly Namjoon had been injured and how long Bangtan had stayed. He’d lied to protect Jungkook whom Infinite would kill just for having an association with Bangtan. And if necessary, he’d lie again. But lying was a dangerous line to walk, and something told Seokjin Hoya was very good at spotting liars with or without his pulse trick.

Whatever was going on with Infinite and Bangtan, whether things were at an all-time high of stress and pressure, or just starting to build up, it didn’t matter. They were gunning for each other. Hoya or one of his men had shot Namjoon. And the situation was about to turn into a full-fledged war zone.

He had to warn Jungkook.

Seokjin fumbled for his cell phone in his pocket and lit up the screen as he unlocked it. He didn’t know what kind of hours his brother kept anymore, especially with it being summer, but a voice mail would do for the moment. Eventually Jungkook would pick up the phone for him, but he was sure to check his voicemail much more quickly.

“Jungkook,” Seokjin said a little breathless. He made his way back to the kitchen, feeling nauseous, and in need of his medication. “You need to call me as soon as you get this. Hoya … Infinite’s Hoya, was just here. He came by and he was asking all these questions about Bangtan and I tried to lie, I think he believed me, but you need to call me. I need to talk to you.” He forced himself to stop, hating how scared he sounded. “Call me.”

He swallowed down a large red pill and a small white one, drank half a glass of water and wished like hell he hadn’t gone out for drinks. He certainly hadn’t had enough to be considered drunk, and with his medical condition it wasn’t something he could risk doing in general, but maybe if there hadn’t been any alcohol in him he could have handled Hoya with a bit more delicacy. He’d let his anger and his attitude run away from him and said things he shouldn’t have.

Almost wearily Seokjin climbed the stairs to his apartment, tugged his shirt over his head and then kicked off his shoes. He was usually much neater, but he felt exhausted. He almost felt as if he’d run a marathon, and all he wanted to do was sleep.

With his cell phone on the bedside table, Seokjin collapsed on his bed face first and promptly passed out.

It was that very cell phone, ringing loudly and vibrating on the bedside table that woke Seokjin a bit later. The sun was already up, thankfully, and Seokjin was feeling a little better than the night before.

Seven. The clock on the cell phone said seven, which meant the clinic was already prepping to open and he was due to see his first patient in about an hour.

His phone, he realized blearily as he wiped at the last bits of sleep in his eyes, wasn’t just vibrating as an alarm. It was actually ringing. Someone was calling him.

“Jin!”
Seokjin flinched a little at his brother’s high pitched voice—a panicked voice.

“Jungkook.”

“Are you okay?” his brother demanded, almost sounding out of breath.

“Yes,” Seokjin assured him, sitting up and stretching. “I’m okay.”

“Fucking Hoya,” Jungkook hissed, but it was too early for Seokjin to care about his brother’s language. “Are you sure you’re okay? He’s … vicious. He’s the one who shot Rap Mon. Did he touch you? Did he hurt you?”

Seokjin couldn’t help laughing a little, “I think you’re forgetting who’s the big brother and who’s the little.”

He could almost picture the scowl on his brother’s face as Jungkook protested, “Our ages have nothing to do with how we look out for each other. Especially when assholes like Hoya come around. He tried to make you tell him something? About that night?”

“Of course he did,” Seokjin said. “We need to meet. How about lunch? I’ll tell you everything that happened, and you can tell me what you and the rest of your … friends plan to do.”

He’d thought it might be a little more difficult to get Jungkook to agree to go to lunch, but less than five minutes later as Seokjin was stepping into the shower, he had a noon lunch date with his brother.

They ended up having lunch outside of Infinite territory. It seemed the safer bet, and Seokjin was more than a little nervous. Not owning a car, it had taken several bus transfers to make it to the pizzeria on time, but all of the trouble was alleviated when he noticed Jungkook was already there and waiting for him.

He didn’t realize how much of a relief it was to see Jungkook until his brother was manhandling him up into a firm hug.

Seokjin remembered Jungkook often as the tiny little kid glued to his size. It had seemed almost certainly so, even as puberty hit, that his little brother would remain his short little brother. Now at eighteen Jungkook was taller Seokjin, and stronger, too.

“Are you okay?” Jungkook asked, hanging onto him a bit before finally letting go. “Jin?”

Seokjin gave him a kind smile. “How about we make a deal? You start calling me by my full name, and I’ll consider calling you Seagull sometime in the future.”

They sat easily, the smell of tomato sauce and meat in the air, and Jungkook scowled, saying, “That’s not going to be my nickname.”

“Then maybe I should propose that you call me by my full name and I won’t resort to calling you Seagull.”

Jungkook gave a hesitant look, then asked quietly, “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I nearly wet myself,” Seokjin admitted lowly. “I went out drinking with my friends the night of, and when I came back, Hoya was waiting for me.” As the paranoia crept back up, Seokjin gave a look around, almost as if he could feel Hoya somewhere, lurking and waiting to catch him with a member of Bangtan. Or however close Jungkook was to that distinction.
“Hey, it’s okay,” Jungkook said, hands laid out on the table. “We’re in JB’s territory. I picked this place for a reason.”

Seokjin frowned. “JB’s?”

“GOT7’s,” Jungkook clarified. “They’re an up and coming gang—they fractured away from 2PM a few months ago, but it was all amicable. They’re just starting to carve out a name for themselves, which means they don’t have beef with any of the other gangs for there to be a problem, and the ones like Infinite won’t pay them any mind, either. No one is watching here. No one will report back to Hoya or any of Sunggyu’s little thugs.”

Tersely, Seokjin pointed out, “You’re hardly one to talk about thugs.”

“So what happened with Hoya?” Jungkook asked, then quickly pointed out, “I ordered us some pizza already. Don’t worry, I remember you like your boring cheese.”

“No doubt,” Seokjin laughed, “you spent half your allowance on your meat toppings.”

Jungkook grinned. “I think you’re forgetting, I actually have a job and get paid. I’m not working for Rap Mon for free. I just take that allowance from dad because I don’t want him to get suspicious before I’m fully prepared to make a clean break.”

Seokjin pursed his lips but didn’t comment on the mention. He thought it was a bad idea, his brother not going to college. It was an even worse idea getting wrapped up in a gang—even if Jungkook insisted they weren’t nearly as bad as Seokjin feared. But worst of all was cutting their father out. Their father was a hard, difficult man. But he was marred by loss and pain, and he was a reflection of all the things he had to endure. Most of all, Seokjin suspected he was lonely, and he hoarded his children close and under his control out of fear and nothing else.

A clean break between Jungkook and their father would have dire implications, maybe even for the both of them. Seokjin couldn’t begin to predict how their father would react, especially if he found out all the details of the truth, but it was going to be like fireworks going off in a brush field.

And Seokjin knew he’d be caught right in the middle of it.

“Rap Mon isn’t like the other leaders, Jin,” Jungkook said. “He doesn’t just throw me into danger and expect me to keep myself afloat. My loyalty and dedication earns me a paycheck for a reason, and I’m even moving in with one of the members next month.”

“That seems fast.”

Jungkook shrugged. “V and J-Hope are getting a new place within the week, and Jimin needs a new roommate to help with the rent. I need a place to stay, so it just kind of worked out.”

Trying not to wince, Seokjin asked, “What about the other one? The one with the round face?”

“Suga,” Jungkook laughed. “He would never live with the others, even if it means all the money he’s got goes to his bills. Suga, I know you wouldn’t think it to look at him, is pretty clean and quiet. He says the others are too loud and dirty.”

There was worry creeping in Seokjin’s periphery, and it lasted until he finally broke down and asked, “How it Namjoon?”

“Good,” Jungkook said almost right away, alleviating at least a bit of Seokjin’s fears. “I saw him not that long ago. He’s in a lot of pain, but he’s singing your praises. He says we’ve got to get ourselves
a doctor just like you, and he said to say thank you. He really appreciates what you did for him and for us.”

“He should continue to be looked over by a trained medical professional. He’s not out of the woods yet, just because he’s stubborn and resilient.”

Jungkook brushed the concern off almost gleefully as their pizza arrived.

Jungkook was devouring his first slice when Seokjin leaned closer over the tabletop and said quietly, “Hoya wanted to know about Bangtan. He was trying to fish for information about Namjoon’s injury.” Seokjin reached for his own slice of gooey, wonderful pizza. “I played the injury off. I told him it was just a bullet graze, not bad in the least bit, and I think he believed me.”

Looking startled, Jungkook dropped his pizza and said in a horrified voice, “Jin … your wrist.”

Arm outstretched for the pizza, Seokjin spied his own wrist. The bruises, finger shaped and smudged blue and a little green, were horribly visible against the daylight. Seokjin had been doing his best to hide them at the clinic, switching the wrist he worse his watch on and keeping his doctor’s white coat on at all times. Jungkook noticing was just poor luck.

“Hoya was …”

Jungkook cut in angrily, “That bastard hurt you!”

“He was attempting to check my pulse, to tell if I was lying or not while he questioned me,” Seokjin said calmly, placing a piece of pizza on his plate with a pointed stare. “I’m not a delicate flower, Jungkook. I don’t need you fussing or fretting over me.”

“You’re not exactly in perfect health, either.”

Seokjin wanted to personally thank his brother for reminding him of that, as if every pill he swallowed, every precaution taken, and everything he couldn’t do, wasn’t a reminder enough.

“I’m fine,” Seokjin told him, then took a bite from his pizza, savoring the taste. “I’m more worried about you.”

Looking as if he’d lost his appetite, Jungkook asked, “Did Hoya really seem as if he believed you?”

“Yes,” Seokjin said confidently. “I think he fully believes that I don’t give a damn about Bangtan, that I’ll sell Bangtan out to keep my clinic safe, and that Bangtan is just another gang to me and not worth helping or protecting.”

Jungkook went a little pale.

“He doesn’t know that you’re my brother,” Seokjin said. “He doesn’t know that you are the person I love the most in this world and will do anything to protect. If he knew you were my brother, and associated with Bangtan, he wouldn’t have believed me. And that is why we have to be very careful and never let anyone know--at least until things quiet down. Because the truth is I do care about Bangtan if you’re a part of them, I will protect you and them, and I will help you if you need it.”

Jungkook poked at his pizza. “You’re a really good brother.”

“Well, I still think you’re an idiot,” Seokjin made sure to tell him. “I think what you’re doing is stupid, too. But I will always have your back. I will always back you up.”
“Thanks,” Jungkook mumbled, looking the closest to being weepy that he had in years.

“I think, however, you should tell the rest of your friends to keep away from the clinic. I have no doubt Infinite will be watching it for the next few weeks. They’re already on high alert, with whatever went down to cause Namjoon to be shot.”

Jungkook nodded. “I’ll tell Rap Mon. He probably won’t want to endanger you anyway.”

“I’m not a child in need of protection.”

“You don’t need to be a target, either,” Jungkook said with a smile. “Rap Mon doesn’t like to put innocent people in danger, anyway. If people want to get involved, that’s their own business. As long as they know what they’re signing up for, Rap Mon doesn’t have a problem. But bystanders? People who are just trying to help and be good? That’s completely different. Plus, Rap Mon really likes you. He wouldn’t want to see you get hurt.”

Digging fully into his pizza, Seokjin laughed, “I’m really surprised he remembers me at all. Between the pain and then the drugs I gave him, he should barely know what happened, let alone who treated him.”

“Oh,” Jungkook eased out. “He remembers you--said he could never forget you.”

Of that, Seokjin wasn’t sure what to make.

Between the two of them, and over the next half hour, they consumed an entire pizza. The meal, along with the easy banter and fun conversation, reminded Seokjin of the better times they’d had. There had been a time, no matter how long ago it seemed, when Seokjin had been less preoccupied, and more attentive to his brother.

Maybe if he hadn’t let his need to help people and open his own clinic overtake him, Jungkook wouldn’t have been so deprived for attention that he turned to Bangtan.

Before they left, and as Jungkook slurped up the last of his coke, Seokjin said gently, “If this is what you want to do with your life, regardless if I like it or not, I will support you. I won’t turn my back on you and I will trust that you won’t hurt others. But this is a dangerous thing you’re a part of.”

“I won’t hurt innocent people,” Jungkook promised. “In fact, I’m only with Bangtan because they’re the gang that’s trying to make things better for people. They’re trying to make a difference, and that’s what I want to do, too. I can’t be a doctor like you, Jin, or a lawyer like dad wants.”

Seokjin leaned over and thumped Jungkook on the head. “But you need to talk to dad. I know you don’t want to, and it’s going to be hard--probably painful for all parties involved. But you have to. You’re not going to college, but here’s dad asking me to talk you into living at home and not in the dorms. I need you to be honest with him.”

There was more than simple trepidation on Jungkook’s face.

“You’ll feel better once you do.”

“Some how I doubt that,” Jungkook huffed.

The next time Seokjin leaned over it was to push at Jungkook’s hair affectionately. “Take it from someone who’s already been through this. Telling dad I wasn’t going to work at some fancy hospital like a fat cat, and making sure he understood I was going to be as charitable and helpful to the poor community as possible, was terrible. He yelled, he tried to make me feel bad, he was unmanageable,
and our relationship was hurt over it. But afterwards? Afterwards I felt like a burden had been lifted from my shoulders. I knew I was free to go on and do what I wanted, and what I knew was right for me. So you need to do the same, if this is what you really want.”

Jungkook scoffed. “You’re advising that I go and tell dad that I’m planning on joining Bangtan, and that in fact I’m currently working with them already.”

“Lean forward,” Seokjin ordered so he could smack his brother again. “Obviously what I’m suggesting is not that you give our father a stroke. But you need to tell him you’re not going to college now, if ever, and that it’s your choice. You need to tell him you have a job, a steady income, that you have a place to stay, and that you’ll be moving out. Tell him, will you, that you love him, but you have to be your own man. If you tell him you have to make your own path and prove yourself, he might be angry with you, but he’ll probably also respect you.”

Incredulously, Jungkook asked, “You think he’ll respect me?”

Seokjin said, “Stranger things have happened.”

“But not more difficult.”

“If I managed it,” Seokjin said, getting to his feet and taking care to tuck his bruised wrist out of sight from Jungkook who looked weepy every time it came into view, “then I most certainly think that my much more hardheaded brother can do it.”

He hoped that Jungkook felt at least a little empowered by the words. Seokjin truly believed in him, just as much as he believed it was important for Jungkook stop lying to their father.

“Come on,” Seokjin said when they’d put off their parting for as long as possible. “I have a full schedule this afternoon and I have to get back. One of the nurses called in today, food poisoning, and we’re stretched extra thing.”

Jungkook made a face. “You work too hard, Jin.”

“You don’t work had enough,” Jungkook elbowed him. “But feel free to send that friend of yours around. V. He’d make a decent replacement for the day.”

A goofy grin stretched across Jungkook’s face. “I don’t think V really likes it all that much that you made him your honorary nurse.”

“I also made a deal with him,” Seokjin replied as he and Jungkook made their way out of the pizzeria and onto the busy street. “He knows the terms that must be necessarily met before I’ll stop referring to him as my nurse.”

Jungkook strolled ahead, his back to the flow of the walkway so he could face Seokjin instead. “He told me, actually. I wouldn’t hold my breath if I were you. I’ve known the guy for a while now, and I only just heard his actual name.”

Happily, Seokjin came to a halt at the nearby bus stop and told his brother, “Get back to work, you slacker. But don’t forget to talk to dad, and even if it isn’t completely safe for you or the others to be around the clinic right now, you’re still my brother, and I still like spending time with you. Call me or text me if you just want to hang out. We’ll find neutral ground.”

With a wave and a boyish wink, Jungkook headed off down the street, blending quickly into the crowd before disappearing completely from sight.
After having lunch with Jungkook, Seokjin genuinely felt better. He’d done all he could to protect his brother and give him a fair warning, and Jungkook was nothing if not resourceful. And, Seokjin was more than confident that he’d finally pushed his brother towards squaring things with their father. Even if things turned out badly, they could resolve the tension completely and the both of them could move on.

Those thoughts, and how things did seem to calm down over the next couple of days, really helped to propel Seokjin back into his normal routine. He saw neither hide nor hare of Bangtan, Infinite kept its distance, and that was about as much as Seokjin thought he could ask for.

Then suddenly, a sharp pain caught Seokjin in the chest by the day’s end half a week later, and continued to build into something that had him significantly worried. His usual regiment of pills didn’t seem to be helping much, and as he lay in bed that night, counting the beats of his heart that echoed in his mind, he worried not for the first time if his legacy would be, at best, attempting to keep a clinic going for the purpose of helping the overwhelming in need community.

Sometimes he was so thankful for the time he’d already been given, and for beating the clock hanging over his head. But other nights, when he was feeling particularly sentimental or sad, it never felt like enough. He wanted more, even if that made him wonder if he was being selfish.

By the time the sun came up he was feeling even worse, and the real warning signs were starting to show themselves. He was breathless, light headed, and it was getting harder and harder to think.

“Yoona,” he said, making a quick call in the early hours of the morning. The clinic wasn’t open yet, none of the other staff had arrived, and it was such short notice, but Seokjin didn’t think he could risk not calling in. “I’m not … feeling well.” He had to go to the hospital.

“Are you okay?” she asked right away, sounding too pert for the morning hours. He was just thankful she was an early riser and was used to getting the occasional early morning call from him. “You didn’t get Lizzy’s food poisoning, did you?”

“No,” he assured her, struggling to get his shoes on. “I don’t think it’s food poisoning. I’m sorry, but I need you to call and cancel the scheduled appointments I have today, and apologize to Jonghyun and Yunho that I won’t be there to help with the walk-in load.”

He leaned heavily on the nearby wall and pulled in ragged breaths.

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yes,” he promised her, though he couldn’t know for sure until he got to the hospital and had a full workup done. “I’ll try to help out later, but right now I just can’t.”

She made a dismissive sound. “Just try to get better. We’ll hold down the fort for you.”

When the phone call disconnected, Seokjin pocketed his cell and pushed off the wall. He hated feeling weak, and he hated being weak. But as there was nothing he could do about it, he had to push on.

So slowly, deliberately, he made his way to the hospital.
Chapter Five

With trembling fingers Seokjin did up the tiny buttons on the blue shirt he wore, feet dangling down from the high examination table he sat on. It was always a little odd when he was on the other end, and terrifying, because it usually meant only one thing.

“Okay,” his doctor announced, coming through the door, a large manila folder in hand.

“X-rays are back?” Seokjin asked hopefully. There’d been a rush put on them, out of respect for how he’d done his residency at the hospital, but sometimes there was no telling how long they’d take, and Seokjin very much did not have all day.

Minah, her high heels clacking a little, nodded as she opened the folder to hold one up to the light. Her short hair bob listed to the side as she cocked her head before giving up on spotting the issue without a backlight. “Right on time, for once.” She headed to the white board across the room and slid the x-ray into place, lighting it up properly.

“And now you tell me the bad news,” Seokjin said, shoulders sagging. He tried not to shift on the paper covered bed, hating the sound it made. More than anything he wanted to get up and run out. If only willful denial was an option.

Minah shook her head. “We don’t know it’s bad news.”

Seokjin wished that were the case. Gently, he told her, “You forget you’re dealing with a doctor here, Minah. More than that, you’re dealing with someone who has intimate knowledge of this condition. I know all the warning signs of a flareup.”

The technical phrase was a “hot phase” but it didn’t make any difference what it was called. The light headedness, the increased severity of his heart palpitations, and the dizziness were all very concrete signs that things were about to get worse.

Across the room Minah crossed her arms and stared at the x-ray. “Let’s not jump the gun, okay? I didn’t spend all this time working to keep you alive for you to go so fatalistic on me.”

Seokjin had to crack a smile at that.

Minah hadn’t, in all actuality, been his doctor from the start. She wasn’t that much older than him. It had been Minah’s father that Seokjin had seen since he’d been diagnosed as a child, and Minah’s father who’d treated and cared for him. But Minah had always been there, lurking around, watching, and making declarations of her own aspirations. Like Seokjin, she’d graduated from school early, blown through her residency, and was now the youngest and maybe even most competent, cardiologist in her field in Korea. When Minah’s father had passed away the previous year, and Seokjin had needed a new doctor, she had been the natural choice.

She hadn’t let him hand his care over to anyone else.

“Any blackouts?” she asked.

Even though she wasn’t paying attention to him, focused on the images of his lungs, Seokjin shook his head. “No, thankfully.” That was truly his worst nightmare.

“Swelling? In either your legs or abdomen?”
Again, Seokjin told her, “No. But it seems like that might be next.”

Finally, Minah turned away from the x-ray and to the nearby table where his EKG and echocardiogram results were displayed.

Mouth dry, Seokjin said, “It’s getting worse, right?”

She finally turned towards him and gave him a sad look. “You know as well as I do, Seokjin, that this is a progressive condition. It will always get worse.”

Until he died.

“I thought we were managing it,” Seokjin said with a sigh. This was not what he wanted to hear. There was still so much for him to do, so much left for him to accomplish, and if his health was starting to significantly fail him, it was the worst timing ever.

“We are. It’s just time to increase our management.”

But still Seokjin could feel the abnormal beats of his heart, and the lightheaded feeling the beats brought with them.

Stepping closer to him, Minah brought her fingers to his wrist. He noted that she absolutely didn’t comment on the bruising at the skin there. Instead she concentrated on the beats that were too quick one moment and too slow the next.

“Well,” she decided, “I think we need to handle your heart being so out of synch right now. We need to get it back to normal, and at this stage I don’t see it happening by itself.”

Seokjin blanched. “A cardioversion?”

Minah patted his shoulder. “I think so.”

And it seemed the day was getting even worse.

“I’ll call for a nurse so we can get started,” Minah said, but then hesitated when she saw his face. “Seokjin. Jin.”

Her hand slipped easily into his and Seokjin remembered that this was the girl who’d gotten into mock fights with him with her father’s tongue depressors. She was the first girl who’d ever kissed him, held his hand just before his first surgery, and promised to always be there for him. She was his friend, and then some. She was a trusted confidant.

“Do you want to call someone to come be with you?” she asked gently. “Your father? Your brother?”

“My father?” Seokjin nearly snorted. “He’s at work, I’m sure. And he’d probably be more irritated that I interrupted his day, than any kind of worry he might feel.” And his illness had always been a sore spot. It was, after all, his illness that had gotten Seokjin and Jungkook’s mother and elder sister killed. At least indirectly.

It was a kind of guilty that Seokjin had wrestled with for a good portion of his teenage and young adult life, and only recently started to come to grips with. All of his therapists and councilors told him that even if his heart condition had caused those deaths indirectly, he was in no way responsible. Seokjin believed that now. But he wasn’t certain his father did.
So for the most part, with the issue being an overly sore and sensitive subject for his father, Seokjin tried to limit his involvement as much as possible. He came to his appointments alone. He didn’t burden his father with the facts of how his condition was progressing. And if there was an emergency, it wasn’t his father that he called.

“It’s not a big deal,” Seokjin told Minah finally. His father wasn’t an option, and who knew about Jungkook. He was probably busy trying to convince himself that being a thug was a normal career aspiration.

Neither did Seokjin want to worry his brother. Jungkook worried more than he let on, and Seokjin didn’t want to add to that.

Minah reminded, “We have to put you out for it. You might feel better if you wake up to a friendly face.”

Seokjin grinned at her. “Your face doesn’t count? It’s certainly friendly and pretty enough.”

Minah rolled her eyes. “Stop flirting, or else I’ll tell my girlfriend and she’ll beat you up.”

Seokjin put a solemn hand over his heart. “She has nothing to worry about. You’re gorgeous and talented, Minah, but my interests lie in someone I can’t remember pulling the pigtails of.”

Minah poked him in the arm. “I pulled your hair right back.”

“I’m fine doing this by myself,” Seokjin reassured. He’d done it alone before. And there were minimal chances for complications, so he wasn’t worried. “But let me call the clinic and tell someone that I’ll be out longer than I expected.”

Almost delighted, Minah comment, “Oh, that clinic of yours! I’d almost forgotten about it.”

“You conveniently forgot that I asked you to put in some volunteer work.”

“When the year turns over,” Minah promised. “I’m swamped until then, and I won’t commit to something I don’t think I can fulfill. But I swear, sometime in the back half of next year you’ll have me for a while.”

“Good,” Seokjin said, because even having Minah a few hours a week would be something incredibly good. Minah certainly wasn’t a pediatrician, and they had Hongbin to fill that position around May, but Minah was especially good with children. She’d go a long way to comforting the smaller ones, and keeping the older kids focused. Plus, when she wasn’t teasing Seokjin, she had a great bedside manner. “I’ll hold you to that.”

Minah moved to the x-rays and commented, “You know, everyone here is pretty secretly thrilled and jealous that you have that clinic.”

Seokjin rolled his eyes in an exaggerated way. “They’re jealous of a building in a bad part of town, that barely has enough funding to keep the lights on, is understocked and understaffed, and barely hanging on?”

Minah gave him a dazzling smile. “Of course, and the people who won’t admit they’re jealous are the ones who are the most. Because it’s your clinic, Seokjin. It’s the start of your very own practice. And you’re so young. That is incredible and amazing and astonishing. Most of the doctors here will work at this hospital for the next few decades before they have the balls to open their own practice, and some of them are such fat cats they never will.”
“Well, I’m not sure how long the clinic can actually hang on. We’re nearly in the red, and we’re getting more and more patients every day. It feels terrible to have to turn people away because of lack of manpower, or because we’re not large enough to handle their more complicated medical issues.”

Minah gave a sorry kind of nod.

“But it’s where my heart is,” Seokjin said finally. “It’s what I want to do with my life, and I don’t regret it for a second.”

His father had always been right, even from the start. With his amazing scholastic performance, residency under the best oncologist in the country, and all the drive and ambition he had bubbling up in him, he could have had an easy ride. He could have ended up at the top of his field already, seeing specialty patients from all over the world.

But that wasn’t what Seokjin wanted or valued.

His only regret was that the nature of his choices led to a considerable amount of stress, and therefore strain, on his heart. He was making himself worse, he understood. But there was no way to change anything, not without giving something important up in return.

“Call your clinic,” Minah urged a few seconds later, a tentative smile pulling at her lips. “Then when you’re done, we’ll get you situated, bring the nurse in, and get this done. You’ll need to rest here for a while, but you’ll be out by later tonight.”

Seokjin caught Minah’s eyes drifting back to his x-ray and test results.

Hoarsely, Seokjin asked, “Minah, how bad is it? How much worse is it this time than the last time I got check out six weeks ago?”

She seemed to deflate in front of him.

“How thin is my ventricle getting?”

Minah’s finger traced a detailed photo of his heart. “Thinner than I want to see,” she admitted finally. “At this size, your heart is having a significant amount of trouble getting blood to your entire body. And I can tell, just by looking at this, that your left ventricle has started to weaken along with the right. That increases the difficulty we’re going to have treating you.”

“So,” Seokjin reasoned, “what you’re saying is that I can expect to just drop dead at any second?”

Minah spun on him almost angrily. “Don’t you dare say things like that, Seokjin.”

He offered an apology, but he didn’t retract his statement. There was always the risk of sudden death, and that possibly had been looming over him since he was a child. The better care he took of himself, and the medications he took, helped to regulate the chances of that happening, but his heart was like a ticking time bomb. And Seokjin didn’t know what the number on the timer was, or when it planned to go off.

“I’ll keep you alive,” Minah said, finally reaching for the light switch on the brightly lit board the x-ray was attached to. “How about you trust me to work something out.”

Skeptically, Seokjin told her, “You can’t invent a cure out of thin air, Minah. I’d gladly take one, but we’re not there just yet in terms of medical advancements. Not even you can work miracles.
She grimaced a little, making him feel like he’d said the worst thing ever, and thumbed towards the door. “I’ll be back in about five minutes. Make your call.”

Her heels clacked all the way to the door and Seokjin made his call.

“How serious is it?” Jonghyun asked, and of all the doctors and nurses that worked at the clinic full or part time, Jonghyun was the only one who knew about Seokjin’s condition. He never asked for details, and never pried into Seokjin’s personal business, but he was aware of it.

“Well,” Seokjin said with a forced laugh, “it’s never good when I have to go to the hospital, but it’s not the worse I’ve ever been, either. I need to have a cardioversion to get my heartbeat back to normal. I’ve had a few before. I’ll be out the entire night, just to be safe.”

Jonghyun gave a pause before asking, “I know you don’t have a car. I can come pick you up afterwards.”

Jonghyun was more of a friend now than a simple colleague, and Seokjin truly appreciated him.

“Is this, or is this not the last night Kibum is going to be in town?” Seokjin questioned.

“Key would understand,” Jonghyun argued back.

“I swear I’ll be fine,” Seokjin said, and he really meant it. “I’ve had this done before. They put me to sleep for it, and when I wake up a little while longer, my heart is better … relatively speaking. I’ll be up on my feel less than an hour after that, and I’ve never experienced any severe compilations. I’ll be more than capable of not only taking the bus home, but also working tomorrow morning.”

With severe hesitancy, Jonghyun asked, “You’re absolutely sure? It would only take half an hour to pick you up and drop you off at the clinic.”

That was true, but Seokjin also knew that Kibum had an early flight out the next morning, and wouldn’t be back to Seoul for almost eight weeks. Seokjin didn’t want to take a second of their time together, away.

“I’ll call my brother,” Seokjin said, trying to reassure him.

“Okay,” Jonghyun said eventually. “Please take care.”

Fifteen minutes later Seokjin had changed fully out of his regular clothes and back into his examination gown. Minah had already returned, her favorite nurse Eunji is tow, and they were preparing to wheel him down the hallway to the room he’d have the procedure done.

“I still think you should call someone,” Minah said as she tucked a blanket around Seokjin’s legs. “You’re one of the strongest people I know, but you don’t always have to be. It’s okay to lean on someone else for a while.”

Seokjin asked her, “Do you give that inspirational talk to all of your patients?”

Minah flicked him on the forehead. “You brat.”

He was out just after that, sedated for the procedure that would essentially shock his heart back into a more natural rhythm. And with any luck, it would hold for a while. His medication did most of the work, keeping his heart going, but every once in a while it wasn’t enough.

Manipulating the beat of his heart with electricity wasn’t exactly the most comforting thought ever,
but it was a necessary evil.

When he woke sometime later, breathing much more easily, and finally, finally without the heavy beat of his heart echoing in his head, Seokjin felt infinitely better.

“Don’t worry,” Eunji said comfortingly, leaning over him as he glanced around the room, trying to get his bearings. She put a hand on his arm and the nurse added, “You came through just fine. You’re going to be fine.”

Voice cracking, Seokjin asked, “Water?”

He managed a small sip of water, even if it felt like too much, and then promptly went back to sleep.

When he’d been sedated, he hadn’t dreamt at all. That wasn’t anything out of the ordinary. He’d spent a lot of time sedated over the years, for medical procedure after medical procedure. He’d never once dreamt during that time. It was always an abyss of blackness and nothingness.

But afterwards, when the heavier sedation wore off into a more natural sleep, the dreams came. And this time he dreamed of something so long ago he’d practically forgotten about it. He dreamed about his mother, about his sister, and about before Jungkook had been born. When Jungkook had been just a thought between his parents, and before they’d known that Seokjin was sick, there’d been trips to the park every afternoon to feed the ducks, adventures on the jungle gym, and cold ice cream in hot weather.

And when Seokjin woke up again, his mouth was full of a cotton like sensation, but he could think much more clearly. And instead of Eunji, who was a very capable and nice nurse, Minah was back.

It had to be much later in the day, Seokjin reasoned, because her hair was pulled back into a less stylish ponytail, her heels were gone and replaced with flats, and already she looked a little worn and tired–like she needed a solid night’s sleep.

“You with us now?”

Seokjin sat up slowly, his eyes locked on the machine next to his bed monitoring his vitals. His pulse and blood pressure looked good, and he was able to hesitantly say, “It worked.”

“It worked,” she confirmed, squeezing his hand. “But as always, you know I have to tell you this isn’t a permanent fix. It will only last so long, and stress or poor habits will exacerbate your condition. Seokjin, I don’t want to see you in here any sooner than our scheduled visits.”

She helped him right himself completely, and take a new drink of water that went down much more easily than the last.

“No worries,” he said, still feeling a little drowsy, but slowly coming back to himself.

Within half an hour he was up and standing, and just after that he was dressed and holding still so Eunji could tie his shoes for him. He’d attempted it already himself, but a sudden case of vertigo had sent him smashing to the ground and he had an egg at the back of his head to prove it.

“Take it easy, will you,” Minah said as she came to see him off. She put the back of her hand to his forehead and cautioned, “You’re going to be a little dizzy and disoriented for the next few hours, but it’ll wear off. Come see me immediately if anything feels off, and don’t take chances with your health. I know you’re stubborn, but be a little less stubborn on this issue.”

“Thank you, Minah,” he said appreciatively, and kissed her cheek in a way that had her blushing.
“I’ll see you in September.”

The sun was low in the sky when Seokjin left the hospital. He was a little unsteady on his feet, and there was the barest hint of vertigo, but he was more than capable of making it to the bus stop less than a block away. Then it would be straight home, hopefully he could manage to eat something light, and then he planned to go to bed early.

He was tottering his way down the sidewalk confidently when he heard the motor of a bike sound far too close for comfort.

Instinctively he veered away, not trusting his sense of balance or the rider.

The rider on the motorbike swerved in front of him and stopped, body vibrating atop the bike.

Seokjin, who was too tired and too worn to put up much of a fight, asked him simply, “What’s your problem?”

The rider turned the ignition key on his bike and flipped up the visor of the helmet he wore.

Seokjin took a long, deep sigh. “Why am I not surprised that you ride a motorcycle.”

Jimin gave Seokjin a wide grin only slightly visible from under the helmet. “Why am I not surprised you’re cheating on your clinic?”

Seokjin tried to push past him immediately.

“Hey, wait!”

Jimin hefted himself off the bike and unlatched his helmet.

“Look,” Seokjin said, and he was going to be very, very angry if he ended up missing the soonest bus and had to wait an additional half hour. “I don’t know why you’re here, following me around, but could you not? Please? I’m not going to say anything to anyone about you or your leader, or anything that might endanger my brother. You didn’t have to come down here and attempt to be all imposing and threatening. And not just because I don’t find you imposing nor threatening in the least bit.”

Jimin gave him a bland look. “You sure think a lot of yourself.”

“I’d settle for you thinking nothing of me at all.”

A spark of light-headedness cut through him and Seokjin held still, hoping it would pass soon.

“I’m here because I although I might not like you, I do like your brother.”

“Jungkook is pretty likable,” Seokjin said, the nausea sneaking up with the vertigo. He couldn’t wait to get home and crawl in bed. He was going to forego the whole food aspect, upon further reflection.

“And he’s worried,” Jimin added. “About you. That’s why I’m here.”

“What?”

Jimin reached suddenly for him and held up his bruised wrist. “This is why I’m here. Because your brother is terrified that some guy from Infinite showed up, because of us, threatened you, and hurt you. That’s why I’m here.”
In the fading light of the day Seokjin looked at the bruises once more. They were more vivid and awful that ever before, and now Seokjin knew it had less to do with how hard Hoya had grabbed him, and more to do with the current level of blood circulation in his body.

“It was Hoya?”

Seokjin jerked his wrist back. “You were seen, going into my clinic that night. One of Infinite’s men saw you, reported back, and that’s why Hoya showed up to demand answers. He grabbed me because he didn’t think I was telling the truth, and he was right, I wasn’t. But I convinced him otherwise. I would never put my brother in danger, even if it means protecting you along the way.”

“So,” Jimin eased out, “you mean to tell me that Infinite’s scariest enforcer showed up, questioned you about something you lied about, hurt you, probably tried to scare you into fessing up, and you still didn’t?”

“No,” Seokjin said simply.

“That sounds like bullshit,” Jimin argued back.

“You don’t have a brother, do you?” Seokjin asked. “Or a sister? Anyone you’d lay down on a wire for?”

“I would for Bangtan. They’re my family, your brother included.”

Finally, the vertigo started to pass. Even with the nausea lingering, it was better than nothing.

“I lied to Hoya then,” Seokjin told him, “and I’ll lie to him every time he comes around. I think I was pretty convincing, and I had a probable story, but please don’t put my brother in danger by making stupid choices in the future. I need you to watch his back, not add fuel to the fire.”

“I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t have his back,” Jimin shot back. Seokjin still didn’t like him, but at least in the regard of Jungkook, Seokjin believed him.

“Okay then,” Seokjin said, and tried once more to step around Jimin.

But Jimin, in the most unpredictable way, cut in with, “So why did you leave that little clinic you defend so much, to go work at that hospital over there?”

Seokjin wanted to demand to know what kind of game Jimin was playing, and why he was holding Seokjin up. But by now Seokjin had figured out the type of person Jimin was. He was there for a reason, he probably wasn’t going to come right out and say what that reason was right away, and if Seokjin wanted him to go away, he’d have to play some kind of waiting game.

“I wasn’t working,” Seokjin said. “And don’t diminish my clinic.”

Jimin shrugged. “It’s nice enough, I guess.”

“When people aren’t bringing guns into it.”

Jimin cracked another smile. “Considering the part of town it’s in, and the kind of shady people that come through it, I bet you more than anything at least one of them has brought a gun into your clinic before.”

Seokjin shook his head. “I have no way of knowing that for certain. I do know, however, that none of them ever pointed a gun at me, making unnecessary demands.”
“Would you have honestly helped us if I’d asked nicely?” Jimin asked with a snort.

“Yes,” Seokjin said in almost a snappish way. “because I’m a doctor and that’s what I do. Anyone, including my brother, would have told you that.”

Unflinchingly, Jimin pointed out, “I think you take for granted that not all doctors are like you.”

Seokjin’s eyes drifted down to Jimin’s waist and chest.

“See something you like?” Jimin asked in an almost crude way.

Seokjin’s eyes jerked back up. Jimin was certainly fit and attractive enough, but that hadn’t been the point of his ogling. “I was trying to see if I could tell if you were wearing a gun or not.”

After a moment of quiet, Jimin said, “I’ve got a piece on me.”

Seokjin tried not to make a completely repulsed face. “I don’t like guns.”

“Your brother mentioned that, but not why.”

“Jungkook doesn’t have the same association with them that I do.”

Jimin turned to nod back at the hospital. “So if you weren’t working there, what were you doing? You left for the place really early in the morning. Almost twelve hours ago.”

Eyes narrowing, Seokjin demanded, “Have you been watching me?”

“Yep.”

“Why?”

Jimin countered, “Why did you go to the hospital for almost twelve hours?”

Seokjin let himself look to the hospital in the distance. “That’s where I did a majority of my residency. I know a lot of the staff. I went to visit a friend. I hadn’t seen her in a while.”

“And that took all day?”

Angrily, Seokjin said, “I don’t know what your problem is or why you’re here, but I want to know even more why you’re following me around. You have no right to do that, and it’s creepy. It’s not your business where I go or what I do, and you’re putting me in a tough spot if anyone spots you in Infinite’s territory. Hoya believed me last time, but I don’t know if he’ll believe me again. So stop it. Leave me alone, don’t follow me.”

“Would that I could,” Jimin finally said, almost in an exhausted way. “You think this is what I want to be doing with my days? Following around some prissy doctor who thinks he’s better than other people?”

There was such furry crawling under Seokjin skin as he spat out, “I do not think I’m better than anyone else. No one is better than anyone else.”

“You sure act like it,” Jimin shot back, eyebrows raised “You think anyone who isn’t a charity case or martyr like you is some selfish, terrible human being. News flash, that’s not true. And me having to watch you parade around with your nose in the air, especially since you don’t seem to know that your nose is in the air, is suffocating. But I do it anyway, because that’s what I was told to do.”
Seokjin said simply, “You’re an asshole,” then he was pushing past.

He did not, for one second, think he was better than anyone else. He understood that not everyone could afford to be so charitable, and some people were simply selfish for various reasons. He knew that instinctively most people wanted to do good, and that was enough. But he didn’t stick his nose in the air, he didn’t think that him running a clinic was any more important than whatever anyone else was doing, and the accusation was absolutely hurtful.

Seokjin had put everything into his clinic. He’d given everything for it, and to keep it going, and he hadn’t done it to be able to brag or show it off or use it as fodder. He’d done it because he wanted to help people, and it was as simple as that.

Behind him Seokjin heard the rumble of Jimin’s motorbike, and sure enough seconds later he was cutting back into Seokjin’s path.

“Gun or no gun,” Seokjin threatened, “if you don’t leave me the hell alone, I’m going to make you regret it.”

“I can’t,” Jimin said, having to speak up so he could be heard.

There wasn’t a terrible amount of people on the street, but of those that were, they were steadily starting to pay attention to Seokjin and Jimin. Attracting attention was never good.

“Why not?” Seokjin asked with a sigh.

Jimin had his helmet back on, and he reached to the side of his bike where a spare was latched on. “You get on and let me take you back to your clinic, and I’ll tell you why.”

Mouth agape, Seokjin looked almost fearfully at the motorbike. “You can’t … that’s a death trap.”

“I’ve been riding for five years,” Jimin assured. “I haven’t crashed once, I’ve never lost a passenger, and I give your brother rides all the time, so that should be good enough for you.”

Seokjin put his hands on his hips. “Telling me that you let my little brother get on the back of your deathtrap isn’t how you’re going to win me over.”

“And why should I care if I win you over?” Still Jimin held out the spare helmet.

Seokjin pointedly didn’t take it. “Because, you should know, with Jungkook being my brother and your friend, we’re linked together. I’m obligated to you by default, and my doctor’s oath requires me to help you whenever you need it. If, god forbid, one of you is shot again, and you choose to come to my clinic, I will help you. But how much anesthesia I use, and how gentle I am, will depend on how much I like you.”

Jimin’s eyes crinkled in what must have been a salacious smile, his mouth still hidden by the heavy helmet he wore. “You’re just a firecracker.”

“I’m also your elder.”

“Get on,” Jimin said, trusting the helmet at him one more time. “You’re a doctor, but you’re also probably the most practical and logical person I know. If there’s a question in your mind, and there must be, I know you’ll want the answer. I’ll take you home, give you your answer, and you can decide from there if you’re satisfied.”

Seokjin made a dissatisfied sound as he looked the bike over one more time.
“You’ll be fine,” Jimin said in an exasperated way. “Statistically speaking you’re safer on my bike than on that bus that’s leaving up there, the one you’re not going to catch even if you run after it.”

Seokjin’s gaze jerked to the bus in question, and it was true that he could see the one he was supposed to be on, driving away from the curb and merging into traffic. It was long gone, and now Seokjin’s only options were to wait an additional half hour, or take his chances with Jimin.

“Not winning me over,” Seokjin warned, then he gingerly took the helmet and slid it over his head. It felt tight, almost impossibly so, and uncomfortable. “And I think your helmet is too small.”

He was fussing with it when Jimin called out, “It’s supposed to be that way. If we crash, for whatever reason, it being that snug will save your brains from getting scrambled.”

It was awkward and almost downright horrible having to throw his leg over the bike and climb on the back. And it only got worse when he realized he needed to wrap his arms around Jimin’s waist, and tightly.

“You’ll be fine,” Jimin shouted as he revved the engine, the bike vibrating on command. “Just hold on tight and lean with me when we turn.”

Seokjin, who wasn’t one for excitement or thrill seeking, closed his eyes, probably squeezed Jimin too tightly, and tried not to hold his breath.

The motorcycle ride, which Seokjin did not enjoy, was thankfully over much sooner than expected. The motorcycle was certainly faster than taking the bus, and Jimin had sense enough to bring Seokjin through the alleyway that cut across the back of the clinic. There were no eyewitnesses there, and if Jimin kept his helmet on, no one would ever know he was there.

“I rode the motorcycle,” Seokjin said as he handed the helmet back, his hair probably completely ruined. “Now tell me why you’ve been following me around.”

Easily enough, Jimin said, “You saved Rap Mon’s life. Maybe another doctor could have helped him, but we didn’t have time for that. It was you. You saved his life, you kept him alive, and don’t give me any bullshit about that being your job. I was there, okay? I saw how you handled him, and it was more than professional behavior. You cared about him, you comforted him, and you made sure he knew he was safe. Then you tried to keep the police away. You even took on Hoya for us, putting a target on yourself. I won’t deny any of that, even if I think you’re boring and have a stick up your ass.”

Seokjin wasn’t certain if Jimin was attempting compliment or insult him.

“The order came down from Rap Mon,” Jimin told him. “Ever since Jungkook told us about Hoya threatening you, and more than that, grabbing you, Bangtan made a decision. For the next few weeks, until things fully calm down, one of us will be watching you at all times. We’re not going to let anything happen to you.”

Seokjin pointed out, “I don’t need a babysitter.”

“I agree.” Jimin shrugged. “But it doesn’t matter what I think. It doesn’t even matter what you do. Rap Mon said to watch after you, to keep you safe, and that it’s on my shoulders if something happens. J-Hope should be lurking around from time to time, too. You should get used to it for the next few weeks.”

Hands on his hips, Seokjin said, “You can tell Rap Mon that I think we should have a little talk. I don’t appreciate him patronizing me via you.”
“It’s a life debt,” Jimin shot back. “Rap Mon looks out for his own, and that’s not negotiable.”

Seokjin argued, “I’m not one of his.”

Jimin kicked the throttle of the bike back up, “Take that up with him, because as far as he’s concerned, you are. That means Bangtan is going to protect you, whether you think you need it or not.”

The bike revved even louder and Seokjin shouted, “You tell him I want words with him!”

Jimin kicked up the stand on the bike. “I’ll pass that along.”

Seokjin, mouth set into a frown that felt permanent, watched Jimin drive off down the alley and cut back out onto the street.

Rap Mon … Namjoon … had ordered that Jimin and the others watch after him?

As much as Seokjin appreciated the sentiment … he supposed, it wasn’t something he particularly needed. And it seemed even more dangerous to constantly have Bangtan hovering around, since Hoya had seemingly bought everything in the story Seokjin had sold to him.

No. It wouldn’t do. Seokjin needed to speak with Namjoon and soon. Something about the situation had to be done. Seokjin was not some damsel in distress, and he was going to let the man know.
Pressing down on the pregnant woman’s stomach in front of him, Seokjin expertly exerted just enough pressure to shift the baby around inside of her, hoping to get a more comprehensive feel of exactly how the baby was positioned.

“Well,” he said, offering the young mother a reassuring grin, “you should be happy to know that your little boy is exactly where he needs to be this close to your due date.” He pressed once more just to be sure, certainly not wanting to make a mistake, and then finally let off.

She gave a sigh of relief. “Pointed down?”

Seokjin removed his gloves, tossed them in the nearby bin, and told her, “His head is absolutely facing down, feet up, and that’s exactly where we want him. When you come to see me next week to deliver this baby, I expect I’ll go as smooth as can be. I don’t foresee any complications at this point, and I know that makes the both of us very happy.”

Across the small examination room one of Seokjin’s nurses gave an encouraging look and offered, “You couldn’t be in better hands. Doctor Kim has delivered three babies already this year, all of them healthy, and there’s no reason to think your baby will be anything but that either.”

Seokjin had trained towards a career in oncology. He’d expected to be an oncologist and nothing else. But working at the clinic had turned him more into a general practitioner, than anything else, and that meant he was getting plenty of experience handling pregnancies and deliveries.

For the more delicate or complex types of pregnancies, and those with complications, Seokjin had been forced to send a couple of mothers towards better equipped hospitals. But his nurse was right. At his own clinic he’d delivered three babies, all boys so far, and two of them were named after him.

Deliveries, more than anything else, made Seokjin nervous. It never failed. But the honor and the joy of holding a newborn in his arms and then passing it off to its mother, was incomparable.

Seokjin patted her on the arm. “Don’t worry. Spend the next week relaxing, getting that nursery of yours finished, and tell your husband that I checked his blood pressure last week and he needs to stay calm too, it’s too high and I will hound him about it if his numbers don’t come down soon.”

The woman, who was barely into her twenties, blushed and said, “I don’t know what we’d do without you.”

She was a homemaker. Seokjin knew that, but she designed and sold handmade jewelry that Seokjin thought was beautiful. Her husband was a delivery driver, often away from home, with a shellfish allergy and blood pressure that reflected both his older age and his diet. This baby was their first and Seokjin was more than happy to see them through the experience. Being in the neighborhood for so long he’d started to become familiar with a lot of the patients who came to the clinic, and he even had his favorites.

“You’ll do just fine,” he assured her, gesturing to her stomach. “And that little guy is lucky to have a mom like you.”

While she redressed herself, Seokjin heard his nurse say, “So we’ve got you down for a delivery date next Wednesday. Doctor Kim will induce you in the morning, likely just before ten, and you’ll have your little guy by nightfall. That is, of course, unless he decides to come a little earlier than his due date.”
“Come see me if you have any questions, concerns, or if your water breaks,” Seokjin interjected. “Come see me for any reason. Being a first-time mom is a stressful thing, and there is no way you can over react or over think something.”

When the nurse escorted her out of the room, Seokjin signed off on his last chart of the day and glanced towards the clock. At nine pm he was officially done with his workday. There were a couple of medical journals he wanted to review, and dinner sounded great, but he didn’t have any more patients to see that night.

At least that was what he thought until Nana slipped her head through the door with a short knock and gave him an apologetic look.

“What?” he asked with a grimace.

“I know,” she eased out, “that you’re supposed to be done now … but …”

“A last-minute walk-in?”

For the most part, word had gotten around that they stopped taking walk-ins around eight. It was the only way they could manage the cutoff at the end of the day and not ruin someone’s night. But a last second walk-in either meant it was someone who hadn’t been the clinic before, or someone who was in desperate need of help.

“What’s the condition?” Seokjin asked, moving to her side.

“Male, twenties, complaining of pain in his abdomen.”

Pain in the abdomen. Seokjin didn’t like the sound of that.

Most people, but nature, disliked going to the doctor. There were various reasons, some of them valid fears, but generally speaking, people avoided the doctor even when they were in pain. Even significant pain.

A man coming in with abdominal pain could be anything from simple flatulence and indigestion, to anything more serious like a hernia, gallstones or an appendicitis.

Nana added, “Jonghyun’s already gone for the night, and Yunho’s still in with his last patient—he might be a while, too. What do you want me to do?”

“Send him in,” Seokjin said without much fuss. Paperwork and medical journals could wait. A man in pain was his priority.

When Nana showed him in Seokjin couldn’t help frowning. His potential patient was wearing an oversized coat despite the August weather, a pair of dark sunglasses even though they were indoors and the sun had already gone down, and a baseball cap pulled low.

He reeked of suspicion, and instantly made Seokjin uneasy.

“Do you want me to stay?” Nana asked, looking apprehensive as well. Typically, the clinic didn’t have the staff for a second nurse or warm body in general to remain in the room during examinations. At least outside of anything that was a delicate nature or unless requested by the patient. “I can stay.”

“You’re off,” Seokjin told her gently. He would not be cowed in his own clinic. “Go head and head out, Nana. Thank you for today.”
Nana gave the shrouded patient a long, deliberate look, then ducked out of the room and closed the door behind her.

“Nana told me you’ve got pain in your abdomen?” Seokjin asked, ducking a little to try and see the man’s face. “I hate to tell you, but you’re going to have to take some of your layers off so I can assess you properly.”

“It’s okay,” the man said finally, pulling off his cap and then sunglasses. “I just need to make sure I wasn’t recognized.”

Seokjin startled. “Namjoon.”

It was an impossible sight, Namjoon himself standing before Seokjin, a small hesitant and sort of awkward smile on his face.

“You remember my name. Awesome.”

Eyebrows pulling together, Seokjin remembered, “Of course I remember you name.” Then he lowered his voice and demanded, “What are you doing here? It’s too dangerous for you to be here.”

The smile on Namjoon’s face widened. “You’re concerned for me.”

Seokjin wanted to smack him. “Of course I’m concerned for you!”

Slowly, indicating he was still hurting from his injury, Namjoon stripped out of his oversized jacket. “I heard this was a clinic that was willing to take anyone off the street, regardless what they could pay, and treat them. I’ve got an old injury I was thinking you could look at.”

Seokjin guided Namjoon to the nearby examination table and chided, “I mean it, it’s too dangerous for you to be here. I know Infinite is having this place watched. There’s no way they aren’t.”

“That’s why I wore a disguise,” Namjoon said happily enough.

As Namjoon fidgeted on the table, Seokjin took a good, long look at the other man.

Previously, when Namjoon had been threatening to bleed out all over his clinic, he’d been disoriented and pale. Seokjin had been able to recognize his attractiveness then, but paid no mind to it. Now was different. Now Namjoon had his color back, was full of life and personality, and was absolutely enigmatic.

And that smile. That smile was a killer. The kind of smile that Namjoon had was the kind that made Seokjin’s knees go weak.

“It’s good to see you up and moving around,” Seokjin offered, if not a little diplomatically. Then he slowly let himself smile and added genuinely, “I was worried about you.” He was more worried than he probably should have been from a strictly doctor/patient standpoint. He didn’t know why, either. “Have you been taking care of yourself?”

Because of who Namjoon was, because of his association with Bangtan, and how Seokjin couldn’t help feeling like he’d dragged Jungkook into a terrible lifestyle, Seokjin should have been predisposed to dislike Namjoon.

But if there was something easy about disliking Jimin, who was rough and crass, then there was something equally easy about liking Namjoon who grinned at him, spoke softly, and put so much of his attention towards Seokjin that he felt special.
“Okay, lift up your shirt.”

Namjoon’s eyes widened. “Already? I think we should go on a date, first.”

Seokjin rolled his own eyes. “I doubt you came all the way down here just to flirt badly with me. You are injured, I should know because I treated you, so please lift your shirt so I can tell exactly how much stress you’ve been putting on the wound by not letting it heal in peace.”

“Am I flirting that badly?” Namjoon asked, but he lifted his shirt over his head anyway.

Seokjin felt his face go warm. It felt terribly unprofessional to accuse Namjoon of flirting with him, especially when he probably wasn’t even doing it in the first place. It appeared to Seokjin that Namjoon had the kind of easy going personality that was excessively charismatic, and maybe easily confused with flirtatious.

Because who in their right mind would want to flirt with Seokjin? Especially since he was at the end of his shift, probably pallid with dark smudges under his eyes, and maybe not even smelling the best he could.

Forcing himself to focus on Namjoon’s injury once more, Seokjin got his first real look at it. He most certainly told himself to focus on the wound and not how Namjoon’s chest was perfectly defined, packed with muscles, tan, and downright gorgeous. With Namjoon’s height and relatively wide shoulders, he was absolutely the pinnacle of masculine beauty that Seokjin preferred.

“I thought you were stupid for leaving the clinic so soon after being shot,” Seokjin told him in a disparaged way.

Namjoon laughed a little. “I was passed out at that point. I didn’t exactly have a choice. But I hear you let me have your bed while I recovered, so thank you.”

The heat flooding onto Seokjin’s face wasn’t going anywhere anytime soon.

“You’ve been physically active,” Seokjin observed, snapping a pair of white gloves on his hands before probing the wound gently. “This would be healing faster if you were taking it easy. In fact, I think it’s a miracle it hasn’t gotten infected at this point. Have you been running around getting into trouble?”

Namjoon offered, “I haven’t been getting into any more gunfights. I’m not doing that again anytime soon.”

Seokjin sighed. “That would be good.” He took the opportunity to clean the wound thoroughly and apply better, more sanitary bandages to the area. Hopefully that would help with Namjoon’s clothing constantly aggravating the skin. “Especially since you have my brother gallivanting around with you.”

Namjoon winced as Seokjin pressed a little too hard on the wound.

“My baby brother.”

“Your eighteen-year-old brother,” Namjoon argued back. “And we both know there’s nothing baby about him.”

“Maybe not to you,” Seokjin said, head cocked. “But he’ll always be my baby brother to me. And I don’t appreciate you dragging him into all kinds of danger.”
Namjoon said, “The others warned me that if I came here, you’d probably lecture me within an inch of my life. So I came prepared.”

“Oh?”

From his coat jacket Namjoon retrieved a small, red wrapper and handed it to Seokjin. “Your brother said this was your favorite.”

Jungkook had been talking to Namjoon about him? How and why?

Namjoon handed him the small object and air caught in Seokjin’s throat.

He barely got out, “You brought me a chocopie?”

Namjoon looked absurdly proud of himself. “Jungkook said that when you two were little, you’d give them to each other on your birthdays. So I know it’s the tradition you have with your brother, but I hope just this once you’ll let me share it with you instead.”

Seokjin looked down at the sweet treat in his hand. It had been ages since he’d had the cookie, but he remembered clearly being younger and sharing them with Jungkook, the two of them buying them for each other.

“Thank you,” Seokjin said, feeling his eyes burn a little. It was ridiculous that a tiny little treat was making him feel so emotional, but there was something about Namjoon caring enough to give it to him, that mattered the most. “I appreciate it.”

“Your brother said you don’t have much of a sweet tooth, but he also said you might not be so angry with me if I got that for you. I think I was successful?”

Seokjin pocketed the treat. “Free pass.”

Namjoon nearly preened.

“For now,” Seokjin added, but he was smiling, and when Namjoon grinned back, Seokjin realized how difficult it would be to get and remain mad at someone like Namjoon.

Then, a little more serious, Namjoon reached out to touch Seokjin’s bruised wrist gently. “I’m sorry this happened to you. I’m sorry that someone thought they could hurt you like this and get away with it … and that it’ll be a while before I can do something about this.”

“I don’t want you to do anything about it,” Seokjin countered immediately. “I don’t want you to start things back up, not when they’re beginning to calm down. This? This is nothing. It’ll fade over time. But I won’t be able to forgive you if you try to retaliate in some way and anything like this happens to my brother.”

Namjoon’s gaze locked on Seokjin’s and he said, “I mean it when I say your brother is eighteen now. He’s not a minor. He’d not a child. I respect that you love him, that you don’t want him hurt, and that you’ll do what it takes to keep him from harm. But he’s a man now. He makes his own choices and lives with the consequences. I would never bring a child into this lifestyle, but again, that’s not what your brother is.”

“And you want me to be okay with that?”

Namjoon lowered his shirt as Seokjin stepped back to take off his gloves, done with the examination.
“No,” Namjoon said, surprising Seokjin. “I doubt you’ll ever be okay with any of this. But I want you to know a few things. They’re important things.”

“Like?”

“Like,” Namjoon said, “Bangtan is family. We watch out for each other, protect each other, and have each other’s backs. We don’t leave anyone behind, we don’t sacrifice anyone, and no matter how long or short a person had been with us, they’re equal if we accept them. Jungkook is accepted, and that means I personally take responsibility for his safety. I won’t put him in harm’s way if I can. I won’t throw him into a proverbial lion’s den. I’ll always act in his best interest, I won’t ask things of him I wouldn’t be willing to do myself, and if he says no, it means no. I won’t take advantage of your brother, Jin. I won’t hurt him.”

“Jin?”

Namjoon looked a little confused. “That’s your name, isn’t it? Would you prefer Doctor Kim?”

“Too formal,” Seokjin protested. He didn’t even like it when his patients called him that. He wanted them to feel comfortable with him like he was a friend. Only other doctors called him something more official. “But my name is Seokjin. Jungkook only calls me Jin because it’s a throwback to when we were children. He shortened my name to make it easier for him, and he’s never let it go.”

“Do you want me to call you Seokjin?” Namjoon asked, head tilting. “Or can I call you Jin, too?”

There was such heavy intimacy in the words he spoke, Seokjin couldn’t even begin to answer.

“Jin,” Namjoon decided for him. “Since all of Bangtan says you refuse to call me anything but Namjoon, I’ll call you Jin.”

“It’s not the same,” Seokjin said a little hoarsely. “But okay.”

Namjoon’s teeth showed as he smiled, and Seokjin probably would have been okay with Namjoon calling him anything at that point.

Slowly, Namjoon slid to his feet. He caught Seokjin’s hand, his fingers curling delicately around the bruises at his wrist, and said in an even tone, “I can’t protect your brother from the world. I can’t predict the future, and I can’t swear to you that nothing will happen to him with us. I can only tell you that he’s doing something with Bangtan that he believes in, and the rest of us will watch out for him.”

Seokjin laughed dryly. “Oh, he believes in Bangtan. I don’t doubt that. I just don’t think what he believes in is worth the risk to his life.”

“Let me prove it to you.”

Seokjin looked suddenly to Namjoon. “I’m sorry, what?”

Namjoon was still holding his wrist. That was the only thing permeating Seokjin’s mind. He could feel Namjoon’s big, sturdy fingers so delicate and gentle at the thin skin of his wrist, his thumb rubbing over the bruises.

“I want to prove to you that Bangtan is not like Infinite. I want to show you and tell you so that you understand we would never do this, bruise someone innocent, just because we can.”

“Now?” Seokjin asked, wondering if he was properly comprehending the words.
“I think I’m the last person you’re seeing today,” Namjoon pointed out.

“Paperwork,” Seokjin said a bit helplessly.


If he’d had even a fraction of his senses, and not been wholly distracted by how Namjoon’s thumb was still stroking at the skin on the inside of his wrist, he probably would have said no. Reason and caution would have won out.

But Namjoon was ridiculously charming and earnest and downright desirable.

And Seokjin liked being the object of his attention. He couldn’t deny that. He liked how Namjoon looked at him, talked to him, and treated him. He liked it maybe too much.

“I am hungry,” he said finally.

“Come with me then,” Namjoon said, only letting go of Seokjin’s arm so he could take off his white doctor’s coat.


Namjoon pulled open the door. “I’ve got a car,” he assured. “But you try prying Jimin away from the bike of his and you’re liable to lose fingers. Plus, he says it’s easier to get around on a bike than anything else.”

“Easier to follow me around,” Seokjin corrected.

“I wondered when we were going to talk about that,” Namjoon laughed.

Seokjin loved the sound of it.

With Namjoon dressed back in his disguise, Seokjin slipped out of the clinic, leaving Yunho to lock up, feeling more adventurous than he had in years.

They drove for what seemed like a long time, to the far stretches of Seoul, and deep into Bangtan territory. It only made sense, of course. It wasn’t as if they could stay in or anywhere near the streets Infinite ran.

Instead they ended up in a tiny little noodle house that smelled like heaven to Seokjin’s hungry stomach, and was packed to the brim with a group of elderly ladies playing an undeterminable card game, half a dozen high school students on their phones, and thirty or so more people laugh and talking and seeming as if there wasn’t a single care in the world worth considering.

“Namjoon,” Seokjin said a bit awkwardly as they came through the front door. “There’s no room.”

Once more, with just a tiny bit of hesitancy, Namjoon took Seokjin’s wrist in his own hand, thumb at his pulse point. “Trust me. I know the owner. Oh, and hey. you’ve got to call me Rap Mon here.”

He gave Seokjin a look of apology. “It’s to protect me, and the rest of Bangtan, and probably even everyone in here.”

“Rap Mon.” Seokjin tried the name once more. It still sounded ridiculous, but it was a small thing for Namjoon to ask. “Okay.”

A sudden boisterous laugh cut through the air, above all other voices, and without warning they were being attacked.
Well, technically they were being attacked by hugs and kisses, and their aggressor was an elderly lady, short and stout, and with tons of gray hair piled atop her head.

Totally caught off guard, Seokjin wobbled on his feet as he heard Namjoon demand, “Grandma! You have to let go of him. I don’t think he can breathe!”

Finally she pulled back. Her eyes narrowed in a scary way and she demanded, “This is the first boy you bring to meet me and I’m not supposed to be excited? I’m not supposed to be happy? You ask too much of me, child.”

Namjoon pressed a kiss to her cheek. “Can we get a table, please? And sweet-sour noodles?”

Once more Soekjin was ambushed by a hug from Namjoon’s grandmother, and then she was off, flying at near Mach speed, running a bunch of customers off from a nearby table. Seokjin winced when she swatted at some of them. “I feel bad taking their table.”

Namjoon laughed and tugged Seokjin towards the vacated table. “That’s my grandfather, and trust me, he deserves every bit of hell she gives him. And secretly, I think he likes it. It reminds him that she thinks he’s worth the fuss.”

“So,” Seokjin asked once they were seated and had glasses of water in front of them. “Do you want to wait until the food gets here, or cut through the tension in the air and tell me what you need to say right now.”

“Yessh,” Namjoon said, leaning an elbow up on the table with a look of amazement. “Can’t a guy just enjoy the company of another good looking guy, have a little food, and then get to the part that sucks?” Namjoon held out his free hand, palm up on the table and stretched out towards Seokjin. “Let me enjoy your company for a while? Just in case you hate me afterwards, or something equally as crappy.”

Namjoon’s grandmother was watching from the partially exposed kitchen, and it wasn’t as if Namjoon was asking such an impossible thing.

So, offering a small smile, Seokjin put his hand in Namjoon’s, let their fingers brush coolly, and stated, “I never pictured you with a grandmother.”

Proudly, Namjoon was quick to say, “She raised me. I was six when I became her responsibility, but she never hesitated. Not even for a second. She and my grandfather mean more to me than anything else in this world.”

Taking some initiative, Seokjin let his grip tighten on Namjoon’s hand and he confessed quietly, “I lost my mother and sister at a young age. But I’m glad you had someone so loving and caring to raise you. You’re lucky.”

“But you didn’t,” Namjoon said, certain in his words.

“I had my dad,” Seokjin corrected. “He wasn’t very loving or caring, but he was there, and that’s something. He could have dumped Jungkook and I with relatives overseas, there were some of offered, including our mother’s sister who lived in Canada at the time. But our father kept us by his side, and he raised us … or at least he employed the nannies who raised us until we were old enough to look after ourselves.”

Namjoon told him, “I bet you ended up raising your brother more than any of those nannies or your father.”
“Why do you say that?” Seokjin wondered.

Two steaming, glorious bowls of red noodles were headed their way as Namjoon snuck in, “It’s in the way your brother looks at you, like you’re the best man he’s ever met in his life, and the kind of person he wants to be when he’s older. It’s not simple idol worship. It’s deeply profound respect and love.”

With the noodles came generous serving of beef, and dozens of side dishes. It was lavish in a way, and as Seokjin turned to thank Namjoon’s for the impressive meal, Namjoon was already digging in.

“You should hurry up,” Namjoon’s grandmother said when she put the last plate down on the table, nudging him in a friendly way. “He’ll eat it all while you’re busy thanking me.”

“You pig,” Seokjin said without any bite when he did indeed spy that Namjoon had stolen just over half the beef and piled it high into the small bowl of rice that was next to his noodles.

Namjoon tapped Seokjin’s bowl. “Eat. Grandma makes the best spicy and sour dish in all of Seoul. But you gotta eat it when it’s so hot it burns your tongue.”

Picking up his chopsticks, Seokjin dug in, savoring the smell, then the taste, and finally how comforting the whole experience was.

Namjoon hadn’t been exaggerating about the quality of the spicy-sour noodles. At least as far as Seokjin had experienced. Like Namjoon he devoured the noodles, then the rice and beef, and then all the vegetables.

By the end Seokjin’s stomach hurt a little, but it was a good hurt.

Setting his chopsticks down, Namjoon told him, “My grandmother raised me because my parents took a stand against being extorted.”

Forehead creasing, Seokjin asked, “I’m not sure I follow.”

“They owned a convenience store about four blocks north. At that time, Shinwa owned the area. But things weren’t good. That gang was fracturing, there was a ton of inner fighting, Shinwa’s thugs were getting out of control, and half the time there was only chaos. I can’t remember a time when Shinwa had actual control of the area.”

Quietly, so he was barely heard, Seokjin told him, “You don’t have to talk about this if you don’t want to.”

“I have to,” Namjoon offered. “So you understand, I have to tell you everything.” He cleared his throat and took a long drink of his water. “Anyway, you know personally that it’s standard policy that business owners and anyone running anything pays a protection fee to the gang who runs their streets. My parents did it for a while, a couple of years, but when Shinwa lost control of their thugs, said thugs started trying to get more from my parents and tons of others. My parents said no, eventually, and they got killed for it.”

Seokjin gripped the edge of the table with a white fingered grip. “I’m so sorry.”

“Shinwa didn’t even know about it,” Namjoon continued. “They didn’t order it; those thugs were just doing whatever they wanted by that point. And just after that, Shinwa split. And then there was a power vacuum, which made everything even worse.”

Seokjin had grown up in one of the most affluent areas of Seoul. He’d had nannies and a cleaning
service and people who drove him and his father and Jungkook around wherever they needed to be. Seokjin hadn’t even been aware of the gang issue that overrun Seoul’s underbelly until he’d been a teen.

“I grew up here,” Namjoon told him. “I grew up with people getting killed over nothing, being extorted out of every penny they needed, girls getting taken advantage of, kids being forced to do terrible stuff, and even worse than that. So when I was old enough, I decided that enough was enough. Some guys tried to bend my grandmother over for more money than she was making in a month, and that was it. That’s when I formed Bangtan. That’s when I took back the streets.”

Carefully, Seokjin asked, “How long ago?”

“No long,” Namjoon admitted. “Three years ago I recruited Jimin, who wanted something to protect again, and J-Hope came after that. V and Suga just kind of happened, and more and more people wanted to work for us as time passed. They wanted to organize patrols to keep the streets clean, they wanted to start a night watch program to protect the home owners and store owners from anyone who thought they could pull a fast one. And now Bangtan is a gang that’s starting to be recognized for its sincerity and its goals.”

“And,” Seokjin told him skeptically, “you want me to believe that you’ve never had to do anything terrible to get where you are?”

Namjoon grimaced in a sad way. “I’ve done a lot I’m not proud of. I’ve done tons that will haunt me until my dying breath. But I did them all knowing that ends were going to justify the means.”

“More food?” Namjoon’s grandmother demanded, interrupting their conversation. She looked between the two of them, almost as if she was already picturing what she was going to bring them.

“No, granny,” Namjoon stated. “I think we both ate way more than we should have.”

Seokjin nodded and told her honestly, “It was the best food I’ve had since … well, since I can ever remember. It was amazing.”

Namjoon’s grandmother looked over Seokjin’s head to tell Namjoon seriously, “This is the boy. You’ll marry this boy and I won’t hear anything else on the matter.”

Namjoon shook his head, hiding his face between his hands. “I’ll think about it, Granny.”

“Don’t think!” she whacked him over the head with the towel that had been hanging from her apron. “You’re a stupid boy. If you think about it, this one will disappear on you.”

She turned to leave and Namjoon called after her, “I love you too, granny!”

Seokjin laughed openly at them.

“I have a question,” Seokjin said when the woman was out of earshot. “What happened with Infinite? That night you… you were hurt.”

Namjoon hesitated. “I would prefer not to tell you, if you don’t mind.”

“Gang members only business?” Seokjin required.

“Jungkook doesn’t even know,” Namjoon replied. “And Suga only knows the barest minimum. I’ll have to tell them more any day now, because negotiations with Infinite fell through. But suffice to say, I didn’t go that meeting with Infinite’s Sunggyu’s expecting it to end in a firefight.”
Curiously, Seokjin asked him, “What exactly did you say or do to piss Infinite off that much? Did you just fail to meet whatever terms were proposed?”

“Initially,” Namjoon said, almost ashamed. “Then there was some name calling.”

“Some name calling?”

Namjoon chuckled. “Sunggyu called me a spineless coward not worth his time or consideration. In return, I might have insinuated that he was too busy getting on his knees for Nam Woohyun, to think clearly about my offered proposition. The guns came out short after that.”

“Well,” Seokjin said, trying not to think about how easily Namjoon could have been hurt. He could have died. “Could you possibly refrain from insulting the love life of dangerous criminals? I would prefer you whole and healthy, and not bleeding in my clinic.”

“Careful,” Namjoon warned, drinking the last of his water. “You keep saying these things that lead me to think that you really care about me. I’ll get the wrong idea if you don’t stop.”

“I’m kind of invested in you,” Seokjin said, his heart starting to thunder, though it felt natural and normal for once.

Namjoon tried, “Because medical supplies are expensive?”

“No,” Seokjin said with a grin. “Obviously because my time is precious.”

Namjoon blinked a bit blankly for a second before stating, “I like you too, Seokjin.”

Seokjin’s grin grew. “No taking back it back if you say it and mean it.”

Namjoon crossed his arms and demanded, “Did some asshole say that to you and not mean it?”

“I’m just covering my bases.”

Namjoon stood and offered his customary hand to Seokjin. “I mean it.”

Taking Namjoon’s hand felt like accepting something even more. And he supposed he wasn’t that far off from the truth.

They got ice cream afterwards. But because they were so stuff from a late dinner, they ended up sharing a single sundae. Namjoon made silly faces at Seokjin, determined to keep him smiling, and Seokjin didn’t let go of Namjoon’s hand.

By the time Namjoon drove Seokjin home they were into the AM hours, Seokjin was drunk with happiness and food, and Namjoon was already telling him about the places he wanted to show him in Bangtan’s territory.

“We have to be careful,” Seokjin said quietly when the car came to a stop a block or so away from the clinic. The windows were tinted and they looked like any other car on the street, but already Seokjin was anxious. “About us. About you being here.”

Namjoon frowned. “You don’t want me to come around? Or you don’t want us to tell people we’re dating?”

Seokjin arched an eyebrow. “When did I say I agreed to date you?”

“I only buy ice cream for boys I’m planning on dating,” Namjoon said obstinately.
“The pressure,” Seokjin said in response, “from Infinite is starting to come off the clinic. I didn’t even spot one of their flunkies today. I like you, Namjoon. But I don’t want either of us to be exposed to unnecessary danger, and Infinite has a million eyes and ears here. We’re playing with fire if we do this.”

Namjoon gave him an odd look, then asked, “Do you know what I thought the first time I saw you? Really saw you?”

Seokjin shook his head.

“I thought you were an angel,” Namjoon admitted. “I was laying on that table, the light was on behind your head, and I was delirious with pain. But I saw you, I saw your beautiful face and I heard you swear to me that was going to be okay. You said you’d take care of me, and I could tell you meant it. I thought it was dead and one of god’s angels was welcoming me to the afterlife.”

“That is so greasy,” Seokjin said.

“But it’s the truth. And after Bangtan told me what you did for us, and how you got hurt for us, I couldn’t think about anything but you. I’m maybe a little infatuated. But I’m more certain than ever. I’m willing to fight to have someone like you. I will keep you safe.”

Seokjin huffed a little. “By having Jimin follow me around with his obnoxious motorcycle?”

Namjoon stated, “That was for your protection.”

“And that’s what I’m trying to tell you,” Seokjin argued back. “I’m a fully-grown man. Like my brother, I make my own choices ad I stand by them. I like you, Namjoon. Against all odds, I really like you, and I want to continue to see you. It won’t be easy, and it will be dangerous, but I’m willing to try if you are. But you can’t treat me like I’m helpless. I’m not fragile or breakable, and I don’t need to be protected. You treat your Bangtan boys like they’re your equals, and I need you to do that same to me.”

Namjoon shot back, “They can hold their own in a fight. I rarely have to worry about them if they get cornered by a couple of guys.”

Without warning, and before he lost any courage, Seokjin leaned over and pressed a soft but determined kiss to Namjoon’s lips.

Namjoon’s lips were rough, and his stubble scratched along Seokjin’s much more smooth jaw. But it was sweet, it was nice, and it was Seokjin’s best bargaining chip. He wanted to give Namjoon more--a lot more--but he needed absolute clarity between them.

“I want this,” Seokjin told him, reaching for the door handle as he pulled away. “But I need you to think about what I’ve said to you. I was a survivor before I met you, and no matter what happens between us, I’ll be a survivor afterwards. I’m not looking for a protector, I don’t want anything close to that, and I won’t let someone put themselves in danger because you’re dead set on them treating me like I’m helpless.”

Then he was out of the car and standing on the sidewalk. He didn’t give Namjoon, or his tinted windows a second glance. Instead he put his hands in his pockets and headed off towards the clinic.

He wasn’t sure when Namjoon left--if he left.

Because looking back seemed like giving an inch. And on this, Seokjin couldn’t afford to.
“I hope you know how much of a life saver you’re being for me right now,” Seokjin told Victoria as he took her through the clinic on the first and likely only short tour she’d receive before she finished up the last of her newcomer paperwork and started working.

Victoria, who was likely one of the prettiest women Seokjin had ever seen, gave him an even prettier smile and said, “You’re doing me the favor.”

“Hardly,” Seokjin said skeptically. “Victoria, look, I’m very proud of my clinic. We’ve come a long way over a short period of time, but you are a highly decorated and incredibly talented neurosurgeon. You are about to agree to work at a clinic that can’t even afford some of the equipment you use regularly. So, while I very much appreciate you agreeing to do this, especially for six months, you’re ultimately consigning yourself to being a general practitioner and not furthering your career.”

“And what makes you think furthering my career is what I want right now?” she asked him.

Seokjin led her to the last room on the tour, the currently empty operating room. “Because you’re brilliant, and brilliant doctors don’t want mediocrity.”

“Then I could say the same for you.”

Seokjin bristled at her compliment. “I’m doing something brilliant right here,” he told her. “Because one day this clinic is going to be ten times this size, and it’s going to be able to accommodate the medical needs of the whole community. And I absolutely have all the faith and confidence in the world that we will get there. But at the moment, a neurosurgeon of your caliber is wasted here.”

Hair trailing behind her as she examined the operating room, Victoria stated, “I could have stayed in China, but that would mean being parted from my husband for the next six to nine months, and I preferred almost any other alternative to that. And you’re right, I had offers from John Hopkins in America for a short tenure there, and from all the best medical hospitals in Japan and South Korea.”

“But?”

“But I’m getting older,” she admitted slowly. “I’m in my thirties now, and I’ve mostly bypassed the stage of one’s life where there are children. I’ve resigned myself to the reality that my life will be defined not by my progeny, but by the legacy of work I leave behind.”

At that, Seokjin nodded deeply. Most doctors, at least those female and high enough in their respective specialty files, tended to put off children until much later in life, or completely. It was an unfortunate thing that Seokjin didn’t think needed to happen if the medical field was more accommodating and supportive. Male doctors often had families and children without sacrificing their careers, and Seokjin hated what that said about the gender inequality among the medial elite.

Seokjin still held out hope that he would have a family of his own one day. He was only in his twenties, and had plenty of time. And he wanted that lovely feeling that came with people who waited up for him to come home at night. He wanted a partner to help shoulder responsibilities with, and children with soccer practices, piano recitals, and first days of school.

Seokjin didn’t know if that was in his future in the least bit, but he hoped so.

“Your legacy,” Seokjin insisted, “is going to be very, very impressive.” Hers was the kind that students were going to study for decades to come in an attempt to emulate her techniques.
Victoria said, “In six to nine months, when my husband’s business takes him back to China, I’ll go as well. I’ll go back to my hospital, continue my research, and hopefully continue to improve the lives of anyone and everyone I can. But I’m starting to want more than that.”

“More?” Seokjin asked, more than a little baffled.

She gave a nod. “For me, satisfaction isn’t being found in the newest surgical techniques, the ones that five carefully chosen people a year will have access to. More and more I find myself wanting to contribute to those who would normally have no hope. The poor, I mean. The impoverished, or those lacking adequate access to medical facilities and doctors.”

“They’re not without hope,” Seokjin said, feeling almost as if he had to defend the people of the neighborhood. “It’s there, it’s just harder for them to find. That’s what our job is.”

Suddenly, Victoria said, “And that’s what I want.”

“To help the people here, of all the possible options you have?”

If she wanted to do charity work, and it essentially was going to be that, she could have picked any underdeveloped nation in desperate need of willing doctors, or even the rural areas of her own China. So why his clinic in the less than reputable part of Seoul?

“My husband knows Yunho,” Victoria said, and Seokjin hadn’t been aware of that. “They’re very good friends, and have been for years now. Yunho is the only doctor who listened to my husband when he insisted something was wrong with him, and that he wasn’t just simply depressed. Yunho diagnosed him with Lyme Disease when no other doctor could find that solution, and got him back on his feet and well again within ten weeks.”

Seokjin chuckled, “Yunho is the most determined doctor I’ve ever met. He sees every patient like a puzzle to be solved, and he’s never given up on one, no matter how long it took.”

Victoria pressed on, “So when Yunho mentioned that this clinic was always in need of help, any kind of help, I wanted to return the debt that our family owes to Yunho. I may not be able to do any complex surgery while here, but I can still catch and diagnose potentially fatal diseases early enough to refer patients for further treatment. I can still fulfill all the requirements of a general practitioner, and you can’t stand there and tell me you couldn’t use the extra help on your busier days.”

Seokjin started at her. “We could use the help on our slowest days. We’re the only clinic in the area, and there is no hospital within a decent travel time. If we weren’t here, our patients would have to go much further for even the simplest medical care, and most of them either can’t make the journey, or can’t afford it.”

“So we’re integral?”

Seokjin nodded. “We’re indispensable, and it’s why I will give every bit of me to keep this place open and going for as long as I can. Without this place, we’re leaving this community without a way to stay healthy, and I won’t do that to the adults, let alone the children.”

Victoria strolled to the center of the room, giving it a last look over. “I want the accolades, Seokjin. Don’t get me wrong. I want to rewrite medical procedures and go down in history for something significant. But the older I get, the more important I find simply helping people. The more my career progresses, the more I want to be a part of the greater good.”

“Even if it means treating broken bones and delivering babies?”
“I like babies,” Victoria said.

“Careful,” Seokjin laughed. “If you treat the moms gently, help them through it, and safely deliver their babies, they’ll start naming them after you. Trust me. I know.”

Victoria padded back to his side. “I am fully content and happy with the idea that for the next several months, I will get to see everything from cuts that need stitches, to tonsils that need to be taken out. If you’ll have me, I want a place here.”

It was humbling, how someone like Victoria wanted to contribute, and Seokjin was honored.

“You can stay here for as long as you want,” Seokjin promised her. But then he had to add with some trepidation, “You know there’s a … crime issue in the area, correct?”

Victoria told him, “I grew up in Quingdao. That is, if you’re not familiar, a port city where tourists like to frequent. It’s on the Yellow Sea. I grew up in … comfort. It was luxury, even. But after standard school, when I went to get my medical degree, I was exposed to something much different. Ninety percent of China is still rural, Seokjin. And of that almost all of it is poor. And you know as well as I do that poverty often breeds violence due to a lack of resources, education and opportunity.”

“I wish that were different.”

Together the two of them left the operating room and headed towards Seokjin’s tiny office for the last of the paperwork.

“I’ve been exposed to my fair share of rough areas,” she assured him. “I can handle my own, I’m confident.”

Seokjin held his door open for her. “Infinite runs this area. They’re brute thugs at times, but if you stay inline, they don’t bother you. We make our … protection payments, and keep our noses clean, and we get to keep operating without any hitches on their end. Even Infinite, for all their issues, recognize that what we do for the community is something good--something needed.”

Victoria sat down on the only spare chair other than at Seokjin’s desk. “I can deal with it, I promise you. It’s not a problem.”

“Then,” Seokjin said, rounding to his side of the desk. “Everyone’s favorite: paperwork.”

It took another half hour to finish up, but afterwards they had a celebratory drink.

Victoria finished hers in impressive time and said, “You know, the hospital I came from just refurbished its entire neurology department. They put the old equipment into storage and just forgot about it, to the best of my knowledge. If I request it, considering how much I contribute to that hospital, and the good press it would garner them, I don’t see why I couldn’t have it all shipped over by the time I’m set to leave.


Victoria told him, “You’d need another neurologist to work it all properly, but if you had all the equipment, you could snag one right out of his or her residency, if you promised them a research grant or something else as lucrative. Maybe you wouldn’t even have to offer them anything. There are a lot of doctors who would be attracted to this clinic and what it does for the community--better doctors than the ones who want to buy their penthouses and accept awards.”
Mind spinning a little, Seokjin had to say honestly, “I don’t know if we have the space for any of that.” He knew they didn’t. And the sheer electricity it would cost to get it all going … it wasn’t feasible.

“Then it seems you need a bigger building.”

Seokjin dreamed of a bigger space. He dreamed of each of the doctors having their own offices and consulting rooms, and more than one operating room. He dreamed of half a dozen examination rooms, a research area, more than one waiting room, more than basic amenities, and not a single nurses station that the girls had to rotate through. The same could be said for the receptionist area.

In a perfect world, they could move into a building and have a budget that allowed them to hire even more doctors, take on a bigger nursing staff, and expand their hours.

And maybe, in the very distant future, they could keep a doctor or two on staff over night for midnight emergencies.

“If only,” Seokjin said. “We’re struggling to stay open as it is. We’re currently looking for outside funding more than we already have. We need a new patron or two. We need a benefactor, government assistance, and any and all donations that are possible.”

“And how much progress are you making with that?”

From the nearby drawer of his desk, Seokjin retrieved the invitation to the hospital gala he’d accepted from Kibum. He handed it over to Victoria. “In two days I’m going to make an appearance there on behalf of a friend. I’m going to attempt to talk my way to a donation pool of some kind, or at the very least get eyes turned towards the clinic. Who knows if I’ll be successful in the least bit, but I have to try. There are going to be a lot of people with deep pockets at the gala. Maybe they’ll be willing to lighten those pockets just a little for a good cause.”

Victoria made a face at him. “Is that how you’re going to sell it? A good cause?”

Seokjin frowned. “People like charity.”

“People like charity?” Victoria repeated. Then she corrected, “No, people like praise. They like being patted on the back. They like being seen as important. They don’t like charity, they just like the recognition that comes with it. So selling it as charity is not the way to go, especially with people who pat themselves on the back all the time.”

Head cocked, Seokjin asked, “Then what would you suggest my selling point be?”

Without missing a beat, Victoria said, “You tell them what a significant tax write-off they can get.”

“Huh?”

“Charity is tax deductible,” Victoria said, “and significantly so if you donate enough. The rich love being stingy, Seokjin. It doesn’t make sense, but it’s the truth. So if you sell their donations as something tax deductible, along with the praise they’re going to get for being charitable, and they might be more willing to write you a check.”

Seokjin openly admitted, “I had no idea you were so cunning, Doctor Song.”

“Bah,” Victoria nearly barked out. “I’m just more used to dealing with the bullshit involved in this sort of thing.”
“Any other tips?” Seokjin took a pad of paper from nearby and put it in front of him. “I feel like I should be taking notes.”

She slid him a pen. “When you go, make sure to mention of how multinational and multicultural this clinic is. Rich people love to brag. They especially love to brag to their foreign friends. While I have no doubt a lot of the people attending this gala will have ties to America and Japan, I’d expect a large number of them to also have business dealings in China.”

“We’re multinational here?”

“You are now,” Victoria laughed. “As long as I’m here. Use my Chinese heritage to your benefit. Make sure you tell all those potential contributors that you’ve got a staff representing more than just Korea. That’s more bragging rights. But you’re going to have to come off as a little pathetic for all of this to work.”

Seokjin said flatly, “I don’t think that’s going to be a problem.”

Victoria, Seokjin was pleased to see, was already proving that she was incredibly valuable. He’d known she would be from the start, but it seemed she had a unique perspective on things, new ideas, and an energy that seemed to have been slowly leeched out of Seokjin over the stress filled months.

She questioned, “You’re getting at least some funding from the government?”

Seokjin gave a quick nod. “That’s primarily what’s sustaining us. But we need more.”

Confidently, Victoria said, “We can get more.”

“I like your enthusiasm,” Seokjin said, giving her a look, “but I don’t know how realistic that is.”

Fierce determination set across her face. “We can get more funding. Because if I’m going to work here, Seokjin, I’m going to see this place thrive. Not getting more funding isn’t an option. I’m going to make it happen. Mark my words.”

Victoria was a little scary, too. But in a good way, it seemed.

Seokjin leaned back in his chair, hearing it creak a little. “Now all I have to do is find a date in two days.”

“Take it there’s no significant other to fill that role?”

Immediately Seokjin thought of Namjoon.

And not for the first time he wondered if he’d overreacted. His stance hadn’t changed, not even slightly. He didn’t want to be coddled, he didn’t need to be protected, and if Namjoon attempted to treat him like he was inferior in any way, they wouldn’t work out. But he’d been worked up when he’d confronted Namjoon about how he felt. And before they could have a long, thorough discussion, he’d left.

So part of the blame was certainly on him.

Not to mention Seokjin was agonizing over how much he did like Namjoon. The feelings had kind of snuck up on him, especially the moment he’d realized maybe it wouldn’t work out between them. He wanted things to work. He wanted Namjoon to hold his hand and pay attention to him. He wanted them to try to being a couple.
“There’s someone I like,” Seokjin admitted to Victoria.

“But?”

“We’re still working things out,” Seokjin said. Hopefully.

He wasn’t certain how long he was supposed to wait, either, before attempting to contact Namjoon. Was he supposed to do it at all? He was the one to tell Namjoon to take time and think about them.

Not to mention he didn’t have a number to contact Namjoon at. No doubt Namjoon had already gotten Seokjin’s number from Jungkook, but Seokjin himself hadn’t thought to do the same. He’d barely thought Namjoon would return any feelings.

No matter what, two days wasn’t enough time to get a date for the gala and he knew it. He’d put the matter off for too long, and short of asking one of his nurses or receptionists, which would be awkward, it looked like he was going to end up going alone.

“I’ll figure something out,” Seokjin said. He didn’t want to burden her unnecessarily.

He didn’t expect anything more from Victoria, so he was surprised when she said, “If you don’t have a date by the event, tell me. I’d be happy to go with you. After all, I do have experience in wringing money from fat cats who could do with a little charity.”

Seokjin felt his eyes go wide. “You’d go with me? With such short notice? Would your husband be okay with that?”

Victoria insisted, “I chose to come to Korea to be near my husband while he works. But that doesn’t mean, other than Yunho and a few others, that I know many people here. My nights aren’t filled with going out with friends.”

“Until now,” Seokjin said very quickly. “Yunho, Jonghyung, and I are taking you out. We’re going to introduce you to plenty of people.”

Victoria gave a grateful nod. “But my point is, my nights aren’t all booked up.”

“What about your husband?” Seokjin asked again. “I wouldn’t want to offend him by asking you to be my date.”

“Changmin,” she said in a convincing way, “is working fifteen hour shifts right now while he tries to acclimate himself. He comes home at night and usually goes to bed within a few minutes, and that’s if I can manage to get him to eat anything first. He’d be happy to see me be able to go out and do things without him until he has more free time. And he’s only heard good things about you from Yunho.”

He certainly wasn’t fishing for compliments, but he couldn’t help asking, “Yunho said good things about me?”

“About your character,” Victoria clarified. “So keep me up to date. Let me know if I need to break out my good dress.”

Seokjin told her with a smile, “Trust me, the position of date is as good as yours.”

Because there was some luck in the world, Victoria’s first full day at the clinic, which admittedly was a Thursday and Thursdays were never overly busy, went smoothly and without problem.
Like Seokjin had warned, Victoria was relegated more to the position of a general practitioner than a specialist surgeon, but never once did she seem disinterested in the people she helped. In fact, she flew through them competently faster than Seokjin or the other doctors had possibly imagined, working steadily and in a friendly manner to help clear out their waiting room in record time.

And the next day, Friday, which was the true stress test as the weekend began and their patients doubled, Victoria seemed just as flawless.

As Victoria expertly popped a dislocated shoulder back into place on a young boy who’d injured himself during a friendly baseball game with his friends, and having first calmed him down enough to stop crying and fidgeting, Jonghyun declared, “If she wasn’t a taken woman, I’d propose marriage right now.”

Nearby, Yunho pointed out, “Changmin would beat you up if you even tried it.”

Uncertain, Seokjin asked, “He’s pretty big then? Changmin?”

Yunho held a measuring hand above his own height. “Tall. And he’s got a baby face, too. It lulls people into thinking he’s this quiet, unobtrusive guy. And yeah, for the most part he is. But he had to fight hard to convince Victoria to even give him a first date. He’s not giving her up for anything.”

Jonghyun gave a grunt of disappointment.

Seokjin pointed out, “Are you forgetting about your boyfriend?”

Jonghyun wandered off, throwing over his shoulder, “I said I’d marry her. Not anything else.”

“I’ll be sure to let Kibum know that,” Seokjin said after him. “And I won’t be surprised when I have to treat you for a concussion.”

“We just need more female doctors around here,” Yunho said decisively. “We can be as gentle and sincere as possible, but we both know there’s just something very calming about women when they’re comforting someone. Our nurses are great, but they’re not the ones treating our patients. Our next hire needs to be female. After Hongbin, of course.”

The ratio was off, anyway. Seokjin absolutely wanted to have a workplace that was skewed evenly between the genders, but previous he’d merely been determined to fill positions. He did think now, however, they could be a little more selective.

“Agreed,” Seokjin said, then he was distracted by the vibrating in his pocket.

Yunho wandered off as Seokjin stared down at the number illuminated up at him. It was a private number, or one blocked, and he had no idea who it could be. He couldn’t even see the numbers of the person calling him.

Dread filled his stomach that it could be someone from Infinite.

But then the phone stopped ringing, and instead a text message came through.

It was a simple command, with no pretense, ordering him to open the backdoor to the clinic quickly. There was no name attached, so it seemed like a bad idea.

But then a second text message arrived, and with one single word:

Emergency.
The doctor in Seokjin was overriding any kind of common sense he might have felt in that moment, and he moved directly to the back of the clinic. There was no one around, thankfully. It was nearing the noon hour, and that meant a round of lunch breaks that would have the floor cleared for a while.

The second Seokjin pushed open the emergency back door he was greeted with the sight of a worried Suga. But more startling than him was the flushed, clearly unwell J-Hope who was leaning against him. J-Hope wasn’t a drastically bigger size that Suga, even if Suga seemed tiny and compact at times, but J-Hope’s full weight was threatening to take the both of them down.

“What happened?” Seokjin asked, reaching for J-Hope immediately and helping Suga bring him inside. A quick look down the hall showed that it was clear, so Seokjin and Suga maneuvered J-Hope into a nearby examination room.

Deliriously, and through half lidded eyes, J-Hope’s gaze followed him as Seokjin puttered around the room, drawing out the necessary medical equipment.

Once more, Seokjin demanded, “What the hell happened to him?”

All kinds of scenarios were running through his mind. Namjoon had absolutely been clear when he’d said that even though Bangtan was working towards having a neighborhood that was safe and family friendly, that Bangtan also did terrible things to try and achieve that.

That meant getting into the kind of trouble that got people hurt.

And though Seokjin wasn’t currently sure what was wrong with J-Hope, it was something serious.

Seokjin pressed the thermometer into J-Hope’s ear as Suga said, almost falling over himself in his rush, “I’m really sorry to come here. I know it puts you in danger. I know Rap Mon said to pull back and not shadow you, and to not put you in danger. But I didn’t know where else to go. I needed someone I trusted.”

Pulling back the thermometer and looking at the flashing numbers, Seokjin swore. J-Hope’s temperature was far too high.

“Suga?”

Seokjin reached across the table to grab his upper arm. “I need you to calm down and breathe. Get yourself together. Then tell me what’s going on.”

Suga gave a shaky nod, was quiet for a second, and then said, “I think he’s got an infection.” He reached for J-Hope’s dangling hand and brought it up for Seokjin to see. There was a bandage wrapped around his palm, and when Seokjin removed it he could see without a second’s hesitation that the skin was absolutely infected. And it was bad.

“That’s what it looks like,” Seokjin said evenly, not wanting to alarm Suga over the severity of the infection. “How did he get the wound?”

He had to clean it, and immediately, but J-Hope also most certainly needed antibiotics.

“A couple days ago?” Suga reasoned, not seeming entirely sure. “He didn’t say anything at the time, but I think he hurt himself when we were jumping fences a few days ago. He stumbled when he landed, which almost never happens, and he was slow getting up. He could have hurt himself then. But he didn’t say anything.”

From the examination table, J-Hope moaned out, “I’m hot.”
Ignoring the heat radiating from his forehead, Seokjin put his hand on the skin and leaned down to tell him gently, “You’re a little sick, that’s true, but you’re also at my clinic. Do you know who I am?”

After a moment, J-Hope mumbled, “It’s cool.”

J-Hope was pushing up into his hand as Seokjin asked again, “Do you know who I am, J-Hope?”

J-Hope swallowed heavily, seemed to have a moment of clarity, and then said, “Rap Mon’s doctor.”

“I’m Doctor Kim,” Seokjin said. “You can call me Seokjin, or even Jin if that makes you feel better. I need to clean your wound before we can do anything else. And it isn’t going to feel good. I can’t give you any painkillers until we finish and get some antibiotics into you. So you have to be strong for me and hold on for just a little longer.”

“Is he going to be okay?” Suga asked.

Instead of answering that question, Seokjin asked him. “How long ago did you find him? Do you have any idea how long he’s been like this?”

Suga shook his head. “V and J-Hope live together, but V’s been out of Seoul for a couple of days, since before I think he got hurt. And I didn’t see J-Hope yesterday. But I found him a couple hours ago. I tried to help him on my own. I gave him some Tylenol and cold compresses, but when I knew he was really bad, I brought him here because I didn’t know what else to do.”

With gloves on and cleaning supplies out, Seokjin took J-Hope’s hand in his own and told Suga, “You did the right thing. This is a severe infection. He needs something a little heavier than Tylenol.”

Suga seemed to steel himself despite the worry, and asked, “Oh, god, is he going to get tetanus?”

J-Hope arched in pain as Seokjin applied the first round of antiseptic to his inflamed skin. Seokjin actually knew first hand how painful the cleaning was, so he worked as quickly and effectively as he could.

“Suga,” Seokjin said sharply, then forced himself to be less severe. “I need you to very carefully leave this room and slip out the back of the clinic. Crack the door behind you so it doesn’t shut all the way, and don’t ever tell anyone that the door does that. Then I want you to call Namjoon … Rap Mon, whatever. You call him and tell him that J-Hope is hurt. I’m going to treat him, but he can’t stay here overnight, and he needs to be watched carefully.”

There was uncertainty in Suga’s eyes. “But he’s so bad off. He can’t stay here in the clinic?”

Seokjin gave a decidedly firm shake to his head. “We don’t have a recovery room, and we hardly ever see patients that need something major done to require it. There’s no place for him here, and if he’s discovered …”

As it was, Seokjin was going to need a nurse. He was going to have to trust one of them.

“Okay,” Suga said, reaching for J-Hope’s good hand. “I’m going to be right back, J-Hope. You know you’re with the best doctor in the world.”

J-Hope blinked sluggishly, still sweating profusely.

“Suga,” Seokjin said before he could exit the room. “I don’t want the whole of Bangtan in my clinic.
You’ll draw too much attention. Do you understand?”

Hand on the door handle, Suga nodded. “You just take care of J-Hope, okay?”

He disappeared through the door and Seokjin finished cleaning J-Hope’s wound.

There were two nurses on staff at the moment, with Lizzy out to lunch and Sojin already home for the day. And given the choice between Raina and Nana, the choice was easy. Or as easy as it could be. Nana was the sweeter of the two of them, the most motherly and friendly. But Raina was, next to Yoona, Seokjin’s longest standing employee. Raina had been on the staff even before Jonghyun and Yunho. It had to be her.

“So who’s dying?” Raina asked with a giggle as she followed Seokjin back to the examination room a few minutes later. “You certainly sounded like someone would if I didn’t come with you.”

He could tell the second she spotted J-Hope laying still in the room, and he herded her more fully in the room when she froze.

“Raina,” he said, handing her two vials of blood he’d drawn from J-Hope. “I need these to go out as soon possible. Today.” She accepted the vials a bit awkwardly, and he understood. The clinic didn’t send blood out for analysis very often, and they weren’t equipped to do it themselves. That was one more thing for the wish list.

“Okay,” she said, but her eyes were still glued to J-Hope. And at a whisper, she asked, “Is he going to be okay? Who is he?”

Seokjin covered her hands with his own. “Raina, I need you to promise me that you won’t tell anyone about him. Don’t look at his face, and if you already have, forget it.” It was unlikely that she’d know who he was, or his connection to Bangtan, but she could be in danger if there was any kind of association made. “I need your word.”

Raina startled a little, then said quickly, “You don’t have to ask that of me. I would never … I …” She cleared her throat and held the vials of blood more securely. “You have my word.”

He lifted his hands from hers. “Thank you, Raina. I can’t explain right now, but I will be able to one day. I promise you that explanation then.”

“You don’t have to,” she said simply, and that was why he’d picked her and trusted her. That right there.

“I’ll run these out immediately,” she said.

“Before that,” Seokjin cut in, “I need you to bring me penicillin G. I’m going to set up an IV. Also bring Penicillin V. He’ll need to take some home with him, and hopefully by then he’ll be awake enough to not need the IV form of it.” And then he was going to cross his fingers that J-Hope hadn’t picked up anything tricky. If the fever was being caused by anything more than a simple bacterial infection, things would certainly be a lot more challenging.

“Ten minutes,” Raina promised, and Seokjin let her leave the room after that.

Seokjin made his way quickly back to J-Hope’s side a second later, thoroughly checking for a medical alert bracelet or necklace of any kind. But thankfully there was nothing to even begin to indicate that J-Hope was allergic to penicillin. Which was a godsend.

Raina returned and the both of them got J-Hope hooked up to an IV that was feeding him medication
by the time Suga was back.

Seokjin told Suga, who was eyeing Raina nervously, “Don’t worry about her. I’d trust her with my life, and so should you.”

Suga gave her a brief nod and then told Seokjin. “I’ve … made a phone call. They’ll be here in half an hour for the pickup. He’ll be ready then?” Suga looked towards J-Hope. “It’ll be safe to move him?”

Straightening up, Seokjin physically moved Suga to J-Hope’s side and sat him down on the nearby chair. Then he told the shorter male, “I’m J-Hope’s doctor. I take that designation very seriously. So believe me when I say I wouldn’t tell you I think his prognosis is good, if I didn’t believe that.”

Neither was he lying. J-Hope’s temperature was much too high, but a round of antibiotics, saline drip, and time would most likely take care of that. Seokjin had properly stitched up the wound on J-Hope’s hand, and he was now resting comfortably with his sedative.

“I believe you,” Suga said, even if Seokjin didn’t quite believe him. But Seokjin didn’t fault him, either. Namjoon, and even Jimin, had made it clear that Bangtan were family. They weren’t just some street gang. They were the most important people in the world to each other.

And now Jungkook was one of them. If it had been Jungkook lying on that table, Suga would have been just as worried, and just as protective. The thought was terrifying, of course. But there was some comfort in there, too.

“Raina,” Seokjin said, with his mind made up. “I need you to do one more thing for me.”

When Suga’s phone vibrated not too long after that, Seokjin was ready to move J-Hope. The IV lines had been detached, Raina was running interference in the hallway, and then Seokjin and Suga were lifting a still sedated J-Hope.

They made it out into the back alley in record time, and there was Namjoon, dressed like there was an oncoming blizzard, with the car running and the backdoor already open.

There was no time for awkwardness as J-Hope was situated in the car, and Suga climbed in after him.

“Thank you,” Namjoon said softly as he hurried toward the driver’s door.

But Seokjin was faster as he was already pulling open the front passenger door.

Namjoon frown at him. “What are you doing?”

“I suspect J-Hope’s severe fever is a case of bacterial infection. If that’s the case, the antibiotics I’m prescribing him should do their job. But I won’t know for sure for a while. I need to monitor him. I can’t do that at the clinic without it being too dangerous, so I’ll settle for doing it wherever you’re taking him.”

Uncertain, Namjoon asked, “You’re coming with?”

“He’s my patient,” Seokjin said firmly. “I need to make sure he’d okay, and there’s a new doctor helping out at the clinic. I can afford to be away for a couple of hours—we’ll call it an extended lunch. At the very least I have to make sure you get him set up properly wherever he’s going to rest, and I need to make sure you understand the warning sings to look for.” Seokjin lifted the hefty sized bag he’d asked Raina to pack for him. “I’m all ready to go.”
Namjoon just looked confused.

“Or,” Seokjin demanded, “would you rather we just stand out here, you looking ridiculous in your coat, and me too obvious in mine? Would you prefer the wrong person stroll by and see us?”

“Get in,” Namjoon said.

Seokjin was already moving.
Seokjin wasn’t absolutely certain where he was, but it seemed more likely he was at someone’s personal residence, than merely a safe house. And he was pretty sure in his deduction, even though he’d held himself back from snooping in any way.

But now he’d been cooped up in the small, quiet apartment Namjoon had delivered them to for almost eight hours. J-Hope’s fever was starting to come down, and was at a respectable number, the secondary IV was doing wonders. So now Seokjin was restless. And a little curious.

For the first time, with his bag all packed and ready to go, Seokjin got to his feet and wandered the small living room.

Its decor was fairly minimal, cleaner than Seokjin had expected for a home that was lived in by at least a couple of people, and there were no pictures on the walls. There was a bit of artwork, but it seemed the kind you’d buy from the thrift store. As did the trinkets and knickknacks littered around the room.

He supposed he probably shouldn’t have been surprised the apartment looked the way it did. Bangtan had to be careful, even with their personal residences. There was too much danger involved in their everyday life to have pictures of loved ones laying around, or objects of actual sentiment.

From his pocket Seokjin’s phone buzzed, and when he checked it, it was just Raina asking if he was okay. He was texting her a quick reply when the front door to the apartment opened and Seokjin startled.

“It’s just me,” Jimin said, quickly shutting the door behind him.

Seokjin had only seen him twice since he’d gotten J-Hope stabilized, but both times just briefly and they hadn’t so much as said a dozen words to each other.

Ringing his hands a little behind his back, Seokjin asked, “Do you know where my brother is?”

Reason told him that there was no correlation between J-Hope’s purely accidental injury, and Jungkook’s safety. But he still wanted to see his brother, and maybe fuss over him.

Seokjin’s paternal instincts had been raging as of late, ever since Bangtan had come into his life. For all intents and purposes, Jungkook seemed to be taking the sudden overbearing urges will some grace, but who knew how long that would last for. Jungkook had never really been one to indulge him, or allow Seokjin to treat him like he was almost eight years younger.

“Running errands,” Jimin said, his motorcycle helmet tucked under one arm. “Hang around long enough and he’s bound to pop up.”

Seokjin shook his head. “I just wanted to see him before I go.”

Jimin looked suddenly shaken. “Go?”

“Yes,” Seokjin said tersely, almost like he thought Jimin was a little slow. “I’ve been here for a very long time. I need to get back to the clinic and close it, and get ready for tomorrow.”

Jimin sputtered, “But what about J-Hope?”
Crossing his arms in assessment, Seokjin stated, “I’m confident that I’ve got his infection under control, and I’ve gotten the appropriate medication into him quickly enough for a standard recovery period. J-Hope is very lucky, actually, that Suga had sense enough to bring him in as fast as he did. That kind of infection? It can lead to gangrene and other terrible complications. But he’s been getting a steady influx of antibiotics, I gave him a tetanus shot just to be safe, and I’m satisfied with how his temperature had come down. If he stays in bed for the next couple of days at the very least, he’ll most likely make a full recovery.”

Lips pursed, Jimin regarded him silently.

Seokjin sighed, “I’ve already spoken to Suga about the most important warning signs to watch out for. He’s my new nurse, I suppose. But I assure you, I’m confident he knows what to watch for over the next few days, and he knows exactly what medication to give him and at what time. Everything is going to be okay. You have my word as a medical practitioner.”

Jinmin’s eyes narrowed. “Shouldn’t you be telling J-Hope’s boyfriend this?”

“Typically,” Seokjin said, more and more convinced that this kind of attitude was something that came to Jimin naturally, and had nothing to do with how poorly they’d gotten off to initially, “we try to avoid placing all the responsibility on the person who is the closest to patient. Love can be … blinding. At the very least, people who are so close to the patient are often incapable of making rational choices in their panic for the patient’s well being.”

“So you think--”

“I think,” Seokjin cut back, “that I’ve gone over all of this with Suga. I trust him to exercise the right amount of judgment. And you should too, because he’s one of you.”

Jinmin’s eyes narrowed. “I trust Suga.”

“Then I don’t know why we’re having this conversation. Trust my medical judgment, even if you don’t trust anything else.” Seokjin took a step towards the bedroom J-Hope was resting in. “Now, I need to check in on my patient before I leave for the clinic.”

“You’re just so full of yourself,” Jimin chortled. “It’s unbelievable.”

“There’s a difference between being full of yourself, and being confident. In this aspect, I’m the latter.”

“You surely wouldn’t let me forget that.”

There was the oddest expression on Jimin’s face when Seokjin gave him one last look. It was unlike anything Seokjin had seen from him before. He didn’t know what the look meant, or why he was getting it. But then there was the barest hint of a smile, and it was even more unsettling than the look before.

Upon consideration, it wasn’t as if Seokjin could deny that Jimin didn’t have a very handsome smile when he let himself. The evidence was there, even if Jimin seemed like he didn’t smile a lot. And Seokjin thought Jimin would be a lot more agreeable if he just smiled more.

Eventually, Jimin said, “Let me know when you’re ready to go and I’ll take you back to the clinic.”

Seokjin felt himself go pale. “On your motorcycle?”

Now Jimin just looked amused. “How else?”
Assuredly, Seokjin said, “I’ll just wait for Namjoon.”

Jimin bristled a little. “You’re too good to accept a ride from me?”

“Maybe I’d be more interested in the idea of you taking me home if you didn’t drive a ticking bomb.”

Jimin laughed, and it was an attractive sound. “You survived once before.”

Seokjin reasoned, “A possible fluke.” He had hated the way his stomach had crawled up into his chest and remained there for the whole ride. And he’d hated even more how exposed and vulnerable he felt. Seokjin wasn’t one for excitement, and a motorcycle was just that. Trailing a little closer, Jimin said firmly, “I’m not going to let anything happen to you, on or off my bike, so you should just stop worrying. You look extra pretentious when you make that worried face. I’ll protect you, even if it’s just for the ride home.”

“I don’t need your protection,” Seokjin said, eyes narrowing as he felt the echo of what Namjoon had said to him. “And you can tell Namjoon that the next time you see him. Tell him I said to stop sending you and the others to look after me like a kid.”

Jimin tossed his helmet across the room, the hard, protective gear landing expertly on the sofa. “Rap Mon already said to back off.”

Seokjin reached for the bedroom door handle and said over his shoulder, “Then stop acting like you have to protect me.”

Jimin said after him, “Who says I have to?”

Seokjin only frowned at him. What was that supposed to mean?

He forced himself to put that from his mind completely as he went to do his final check on J-Hope. Jimin was just a headache waiting to happen, and Seokjin didn’t have the time or patience for that.

The curtains were drawn tightly in the room when Seokjin entered fully and shut the door firmly behind him. The sun would be down within the hour, but Seokjin understood the need to create a bubble of safety in the room.

“Do you need me to move?”

At the sound of V’s rough voice, Seokjin answered back lightly, “Have I ever needed you to move before?” Then Seokjin gave him a comforting smile. “You’re fine where you are.”

Stretched out on the full bed that dominated one of the two bedrooms in the apartment, was J-Hope. He’d been there since Seokjin and the others had arrived, unconscious the entire time, but steadily getting better. And crammed into his side, almost curled around him like an octopus, was V.

It hadn’t taken Seokjin long to work out what it meant by the way V had acted.

But it hadn’t been expected. Bangtan seemed more like brothers than lovers. They teased each other
and harassed each other like brothers, and Seokjin had never seen any kind of romantic inclination between any of them.

Still, there was no denying that V and J-Hope were in a relationship of some kind. And there was a lot to be said from the the way Suga had given him careful, almost hopeful looks when Seokjin had realized it.

The absurdity of it had made Seokjin a little angry. As if he would care less for his patient in any way, under any circumstances.

“How’s he been doing?” Seokjin asked, reaching for his nearby thermometer.

“Sleeping,” V said, sounding a little frustrated. He had his fingers linked with J-Hope’s and was holding on with some pressure. “Just sleeping.”

Seokjin grinned again. “I know it’s kind of boring, but honestly, sleeping is the best thing J-Hope could possibly by doing right now. And he is just sleeping. He’s not sedated. That means he’s healing as he sleeps, and he’ll be back on his feet sooner than not.”

“I’m just …” V sighed. “I’m not used to him being this quiet. He’s never quiet.”

“Yeah,” Seokjin said with a soft laugh, “I got that impression with him.” Of all of Bangtan, Seokjin had probably spent the least amount of time around J-Hope. But every time Seokjin had seen him, he’d been bright and happy and smiling. He didn’t look like he fit in at all with Bangtan, but he must have.

V’s head rested against J-Hope’s shoulder. “I don’t like it when he’s this quiet.”

Seokjin took J-Hope’s temperature silently, and when the device beeped, he said, “Look at that. His temperature is down even more from the last time I checked it. V, I don’t want to make you believe that J-Hope is going to be back on his feet by tomorrow. That isn’t the case. But he’s improving more quickly than I anticipated.”

Next Seokjin checked J-Hope’s hand, and he was even more pleased that the sight of the wound was less red and irritated than it had been, the stitches were holding well, and all signs of infection were starting to calm down.

“So,” Seokjin told V. “I talked to Suga about J-Hope’s antibiotic routine. If you have questions, he can answer them, and if you stick to it, he’ll only need them for a couple of days more. But for now, I need to get back to the clinic.”

Lightning fast V reached out and snagged Seokjin’s wrist, his fingers getting tangled up almost comically in the bracelet Seokjin wore.


“J-Hope,” Seokjin corrected, “is going to be just fine. All he needs is to continue to rest, take his antibiotics—the kind which can now be taken orally, and not run off getting into danger before he’s ready. With you here to watch over him, I know that’ll happen.”

“What if something goes wrong?” V demanded. “What if his fever spikes again?”

“I don’t anticipate it will,” Seokjin said, but then assured, “however, if anything happens, if you have any worries or even simple questions, you can always call me. I always have my phone on me, and I always answer or check my messages promptly. And if you think that you need to, you can bring J-
Hope to the clinic, or I’ll come back over here. But V, I’m telling you, he’s going to be fine. By tomorrow, I think his fever will be completely gone, and the day after, he’ll be awake and alert enough to have a full conversation with you. This time next week? It’ll be as if nothing even happened.”

“I know, I know,” V said, going a bit boneless on the bed. “I’m sorry. I just … I worry.”

“You love him.”

V’s eyes darted over. “You … ah …”

“I can tell,” Seokjin said expertly. “It’s in the way you talk about him. I only needed to hear you say a few words about him for less than a minute, and I could tell.”

“And?”

“And what?” Seokjin asked lightly, straightening up.

“I don’t know,” V laughed. “Everyone else had a lot to say when J-Hope and I started dating. I thought you might too.”

Seokjin shrugged. “I think the two of you are clearly good for each other. So I can’t imagine anything else matters, let alone what I think. You take care of each other, that much I can see, and I bet you watch after each other, too. You have each other’s backs?”

V gave a silent nod.

“Then you’re good for each other,” Seokjin said. “And that’s all that matters.”

Seokjin was putting the last of his things away in the bag he’d brought when V asked him suddenly, “What’s that bracelet?”

Almost instinctively, Seokjin looked down at it. “It’s nothing.”

“I don’t think it’s nothing,” V said seriously. “I’m a nurse, remember?”

Seokjin chuckled. “It’s a medical alert bracelet. I wear it in case I need immediate medical attention, or I’m involved in an accident. It’s so my doctors, or whoever is treating me, knows exactly what my condition is, and how to avoid complications.”

There was no use in lying. The universal medical symbol on the top indicated that it was something related to his health, and V wasn’t an idiot.

V, slowly, eased out, “Complications? Medical alert?”

“It’s nothing for you to worry about,” Seokjin insisted. “It’s a condition I was born with, it’s something I manage with medication and frequent hospital checkups, and vigilance.”

“What kind of condition?”

Seokjin gathered up his bag. “It’s nothing you need to know about. The bracelet is only for emergencies, so don’t think about it.”

For a second more, Seokjin thought V might press the issue, but eventually he nodded and said, “Thank you for helping J-Hope, and for helping all of us time and time again. Thank you for coming when we need you, and letting us come to you. Thank you.”
“You don’t have to thank me, V.”

“Taehyung.”

Seokjin stopped. “Huh?”

On the bed, V finally detached himself from a sleeping J-Hope and sat up slowly. “My name … my real name. It’s Taehyung.”

It meant something. It meant something utterly profound and important that V was telling him what his actual name was. Because more and more Seokjin was starting to understand why Bangtan went by the ridiculous, almost laughable names. Namjoon did it to protect his family. Taehyung obviously did it to put a barrier between anyone who might hurt his friends and himself. Names were shields with Bangtan, and only the most trusted were let into the fold.

Formally, Seokjin bowed towards him. “It’s nice to properly meet you, Taehyung.”

“That’s Nurse Taehyung.”


When Seokjin was back out in the living room he was surprised to see that almost everyone was present, sitting around in various states.

Except for …

“So you’re all sitting around while my brother is out there doing your dirty work?” Seokjin said, eyes gaze sliding from Jimin, to Suga, and then to Namjoon. But he hoped they understood that there was no bite to his words.

“Actually,” Suga piped up, sitting cross legged on the sofa. “I think Jungkook is visiting your father.”

A little confused, Seokjin repeated, “Visiting my father?”

Jimin shrugged.

Namjoon didn’t look certain either, but neither was he meeting Seokjin’s gaze for more than a moment. The awkwardness was starting to reach maximum levels.

Then a second later Seokjin realized. “Oh!” he exclaimed louder than he’d intended. “He’s finally going to tell our father about Bangtan.”

“What!” Jimin demanded.

“He’s going to what?” Namjoon asked as well.

Seokjin felt a bit stupid, flailing his arms as he rushed to tell them, “Well, not Bangtan!” He took an even, calming breath amidst a tightening chest, and said, “I told Jungkook that he had to be honest with our father.”

“What?” Namjoon asked tersely.

“Our father thinks Jungkook has been wasting the summer away with friends, and that when the semester starts back up, he’ll be an incoming college freshman. He thinks that Jungkook is going to
give into pressure and become a lawyer or accountant. We all know that’s the furthest thing from the possible truth. And I can’t let Jungkook perpetrate that kind of deceit. So I told him he had to tell our father.”

“Tell him exactly what?” Jimin asked, looking scary.

“Not that he’s gone and stupidly joined a gang,” Seokjin bit back without restraint. “I know that Jungkook can’t tell anyone he cares about, or even strangers for that matter, about Bangtan. But he can and does need to say something about not planning on going to college. He needs to come clean about his future plans not being what our father expects, and he can’t pretend like a better solution will suddenly present itself.”

Suga frowned. “Is your dad going to take that well?”

Seokjin nearly winced. “When I told my father I planned to open a clinic that would cater an impoverished public who couldn’t afford to seek medical treatment elsewhere, he threatened to disown me. He cut me off from the family financially, told me I had to move out, and lectured me for at least an hour about what a disappointment I was to him. He let me know he thought it was nothing but a wasted opportunity, that my dead mother would be ashamed of my selfishness, and that was just the beginning.”

Jimin balked. “Selfishness?”

“I was considered,” Seokjin told them, “to be the premier candidate in the oncology department during my residency. I studied with the best in Seoul and was being primed to take over a comfortable job that would mostly include research, a couple of incredibly difficult cases a year, and plenty of praise and awards from my colleagues. I could, my father argues, eventually have been a household name within medical community. He still, to this day, thinks I’m selfish for apparently wasting the talent I have and becoming his equivalent of a backwater voodoo doctor.”

Namjoon and Suga looked offended, but it was Jimin who said, “What an asshole.”

Seokjin tried to give them a smile. “It’s okay. My father has always been like that, at least as long as I can remember. He’s suffered loss and trauma that has made him the way he is. And he’s entitled to his opinion. Because what he sees as a waste, is something I see as an opportunity. I like setting broken bones and delivering babies. I like people coming to see me before their conditions become irreparable, and I like saving lives through preventative measures that my patients can actually afford. Health care is not a privilege. It’s a right. One day my father might understand that, but if he doesn’t, that’s something I’ve learned to accept.”

Namjoon asked, “What do you think is going to happen with your brother?”

“I don’t know for certain,” Seokjin said honestly. “But what do I suspect is going to happen? I think my father is going to lose it. He’s going to blow up, and I’m going to end up being very thankful for Bangtan.”

Jimin snorted loudly.

“Really,” Seokjin said, and he hoped they believed him. “Because my father is probably going to kick him out. He’s going to say the same things to Jungkook that he said to me, and the difference is that when I had to leave home, I was on my own completely. I didn’t have anyone. But Jungkook will have you, and I know you’ll take care of him.”

Of that, he had no doubt.
“Anyway,” Seokjin pressed on. “I need to get back to the clinic. I wouldn’t leave if I wasn’t confident about J-Hope. So, should I get a cab?”

“I already offered to take you back,” Jimin said, straightening up. “But I forgot, you’re too good for my bike.”

“Sorry,” Seokjin told him, “I just don’t think there’s room enough for me on the back with your attitude taking up all that space.”

Jimin laughed loudly. “You didn’t seem to have a problem holding on tight to me the last time we rode together.”

Seokjin told him with false sweetness, “That’s because I was trying to squeeze the life out of you. Sadly, I failed.”

With amused eyes Suga asked, “Is there going to be a rumble?”

“I’ll take you back,” Namjoon said suddenly, getting to his feet. “It’s only fair. I brought you here in the first place.”

“Okay,” Seokjin said. Even the awkward car ride with Namjoon was bound to be better than a motorcycle ride with Jimin.

Jimin leaned back in his armchair and said in a sulking kind of way, “It’s just a motorcycle. It’s not going to hurt you.”

Suga asked Jimin, “You like to tell people you’ve never crashed, but didn’t you break your arm once when you wiped out on that thing?”

Just as Namjoon and Seokjin were slipping out of the apartment, the first of the sofa pillows started flying across the room, accompanied with a war cry.

When they were in the car and headed back towards the clinic, Namjoon kept his eyes locked on the road, but said, “I want to thank y--”

“Don’t,” Seokjin said sharply, leaning his head against the cool of the glass window. “If one more person thanks me for doing my job, I’m going to lose it.”

Namjoon didn’t answer back right away, but when he did, he said, “Your job is to show up at that clinic, see the people who come through the front door, and not screw up. Your job isn’t to constantly be at our beck and call, running off to take care of us as every chance. So when we say thank you, even if you’re tired of hearing it, just know that it’s because we know how much above and beyond this is for you, and we genuinely appreciate you.”

“All right,” Seokjin said quietly, because he wasn’t sure what else to say. “You’re welcome.”

As expected, Namjoon drove them to the back of the clinic, down the alleyway that Seokjin was becoming too familiar with.

But when he stopped the car, Seokjin hesitated. He told himself he was working up the courage to say something, but he wasn’t certain.

“I think we should talk,” Namjoon said, surprising Seokjin.

“About us?”
Namjoon gave a silent nod.

Seokjin steeled himself. “I want to say I’m sorry--about how confrontational I came off last time. I didn’t mean to lash out at you. That wasn’t fair. I just wanted you to understand that I had to fight really hard to be as independent as I am right now. And I’m not giving it up for anything. Or anyone.”

Softly, Namjoon said, “Because of your father?”

“Because of him,” Seokjin agreed. “I grew up very repressed. I had to do what he said, and I based my entire life around trying to please him. I fell in line a lot, and never questioned if what I wanted was more important that what he did. Me getting away from him, starting the clinic, and proving that I can stand on my own, is the most important thing I’ve ever done in my life.”

Namjoon turned to look at him. “I just want to keep you safe.”

“By having your friends follow me around? By having Bangtan report back to you where I go and what I do?”

Namjoon looked pained. “You’re special to me. If anything happened to you …”

“Danger will always be there,” Seokjin said knowingly. “And that’s just a part of the life we lead. But I can’t have you standing over me. I can’t have you so scared of that danger that you treat me like a child.”

“And what should I do instead?” Namjoon asked, sounding desperate. “Wait until either of us slips up in the slightest? Wait until someone in Infinite gets a little too nosey and spots something out of the ordinary? I’m supposed to just trust that you won’t get snatched off the street and disappear?”

“Namjoon--”

“No,” the other man said quickly, “that is a very real possibility to us associating, and you want me to pretend like it isn’t there. You want me to think that nothing will happen if anyone draws a connection between us, and that’s not the truth. But if Jimin is there, or Suga, and Infinite tries to make a move against you, they could be all the difference in the world you getting hurt.”

Quietly, Seokjin said, “Jimin said you already told them not to follow me around.”

“For now,” Namjoon said. “But if we get serious, if you become even more important to me, I can’t just let you walk into danger unprotected each day.”

“I don’t know how many times I have to tell you I don’t need your protection,” Seokjin huffed in a frustrated way. “I’m quick and smart. I can think my way out of a problem. And I’m not as helpless as you’d like to believe I am. I walked face first into danger each and every day before I met you, and will continue to hold my own in this neighborhood every day after. You attempting to protect me, is going to get me hurt. Do you understand that? You’re drawing attention to me. You’re painting the target on my back.”

Seokjin could see Namjoon’s fingers clench into fists in his lap.

“Maybe I am,” Namjoon said.

“You’re what?”

Namjoon gave him a heartbreaking look. “I’m making you a target. I’m putting the bullseye on you,
and that’s not right.”

“I…”

Namjoon shook his head. “I meant every word I said to you that day I told you I thought you were an angel. I looked up at you and it felt like my heart started beating for the first time in my life. You’re gorgeous, you’re kind, and you’re incredibly intelligent. You go out of your way to help people, you act so selflessly you could put the best saint to shame, and you are the strongest person I have ever met in my life. I… I talk about you becoming more precious to me, but the truth is you’re already precious. You’re already the most precious person I have in my life, next to my grandparents, and I will do anything to protect you.”

“Namjoon.”

“Even,” Namjoon added, “even if that means you’ll be the safest away from me, and away from Bangtan.”

Shakily, Seokjin felt his breath caught in his throat. “You don’t get to make that kind of choice for me.”

“That choice has already been made for us,” Namjoon argued. “Infinite didn’t have a single reason to look at you until we stumbled into your clinic and brought all kinds of trouble with us. And if we’re gone, they won’t have a second reason to look.”


“I have to.”

“That’s bullshit,” Seokjin snapped. “You running away from this, from us, is not the way to solve this. We need to talk this through and come up with a solution that works for us. You don’t need to once again try and decide things for me. You’re the leader of Bangtan, you’re not the leader of me.”

Namjoon shook Seokjin’s hand away. “Infinite has no idea that Jungkook is even associated with us. I’ve kept him under the radar for a reason. So he can still come here. He can still come see you and the two of you can just be normal. If stuff is really going down with your father, I have a feeling he’ll need you.”

Seokjin blinked rapidly as he felt his eyes start to burn. “Tell me what you’re saying. Tell me plainly, and only say the things you really mean. Tell me what you won’t want to take back when you’ve had more time to think about this.”

Seokjin’s eyes were stinging, but Namjoon’s were actually wet as he told Seokjin, “Me being around you isn’t possible anymore. I have very strong feelings for you, but I won’t put those feelings before your wellbeing. I won’t be with you. That’s what I’m saying.”

Seokjin clenched down on his teeth so hard he was surprised there was no cracking.

“You don’t want us to try.”

“No,” Namjoon said. “I won’t try.”

Seokjin, with trembling fingers, reached for the door handle.

“I’m sorry,” Namjoon whispered. “I can’t…I won’t be the one to get you hurt. You’re right. You can take care of yourself if I’m not there. And as much as I like you, it isn’t worth your safety.”
The barest hint of light that managed to make it through the tinted windows, and it bounced off Seokjin’s medical alert bracelet peeking out from underneath his sleeve.

“Does it matter what I want?” Seokjin asked him. “Does it matter that you make me happy? Does it matter I’m willing to work on us and find a way for us to be together? Even if it isn’t easy? Does it matter to you at all that this isn’t what I want for us? Because I see an us?”

“No.”

Seokjin twisted his wrist and said, “I have a heart condition. I’ve had it since birth and it’s only getting worse. I’m going to die from it one day, and that day is probably going to be a lot sooner than I want. I joke about Jimin’s bike being a bomb, but my heart truly is, and I don’t know the time on it counting down. And living like that? Knowing that every time my heart stutters or my chest goes tight, that I could be on my way to the morgue, has made me more inclined to fight for what I want. And so I’m telling you that I want you. I want whatever we could possibly have, and I was willing to fight for a chance at it.”

Regret streaked its way across Namjoon’s face, but also resolve.

“I don’t connect easily to people who aren’t my patients,” Seokjin admitted, feeling almost like the air was thin. “I find it hard to date, and sometimes hard to trust people. But with you it was different. With you…”

Shaking his head, Sokjin gave a huff and then pushed out of the car at once. It took a second to get his feet firmly underneath him. And once that was done, he took a moment to steady himself. He heard Namjoon called after him, “Seokjin--”

Seokjin closed the door to the car behind him. Then, trying his best to put Namjoon from his mind, he cut down the rest of the alleyway so he could go around the building and enter through the front.

There were only a couple people in the waiting room when Seokjin entered, and despite the pain he was feeling inside, he made sure to greet each of them and smile as warmly as he could possibly manage.

Most of the staff, as usual, had gone from for the day already, but Seokjin was surprised Victoria was still present. He hadn’t expected her to pull a twelve hour day.

“You look pretty bad,” she told him honestly, but cracked a smile to let him know she didn’t mean it in a rude way. “I find it hard to date, and sometimes hard to trust people. But with you it was different. With you…”

“Sorry,” Seokjin said, trying for normalcy in his voice. “I had an emergency call I had to respond to. It happens rarely, but once in a while I have to go to a patient.”

And now all he wanted was to climb the stairs to his apartment, crawl into bed, and hold his pillow tight. He wanted to desperately try to pretend that Namjoon didn’t seem to think they were worth fighting for, and that Namjoon didn’t want to try and see if things could work between them.

Seokjin understood that things were new with them. He understood that neither of them had put much into their relationship yet, and they’d only shared a single kiss. But all the potential in the
world had been there. And Seokjin had felt something special. Namjoon had truly made Seokjin happy, like he hadn’t been in a while. And now it was gone before Seokjin had had a chance to enjoy any of it.

“I understand,” Victoria said, not seemingly irritated in the least bit. “Excited for tomorrow?”

Seokjin blinked slowly. “Tomorrow?”

Victoria arched an eyebrow. “The gala?”

Seokjin could have pulled out his hair in that moment. The gala. He’d completely forgotten about the gala.

“You forgot,” Victoria accused.

“I didn’t,” he lied. “Tomorrow night. Nine. I have your address and I’ll pick you up at eight-thirty.”

“Okay,” Victoria said, but he didn’t think she believed him.

“I’m looking forward to it,” he swore, then gave her a parting wave. “I’ll see you then.”

She turned away and Seokjin crumpled a bit, falling back against the nearest wall, sucking in air almost frantically as all of the sudden the hurt and the pain of Namjoon discarding him caught up with him. He clutched a hand to his chest and closed his eyes, his head tipping back against the wall.

It wasn’t fair. After so long of thinking he’d be married to his work, he’d finally found someone he liked. And there’d been hurdles to get over, major issues to resolve, but Namjoon had proven time and time again he was a better person than Seokjin had initially given him credit for.

But it had been all for nothing.

And now Seokjin was alone again, married once more to his work. It left him feeling lonelier than ever, and never so full of regret.
Chapter Nine

Seokjin asked his brother, “So I take it you’re sufficiently plied with food, drink, and comfort?”

Currently Jungkook was stretched out on Seokjin’s bed, a can of soda on the nearby bedside table, a bag of chips mere inches away, and a mound of pillows behind him. From Seokjin’s tiny kitchen the smell of something delicious, which would be Jungkook’s dinner in about a half hour, came drifting in.

Jungkook flashed him a thumbs up. “You’re officially the best big brother ever.”

From nearby Seokjin reached for a bag of gummies, tossed it to Jungkook, and tried not look smug.

“Seriously,” Jungkook said, “If this were an anime, I would have little hearts in my eyes right now. And I’d probably be calling you Sempai.”

Seokjin snorted, though he was secretly pleased, and he turned back to his wardrobe.

It was the night of the gala and he’d been in an intense staring match with the suit he was supposed to wear for several minutes. Seokjin wasn’t one to get dressed up often, and he remembered the suit had a tie. Dread was starting to build in Seokjin.

“I take it there’s a reason you let me come here, lounge around and bother you. You fed me even before hand, cooked me dinner, and are now giving me treats with a ton of sugar in them. Did I do something really bad and you’re trying to lull me into a false sense of security before you rip the rug out from under me and beat me with it?”

Seokjin laughed. “Can’t I just be a good big brother?”

“Yes,” Jungkook admitted, “but I’m still suspicious.”

Finally, Seokjin took the suit off the hanger and turned back to Jungkook saying, “Dad started blowing up my phone today.”

Jungkook, who’d been half reaching inside the nearby chip bag for a Dorito, froze. His eyes went almost hysterically wide. “Dad … called you …”

“Mm-hm.” Seokjin laid the suit out on the back of a nearby chair. “First, he wanted to complain about you, then he wanted to accuse me of having some part in it, then mostly he just wanted to yell.”

Almost at a whisper, Jungkook asked, “What did you say back?”

“Keep eating,” Seokjin commanded, pointing at the bag of chips. “I told dad you’re not a child. I said you’re eighteen now. You’re a man, and you’re free to make your own choices, your own mistakes, and forge your own path. I said I would support you, and that’s around the time things got really bad.”

“I’m sorry,” Jungkook said, frowning.

Seokjin told him, “I’m not. I’m only sorry you had to face him down and endure what I’ll assume wasn’t a very enjoyable time.”

“No.” Jungkook flopped back wholly on the bed. “It wasn’t great. There was a whole lot of
screaming, like you said, accusations, some threats, and then he delivered what I think was supposed to be the finishing blow.”

“What was it?”

Jungkook said, “He told me if I wasn’t going to go to college, then he couldn’t support me anymore. He said I had to find a new place to live, get a job on my own, and support myself.”

Seokjin pointed out, “He said this after you already told him you have those things?”

“I didn’t give details,” Jungkook said with a nod. “But I let him know I’ve got an apartment, and I have a job that pays, and that I am supporting myself. I told him I’m happy where I am and what I’m doing, and that I don’t need his credit cards. I’m not sure he was listening in the least bit, and he probably expects me to come running home within a week.”

“Maybe he wants you to,” Seokjin mused. At the look on his brother’s face, he said, “You are the baby of the family, whether you like to admit it or not--other when you’re using it to your advantage in an argument. You’re our father’s baby in a lot of ways, and you leaving is the last straw. He’s coming home to an empty house these days.”

Jungkook didn’t look moved in the least. “He’s got his secretary who practically lives at the house, the actual housekeeper, and his driver. I don’t think he’ll run out of people to yell at.”

Seokjin shrugged. “Probably not. But like I said, you’re the last of his family to leave him, and that’s all he’s had in his life, one way or another.”

Jungkook chomped down on a chip. “I can’t believe you’re defending him.”

“I’m understanding him,” Seokjin corrected. “And one day you will too, when you’re older. You never have to agree with him, but you might start to understand him with time.”

Jungkook frowned.

“But,” Seokjin threw in, “I want you to know I’m really proud of you for going to him, being honest, and standing up to him. You’re not my kid brother anymore, you’re really a man.”

“Stop,” Jungkook wailed dramatically. “I can’t take it. Stop. You’re making things uncomfortable between us. Can you tease me instead?”

Seokjin cuffed Jungkook over the back of the head gently. “I’m never going to be that mean, cold brother you apparently always wanted. Deal with it.”

Jungkook cracked a smile.

Eventually, Seokjin figured it was the longest he was able to put off getting dressed. He had to pick up Victoria in an hour, and with any luck his brother would eat the dinner he’d made, watch TV, and stay out of trouble.

“Hey, can we talk about something else?” Jungkook asked.

Seokjin reached for his undershirt and slid it over his head, enjoying the feel of the crisp, clean fabric sliding over his skin. “You know you don’t have to ask me.”

Jungkook sat up and crossed his legs under him. “Are you and Rap Mon … what’s going on there? Are you guys fighting or something?”
Startled, Seokjin asked him, “Why?”

“It’s weird,” Jungkook insisted. “For a while there, Suga was saying that the two of you were going to run off and get married. I guess Rap Mon took you out on a date?”

Seokjin supposed the noodle house met some of the qualifications of a date. But nothing that came after that had been good. It all hurt less now, but it still was a burn. He hated how they’d parted, how Namjoon had given up so easily, and how Seokjin had thought it might work between for a half second.

“He took me to eat,” Seokjin said. “I kissed him. I liked him.”

“That’s weird.”

“But what?”

“Because he’s my boss and you’re my brother!” Jungkook burst out. “I mean, I would have gotten used to it, but it was weird when I first heard about it. Why didn’t you say anything?”

Seokjin questioned him, “You wanted me to talk to you about liking Namjoon? The first person I’ve liked in a very long time.”

“Point,” Jungkook conceded. “And I mean I guess I understand why you like him. He’s good looking, he’s strong and brave, and he’s pretty funny, too. Plus, he’s like super smart.”

“Smart?”

Jungkook nodded. “Jimin said J-Hope went to school with him, and apparently Rap Mon was always at the top of his class. And he even over performed in those nationwide tests. He could have gone to college anywhere, and he speaks English fluently—his accent isn’t that bad either. He’s really smart.”

That wasn’t exactly what Seokjin wanted to hear. He was just starting to ready himself to forget Namjoon forever. Now Jungkook was only adding to the reasons why Namjoon was the best potential partner Seokjin had had in forever.

“But something happened between you?” Jungkook guessed.

“Did Namjoon say something on his end?” Seokjin prayed Namjoon wasn’t exposing their personal business, even to the people he trusted the most.

“Yeah,” Jungkook said tensely.

As Seokjin was slipping his pants on, he said, “I really did like Namjoon. I guess I still like him. But we couldn’t come to an agreement on our relationship. He wanted one thing and I wanted another. It fell through before there was much there.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Maybe it should have been a little uncomfortable talking to his brother about his love life, but Jungkook was earnest and frank as a person, so it didn’t feel awkward.

“He’s Bangtan’s leader,” Seokjin said, zipping up his black slacks. “I’m a doctor who works in the heart of Infinite’s territory, and apparently Infinite and Bangtan are having serious issues right now, for whatever reason. That makes all of this incredibly dangerous. Namjoon wanted to try and protect
me … to … try and do things for me I don’t want. I let him know I have never needed to be protected, and that isn’t about to start any time soon. We couldn’t compromise.”

Jungkook said agreeably, “For a while I know Rap Mon had Jimin trailing you.”

“I told Namjoon the truth,” Seokjin said, next buttoning the dress shirt up. “I said that him trying to have members of Bangtan protect me from Infinite, was only drawing attention to my connection to Bangtan. I said he was making things more dangerous for us, and he decided that us being together, in a relationship, wasn’t something he wanted to do anymore.”

Namjoon had given some half-assed reason about continuing to protect him, but it really was bullshit in Seokjin’s opinion. And Namjoon’s reasoning for ending things between them had hurt more than the actual parting.

“That’s crazy,” Jungkook declared. “Who wouldn’t want to date you? Even if it was hard.”

Seokjin must have looked as surprised as he felt.

“You’re super-hot, Jin,” Jungkook proclaimed. “And you’re the best doctor ever. You’re nice to people, you cook really well, and you—”

“Jungkook,” Seokjin said softly. “I really liked Namjoon. I thought whatever risk or danger that was associated with him, was worth it. He didn’t feel the same. And considering you just had to deal with our father, I don’t think I have to tell you that you can’t force people to think the same as you.”

Jungkook blurted out, “Rap Mon said that you were off limits. He told everyone that we had to leave you alone and stay away from you. Except me, of course. But he told me I had to be extra careful and not draw attention to you, or to my connection to Bangtan.”

Seokjin sighed. “Nice to see he’s attempting to control things even when we’re not together.”

“He was really serious,” Jungkook said with some kind of wince. “I’ve never seen him like this before, Jin. He said that if any of Bangtan went around you, if they even just happened to pass by an area they knew you were in, they’d be out.”


Jungkook’s eyebrows ran high on his forehead. “Out of Bangtan.”

Seokjin’s mouth went dry.

“Has that ever happened before?”

Silently, Jungkook shook his head.

Once more Seokjin said, “He’s trying to protect me. That means he isn’t learning. Because if he was, if he was paying attention at all, he’d know that I’m not the kind of person who’s delicate or in need of that. I need him to trust and believe in me, to take chances with me, and to be patient with our relationship. Not this.”

Jungkook blew out a breath of air. “I think he thinks you’re delicate. He was asking me, you know. About your heart.”

Seokjin groaned. “That’s my fault.”

His condition wasn’t exactly anything he went around advertising. People who knew tended to either
treat him as if he was incredibly fragile, or as if he could somehow give them the condition he’d been born with. In any case, it was better to only share his medical issues with his closest friends.

He’d only let the matter slip with Namjoon because he’d been upset and angry. He hadn’t meant to guilt trip or motivate Namjoon in any way. He’d just wanted to drive home his point that he was old enough now, and aware enough of his condition, that he was going to do what he wanted. He was going to love who he wanted, save who he could, and take all the risks in the world.

“Did you tell him anything?”

Jungkook shot him a dark look. “Give me some credit, big brother.”

Seokjin felt ease at once. “I know. Okay.”

“I just said,” Jungkook told him, “that it was something you were born with. I said you had never let it bring you down, it didn’t stop you from doing your job in any way, and if he wanted to know more, he should ask you personally.”

Seokjin crossed the short distance between them, curled his fingers around the back of Jungkook’s neck, and brought their foreheads together. “Thank you.”

“So?” Jungkook asked when they parted. “Is that it then? That’s it between the two of you?”

Seokjin put the tie behind his neck and straightened the two ends in front of him. “That’s what Namjoon decided. It’s not what I want, but I also don’t know anymore if I want to be with someone who isn’t willing to fight for something that could be so good.”

Jungkook reasoned, “Maybe he’s just scared.”

“Maybe,” Seokjin said as he fussed with his tie, “Namjoon should consider other people’s feelings, and not be so selfish. I’m only going to live once, and that’s the same thing that can be said for everyone else. Sure, some things in life are risky, and other things aren’t worth it. But the older I get, Jungkook, the more is start to realize that if you’re going to take a risk on something, the thing most worthy of that is another person.”

Jungkook rolled off the bed as Seokjin gave a frustrated sound and pulled his tie away.

“Here,” his brother said, standing in front of him and expertly tying it.

“How do you even know how to tie a tie?”

Jungkook smiled. “You’d be surprised the kind of useless information and skills I pick up running things around for Bangtan.”

Thirty seconds later when Seokjin took a look in the mirror, a respectable looking man with a perfectly tied tie was staring back at him.

“You look good,” Jungkook said confidently. “Everyone will be throwing themselves at you tonight.”

“I wish they’d throw their pocketbooks at me instead,” Seokjin retorted.

Jungkook brushed invisible dirt off Seokjin’s shoulder. “You’ll get the money to keep the clinic running. I know you’ll manage. You always do.”

Seokjin couldn’t help smiling a little. Jungkook’s optimism was appreciated.
For a while longer Seokjin was able to linger, enjoying the company of his brother.

The meal he’d prepared came out of the oven, and while Jungkook ate quickly and with sounds of appreciation, Seokjin went over the lines he’d be delivering that night in the hopes that someone would want to invest in the clinic.

Eventually, however, Seokjin knew he had to leave to pick up Victoria.

“You can stay as long as you want,” Seokjin assured Jungkook who was laid out on the sofa, rubbing his stuffed stomach dramatically. “You can stay all night and leave tomorrow morning. I don’t mind. But if you do go, use the side door, okay? Don’t go through the clinic. I don’t want you setting off the alarm by mistake.”

Jung gave him a salute, wished him luck, and then turned back to the show on the TV.

For the event that night, Seokjin had borrowed Jonghyun’s car. He’d gotten the keys in exchange for working on Sunday, which was normally his day off, so Jonghyun could have the day instead. Considering things with Jungkook had settled down, and things with Namjoon had ended, it didn’t seem like such a huge sacrifice to make. It wasn’t as if he had anything else to do, other than a little grocery shopping that could be done at any time.

And as far as cars went, not that Seokjin was much of a judge, the blue tinted sedan was nice enough. Mostly Seokjin just cared if it would serve its purpose of getting himself and Victoria to and from the gala.

To pick up Victoria, Seokjin had to drive almost completely across Seoul, which took longer than he’d anticipated due to the weekend traffic.

It also didn’t escape his notice that Victoria’s residence was near where Seokjin had grown up, in one of the most premier, gated communities. Seokjin looked the part in his car and suit, but he certainly didn’t feel it. And he was uncomfortable being so close to the house he hadn’t visited since he was nineteen.

“I thought you got scared and changed your mind,” Victoria remarked when she buzzed him into her apartment. She looked absolutely gorgeous in her midnight blue, thigh length dress. It was cut very flattering to her figure, and with her hair styled, makeup done to perfection, and decorative jewels in place, Seokjin was certain he was going to have the most gorgeous woman at the gala on his arm.

“I didn’t,” Seokjin assured her, guiding her back to the car a short distance away. “It’s just been so long since I drove anywhere, I forgot to anticipate the traffic. We’ll make it on time, but I’m a little embarrassed.”

By the time they arrived at the hospital and Seokjin passed the keys to the car off to the valet, the party was in full swing. They weren’t late by any stretch of the imagination, but a good deal of the guests were already there and mingling.

He could do this, Seokjin told himself, he could manage one night around people who were technically his peers. He wasn’t inferior to them in any way, and he had nothing to be nervous about.

Of course, just as he and Victoria were accepting flutes of champagne Victoria observed, “You look nervous.”

Seokjin had to admit, “It’s been a long time since I’ve been around this many other doctors.” All of them who were constantly progressing their careers and publishing medical articles. While Seokjin slaved away at his tiny little clinic, barely making end’s meet.
They did a full circuit of the room, politely introducing themselves here and there, and then Victoria asked, “You never considered working at a hospital like this?”

Seokjin drank down at least half his champagne. “I did once,” he told her, and it wasn’t a lie. “When I first started my residency, I thought that this was the place I wanted to be. This type of hospital, the kind that’s on the cutting edge of new technology, and the forefront of new procedures, appealed to me in many ways. But that was before I understood the logistics of the medical world. That was before I realized all the new treatments I was helping to develop, wouldn’t reach a faction of the people who needed them, at this kind of hospital.”

Before Victoria could respond, and Seokjin hoped he hadn’t made her feel uncomfortable in any way, someone was calling his name.

Seokjin blinked in surprise at the sight of his old friend rushing towards him.

“Minhyuk,” Seokjin greeted him quickly, and then laughed when he was swept up into a tight hug. He regained his senses a second later and introduced, “Victoria, this is one of my oldest friends, Minhyuk. We did our residencies at the same time and were close.”

Minhyuk, who’d always been such a free spirit that Seokjin had envied him greatly, gave Victoria a bow and said, “I have no idea how Seokjin managed to snag you, but I’m honored to meet you. Also, do you have a sister?”

“Victoria is a friend and a neurosurgeon,” Seokjin said, clearing his throat. “She’s smarter than the both of us put together. Chew on that.”

“Oh!” Minhyuk bowed even more deeply than the first time.

Victoria brushed the comments off. “I’m new to Seoul. Seokjin was kind enough to invite me along to meet some of the doctors in the area.”

Minhyuk looked skeptical. “Seokjin is about as social as a recluse.”

Seokjin rolled his eyes. “Not all of us can run off to Nepal and live out of our backpack for years.”

That was, at least, the last Seokjin had heard of him. Minhyuk had joined Doctors Without Boarders, sold almost everything he owned, and had given up many of the possible fellowships coming his way in the future. He’d gone off to work as a doctor in underdeveloped countries, and places in desperately need of basic medical help.

“What are you even doing back in Seoul?” Seokjin asked, astounded. He’d thought for sure that when Minhyuk had set off for Nepal, everything he owned in his backpack, that it would be the last time Seokjin saw him.

Victoria touched Seokjin’s arm lightly and said, “I’m going to let you two catch up.”

“You can stay,” Seokjin said right away, hoping she’d enjoy Minhyuk’s company.

She nodded towards a light cluster of people near ceiling to floor windows. “I’m going to head over there and check out our first possible sponsors.”

She wandered off without so much as a glance back and Minhyuk asked once more for certainty, “She doesn’t have a sister? Seriously?”

Seokjin only smiled. “It’s really good to see you, Minhyuk. Now, really, what are you doing back in
Seoul?"

The taller doctor offered, “My older sister is getting married. Her boyfriend just finished his military service and he’s asked her to marry him. With our parents gone, I have to be here to help her.”

Slowly, as Minhyuk talked, and the time passed, Seokjin started to relax more and more. Alcohol helped, and Victoria, who was working the crowd over like a politician, was a force to be reckoned with.

Seokjin did his part, too. He found the least threatening people, leaving the tigers to Victoria, and spent the next several hours explaining the purpose of his clinic, and more than that, his dream for it.

Minhyuk, who was actually at the event to support a cousin of his, seemed to join in for the fun of it, selling Seokjin’s clinic like it was his own.

As the night began to wind down, with Seokjin having drunk more than he thought was smart, and having secured several promises from prominent people to look into the clinic, Seokjin was tentatively declaring the night over and a success.

He, Victoria, and Minhyuk stumbled their way out into the warmth of the early September night that was lingering in the foyer before the exit, Victoria carrying her heels in one hand and Minhyuk insisting they go to a nearby bar.

“You can’t be serious,” Seokjin told him, his head spinning a little. Because of his medication alcohol was typically off the table unless he planned for it ahead of time. But he’d predicted that the event would include plenty of alcohol, so he’d forgone his medication that day. He’d certainly be fine until he got back to his home, but it wasn’t something he could make a routine out of. “It’s late.”

Minhyuk scoffed. “The morning is young, and so are we.”

Victoria protested, “Not that young.”

Minhyuk insisted, “We’re young and pretty. Let’s go get drinks. I’ll even pay. Victoria, my new friend, tell me you want to go home to that sleeping husband of yours and I won’t say another word. Or, if you want to go get some soju and sing some karaoke, you come with me now.” He held out his hand like he was expecting her to accept before she said anything.

Surprisingly, Victoria seemed to be weakening.

Seokjin couldn’t bring himself to blame her. Minhyuk was impossibly charming. He’d worked his way through half of their residency group by the time they were in their second year.

“Oh, okay,” Victoria said finally. “But just for a few hours! And only because I don’t have a shift at the clinic until the afternoon.”

“Seokjin?” Minhyuk demanded. “Are you going to be our wet blanket?”

Like Victoria, Seokjin knew that he didn’t have a morning shift, either. He wasn’t scheduled to go in until noon, but that didn’t mean when he did show up for his shift, that he wanted to be suffering from a hangover.

“Oh, actually,” a new voice cut in, deep and tentative, “I was hoping Seokjin might want to come with me instead.”

Seokjin turned so quickly he got a little dizzy, and he could hardly believe that Namjoon was
standing in front of him.

Namjoon, looking dashingly handsome in his own suit, cufflinks shining under the florescent light, was looking over at him with a pinch of nervousness, but a whole lot of hopefulness. His hair was slicked back in a stylish, debonair way, and he looked like someone’s prince charming. God, and the smile, it was still the smile that was getting Seokjin.

“How … why …” Seokjin didn’t know where to start.

“Hi,” Namjoon said, smiling a little. “You look nice.”

“How did you know where I was?” Seokjin asked, unable to concentrate on anything but Namjoon standing in front of him. “And how did you get in here?”

Namjoon put his hands in his pockets and said, “After your brother got done yelling at me for being an idiot and selfish, he told me where the hospital party was that you went to. I came right here.” He plucked at his suit jacket, which looked a slight bit too small on him and added, “The trick to getting in anywhere, is looking like you belong. And confidence.”

Minhyuk took a step up next to Seokjin, his own stance defensive. Seokjin knew Minhyuk would help him out if he indicated for even a second he wanted Namjoon to go away.

“Can we talk?” Namjoon asked.

A little childish, and fueled by alcohol, Seokjin asked, “Are you sure you wouldn’t prefer to decide that for me?”

The smile fell completely from Namjoon’s face and he said, “Yeah, I deserved that. But give me a chance anyway?”

“Seokjin?” Victoria asked.

Seokjin was absolutely kidding himself if he tried to pretend like he wasn’t going to do what Namjoon was asking.

“You two go ahead to the bar,” Seokjin said, turning to Minhyuk and Victoria. “Text me the address and I’ll join you as soon as I can.”

She hesitantly accepted them. “Are you certain?”

Seokjin glanced back to Namjoon, then nodded. Not matter what came out of whatever they were about to talk about, it was probably best that they got it out of the way and done with.

“I parked around the corner,” Namjoon said when Seokjin came to stand next to him. “Want to get some ice cream?”

Seokjin asked skeptically, “At one in the morning?”

“I know a place,” Namjoon said confidently.

Once more, Seokjin let himself be taken all the way into Bangtan territory. Seokjin didn’t know what to think of the move, or the utter silence in the car.

In fact, neither of them had anything to say until Namjoon was setting bowls of ice cream down in front of them. For such a ridiculous hour, the ice cream shop was at least halfway full, and the sounds of the other patrons were enough to cover their own conversation.
“So, I’m an idiot,” Namjoon said. Seokjin had gotten coffee flavored ice cream and Namjoon had something that looked like mango. Namjoon wasn’t really eating it, merely dragging his spoon through it, and for the first time Seokjin realized he was probably just as nervous. “That’s what your brothers says.”

“A lot of things come out Jungkook’s mouth that aren’t worth listening to,” Seokjin said slowly, taking a small bite of his ice cream. It was exceptionally good. “But in this case …”

“You’re inclined to believe him?”

Seokjin didn’t give a real reply. And neither did he apologize for anything his brother had said.

Instead he said, “I didn’t think I’d see you again. Not on purpose. You were pretty clear when you said you were done with me.”

“Yeah.” Namjoon hung his head. “Here’s the thing. I spend every day, all day, deciding things. And I have to decide them in the most selfless way I can think of. Most of the time I’m pretty sure I’m getting it right. But then something comes along that just rocks my world completely, makes me question everything, and this time around, it was you.”

Seokjin admitted, “I wasn’t exactly expecting to find myself interested in the gang leader for Bangtan, especially with my little brother getting involved.”

“I thought I was being selfless with you,” Namjoon told him.

“You weren’t,” Seokjin said pointedly.

Namjoon nodded deeply. “I know. I was being selfish, actually. I was really, I guess there’s no point in denying it now, trying to protect myself from what I was feeling for you. Don’t get me wrong, the idea of you getting hurt terrified me, and still does. But I have never cared for someone the way I feel myself caring for you, and I was terrified that something would happen and my heart would break.”

Feeling a little stronger, Seokjin took a bigger bite of his ice cream. “What changed your mind?”

“Your scary ass brother,” Namjoon said right away.

“I didn’t send him after you like a bulldog,” Seokjin was clear to say.

Namjoon waved him off. “I know you didn’t. I know you’re not that kind of person. But you guys talked today? He told me what he thought about it all, how stupid and selfish I was being, and how I was hurting you.”

Seokjin set his spoon down and loosened his tie. “You know, Namjoon, it’s okay to be scared once in a while.”

“Rap Mon,” Namjoon reminded, kindly.

Seokjin continued on, “I get the feeling that you don’t let yourself be scared very often.”

“It kind of defeats the purpose of the job I have,” Namjoon said, “if I get scared over things.”

“But you’re human,” Seokjin argued. “And especially when we’re talking matters of the heart, it’s okay to be unsure or scared. Everything about trusting other people not to break your heart is scary. It should be. And that’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

Namjoon reached across the table to capture one of Seokjin’s hands. “But what kind of comparison
is breaking my heart, to you getting broken worse than that? If anyone in Infinite found out how much I care for you, or even a fraction of that, they’d use it against us in a second. They’d try to hurt me by using you, and they’d succeed.”

Seokjin let himself squeeze Namjoon’s fingers securely. “Infinite doesn’t scare me. I think what they do is brutish and thuggish and deplorable. They use fear tactics and intimidation and that makes them overgrown bullies. I refuse to be sacred of bullies.” He added with a laugh. “And trust me, in the fear department, Infinite is nothing compared to when I took my medical boards. I’d face down Sunggyu and his thugs any day over the peer review board that certified me.”

“You don’t have to fear a threat for it to still be one,” Namjoon argued softly. “And that threat, even if you don’t fear it, will break you to get at me.”

Without any sort of warning, Seokjin leaned over the table to place a gentle, chaste kiss on Namjoon’s lips. He didn’t pull back right away, asking, “What do you feel when I do that?” He kissed Namjoon one more time for good measure.

Namjoon sucked in air audibly. “I feel … like I’d do anything to have you kiss me again.”

“No reward,” Seokjin said, “is worth obtaining if there isn’t risk involved. Right now I can’t fix the risk associated with us being together. I can’t move the clinic, I can’t abandon it, and you can’t do either with Bangtan. And I can’t say that things won’t be like this for a long time. I just don’t know. But when I kiss you, when I feel you against me, I realize what was missing before that.”

Namjoon’s large hand carded up into the hair at Seokjin’s nape, and then he was tugging Seokjin in for a much deeper kiss.

It was sweet and wonderful and the kind of kiss that Seokjin hadn’t had forever. There was no pressure to it, no pretense, and he could simply lose himself in the sensation without having to worry about anything.

“I’m sorry,” Namjoon said, putting the barest hint of distance between them. His breath was ghosting over Seokjin’s lips. “I tried to control the situation without realizing I was trying to control you. I was wrong. I’m sorry.”

Seokjin’s fingers brushed against the pulse point at Namjoon’s throat. “It’s been a long time since someone tried to look after me. I didn’t react in the best way.”

Head tilting, Namjoon kissed him much deeper, ignoring the people in the shop, even ignoring the world around them completely.

“I’m scared,” Namjoon snuck out. “I’m scared of how you make me feel. I’m scared of losing you. I’m scared of the world ripping apart the one good thing I have going for me.”

“Well,” Seokjin decided, bumping his head gently against Namjoon’s, “you help me feel a little less scared, a little more courageous, so maybe I can help you do the same.”

“Can’t hurt to try,” Namjoon confessed.

Namjoon wanted to try. And Seokjin, he was so thankful for it, he could have wept. He settled for leaning over the table for another, deeply passionate kiss, this time with the pressure of his tongue on Namjoon’s teeth and all the intent in the world.

“Boys,” the shop owned called out, startling Namjoon visibly and making Seokjin blush. The owner, an older looking man who didn’t seem too upset, offered, “take it outside, will you? My shop is for
Seokjin let out a laugh and Namjoon had him by the wrist again, leaving their ice cream behind as he tugged them from the store at a jog.

“I feel like Superman when I’m with you,” Namjoon said, kissing Seokjin again the second they were outside the shop. “You make me feel like I can do anything. You make me so happy.”

Seokjin wrapped his arms around Namjoon’s neck hugging him tightly. He asked, “I’m not tired. Are you?”

Namjoon said in a cracking voice, “My apartment isn’t far from here. You want to go?”

Seokjin caught Namjoon’s lips with his own in reply.
Chapter Ten

Chapter Notes

A quick thank you to all the readers for having patience last week when there was no update. I had a death in the family, and obviously that took priority. Regular updates are back on schedule now.

Seokjin sighed contently as warm lips trailed across his bare shoulder, sparking all the nerve endings along the way.

Because it was so early in the morning, and probably because Seokjin had slept so well aided by Namjoon and alcohol, his reply came out a little rough and not unlike a rumble. He said, face half burred in a pillow, “I’m not normally this easy.”

Namjoon, who was crowded up against him, smiled against Seokjin’s smooth skin. “Trust me, there’s nothing easy about you.”

Light was just starting to filter its way into the bedroom Namjoon called his own, and Seokjin wasn’t looking forward to getting up and breaking the illusion of perfection they’d managed to achieve.

But fondly he recalled the night before … or the early morning hours. They’d kissed and kissed until Namjoon was panting and Seokjin’s lips hurt. Then Namjoon had brought them to his place, and Seokjin, so lost in the overwhelming feelings he was experiencing, started pulling at Namjoon’s clothes before they even hit the bedroom.

They hadn’t had sex. They could have, Seokjin was aware of that fact, but they hadn’t. Namjoon had pressed him down against the mattress in a reverent way, and proceeded to worship Seokjin’s skin with his mouth. But at no point in the early morning hours had Namjoon’s hands strayed to the underwear Seokjin wore, so Seokjin hadn’t pushed the issue.

“I’m not sure if that’s a compliment or an insult,” Seokjin commented when his thoughts slipped out for Namjoon to hear.

Namjoon laughed deeply, and then he was using his big, warm hands to turn Seokjin over on his back, and in one fluid movement Namjoon straddled his hips.

“Everything,” he insisted, leaning down to kiss Seokjin properly, “about you is a compliment.”

A shiver of a thrill crashed through Seokjin just before Namjoon’s mouth attacked his neck. And then he was moaning, almost obscenely loud, as Namjoon’s teeth bit and pulled at the delicate skin, before kissing apologies to the area and caressing it with his tongue. When the suction started, with the kind of intent that meant only one thing, Seokjin threw his arms around Namjoon’s neck to tug him closer.

“You’re impossible,” Seokjin said, out of breath when Namjoon gave his neck one final kiss and rested calmly against him. The weight of Namjoon’s body, heavy but not oppressing, was a kind of comfort Seokjin hadn’t expected. He liked the feel of being so encompassed and safe.

Eventually Namjoon rolled to the side, tucked an arm around Seokjin and was quiet.
Seokjin liked the quiet. He liked the ease and comfort of which they could lay together in the still dark bedroom, twisting together like they were one. He liked that Namjoon knew just the right way to move around him, whether instinctively or not, and he liked even more how well they fit together.

Seokjin felt a sudden pressure on his wrist, and when he looked Namjoon was toying with his medical alert bracelet.

He waited for Namjoon to ask, “Will you tell me about this?”

“I …” Seokjin hesitated. If he told Namjoon any of the specifics, there was a chance things would be different between them.

Hurried, Namjoon said, “You don’t have to if you don’t want to. I just … I want to know if I should be worried. If there’s anything I can do. If you have a medical emergency of any kind, I want to know what to tell the paramedics, or I want to be able to do something to keep you alive until they get there.” He was somber and quiet for a moment before adding, “And I know it has to be that bad. People with minor medical conditions don’t wear these bracelets.”

Seokjin sat up. His neck was aching fiercely from where Namjoon had all but attacked him, still he put it from his mind. Instead he gathered the sheets on the bed around his waist as he went, even though he was wearing his underwear, and pointed out, “People who have allergies will wear these bracelets.”

“You said it was a heart condition. That day in the car.”

Seokjin supposed, if there was going to be something special between them, there also had to be trust and honesty.

Giving a sharp little nod, Seokjin said, “The technical name is arrhythmogenic right ventricular dysphasia.”


Seokjin continued, “It’s an inherited disease, my mom had it, and her dad, too. If I have kids, at least any biological, there’s a good chance I could pass it on to them or my grandchildren. That’s a scary thought.”

“So,” Namjoon asked gently, “what does that mean for your heart?”

Fingers tapping over where his heart was, Seokjin remembered that Jungkook had told him how smart Namjoon was. So, not holding back, he told Namjoon, “It means that parts of my heart, particularly the parts that are held together by cells, become detached. My right ventricle is thin because of that, and it’s harder for my heart to pump blood through it. Over the years, my right ventricle has gotten more and more stretched out, and weaker. This is a progressive genetic condition.”

Namjoon was pale.

Seokjin added, “Because of the strain on my right ventricle, lately there’s been some weakening to my left. The reality is that both are not what they should be in terms of strength, and never will be normal.”

“You can’t have surgery?” Namjoon asked, looking frightened.

“There is no cure,” Seokjin said flatly.
“Then …”

Because Namjoon looked a fraction of the strength that Seokjin knew he was, Seokjin leaned over and kissed his forehead gingerly. “I manage the condition with medication. I have medication that I take every day, and medication for emergencies.”

Namjoon’s hand framed Seokjin’s face. “What can I do?”

He sounded so endearing and Seokjin wondered if he wasn’t falling deeper down the emotional hole with Namjoon.

“I manage my condition just fine,” Seokjin said with a promise. “It rarely affects my life in an adverse way, and it’s not something you have to worry about.”

Namjoon gave a hoarse laugh. “I believe you said your heart was a ticking time bomb.”

Seokjin regretted that. “I guess it is,” he admitted. “The truth is, even with medication and the diet I maintain, I could go at any second. My heart could just give out without warning. I accept that. I’ve had time to accept that. But what I’m trying to tell you is that plenty of people who are much older than me have lived with this. There are some things I can’t do, and yes, there will be moments when I might need to go to the hospital because I can’t get my heart to beat regularly or I’m lightheaded and the warning signs are blaring at me. But this condition doesn’t control my life, and I don’t fear it.”

Almost breathless, Namjoon remarked, “You’re the most fearless person I’ve ever met in my life.”

“Well,” Seokjin replied tersely, “I wasn’t always like this.”

“I find that hard to believe.”

Feeling almost like all his courage was gone, Seokjin toppled back against the soft bed and mound of pillows. It almost surprised him that Namjoon had that kind of bed. It reeked of the kind you found in showrooms, with the perfect blue trim, the twenty pillows, and the duvet that was meant for display and not use. The two of them had utterly destroyed the bed with their previous activities, but even now it seemed far more posh than the much smaller and simpler bed Seokjin had at his own place.

“I don’t want to hover around you,” Namjoon said, placing his head next to Seokjin’s on the pillow. “But what kind of things should I watch out for?”

Seokjin shrugged. “I try not to get too worked up about things. My father accuses me of being too laid back and at ease with things, but it’s mostly to keep my heart rate from becoming too aggravated. You won’t see me running much, either. And keeping the surprises, the jarring ones, to a minimum would be great. But if I’m having a problem with my heart, it’s nothing you’ll be able to see before I feel it.”

“I just …”

Seokjin reached for him, smoothing his fingers across Namjoon’s forehead, then down his jaw and to his chest. “Don’t worry. Or try to worry less? This isn’t something you can do anything about. And other than taking my medication and keeping up with my doctor appointments, there isn’t anything I can do. We just have to live with this. And … and …”

Namjoon frowned. “What is it?”

Seokjin gnawed on his bottom lip for a moment, then said, “If you can’t handle something like this,
or if it’s something that’s a major worry for you, I understand. My father loved my mother very much, but this put an extreme amount of pressure on their marriage. We--"

“We,” Namjoon interrupted, “will be just fine.”

Seokjin stroked the soft skin at Namjoon’s chest. “It’s not going to get better. I really want you to understand that. I was diagnosed as a kid, which is pretty rare, actually, and only because they knew to look for it. When I was young, I could do a lot of things I can’t do now. And there are things I can do now, that I probably won’t be able to do in a few years from now. I don’t know what will happen between us, but you should be prepared.”

Namjoon shook his head slowly. “I’m not going anywhere. I hope you’re not trying to run me off.”

“Never,” Seokjin swore.

“Then trust me,” Namjoon offered. “I can handle this. And I’ll tell you if that changes, but I really don’t expect it to.” Namjoon’s fingers caught Seokjin’s.

“Okay,” Seokjin said. He believed Namjoon.

Namjoon tugged the sheets up around them once more and said, “It’s getting kind of late. Do you want to get up, or just say screw it all and go back to bed?”

Seokjin laughed a little, amazed at how it felt to share a bed with someone like Namjoon. “I would like to stay in bed all day, but I think we both know that’s not an option.”

“No!” Namjoon protested dramatically. He hugged his arms around Seokjin’s middle and acted as if he would never let go. “Bed. Choose bed.”

Seokjin tapped his arm. “Let go,” he said with a smile. “I’ll cook you breakfast if you do, provided you have ingredients in your kitchen.”

Perking at the sound of food, Namjoon asked, “You can cook?” His arms reluctantly let go of Seokjin.

“My mother died when I was young,” Seokjin said, finally crawling from the bed, not feeling self-conscious now in the least bit as he stretched. “And my father ended up married to his job after that. A series of housekeepers and nannies raised Jungkook and I. Jungkook did his best to rebel against them and make their lives difficult. I was just curious a lot. One of the housekeepers was a fantastic cook. She loved kids, too, so she’d let me stand by her side as she made dinner every night, and always patiently explained all the steps. I’m think I’m a decent cook thanks to her.”

Namjoon rose from the bed as well, took Seokjin by the hand, and led him out of the bedroom.

The night before, or the early morning hours when they’d stumbled their way into the apartment, Seokjin hadn’t paid much attention to it. He’d been too busy making out with Namjoon. But now he could see that the apartment was spacious and decorated in a homely way. It didn’t seem like the apartment of a bachelor … though Namjoon wasn’t that anymore.

“Can I … ask how your mom died?”

The question startled Seokjin, almost to the point of fear, but he knew almost right after that what Namjoon was getting at.

“She had the same medical condition,” Seokjin told Namjoon, “but she didn’t die from it. And it’s
remarkable, the doctors always said, that she managed to have three children and not exacerbate her condition. But no, Namjoon, she didn’t die because her heart gave out.”

And he prayed, Seokjin absolutely prayed Namjoon wouldn’t press the subject. It wasn’t something that Seokjin thought he could talk about.

They entered the kitchen and Namjoon flipped on the light. Then he released Seokjin’s hand to open the small window in the room and let the morning air and light in.

“What about Jungkook?” Namjoon asked.

Seokjin shook his head. “He, whether he likes it or not, gets checked for the genetic abnormality every couple of years. He’s been lucky. This is a condition that effects thirty to often fifty percent of a genetic line. He really dodged a bullet that he’s been perfectly healthy since the moment he was born.”

Opening Namjoon’s refrigerator, he was almost shocked to see how well it was stocked.

“It’s my grandmother,” Namjoon said with a grin, sensing Seokjin’s thoughts. “She comes by once a week, tries to make sure I’m eating right, and refuses to accept that I’m not at home enough to really cook for myself.”

From the fresher drawer, Seokjin withdrew eggs. “How about a Western style breakfast?”

“Pancakes?” Namjoon asked excitedly.

“I need flour,” Seokjin said, taking quick stock of what Namjoon had and didn’t have. “We could go to the store really quickly. If we pick up some strawberries, I could make strawberry pancakes. Or maybe blueberry?”

Namjoon glanced at the nearby clock worriedly.

“What is it?” Seokjin asked.

“The guys should be coming over soon.”

Seokjin frowned. “The guys?”

“Bangtan,” Namjoon explained. “It’s something they do almost every morning. They come over, we talk about what we’re going to do that day, if there’s anything planned, and then we split up to do whatever needs to be done. If you don’t want them to know about you … about us … then we should …”

Eyes narrowing, Seokjin asked, “You don’t want them to know about us?”

“NO!” Namjoon protested immediately, moving closer to Seokjin. “If it was safe, I’d shout from the top of the highest building in Seoul that someone like you, the most amazing and beautiful person I’ve ever known, wants me. I just thought maybe you …”

“Wouldn’t want them to know?”

Namjoon looked anxious. “I wasn’t sure. And I wouldn’t blame you if you wanted to keep things between us at the moment. We’re just starting to figure us out. Other people might complicate things.”

Seokjin scoffed. “Jungkook is my brother, and Bangtan is your family.”
He didn’t feel like he needed to say anymore.

But Namjoon didn’t seem sure. “So I should …”

“You should,” Seokjin told him, already opening cabinets and looking for bigger mixing bowls than what he could currently see, “tell one of them to stop by the nearest store and get us flour and strawberries.”

A foolish looking smile engulfed Namjoon’s face. “Blueberries.”

Seokjin nodded and amended, “Flour and blueberries.”

“Okay,” Namjoon said simply. Then he warned, “But we’re going to need a lot. I don’t think you have any idea how much Bangtan can eat.”

Seokjin didn’t look impressed. “Jungkook was once asked to leave an all-you-can-eat buffet, because he was eating through their profits. I think I fully understand how much Bangtan can eat.”

Namjoon leaned across the island countertop in the kitchen to steal a quick kiss from Seokjin, then he was off to find his phone and make the necessary calls.

The second Namjoon was out of sight Seokjin let out a breath of relief. The truth was he was a little scared to expose his new and fragile relationship to Bangtan. But he also hadn’t been lying when he stated that he understood Bangtan was Namjoon’s family. Their relationship wasn’t something he wanted to hide from them, so it was probably best to introduce their relationship like ripping off a Band-Aid.

And food never hurt to soften a blow. If he could bribe them with good food, maybe Bangtan would take the news well.

It was a little frightening how much Seokjin wanted them to accept his new role in Namjoon’s life.

“All right,” Namjoon announced, coming back into the kitchen a few minutes later. “The boys are on their way, they’re going to pick up the things we need, and J-Hope wants to know if you know how to make omelets.”

“I do,” Seokjin said, and discovered that Namjoon had quite a few ingredients for an omelet. Carefully, as he set packaged ham and a tomato on the countertop, he asked, “How did they take it? Me being here.”

Namjoon lifted himself to sit on the countertop, but jumped down the second Seokjin swatted at him with an angry expression.

“So, you’re one of those cooks,” Namjoon said merrily.

Seokjin told him, “Yes, I’m that rare breed of cook who doesn’t want another person’s butt where I’m going to put the ingredients that I’ll cook with. Will the wonders never cease?”

More than once Seokjin had been told his sarcasm and aptitude for unfunny jokes would be something that ended up alienating people. For years Seokjin had tried to curb his thoughts, soften his reactions, and always, always, think before he spoke.

But there was something to be said for Namjoon who didn’t seem upset by his comments in the least. In fact, Namjoon seemed to find them delightful.
The evidence was staring Seokjin in the face as Namjoon turned his nearly naked body towards Seokjin and thrust his butt out. He declared, “Okay, I get you, but if there has to be a butt up there, you’re glad it’s mine, right.”

Seokjin gave his butt a swat with the spatula he had in his hand, but also accepted an apologetic feeling kiss from Namjoon.

“But speaking of,” Seokjin said, looking down at his own barely clad body, “I kind of think we should put clothes on before the others get here.”

“I don’t think we have enough time to wash your clothes from yesterday,” Namjoon said, and together he and Seokjin hunted through the living room and the bedroom for the items that had been so hastily pulled off many hours earlier.

Seokjin commented, “I paid a lot of money for this suit when I bought it.” He held up a perfectly fine jacket, but an undershirt that had several missing buttons, and pants that were wrinkled, frayed, and probably in need of replacement.

“Sorry,” Namjoon said.

“Are you kidding?” Seokjin asked, feeling bold. He tossed the pants over his shoulder. “If this suit was going to die, I prefer it to happen in this way.” And he felt warm all of the sudden, remembering Namjoon’s hands on his hips, the pressure from his fingers, and the wetness of his mouth.

“Come with me,” Namjoon said, nodding towards his bedroom. “I’m taller than you, but I think I have some clothes that will fit you. Unless you want to call your brother up and ask him to bring you some clothes?”

Seokjin asked, “And have to admit why I need them in the first place?”

There was some kind of preening, boastful tone in Namjoon’s voice as he said, “Oh, I think he knows already.”

Seokjin swatted him one more time for good measure.

Before Bangtan arrived, but not with much time to spare, Seokjin ended up in a shirt that was much, much too big for his lanky form, but pants that fit better as long as he kept a belt cinched tight. When he tucked the shirt in, he imagined he looked absolutely horrible, but at least everything fit.

He also, at the foot of Namjoon’s bed and buried under a mountain of blankets, found his cell phone. There were several missed calls from Minhyuk and Victoria, and almost a flood of text messages. He did his best to respond to the most important ones, let everyone know he was fine, and that he’d be back to the clinic shortly.

“Hey,” Namjoon said, covering Seokjin’s hand with his own as he stood in the bedroom’s doorway, cell phone clutched between his fingers. “Everything good on your end?”

Seokjin slipped his phone into his pocket. “Everything is fine.”

“Don’t be nervous,” Namjoon said, kissing the side of his head. “Now, let’s go finish getting things ready. Because when those boys blow through here, it’s going to be a hurricane of chaos and noise.”

Seokjin gave Namjoon an odd look, then asked, “Do you sometimes feel like you’re their dad?”

Namjoon countered, “Haven’t you ever felt like Jungkook’s parent more than his brother?”
“Fair enough,” Seokjin said, heading back to the kitchen. And it wasn’t the worst thing in the world.

Less than ten minutes later Bangtan were busting through the front door, startling Seokjin into dropping the pan he’d been pulling down from the cabinet. Namjoon was sitting once more on the island, though this time Seokjin was allowing it because of the cheesy smiles being sent his way. It wasn’t that they were unexpected, it was that Seokjin had been under the impression that they’d knock first. He hadn’t known they had keys.

“Hey!” Namjoon shouted so sharply and so angrily that it was almost comical how the rest of Bangtan skidded to a stop, nearly falling over themselves.

“It’s okay,” Seokjin said with a reassuring smile to Namjoon as he bent to pick the pan up.

“It’s not,” Namjoon said back roughly, then turned on Bangtan and said, “Don’t ever bust in here like that again. You need to--”

“Namjoon,” Seokjin said more firmly.

It was Jungkook who broke the ice, mumbling, “I’m really sorry.” Then he bowed deeply. Then one by one, even Jimin who was looking confused, bowed and apologized.

The last thing Seokjin wanted to do was linger on the moment, so he asked instead, “Do you have the ingredients? I’ll start on the pancakes now if you do.”

J-Hope, looking absolutely recovered from his previous illness, handed over the cloth grocery bag and asked, “And my omelet?”

Seokjin gave a grinning nod. “I took out all of the things that I have to put in it. Tell me what you want and I’ll make it.”

Seokjin, for the most part, had been expecting at least some initial awkwardness. But it wasn’t there, and that was off centering a bit. Seokjin cooked easily, Namjoon resumed his almost watchdog position on the countertop, and the rest of the group puttered around the respectable sized kitchen. Bangtan set the table, fetched for Seokjin anything he needed, and once in a while plied him with questions about how he learned to cook, why Jungkook wasn’t a good cook, and how often he was willing to cook for them.

“Done,” Seokjin announced as he shut off the stove and gestured for all the boys to gather around the table. He had several rounds of blueberry pancakes, fruit, eggs, meat, and more than one omelet. It wasn’t his best showing ever, but decent for such short notice.

J-Hope, who looked as if heaven was unfolding on his face when he bit into his omelet, said, “If you can cook Korean food this good, we’re never letting you leave.”

Namjoon shot Seokjin an amused look.

Suga put his elbow on the table and his chin in his palm. “Jungkook, you’re such a jerk. How could you not tell us your brother is such a great cook.”

Seokjin reached across the table and nudged Suga’s elbow. “Not on the table.”

Taehyung’s eyes went wide. “He’s more like a mom.”

In a haughty way, Jungkook announced, “Now you’ll all know what I deal with! Wait until Jin starts trying to make clean your rooms and checks to see if you washed behind your ears.”
A mouth full of eggs, J-Hope said, “If he cooks for me, I don’t care.”

The table rattled just a bit as Jimin slammed his glass down on the table.

Suga, elbow removed from the table, asked, “What’s your problem?”

Jimin gestured between Seokjin and Namjoon, and demanded, “Is this a thing now?”

Most of Bangtan couldn’t see, but since the start of the meal Namjoon had captured Seokjin’s fingers in his own under the table, holding them easily and without hesitation.

“Yes,” Namjoon said bluntly, before Seokjin could offer a more diplomatic answer.

Jungkook leaned over to Suga and said, “It’s like watching your parents get together … before you’re born … but more gross.”

Suga smothered a laugh behind a hand as Taehyung nodded in agreement.

“This isn’t funny,” Jimin pressed, and there was such ferocity in his words. “The last I heard on pain of death we were ordered to stay away from this princess.”

“You’re a jerk,” Seokjin said dully.

“And if we did go near him,” Jimin continued, turning his full attention to Namjoon, “we’d essentially better pack up and leave town. And now you two are having pajama parties? Am I violating the restraining order? Should I leave and maintain a hundred feet of distance?”

Namjoon got to his feet, shoulders squared. “If that’s the kind of attitude, you’re going to have, I suggest you leave.”

“I want clarification!” Jimin argued. “Am I supposed to watch out for the doctor, or am I supposed to avoid him? Are you busy being emotionally constipated about your feelings, or have you wised up that a relationship is not what you need right now?”

“And I suppose you want to tell me what I need,” Namjoon said back, furious.

Jimin shook his head. “No, but I’ll tell you what we need—what Bangtan needs. We need a clear-headed and focused leader. We need someone who understands his priorities. What if we need you and you’re here, playing footsie? I get that he’s attractive, he’s very attractive, but is now the time for a silly fling?”

Before Namjoon could say anything back, and with the rest of Bangtan looking conflicted and embarrassed, Seokjin stood himself and said, “You sound like the jilted first wife in a failed marriage.”

Jimin sputtered.

Jungkook snuck in to the rest of them, “Clearly my brother is the hot new trophy wife.”

“Neither,” Seokjin told him, “should I have to entertain the idea of defending my relationship with Namjoon to you for a second. But regardless of how recent this development is, it’s not something I take lightly. And considering Namjoon and I are both consenting adults, I think we can do whatever we want without the necessity of your permission.”

“You have no idea what’s going on around you,” Jimin said.
“I know I’m not trying to steal Namjoon or his time from you,” Seokjin said. “I don’t know where my relationship with him is going to go. I just know that at the moment, he makes me happy, and that’s what I care about. Not your tantrum. Not your feelings. Namjoon. So, I suggest you either become okay with it quickly, or deal with your issues on your own time.”

Namjoon shrugged, pleased.

Seokjin added, “I’m not asking to join your gang. I don’t want to know your secrets. And if you want to play keep away, that’s okay too.” There was so much tension and anxiety in the room that Seokjin just wanted to sit down and have a glass of cold water. “But let me warn you, if you don’t get yourself under control right now, sit down, and finish the food that I took the time to cook for you, I’m going to put you on my list. And you do not want to be on that list.”

With Jungkook nodding almost viciously in the background, Seokjin was fully aware of how easy it would have been to goad Jimin into leaving. Seokjin had a significant amount of sway over Namjoon at the moment. He could’ve gotten Jimin not only evicted from the apartment in that moment, but also estranged from Namjoon. And he could have done it with only a few words.

But Namjoon and Jimin were friends. They were brothers in Bangtan. And Seokjin didn’t want to break that.

Unexpectedly, Jimin asked, “I thought I was already on that list.”

Seokjin said, “It could go either way. I’m still deciding. Are you going to make that easy or difficult for me?”

Namjoon looked on, appeased with what was being said. And seemingly a little awed, which was an expression several members of Bangtan were sharing with each other.

From the table, Taehyung called out, “Dad was going to get married eventually. Come on, Jimin, at least be thankful we got a hot step-mom who can cook.”

Seokjin swung back to Taehyung. “What was that, Nurse V?”

There were a few more moments of stillness in the apartment, then Jimin begrudgingly said, “I don’t want my breakfast to get cold.”

Stepping to the side, Seokjin said, “Wouldn’t want that.”

Their was a constant balancing act. Seokjin dared to think they’d managed to level out the seesaw for the moment.

“Here’s the deal,” Namjoon said when they were all back at the table, and he was holding Seokjin’s hand above the table. “We’re trying this carefully, and we need you to be careful, too.”

Most of the food was gone, and Seokjin knew boys well enough to deduce that they’d be less inclined to sit still and pay attention when there was nothing left.

“So, we still shouldn’t hang around Seokjin?” Suga asked.

“Except for me,” Jungkook cut in.

Namjoon nodded. “There isn’t much, currently, tying Jungkook to us. As far as anyone is concerned, Seokjin is merely visiting his brother who now lives in the neighborhood, if he comes around. So, in that way, Jungkook can act as our intermediary.”
“But no following the princess around,” Jimin inferred.

Seokjin didn’t allow himself to react to the poke.

“No,” Namjoon told them, following suit. “Infinite has eyes everywhere, and Seokjin is safer if we’re not around unless absolutely necessary. And he’ll call us if he needs us. Therefore, none of us, myself included, is going to hang around the clinic, or be going into Infinite’s territory without a good reason.”

Seokjin wondered what it had taken for Namjoon to say that.

“For right now,” Seokjin felt like he had to interject.

Namjoon nodded. “For the time being.”

“Okay,” J-Hope said easily. He’d polished off two full omelets himself and several pancakes. Seokjin was half scared he was going to ask for more food.

The rest of the group gave sounds of agreement and Seokjin squeezed Namjoon’s fingers.

As the last of the food disappeared, Seokjin made a point to lean close to Jungkook’s side and remind, “Don’t forget what next month is.”

Jungkook seemed oblivious, but Seokjin knew it was a ruse. “October?”

“Don’t,” Seokjin warned. “I need you with me next month. I need you and you know it.”

No one was paying any attention to them as Jungkook gave out a shaky breath. “It’ll be especially bad with how things happened with me and dad.”

“I don’t care about that,” Seokjin said. “And I don’t care what he has to say. I have to be there, and I need you to be there, too.”

Finally, Jungkook said, “I will. You can count on me.”

Seokjin nudged his shoulder gratefully. “Also, thanks for being a good brother just now.”

Jungkook gave him a knowing smile. “You know it.”

Just as Seokjin was reaching for the first bowl to start the dishes, a thunderous knock came from the door. Seokjin lost his grip on the bowl, and by the time he had it once more, Taehyung was at the door, cracking it open and speaking to someone on the other side.

A moment more and Seokjin realized Namjoon had shifted towards him in a decidedly protective manner. But it was confounding to Seokjin. This was Namjoon’s home. It wasn’t completely safe?

Taehyung shut the door and dashed his way back to the table. He leaned down to whisper into Namjoon’s ear something Seokjin couldn’t hear, and then everything was changing.

“V, J-Hope,” Namjoon said, on his feet in a second flat. “You’re with me. Suga, go to the West side now. I want everything at a standstill there, nothing that isn’t civilian goes in or out. Jungkook, you-”

“What’s going on?” Seokjin demanded. The entire atmosphere of the room had changed and it was frightening.
“It’s nothing,” Namjoon said, and it was done so convincingly that Seokjin believed him for a second. “But I’m going to need you to remain here for a moment.” Namjoon cut back to Jungkook. “Call up the boys. I want everyone on deck for this. You and Jimin get them out there. We’ve got a sighting, could be hostile, and--”

“No,” Seokjin said firmly. “I want you to tell me what’s going on. I’m not going to sit here stupidly while things are happening around me.”

Namjoon took such a deep breath that Seokjin could visibly and dramatically see his chest rise and fall.

Then he said, “There’s been a potential sighting.”

“What kind of sighting? Of who?”

Namjoon grit his teeth. “Of someone who doesn’t belong in this area.”

Seokjin felt his throat close up a little. “Infinite?”

“I don’t know,” Namjoon said honestly. “And that’s why you need to stay here, until I figure out what’s going on.” Namjoon nodded to Jungkook and he was up in a second, already heading out the door. “We have to be careful in case it is someone from Infinite prowling around. If they got eyes on you …”

The rest of the boys were moving after that, abandoning everything, and were talking quietly between themselves.

Seokjin shook his head. “I need to go home. I’ll just catch a cab, okay? I’ll keep my head down.” He had to pick up Jonghyun’s car that he’d left parked overnight. Then he needed to get back to the clinic quickly.

Namjoon protested immediately, “It isn’t--”

“I need my medication,” Seokjin said, and it was the first and only thing on his mind at the moment. “I didn’t take it yesterday because I knew I’d be going to the gala, and that’d drink. And I haven’t had it this morning.”

“Are you okay?”

“For now,” Seokjin said. “But I need it soon.”

Namjoon blew out a huff of hot air. Then he called out, “Jimin.” He gestured for the younger man to come over.

“Yeah?” Jimin asked, jogging to their side.

Namjoon put a hand on his shoulder and said, “I need you to take Seokjin home before coming back to help.”

The protest was on Jimin’s face right away. “That’s bull--”

“Hey,” Namjoon said sharply. “I’m trusting you to keep the person that has my heart, safe from people who’d try to rip it out of my chest.”

Jimin went silent.
“Take him home,” Namjoon said again. “Make sure he gets there safely, and then when you get back, help Jungkook. This is what I’m telling you to do. Do you understand?”

Jimin looked over at Seokjin. Seokjin was expecting a fight of some kind, but there was only acceptance as he said, “All right. I’ve got my bike out front.” Jimin’s eyes cut to Seokjin. “It’s your lucky day.”

“He’ll get you there safely,” Namjoon said to Seokjin, then he kissed his mouth gently and added, “I’ll call you later.”

“Be safe,” Seokjin told him, feeling his first real hint of fear for Namjoon’s safety since the two of them had gotten together. “Don’t take any chances. I mean it, Namjoon. I don’t want to have to stitch you up again.” His fingers came up to brush against the material of Namjoon’s shirt over the area that he’d been shot.

Namjoon kissed him once more, oblivious of Jimin standing there watching them. He promised, “I’m always careful.”

Seokjin didn’t believe that.

In a strained voice, Jimin asked, “Can we go now?”

Seokjin gave a nod to Jimin. “I’m ready.”

“Then come on,” Jimin said, leading the way.

Seokjin, without much of a choice, followed after him.
Chapter Eleven

“Are you sure you don’t want at least one of us to go with you?” Yunho asked, straightening the collar on Seokjin’s shirt.

“Maybe we should all go,” Jonghyun said, looking indecisive. “We should present a united front.”

Yunho shot back, “But we don’t want to scare anyone off.”

“Guys,” Seokjin tried.

“Here,” Jonghyun said, thrusting a huge packet of paperclipped and stapled sheets of paper in a manila folder to Seokjin. “This is our most comprehensive report to date, going back six months, encompassing everything from our financial data, to our projected expectations for the coming year.”

Yunho’s fingers dug too tightly into Seokjin’s collar. “Make sure you talk about what the neighborhood was like before we came along.”

Jonghyun nodded almost frantically. “Sell the homicide rate and violent crime statistics like a virgin in a brothel.”

Seokjin’s head cocked. “Did you just …”

Jonghyun blushed. “Sorry. I just … we really need this.”

“Badly,” Yunho said. “So, make us sound in need, but not desperate. Play up how bad the neighborhood is, and what it would be without us, but don’t make it sound like this is an American ghetto.”

“Yunho. Jonghyun.” Seokjin took the folder between his fingers and held it like a life preserver. “I won’t mess this up. Have a little faith.”

From the doorway, with her arms crossed and an amused look on her face, Victoria said, “Do any of you listen when I talk at all?”

Yunho made a face. “Of course.”

“Then did you not hear the part where I said Changmin was bringing an investor?”

Jonghyun looked confused. “I’m not …”

Victoria sighed. “Not a potential investor, an actual investor. Sometimes I’m scared you guys are doctors, if you manage to miss the little things like this.”

“We …” Yunho started.

Victoria rolled her eyes. “Come on, Seokjin. Changmin is notoriously punctual. If he beats us to the restaurant, I’ll never hear the end of it.”

She turned to leave, and as Seokjin moved to follow after her, Jonghyun whispered, “Bring us back a check!”

Yunho added, “Please.”
It was, with no small bit of surprise, that Seokjin had failed to secure any real interest from the gala he and Victoria had attended. As the weeks passed, there’d been a few promises, and some questions, but no donations, and no follow up phone calls.

With each day that went by, and each meeting that Seokjin had with Jonghyun and Yunho about the state of the clinic, things seemed more and more desperate.

But then, without warning, and without Seokjin asking, Victoria came to him with a possible opportunity.

Seokjin had been skeptical when she’d said Changmin, representing his firm, was interested in claiming a stake in the clinic, but that he had a friend who was also interested.

Victoria had chided, “Don’t look a gift horse in the mouth.”

And Seokjin hadn’t.

So now he was in the car with Victoria, headed to meet Changmin for the first time, terrified that he’d get there and the idea of having an influx of money would disappear into the wind.

They managed to snag a parking space fairly easily, Seokjin complimenting Victoria on her driving skills, and then they were ambling towards the outdoor café that was in the heart of Seoul’s financial district.

Seokjin had seen a few pictures of Changmin on Victoria’s phone. But meeting him in person was completely different.

Seokjin, who was now completely smitten with a certain gang leader, was still more than a little flustered by the decidedly handsome and masculine features of Changmin. In fact, Changmin was excessively handsome, with chiseled features, clear skin and the kind of smile that could knock needs and turn them wobbly. He did have a youthfulness to him, and his age was probably impossible to guess, but undeniable, he was gorgeous.

Not to mention his incredible height.

Changmin with his perfect features, his amazing smile, and his pressed suit, was most certainly the kind of man that women threw themselves at. And men, too.

But then Victoria pulled ahead of Seokjin to kiss Changmin, and Seokjin saw such absolute love and devotion on his face when he looked at her, that there was no way there were any other people in his periphery. In just a second, Seokjin saw that Victoria was his whole world, and that he maybe wasn’t even aware of Seokjin at all as she spoke softly to him and held his hand.

Eventually the brief spell was broken, and after Changmin helped Victoria push in her chair, he reached over and shook Seokjin’s hand.

Seokjin returned the grip and said, “It’s nice to finally meet you.”

“It’s nicer for me to meet you,” Changmin said. “I always like to know my competition.”

Seokjin felt himself go white. “I’m not … wait …”

Changmin laughed and Victoria hit his chest. “That’s not funny,” she said, even if she was smiling.

“Sorry,” Changmin apologized. “I didn’t mean you’re my romantic rival. But you’re all I hear about
at home sometimes--you and that clinic of yours. You’ve got her thinking about the clinic and her patients there so often I’ve got to fight for her attention.”

“That’s not true,” she chastised.

“It is,” he argued playfully, and Seokjin was truly enjoying seeing gentle banter between people who truly loved each other.

“So Seokjin,” Changmin said, clearing his throat and signaling to the nearby waitress. “a friend of mine will be joining us in about half an hour. It was the only time he had for us today. But until then, I suggest we enjoy a good meal and get to know each other as friends.”

The waitress arrived to take their order and Seokjin shrugged. For funding for his clinic, Seokjin knew he could do just about anything. And genuinely Changmin seemed nice and funny. Seokjin wanted to be on good terms with him, and not just because of Victoria.

By the time their food was starting to arrive, Seokjin wasn’t sure if he wasn’t a little in love with Changmin himself.

Changmin was funny and personable. He cracked jokes easily, came off as friendly, had an ease to him as he spoke. He made Seokjin feel comfortable and almost as if they’d been friends forever.

“So you didn’t even meet in Korea?” Seokjin asked, interested as Victoria explained how she’d met Changmin.

Changmin shook his head and said for her, “I went abroad as part of a case I was working. I was just low-level member of the firm, barely a junior associate, and I went where I was told. I met Victoria in Peking. I fell in love right away.”

Victoria said, “I didn’t.”

“It’s true,” Changmin laughed, unbothered. “I was smitten. I followed her everywhere I could, tried to buy her things, and I was pretty desperate just to make eye contact. I wore her down eventually.”

Victoria told Seokjin, “I put him out of his misery. I thought it was only humane.”

They told him how they’d split their time equally between Korea and China in the beginning, and that it had been hard. Their relationship had suffered for it and they’d almost broken up several times.

More somberly, Changmin said, “I thought it was going to lose her.” He grimaced. “So I went to the firm, I told them that I wanted a transfer to the burgeoning Chinese branch of the firm, or I was going to quit. I’d find other work if I had to. But I wasn’t going to give up Victoria for my work, and it was my work putting a strain on us.”

Seokjin guessed, “So you moved to China permanently?”

Changmin nodded and took a bite of the fish on his plate. “I got the transfer. I never regretted it, even if Chinese food isn’t as good as Korean.”

Victoria pretended to look offended. “We’re getting a divorce immediately.”

Scoffing, Changmin said, “Good luck with that at this point. You can’t live without me anymore.”

When she didn’t put up a front, her answer was obvious. But Seokjin had already known that. After all, she’d followed Changmin back to Korea, as opposed to spending half a year apart from him.
“So,” Seokjin offered, truly curious, “what brought you to Korea then?”

Changmin snorted a little. “For the same reason I have a check for your clinic in my pocket.”

Seokjin’s eyes widened.

It was Victoria who cleared her throat and then said more than a little diplomatically, “There was an incident.”

Quickly, Seokjin said, “You don’t have to say anything. It’s not my business.”

Tight lipped, and with lines of worry creasing his face, Changmin told him, “Incident is a very liberal way to pose the situation.” He took a deep breath. “Several of the higher-level members of the firm were caught misappropriating funds.”

That sounded very bad. Seokjin kept a hawk’s eye on everything that went in and out of his clinic. He knew the price and average use of everything that was handled, and he kept a strict ledger of the highly expensive medication that was stored away in the area they called the vault. So the misappropriation of funds in a law firm had to be extremely severe in comparison.

With some shame, Changmin said, “Members of the firm were caught using the money that our clients entrusted to us as their lawyers, to go on vacations, take meals at extremely exclusive and expensive restaurants, and worse than that …”

“Worse?”

“They hired escorts,” Changmin managed, “for both public and private instances.”

Victoria told Seokjin, “Please don’t spread this around. The firm is in the middle of taking care of the matter, but they want to do it as quietly as possible. There will be lawsuits involved, and when a firm is suing its previous employees, things can get nasty.”

After a long drink of water, Changmin said, “When the managing partners found out and traced the depth of the issue, they had no choice but to let these employees go. But that left a significant hole in both the firm and our client’s trust. I was recalled from China to settle things here.”

Seokjin hedged, “I still don’t understand what that has to do with my clinic.”

“Damage control,” Victoria said simply.

Like they were a perfect pair working in tandem, Changmin added, “Should this leak to the press, and it probably will, the firm needs to be prepared to do a large amount of damage control very quickly. By donating and endorsing your clinic, should the papers attempt to drag the firm through the mud, the firm can quickly point out all of the good we’re doing either to atone, or simply out of the goodness of our hearts.”

Seokjin could have laughed. No law firm did anything out of the goodness of its heart. But Seokjin understood all the same. The public would enjoy a juicy story of corruption and deceit for a few days, but more potent was the goodwill story about how Changmin’s clinic was making a donation to a clinic that benefited a low income and crime riddled neighborhood. They could wring that story for good press for weeks. Maybe more.

Changmin withdrew his pocketbook, and from that came a crisp looking check.

“This,” he said, sliding it over to Seokjin, “is the firm’s way of thanking you for doing your part to
Victoria nodded at him, and when Seokjin picked up the check and peeked at the number on it, he tried not to look too startled. It was a more than nice donation.

“If the trouble at the firm leaks,” Changmin continued, “we ask that you give a few interviews about what the money means to you. Paint us in a good light, will you?” Changmin gave the first sign of an awkward smile. “I promise you, the firm does good work. Most of us are trustworthy and hardworking. A few bad eggs have attempted to spoil the whole dozen, but that doesn’t mean we’re all the same.”

Careful Seokjin put the check in his own wallet for safe keeping, and he assured Changmin, “That won’t be a problem.”

“And,” Changmin said casually, “we can talk at a further date about establishing a more permanent arrangement. Victoria tells me charity is great for tax season.”

Seokjin was so full of happiness he felt like he might burst.

Changmin’s friend, who ended up being a Korean-American who Changmin had also met in China, came less than fifteen minutes later.

He thrust his hand out to Seokjin right away, before even taking his seat and said almost too loudly, “I’m Danny Ahn.” He nearly tripped over his own chair as his too long hair fell into his line of sight.

Changmin shook his head in an amazed way. “You know how to make an entrance. Late and clumsy.”

“Hey,” Danny said a little snappishly. “You try living my life. Then you’d know how impossible it is to be on time.” Danny flashed a more dazzling smile to Victoria. “Nice to see you again. My offer still stands if you want to leave this loser.”

Victoria laughed while Changmin glared. She said, “I doubt your wife would appreciate things like that coming from you.”

“Seokjin,” Changmin said, gesturing to Danny, “I wanted you to meet Danny because he currently works for an American sponsored organization that is right in your wheel house.”

Danny leaned an elbow up on the table and said, “It’s true the organization I’m with is American, but we’re looking to go multinational, and we’ll have the backing of several global funding parties if we do.”

“And what do you do?” Seokjin asked, feeling a little lost.

“What you do,” Danny supplied, “essentially. The focus of my organization is to concentrate on presenting educational opportunities for those individuals who come from low income families, but want to become doctors and nurses. We provide grants and scholarships for high school students so they can go to college. We run seminars and workshops for those just starting out in medical school. And we open clinics in underprivileged neighborhoods, or where the cost of health care far outweighs what a good deal of people are capable of paying.”

“That’s amazing,” Seokjin said.

“We work with Doctors without Borders,” Danny continued, “provide relief for communities who need free access to dental, health, and vision care, and we try to focus on preventative care.
Changmin tells me what your clinic is doing, in the neighborhood it’s in, is nothing short of a miracle.”

“It wasn’t easy to get off the ground,” Seokjin said honestly. “But it’s worth the struggle every day.” He slid the folder he’d been protecting since Yunho put it in his hands, towards Danny. “This is the proof.”

Danny leaned towards Seokjin. “I’m serious about us wanting to expand to other countries. We’ve already formed a subdivision for that very aspect while our main body focuses on the United States. I’d like to visit your clinic, if I may, and make a donation.”

“Of course!” Seokjin all but squeaked out. “And thank you.” He got to his feet and bowed deeply.

“Enough of that,” Danny said, waving him off.

Changmin interjected, “You’ve been in America too long.”

“You’re one to talk,” Danny shot at him. “You’re so Chinese now I’m surprised your parents recognize you.”

Victoria told Seokjin, “It’s always like this when they get together. I usually lean back and try and decide which one is acting like a five year old, and which is the six year old.”

“You’re just jealous I made a new friend that I’ll possibly like more than you,” Danny told Changmin as he handed a check of his own to Seokjin. “Don’t be jealous, Changmin. You can come visit me in New York one of these days, if you’re nice to me.”

Changmin rolled his eyes so hard Seokjin was worried he’d strain something.

“Thank you,” Seokjin said once more, fighting the urge to bow again when he noticed the amount of the check almost rivaled Changmin’s.

“There’s one other thing,” Danny said, tearing his eyes away from Changmin. “Seokjin, you’re the kind of doctor that my organization hunts for. You’re smart, resourceful, and headstrong. We want to expand into countries like Korea and do on a much larger level, what you’ve managed to do at your clinic. We’d like to have your assistance to do so, your guidance in dealing with an environment much different than the States, and we’d compensate you for it.”

“I’d love to know more.”

“Brilliant,” Danny said. “Now, how about we all get desert?”

Victoria asked, “Have you eaten any real food today?” But she already had the desert menu in her hand and was skimming over it.

“Does airplane food count?” Danny asked. “You know I just got into town this afternoon. Literally. I came right here.”

“Okay,” Changmin said, leaning over Victoria’s shoulder to see the menu himself. “Desert then. For Danny whose wife will kill him when we tell her he isn’t sticking to his low cholesterol, low fat diet that his doctor specifically said him had to.”

Danny pouted openly and Seokjin laughed. It was probably the best, most productive lunch date he’d ever had.
When he brought the two checks and the coming opportunities to Yunho and Jonghyun they squeezed him so tightly that Seokjin wasn’t sure he breathed for a couple of minutes. Then he had celebratory shots from the bottle of vodka that Seokjin hadn’t known Yunho kept hidden away in one of the back cabinets in the storage room.

“This is going to buy us at least a couple months of breathing room,” Jonghyun said, clinking his shot glass against Seokjin’s. “We can even get that new ultrasound machine we need.”

Yunho corrected, “We can pay our staff and keep the electricity on.”

Seokjin said, “We weren’t in that much danger.” But they weren’t that far off, either.

It was rare that Seokjin felt things were going so utterly his way that he could take a moment to breathe and appreciate the situation. But considering it was currently happening, he was quick to take advantage of the situation, and made a quick call to ask Namjoon to meet later that night.

For once, paperwork could wait.

After the checks were safely in the bank, and Seokjin was enclosed in the tinted windows of Namjoon’s car, he felt safe enough to say, “Today was the best day I’ve had in a really long time.”

Namjoon didn’t take his eyes off the road, still too close to Infinite’s headquarters to not be openly nervous, but he did say, “You look really happy.”

Seokjin pulled a little at the seatbelt he wore, the strap cutting across his neck as he turned to Namjoon. “How can you say that? You haven’t looked at me once since I got in the car.”

They rolled to a red light and finally Namjoon’s eyes drifted over to him. “I told you, from the moment I saw you, from the second I thought you were an angel welcoming me into heaven, I’ve known what a beauty you are. At this point, I don’t have to look at you to know when you’re happy. You radiate it.”

“I’m not a girl,” Seokjin said a little defensively. He had been teased for being pretty as a kid. He was certainly prettier than some of the girls he’d gone to school with. A lot of them, actually.

Namjoon cracked a smile. “I just mean, Doctor Kim, that you’re gorgeous, and I appreciate the view as much as I appreciate your optimism and positivity. It’s kind of rare those things go hand in hand. But look at me. I feel all kinds of smug, because I got someone beautiful on the inside, and the out.”

Before the light could turn, Seokjin leaned over to kiss the corner of his mouth. “Good answer.”

Namjoon nearly preened, “I’ve been studying up on how to be a good boyfriend. I don’t want to mess this up.”

The car was moving again by the time Seokjin said, “I wouldn’t worry about that, if I were you. You’re doing fine from where I’m sitting.”

Namjoon gave a blush and Seokjin was pleased.

As expected, Namjoon took them to his grandparent’s noodle house. Seokjin hadn’t exactly been subtle when he’d let Namjoon know that it was the best food he’d had in a long time. And he was more than a little envious of Namjoon who got to have it any time he wanted, and was in such close proximity.

“You come here as often as you want, my son-in-law,” Namjoon’s grandmother said the second they
were seated and Seokjin was telling her how he couldn’t get enough of her food.

“Granny,” Namjoon said, always seeming so embarrassed when she talked. But the love was so easy to see in his eyes whenever he was with her, and Seokjin knew her teasing was just teasing.

“Ignore him,” she told Seokjin, patting his head like he was in kindergarten. “You’ll be my son-in-law. Then I’ll cook for you every day.”

Namjoon pointed out, “Technically he wouldn’t be your son-in-law, granny.”

Her eyes narrowed at Namjoon so Seokjin interjected skillfully, “I love your food, Grandmother Kim, but I’d be even more honored if you’d teach me how to make your best dishes.”

Something gleeful passed over her worn and wrinkled face as she inquired, “You like to cook?”

Seokjin nodded. “Very much. My brother complains I make him eat healthy food too often, and he says that healthy food tastes bland. But I think I’m a good cook.”

Namjoon’s grandmother leveled a finger up at Namjoon threateningly. “You bring this beautiful boy into my restaurant. He is a doctor. He likes to cook. And you tell me he won’t be my son-in-law?”

With dozens of people surrounding them, and chatter loud in the noodle house, Namjoon smiled sweetly at his grandmother and said, “I really like him, Granny. He likes me. How about we don’t rush things so maybe there’s a chance of that in the future?”

She put her hands on her hips, considering his words for a second, then told Seokjin, “You come and see me when you want to cook.” She called back to the kitchen to get started on their order, then told Namjoon, “The lion who waits for the noon hour, misses his chance with the gazelle which frolics in the morning dew.”

She shuffled off and Seokjin asked, “What is that supposed to mean?”

It looked like Namjoon’s face must have been hurting from how hard he was smiling. “I think she’s just telling me not to let you get away. You’re the gazelle frolicking in the morning dew.”

“Of course,” Seokjin said. “And you’re the lion with a pride.” Though when Seokjin thought about the members of Bangtan like Taehyung and J-Hope, he imagined small lion cubs rolling around and purring.

Seokjin wasn’t completely naïve. He knew that all the members of Bangtan, his brother included likely, were capable of being dangerous and lethal. But Seokjin hadn’t ever seen that kind of behavior from them, other than a few threats from Jimin and an ill placed gun.

There would come a day, Seokjin had no doubt, when he saw them for the lions they were. But for now, he imaged cubs.

“Prides rarely have more than one lion,” Namjoon said, scooting closer to Seokjin. “It’s a dominance issue, and the lion who controls the pride will … weed out the competition, so to say. So, a pride is primarily composed of a single lion, several lionesses, and all the children he fathers with them.”

A little wonderstruck, Seokjin commented, “I forgot that you’re very smart.”

Namjoon asked excitedly, “Someone told you I’m smart?”

“Top of your class smart,” Seokjin said, and he moved is hand to Namjoon’s under the table.
It was unspoken between them, heavily implied and nothing in need of an explanation, that they
could be friendly in public, but not overly affectionate. Bangtan territory was much safer for them
than Infinite’s, but one wrong move would spell disaster. They could be considered good friends at
Namjoon’s grandmother’s noodle house, but anything more was dangerous.

By the time they had steaming bowls of specialty noodles in front of them, deep fried and extra
crispy chicken tucked to the side like an extra prize, Namjoon said, “I have something for you.”

“For me?” Seokjin asked. He felt momentarily worried. “We haven’t been dating long enough for us
to have an anniversary of any kind.”

“I didn’t get you a present because I felt like I had to,” Namjoon said kindly, moving a piece of his
own chicken to soak in Seokjin’s noodles. “I did it because I saw it and thought of you, and because
you’re the kind of person that makes me want to give gifts to you all the time for no reason at all.”

Seokjin thrust his chopsticks at Namjoon and said, “Now you’re the one making me look like the
bad boyfriend.”

Namjoon chuckled, and from his pocket he produced a plain, ordinary looking box. He set it
between them and said, “This is for you.”

Food mostly forgotten, Seokjin reached for it, taking off the top easily and peeling back a bit of fluffy
paper covering.

“It’s beautiful,” Seokjin said the second he saw the silver pendant. Thankfully his hands were still
clean, and he lifted it so he could admire it better.

“I got it put on a short chain,” Namjoon said, his voice making him sound like he was nervous.
“Because I know you have to bend over your patients a lot, and do all kinds of things at your clinic. I
didn’t want you to get the pendant caught in anything with a longer chain.”

Something that small but also that thoughtful was incredible.

“I like it a lot,” Seokjin made sure to tell him, his thumb ghosting over the ivory colored etching.

“It’s Saint Luke.”

Seokjin gave a nod. “The patron saint of physicians and surgeons. Namjoon, really, this is
wonderful.”

The craftsmanship on the pendant was exceptional, and there was no way it hadn’t cost a pretty
penny.

“You know,” Namjoon asked, clearly surprised.

“Of course,” Seokjin laughed, wanting desperately to be able to kiss Namjoon in that moment. “It’s
not exactly something they teach in medical school, but it’s something all doctors eventually pick up.
Most of them end up with some kind of charm with Saint Luke on it for good luck.”

Namjoon asked a bit too quickly, “Do you?”

“I do now.” Seokjin held it out to Namjoon and asked, “Will you put it on me?”

Their noodles were getting cold, and Seokjin was certain that now both of Namjoon’s grandparents
were watching from the kitchen. But it all seemed inconsequential to Seokjin when Namjoon’s warm
fingers brushed against his neck, and the cool sensation of the silver chain draping across his skin contradicted that warmth.

The pendant fell perfectly just at his collarbone, and was the perfect length to tuck under his shirt if need be.

“It’s perfect,” Seokjin said, hoping Namjoon understood how much he liked it. “Thank you. I’m really kind of upset now that I don’t have anything for you.”

“You don’t need to get me anything in return,” Namjoon said, and with a final nod of approval at the pendant, he finally went back to his noodles. “The fact that you like it is more than enough.”

“I love it,” Seokjin corrected.

“Then I hope it’s a good luck charm for you.” Namjoon took a big bite of noodles.

“I know what I’ll do to repay you,” Seokjin said, watching Namjoon nearly suck down half of his noodles in thirty seconds.

“Huh?”

“I’ll cook for you,” Seokjin said, his mind made up. “Not Western food, either. I’ll make you my best traditional Korean dishes. A full dinner. Just the two of us to enjoy it. We’ll leave the kids at home for once, okay?” Up until the interruption that had occurred at the end of the breakfast meal ages earlier, Seokjin had very much enjoyed eating with all of Bangtan. They were loud and boisterous, but also lovely and lively.

An intimate dinner just the two of them sounded better, however.

Namjoon lowered his chopsticks and asked, “Can you make naki bokkeum? With a side of japchae?”

“Is that your favorite?” Seokjin countered.

Namjoon gave a deep nod. “Granny always makes it for me on my birthday.”

“Then I’ll make it for you when I cook,” Seokjin said.

Namjoon seemed excited at the prospect, and so the weight of the pendant seemed less burdensome against Seokjin’s skin.

When the meal was done and the crowd around them was beginning to thin out, Seokjin kissed Namjoon’s grandmother on the cheek and said, “Thank you very much for the wonderful meal.” He didn’t have grandparents of his own. There were none living on either side and it was surprising to him how easily he’d taken to Namjoon’s grandmother. He almost considered her his own, with the way she doted on him and his eating habits whenever she saw him.

“You’re a good boy,” she said into his ear as she hugged him. “And you’re good for my boy.”

“Thank you.”

Then she squeezed him harder than he’d thought was possible for someone of her age, borderline painful, and she said, “If you break my grandson’s heart, I will poison your next meal.”

Seokjin blinked slowly as she kissed his brow and pushed him towards Namjoon and the door.
“What’s wrong?” Namjoon asked when he saw Seokjin’s expression.

“Your grandmother,” Seokjin said, feeling Namjoon’s hand settle at the small of his back as he guided him out onto the street.

“What about her?”

Seokjin shook his head almost in disbelief. “I think she had it wrong when she said you were the lion. I think she’s got that covered personally.”

Namjoon wondered, “What makes you say that?”

“Nothing,” Seokjin laughed out. “I just mean she loves you very much.”

Namjoon looked confused, and Seokjin realized suddenly that he was jealous. Namjoon’s grandmother had given him the equivalent of the shovel talk. Seokjin knew Jungkook loved him a lot, and would have his back always, but he wasn’t the type to say the kind of words Namjoon’s grandmother had. And Seokjin’s father would rather be glad to wash his hands of him, than defend him.

It was a petty kind of jealousy, and maybe not even the kind he should have given attention to. But it was lingering in his mind as Namjoon opened the car door for him.

“You’re lucky,” Seokjin told him, kissing Namjoon the second they were protected by the anonymity of the car. “She’s a great grandmother.”

Namjoon made a quiet sound, reaching up to cup the side of Seokjin’s face as he kissed him back, with more pressure and more love than Seokjin had ever felt before.

And suddenly Seokjin was the one who felt lucky.
Chapter Twelve

“I suppose I have you to thank for your brother’s growing disobedience.”

Once, Seokjin had thought himself a dutiful son. He had done as he was told, over performed in school, become a doctor, and withstood all the seemingly endless criticism his father had for him as he became an adult and started to make his own choices.

Six months ago Seokjin wouldn’t have dared to contemplate ducking out of the scheduled lunches he took with his father regularly.

But now?

Truly for the first time in his life Seokjin had thought long and hard about using his condition to feign sick, cancel on his father, and go spend time with Jungkook or Namjoon, or Taehyung. Not to mention J-Hope, who of all of Bangtan Seokjin found himself falling into a natural ease with as the weeks passed.

Seokjin would have rather endured Jimin, even.

“Jungkook is an adult now,” Seokjin said, feeling almost like a broken record. He was tired of repeating himself. And the more he had Namjoon in his life, making him happier and more aware of the things he’d been missing before, the less time for pandering to his father, Seokjin discovered he had.

“Did you tell him he could go off and do whatever he wanted?”

Seokjin looked down at his plate of food to try and hide the smile that he knew was pulling at his face. “No one has been able to tell Jungkook what to do since he was ten. And god help the person who tries.”

What he could have said to his father instead, what his father hadn’t figured out in well over a decade, was that Jungkook was a bit like Seokjin. He liked to make people happy, and he could be obedient. But he didn’t like being forced or coerced, and even if he didn’t have a choice in something, he liked the illusion that he did. Asking, with Jungkook, not demanding, went a long way. Especially when it came to family.

“He’s gone and followed your example,” his father snapped, features pulling severe. “And I know you encouraged him. Don’t try to tell me otherwise.”

Seokjin pointed out, “I went to college. I went to graduate school and medical school.”

“This is your brother’s future on the line!”

Don’t get up, he told himself. Don’t walk away. Don’t be disrespectful.

Seokjin wondered how many meetings he had left in him. He wondered how many times he could sit across from his father mostly silent, submissive, and receive countless lectures and complaints and tirades.

At one point in his life, he’d thought he could take them for all his days.

But something was changing.
“I did tell him I thought he was making the wrong choice,” Seokjin said, looking up to meet his father’s gaze. “I told him I thought it was a mistake that he wasn’t going to go to college and get an education. Never mind him living in a dorm or at home. I said an education was the most important thing I thought he could give himself. But I recognize that college isn’t something he wants. It isn’t what Jungkook wants, and I won’t force my brother into something that he doesn’t want. Not when he’s old enough to know what that is.”

His father scoffed. “This isn’t about what he wants.”

“Isn’t it?” Seokjin questioned. “He’s not a little boy anymore. And it’s his life. I think he gets to do with it what he wants, and I’ll support that.”

With a sour expression, his father said, “This is ridiculous.”

Something wasn’t just changing in Seokjin. Something was bending, and the tension was such that it was going to break soon.

He wasn’t even aware he was speaking until he asked his father, “Isn’t it enough I do what you want? Can’t you just leave Jungkook alone?”

“How dare you,” his father said, and then he was gripping Seokjin’s arm so hard that there’d be bruises. It was the hardest his father had ever grabbed him, the most he’d ever hurt him, and it was unexpected to say the least.

“I’m sorry,” Seokjin said, almost breathless, with tears in his eyes at his own shock. “I’m sorry.”

“You are the most ungrateful son I have ever known,” his father said, and let his arm go a moment later. Seokjin could have wept, as ridiculous as the emotion felt in the moment.

“I just meant--”

“I know what you meant,” his father barked out. “And have I not done everything for you that a father should? I clothed you, I made sure you were fed, and I protect you from the harsh world. I catered to your … medical needs, provided you with the very best education possible, paid your way through medical school, and gave you free reign during your residency. And for what? So you could become a disobedient, rebellious, disrespectful son?”

Seokjing’s fingers twisted together in his lap nervously. “If this is about the clinic again, I--”

“It’s always about that damned place.”

Seokjin wondered if things would be better between them if he gave it up. What if he closed the clinic’s doors, took a normal job at the nearest hospital, and put the whole matter from his mind completely. Would his father be different to him then, or would there simply be a different set of complaints to endure?

Quietly, Seokjin asked, “Can’t you accept it? Can’t you accept that I’m doing what makes me feel the most fulfilled?”

Wryly, and with a dry chuckle, his father said, “Oh, I’ve more than accepted it. What I don’t accept is you inspiring your brother to act in the same careless fashion you have. To what? Do menial labor as an uneducated peasant?”

Seokjin hardly thought they were caught in some ancient dynasty.
“I don’t think that’s what Jungkook plans to do with his life,” Seokjin offered.

“He wasn’t clear, either, what he planned on doing.”

Seokjin wasn’t sure what to say to that. How did one describe Bangtan without giving anything away?

Finally, Seokjin said, “He’s working security right now.”

“Security,” his father scoffed.

“Yes,” Seokjin shrugged. “Security. He’s … helping keep some places safe that need to be. He feels like he’s doing something to make a difference, and he doesn’t need an education for that. I think we should be supportive. Maybe he’s making a mistake, but it’s his mistake to make, and right now things seem to be going okay.”

At the roll of his father’s eyes, Seokjin knew it was pointless to keep trying. There was no way their father was going to accept Jungkook not going to college, and he was going to blame Seokjin.

In one last ditch effort, Seokjin said, “Jungkook is standing on his own two feet at eighteen. That’s not something completely unimpressive. He has a job, he has an apartment, he pays all of his own bills, he hasn’t come running back to ask for help of any kind, and he’s learning important life lessons. I know you want your children to be successful and contribute to the world in some important way, but can’t it just be enough for right now, that both Jungkook and I are living free and independent of you?”

His father took a long drink from the oddly out of place wine glass, then stated, “You have no idea the shame I feel when I have to tell others that I have one son squandering his medical degree and another running down by the docks no doubt with degenerate hoodlums. What will be next? Will you end up a victim of the people you are foolishly trying to help? Will Jungkook father an illegitimate child?”

Seokjin’s mouth fell open a little. He wasn’t sure what to say to that.

“I won’t accept this,” his father said sternly. “Your brother will give up this foolishness, he will go to college and study the material of my choosing, and I won’t hear of this again.”

Curiously, Seokjin asked, “How do you plan on achieving this?” There honestly wasn’t much, if anything, in the world that Seokjin thought could make Jungkook fall in line.

The bigger issue was that Seokjin had most certainly started out thinking that Bangtan was just a thuggish group of children, running around and causing mayhem for the fun of it. But a decent amount of exposure to them and what they did, not to mention the fact that Seokjin was slowly starting to fall head of heels in love with Bangtan’s leader, produced a completely different picture.

Bangtan was different. They weren’t like the other gangs that relished in violence and needless trouble through intimidation and worse. Bangtan wasn’t power hungry, corrupt, or involved in things like drugs and prostitution.

If Seokjin had his way, Jungkook would be where their father wanted him. He’d be sitting in a dorm at that very moment, studying out of a book and a laptop, worried about memorizing things, tests, internships, and his future.

But if that wasn’t going to be a reality, Seokjing could accept that Bangtan, who’d been created to help the community and take the power back, was a decent second.
Seokjin couldn’t coddle Jungkook. He couldn’t make his choices for him. And he even couldn’t save him from any of the mistakes or pain he’d experience in the coming years. But Seokjin could support him, especially with their father.

“I don’t plan on convincing him,” Seokjin’s father said. “You’re going to do it.”

Seokjin frowned. “I already told Jungkook I’d support him as he makes his first real life choices. I can’t go back on my word to him.”

“Can’t or won’t?”

With finality, Seokjin nodded. “I won’t.”

The expression that settled on his father’s face was something that filled Seokjin with dread immediately.

And then his father said, “I’ll make this very easy for you, Seokjin. Your clinic is important to you?”

Seokjin frowned. “You know it is. Why?”

His father cut out roughly, “You’ll convince your brother to come home, to go to college, and to study a respectable subject. You’ll do this before the end of the month, so there’s a chance I can get him into the university through late registration, and you’ll make sure he comes home with a new, improved attitude.”

“Or?” Seokjin asked, sensing that the word was floating around between them like a dark thundercloud.

“Or,” his father said simply, “I’ll see to it that your clinic loses all of its government funding. That is the funding that keeps it afloat, correct? Will you be able to keep your doors open without any government provided funding?”

“I …”

It was a move so ruthless and so dastardly that Seokjin hadn’t stopped to consider for one second that his father would do it. Because the both of them knew that even with private donations, and extra funding from outside sources, it was the government provided assistance that contributed the most. The money the government gave them on a monthly basis paid for everything from the gloves they wore to the bigger equipment that they used. It was why they had electricity and running water, how they could afford the medication that they so sparingly used, and it was almost one hundred percent responsible for the salaries of the medical personnel who worked at the clinic.

“The clinic can’t stay open without that money,” Seokjin said, taking in a shuddering breath. “How can you--”

“I will,” his father said sharply, “do whatever it takes to get the one son I can still save, back on the right path.”

“But that clinic,” Seokjin struggled to get out, “isn’t about us. It isn’t about you or me or Jungkook. It’s about the thousands of people in the neighborhood who depend on the clinic to take care of them. Most of them don’t have anywhere else to go. You’re threatening not just to hurt me, but to hurt all of them.”

“I think you would know by now that my main focus, rather my only focus, is my family.”
Seokjin pressed, “I treat children at the clinic, and the elderly. You can’t do this.”

“I can and will get that funding cut off,” his father told him, face at peace.

Seokjin gripped the edge of the table, feeling a little lightheaded. “Is this how things will work from now on? You’ll tell me to do something, and if I refuse the first time, you’ll hang the clinic over my head?”

His father polished off the glass of wine. “You’ll understand if you become a father.”

“No,” Seokjin shot back. “I don’t think I will.”

He’d never be the kind of father that his own was. He wouldn’t hurt his children or try to blackmail or force them. He wouldn’t make them want to cry, not like Seokjin’s father did.

“I need to go,” Seokjin said, standing quickly. He needed to figure out what he was going to do. It certainly wasn’t whatever his father wanted. But if the clinic lost its government funding, and that was something Seokjin knew his father was capable of making happen, then another solution had to be found and quickly. There were only a handful of weeks left in the month, and the last few days of October were moments that would be consumed with the act of mourning and remembrance.

“Sit down,” his father said sharply.

“I think you already know my response to what you’ve said to me just now,” Seokjin said, trying not to appear as if he needed the back of his seat to keep him on his feet. “So we don’t have anything else to talk about.”

He didn’t wait to see if his father gave a reply. The moment he got his feet working he was walking swiftly away from the table, and then he burst out onto the streets, a cool October wind catching him by surprise.

He would not be cowed, he declared as he stalked towards the bus stop. He wouldn’t let his clinic fall to ruin, but neither would he let his manipulative father use it to get what he wanted. There was a solution out there, one that Seokjin planned to find with Yunho and Jonghyun. They were all invested in the clinic, dedicated, and determined.

But more important in the moment was getting to Jungkook.

Because the bigger concern was that their father would get to Jungkook and say the same thing to him that he’d said to Seokjin. And Seokjin knew his brother. Jugkook would give in to their father, if he knew resisting meant costing Seokjin the clinic.

He was waiting for the bus at his stop when he pressed his phone to his ear and listened to the dial tone sound. “Pick up,” he mumbled quietly, knowing that the only leg up he had on his father at the moment was that if he wasn’t busy, Jungkook was sure to pick up his phone call. And Seokjin had a rough idea of where the apartment that Jungkook stayed at was located.

“Jin?” Jungkook asked when finally the line clicked over.

“Where are you?” Seokjin asked right away. “We need to talk.”

Jungkook must have heard the desperation in his voice, because he asked back right away, “What’s going on? Are you okay?”

Seokjin repeated quickly, “I have to talk to you about something very important. It can’t wait. Where
are you?”

There was something in the background on Jungkook’s end of the line, people talking, and Seokjin wondered if he’d interrupted something important. Bangtan business.

“I’m at my apartment,” Jungkook said just after that. “Do you want me to come get you? I thought you were having lunch with dad. Is something wrong?”

The bus he could take to get across Seoul to Bangtan territory rounded the corner in that moment, so Seokjin told his brother, “I’m already on my way. Give me the exact address of your apartment, please.”

Tensely, Jungkook said, “Something just happened, right? Something not good.”

“I’ll tell you as soon as I get there,” Seokjin said, waving a hand out to the bus just to make sure it stopped to pick him up.

“Okay, okay,” Jungkook said. “Jin, you sound … I know something is wrong.”

“Jungkook,” Seokjin said, climbing up onto the bus when it had stopped. “If dad calls you, don’t pick up the phone. Let me talk to you first.”

“Oh, Christ,” Jungkook swore, “what’s he done this time?”

Seokjin swung himself down onto a seat on the bus and said, “I’ll be there in twenty minutes. Don’t pick up the phone if he calls.”

The bus rumbled on, and with shaking fingers Seokjin called the clinic next. He was going to be a little late … or a lot. And he couldn’t bring himself to care. Because as much as he loved the clinic, and had given it his heart and soul, Jungkook was the most important person in the world to him. And Seokjin would not let their father use Jungkook.

It was the first time Seokjin was actually going to Jungkook’s apartment. He’d been to Namjoon’s a couple of times, and he’d also gone to the apartment that J-Hope shared with Taehyung.

From the outside, as Seokjin moved swiftly towards the front door twenty minutes later, Jungkook’s apartment looked almost identical to the other’s. There was the same white door, the same blue trim, and the same well-kept patches of greenery that gave the apartment buildings splashes of life and color.

His impatience got the best of him at the foot of the stairs that led up to Jungkook’s second floor apartment, and he jogged the rest of the way.

For once it felt good to be out of breath, and he knocked on the apartment door with intensity.

But it wasn’t Jungkook who answered.

“What are you doing here?” Seokjin asked a bit rudely, more surprised than anything to see Jimin’s face staring back at him.

Flatly, Jimin said, “I live here.”

That was right. A second later Seokjin remembered that Jungkook had told him J-Hope and Taehyung had moved to get their own place. That was why Jungkook had been able to get an apartment so fast. Jimin had needed a roommate quickly.

Jimin’s normally cocky face was swollen, definite evidence that he’d been hit several times over, with most of the swelling happening around his jaw and cheekbones. He also had a split lip, remnants of dried blood on his nostrils, and there was a weary kind of sag to his body.

A bit dumbly, Seokjin said, “You’ve been in a fight.”

Jimin stepped to the side so that Seokjin could enter, and said, “Your powers of observation are stunning.”

“You’ve been in a fight, too,” Seokjin repeated again, the moment he spotted Jungkook in the living room, the early signs of a black eye on the right side of his face all too clear.

There was a first aid kit open in front of Jungkook, but he looked a little lost with it, and maybe a little dazed. Was that a concussion Seokjin was picking up on?

“You,” Seokjin said, pointing at Jimin and then the spot next to Jungkook on the sofa. “Sit.” He wasted no time butting his way between the two of them, assessing the fairly well stocked kit.

“We’re fine,” Jungkook said in a light way. “It was just a brawl.”

Jimin had a scowl to his face, but he did as he was told and sat gingerly next to Jungkook. He asked Seokjin, “Did you think this territory kept itself clean?”

“No,” Seokjin said, and started with more chastising words until he saw the black handgun at the edge of the coffee table. The room was well lit, and the curtains across the way open, so Seokjin was more than able to make out the flecks of dark red liquid on it.

It had been used in whatever tussle Jimin and Jungkook had been in. It might have killed someone. Jungkook or Jimin might have killed someone.

Jimin traced his gaze and with raised eyebrows said, “This isn’t your clinic, princess.”

It was Jungkook who reached across and snagged the gun, tucking it away and out of view with an apologetic look. He told Seokjin, “Sorry. I forgot to put it away. I forgot it was there at all.”

Seokjin took his brother’s chin in his right hand, and then held up his index finger on his left. “Follow my finger please,” he requested, moving it slowly. “I want to check if you have a concussion.”

To his relief, Jungkook had all the outward signs of a concussion, but none of the actual evidence to back it up. He was a little dazed, but his pupils were tracking fine, and of equal size, and he wasn’t complaining of any nausea.

“Should I bother to ask what happened?” Seokjin asked when he was certain Jungkook was okay. He nudged Jungkook and said, “Go put some ice on your eye. It’s going to be ugly for a while, too.”

“Nah,” Jimin said, reminding Seokjin he was in the room, sprawled out a little on the sofa. “Unless you want to hear about us kicking some ass, and the way we do it here in Bangtan territory.”

Seokjin rolled his eyes and caught Jimin’s nearest hand. He surveyed the busted knuckles, dried blood coating them, and pointed out, “With aggression, you hold this territory.”
Jimin didn’t, to Seokjin’s surprise, pull his hand back. Instead his fingers went limp in Seokjin’s grip as they were inspected and tested for mobility.

“It can’t be done through diplomatic means,” Jimin said, then hissed at Seokjin who was coating his knuckles with peroxide.

“Please,” Seokjin scoffed. “That’s barely burning you.” He dabbed at the bubbling areas with a clean, sanitized cloth and was diligent in making sure Jimin’s knuckles were thoroughly taken care of. “I can go get some rubbing alcohol if you really want it to hurt.”

“No,” Jimin pouted a little, fingers stilling.

Seokjin leaned forward and blew on the injury. “That better?” he teased. “I do that for the kids who come in with scraped knees.”

Jimin tensed up all the sudden and Seokjin took it for real pain, and startled a little, asking, “Are you okay?”

“Fine,” Jimin managed in a wrangled voice a second later. “I’m fine … I just didn’t …”

Softly Seokjin said, reaching for the gauze to wrap Jimin’s knuckles, “I have a good bedside manner as a doctor, I’ve been told. And we’ve had our differences, but when I’m treating you, I will always take good care of you. I don’t want to see anyone unnecessarily hurt, even you.” Seokjin offered him an encouraging smile. “And you’re lucky. The face of the person you must have punched with this hand had to be soft, because you don’t need stitches.”

Gruffly, Jimin admitted, “You are a good doctor.”

From the other side of the sofa, Jungkook said, “Jin’s like … he’s got this special touch. This magic touch. It’s weird, you know, but it’s real.”

“Look up please,” Seokjin said, tilting Jimin’s head like he had Jungkook’s. And to his brother’s words he said, “I just try to think about my patients as human beings. It’s important that I treat their injuries as quickly and efficiently as possible, and I never lose sight of that. But I know that half of the healing process is being made to feel good and comfortable, and taken care of. My patients know that I care about them. They know I will fight to make them better. And they can trust me because they understand that I’m the kind of doctor who will always be their biggest advocate and do whatever it takes to see them through what’s bothering them.”

“Oh, god,” Jimin moaned out. “You’re like Mary Poppins.”

“Jungkook,” Seokjin said over his shoulder, “go get me the rubbing alcohol. We’ve suddenly just run out of peroxide.”

Jimin grinned wide, which split his lip again and brought up new blood, but Seokjin was there with a clean cloth the moment it happened, taking care of him.

Eyes narrowed a little, Jimin said, “You have really soft hands. And your face. It’s too pretty.”

“Are those compliments or insults?”

“I haven’t decided yet,” Jimin stated, and didn’t say anything again until Seokjin had finished patching him up.

Once the first aid kit was all packed up stored away, Jungkook put a hand on Seokjin’s shoulder and
said, “I know dad said something to upset you. Will you tell me what he said now?”

Jimin padded into the other room, likely his bedroom, and Seokjin nodded.

“But,” Jungkook said before Seokjin could start, “I’m guessing it was about me.”

“Of course,” Seokjin sighed out. “He’s still upset that you won’t go to college. I thought he just wanted to lay the guilt at my feet. I was right in that regard. He does blame me. He thinks I made you too independent and rebellious.”

A furious look on his face, Jungkook said, “That’s total crap!”

“Well, we know that.”

Jungkook flung himself back against the sofa. “Me not wanting to go to college has nothing to do with you.”

“Maybe in a way it does,” Seokjin conceded. “Dad spent a lot of time trying to keep me in line, control my life, and make my choices for me. He didn’t have the time or energy to do that for you, so I think he expected me to do it for him. But he’s right. I did try to make you independent, even if that made you rebellious in his eyes. I tried to make sure that you’d grow up strong and capable, and able to make choices for yourself. I’m always here for you right now, Jungkook, but I might not be one day.”

“Don’t you dare say that,” Jungkook said back immediately, a waver in his voice.

“It’s true,” Seokjin insisted. “So that means I had to make sure my kid brother could take care of himself. I told dad that you’re a man now. You’re an adult and you can make your own choices and experience your own mistakes. I said I didn’t agree with you choosing not to go to college, but that I was still going to support you, no matter what he said. That wasn’t a lie. Jungkook, if this is what you want to do, I won’t ever push you again towards college.”

Jungkook frowned. “I bet he took that really well.”

Seokjin shifted to lean back on the sofa with him. “It’s worse than you think.”

“Wait.” Jungkook sat up suddenly. He pulled at Seokjin’s shirt on the sleeve, revealing the reddened area where he’d been grabbed. “Swear to me he didn’t do this. Jin, swear to me.”

Seokjin tapped his fingers in a playful slap against his brother’s forehead. “I bruise easily. You know that. It’s an actual fact, because my heart doesn’t circulate blood as well as it should. It’s the same reason I have cold hands and feet no matter the time of year. He grabbed me, that’s what this is from, but he didn’t do it as hard as he could have, and I don’t think he was trying to intentionally hurt me.”

Seokjin didn’t tell Jungkook about the fear he’d felt, or about how their father had never been so vicious with him in his life. If anything his father had always avoided touching him, scared to injure him.

“I’m going to--”

“You’re not going to do anything,” Seokjin said. “And that’s not why I came over here.”

Jungkook gestured at his arm. “What’s worse than this?”

“What’s worse is how he tried to force me to make you enroll in the semester.”
“Tell me,” Jungkook ordered, sounding braver than Seokjin knew he was in that moment.

Seokjin took a deep breath. “He told me that if I didn’t talk you into coming home to live with him, and get you late enrolled in the semester before the end of the month, he would get all of the government funding that the clinic received, pulled completely.”

Seokjin had expected Jungkook to be angry. He’d expected an explosion of shouting. He hadn’t expected Jungkook to lash out, kick violently at the wooden coffee table, and overturn it sending books and knickknacks and all sorts of odds and ends toppling to the ground.

“Jungkook!”

“What!” Jungkook seethed.

Jimin came around the corner cautiously. “The two of you planning to rumble in here?”

“You need to calm down,” Seokjin said, running a hand through his hair.

“How can I?” Jungkook asked almost desperately. “Dad knows what that clinic means to you! How can he … why would he …”

“I’m angry too,” Seokjin told him, “but kicking things and breaking things isn’t going to make anything better.”

“It makes me feel better!” Jungkook argued. “And you don’t look angry. You look like you’re just going to sit there and take it.”

Coolly, Seokjin said, “I’m obviously not. I don’t know what I’m going to do, but our father is sorely mistaken if he thinks the clinic is the most important thing in my life, and I think that’s what he’s banking on.”

Jungkook quieted as Jimin commented, “That clinic seems like it’s the most important thing in the world to you.”

Once more, Seokjin said, and directly to his brother, “Well, it’s not. Don’t you understand, Jungkook. It’s you. I love you more than I love that clinic. And I won’t let our father pressure you like this, and it’s what he’s going to try. That’s why I came right here as soon as I walked out of that luncheon. I’m warning you right now, Jungkook, don’t you dare. When he calls you up, and tries to tell you that he’ll ruin my future if you don’t do what he says, don’t you dare consider giving in for a second.”

Somberly, Jungkook lowed his head, his chin falling to his chest. “But he will. He’ll destroy your clinic if I don’t do what he says. I can’t let that happen.”

Jimin crossed his arms and remarked, “Your dad is a douche.”

Seokjin crossed to where Jungkook was standing and wrapped him up in a tight hug. He felt his brother tremble a little, his shoulders shaking, and Seokjin held him more firmly.

“It’s okay,” Seokjin said, rubbing his hand along Jungkook’s back. He found Jimin’s face across the room and was more relieved than he’d thought he’d be, to find a sympathetic expression staring back.

“It’s not,” Jungkook said, and Seokjin had to remind himself that his kid brother was an adult now, eighteen and a man, but still his kid brother. “How can he do this?”
“Because he thinks he’s right,” Seokjin said simply, and it was baffling that his father could be so simplistic at times, and impossibly complex at others. “He’s trying to focus now on the son that he expects to be his legacy.” Seokjin pulled Jungkook back at arm’s length. “I think he’s starting to understand that he might, and probably will, outlive me. My condition was pretty fixed when I was a teen, but it’s getting worse every day now that I’m in my twenties. What’s he going to do when I die before he does? I’m sure he’s thinking about the son that will outlive him, now, and that’s you. He wants, even if he’s doing it in a horrible way, to make sure that you’re the kind of legacy that he considers successful.”

Jungkook burrowed his face back in Seokjin’s neck. “I hate him.”

Across the room Jimin was only still staring, but this time the look of sympathy had turned to one of confusion.

“You don’t hate him,” Seokjin said. “You can be angry at him, but you can’t hate him. He’s your father. And while he’s wildly misguided, he’s doing what he thinks is right for a son he considers to be incapable of seeing the right path in front of him.”

Jungkook bit out, “Mom would never have let this happen.”

“No,” Seokjin agreed quietly. “She wouldn’t have.”

Seokjin brushed Jungkook’s bangs back, gave him an encouraging smile, and said, “I want you to go wash your face, okay? Go wash your face and then come back and sit down with me again. We’ll talk about what we’re going to do when dad approaches you. We won’t let him use us against each other.”

Almost a little pathetically, Jungkook blundered out, “But what if I agree to some classes? What if I try to bargain with him? I could try.”

“No,” Seokjin said firmly. “That isn’t what you want and I’m not going to let him bully you into it. Wash your face, Jungkook. We’ll decide on an action plan after that. The clinic has a lot of new options right now that you don’t know about. I’ll tell you about them, and we’ll talk for as long as you need to be sure I won’t let dad get away with this.”

Jungkook sniffled a little, then shuffled off towards the bathroom.

He’d scarcely been gone a second before Jimin asked, taking a step forward, “You’re sick?”

“I have a heart condition.” There was no point in hiding it. Taehyung knew there was something wrong with him, Jungkook knew everything, and Namjoon was getting there.

“… it’s fatal?”

Seokjin didn’t quite like the look on Jimin’s face. It was an odd mixture of concern and upset and … something else. Something he couldn’t pin down.

“It’s progressive,” Seokjin corrected. “That means for the rest of my life, no matter if I live another five minutes or fifty years, it will continue to get worse. There is no cure, but I’m on a strictly regimented medication routine, I have a cardiologist who I see religiously, and I don’t take chances with my heart. Bearing something catastrophic and unpredictable happening, I’m going to be around for a long time.”

Tensely, Jimin asked, “Are you okay … now?”
Seokjin cracked a smile. “My dad pissing me off doesn’t endanger my heart, Jimin.”

“But your heart must make some things difficult or hard for you.”

The conflict on Jimin’s face was so unexpected. It was a nice change, however, from the scowls that Jimin usually sent his way.

“Careful,” Seokjin said, bending over to right the table Jungkook had overturned. “Your empathy is showing.”

“I--”

“You don’t,” Seokjin said, “need to worry about me … not that I really think you would. So put it from your mind, okay?”

Jimin seemed like he wanted to protest something. But then Jungkook reemerged with a freshly washed face and he was all Seokjin could think of.

“What if I just tell dad to go to hell?” Jungkook asked sitting back on the sofa. He pulled his legs up and crossed them under him.

Diligently Seokjin sat next to him. “You could, but I think that might make things worse for me.”

Jungkook grimaced. “So, I should try to explain to him again why I don’t want to go to college?”

From the corner of his eye Seokjin could see Jimin inching forward, and not backing out like he’d expected. But it was Jimin’s apartment too, and it had been before Jungkook had lived there, so he could do whatever he wanted.

“You should be firm with him,” Seokjin started out, “but tell him that you’re not changing your mind, and you’re not letting him threaten you with my clinic, either. When he puts up a fuss, and he will, tell him you’ll talk to him when he can be reasonable, and either leave, or if it’s on the phone, hang up.”

Jimin slid into the recliner across from them and asked almost quietly, “So what are you going to do about your clinic?”

Jungkook nodded quickly. “You said you have options.”

Seokjin looked between the two of them, then said, “I have a new doctor at the clinic. Victoria. A little while ago, she took me to meet with her husband and a friend of theirs. That meeting was extremely good for the clinic. I’m cautiously optimistic.”

Jungkook said flatly, “You’ve always been too optimistic.”

“And that,” Seokjin said confidently, “is why I’m your big brother, and not the other way around.”

A smile broke on Jungkook’s face, and Seokjin understood in that moment he’d do anything to keep it there. Even defy his father.

Anything.

Chapter Thirteen

Carefully, as if he were handling a delicate orchid, Seokjin turned Namjoon’s grandmother’s wrist over to rest on her lap as he measured her pulse. He counted the beats diligently, all too aware of Namjoon lurking behind him.

When he did eventually lose track of which number he was on, Seokjin turned to let go of the older woman’s wrist for a second and called out to Namjoon who was even closer than expected, “Can you please stop hovering around like a military drone? You’re distracting me, and making this take longer than it should.”

Seated on a kitchen chair in front of the kneeling Seokjin, Namjoon’s grandmother protested, “This is unnecessary. I need to get back to work.”

“No, no!” Namjoon protested, jetting forward toward to her almost as if he planned to wrap around her like an octopus.

Seokjin picked her wrist up one more, measured the beats in perfect silence, then said, “Namjoon told me he found you passed out in the stairwell. That doesn’t happen without a reason.”

When Seokjin had gotten the frantic call from Namjoon, the leader of Bangtan spewing more gibberish than actual words, he’d thought for one tragic second that something worse than fainting had happened. The call had come in a few hours after two, and by then Seokjin had finished seeing all of his scheduled appointments and was only doing paperwork. But he’d come right away when Namjoon had called, and he hadn’t even put up a fuss when it had been Jimin and his motorcycle waiting for him at the back entrance to the clinic.

It was something to note, Seokjin supposed, that Jimin had seemed a much more calm and rational driver as they made the journey to Grandmother Kim’s noodle house. Previously Jimin had liked to cut corners close, speed without any real need for it, and brake too hard. Now he was obeying all of the signs of the road, keeping within the city limit, and giving proper indication for when he planned to turn.

Seokjin suspected it had a lot to do with Jimin learning about his medical condition, but he was so thankful he couldn’t bring himself to care.

From his nearby bag Seokjin retrieved a blood pressure cuff and fitted it on her arm with ease. He asked her, “Do you remember what you were doing just before you fainted? Were you just climbing the stairs?”

She thought for a moment, then said, “I was coming upstairs to get my purse.”

Namjoon interjected nervously, “There’s a fundraiser going on in the neighborhood right now. One of the local schools is trying to raise enough for an end of the school year field trip to Jeju. The kids like to come around this time of day, just after regular school lets out, but before cram school starts.”

Seokjin nodded. “So, you were coming up the stairs?” he prompted.

“And that’s it,” she insisted. “I got dizzy.”

A little further back in the room, Namjoon’s grandfather, who Seokjin had had very little contact with, said sharply, “What if you had fallen? What would I have done then?”
Grandmother Kim gave a sharp laugh. “You would have to cook for yourself then! And knowing you, you’d end up poisoning yourself within a week.”

The older man gave a strained look and didn’t seem for a second like that was his real concern.

Seokjin finished inflating the cuff and took a look at the number on it, asking, “Has this happened to you before? The fainting? And not just climbing stairs. At any time.”

Namjoon’s grandmother was quiet.

Understanding her reluctance, Seokjin put a gentle hand on her knee and offered, “This is nothing to be ashamed of. The truth is, no matter what we do, our bodies eventually fail us. And believe it or not, this happening to you is a good thing. These are the warning signs our bodies send our brains so we can fix whatever failing is happening. I can help you, Grandmother Kim, but only if I know all the information and have a clear picture of what’s going on.” He leaned closer and asked, “You don’t want Namjoon to worry like this, do you?”

Her elderly eyes flickered to his face and she shook her head.

“Then this has happened before?” Seokjin asked.

She nodded. “A few times before.”

“Why didn’t you say something, Granny!” Namjoon demanded, looking distraught.

“You have enough to worry about,” she urged back, and seemed stubborn as she added, “What could you have done?”

Taking the blood pressure cuff off her arm, Seokjin said definitively, “Grandmother Kim, I want you to come down to the clinic and see me within the next few days. I’d prefer to oversee your treatment myself, and though I know the clinic is further than your local hospital, I think it’ll be better for you to be with a doctor you know and trust.”

Pale, Namjoon asked, “Is something wrong with her?”

Slowly Seokjin stood. And instead of answering Namjoon, he told his grandmother directly, “Your pulse is elevated, I don’t like how clammy your skin is, and your blood pressure is much too high. When you come to the clinic I’ll give you a full workup and make sure to solve this.”

“Bah,” she remarked, waving a hand at him. She ambled up to her feet and was already trekking back to the kitchen of the noodle house attached to the apartment she lived above. Namjoon’s grandfather was trailing after her at once, complaining about her not taking care of herself and working too hard.

“Seokjin.”

Before Seokjin could process the sound of his name, Namjoon was wrapped around his back, holding him tightly.

“What’s wrong with my grandmother?”

Seokjin hugged Namjoon’s arms tighter around him. He could tell quite clearly that Namjoon was scared.

“I think,” Seokjin ventured, “your grandmother’s very rich and fat heavy diet is finally catching up
“Huh?” Namjoon’s hold on him loosened in his confusion.

Seokjin took advantage of the movement to turn and hug him properly. He pressed a soft kiss against Namjoon’s stiff lips and said, “I think she’s having some cholesterol issues, and her blood pressure is worrying. I’ll give her a full checkup when she comes to the clinic, get her on the right medication, and this shouldn’t happen again. But she might also have to make some diet changes. She can’t keep eating like she’s twenty.”

Namjoon sagged a little in relief, brushing his temple against Seokjin’s. “Have you tried telling that woman what to do?”

“I didn’t say it would be easy,” Seokjin admitted, smiling a bit as he breathed in Namjoon’s scent. “But this is her life. She’s older now. Her body is getting frail. If she wants to live long enough to see grandchildren, she has to make changes.” Seokjin thumped Namjoon on the chest. “That means you’re going to have to be firm with her.”

Namjoon bent to retrieve Seokjin’s bag and passed it to him, remarking, “It’ll be a fight just to get her to your clinic. She doesn’t like doctors, even if she likes you, and she hardly leaves the restaurant for anything.”

“That’s for you to figure out,” Seokjin said with a light chuckle as the two of them made their way towards the restaurant portion of the building. Seokjin was half afraid that he’d talk himself into stopping for a post lunch snack. Never before had he been concerned about his waistline expanding, and in fact he’d struggled most of his life to keep his weight up, but Namjoon’s grandmother’s cooking severely threatened that.

“Okay,” Namjoon said, rubbing a hand across the back of his head.

Comfortingly, Seokjin said, “Just call the clinic sometime today or tomorrow. Make an appointment whenever she feels comfortable for it, though sooner rather than later, and bring her in. I’ll take care of her, Namjoon.”

“I trust you,” Namjoon said seconds before they were bursting out into the busy front of the restaurant.

“Suga! V!” Namjoon called out, a hand raised as they swerved through the packed space.

Seokjin was quickly learning that it wasn’t uncommon to find members of Bangtan at the noodle house at all times of the day. Most of them seemed to gravitate towards it almost subconsciously, so Suga and Taehyung, who were sharing several bowls of food in a table near the corner of the restaurant, weren’t out of place at all.

“Hey,” Suga offered to Seokjin, but V was too busy eating as quickly as he could, to even notice Seokjin.

“What are you two doing here?” Suga asked, showing more restraint with the food.

Seokjin nodded to Taehyung eating and asked, “Can he even breathe?”

Namjoon chuckled, “If he can’t, it’s a good thing we have a doctor in the house. And Taehyung, hearing the question, flashed a thumbs up but didn’t stop slurping down his food for a second.

Seokjin turned back to Suga and answered carefully, respectful of his patient’s privacy, “I was just
looking Namjoon’s grandmother over. It never hurts to be vigilant, especially with our elders.”

Suga made a surprised face. “I didn’t know you made house calls.”

Namjoon said proudly, “You know Seokjin well enough by now. How can you be surprised?”

At the praise, Seokjin blushed uncomfortably, then told Suga, “I do it frequently enough, actually. Some of my patients can’t come to me, so I go to them. It’s not unusual for me to make a few house calls a week, but I do try to encourage the patients that can come to me, to do so.”

Suga leaned forward on the table and pushed his nearly full bowl of noodles, kimchi, and meat away, towards Taehyung who attacked it mercilessly.

“Seokjin,” Suga asked. “You’re a really good doctor, right?”

“I’d like to think so,” Seokjin laughed.

“But you’re so young,” Suga pointed out.

With some reluctance, Seokjin admitted out, “I studied hard when I was younger, and my father pushed me harder than I think was healthy for me. I graduated high school early, and did my residency a quickly as possible. I assure you, I’m a fully competent and trained doctor, but I did things sooner than most in my field. I excelled, in a word.”

“So, you’re good at figuring out things? Like when people are hurt but no one can figure out why?”

Seokjin’s eyes raked over Suga’s small, but sturdy body. “Are you feeling ill?”

Suga went tight lipped.

In response, Seokjin shrugged. “I consider complicated medical mysteries to be challenging puzzles. Some doctors don’t like being frustrated in that way, and the complex ones are always frustrating, but I enjoy being challenged. If you’re feeling ill, but aren’t sure why, I wouldn’t mind taking a look at you.”

More firmly, with an edge to his voice, Namjoon said, “I can’t afford to have anyone in Bangtan down right now. If you’ve got a problem, let Seokjin figure out what it is.”

“It’s not me,” Suga said finally. “It’s my sister. There’s something wrong with her, even if her doctor doesn’t think so.”

Next to Suga, Taehyung lowered his bowl slowly, wiped at his mouth, and asked, “Hyomin?”

Even Namjoon looked startled. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

Suga ignored them, staring straight at Seokjin. “My sister is ten. She should be out running around and playing with her friends. But all she does is lay around and sleep. She says she’s tired all the time. She can barely stay awake at school.”

Seokjin’s eyes narrowed in interest. “You said a doctor already cleared her?”

“Some asshole at the local hospital did,” Suga said with fierce anger. “He acted like she was just lazy, but I know she isn’t. She used to be loud and energetic.”

“How recent has this happened?”
Suga looked to be guessing as he said, “A couple weeks. Maybe a month.”

Seokjin could see the tension and unease radiating from Suga, and the tapping of his fingers erratically on the tabletop was a sure tell.

“Suga,” Seokjin offered, “I’m done with my scheduled appointments for the day. I want to take some walk-ins at the clinic later tonight, but I’m free at the moment. If you want, I can come take a look at your sister. Or you can bring her—”

“Can you?” Suga cut in quickly.

“Run it by your parents,” Seokjin said simply. “If you clear it with them, I can come over, or you can bring her to the clinic.”

Getting to his feet, Suga told them he would be right back, and then phone in hand he made his way outside to make the call.

“Do you really think you can help his sister?” Taehyung asked, almost as if he’d lost his appetite.

“I won’t know until I see her,” Seokjin said. “And I don’t discount any other doctor’s assessment, even if Suga thinks he was an…”

“Asshole,” Taehyung supplied.

Seokjin nodded. “But maybe. And it never hurts to have a second opinion.”

Without warning, Namjoon wrapped his hands around Seokjin’s fingers and urged, “You don’t have to play doctor to all my friends.” He winced a little. “I probably shouldn’t have called you to look at granny. I feel like I’m taking advantage of you.”

Seokjin shook his head, saying, “Some things are in your blood, Namjoon. You being a leader, that’s in your blood. Me being a doctor? That’s in mine. You can’t take advantage of someone who wants to do the things they are. This is what I live for, Namjoon, helping people. If I get tired, or need to take a break, or don’t have time, I’ll say something. But right now, I’m not saying anything.”

Namjoon’s voice lowered, and he stated, “Okay. I trust you to know your limits. But also, you should know, when you’re being a doctor-y, you’re super hot.”


“Super hot,” Namjoon reinforced.

Taehyung said, “You’re speaking quietly, not silently. I can hear everything you’re saying.”

Namjoon’s eyes traced their way down to Seokjin’s lips, like he wanted to kiss him. And he said, “I especially like it when you wear your white doctor coat. When I see you in it, I want to rip it off, and then—”

“I swear to god,” Taehyung said, slamming his chopsticks down. “I’m not like you, Rap Mon. I don’t eat for free here. And if I get sick, and bring everything up that just went down, and have to pay for it still, I’m going to be really pissed off.”

“All right,” Seokjin said in a pleased way. “We have to leave him alone now. If he gets sick I’ll be morally required to care for him until I’m sure he’s okay.”

“But wait,” Namjoon said, still playful. “If V needs Doctor Kim, does that mean you’ll put the white
Taehyung got to his feet right away. “That’s it. I’m out of here.” He pulled his wallet from his pocket, put a significant amount of money down on the table, and declared, “I hope the two of you make someone else sick from now on.”

Namjoon laughed loudly as Taehyung all but ran from the noodle house.

“That was a little mean,” Seokjin said.

Namjoon added, “But also a little fun. Come on, don’t make that face. We’ll make it up to him somehow.”

Before Seokjin could reply, Suga was coming back through the crowded area, and said quickly, “My parents are both at work right now, but neither one of them has a problem with you checking out Hyomin as long as I’m there.”

“I’ll drop the two of you off,” Namjoon said, standing and offering a hand down to Seokjin.

“Let’s do it,” Seokjin agreed.

Much to Seokjin’s surprise, Suga’s home was an actual house, not an apartment, and it was located in the quietest part of Bangtan’s area. The area surrounding the home was well cared for, and the house itself looked friendly enough.

“This way,” Suga said, getting out of the car almost before it had come to a complete stop.

“I mean it about your grandmother,” Seokjin said, leaning across the divider between the front passenger seat and the driver’s seat. He kissed Namjoon’s cheek. “Make sure you call and schedule something. Her life is nothing to procrastinate taking care of.”

“I will, I promise.” He wrapped his fingers around the back of Seokjin’s neck gently and tugged him easily into a proper kiss.

Suga knocked on the front passenger window impatiently.

“Now him,” Seokjin said unflinchingly, his breath against Namjoon’s lips, “him you can feel free to be as mean to as you want.”

Namjoon delivered a sweeter parting kiss and mumbled, “He’s just anxious for you to see his sister. Call Jimin when you’re ready to go home.”

Seokjin was less than thrilled about the prospect of getting back on the bike, but he was being chauffeured around at will, so he tried not to complain.

“See you later,” Seokjin said, then he was getting out of the car and heading with Suga into the house.

“Hyomin!” Suga called out the second he was through the front door. “Hyomin, I’m home!”

Seokjin followed Suga through the traditional style home, noting its cleanliness and upkeep. Seokjin wondered if Suga had his own apartment, or if he still lived at home with his parents. Soekjin wouldn’t have put it pass him to still be at home, at least with parents who worked full time and a young sister to look after.

“Hyomin?”
After what seemed like an eternity, she called out, “I’m in my room.”

“This way.” Suga led Seokjin down the nearby hallway.

Suga’s younger sister, Hyomin, was seated at the desk in her room, one arm up on the surface and her chin in her palm. And as expected, she seemed absolutely exhausted, paler than she ought to be, and Seokjin would have bet his medical career on the fact that something was wrong.

“Hyomin,” Suga said, gesturing to Seokjing. “This is my friend, Doctor Kim. Mom and dad said it was fine if he took a look at you. Then maybe we can figure out why you’re so tired all the time.”

She remained silent, watching him as Seokjin moved swiftly to her side, kneeling down next to her to say, “I’m Doctor Kim Seokjin, but you can call me Doctor Jin if you want. When I treat people your age, they prefer that. Your name is Hyomin, right? How about we move to the bed so that I can get a proper look at you.”

She gave a nod and shuffled her way over to the bed with the pink duvet atop it. She made sure to leave him plenty of room.

“Jin is short of Seokjin,” he said, placing his bag near enough her that she could see whatever was in it when he opened it. “Is there a nickname that you like to go by?”

Her pupil reaction was a little slow, but not completely abnormal, and behind the both of them Seokjin could feel Suga hovering around.

Hyomin shook her head slowly and Seokjin, with a grin asked, “So I’ll call you Hyomin then, if that’s okay with you. What name do you call your brother?”

It was the first spark of life he saw from her when she glanced past him to Suga, and then said without much thought, “Suga.”

Seokjin’s grin widened and he turned back to look at Suga. “She’s good. Smart girl.”

Suga said smugly, “She’s my sister. She’d never give something important away.”

“All right,” Seokjin laughed.

From his bag, with her watching, he retrieved the blood pressure cuff that he’d used on Namjoon’s grandmother. It was a bit too large for Hyomin, but he needed to get at least an idea of what her blood pressure was.

“Suga said you haven’t been feeling well?”

The almost lifeless eyes were back.

“She’s shy,” Suga interjected. “And I’m serious, that doctor we saw a was a real jerk.”

So maybe she wasn’t shy, Seokjin decided. Maybe it was something else.

“Hyomin,” Seokjin said, making sure to look her right in the eyes. “How about we make a promise to each other right here and now. If you promise to be truthful and honest with everything you tell me, I promise to always believe what you say. How about that? Do we have a deal?”

He wasn’t certain she was going to agree, and he couldn’t judge her reaction properly. But then, slowly, she was nodding and saying, “Okay, Doctor Jin.”
Seokjin shared a smile with her. “Good. Let’s started. You must have a lot of homework.” He fitted the cuff gently around her arm and stated, “Your brother told me you’ve been feeling very sleepy lately? Even after you get a full night’s sleep?”

Hyomin said in a soft voice that Seokjin was willing to bet was the best she could muster at the moment, “All the time. I tried to sleep more it doesn’t help.”

Seokjin pumped the cuff slowly. “Anything else? There is nothing you can tell me that I won’t think is important. As of right now, I’m your doctor and you’re my patient. That means I listen to what you say, I believe you, and you tell me even the smallest things that you might not think are that important.”

Suga interjected in an anxious way, “You’ve been getting dizzy, too.”

“You’ve been dizzy?” Seokjin asked her.

“Sometimes,” she admitted. “And my heart …”

Seokjin paused. “What about your heart?”

Hyomin, who was cute as a button, gave an almost invisible nod. “It beats really fast sometimes.”

“And slow at other times? Slower than you usually feel?”

“No,” she denied, and Seokjin felt sweet relief whip through him. A quick heartbeat, rather than a heartbeat that alternated between quick and slow, was easier to deal with. And it indicated something much better than the other scenarios that were playing through Seokjin’s head.

“No?” he asked to be sure.

“No,” she confirmed. “It just gets fast sometimes, like when I stand up really fast, or for too long.”

“Do you know what’s wrong with her?” Suga cut in sharply.

Seokjin turned to Suga and pressed a finger to his lips. Suga was worse than some of the parents that accompanied their children. It was obviously only because he loved her, though.

“What about your appetite?” Seokjin inquired. “How are you eating?” He finished inflating the blood pressure cuff.

Hyomin admitted, “I don’t get hungry a lot, and sometimes the smell of food makes me feel sick.”

“But when you do manage to eat? Do you feel better or worse?”

There was a conflicted look on Hyomin’s face before she told him, “I don’t know. Sometimes yes. Sometimes no.”

Seokjin got his first look at her blood pressure reading and his eyebrows went up towards his hairline.

“You’re really pretty.”

Seokjin startled a little, then laughed at Hyomin’s words. “You’re pretty, too,” he told her. “Prettier than me. Girls are supposed to be pretty.”

In a determined, almost defensive way, Hyomin stated, “Boys can be pretty too. Boys can be
“anything girls and can be. And you’re the prettiest boy I’ve ever seen.”

“Hyomin,” Suga said, but he didn’t move from his spot across the room. “He’s your doctor. Show some respect.”

Seokjin shook his head. “It’s fine. Suga, she’s only a kid.”

“I’m ten,” she corrected.

Seokjin laughed a little. “I guess you’re right. You’re almost a young lady.” He tried not to let his worry at her blood pressure show on his face. “Just a few more questions, okay? Hyomin, do you feel weaker than normal? I don’t mean tired, I mean weak.”

There were circles of tiredness under Hyomin’s eyes, overt signs of exhaustion. “My body feels heavy.”

“And you don’t take any supplements or vitamins or other medication?”

Hyomin shook her head as Suga said, “She’s always been very healthy. I got sick all the time as a kid. Hyomin got sick maybe once from birth until now.”

Seokjin placed the cuff back in his bag, closed it, and told her warmly, “Thank you for being such a good patient for me. You answered all my questions, you remained calm, and you’re one of the best patients I’ve ever had.”

He slid from her bed to stand, gathering his bag up with him.

“Well?” Suga asked.

Seokjin nodded towards the door, but told Hyomin, “It was very nice to meet you, Hyomin.”

With pale, thin lips, she replied, “It was nice to meet you too, Doctor Jin.”

Seokjin waited until he and Suga were outside of her room, with the door firmly closed behind them to say, “I can’t give you a definitive answer, but I think I might know what’s wrong with her.”

Suga’s shoulders sagged. “There is something wrong with her.”

Seokjin put a comforting hand on his shoulder and reminded, “You already knew that, Suga. Even when the previous doctor told you otherwise.”

“And you looked at her for five minutes and knew something was wrong with her,” Suga nearly spat out. “How could that other guy, that asshole, think she was faking it?”

“I don’t know,” Seokjin offered. “Doctors are often overworked, Suga. And they’re also just human. Doctors make mistakes. I think a lot of people forget that.”

“So, what’s wrong with her?”

“Do you have a pad of paper and a pen?” Seokjin asked. “I need to write a number down for you.”

A few minutes later Seokjin was scribbling down a name and number on a Hello Kitty notepad that Suga swore was Hyomin’s, even though he’d retrieved it from his own room. Seokjin absolutely did not tease him about it, considering he owned the same pad and was more than a little partial to the color pink.
“This,” Seokjin said, handing him the piece of paper, “is the name and the number to a friend of mine. She’s a hematologist, and you need to make Hyomin an appointment with her as soon as you can.”

Suga’s fingers shook as he accepted the paper. “What’s wrong with Hyomin? What’s a hematologist?”

Seokjin told him, “Your sister is tired all the time, regardless of how much sleep she gets. Her appetite is gone, but she will sometimes feel better after eating. She’s dizzy at times, and the most worrying symptom she’s exhibiting is the extremely low blood pressure reading I’m getting from her. I’m not a hundred percent certain, and won’t be until Hyomin has the proper blood work done, but I think she’s got a moderate to severe case of anemia.”

Slowly Suga repeated, “Anemia?”

“That’s what I think,” Seokjin said with a nod. “I’ve seen this before in children, and I’m fairly confident I’ve gotten it right here. But a hematologist, who specializes in blood disorders, will be able to tell for sure. And that number I just gave you, is for the best one I’ve ever met.”

Suga held the paper almost reverently, tentative hope shining in his eyes. “Can you tell me what anemia is? I’m not …”

Suga, who’d always come off as capable and strong, if not the brooding and silent type, suddenly only looked like a worried older brother.

“It’s a blood disorder,” Seokjin said gently. “If this is anemia, it means Hyomin’s body doesn’t have enough red blood cells. The red blood cells are what carry oxygen to all the parts of her body. There are various forms of anemia, and the hematologist will determine that further, but I think Hyomin is just feeling the effects of this. And it’s also why she feels better sometimes when she eats. I’d guess that happens when she eats meals high in protein and nutrients.”

“And it’s … treatable?”

Seokjin most certainly saw Suga’s eyes go to his medical alert bracelet. There probably wasn’t a person in Bangtan now who didn’t know now about his heart, and there was no telling who was to blame for that. Though probably not Jungkook, and not Namjoon. But it didn’t matter, not really.

“It’s fully treatable,” Seokjin assured, “and in very manageable ways. It could be as simple for her as taking an iron supplement every morning before she goes to school—one pill or chewable gummy. And then she’d be back to her normal self.”

With a wheeze Suga doubled forward unexpectedly and braced his hands on his knees, breathing deeply.

Seokjin put a solid hand between Suga’s shoulder blades. “Your sister is going to be okay, Suga.”

“Yoongi.”

“What?”

“My name,” Suga said, straightening back up with obvious wetness in his eyes. “It’s Min Yoongi.”

A smile fought its way onto Seokjin’s face. “Careful. The more time I spend around Bangtan, the more I find out your secret identities.” In fact, J-Hope’s was the only name Seokjin didn’t know.
“They’re not secret identities,” Yoongi protested. “They’re how we protect the people we love. And if any other members of Bangtan are telling you their real names, you should probably stop and consider what that means.”

The smile didn’t leave Seokjin’s face. “I know what it means.” He frowned a second later. “I just still don’t understand why Jimin goes by his real name. That is his real name, right?”

Yoongi nodded. “It is. But Jimin is … different. He’s always been different. Angry. Unabashed. Unflinching. Honest, even to the point of bluntness.”

“I could tell,” Seokjin sighed.

“It’s not his fault,” Yoongi protested. “He’s been through a lot. He’s endured almost more than any of us, arguably more than Rap Mon. He’s angry for a reason, and he doesn’t, other than Bangtan, have anything left to protect. That’s why he is the way he is.”

If Seokjin had said he wasn’t curious, it would have been a lie. But it was Jimin’s business, his story, and Seokjin was already on such thin and uneven ice with him. The last thing Seokjin wanted to do was put them back on completely bad footing, all for the sake of learning what would probably come out eventually.

“Anyway,” Yoongi said, bowing low and respectfully to Seokjin. “Thank you for this. Thank you for coming over and looking at Hyomin. Thank you for this number and your help and for just … for being a good person. I don’t know how I can repay you.”

“Yoongi,” Seokjin said, “just keep taking care of my brother, okay? Watch out for him. Jungkook is headstrong and rarely thinks before he acts, and he’s so sure of himself I worry all the time. If you make sure he doesn’t get too deep into trouble, we can more than call this even.”

“Deal,” Yoongi said right away. “But you should know, I feel like I’m getting the raw end of the deal. Your brother is … a force of … madness.”

Seokjin laughed loudly. “Imagine how it was growing up with him.”

Yoongi said in a kind of impressed way, “I’m surprised you survived into adulthood. Or that he did.”

Seokjin made to reply when his phone began to buzz.

“It’s the clinic,” Seokjin said, reaching to take the call immediately. It was the number from the front desk where Yoona manned the phones like a military commander. “I have to take this.”

Yoongi nodded. “If you’re done here, I’ll call Jimin to come pick you up.”

Seokjin gave a distracted nod.

“Seokjin,” Yoona said right away, some kind of fright in her voice. “Where are you?”

“I had to make a house call,” Seokjin said, frowning deeply. “What’s wrong?”

“You have to get back here right now!” Her voice was pitchy, indicating the level of her fright, and in the background Seokjin could hear … things crashing together, heaving thumps, and shouting. There was a lot of shouting.

Seokjin’s stomach curled in on itself as he thought about Infinite being there, trashing his clinic for whatever reason. They could be overly thuggish in their behavior at times, especially when they felt
threatened, and on more than one occasion Seokjin had heard of them ruining stores and home residents just to prove a point.

“Yoona!”

“It’s Yunho and Jonghyun!” she replied quickly, and it was the last possible thing Seokjin had expected to hear from her. “They’re fighting! I mean, they’re literally fighting! And they’re wrecking things and scaring the patients and you have to get here now!”

“Is everything okay?” Yoongi asked, reading the look on his face.

“They’re fighting?” Seokjin demanding, ignoring Yoongi completely. “How … why!”

“Look, I have to go,” Yoona said, almost like she was far away. “I have to try and help calm everyone down. Please, Seokjin, get here as quickly as you can.”

The call clicked over to dead silence and air rushed out of Seokjin’s lungs. “There’s an emergency at the clinic,” he told Yoongi, not sure if he truly believed the two other doctors were in some kind of … physical altercation. “I have to go right now. Please tell Jimin to hurry.”

Yoongi pursed his lips for a second, then said, “My parents have a second car. It mostly sits in the garage because they work at the same place and always carpool together.”

“Are you …”

Yoongi said, “I’ll get the keys.”
“So,” Yoongi tried as they sped towards the clinic, mere minutes away with how the Bangtan member was driving. “Is it always this exciting at your clinic? I mean, gunshot wounds, gangsters lurking around, fistfights between the doctors.”

Seokjin gave him a look from the corner of his eye, clinging to the door handle. Instead of a proper response, he said, “I didn’t honestly think it was possible for me to feel more scared than when Jimin is driving. And I’m certain he has a death wish.”

Yoongi gave a deep kind of laugh. “He’s just an adrenaline junkie.”

“He’s crazy,” Seokjin corrected. “And not just because he drives a motorcycle.”

They were well into Infinite territory then, and Seokjin wanted to put a hat over Yoongi’s head or slip sunglasses over his eyes.

“Jimin just likes to feel.”

The comment caught Seokjin off guard. “Feel?”

There was clear hesitancy on Yoongi’s face, then he said almost delicately, “Most of us in Bangtan, even if it’s only a family member or two, have someone we’re fighting to make the world better for. I guess Jimin has us, but he doesn’t have any other family--any blood family. He doesn’t even have the people he took a second chance on.”

Seokjin looked away from the familiar streets. “He’s an orphan?”

With a deep, heaving breath, Yoongi let slip, “I’m trusting you with this information, Seokjin. And I’m not trusting you with it because you’re Rap Mon’s boyfriend. I’m trusting you because I think you’re a good person, and someone who can guard precious information if necessary. So, if I tell you this, I’m trusting you.”

There weren’t any words that seemed like they’ve be proper to respond with, so Seokjin just gave a heavy nod.

Yoongi was silent for some time, then offered up, “Jimin was someone’s little brother once. He was someone’s son. Has Rap Mon told you what happened to his parents?”

In an airy way, Seokjin said, “He said they stood up to the thugs in the neighborhood, and lost their lives for it.”

“I think Jimin’s parents had the same idea.” Yoongi pursed his lips in thought. “I’ve known him for years and years, and he hardly ever talks about them, but what I’ve gotten from him is that they weren’t the kind of people who’d be cowed easily. They were kind and loving, but also not complacent. Rap Mon’s parents weren’t the first to find out the hard way that standing up to bad people can sometimes get you killed. At least if you don’t have anyone watching your back.”

Seokjin gripped the car door tighter, and it had nothing to do with Yoongi’s driving. Still feeling breathless, Seokjin dared to ask, “You said Jimin was someone’s little brother?”

Wryly, Yoongi told him, “It’s not your fault, really, but the way Jimin tells it—and he was just a little kid at the time, ten when this all happened—his older brother was a really kind and gentle soul. Jimin
says he has memories of him, of an older brother who was just like you are. I think that’s part of the reason you hit so close to home with Jimin. He had a brother who was just like you, who helped people on instinct alone, and put others before him, and cared too much. Jimin sees too much of his brother in you.”

“Oh,” Seokjin breathed out.

“I think Jimin is scared that he cares too much about you now, and the same thing that happened to his brother, is going to happen to you. I’m not even sure he can see the difference between the two of you now, in that regard.”

Seokjin felt the lump in his throat crawl its way down to his stomach, and settle like a brick. “I …” There still weren’t any words he could find.

“They made him beg.”

Seokjin turned to Yoongi sharply. “Who?”

“The guys who pulled Jimin and his brother out of their house in the middle of the night, after murdering their parents. They made Jimin’s brother beg for their lives, down on his knees, like he was worse than the scum on the bottom of someone’s shoe. His brother didn’t beg for his own, though. Jimin told me he remembers that. He remembers it like it happened yesterday. His brother only begged for Jimin to be spared, and you know, that’s the only mistake that will ever matter to Jimin for as long as he lives.”

“Mistake?” Seokjin asked, unsure.

Yoongi gave a firm nod. “It was a mistake to let Jimin live in the end. It was a mistake for them to force Jimin to watch his brother be killed. It was a mistake that they overlooked him because of his age, and when they let him go they thought they’d wiped their hands of the situation.”

Because Jimin had grown up, Seokjin thought, and vengeance was a powerful motivator.

Yoongi continued on, “He got put in a boy’s home after that, and I think it was a good place to live. I think he found a second home there over the years, and cared about the people there, and maybe that could have been the end of it. Maybe Jimin could have learned to let go of some of his anger inside of him.”

Seokjin sensed a huge but.

They rolled to a red light as Yoongi said, “Shinhwa kept an iron first of control on that area for years and years as Jimin grew up, and they used to steal boys from those group homes at a young age to be a part of their gang. It’s disgusting to think about.”

Head cocked, Seokjin reasoned, “I’m certainly not justifying any of that, but you can’t tell me you don’t have dozens of subordinates running around working for you, and some of them young or underaged.”

“Not thirteen or fourteen-year-old kids,” Yoongi said in an offended way. “And only the willing join Bangtan. No one gets forced in, and we don’t torch their homes when they refuse.”

“What!”

Yoongi didn’t look away from the road as they were moving again. “This is the point in Jimin’s history that I think really did him in. Like the final nail in the coffin. Sometimes I look at him, and I
think this is it. This is what stole the last bit of innocence from him.”

“Yoongi,” Seokjin offered gently. “You don’t have to…”

Yoongi looked weary as he said, “I don’t know the details. This is one thing Jimin doesn’t talk about. I just know that Jinmin’s boy’s home finally started putting up a fight. The workers there refused to let their boys get devoured up by Shinhwa, especially as the gang was starting to have major issues at the time and were in danger of starting some kind of civil war. So, when the workers said no one more time, Shinhwa set the place on fire. Jinmin made it out, and so did a couple other kids, but lots of people died. Seokjin, Shinhwa barred the doors. They locked those people in before they set the place on fire. Just to prove a point.”

Seokjin felt his heart seize up into his chest, and for one moment, there was a stutter. But it was just heartache, he realized a moment after that. It was just sadness.

“Jimin lost everything,” Yoongi said, “time and time again. He kept cheating death, and I think he felt like he didn’t deserve that. Every time he had something he loved, it was snatched from him, and he joined up with Bangtan because he was angry, and desperate, and wanted an outlet.”

Seokjin gave a somber nod as the clinic came into sight.

“Sometimes it’s easier, you know?” Yoongi offered. “To just close yourself off to all the things that make you feel. So no, Jimin isn’t patient, or kind, or gentle, but it’s just because he’s afraid the universe is going to take another swing at him if he tries to be. That’s what he’s been taught over the years. We’re a family, Bangtan is a family, and Jimin feels safe around us because we can all hold our own. We’re not his parents caught unaware. We’re not his brother begging for his life. We’re not the other kids being burned alive. We’re fighters. That’s why we’re his new family. But you?”

“I’m collateral damage,” Seokjin mused.

“You’re the loss the might break him,” Yoongi said in a contemplative way. He shook his head. “That’s what Rap Mon and I think, at least. I’m not inside Jimin’s head. I don’t know for sure. But it makes sense, the way Rap Mon and I figure it. So just … even when Jimin is being difficult, and hard to handle, just give him a little more leeway, okay? He’s a complicated guy, and he’s probably a lot more damaged than he would ever want someone to know.”

Quietly, not even sure if he wanted to know the answer, Seokjin asked, “Did he get it? His revenge? On the people who hurt him and his family, and those other people?”

Yoongi angled towards him and said bluntly, “The truth is, Seokjin, when you’re carrying around that much anger and hurt, no amount of revenge is ever going to be enough.”

If that wasn’t food for thought, Seokjin didn’t know what was.

“But,” Yoongi cut in, like the swipe of a knife, “if you’re asking did he murder those bastards who killed everyone he loved time and time again, then the answer is yes. And I bet he even enjoyed it.”

Seokjin steadied himself against the door on more time, and he closed his eyes against the truth that was floating around him. The truth and the magnitude of it.

Silence lapped in the car, and Seokjin felt suffocated by it.

“Here’s the clinic,” Seokjin said, pointing up ahead when they arrived. “If you want to drop me here, it’ll be safer.”
Yoongi scoffed. “No offense, but I’m not about to let my boss’s boyfriend throw himself headfirst into a rumble.”

“Well, with offense taken,” Seokjin cut back, “your boss’s boyfriend doesn’t need a chaperone.”

Yoongi laughed, but kept driving.

There wasn’t much time to worry about Yoongi being there or not, because the car screeched to a stop and Seokjin’s heart nearly leapt up into his throat. He could see dozens of people who were probably supposed to be inside the clinic, including some children, scattered out on the front sidewalk. And there were clinic personnel there as well.

“What’s going on?” Seokjin demanded the second he was out of the car and quick enough to snag Nana’s attention. She and Lizzy were hunched together talking quietly while nearby, Raina tried to calm one of their regulars.

“Seokjin!” Yoona said, waving an arm from her position nearer the clinic door.

“Please,” Seokjin all but begged. “Tell me Yunho and Jonghyun aren’t actually fighting.”

“They aren’t anymore,” Yoona said. “Not since Victoria got out her pepper spray and taser and threatened to use both on them if they so much as moved from the room she sat them in.”

Victoria seemed even more like a godsend now.

When Seokjin stepped through the doors to the clinic, at least everything looked okay. The waiting room was in perfect condition, as was the reception area and the front nurse’s station. But the further back he went, towards the examination rooms, he began to see the first signs of evidence that there’d been a fight.

The cheap but pleasant art that had been hanging on the walls was now on the ground, there were boot scuffle marks everywhere on the normally pristine floor, the informational charts that hung on the back of the doors were ripped and torn, and there was more than one hole in the adjacent walls.

“In there,” Yoona said from his side, pointing to the largest examination room they had. She remarked, “I trust Victoria not to let them kill each other … but not for her not to kill them out of annoyance.”

By the time Seokjin was at the door he could hear Victoria’s voice loudly and very sharp as she exclaimed, “Grown men! That’s what you look to be, at least. But you’re behaving like delinquent school children. You’re both ridiculous and shameful!”

Seokjin pushed open the door and tried not to ask too frantically, “What is going on here?”

Yunho and Jonghyun were on opposite sides of the room, with Victoria between them like a mediator of sorts. She certainly had a small can of pepper spray in one hand, and a crackling taser in the other. She looked incredibly intimidating.

Jonghyun, with some swelling to his forehead like he’d taken a knock to his head, turned to Seokjin, pointed at Yunho and said, “This bastard is betraying us!”

Yunho shouted back immediately, “Don’t you dare call me a bastard!”

Seokjin looked between them, gob smacked. “You’re doctors,” he told them, incredibly disappointed. “You are doctors and you’re supposed to be symbols of something better than this.
How can you behave like this? How can you call each other names, fight with each other, and scare our patients?"

“It’s because of him!” Jonghyun shouted in a heated way. “Yunho is a traitor and I’ll kill him for doing this to us!”

“You can try!” Yunho screamed back.

It was a cluster of movement that happened next, with Victoria being bypassed by Jonghyun who lunged around her for Yunho. She lost her balance in the move, even as her arm snaked out with the taser to try and ding someone, ultimately failing.

Jonghyun and Yunho crashed into each other, kicking, punching, and shouting once more.

“Hey!”

Seokjin was no fighter. He had very little experience getting into fights, was relatively weak in terms of physicality, and he bruised exceptionally easy. He most certainly was the type of man who thought his problems through and solved them with words.

But neither could he have his two main doctors fighting in the clinic they were struggling to hold together.

“Knock it off now!” Without much thought, Seokjin was between the two older men, trying to force them to separate, and to stop screaming.

Behind him, he heard Victoria shout at him to get out of the way. “I’ll tase them, Seokjin, move!”

It sounded like the best way to handle the situation, especially with the threat of the police showing up if they couldn’t get things under control.

Each gang, as far as Seokjin knew, had a unique relationship with the police in their area. Some gangs were ignored by the police. Some were targeted. Some owned the police, and some worked with them. Infinite owned their police, and bringing the police out to the clinic would mean turning Infinite’s eye to the clinic when Seokjin had just started to feel comfortable that they’d fully looked away.

There was a shout from a voice much too deep to belong to Victoria. And with Jonghyun and Yunho busy throwing wild punches at each other, it couldn’t have belonged to either of them.

None of it mattered to Seokjin a second later when pain exploded across his face and he was careening to the floor.

The tile of the room was cold through his clothing, seeping into his skin.

His face was throbbing, his mind was spinning, and he felt stupid.

Cold and stupid.

“Do you see now why I didn’t just drop you off?”

The lighting above Seokjin wasn’t harsh, no matter how sharp and artificial it was, but it was better when Yoongi leaned over him to block it from hitting him.

“Yoongi?”
Seokjin turned his head and he could see Yunho sitting on the floor, rubbing his head, and Jonghyun just across the way, quiet and watching Yoongi in a surprised way. No one was shouting, the fighting appeared to be done, and Seokjin had no idea how any of it had come to be.

Yoongi arched an eyebrow and reminded, “Call me Suga here.”

“What happened?” Seokjin asked. It hurt to talk. It hurt just to move his jaw, and that probably meant the swelling was going to be magnificent in a few hours.

Victoria’s heels clicked softly on the tile she was moving across, and then she leaned over him too, asking, “Who’s your friend, Seokjin?”

Seokjin looked back to Yoongi and asked, “I got hit, didn’t I?”

Crouched on the ground next to him, Yoongi gave him a sad kind of smile. “You did. I got here just in time to see it. But if it’s any consolation, you took the hit pretty well, for someone I’m going to guess who’s never taken a punch before in their life.”

Seokjin brought his fingers up to his jaw line, feeling along the skin. It ached even from his gentle touch. “Nope. Never gotten hit in the face with a punch before.”

Victoria caught his wrist. “Are you okay?” Her tone of voice was terse, and he understood what she meant right away.

Nodding, Seokjin asked, “Who hit me?”

Yoongi gestured to Jonghyun who had sunk to his knees in an apologetic way. “That one. But it did look like an accident.”

Jonghyun called out to him, “I’m so sorry, Seokjin. I didn’t mean to!”

Victoria placed two of her fingers at Seokjin’s wrist to take his pulse.

“Stop that,” he said gently, pulling his hand away. “I would tell you if something was wrong.”

Sighing loudly, Yoongi said, “Your boyfriend is going to be pissed I let you get hit.” But the tone of his words indicated he was more frustrated in himself than anything else.

“I like this one,” Victoria said to Seokjin, nodding to Yoongi. “He broke up the fighting while you were flailing on the floor.”

“So funny,” Seokjin told her. Then he held a hand out to either of them and asked, “Help me up?”

A few minutes later he was not only sitting, but he was on his feet.

“Now,” Seokjin said, looking between Yunho and Jonghyun who were both less anxious and tense looking, “can either of you can tell me why you’ve decided to do this here, where we work, and what started it all.”

Yunho looked away almost angrily, his eyes on the far wall.

“Yunho,” Jonghyun said acidic in his words, “is trying to fuck us.”

Before Seokjin could say anything, Yunho shot back, “You’re a moron if you think I’m doing this on purpose!”
“You’re choosing it!” Jonghyun told him. “That’s free will. Or am I mistaken? Are you not trying to fuck us and someone is forcing you to?”

“Hey!” Seokjin snapped. “Knock it off with that language. And stop yelling at each other. I thought we were friends.”

Jonghyun said, “I thought we were too.”

“Seokjin,” Yunho said, turning to him. “Do you remember what I told you all those months ago when this clinic was still just a pipe dream? Do you remember why I told you I was more than happy to come here, leave my post at my previous job, and work here?”

Seokjin nodded. “You said you wanted to help underprivileged patients. And that … that you were tired of waiting for opportunity to come to you.”

With his feet braced under him and his shoulders straight, Yunho explained, “I have been trying since I was twenty to get onto the orthopedic association’s board. I’ve been working towards that goal because I want the challenge of taking on the most complicated cases these are, treating the most in need patients, and I’m not afraid to say that I want the recognition that comes with it.”

Yunho was a highly talented and decorated orthopedic surgeon. Seokjin had known when he’d taken the job at the clinic that Yunho was better suited for more, but he’d never once been ungrateful.

“I want to be on that board,” Yunho continued. “I want to see patients in different countries, write review papers after next to impossible surgeries, and I have always been clear with you that my end goal is the board.”

In a darkly angry way, Jonghyun said, “Guess who’s finally good enough to make the cut?”

Eyes jerking from Jonghyun back to Yunho, Seokjin breathed out, “You were accepted onto the board?”

Jonghyun scoffed as Yunho nodded slowly. “I knew I was being considered for the position when a spot opened up six months ago. I didn’t say anything because I didn’t think I’d get it. I’ve been up for consideration before. But I got it. They’re giving it to me. This is going to be the highlight of my career—the surgeries I’ll get to do.”

All of the sudden, his balance going wonky at the realization, Seokjin understood what Jonghyun was so mad about.

Simply, Seokjin said, “You’re leaving.”

Yunho didn’t say anything. He didn’t have to.

“So now we’re down a doctor!” Jonghyun said, a furious look on his face. “We’re down a doctor as our patient numbers keep rising. And it’s not because he’s having an emergency of some kind, or because the situation is out of his control, no, we’re down a doctor because he’s leaving us for something better.”

The disappointment was welling up so much in Seokjin’s chest it was nearly overwhelming. “This clinic needs you.”

“I know,” Yunho said, looking truly sorry. “I know it does, and I’m sorry to go. But this is my dream, Seokjin This has always been my dream, and I thought you understood that if I ever got a
shot at my dream, I would have to go for it. I’m not doing this to screw the clinic over. I’m doing it because this is what I’ve dreamed about at night since I declared my focus to be in ortho.”

Jonghyun accused, “And we’re not supposed to think that this is anything other than poor timing? The second we’re about to lose our funding for the clinic, and possibly have to shut down, you get accepted into a fancy organization that’s going to send you off to the far corners of the world to do impressive surgeries?”

Yunho said in a pleading way to Seokjin, “It is just really bad timing. I swear.”

Seokjin let out a long breath. “When would you be leaving us?”

“Seokjin!” Jonghyun demanded. “How can you be okay with this?”

“I’m not okay,” Seokjin told him quickly, “but I can’t, and neither can you, stop Yunho from taking this. There’s nothing we can do. It’s already done, I think.”

“At the beginning of the year,” Yunho said. “I need to be in Toronto for a summit meeting in January.”

“It’s almost November,” Victoria said, speaking up for the first time since Yunho began to explain himself. “I don’t think we can get a doctor in here and set up by January.”

No, Seokjin didn’t think so either. Especially since Victoria would be leaving not long after that, sometime around late February. They expected to have Hongbin in a few months after that in the summer, but there was no way Seokjin and Jonghyun were going to be able to balance their patient load between the two of them.

And that was if they even were able to keep the doors open long enough for that problem to rear its head.

“You’re trash,” Jonghyun said, jabbing his finger at Yunho. “I had so much respect for you. I thought you were an amazing doctor, doing amazing things for people who desperately needed you. But you’re just opportunistic trash.”

“Screw you,” Yunho snapped back. “If your dream job popped up out of nowhere, you’d go for it, too. Stop acting like you’re better than me.”

“I wouldn’t leave this clinic so abruptly,” Jonghyun argued. “I wouldn’t leave my fellow doctors high and dry, and abandon my patients, and all for glory and money.”

“Yunho,” Seokjin said softly, not wanting the room to dissolve into another fight. “I think you should go. Take the rest of the day off. We’ve got it covered here. You should go and … just go and give us some time.”

Spitefully, Jonghyun offered, “I guess we’ll have to now, just the rest of us.”

Yunho seemed as if he might hesitate for a second, but then he was nodding and slipping past Yoongi to leave the room.

“He’s fucked us,” Jonghyun said softly, deflating as Yunho left the room. “Royally.”

“We’ll figure something out,” Seokjin said, even if he didn’t know what that something was.

“Will we?” Jonghyun questioned. “We just lost a doctor who handled a fourth to a third of our
patients in a day. We lost a certified doctor who we needed to have on the payroll for our federal funding. And who knows if we have that funding at all right now, with your father making his threats. What are we going to do, Seokjin? We can’t do this on our own.”

“Jonghyun,” Seokjin called out, but like Yunho, Jonghyun fled the room quickly.

Victoria, a second later, put a supportive hand on Seokjin’s shoulder. “We’ll figure things out,” Victoria said, making her solidarity with them obvious. “We’re smart and resourceful and we will handle this. Trust me.”

“Okay,” he said, but didn’t believe for a second that things would work out so well. “I’m going to … go see if I can do anything about my face. Victoria, will you please handle everyone out front? The more desperate patients we can take today for a few hours, and the nurses can see some of them. But everyone else should go home for the day. We have to figure things out before we can have a full patient load again. We have to sort this through.”

He didn’t stop to check that she was in agreement, and instead just headed directly towards the nearest bathroom.

Seokjin locked the door behind him as he flipped on the light and then leaned his hands up on the sink, looking at himself in the mirror.

His face looked … well, he looked as if he’d been punched. His normally smooth, pale skin was blemished with an angry red mark along the right side of his jaw. The mark was the size of a fist, but threatened to be an even bigger bruise before the whole thing was done.

Seokjin sighed.

He felt like crying, and was worried it might actually happen. There was a telltale sign of burning in his eyes.

“Seokjin?”

Yoongi’s voice sounded from the other side of the door as a knock vibrated.

Seokjin reached for the water right away, turning it on. He called back, “I’ll be out in a second. Look, you don’t have to wait here. Thank you for bringing me, please don’t mention me getting punched in the fact to Namjoon. I don’t want him to worry.”

“I don’t thin--”

“Yoongi,” Seokjin said sharply. He leaned forward against the sink, shoulder shaking as he tried to hold himself together. “Please. I need space.”

After a second or two of silence, Yoongi said, “All right. I’ll go now. Thank you again for helping with my sister. I’ll see you around.”

Seokjin listened carefully for the sound of Yoongi’s feet on the floor.

When he was certain he was alone, Seokjin let the water he splashed on his face to hide the tears.

Neither Jonghyun nor Yunho came back that day. Seokjin and Victoria did their best to handle the patients who hadn’t wanted to return another time, and the whole day felt tense and beyond uncomfortable. The staff could sense it, even if they didn’t really know what had happened, and the minutes dragged on like hours.
That night Seokjin went to bed early, flopping onto his mattress with a kind of weariness he hadn’t felt in a while. He draped an arm over his eyes and took deep, even breaths, trying to ready himself for what the next day would bring. All the while his heart pounded painfully in his chest like a reminder of minutes ticking down, and Seokjin had never before so badly wanted to rip his own heart out.

“We have to handle this maturely,” Seokjin said the next morning before the clinic opened. He had assembled Victoria, Jonghyun and Yunho extra early in the morning, and he knew no matter what was going to happen with Yunho, they had to learn how to work together for the coming months.

“Maturely,” Jonghyun snorted.

Seokjin asked him, “Am I going to be the one who acts like the eldest here?”

Jonghyun crossed his arms. “I just think us sitting here, pretending like everything is okay, is ridiculous. Everything is clearly not okay.”

“No,” Victoria agreed, glancing between them. “But are you such a child that you think the people who come to us for help should suffer because of the issues we’re having?”

Jonghyun looked suddenly regretful.

“Yunho,” Seokjin said, breaking through the silence. “You said you’re leaving in January, right?” When he nodded, Seokjin added, “Then until the very end of December, we’re going to act like everything is okay—even if it isn’t. We won’t alarm our patients, we won’t give any hint of instability, and we won’t let the clinic hurt because of this. We will go on like always.”

Yunho cleared his throat and said, “I’ve been looking into who might be able to replace me. I know a few doctors who—”

“I think you’ve done enough,” Jonghyun cut in.

“I think,” Seokjin said, not wanting to sound cruel, “that we can hand your replacement. Yunho, I think we need to.”

“Okay,” Yunho said softly.

Victoria asked, “Are we going to tell the nurses? The receptionists?”

Jonghyun shrugged. “Will they gossip? What if one of them says something to the more regular patients we have? For some of them, we’re the only people they trust with their health and security. We shouldn’t risk getting them scared or worked up.”

Seokjin decided, “We should tell Yoona. She handles a lot of our important business. She’s been with the clinic since the beginning. She can be trusted.”

“Agreed,” Jonghyun said.

His hands folded on the table in front of him, Yunho said quietly, “I never wanted to hurt anyone, or this clinic.”

“I know,” Seokjin said, trying to smile a little. “And I’m angry you’re leaving so abruptly, but you’re following your dream. It’s not fair or right to ask you not to go after your dream. This clinic is mine, and where would I be now if I hadn’t fought to achieve it?”
Unexpectedly, Jonghyun turned to Yunho and said, “You should have told us. That’s what I’m most upset about. You should have said something the second you came back up for consideration, and then right after you found out they were offering you the position. I had to pick up your mail by mistake and find out that way? From the acceptance letter you just left lying around?”

Heartfelt, Yunho apologized, “I’m really sorry, Jonghyun. You’re right. I should have said something as soon as I knew. I was wrong.”

Jonghyun nodded in what seemed like the start of forgiveness. “I’m sorry for freaking out so much on you.”

“We’re all under a lot of stress,” Victoria said.

“That’s not a lie,” Seokjin agreed. “But we can get through this. We will, because the alternative is not something I’m willing to accept.”

“Speaking of,” Jonghyun reminded, “what can we do about your dad? Seokjin? We have to block him from trying to kill our funding because he’s pissed about your brother.”

Seokjin swore, “I’m working on it. I won’t let him take our funding, no matter what he threatens. He doesn’t represent the whole of the Korean government, no matter who he knows. I won’t let him get away with this.”

“But what if he does?” Jonghyun posed.

“Then we go into funding overdrive,” Victoria proposed. “We get anyone and everyone to sponsor us. We have fundraisers, we appeal for research grants, take private donations, and whatever else we have to. We do what it takes to keep this place open.”

“Got it,” Jonghyun said. “And that’s something we have to get the other nurses and receptionists in on. This has to be a group effort.”

Yunho asked, “What about trying to get some of the neighborhood businesses to kick in a little? Everyone is strapped for money here, but if they all donate a little, that little becomes a lot. And for anyone who kicks in privately, we can offer some kind of discount for every time they come to see us.”

Victoria said quickly, “That’s a good idea. What about a rewards system? Tiered rewards? Donate a certain amount of money and you get free hearing or vision tests for the year, or donate a different amount and don’t pay to visit for an annual checkup? We could try and points system or something like that? What about being able to buy those points?”

Yunho wondered, “What kind of price points were you thinking of? We have to keep in mind the means of the people in this neighborhood.”

Unexpectedly, Jonghyun said, “But haven’t you noticed? Word is getting out about us. People are coming to see us who aren’t directly within the boundaries of this neighborhood. People are spreading the word about us here and others are listening. We might be able to capitalize on that, too.”

Seokjin looked from face to face, listening to the ideas bounce between the doctors he called his friends.

They were amazing.
And more than that, they were fighting as hard as him to keep the clinic open.

Seokjin had never been so proud to call them friends.

“Sounds like you’ve had a pretty exciting few days,” Namjoon remarked the next time he saw Seokjin. They were cooking dinner together at Namjoon’s apartment, enjoying easy conversation and better company.

“Exciting is not the word I would choose,” Seokjin said with a scoff as he stirred an oversized spoon through the thick, bubbling mass of doenjang that had been simmering for half an hour.

“And this?” Namjoon said. Delicately his finger traced along the portion of Seokjin’s jaw that was now an ugly shade of yellow and green. The blue and purple would follow, but for now it looked the worse it was going to. “I hate that you got hit.”

“It was my fault,” Seokjin said in a joking way. “I tried to get between two people bigger and stronger than me. I don’t know what I was thinking. I wasn’t.”

Namjoon made a displeased sound. “Still. And with Suga there.”

Seokjin rolled his eyes and corrected, “Yoongi’s sole responsibility is not to keep me from doing stupid things.”

Picking up a pair of chopsticks, Namjoon stole a piece of kimchi from nearby, popping it in his mouth and remarking, “So he told you his name?”

“He did,” Seokjin confirmed. “And don’t eat anymore. You’ll ruin your appetite, and the food will be ready in fifteen minutes.”

Obediently, Namjoon put down his chopsticks, even though Seokjin knew how much he loved kimchi.

“It’s their way of trusting you,” Namjoon said, and not without pride. “It means they know you’re one of us, and they trust you enough to know things that could be used to hurt them, or the people they care about.”

Seokjin turned the burner on the stove down low and covered the pot. “Speaking of, Yoongi called me earlier. He said his parents took Hyomin to the doctor I suggested and she was diagnosed with anemia. They got her on an iron supplement medication, and she’s going to be just fine.”

Namjoon’s arms wrapped around him from behind and he pressed a kiss to the back of Seokjin’s head. “You’re all kinds of amazing.”

“You should know,” Seokjin warned, “flattery doesn’t work on me.”

Namjoon kissed him again. “You know I’m not flattering you.”

They took their meal at the low to the ground kitchen table, side dishes spread out around them and more food than two people could probably eat.

Seokjin joked, “We should have invited Taehyung. He’s like an overactive puppy, and he certainly eats more than anyone else I’ve ever seen.”

Namjoon was piling the kimchi high onto his rice bowl, when he said, “V’s gone hungry before in the past, when he was a kid. I mean, he went hungry a lot as a kid.”
Seokjin paled.

With a lot more levity, Namjoon added, “When I met him, when I offered him a place in Bangtan and the kind of stability that he needed, he was hoarding food. I’d go over to his apartment, this was before J-Hope was ever around, and there’d be food stuffed everywhere—under his bed, in closets, everywhere. I kind of get the feeling he was scared he’d run out and have to feel that hunger again. He’s much better now, and J-Hope has really helped him deal with that fear and anxiety, but he still eats too fast, like he thinks the food is going to disappear. And he’s always self-conscious about it. Try not to say anything, okay?

“You really think I’d say something insensitive to Taehyung?” Seokjin asked skeptically.

Namjoon paused, hand with bowl outstretched towards the still bubbling pan of doenjang. “Okay, fair point.”

Seokjin leaned across the table to kiss his mouth, then portioned the doenjang into Namjoon’s bowl for him. “That’s what I thought.”

Namjoon blushed a little. “I always forget with you—what kind of a soul you have. I shouldn’t. But I do.”

A little regretfully, Seokjin told Namjoon, “Pretty soon I don’t know how many times we’ll be able to do something like this. I’ll have to work even more than I do, and I’ll have less time for us.”

Namjoon’s hand stilled on his spoon, and said in his own reluctant voice, “Things with Infinite are … they’re getting more tense. It might be better, or safer, if we don’t have the same amount of time to spend together. Calling and texting is safe, but there are more eyes on Bangtan every day. And the police are … they’re becoming less cooperative.”

At the mention, Seokjin said, “Infinite pay to control the police force in their neighborhood. I take it the police here aren’t nearly as corrupt?”

“No,” Namjoon chuckled out. “They know who we are, and what Bangtan does, but they see us more as vigilantes than anything else. They’re always looking for a reason to bust us on something, and bribery with them isn’t an option.”

Seokjin felt better knowing that Namjoon wasn’t bribing the police in Bangtan’s territory.

Seokjin dragged a sardine from the doenjan soup to his rice and asked, “Will you tell me yet why you and Infinite are fighting? It wasn’t this way before, and even the smaller issues between gangs never escalated like this. I know it’s something serious. I also know you can’t tell me all the things I want to know. But this seems important. Can you say anything?”

Namjoon shook his head. “Not yet. Seokjin … I’m not … not telling you to be an ass. Jungkook doesn’t even know, and the others just found out. Anyone who knows right now is an immediate target, and you go to sleep in a place where Infinite can and will reach out if they suspect you know anything.”

“I don’t like dangerous,” Seokjin said, reaching instinctively for Namjoon’s side. His gunshot wound was completely healed now, leaving only a faint, pink scar as proof it had ever existed. But the fear was still there in Seokjin’s mind as if it had just happened. “I don’t like you and dangerous in the same conversation.”

Namjoon caught Seokjin’s hand and kissed his knuckles. “It will always be dangerous around me,” Namjoon said, looking unhappy. “I will always be exposing you to danger when I let you near me,
and I hate that. I hate that more than you will ever know. But the least I can do is minimize the danger. That’s why I won’t tell you. Not until I have to.”

In a soft voice, Seokjin admitted, “I don’t know what I’d do if I lost you.” Namjoon was so important to him now, such a part of his life, it would probably feel like a part of him was being cut out if anything happened to Namjoon.

“I’ll be careful,” Namjoon swore, leaning in to kiss Seokjin properly. “Trust that I will, okay? I have you to come back to, so every time I go out that door, I do whatever I can to stay safe.”

“And if the police are the ones who pick you up?”

Namjoon cracked a smile. “Then I can count on you to bail me out?”

Seokjin chuckled. “You know I don’t have any money.” He leaned his head against Namjoon’s shoulder, reveling in the feeling of security and safety he gave off.

“I’ll be careful,” Namjoon said, wrapping an arm around Seokjin again. “For you, I swear it.”
Chapter Fifteen

The middle of October meant that it was not only gloomy and overcast outside, but also cold and windy. For Seokin, who had a defective heart that rarely pumped blood effectively enough to fight off a constant feeling of coldness, the winter months were his least favorite.

But stepping into the flower shop, the heat and humidity hitting him in the face all at once, Seokjin could breathe deeply and enjoy clinging to a little artificial summer.

“Hi,” the girl at the front registered called out when she saw him, bowing and welcoming him to the shop.

“Are you serious?” Jimin snorted from behind Seokjin. “I can’t believe I’m spending my Saturday at a flower shop.”

Seokjin ignored him and made his way directly to the girl’s side, taking in the explosion of color around him and the fragrant smells. Seokjin was especially fond of flower shops. And he certainly visited them enough over the years.

“You have a very beautiful shop,” Seokjin complimented, paying particular attention to the bunches of more delicate flowers. Everything looked healthy and alive in the shop, which was impressive considering the conditions outside and the time of the year.

“What can I help you with?” the girl, a teen asked. Then her eyes drifted to Jimin and the shock on her face meant she knew exactly who he is.

“Ignore him,” Seokjin said, stepping deliberately so that he blocked Jimin from her line of view. “I need to buy flowers for two occasions, both to be delivered shortly.

Usually, at least at the end of October when he went through the usual motions of paying his respects to his mother and sister, Seokjin visited a particular flower shop around halfway between where he’d grown up, and the clinic.

But with things starting to get more tense between Infinite and Bangtan, and Seokjin worried how little he’d be able to visit Namjoon over the coming months, he was taking every opportunity he had to be with Namjoon. He had plans later that day, after running a few errands, to see Namjoon. In fact, the plan was to have dinner with Namjoon and Jungkook.

Seokjin was holding out hope that it would be more of a family dinner, than one with members of Bangtan. Jungkook was his brother, the most important person in the world to him. And Namjoon was … he was currently the person invading his heart. He wanted all three of them to be together for mundane but lovely things like meals. He needed to know that the three of them could be together without there being an awkwardness.

It was probably more than a little foolish to be worried. Namjoon and the other members of Bangtan doted on Jungkook. And it seemed that he was the only one they’d let into their group, at least to such a high and valued position, since Bangtan formed. They loved him like family, most likely, so there probably wasn’t much if any friction between Namjoon and Jungkook.

But a family dinner seemed a different kind of test.

“Two occasions?” the shop girl asked, but she was still focused on Jimin in an uneasy way. Seokjin couldn’t blame her. In his leather jacket and with the bored but dangerous look on his face, he reeked
of intimidation.

“I need Calla Lilies, specifically,” Seokjin said, “and Peonies.”

Seokjin trailed her across the floor as she showed off particularly well cared for bunches of flowers, and asked him what kind of arrangement he wanted.

“Something clean and simple,” Seokjin said, reaching his fingers out to skim across the delicate petal of a nearby flower. “I’m paying my respects to my family in a few days. The flowers are for the graves of my mother and sister.”

To the side, Seokjin could just see Jimin’s head cocking towards him in interest.

The girl rushed to say, “I’m so sorry!” and she bowed almost dramatically.

“It’s okay,” Seokjin said with a comforting smiling. “They died a long time ago. More than ten years ago. I just want a beautiful arrangement for when I go to their graves to pay my respects.”

As if she’d been set by a new fervor, the girl began pulling together an arrangement that she told him most certainly would be gorgeous. She promised, “The best you’ve ever seen!”

Behind them, Jimin sighed out, “This is going to take a long time, isn’t it?”

“You don’t have to stay,” Seokjin said a little angrily. It was important to him, beyond important, that he put time and care into the flowers he selected for the family members who were no longer with him. “I don’t even know why you’re here in the first place. Go if this is such a burden to you.”

Jimin seemed a little taken aback by Seokjin’s aggression, but played it off easily with a sigh and a wave of his hand. “If I could go, you’d better believe I would. But I’m stuck here.”

The flower girl was looking nervously between them as Seokjin pointed at the door and said, “There’s the exit. Go.” He had only needed Jimin to bring him to Bangtan’s area. He didn’t need the man to hang around him.

“I don’t think so.”

Jimin slid closer and the flower girl backed off.

“Why not?” Seokjin asked.

Quietly, so they weren’t overheard, Jimin said, “You didn’t want anyone following you around or watching you in Infinite’s territory, and that’s up to Rap Mon to agree to. I just do what I’m told. But here? You know the rules are different here.”

Seokjin hadn’t been willing to make concessions to Bangtan lurking around him at the clinic or when he left his apartment. And Rap Mon, despite the issue they’d had at first, had absolutely kept his word—in Infinite’s territory.

Yet the rules were, as Jimin had stated, different in Bangtan’s part of the city. And it seemed like a small thing to concede, allowing Namjoon to have eyes on him when he visited the streets that Bangtan owned. Namjoon, who was growing more anxious and more worried about the safety of the people he cared most about, hardly ever asked for anything. So, while having Jimin follow him around until Seokjin could meet up with his brother wasn’t ideal, it wasn’t the worst thing ever.

“It’s too hot in here and it smells bad.”
Seokjin told himself again, it wasn’t the worst thing, even if it seemed like it a little at the moment.

“Door,” Seokjin said and pointed again. “Go get some fresh air if it’s so horrible in here.”

Jimin rolled his eyes and asked in a glib way, “Doctor’s orders?”

Before Seokjin could respond Jimin was strolling out the front door, hands in his pockets and looking truly like a thug with his strut.

When the door shut behind him, the flower girl asked at a whisper, “Do you know who that is?”

“I wish I didn’t,” Seokjin sighed out. Then he pulled himself together, put a smile on his face and said to her, “My sister really liked baby’s breath. I’d like to put some in with her peonies, if you don’t think it would look out of place.”

Fifteen minutes later they had settled on two, absolutely spectacular arrangements, and Seokjin thought they were his best yet. The wouldn’t last long out in the cold, with the wind and elements battering down on the delicate flowers. But so long as the flowers made it through the memorial day, he’d be happy.

Truthfully, Seokjin didn’t even know how October twenty-ninth would go down. There had always been tension and unease in the family, especially once Seokjin and Jungkook had gotten older. But this was the first year neither Seokjin nor his brother were talking to their father, and also the first year Seokjin didn’t think he could bear to be the same room as their father.

Maybe the day would be a complete train wreck.

Or maybe just for that one day, they’d all pretend like nothing was wrong.

Seokjin had no clue which it would be, and though he detested lying and ignoring a problem at hand, for the sake of his mother and sister’s memory, he hoped they were all going to play pretend.

“You said you had a second order?”

“Ah, yes, sorry.” Seokjin startled back to the present. “I’m a doctor. A patient of mine just had a baby recently and the christening is coming up. I can’t attend due to a previous engagement, but I want to send flowers.”

“That’s so sweet,” the girl gushed.

She obviously, not that Seokjin was going to tell her, had no idea how often he was invited to birthday parties, christenings, blessings, anniversaries, and other such events. It happened all the time, much too often, and in a bid not to show any patient favoritism, he hadn’t gone to any of them. But he usually sent a gift, or flowers.

“It’s a boy,” Seokjin said, looking towards the violets that were sprinkled in with daises, “but the flowers will be for the mother, and less for the baby. But still, I’ll want to get blue probably?”

Seokjin could officially add another baby to the list of children being named after him. It was flattering to say the least, but also served as a reminder that Seokjin wanted his own child one day. He wanted to send out invitations to a christening he was holding, or his child’s birthday.

“I have just the arrangement in mind,” the girl said, and selected a clear vase to put the flowers in.

It had, Seokjin would have to admit, taken longer than expected to get the orders finished. He needed
different delivery dates and locations for the flowers, and had to be absolutely certain he’d gotten everything right before swiping his card and paying for everything.

But the sense of accomplishment and happiness he felt once he’d finished, was more than a breath of fresh air.

He was putting his wallet away when his phone rang, Jungkook’s name on the faceplate.

“Where are you?” his brother asked, a great deal of background noise threatening to overtake the call.

“At the florist,” Seokjin said, and as he reached for the door to take him outside he could see Jimin out on the street. Only he certainly wasn’t alone. There were three other people with him, a girl and two boys, but they didn’t look for a second like they had any association with Bangtan. They were dressed casually, with easy body language, and the girl in particular seemed to be paying Jimin special attention. “Where are you?”

Jungkook said something to someone else, then told Seokjin, “I’m just at the convenience store picking up a few things. But I’m mostly finished if you want to hang out now.”

Seokjin watched the girl outside laugh almost obnoxiously about something and put a hand on Jimin’s arm.

“Okay,” Seokjin said easily. “I have the flowers ordered already. Do you want me to meet you at the store? I can help you carry back the things you buy.”

Jungkook laughed. “You need to get a car, Jin. Do you know what it will look like if I get one before you?”

“You’re eighteen,” Seokjin reminded. “You don’t need a car. And when things are going a little better at the clinic, I’ll get one.”

The background noise was just as loud, but Jungkook was less so when he said, “I finally talked to dad … about … you know.”

With one hand Seokjin did up the buttons on his jacket before he went fully outside. “Was it especially bad?”

Jungkook gave a thin laugh. “It was the kind of fight that’s going to make the twenty-ninth a horribly uncomfortable day. I might have said something about never wanting to speak or see him again. There was a lot of screaming, too.”

If it had just been Seokjin’s relationship with his that that suffered, he could have endured it. But Jungkook didn’t deserve to be caught in the middle. He always deserved better.

“I’ll head to where you are now,” Seokjin said, giving the flower shop girl one last wave and appreciative bow. “Tell me the address and I’ll get a taxi.”

He could hear the confusion in Jungkook’s voice as he asked, “Aren’t you with Jimin? Or was it V? I can’t remember.”

“Jimin,” Seokjin said, and now the girl outside was practically throwing herself all over the short male. Jimin didn’t look as if he minded it much, but Seokjin thought it was in bad taste to be done so publicly. “But I think he’s a little distracted right now.”
“He shouldn’t be distracted when he’s supposed to be watching you.”

“I don’t need him to watch me,” Seokjin reminded. “And wouldn’t you think with this being Bangtan’s territory, that it would be safer? Or is there something going on that I should know about?”

“You should get him to bring you,” Jungkook said, ignoring the question.

Seokjin said again, “I’ll get a taxi. If I have to get back on that motorcycle of his again, I might get sick.”

“I thought you said he was driving better?”

It wasn’t a lie when Seokjin said, “He is. But I feel a little under the weather anyway. I’d prefer not to get back on, especially with it being so cold.”

“Okay,” Jungkook said, and Seokjin could picture him shrugging. “I’ll buy treats for the both of us.”

“That’s the last thing you need,” Seokjin laughed. “Try not to pick anything with too much sugar. I don’t need you bouncing off the walls tonight.”

Jungkook replied, “Yes, mom.”

The cold weather and whipping wind was like being slapped in the face as Seokjin hung up the phone.

He gave a quick look to Jimin who now had his back to Seokjin and clearly hadn’t seen him leave the shop.

The more time Seokjin spent around Jimin, the less the truly knew what to think of him. He wasn’t the brutal thug that it would have been too easy to categorize him as. And now that Yoongi had told Seokjin about the trauma that haunted Jimin, it was hard to think of anything else at times. So Seokjin felt like he was floundering even more with Jimin, never sure what to say, and less sure what to do.

Thought at the moment, his choice had been made.

He decided, a second later, against letting Jimin know he was leaving. Jimin deserved to panic a little the second he realized Seokjin was missing, if only for not showing the appropriate respect in the flower shop.

If Jimin called his phone, Seokjin would answer and tell him where he was immediately. But until that happened, and no matter the panic that would ensue before that, Seokjin fully had no reservations about subjecting Jimin to just deserts.

Seokjin went down a block and around a corner to hail a cab, and was well on his way to meet his brother without any guilt as he passed by Jimin and saw nothing had changed.

When Seokjin arrived at the provided address, paying the taxi driver and getting back out into the cold weather, he could just make out his brother through the windows of the store perusing the aisles.

“I thought I told you not to get the most sugary things you could find,” Seokjin said when he was near enough.

Jungkook beamed as if he wasn’t being a petulant child. “I got some stuff that’s green. That means
it’s healthy, right?”

Seokjin raised an eyebrow and peered down into the small hand cart Jungkook was carrying. He lifted a pack of green jelly candies and said, “Green dye number two doesn’t count as healthy.”

Jungkook gave an even brighter smile. “I got us chocopies.”

Seokjin looked back into the cart and he could see almost a half dozen of the round, dark cakes.

“You’re lucky I like you so much,” Seokjin said, nudging the basket. “I’ll make you get something healthy at dinner tonight.”

Bouncing a little on his feet, Jungkook said, “And you said Rap Mon promised us getting to to an American style restaurant. We’re going to get hamburgers!”

Seokjin wanted to put up a fuss, because greasy beef wasn’t what his brother’s still growing body needed. But the idea of getting hamburgers seemed to make Jungkook so happy Seokjin couldn’t bring himself to say otherwise.

And, naturally, it had been Namjoon who’d suggested hamburgers. He’d caught Seokjin on the way out of his apartment at the last second, hooking his fingers around Seokjin’s wrist, thumb brushing his pulse, a sated and loving look on his face.

“You do have to let me go,” Seokjin had teased. They’d already made the agreement that they’d have to start limiting how much time they had together, but Seokjin knew neither one of them had their heart in it.

“Let’s get dinner,” Namjoon had suggested, tugging Seokjin close again until they were warm against each other, leeching in body heat. “You, and me, and Jungkook.”

“Jungkook?” Seokjin hadn’t been able to stop the eyebrow that had arched. “And I thought we said less time together, not more.”

“Out of necessity.” A corrective finger had gone up indignantly. “Not because either of us wants it, but because we gotta be even more safe now. But this weekend, Saturday we should go out to dinner. Suga’s got the night for me, Jungkook doesn’t have anything planned on our end for that day, and I want to treat you. We should get a good dinner, before we have to play phone tag, and make it count.”

The thought had been something special, something that curled warmth in Seokjin and reinforced for him that Namjoon was a good, good person. He was someone caring and loyal and romantic, and more than that, it was a feeling that made Seokjin feel more confident in his choice deciding to fight for a relationship with him.

“But Jungkook? You want to have dinner with me and my brother?”

Namjoon’s lips had been a little dry, but mostly nice when they’d skimmed Seokjin’s forehead, the gang leader saying, “He’s a friend of mine, and good kid. I like him a lot, Seokjin, and I trust him. But more than that, he’s your brother. He’s the most important person in the world to you, and no matter what, I want to make a good impression with him. I want him to look at me and know that I’m someone worthy enough to receive his big brother’s attention.”

“Jungkook looks up to you,” Seokjin hadn’t hesitated to say in the moment. “He trusts you, too. You don’t have anything to be worried about with him. Don’t you know that?”
Even now, standing in the convenience store with Jungkook, Seokjin could remember the look on Namjoon’s face, the odd smile, as he’d said, “He trusts me to watch his back, Jin. And yeah, that’s something important, but I want him to trust me with his brother. That’s something different entirely.”

The words had won Seokjin over easily, especially with how practically swoon worthy they were. And Namjoon, the smug jerk, must have perfected the art of buttering people up. Because when he’d broached going to a new American style hamburger place that had recently opened, Seokjin hadn’t been able to say no.

Namjoon was dangerously close to being too far into Seokjin’s heart for him to bear the idea of wrenching him out for any reason.

“What’re you thinking about?”

Seokjin jerked a little back into the present. “What?”

Jungkook’s forehead creased, and when he wanted to be, he could be utterly perceptive. So, it wasn’t really a surprise when Jungkook said in a quiet, delicate way, “You know it’s gonna go fine tonight, right? The dinner with me, you, and Rap Mon. That’s what you’re thinking about. I can tell. It’s what you’re worried about.”

“I’m not,” Seokjin defended right away, but the guilt of lying to Jungkook about even the smallest thing ate at him right away, and he amended, “I just want it to go smoothly.” He’d told Namjoon it would, and he did not want to be made a liar of.

“Why wouldn’t it?” Jungkook asked, shrugging easily. “I like Rap Mon. He’s a cool guy, a good boss, and he has my back. And you’re my brother. You’re awesome. You’re the best, and you take care of me.”

Seokjin laughed out, “Up until you moved out and had to live on your own, I wasn’t even sure you could manage to feed yourself and wash your own laundry without me.”

Jungkook rolled his eyes melodramatically. “My point is, I’m getting a free dinner with the two best people I know. What’s your holdup about that?”

Jungkook, it seemed, hadn’t realized it yet.

He hadn’t realized how close Namjoon was to stealing Seokjin away—proverbially of course. Stealing him away from Jungkook, in fact.

And for that, Seokjin could have laughed himself silly. Because when the day did come, Namjoon was going to have a mess on his hands.

Jungkook was a good kid, well meaning, honest, earnest, and kind. But he’d done his best to ruin every single relationship Seokjin had ever had, and Seokjin didn’t think jealousy or fear were going to stop Jungkook from trying the same thing with Namjoon.

Or maybe it wasn’t sabotage that Jungkook liked to engage in. Maybe it was just teasing and testing, and none of the people had lived up to Jungkook’s standards of who was good enough for his brother.

“I’m supposed to run your dates off,” Seokjin had said a bit gruffly once he’d figured out what was going on, ages ago and before Seokjin had stopped introducing dates and boyfriends to his brother. “Not the other way around.”
Jungkook had only put his chin in the air indignantly, defiantly, and stated, “You’re better than all those guys, Jin, you just don’t always see it. I’m just helping.”

It would be very interesting for sure, when Jungkook eventually tried to push at Namjoon and the relationship in general, when he figured out it was more than casual dating.

“I’m sure everyone will be on their best behavior tonight,” Seokjin said, leveling Jungkook with a serious glance. “Everyone.”

Jungkook gave an exaggerated look of being offended.

“Come on,” Seokjin said, leading them down the drink aisle. “Let’s get just a little more and then we can go back to your place and talk. I know you do want to talk about dad.”

Jungkook gave a somber kind of nod. “I tried to be calm, Jin. I really tried. I’m not lying at all. But I just got so angry and then I was yelling.”

Seokjin put two bottles of juice in the basket. “On the phone?”

Hanging his head a little, Jungkook said, “I’m glad it was on the phone. It would have been so much worse if it was in person.” He sounded ashamed of his behavior, and that was truly indicative of who Seokjin’s brother was. Jungkook was always someone who lived in the heat of the moment, and that often caused him regret when hindsight came around.

“It will be okay,” Seokjin assured, putting a comforting arm around him. “And no matter what happens, we have each other. I’ll always have your back and you’ll always have mine.”

“But what about the twenty-ninth?”

Seokjin thought for a moment, and then he said firmly, “No matter what happens with our father, we will pay our respects like we do every year. We’ll go through the traditions, we’ll fulfill our requirements, and nothing will stop that. Don’t you believe me?”

Jungkook hefted the hand basket up a little higher and gave a nod. “I believe you.”

“Then let’s go pay for this,” Seokjin said, steering him towards the cash register. He asked curiously, “Will this hamburger place also offer salads? I’ll nag you less if I know you’re getting a salad on the side.”

Jungkook made a face. “I don’t think you understand the concept of what good tasting food is supposed to be.” He looked so serious that it was almost hysterical. “I think there’s a rule somewhere about good tasting food not being allowed to be green.”

Seokjin was laughing as he stated, “You’re capable of eating a five-pound watermelon by yourself, and I promise you, that’s not only healthy but green.”

Stopping short of the cash register a little, Jungkook said lightly, “Huh. I guess you’re right. Maybe that rule only applies to vegetables.”

There was nothing to indicate the souring of the moment. There wasn’t a change in the wind, a sudden, brittle tension in the air, or even the prickling of a sixth sense.

For Seokjin there wasn’t the barest hint that everything was about to change.

At least not until the glass behind them shattered in a hail of bullets screaming through the air.
Then the bullets weren’t the only thing screaming. In fact, there was more screaming coming from the other people in the store, as lights shattered, metal bent, and the previously calm scene turned to utter chaos.

Seokjin ducked his head down instinctively, eyes closing as panic flooded his system.

And for the most part, he was frozen in his fear, confronted for the first time with a situation that he’d never experienced before, and didn’t know how to handle.

In truth, the only thing he knew was that the world was seemingly moving in slow motion. People were collapsing around Seokjin and Jungkook, wide arcs of blood splattering everything from the floor to the ceiling, and bottles and cans were exploding from the sudden gun fire.

Seokjin’s big brother instincts kicked in a second later, even as his heart gave a significant stutter, and he turned for Jungkook. He’d throw himself over his brother and shield him, he knew, and hated that it had taken his brain so long to draw such a necessary conclusion.

“Jin!” Jungkook shouted, and he was way ahead of Seokjin.

He grabbed Seokjin almost painfully and threw the both of them over the countertop that they’d nearly been standing at. It was an uncoordinated throw, one born more out of desperation than anything else, and they both took a hard hit as they spilled out onto the floor on the other side.

But Seokjin understood the significance all at once. As the bullets continued to fly in their direction, they were now at least partially hidden by the countertop that the store’s cash register had sat on previous. It was now in pieces around them, though, and money floated down in a surreal way.

“Just stay down!” Jungkook shouted.

Seokjin barely heard him, because he’d caught sight of the young, friendly man who’d been waiting at the cash register to ring them up. His pale blue shirt was now stained dark with blood, and his wide, sightless eyes made it evident enough that Seokjin knew it would be pointless to reach over and check his pulse.

He’d been standing so close to them. He’d been less than six feet away. And now he was dead.

“Jin!” Jungkook shouted again.

Seokjin braced a hand heavy on the floor as he felt his heart give a second stutter.

Once was a fluke. Twice was … trouble.

Almost in a daze, Seokjin gasped in air, his chest heaving. He looked to his brother, his younger brother who’d remained innocent and childlike for so long, only to find Jungkook braced expertly at the edge of the counter. In his hand was a silver gun, held easily and with familiarity.

Seokjin watched him pop up and fire off several rounds without blinking an eye.

“Jung …” Seokjin tried, reaching a weak hand out for him.

He could feel his heart stuttering, slowing, and missing beats. His chest was contracting, tightening, and making him fear the worst. Sucking in air wasn’t a problem, but it seemed as if all the sudden that air meant nothing. And his vision was starting to go spotty.

In one fluid motion, a terrifying one at that, Jungkook ejected the clip in his gun, dropped it to the
floor, and slid another spare cartridge in. He inspected the gun as he shouted to Seokjin, “Just stay down! Keep your head down!”

Then Jungkook was firing the gun again, shooting off precisely and with an air of confidence.

“Jungkook,” Seokjin tried again. The world was spinning around him, going dark only to brighten, and then dim again. He’d stopped gasping for air, stopped trying to move, and knew full well what was happening with him. “Jung …”

He was tipping before he knew it, toppling over to sprawl out too close to the dead body near them. The pool of blood from the man was creeping steadily towards Seokjin, but he couldn’t move. He could only count the beats to his heart as they slowed, and then threatened to stop completely.

Distantly he could hear Jungkook saying something, maybe calling his name, maybe merely shouting for him to stay back.

In the end it didn’t matter, because Seokjin knew this was how he died. He knew this was how his heart stopped, through the panic and confusion and fear. This was how he left Jungkook alone to deal with their father on his own, and without a comforting hand to guide him through the more challenging years of his life still to come.

Cold fingers pressed to his cheek, then slid down to his neck, and Seokjin was certain he could hear Jungkook calling at him, begging for him. But by then he was fading into nothingness.

And in the end, there was only an absolute oblivion.
Chapter Sixteen

In the moment between life and death, with his mind floating and all sensation drifting away, there were many memories floating around in Seokjin’s mind.

But there was one memory that mattered.

And there were a series of events leading up to it that went like this:

Seokjin had always been exceptionally observant. He’d been a watcher, more than a doer, probably too quiet for his mother’s tastes, and too reserved for his father’s. He’d been, by all accounts, the toddler who was sat in one place, usually on a soft blanket in his mother’s line of sight, and remained in place.

So, to say that he’d been too aware of his medical needs from a young age, would have been an understatement. Because kindergarten had come around soon enough for Seokjin. It had come along earlier for him than for others, in fairness, because at three Seokjin knew his numbers, his letters, his colors, and had better sentence structure than most children several years older than him.

So he’d gone to a posh, very exclusive pre-school academy that Seokjin’s mother had hated—even if she’d begrudgingly admitted he needed the advanced attention, and his father had needed to pull strings to get him into.

And things had been fine in the classroom, of course. Seokjin, as he tended to do, had excelled.

But then break time had come. Moments spent outside on the jungle gym had come. The anticipation of running around with other kids had come. And Seokjin had been set to the side, as he had been during his toddling years, and expected to remain in place.

“It’s your heart, my love,” his mother had whispered to him at night, tucking him into bed when he’d asked finally, finally, why he couldn’t go run and play and do all the things that the other children did. The very things that he’d had to watch his older sister do.

And that, naturally, had been the night he’d found out that his heart was defective. Broken. Subpar.

That night, his mother perched on the edge of his toddler bed, smelling of lavender, her voice soft and worried, had stuck with him so strongly that he still occasionally thought of it.

It just wasn’t the memory that Seokjin cherished the most, and kept in his mind as his heart stuttered out and he died on a gloomy October afternoon. But it was something that led to his most important memory.

Because he’d wanted to know, “Mommy, it’s okay. I can go to the doctor like you. I’ll better then, right?”

There was no cure. He had been too much of a child to understand that at the time, but even at his young age, there’d been medication, and ways to reduce stress on his heart, and for Seokjin, it had been a miracle.

That had been, in a likelihood, the defining moment that led to him wanting to be a doctor. He’d wanted to be like the man his mother went to see in the big building downtown, who always made her feel better, and who made Seokjin feel better in turn because of that.
A doctor could fix anything. A doctor made people feel better. And a doctor was what Seokjin was determined to be. He was determined to be defined by the decision, and make his dream a reality.

He’d also, of course, as the years passed slowly, thought it was destined to be the most important thing in the world to him.

Then, naturally, a fussing, wriggling, pink little baby was put in his arms, and Seokjin knew true love for the first time in his life. It wasn’t until he had Jungkook that he realized the difference between a dream worth striving for, and one that was a gift freely given.

It was the moment cemented in his mind from the second it happened, a moment that made all others pale in comparison, and that defined who he was more than his want and need to become a doctor. Because he was suddenly a big brother, and there was nothing more wonderful.

And his father’s voice was there, echoing in the memory, saying worriedly, “He’s too young to hold Jungkook, Jisoo. His arms might give out. We shouldn’t—”

There’d been a hush, and a soft beratement from Seokjing’s mother, “Seokjin is far old enough to hold his little brother. And just look at them. Look at Seokjin. I think he likes the baby.”

Like was an understatement.

Of course, Seokjin had an older sister. He had a sister who was smart, and funny, and pretty nice to him, but having Jungkook felt different in some way. Having Jungkook felt like a responsibility, and one that he was meant to bear. Seokjin’s older sister was terribly mature for her age, self-sufficient, and the last person in the world to ask for help with anything.

But here was a baby, in Seokjin’s arms, that the doctor had given him (“Your mother did the hard work,” his father had said to him the one time Seokjin had tried to explain why doctors felt so reverent to him), and it was a person who needed Seokjin for everything.

This was the cherished memory, the one Seokjin couldn’t let go of as he drifted away, lying on the cold, tiled floor of the convenience store, another man’s blood creeping up on his still form.

Jungkook.

Seokjin hadn’t been able to run or play like the other children. There’d always been a series of medicines to take, his mother’s worry, a set tightness to his father’s face that he now knew was was carefully hidden, panic, and a constantly building fear.

But the one thing that never changed, that never made Seokjin feel like he was broken in some way, and that gave him purpose, was Jungkook.

That, and the drive to go into medicine. And Jungkook.

But from the moment Jungkook had come around, they’d always seemed to go hand in hand, which was fitting, really.

“I’m gonna be a doctor,” he’d told Jungkook, shut away in the bedroom they shared, the baby dozing in his bouncy chair. They were often like that, hidden behind a door, Seokjin fiercely protective of his time spent with his brother, almost monopolizing it unfairly.

And his favorite thing to do, besides keep a close eye on Jungkook who liked to cry for attention, just for attention, was take the new teddy bear his parents had gotten him when Jungkook had been
“You’ll turn him into a doctor,” his father had bit out once, just before Seokjin’s mother had died, when he was old enough to understand some of the expectations his father had for him. “I see you encouraging him with that teddy bear of his, buying him gauze, letting him give you patient reports on it.”

“I wouldn’t be opposed to that,” his mother had laughed. “It’s not a terrible profession, husband. And should I remind you that you spent no less than twenty minutes with Seokjin yesterday, letting him console you after he decided that the teddy bear needed heart surgery.” His parents had been loving, and his father had been softer then—less harsh and severe. “If our son wants to become a doctor, let him. Support him. Don’t pretend like you won’t be proud of him if he simply becomes whatever he has his heart set on.”

“I am thinking of his heart.”

“No,” Seokjin remembered his mother saying, “you’re thinking of your own.”

Seokjin’s final thoughts now were of Jungkook. He thought of that baby in his arms for the first time, and the way they’d played together, thicker than thieves, in the early years. Seokjin remembered the feeling of understanding what true love was for the first time, in the form of a brother he’d do anything for.

And when he died, slipping in a dark void of unknown, he thought that if he could at least take a cherished memory with him, it was okay that there was nothing more.

Except there was something afterwards.

Of course, there was.

And he woke up in the hospital.

Though waking up meant being in the most uncomfortable pain he’d felt in a long time. It wasn’t a visceral kind of pain, which meant he was on painkillers of the strong type, but his body was full of aches, his chest was wound up tightly in an unnatural feeling way, and he couldn’t move.

Mostly.

He realized a second later his fingers and toes were fully functional, as was his head, and he could feel everything. But from his stomach up to his chest, nothing would move, and the pressure and pain that came with trying was enough to make him stop almost immediately after starting.

But he was awake. He was alive. And he was confused.

What had happened? The last thought Seokjin had in his mind was drifting through old memories, both from before Jungkook had been born, to after. And before that, he’d been in the middle of Bangtan territory, being shot at, and experiencing fear like he’d never known existed before.

He just couldn’t pin down if the fear had come from being shot at, or finally understanding what the sensation of dying was.

Regardless, he wasn’t dead, he was just hurt. A lot.

There was more to indicate how badly he was injured at the moment, from the oxygen tube fitted to his nose, to the heavy, thick IV slunk deep in the back of his hand. There were various machines
monitoring his status surrounding the bed, but it was obviously night. The lights were low in the room, so the glow they gave off was his best source of further assessing the situation.

Seokjin swallowed at the lump in his throat, breathing as deep as he dared. He could feel the burn and strain in his chest right away.

Someone had performed CPR on him. He recognized the feeling of several broken ribs, the evidence of an intense effort to save his life.

But who? And how?

Aside from the steady beeps echoing in the room, Seokjin had so far been greeted by silence. His was the only occupant in the room, though he didn’t know which hospital he was in, and it was certainly a nice room.

Then someone else coughed a little, and Seokjin froze.

His ears were ringing as he traced the sound to the sofa across the room, placed underneath a window that was streaming moonlight down through the curtains that had been pulled open.

To his surprise, there was his father.

Seokjin recognized the worn, older features on the man’s face immediately. He just couldn’t believe what he was seeing. That was his father, curled up on the sofa that was too small for him, still dressed in clothes he’d likely worn to work, lines of stress caked into his face like never before.

Maybe he was just tired and confused from the recent trauma, but Seokjin could hardly explain why his father was in the room, sleeping on the sofa, looking as if he’d been there for a while.

Seokjin did not have his father listed as his emergency contact, and after their fight and his father’s threat, Seokjin hadn’t thought his father would come to him even for the most serious of events.

This probably counted as a serious event.

Because Seokjin had felt his heart stutter. Then he’d felt it slow. And eventually, he’d felt it crawl to a stop. He firmly believed no one should have to feel their heart stop, but he had, and he’d been certain that meant he was going to die.

But he was still alive. He was in the hospital, someone had saved him, and even his father had come to see him.

His father.

Seokjin had few deep regrets in his life, but the way his relationship had broken down with his father, was one of them. And whether it was his fault or not, Seokjin felt like he hadn’t done enough to save the relationship between them. He felt like there must have been something he could have done to make it easier between them, or to make it better.

But distance had built between them so easily, and the years hadn’t been kind to the way Seokjin pulled away into adulthood, having to leave an already lonely man further alone.

Still, it was something that his father was there, not six feet from Seokjin, twitching a little in sleep on the sofa. It meant something that his father had come, and not only come, had stayed with him.

His father was not a sentimental man. Not anymore. Seokjin truly believed most of his father’s heart
had died with Seokjin’s mother and sister. But this was sentimentality. This was Seokjin’s father, being a father, and it pulled at his heart.

The monitor jumped in response, and he forced himself back to a state of calmness.

Tiredly, Seokjin closed his eyes. He was exhausted and there was no point in trying to figure out anything when he couldn’t move and probably wouldn’t be awake for much longer.

Rasping in a deep breath of air that came with a painful rattle, Seokjin savored the feeling of being alive.

His heart was a ticking time bomb with an unknown number on the countdown timer. Seokjin had thought in that convenience store, that it was approaching zero, but he was never so thankful to be wrong.

“Seokjin,” his father eased out softly, and Seokjin kept his eyes slammed shut, and his body still.

He wanted to play asleep, afraid there wouldn’t be any words to confront his father with, or maybe just the wrong ones.

But when nothing followed, and Seokjin dared to crack his eyes open in the slightest, he could confirm that his father was sleep sleeping. The man had flopped a little more onto his stomach, into a position that must have been hell for his back, but he was still passed out.

And maybe he was dreaming about Seokjin. Wonders never ceased, it seemed.

Seokjin went to sleep with that on his mind.

The next time he woke up the sun was up, and high enough in the sky that the whole room was lit properly. And the sofa, the one that Seokjin had seen his father sleeping on, was empty.

Maybe he hadn’t seen his father. Maybe the man had never been there and Seokjin had just imagined him, clearly a little high off the pain medication being pumped into him. Everyone, no matter how estranged from their parents, wanted them there when they were hurt. It was a natural response and Seokjin knew as infuriating as his father was, and how hurt he was by the man’s actions, he still wanted his father with him after nearly dying. Maybe he’d been so afraid to think that his father wouldn’t be there, that he’d imagined it all to make himself feel better.

“--supposed to stop things like this from happening.”

Seokjin looked quickly towards the door to the room that was opening. He caught his brother’s voice and shut his eyes instinctively, his heart racing a little as he recalled how easily Jungkook had fired his gun, and how deftly his shots had probably hit their targets.

He was scared, Seokjin realized, he was scared of how Jungkook had handled the gun, and the ease of which it had all happened.

“What’s wrong with his heart?” Jungkook asked someone, probably a nurse or doctor. “It’s going faster than it should be. I know what his heart should sound like. I could count the beats it’s supposed to be at from a mile away.”

Seokjin pleaded with himself to calm, or else he’d certainly give himself away.

A feminine voice sighed, and then said, “Honestly, we expect his heart to be a little erratic for the next twenty-four hours. Everything else looks okay. Maybe he’s just having a bad dream. It’s not
unhealthy, even with his condition, for his heart to beat a little slower, or faster, depending on the situation. You know that, Jungkook. Stop looking at me like I’m an incompetent doctor who’s going to let your brother die on her watch.”

Minah. That was Minah’s voice.

That told Seokjin exactly what hospital he was at, and it eased him to know she was overseeing his care.

“His body is still mostly in shock,” Minah continued. “Remember, he experienced a nasty jolt, which sent adrenaline racing through his body at an abnormal rate, and spurred his heart to work harder than it’s capable of. He experienced heart failure, which is catastrophic in its own right, and then his body endured several minutes before CPR when it was administered to try and save his life. Add to that the broken and fractured ribs he has, and his body is expected to be fragile at the moment.” She added a little more warmly, “I’m taking care of him, Jungkook. I’m caring for him now. You know I won’t let anything happen to your brother under my watch.”

Jungkook gave a loud, shaky breath. “I was so sure I’d fucked up.” His brother added in a quick apology for the language. “I didn’t even realize what was happening until it was too late. I should have seen the signs right away. I should have known this would happen. I know the signs, Minah. I know what to look for—but what’s the point of having training on it if I don’t see it. Why bother if I’m just going to overlook it all and let my brother collapse next to me.”

Minah commented, “You were caught in the middle of some horrible gang attack. That isn’t your fault, and neither is your brother’s heart simply being the way it is.”

Gang attack. Was that what it had been? Seokjin hadn’t seen anything, truthfully. One second he’d been teasing his brother about his food choices, the next they were spilling over a countertop to hide from a barrage of bullets aimed in their direction.

Had it been Infinite? Was it a different gang? Or had the event been completely random? Had this been an attack against Seokjin directly, because of Namjoon? Oh god, he hoped not. Namjoon was already touchy about the amount of danger he felt he was putting Seokjin in. He’d be unbearable if this was Infinite making a point, or deliberately trying to take him out.

“I started CPR the second I could,” Jungkook said, sounding seeped in guilt. “I thought I was too late. I didn’t think I could get his heart started, and it was forever before the ambulance got there.”

It took an enormous amount of will power from Seokjin to remain calm and still as he listened to his brother talk.

“You wouldn’t have been able to get his heart going again on your own,” Minah said in a knowing tone. “It needed some serious medical intervention for that. But you kept the blood circulating in his body and you breathed for him long enough to prevent brain damage from occurring. You did good, Jungkook. You saved his life. You understand that, right? You saved Seokjin’s life.”

Seokjin knew he should have felt pride. He should have been exuberant with the joy rushing through him for forcing those CPR classes on his brother year ago. But still there was the overwhelming thought flooding his body that Jungkook had been too familiar with the gun. Jungkook had known what he was doing. In that moment, even if Jungkook had been defending their lives, he’d been nothing but a gangster with a gun, prepared to kill people.

What was his brother turning into?
Jungkook asked, “Then why hasn’t he woken up yet? He’s been out for two days now. And that’s not counting the half day he spent in surgery and up in the ICU.”

Two days?

“He’ll wake when he’s ready,” Minah told Jungkook. “If his body isn’t ready yet, we don’t want to push him. Plus, don’t you like him better like this?” She gave a small laugh. “When he’s awake he’ll be bugging us endlessly, fussing about being kept on bed rest, being the worst patient ever.”

Jungkook gave a nervous laugh. “Doctors make the worst patients. Isn’t that how the saying goes?”

“Usually,” Minah agreed. “It has something to do with us feeling frustrated at being useless for the time it takes us to recover, and knowing exactly how long it’s going to take. It’s unavoidable, I’m afraid. Doctors are doers, and when we’re not doing, we’re cranky.”

Seokjin could hear them shuffling around in the room as he started to feel tried again. The steady beat of his heart was beginning to lull him towards sleep. He had a feeling he’d be doing nothing but sleeping for a while his body fought to recover against what had happened.

“I thought … Jin said he was trying a new regiment of medication. He said it was stronger so he could do more things and not have to worry about something like this happening. That medication was supposed to prevent things like this.”

Minah’s heels stilled on the floor as she said, “Nothing will ever fully prevent the possibility of something like this happening, Jungkook. You should be completely aware of that. Yes, your brother was trying out a new type of medication, but short of having a perfectly functioning heart …”

Jungkook finished for her, “This was probably going to happen no matter what.”

“We say no shocks to his heart for a reason,” Minah said. “He can’t take them.”

Seokjin had never felt overly defective. He’d never felt like he was losing out on the healthy heart club, not when he could stay inside and play with Junkook when they were kids. But now, more than ever, he hated being someone that had to be looked after and watched carefully. He hated that his brother had likely had to endanger himself, put down his gun, and start CPR to save Seokjin’s life. He hated being a burden, and feeling burdened by his heart.

“Well, don’t let go,” Minah laughed in an indulging way. “Hold on, Jungkook. He might wake up sooner if he knows someone is waiting for him. I’ll be back in about a half hour, okay? Call me, or call one of the nurses if you need anything.”
“Thank you, Minah,” Jungkook said, his voice going small, making him sound younger than he was. “Thank you for getting him transferred over to this hospital, where I know the staff, and trust them, and trust you. That other doctor, he didn’t want to move Jin over here, but you made it happen, so thank you. You always take care of us. I hope you know how much we appreciate that.”

Minah’s voice was gentle in turn when she replied, “We’re family by now, Jungkook. And this is what family does. I’ll come check in on you guys later.”

Seokjin could hardly focus on the sound of her shoes across the floor as Jungkook leaned in close and said, “I’m so sorry, Jin. I’m so sorry got you involved with Bangtan. I’m sorry you came anywhere near them and got hurt because of it. This is my fault and I’ll never forgive myself for this.”

Sleepily Seokjin squeezed deliberately at Jungkook’s hand. He was scared of what he’d seen his brother do, scared at how easily it had been for him to do it. But he would never be scared of his brother. And he wouldn’t let his brother blame himself for the choices that Seokjin had made.

“I’m so sorry, but I’m going to find who did this. Bangtan and I will find the bastards who hurt you, Jin. We won’t let them get away with this.”

Jungkook’s fingers rubbed across Seokjin’s hand, careful of the IV, and all Seokjin could think of was the tiny little boy who’d begged to be carried around everywhere, and who Seokjin had barely been able to say no to on a steady basis.

Jungkook swore, “And when I find them, Jin, I’m going to kill them.”

Jungkook wasn’t that little boy anymore. And maybe Seokjin should have been a little afraid of him. But being afraid or not, didn’t diminish how much Seokjin needed him there in the moment. And while Seokjin had always been a little wary of how quick Jungkook was to break the rules, it was a sweet relief when he heard Jungkook kicking his shoes off. Because Seokjin knew what came next, and a dip in the bed proved it.

He must have drifted, not unexpectedly, but some time later he was awake again, and it was to the feeling of warmth pressed along his side.

Jungkook. Jungkook was laying in the bed with him, curled on his side, looking innocent and young with his face relaxed in sleep.

“I could get him thrown out for that, you know,” Minah said in a teasing way.

Seokjin blinked a little sleepily at her as she opened his door a bit wider. She looked tired. She looked like she hadn’t gone home in a while, and hadn’t slept in longer, and was worried. He dared to hope it wasn’t his fault.

“You know Jungkook,” Seokjin said a raspy way, using his voice for the first time in more than a couple days. “He does what he wants.”

“The little brat.” Minah chuckled. She crossed to his bed and lifted his chart from the slot at the end of it. Seokjin watched her eyes flicker between the chart, and then the machine he was hooked up to. It must have been at least somewhat okay, because she put the chart back down, slid her hands into the pockets of her white coat, and then drifted over to him.

“Minah?”
Minah gave a nod to Jungkook, and when Seokjin gave him a better look, he could see the dark circles under Jungkook’s eyes, the pallid tone to his skin, and the overall look of exhaustion on him.

“I don’t think he got one second of sleep for a couple of days. And that’s kind of scary to think about, actually.” She pursed her lips for a moment, then added, “When we got you transferred over here, from across town, Jungkook came with you. I almost admitted him then. He seemed to be on the edge of a panic attack, or something far worse, and it didn’t look like something that had only been happening recently. Kim Seokjin, just what kind of trouble are you and your brother getting yourselves into?”

It wasn’t as if he could tell her the truth, or give her any hint of Bangtan, or Namjoon, or the trouble he’d let himself wade knee deep into.

But he did say, “Wrong place, wrong time. It happens.”

“In South Seoul?” Minah arched an eyebrow.

“Minah, drop it.” He tried to be firm, but he sounded like he was an eighty-year-old man, and he still didn’t have any strength. “It really was just me being in the wrong spot at the wrong time.” As far as she was concerned, that’s all it could ever be. “I was meeting Jungkook and a friend for lunch. They wanted to go to this burger place out there. We stopped for afternoon snacks first. I think someone was trying to rob the place.”

Whoever had shot at them had most certainly not been trying to rob the place. They’d been trying to kill someone. But had they been trying to kill Seokjin? Seokjin figured that was a question for a different time.

“Okay, okay,” she sighed out. “I just came by to check on you, like I promised your worry wart brother, and because you’re a pain in my side that I’m too invested in now.”

“I’m okay,” Seokjin promised. And he was able to lift his far hand, one that had been tucked around Jungkook, to cradle him a little closer. There’d been a time in his life when he could have carried Jungkook around. He’d done it all the time when Jungkook was a baby. His father had hated it, and claimed Jungkook was too heavy, and he’d tried to break the habit Seokjin had of it, but to no avail. And when Jungkook had been a kid, even a preteen, there’d been moments when Seokjin had been the bigger, stronger brother.

But now? Now Jungkook was shooting up like a weed. He was tall and confident and capable looking. He was strong and healthy. He was bigger than Seokjin now, certainly heavier than him, almost as tall, and he took the little, out of little brother, much too easily.

Still, in these moments, with both of them needing the other, with something terrible having happened, and with the opportunity being presented, Seokjin still felt like a big brother who could wrap his little brother up in his arms and make the bad things go away. He felt like he could still be the person who picked Jungkook up and carried him far from danger, trouble, or anything else that might be coming at them.

Seokjin rubbed his fingers gently against Jungkook’s back.

“We’re going to be okay. We always kind of are.”

Minah offered a small, tentative smile. “Okay. I get it. You’re okay. Even though we both know you’re not, you’re too stubborn to admit otherwise, so you’re okay.”

Seokjin gave her an unapologetic shrug, and tried not to jostle Jungkook too much in the process.
“I’m alive, aren’t I? I’m breathing. And I have Jungkook with me, safe and sound. That’s pretty okay, as far as I’m concerned.”

“You’re something else,” Minah said with some kind of awe. “But I just have one more question, okay? One more question and then I’ll leave the two of you to cuddle there.”

The teasing lit to her tone made Seokjin roll his eyes, but frankly he did want to do just even more sleeping, and Jungkook was prefect and warm next to him. He was right where Seokjin liked to keep him.

“Seokjin?”

“You said you have a question?” Seokjin replied.

“Kind of a question, kind of an observation.” Minah’s head tilted in a way that just begged curiosity. “See, when you came in, when we got you transferred over here so I could oversee your care, it wasn’t just Jungkook who came with you. A lot of other people came, too, and they’re still here, prowling around the waiting room. Guys who don’t look like they belong in a hospital.”

Seokjin froze. Bangtan?

“Including one little jerk with a very bad attitude who keeps accusing me of deliberately withholding information about you from them.”

Jimin. That had to be Jimin. Seokjin would have bet all the money in the world on that.

Minah swayed a little back and forth, indicating how her feet were hurting her in her shoes, as she explained, “Those guys who came with Jungkook, following you over here, they’ve been taking turns staying. Some of them come, some of them go, but there’s always a group of them. And the group? It’s grown over the days. It’s the same couple of guys who ask about you, who ask about visiting hours, and who can be in the room with you, and your condition. But overall? There is a growing number of people lurking around, looking suspiciously tense, particularly perusing the floor that your room here is on. Kind of like they’re looking for trouble. So, my question is to you, Kim Seokjin, is about them. Just what have you gotten yourself mixed up in, and what have you brought into my hospital?”

“I don’t know,” Seokjin said, honestly confused. He knew that Bagntan was a lot bigger than just the core members that Seokjin had spent the most time around. There were dozens and dozens of members who called themselves a part of Bangtan, and Seokjin had seen them around from time to time. So, it could have been them. Namjoon could have called them in to the hospital.

But he severely hoped not. Because if there were members of Bangtan prowling around, expecting trouble, then Seokjin thought he could take a pretty good guess at who’d been shooting up the store. And who the target had been.

“Are they causing trouble? Are they a problem?”

“You’d think so,” Minah said, cutting a him a break right away and chuckling. “But they’re all on their best behavior. Exceedingly polite, actually. Except for that one guy. I’m just wondering who they are, how they know you and Jungkook, and why they seem to think that you’re not safe here in my hospital.”

Seokjin’s mouth was dry, and he would have given anything for a sip of water, but sleep was creeping back up on him, and the bed was too soft, and Jungkook too warm, for him to fight it off.
“They’re okay,” Seokjin promised. “They’re …Jungkook’s work friends.”

Minah barked out a laugh of disbelief.

“Minah. I swear. They’re okay.”

There was nothing about Bangtan’s gang affiliation that Seokjin personally agreed with, and nothing he morally found acceptable. But he believed Namjoon to be a good person, and a competent leader. He believed that Namjoon kept his people on tight leashes. And if Namjoon didn’t, then Yoongi certainly did.

“They’re fine,” Seokjin promised, feeling Jungkook’s arm around his waist tighten. His brother slept like a rock, and wasn’t in danger of waking any time soon, but Seokjin was happy enough to settle down and just doze with him. “I promise.”

“You’re lucky your word means something to me,” Minah replied, but then he could hear her backing away slowly, stepping lightly, and then the room was quiet and the door was shut.

Namjoon. Seokjin wanted to see Namjoon. He wanted to ask him so many questions, and hug him tightly, and just be with someone who made him feel safe.

But better than Namjoon was Jungkook, and Seokjin relished in the feeling of his brother stretched out against him, snoring so softly it was next to impossible to hear.

This time, this time when he sunk into oblivion, it was without fear, and without pain, and into a state of mind that held more good memories. And it was a good oblivion to be in.
Chapter Seventeen

“You realize you can’t win, right?”

Seokjin gave a loud and deliberate scoff, as if he would yield for a second. And he returned, “I’ve been an underdog for quite a while. You should understand that I’ve perfected the art of being resourceful, clever, and lucky.”

Taehyung’s eyes narrowed, then slid over to J-Hope who was watching with a gleeful expression.

“Don’t look to him for help,” Seokjin warned. “This is between me and you.”

“Ah,” Taehyung made a clicking sound with the tongue. “But this has nothing to do with being resourceful.”

Seokjin assessed the situation carefully. “That’s true. But I think you’ve made a fatal mistake.”

J-Hope gnawed on his fingernails and remarked at a whisper, “This is so stressful.”

Taehyung asked casually, “What kind of mistake?”

“You’ve underestimated me, Taehyung. And that’s disappointing. I’m always disappointed when people underestimate me, and it tends to happen more often than I’d like.”

Taehyung shrugged, leaning forward. “It probably had something to do with your face. You’re very pretty.”

At the dig, Seokjin gave an especially beautiful smile, knowing exactly how to do it. “Do you know the best part of being so pretty?”

Taehyung guessed, “Free drinks at the bar?”

“No,” Seokjin said, laying his cards down on the hospital blanket in front of him. “The best part is that people rarely think you have the brains to go with it.”

Taehyung’s eyes widened for a second, peering at the cards, then he dramatically wailed, “Nooo!” and flung his own cards down.

J-Hope laughed almost hysterically from the nearby chair next to the bed, and Seokjin felt the need to add, “I also did warn you, I tend to be very lucky. Poker is half luck anyway.”

Taehyung, who’d been seated at the end of Seokjin’s hospital bed for their tense poker game looked once more from his own straight to Seokjin’s full house. He asked curiously, “How did someone as nice as you learn to play poker so ruthlessly?”

Seokjin gathered up the pot they’d been playing for after nearly half an hour. It included unhealthy bags of chips that Taehyung was always snacking on, packs of gum, loose pocket change, and smaller, miscellaneous items that were all now Seokjin’s.

“I did go to college,” Seokjin said with a bit of a laugh. “I didn’t spend every free second I had studying, and late at night the boy’s dorm could get pretty rowdy. Poker was a staple for winning and trading things we wanted from each other.”

Sitting back in his chair, J-Hope said, “Taehyung’s a really good poker player. I can’t believe you
beat him so easily. You should play cards with all of us one night.”

Taehyung lounged back on Seokjin’s bed, stretching his arms. “They are going to let you out of here soon, right?”

After four days, and that didn’t include the two that Seokjin had spent unaware and unconscious, he certainly hoped he was getting to the point of release. Minah, Seokjin thought, was being too overprotective, and coddling him too much. His chest was still tight with pain from the CPR, and the suffocating feeling of his heart stopping still paralyzed him at night when he was trying to sleep, but he was ready to go home. And he was starting to think there was no medical reason to keep him.

Seokjin just wanted to go home. He wanted to go back to his apartment, back to the clinic, and back to his normal routine. Or as close as he could get with tapped ribs and an inability to bend down.

“Soon,” he told Taehyung. Then he frowned and said, “You both realize nothing is going to happen to me here, right? You don’t have to stand guard. And you can tell the twenty guys you’ve got eating up space in the waiting room the same thing.”

J-Hope, who almost always had a smile on his face to match his bubbly personality, said seriously, “Someone tried to kill you.”

Taehyung said sharply to J-Hope, “Don’t say stuff like that!”

“It’s true,” J-Hope argued back. “Someone tried. But they’re not going to get a second chance at it.” J-Hope told Seokjin, “We’re here to keep you company. We’re here to make you less sad to be in the hospital. But we’re also here to make sure no one gets any ideas. Bangtan is looking out for you, and no one is getting past us.”

Seokjin wasn’t scared.

He knew Taehyung and J-Hope and the others expected him to be, especially since he’d nearly been shot full of bullets less than a week earlier, but he truly wasn’t. He wondered how he could be, when he’d managed to survive his heart completely failing him. That was the scarier thing, in his opinion. Also scarier was Jungkook’s familiarity with the gun he’d used to defend them, and what it obviously implied. In comparison, anyone looking to target him was almost a joke.

J-Hope swore, “We weren’t with you and Kookie when these people came after you, but we will be here now.”

Seokjin posed, “Have you ever stopped to consider that Bangtan made me a target?”

He hadn’t meant it in an accusing way, neither had he intended to hurt anyone’s feelings. So, he felt immediately bad when a look of horror and regret etched on J-Hope’s face.

He moved quickly to counter, “Or maybe we need to think of a real possibility here that this was completely random.”


“Random,” Seokjin insisted. “No one has claimed responsibility for the shooting, correct? No one has left any sort of evidence indicating they’re the party responsible. So, as much as I know you don’t want to think of this being simply a random act of unwarranted and needless violence, but it may be just that.”

At least with a purpose, Seokjin understood, Bangtan could focus. If they knew how and why it had
happened, they could channel their anger and their aggression properly. But if this was random, and there was no reason for it, what kind of reaction could they have? Seokjin understood the frustration.

Taehyung crossed his arms. “This wasn’t random, and I don’t care if no one has said it was them yet. There was no reason for that store to be a target, and no one started shooting until you showed up. You were the target, and we don’t know if it’s because you’ve been sighted around Bangtan, or someone drew some kind of connection between you and Rap Mon. None of that actually matters. You should just get used to seeing our faces until Rap Mon deals with this.”

They said that was the reason he hadn’t come to visit. In four days since Seokjin had started getting visitors, he’d seen nearly the entire staff from the clinic, and been haunted endlessly by members of Bangtan. Except for Namjoon. Namjoon hadn’t come to see him once, and had only spoken to him briefly on the phone on one occasion.

Seokjin tried to tell himself that he had no business being hurt by such a thing. A full-fledged attack had had happened in Bangtan territory. Namjoon had to handle the situation, and quickly, because the police were sure to be involved. Namjoon had responsibilities to the people who trusted him, and Seokjin couldn’t expect himself to be prioritized.

Namjoon, he told himself, would come see him when he could, and he just needed to be patient until then.

“You think he’ll catch the people who did this?” Seokjin asked with real curiosity.

J-Hope gave a firm nod. “Of course. He’s not Leader Mon for nothing.”

Seokjin sunk deeper into his cocoon of blankets, sliding down his pillow. His feet nudged Taehyung at the end of the bed and Seokjin pulled the blue blanket on his bed to his shoulders.

Seokjin had faith in Namjoon’s abilities. That was certain. And just as much as the rest of them, Seokjin wanted justice to be done … but what if that justice occurred outside the law.? Seokjin didn’t think he could support that.

He just couldn’t escape the nightmares, either.

Because now at night when he closed his eyes, he saw the battered, nearly demolished bodies of the people in the store who’d been standing much closer to the windows. He saw the face of the boy at the cash register, and then he saw himself, on the ground, gasping for air like a fish on dry land.

Knowing that the people who did that were caught wouldn’t erase those sights or feelings, but Seokjin thought maybe he’d get a better night’s sleep afterwards. That was his hope. He just had to figure out if that was worth circumventing the law.

“You look tired,” Taehyung said, and he slid off the bed with a bit of a grunt. He reached back over to smooth the blankets over Seokjin’s legs. “We’ll let you get some rest. If you nap for a long time, we might be gone by the time you wake up, but someone else will be here.”

Seokjin was tired, he could feel his eyelids starting to get heavy, and it was a disturbing notion that he was still so exhausted by the most mundane tasks. He’d only woken, eaten something, played a few rounds of poker, and then talked a bit. It was nothing that should have made him tired.

“You don’t have to,” Seokjin tried again. “Send someone else in here I mean. There are doctors and nurses everywhere. No one is going to try anything here.”

Taehyung strolled to the door and called back, “We’re not taking any risks. Come on, Hobi.”
J-Hope got to his feet and gave Seokjin a firm nod. “You’ll be okay. We won’t let anything happen to you. And we’ll figure out who’s targeting you and why.”

“Hobi,” Taehyung called from the hallway. “Come on. We need to check in with Rap Mon.” He ducked out of the room and the door closed quietly behind him.

Seokjin gave a tired smile. “That’s your name?”

J-Hope gave a friendly shake to his head. “Just another nickname. Tae calls me that.”

“You love him,” Seokjin stated, recognizing the look on J-Hope’s face when he spoke about Taehyung. “That’s good. He loves you, too.”

Unexpectedly, J-Hope reached out to touch Seokjin’s wrist through the hospital provided blanket. Smiling so widely his eyes were squished in an adorable way, he said, “Thanks. But I think it’s the same way Rap Mon looks at you, too.”

Seokjin wondered, did he have that identical look of love in his own eyes?

“Get some rest,” J-Hope said, drawing back. “I think Kookie will be here when you wake up. He’s been running himself ragged trying to get the people who did this. Rap Mon is going to make him take a break soon. And honestly, we all think he gets super nervous whenever you’re out of view. We used to think he was like your little duckling, but maybe he’s the momma duck? Who knows.”

Seokjin yawned and called to him, “Thanks, J-Hope.”

“You can call me Hoseok,” he insisted from the doorway, bouncing a little on his feet. “And really, if you wanted to know my name, all you had to do was ask. I would have told you. Taehyung trusts you, and that’s enough for me.”

Seokjin wasn’t sure if Hoseok was an absolute fool or the most wonderful person ever. Maybe it was best of the jury was still out on that.

He slept for quite a while afterwards, which was, unfortunately, still how he spent most of his days. It had been just after lunch when Taehyung and Hoseok kept him company, but by the time he woke back up the sun was a ball of pink and orange in the horizon, low enough to indicate it would be gone completely very shortly.

And instead of Taehyung and Hoseok, as promised, Seokjin was looking at his brother. Rather, he was looking at his brother looking at him.

With a scratchy voice, Seokjin said, “I told you not to read that mindless American drivel that calls itself a book. Watching someone sleep is not romantic. Next you’ll think you sparkle in the sun or something like that.”

Jungkook gave an uneasy laugh. “I didn’t actually read Twilight, okay? And I only saw like half of the movie … and I kind of fell asleep before the end.” He shook his head. “Anyway, trust me, there’s nothing romantic here. I love you, Jin, but I’ve got my heart set on someone else.”

“Oh?” Seokjin inquired, groaning a little at he tried to sit up. Jungkook moved to help him immediately, careful of his chest. “My little brother’s in love?”

Jungkook blushed. “It’s just a stupid crush. I mean … she doesn’t even know I exist.”

“It’s not stupid if it’s real,” Seokjin corrected.
Once Seokjin was situated properly, Jungkook let himself rest on the edge of the high hospital bed. His head fell down, chin brushing his chest, and his hands twisted nervously in his lap.

“Hey,” Seokjin nudged him. “Why are you making that sad face?”

“Are you serious?” Jungkook looked to him, blinking back tears. “This is all my fault and I’m so ashamed I just want to die.”

Seokjin’s eye widened. “What?” He was reminded of how he’d heard the same words from Jungkook earlier. They still sounded ridiculous.

In response, Seokjin palmed Jungkook over the back of the head.

“Ow!” his brother exclaimed, flinching away.

Seokjin leveled a warning finger up at Jungkook. “Those are stupid words to say, and my little brother is not stupid, so don’t say them.”

“It’s true!” Jungkook protested, “and you’re the one being stupid if you think otherwise.” He seemed to flinch away on instinct, anticipating another blow.

But Seokjin was more worried than anything else, and asked gently, “Why do you say that? You didn’t attack me. You didn’t stop my heart. If anything, you’re the one person who kept me alive. Me being alive is due to you.”

Jungkook looked much younger than eighteen as he choked out, “I’m the one who had to run off and join Bangtan. I was blinded by the stories I heard about them and my own rebellious urges. I wasn’t thinking about what joining with Bangtan would do to the most important person in my life—you. And then I let myself keep going when you said you’d support me, even though I knew you thought I was making a mistake. I took advantage of my big brother always having my back.”

“You do not,” Seokjin urged firmly, “get to feel ashamed or burdened by the consequences of your own choices in this instance. You’re not a child. You make your own choices for your own reasons. All I can do is support you, and that isn’t you taking advantage of me. That’s two people respecting each other and understanding that sometimes things just happen. I can’t control you, you can’t control me, and neither of us can control those people who hurt us.”

Jungkook shook his head. “You always know the right thing to say, but you can’t make me feel better right now. And you can’t change my mind. If I hadn’t joined Bangtan, you wouldn’t have ever met any of them. You wouldn’t have become associated with them, and then you wouldn’t have become a target.”

Seokjin rubbed away the last bit of sleep from his eyes and told Jungkook, “You know how I am with my clinic. And you know how I feel about people trying to control how I put my medical training to use. It’s probably a safe bet to assume that eventually Infinite and I would have clashed over that clinic. Eventually I would have put my foot down against them, they would have pushed back, and I would have become a target to them. Same target, different gang.”

Jungkook was quiet for a moment, then said, “These people, whoever they are, tried to kill you. They shot at you and their intent was to kill you. You could have died. Lots of people did.”

Six. That was the number Seokjin knew. Six. Three people on the street, two near the front of the store, and the boy at the cash register. There were six casualties, with several more people wounded. The fact that Seokjin and Jungkook had come through relatively all right, was something of a miracle.
“I could get hit by a bus tomorrow and die,” Seokjin pointed out. “You know how those bus drivers speed.”

The edges of Jungkook’s eyes crinkled in a smile. “I keep telling you to get a car.”

“My point,” Seokjin said deliberately, “is that whether this was a random occurrence or something deliberate, life is unpredictable. Life is dangerous. That’s what makes life worth living—knowing that it could be gone in a moment’s notice. Take it from someone who constantly lives knowing that each day might be their last. I’m not angry. I’m not scared. I’m only happy that we’re both okay, and we’ll do what we can to deal with this situation.”

Jungkook reached for him immediately, tugging him into a gentle hug. “I don’t call this you being okay.”

Seokjin chuckled, patting Jungkook’s back. “I’ll take a few bruised and cracked ribs as a fair tradeoff to you keeping me alive long enough for the ambulance to get to me.”

It took some shifting, and though Seokjin and Jungkook were both slim, the hospital bed wasn’t particularly built for two. But eventually Seokjin managed to scoot to one side enough that Jungkook could tuck in next to him, just like when Seokjin had woken to the sound of his brother and Minah’s voice.

It reminded Seokjin of when Jungkook had been a small child, sharing his bed despite them each having their own rooms. Their father had detested it, tried to discourage it, and even become angry over it. But each night for years Jungkook had climbed into Seokjin’s bed for comfort, and each night Seokjin had held him until he slept.

“I thought you were going to die,” Jungkook said quietly, his voice barely louder than the beeping of the machines that kept track of Seokjin’s vitals. “By the time I realized how much trouble you were in, you were passing out. They were still shooting at us and I didn’t know what to do. I was worried if I stopped to help you, they’d come in and kill us for sure.”

Seokjin soaked in the warmth of his brother. “But you did it anyway?”

“I had to,” Jungkook admitted. “Because if you died, and I let you to save myself … that’s not something I could do. So, I stopped firing back. I started CPR on you the second I realized your heart had stopped. God, I barely remembered what to do. I wasn’t really paying much attention to those classes you made me take.”

“Those classes were important. You should have been taking notes.”

“Oh,” Jungkook assured, “you can bet your ass I’m going to retake all of them now, and I’ll bring home pages and pages of notes.”

It would never be something Seokjin forgot, that Jungkook had saved his life. His heart had become completely unresponsive and useless the second it had become so overloaded it shut down. Without his heart to pump oxygen to his body, most importantly to his brain, he would have been either dead or a vegetable in a few minutes. But Jungkook breathed for him. He’d kept stimulating his heart, forcing circulation of blood cells through his body, and preventing him from eclipsing completely.

Seokjin’s fingers brushed through Jungkook’s hair. “Was I …” He wasn’t sure how to say what he was curious about.

“Hm?”
“The first time I woke up,” Seokjin tried again, his nails scratching soothingly at Jungkook’s scalp, “I thought I saw dad. Was I just hallucinating? Why would he have been here?”

Jungkook nosed at Seokjin’s shoulder. “Don’t be mad at me, okay?”

Seokjin’s mouth opened in surprise. “He was really here?”

“I called him,” Jungkook confessed. “I know he’s an ass, and you probably don’t want him anywhere near you, but I was so scared. I thought you were going die, I didn’t know what to do, and I called him. I called him and I told him and he came down here.”

“He was sleeping in the room when I woke up,” Seokjin said, almost like he still didn’t believe it.

As if it was a secret, Jungkook said, “He cried. I think he thought you were going to die, too. He went to the bathroom after we got our first update. They’d gotten your heart going a couple of times already, but it kept stalling out, like it couldn’t even manage to do what it had been doing poorly before. They weren’t sure how many times they could bring you back before it was a lost cause. Dad … he didn’t say anything when they asked if we wanted to consider a DNR.

A DNR.

A Do Not Resuscitate.

Seokjin hated them. It was in him, in his heart and soul, to try and work on a patient until death snatched them away. It was everything he could do to keep someone alive, and all that mattered to him from start to finish. So, when family members, or patients themselves, elected for a do not resuscitate, it hurt Seokjin terribly.

But in this instance, Seokjin understood. With each attempt to get his heart started again, it must have damaged it further and further. Minah hadn’t said as much, but maybe it was the real reason was still in the hospital. How many times had they needed to restart his heart? Two or three times? Four? More? His heart, technically, hadn’t been in poor condition before. It had only been the values and arteries that were most damaged and deformed. But what about now?

Had more time been stolen from his life?

“He just went to the bathroom,” Jungkook continued on. “He didn’t say anything to me. He just left. And I was so angry. I was so pissed off I wanted to scream at him and shake him and demand that he leave the hospital. So, I followed him. I was going to tell him what a horrible father he was, and how he didn’t deserve a son like you, and how I wished he died and was gone so we could all be happier. But then I heard him.”

“Crying?”

“Crying,” Jungkook confirmed. “He’d barricaded himself in one of the bathroom stalls and was sobbing. I … I’ve never heard him cry like that before. And that’s when I realized that he was just as scared you were going to die as I was. That’s why I didn’t fight him when Minah said only one of us could stay with you that first night. I let him be the one, and I went out with Suga and Rap Mon to search the streets instead.”

Seokjin said, “I must have reminded him of her.”

Their mother.

Jungkook’s fingers tightened from where they were gripping Seokjin’s blanket. “That’s no excuse.”
"Maybe. Maybe not."

The steady beats of Seokjin’s heart weren’t nearly reassuring as Jungkook’s presence next to him.

“I have to tell you something,” Seokjin said finally, unable to hold back anymore. “But you’ll be upset with me.”

“Unlikely,” Jungkook scoffed out.

Seokjin nodded seriously. “I used to see you, even up until a few days ago, as my innocent kid brother. I knew, realistically, you weren’t. How could you be at eighteen? But to me, you were this cheery, sometimes obnoxious, but good willed kid that I raised to be a pretty good example for others to look towards.”

Jungkook laughed, “Not to be prideful or anything.”

“I am proud,” Seokjin insisted. “I’m proud of who you are, who you’ve become, and the things you’re going to do with your life. But in that store … when we were being shot at … for one second I thought might be scared of the man you’d become.”

“Of me? You were scared of me?”

There was a hint of something horrible on Jungkook’s face. “Jin … I …”

“I was frightened afterwards, too,” Seokjin confessed. “Because it was fine if my little, baby brother wasn’t so small or innocent anymore. That was something I could live with. But how you handled that gun … how you shot it so easily and were prepared to kill …”

“Oh.”

Seokjin held him as tightly as he feared. “I know you were doing what it took to keep us alive. And you were doing what I never could have. You did save our lives, you did protect us, and I’ll always be thankful. But I knew the second I saw, that wasn’t the first time you’d shot at someone. And that made me wonder what else Bangtan had made you do.”

Jungkook sat up suddenly, dislodging Seokjin a little. He protested, “Bangtan hasn’t made me do anything!”

“I didn’t mean it like that,” Seokjin said almost lazily. “I meant, since joining Bangtan, I wondered what else you had done, or felt as if you had to do. I wondered if I really knew you at all anymore. And I was scared of what you were capable of.”

“Oh,” Jungkook eased out. “Oh.”

“It’s not the first time, is it?” Seokjin asked. “That you fired your gun?”

“No,” Jungkook admitted.

“Have you killed anyone?”

Jungkook frowned. “Do you want to know the answer to that?”

Seokjin didn’t really want to know, he’d just had to ask. It didn’t make sense, but the situation was delicate and odd and nothing seemed the right or wrong thing to say.

But thankfully he didn’t have to guess, because Jungkook said, “No, I haven’t killed anyone. And
yeah, I’ve shot that gun before, so I was comfortable enough doing it at the story when we were in trouble. But I won’t be ashamed of that. I respect that gun and I only use it when I have to. But I do use it.”

Suddenly Seokjin’s hands were at Jungkook’s waist, demanding, “You didn’t bring that gun into the hospital, did you?”

Jungkook arched an eyebrow. “No. I didn’t bring a gun into the hospital where my brother is being treated. And just for the record, I’ve never brought a gun into your clinic, either. Not even the first night you met Bangtan. I know how you feel about guns. I know, okay, and I wouldn’t do that to you.”

“Thank you,” Seokjin said, meaning it deeply.

Jungkook tucked himself back against Seokjin. “It’s not fair,” he mumbled into Seokjin’s blanket. “It’s not fair that you’re stuck here, in the hospital, and it’s not something you deserve.”

Seokjin chuckled. “There’s no such thing as someone deserving or not deserving anything. That’s like thinking life owes you something. We play the hands we’re dealt, and we deal with the rest.”

Jungkook made a sound of annoyance.

Seokjin mused his hair and said, “I know, that pretty much sucks, but it’s just the way the world is.”

A few hours later, as the sun was gone completely, and the moon was inching higher in the starry sky, a soft knock came to Seokjin’s door.

Seokjin didn’t miss the way Jungkook’s body tensed up, or how fast he swung himself off the bed and into a defensive position.

Seokjin offered, “I don’t think anyone who wants to come in here and start trouble is going to bother knocking first.”

Jungkook didn’t move, even as he called out, “Who is it?”

The reply was prompt, “Suga.”

Jungkook deflated and Seokjin sat up in bed, suddenly realizing that he’d been tense, too.

“Hey,” Yoongi greeted, slipping into the room and closing the door behind him. His eyes settled on Seokjin and he offered a half smile. “Glad to see you up and looking much better than the last time I was here.”

“When was that?” Seokjin asked curiously. He’d spent most of his time with Jungkook over the past few days, though Taehyung had been to visit at least twice a day, and Hoseok had become increasingly prevalent over the past forty-eight hours. Yoongi, on the other hand, had been like Namjoon … suspiciously absent.

Yoongi drifted to the bed and answered, “I saw you the first day they let you have a steady stream of visitors. I stayed with you so Jungkook would go home and shower and get a few hours of sleep. You looked, no offense, not so great then.”

“I did almost die,” Seokjin said in a light way, trying to get Yoongi to smile. “But I had Jungkook there to save me, and then a whole team of specialist doctors to help me.”
Yoongi gave a nod. “It would be pretty crappy if you died. We’re all just getting used to you.” Yoongi nodded to the bedside table. “I took my sister you were sick. She made that for you.”

Seokjin turned to look at the hand drawn card that was propped up on the table. Seokjin hadn’t really noticed it before, but now that he did, a smile broke on his face at the fairly well drawn figures drawn on the card. Seokjin could pick himself out, along with Hyomin, and Yoongi. And in all actuality, there were other characters, drawn almost in an anime style, that looked a little like Namjoon, and other members of Bangtan.

It said everything about Yoongi’s dedication to Bangtan, that he’d let his sister around the other members.

“Tell her I said thank you?” Seokjin asked. “It’s wonderful.”

“She’s not the best drawer,” Yoongi said with a half-smile, “but she tries, so that counts. So, write her a thank you note back, okay? And maybe, if you’re feeling up to it, she could come visit for a couple of minutes. She’s been worried.”

“Of course she can,” Seokjin said kindly. Hyomin was a sweet girl, and Seokjin was interested in spending time with her having recovered from her medical diagnosis.

“Good. Fine. I’ll tell her.” Yoongi said it all a little awkwardly, like he hadn’t really expected Seokjin to be interested in seeing her. “We’ve all been worried.”

Seriously, Jungkook said to Seokjin, “That practically means Suga love you.”

Yoongi rolled his eyes.

“Why’re you here?” Jungkook asked with a frown. “I’m okay to stay with Jin. Minah said family can stay in the room with him as long as they want.”

Yoongi’s eyes cut between Seokjin and Jungkook, then revealed, “Jimin’s going to stay tonight. He’ll wait out in the hallway.”

“Jimin?” Seokjin questioned. He was another member of Bangtan Seokjin hadn’t seen much of.

Truthfully, Seokjin considered Jimin to be a lot of the muscle of Bangtan. He was small in stature, but he gave off an aura of power. The clothing he wore did little to hide how physically strong he likely was, and Jimin had always seemed to Seokjin the kind of man who didn’t mind getting his hands dirty. Jimin, for all intents and purposes, was probably Bangtan’s version of Infinite’s Hoya.

“Why?” Jungkook asked, voice dropping suspiciously.

“You need to come with me,” Yoongi said, giving no room for disagreement. “Rap Mon sent me to get you specifically. We have a lead.”

Jungkook was reaching for his shoes located near the end of the bed immediately.

“On who shot at us?” Seokjin asked, butting in without any shame.

Suga nodded. “If the lead turns out to be good, too, and we think it is, then we’ve got the bastards cornered.”

“There’s more than one?” Jungkook asked, barely looking at the laces on his shoes as he tied them.

“We think there’s two,” Suga confirmed. “But that’s not the problem here.”
Seokjin set aside the blankets on his bed carefully and swung his legs to the side. His sock clad feet hung a few inches from the floor and he carefully inched forward, wary of his IV line and the monitoring equipment attached to his body. Not to mention how tightly his ribs were wrapped, which limited almost all of his mobility.

“I don’t see a problem,” Jungkook said, standing to stub his toe into the ground to test the strength of his laces. “Whether it’s one or two or a hundred, let’s go get the bastards and make them pay.”

Make them pay, Seokjin assumed was a euphemism for something that he couldn’t agree with on a moral level.

“Jungkook,” Yoongi said, sighing almost dejectedly. “Rap Mon will give you the details when we meet up, but it looks like one of the guys who did this, the driver, was hired help from out of town—or out of our territory at least. But the other? He’s one of ours.”

Jungkook froze and Seokjin frowned, asking, “One of yours? Like … a member of Bangtan?”

Jungkook spun back to Seokjin and said immediately, “Hey, no, you should be out of bed.”

“Should I pee in the bedpan?” Seokjin asked.

Jungkook looked a little embarrassed.

“One of our own,” Yoongi said again, rubbing a hand over his face. “Obviously not someone high enough in Bangtan to have any brains, but if this turns out to be our guy, who we’re going after now, he’s wearing our colors, doing what we say.”

“Obviously,” Jungkook snapped, “he’s not doing what we say.”

“I know,” Yoongi said in a dejected way.

“And who the fuck,” Jungkook snapped out, voice rising, “would be stupid enough to go after my brother? Who would be stupid enough to go after an innocent doctor with no real ties to Bangtan?”

Yoongi thumbed towards the door. “I don’t know, but how about we go find out? At the very least, I’m going to need you with me to pull Rap Mon off this guy if it turns out he’s the one.”

Jungkook looked confused. “You mean help me pile on, right? Because I’m not helping you stop Rap Mon from destroy this guy if it’s him. If anything, I’m getting in on it.”

“Jungkook,” Seokjin said, rubbing a hand across his forehead. The first signs of a headache were building, and against all rationale, he was tired again. He was dreaming of getting back into bed and sleeping for eight more hours at least. “Please.”

“Look,” Jungkook said, exhaling loudly. “Just get some rest, okay? Don’t worry about me, or anyone else for that matter, and concentrate on getting better. I’ll come back in the morning and see you then. Everything will be fine. Don’t stress and don’t worry.”

Seokjin asked a bit irritated, “Don’t worry that my brother is about to go throw himself into danger in the name of revenge?”

“Are you serious?” Jungkook demanded. “Are you really upset I want to get back at the people who almost killed us?”

Yoongi took a deliberate step back and towards the door, saying, “I think I’ll wait outside for you
two to finish. But Jungkook, don’t take too long. We got tipped off to this guy by a … less than loyal source. Who’s to say this source won’t want to work both sides and let our guy know we’re coming.”

Seokjin waited until Yoongi was out the door to ask, “Did you think I would be okay with my brother going off to torture and do worse to someone in my name?”

“To someone,” Jungkook corrected angrily, “who tried to kill you. Who nearly did!”

Seokjin shook his head and shuffled his way towards the room’s bathroom, dragging his IV pole with him. “You can do what you want, Jungkook. I’ve told you repeatedly that you’re an adult and you make your own choices. But don’t you dare try to justify what you’re about to do to this person, as something you’re doing for me. If you do this, don’t you attach me in any way. I don’t want you to do this. I don’t condone it.”

Jungkook asked, “So you just want me to leave this person alone? You want me to let them off the hook, give them a free pass, and let them probably try to hurt you again?”

Seokjin nudged the bathroom door open with his food and called back, “You do whatever you feel you have to do, Jungkook. But don’t for a second think that this is something you’re doing to protect me. You’re doing this because you’re angry and you want comeuppance. Don’t confuse those.”

He shut the bathroom door behind him a second later and leaned back against it. There was silence long enough for Seokjin to worry that Jungkook was waiting for him on the other side of the door, not ready to drop the subject. But then he heard his brother shuffling around before the door to the hospital room opened and closed with a click.

Using the bathroom should have only take a minute or two, but Seokjin took his time to wash his face properly with warm water, and calm himself.

His brother was a member of Bangtan. Jungkook was probably going to kill someone within an hour. And Seokjin had no choice but to accept it.

Slowly Seokjin shuffled his way back to the hospital bed, suddenly not so tired. How could he sleep when he knew people who cared for him were going to hurt someone else, based on what had happened? Seokjin couldn’t help feeling responsible or what Namjoon and Seokjin were going to do.

“You okay in here?”

Seokjin turned towards the door where Jimin’s head was peeking in, a worried look on his face.

“Yeah,” Seokjin assured, giving him a tentative smile.

“Suga said you were fighting with your brother.”

“It’s okay,” Seokjin said, climbing gingerly back into bed.

“Oh.” Jimin gave him an appraising look that was almost kind. “Okay. I’ll be out here if you need anything.”

As Jimin pulled back, Seokjin called out, “Jimin?”

“Yeah?”
Seokjin nodded to the sofa across the room. It was the same one his father had slept on so many
nights ago. “You can stay in here if you want.”

Jimin arched an eyebrow. “Seriously? You want me in here?”

Shrugging, Seokjin replied, “The sofa in here has to be more comfortable than any of those plastic
chairs out there. And if you’re supposed to be here to keep an eye on me, wouldn’t it be better if you
could actually see me? I’m just going to sleep, so you could watch some TV with the volume low.”

Jimin inched his way into the room. “I thought only family was supposed to be in here overnight
with you.”

In an exhausted way, Seokjin said simply, “You’re Bangtan. That makes you family, right?”

“Right,” Jimin said back softly. "Family."
Instead of Jimin taking the sofa like Seokjin had suggested, he slid expertly into the chair next to the hospital bed and leaned forward to rest his forearms on his thighs.

Seokjin regarded him oddly for a moment, then asked, “Is there a reason you’re sitting there? I promise you, the sofa is comfortable. And I think it pulls out into a bed.” His father had certainly managed to catch at least a few hours on it.

Instead of a quick retort like Seokjin had expected, Jimin’s head dropped even further, making him look absolutely defeated.

“What’s wrong?” Seokjin asked. It was so unlike Jimin, who seemed ruled by his confidence and bravado.

“I’m …” Jimin broke off to clear his throat. Then he looked up at Seokjin and there was such agony on his face. “I’m so sorry.”

Seokjin asked, taken aback, “Sorry for what?”

“What am I not sorry for?” Jimin asked, but it sounded rhetorical in nature. “Seokjin, it’s my fault you go hurt.”

It was the first time Seokjin could recall Jimin openly using his name. Most of the time Jimin called him Doctor Kim, occasionally Jin, and when he wanted to be an ass, he threw around the moniker Princess. But Seokjin? It was so startling now to hear his full name come from Jimin.

“Jimin.”

“I’m sorry, Seokjin. I’m so sorry.”

Seokjin shifted a little, drawing his blanket up to get comfortable. He requested, “Can you do something for me?”

Even more concerning was the gathering wetness in Jimin’s eyes. “Huh?”

Seokjin gestured to him, feeling an overwhelming urge of protectiveness swell up in him. Jimin, though not a child and older than Jungkook, was obviously still capable of being hurt, being vulnerable, and needing a little comfort occasionally. The sadness that existed in him had been hidden away deeply and securely, but Seokjin was seeing it now.

And it was heartbreaking.

“Lean forward,” Seokjin requested gently. “Lean toward me.”

Confusion clashed with the obvious despair Jimin was feeling, but he leaned towards Seokjin all the same.

“Thanks,” Seokjin told him, holding himself carefully so he didn’t have to reach far to smack Jimin’s sharply across the back of the head.
“Hey!” Jimin protested loudly, an astounded and surprised expression giving way to him demanding, “What was that for? And why did you hit me so hard?”

Seokjin wondered, “What’s with people blaming themselves around me? Do you all think that makes me feel better when you berate yourselves and think you’re responsible for the actions of others?”

Pouting, Jimin rubbed his head with more fervor. “You’re supposed to be injured. How can you hit that hard?”

“Lean forward again, please.”

“No!” Jimin shouted, holding his head protectively.

“You don’t want me to hit you again?” Seokjin asked casually. “Then how about you don’t say things that make me want to smack some sense into you.”

Jimin blinked widely. “You’re going to make a terrifying mother one day.”

Seokjin was contemplating lunging for Jimin as he said, “I’m a boy, Jimin. I’ll be a father.”

“I don’t know,” Jimin said skeptically. “You hit like an angry mom.”

Giving up on the threat of physical violence, Seokjin leaned back against his pillows and said much kindlier, “I don’t want you to shoulder any of the blame for what happened. You weren’t there.”

“That’s my point,” Jimin argued back almost immediately. “I wasn’t there, I should have been. I could have kept you safe if I was there.”

“You don’t know that.”

Once more Jimin’s voice rose and he snapped, “I wouldn’t have let anything happen to you!”

Incredulously, Seokjin asked, “So you can magically fix my heart? That’s what you’re telling me? That if you’d been there, you could have stopped it from giving out on me? The heart that I was born with, and the very heart I seem to be the only one capable of accepting? You’re claiming you could have stopped the heart failure that I experienced? That’s what you’re saying?”

Jimin went pale.

“If anything,” Seokjin continued, “this is on me. Taehyung and Yoongi and everyone else claim this was an attack directly at me, either to make a statement about my closeness to Bangtan, or as a move directly against Bangtan or Namjoon. In any case, if I was the target, I brought the firefight to my brother and endangered him. I took it away from you.”

Shaking his head, Jimin said, “I would have preferred to be there. Maybe I couldn’t have stopped your heart from hurting you. But I could have helped hold off the attack, or helped Jungkook start CPR on you—I know how to do it, you know I could have done something, and not just sat on my ass while you were fighting to stay alive.”

“I doubt you were sitting on your ass.”

“No,” Jimin agreed. “But I wasn’t paying attention to you. I wasn’t watching you like I was supposed to.”

“Lean forward.”
Eyes going large again, Jimin protested, “No way.”

“Come on,” Seokjin urged. “Just do it. I’m not going to hit you again. This time.”

Jimin squeezed his eyes as he tipped his head towards Seokjin.

“You are not to blame,” Seokjin said firmly. He wrapped his fingers around the back of Jimin’s neck and bumped their foreheads together. It was an odd angle for Seokjin, his chest pulling tight and making it a little hard to breathe, but it was worth it for the look of shock on Jimin’s face. “I made the decision to leave because I was upset. I didn’t tell you because I was being petty. This is not on you, and I don’t want to hear you try to make it sound like it is. Understand? You do not get to blame yourself for this, and I won’t let you try. So, knock it off with the guilt, okay?”

Jimin gave a small sniffle, the nodded.

“And I’m okay,” Seokjin insisted. “This is something I’m going to recover from. Stop treating either of us so pitifully. Or I will hit you again.”

“Okay,” Jimin said with a deep exhale. “I get it.”

“Good.” Seokjin released his hold on Jimin.

“But I can’t just turn off the guilt I feel,” Jimin told him. “I feel responsible, and I don’t know how not to.”

Seokjin nodded a little. That wasn’t something he could fix. It was only something Jimin could do for himself.

“I should have told you I was leaving the flower shop,” Seokjin said. “That was my mistake. I was angry at you so I deliberately didn’t. I wanted you to panic when you realized I was gone, because I knew you could get in trouble for me slipping away.”

Once more Jimin rested his forearms on his thighs. “You were angry because I’m always making you angry. I’m always antagonizing you.”

“I’ve been meaning to ask why.” Seokjin was very much tired, but talking with Jimin in a quiet, serious way, seemed far more important than sleep. “Is it just because we got off to a bad start?”

Or was it all about Jimin’s dead brother, whom Seokjin reminded him of, like Yoongi claimed?

Jimin gave a sad smile. “It’s because … I think it’s because you stood up to me. That night, when Rap Mon was shot, I was scared and desperate and you were there, standing up to me, refusing to just bow to what I was saying … giving me attitude.”

Seokjin pointed out, “You put a gun in my face.”

“I’m used to putting guns in the faces of people who are being difficult,” Jimin shot back. “When I do, they usually don’t put up any more resistance. But you gave me more of it. I had the gun, but you were the one in control of the situation. I was being threatening, but you didn’t back down for a second. You were strong and calm and unflinching and I … I was …”

Jimin had been baffled, and probably intrigued, Seokjin reasoned. Most of all, Seokjin was willing to hedge, Jimin was just fascinated by the first person who didn’t care who he was, where he came from, or what he was holding.
That was … completely unexpected.

Jimin gave a low chuckle. “I antagonize you on purpose, Seokjin, because I like how you challenge me. I like that you don’t give an inch, you don’t let me act however I want, and you give as good as you get. I didn’t know how much I liked that until I found someone like you.”

Frowning, Seokjin asked, “But it’s not as if you push Bangtan’s members around. They stand up to you all the time. I’ve seen it.”

“It’s not the same,” Jimin insisted. “We’re like warriors. We’re built to be combative and defensive, in order to do what we do. You’re just a doctor.”

Seokjin scoffed. “Just a doctor.”

“You know what I mean,” Jimin said, almost apologetically.

“So,” Seokjin tried, “you rile me up, poke fun at me, and are a jerk at times because you like that I snap back at you? How does that make any sense?”

Jimin didn’t answer, instead he hid a smile of some sort behind a hand.

Eventually, Jimin confessed in a strangled way, “It wasn’t a big deal for me to be there with you at the flower shop. I didn’t have anything else to do that day, and the truth is, you are one of us. You’re one of Bangtan, even if it isn’t official or anything. You take care of us, you patch us up, you cook for us and hang out with us and you’re our friend. So, me watching after you wasn’t even something that Rap Mon needed to ask me to do. I just put up a fuss because you were paying more attention to the flowers than me.”

Seokjin gave him an incredulous look. “Please tell me you’re not saying you were jealous of the flowers I was buying for the graves of my mother and sister.”

Jimin looked horrified. “What?”

“It wouldn’t kill you to pay attention from time to time,” Seokjin said with a sigh. “I was buying flowers for the graves of family members who are deceased. It was an important thing to me, and you made me angry by acting in such a disrespectful and flippant way.”

It didn’t even matter anymore, though. Seokjin had spent the anniversary of his mother and sister’s deaths in the hospital’s intensive care unit, barely holding onto life himself, and then days and days afterwards recovering. The date had come and passed.

“I’m sorry,” Jimin offered, face full of regret. “I was being an ass. I should have been paying attention. You’re not a frivolous person. I knew that. If we were at that flower shop, it had to be for a good reason, but I didn’t stop to find out what that reason was.”

At least Seokjin knew the flowers had been delivered promptly and with care to the graves in question. There was just no telling what had happened on the actual day, with Seokjin in the hospital and Jungkook watching over him. Maybe their father had paid his respects all by himself. Maybe no one had gone for the first year ever.

“Going to that florist was the most important thing to me at the time,” Seokjin said. “It was about more than flowers.”

Jimin gave a shameful nod.
Softly, Seokjin asked, “Do you have a time of the year you remember your family at?”

Jimin looked startled.

And carefully, Seokjin said, “I’ve heard things about your childhood, bits and pieces. I’ve tried not to pry, but I know you lost your family young. I know you suffered horrible loss that prompted you into this lifestyle.” He certainly wasn’t going to give away anything Yoongi had told him, which had been in confidence.

Jimin leveled his arms up on Seokjin’s bed and leaned into them. He was quiet in thought for a while, then said, “I don’t even remember what my parents looked like.”

“You grew up in a boy’s home?”

Jimin gave a shaky nod. “It wasn’t bad there.” A small, reassuring smile followed. “There were a lot of good people there—people who cared about each other. And we all kind of were … we were kind of family. A weird one, but a family.”

Until, Seokjin recalled being told, Shinhwa’s thugs had burned it to the ground. With most everyone inside.

“I’m glad,” Seokjin said. Because if Jimin could have happiness even for a second, it was seeming more and more like he deserved it.

Seokjin shifted underneath his blankets and yawned.

“You should get some sleep,” Jimin decided, standing. “I’ll put the TV on mute until you fall asleep.”

“Jimin.”

Seokjin reached out to catch Jimin’s wrist. He held it loosely, so Jimin could pull away immaturely if he wanted to, and counted it as a victory when he didn’t.

“What?” Jimin’s eyes seemed locked on Seokjin’s fingers.

“I’m glad you weren’t with me.” Seokjin told him firmly, “I’m thankful, actually, that I left you behind and that we were irritated at each other. Because if you had been there, you could have been hurt, and then I’d feel even worse than I already do.”

Peering strangely at him, Jimin asked, “You don’t feel guilty, do you? About what happened?” He was almost accusatory in his words, like he’d be personally offended if Seokjin carried any guilt.

“About being responsible for the deaths of those innocent people when I was the target?”

Jimin put his hands on his hips. “Now who deserves to be hit for thinking they’re responsible for the actions of others?”

Seokjin sunk back fully against his bed. “Okay. Maybe you’re right about this guilt thing.”

Finally, Jimin pulled his wrist free from Seokjin’s grip. “How about we make a deal? I’ll try my best not to feel guilty about not being there for you and Jungkook, and you try your best not to think that it’s your fault someone decided to target you.”

Before Jimin could move to the sofa, Seokjin said quietly, “If they find the person who orchestrated this … if Namjoon and Yoongi and Jungkook are certain it’s him, they’re going to kill him, aren’t
“They?”

Jimin pursed his lips.

“I can handle it, okay? You can tell me the truth.”

“It’s not that I don’t think you can handle it,” Jimin stated, and seemed truthful. “It’s that I don’t think you really want to know the answer.”

“It’s yes,” Seokjin said for him.

“Eventually,” Jimin admitted with a slow tip to his head. “But the guy is going to wish before the end that it happened fast. Because to your brother and to Rap Mon, and to all of Bangtan, this is about as personal as it gets.”

Seokjin asked, “What if I asked them not to?”

Jimin gave an unbelievable look. “You don’t want them to take out a very real threat to you? The guy who tried to kill you?”

Seokjin could only shrug. “I don’t want more deaths on my conscience. I don’t want to know anyone else died because of me. Maybe Namjoon would consider—”

“No,” Jimin cut in quickly. “I doubt there’s anything in the world you could say to make him not take this guy out. Not even if you asked him personally, or begged or pleaded.” Curiously, Jimin asked, “Do you know why?”

“Because,” Seokjin offered carefully, “he considers me family now? A part of Bangtan’s family?”

Jimin crossed swiftly to the sofa across the room and nearly threw himself down on it. He brought an arm up to cover his eyes, and said almost with a laugh, “It’s because he’s in love with you. Maybe he hasn’t said it to you yet, but I can tell. We can all tell. He’s so in love with you it’s ridiculous.”

“In love,” Seokjin repeated, a little stunned. They’d known each other only a few short months. And while there was an incredible attraction between them, and they were so very good together, Seokjin didn’t know how it could be love already.

Jimin snorted. “He’s been in love with you since he woke up from whatever you pumped in his system, rambling about having seen an angle. We all laughed at him, writing him off because of said drugs, but he persisted. He started taking nonstop about you, bugging Jungkook for the smallest bit of information, and talking himself slowly into what he knew was wrong.”

Jimin sounded … angry again. Maybe resentful, or possibly something else.

“We all knew it was wrong to drag you into this,” Jimin said, craning his head to look properly at Seokjin. “The rest of us, we all got involved in Bangtan in different ways, but always because this is something we believe in and are willing to fight for. We all have a personal stake in here somewhere, even Jungkook now. But you’re just a doctor trying to do right by people. Rap Mon knew he should keep you out of this, especially with tensions starting to reach a boiling point, but he was so infatuated, so in love with the angel who saved his life, he couldn’t help himself.”

Seokjin felt the frown on his face deepening. “He didn’t drag me into this kicking and screaming.”
“No,” Jimin agreed. “But he blame here really goes wholly to Rap Mon. Because Jungkook wouldn’t have ever brought you near Bangtan territory. He wouldn’t have introduced you to us, or let you learn our names. He wouldn’t have taken the risks that Rap Mon did with you. Rap Mon put a target on your back. He’s the reason someone tried to kill you. And that’s why you can’t feel guilty about whatever he’s going to do. He’s just cleaning up his mistake, almost at the expense of your life.”

Carelessly, Seokjin called over to him, “I don’t understand why you’re so callous all of the sudden. You sound … bitter.”

Jimin reached for the nearby remote and flicked the TV on, immediately hitting the mute button. “I’m not bitter.”

“Then what?”

With an exaggerated sigh, Jimin said, “I just know that if I were Rap Mon, if it were you and me, I wouldn’t have put you in danger. I would have protected you, at the expense of my own feelings, and I wouldn’t have compromised out of some weakness of affection.”

Seokjin wrangled his blankets up higher and bit out, “That’s such bull.”

“Is it?” Jimin demanded. His eyes narrowed as he looked to Seokjin and said evenly, “If you were mine, I wouldn’t have let this situation get anywhere near what it has.” Then he turned back to the TV, folded his arms over his chest, and seemed completely done with the conversation.

Seokjin, on his hospital bed, was completely dumbfounded. “Jimin …”

“Get some sleep,” Jimin called out, but his tone was clipped and heavy with no patience.

What the hell had the conversation devolved into, Seokjin wondered. They’d been so open and candid with each other at first, and Seokjin had truly thought they were making progress. But then all of the sudden Jimin had gotten angry again, and then there’d been nothing but riddles in the end.

If he was Jimin’s?

Did Jimin have aspirations on being Bangtan’s leader?

Seokjin wanted to ask more. He was endlessly curious about the way the conversation had ended. But the urge to sleep was more overwhelming than it had ever been. The room was warm, the bed was relatively comfortable, and the soft glow from the television was more like a nightlight than anything else.

His eyes slid shut when he didn’t think he could stay awake any longer, and he was honestly thankful. Sleep meant escape from the weight of the guilt and the knowledge that his brother and Namjoon were probably doing something terrible at the moment.

For just a second Seokjin felt the ghostly pressure of light fingers along his jaw, a touch so tender and so tentative that it almost wasn’t there in the first place.

He tried to blink his eyes open, unsure if he was actually feeling something on his face, or if it was a manifestation of his exhaustion making his body tingle.

And because of the darkness in the room, cracking his eyes open produced the phantom image of some blurry form above him, blocking out the moonlight that was just edging towards Seokjin’s bed.
But then everything was gone, and Seokjin was drifting into a heavy sleep for the night, unaware of anything going on around him, and unable to care.

When he woke in the morning it was the definite feeling of pressure brushing across his cheekbones, and the smiling, happy face of Namjoon hovering over him.

“Personal space,” Seokjin mumbled, then pushed at him. But it was halfhearted at best, and more playful than anything else.

“Aw, come on,” Namjoon said in a teasing way, “you haven’t seen me in forever. Didn’t you miss me?”

An ache welled up in Seokjin so quickly that he knew Namjoon’s words had to be the truth. And so, he said, “Yes. I did miss you.”

A full smile blossomed onto Namjoon’s face and he swooped down for a gentle kiss.

“I haven’t brushed me teeth yet,” Seokjin protested.

“I don’t care,” Namjoon insisted, stealing a second kiss, then a third. “You’re perfect like this. You’re always perfect to me, bad breath or not.”

Gratefully, Seokjin let Namjoon press him down against the hospital bed, savoring the feel of the person he cared for coming back to him.

Namjoon cupped his jaw gently after one last kiss, and asked, “How are you doing?”

“Good,” Seokjin insisted, and it was certainly true that every day he felt a little better than the day before it. “Better.”

“I’m glad,” Namjoon said, stroking the stubble skin at Seokjin’s jaw. “You … I was so worried. I was scared, actually. Terrified.” He sat heavy on the bed, taking Seokjin’s hands in his own. He confessed, “I always knew I couldn’t stand to lose you, but I believed you when you said you were going to live a long time. I guess I just never considered all the things that could happen outside your control.”

Seokjin squeezed his fingers. “You’re a jerk for staying away so long.”

“A jerk?” Namjoon asked. “Come on, I wasn’t doing it on purpose. I had to take care of some business. You’re important to me, Jin, and if I could have been here from the start, I would have. You know that, right?”

“Well,” Seokjin said, giving a peace offering of a smile, “Taehyung and Hoseok were great company while you were gone, and I got to make my brother wait on me hand and foot, so maybe it wasn’t terrible you had to be gone.”

Namjoon reinforced one more time, “I had to. It wasn’t by choice.”

The morning light was streaming through the open curtains across the room, and Seokjin took note of the dark circles underneath Namjoon’s eyes and the pallid tone to his skin.

He chided gently, “You haven’t been taking care of yourself.” Seokjin ran his fingers through Namjoon’s hair soothingly. “You’re too pale and I bet you haven’t been eating right.”

Namjoon grinned. “I’ve been a little preoccupied. And maybe I like you fussing over me.”
Strictly, Seokjin said, “You don’t have to eat improperly to get me to fuss over you.”

“Nice to know,” Namjoon chuckled, pushing into Seokjin’s hand. “But that should be over with.”

Seokjin found himself stilling, his mouth suddenly drier than it had ever been. He asked slowly, “Then … you got your man?”

Namjoon drew back, sitting more straightly on the bed, and piling his hands into his lap. “Your brother warned me you weren’t happy about what needed to be done.”

Seokjin whispered fiercely at him, “How could I be okay with what you and Jungkook and the rest of Bangtan did?”

“Jin.”

“No,” Seokjin insisted. “I don’t like what you do. I accept it because I understand the world that we live in, but I don’t like it. And I can’t support these kinds of things. Namjoon, honestly, it hurts me to know that you’ve … ended someone’s life because of me.”

“He’s not dead yet,” Namjoon pointed out.

“But he wishes he were, correct?”

Face twisting into an expression of anger, Namjoon demanded, “What did you want me to do, Jin?” It was the angriest Namjoon had ever been at him, and it felt terrible to have the emotion directed at him. “Let the bastard go?”

“Not kill him in my name,” Seokjin protested.

Namjoon’s head cocked as he asked, “What do you think would have happened if I let him get away with this? Go ahead and guess. Think long term.”

Seokjin only shrugged, sitting up further on his bed.

“I let this guy get away with hurting you, almost killing you,” Namjoon told him, “and it sends a message. It says I’m weak. It says that I’m not capable of taking care of the people that I love, and that I won’t strike back when I’m threatened. It tells my enemies that it’s okay if they target you, and that they can get away with hurting you. I’m not prepared to send that message.”

And that was fair enough. Seokjin didn’t like it, but he did understand Namjoon’s point of view. It just made him feel sick to his stomach and he hated even thinking about it.

“I just …”

“Jin.” Namjoon framed his face carefully and then kissed his mouth once. “What if I let this go and someone tries again? What if next time you’re at your clinic and someone takes a shot at you? I’m not saying this to play dirty, I’m saying this so you understand the worst possible scenario. What if you’re at your clinic, someone thinks they can get away with hurting you, and they try with dozens of sick and innocent people around you?”

Seokjin felt himself grow violently ill in a matter of seconds. Parents brought their children to see him at the clinic all the time. Mothers gave birth there. The elderly were in and out like clockwork. Seokjin could be risking them.

Namjoon slid down from the bed and scrubbed a hand over his own face. “It makes me sick to think
one of my own did this. And I’m going to find out why. But Jin, we were lucky it was one of Bangtan’s lower level members. What if this had been done by someone in Infinite? Or any of the other gangs?”

“Namjoon,” Seokjin tried.

“I have to do this the only way I know how,” Namjoon said. “I don’t take any pleasure in it, but if the alternative is risking you, I won’t let it happen.”

Despite the pull at his chest, Seokjin threw legs to the side and stood a little wobbly. He rushed out a thank you when Namjoon helped steady him. Then he was folding his arms around Namjoon’s shoulders like they belonged there and hugging their bodies together.

“I understand,” he told Namjoon, mumbling the acknowledgment in his ear. “But please, I’m begging you. Don’t let Jungkook be the one to end his life when the time comes. Don’t let it be Jungkook. Please.”

Namjoon’s hands were big and warm at Seokjin’s waist, the heat from his fingers cutting through the pajamas he wore.

Namjoon told him, “Jungkook already asked to be the one to do it. He’s taking this more seriously than you think. He realizes now how close he came to losing you, and how it could happen again if we don’t do this now.”

“Please,” Seokjin begged. “Please, don’t let him. He thinks he wants it, maybe he does, but I don’t know if his soul is ready.”

Namjoon hugged him tighter, probably as tightly as he dared. “Okay. I’ll have Yoongi take care of it, or I’ll do it myself. After we have all the information we need.”

Uncertain, Seokjin pulled back to ask, “A confession?”

Namjoon guided him back to the bed and corrected, “I’d rather know why. Bangtan is a family. We don’t let people like this in. Members are vetted. That means at one time, this person was trusted. This person was trusted with the knowledge of who you are and what you mean to me. So, what changed? Why the sudden disloyalty? I have to know. And I also need to know if this is an isolated incident. Here at the hospital you’re the safest and protected you can be. But whenever they let you out, we’ll be taking chances again. I have to minimize the risks as much as possible. You understand, right?”

“Tuesday.”

“Tuesday?”

Seokjin nodded. “They’re going to let me rest at home on Tuesday, provided I remain well until then.”

Namjoon looked almost violently opposed to the idea. “That’s in six days—almost a week. You can’t be ready to go home after six days. That’s ridiculous.”

“What’s ridiculous about it?” Seokjin asked, folding his legs in front of him.

Gently, Namjoon’s hands probed his sides. “Jungkook broke several of your ribs administering CPR, and that’s not even considering that your heart stopped.”
“I’ve had it stop before,” Seokjin said calmly. “And I know how to watch for the warning signs of anything catastrophic. The doctors have done what they can for me in that department, and now, believe it or not, I just need to rest. My ribs will heal on their own, too. When they’re sure my heart is stable, they’ll release me to rest at home. In six days.”

Gruffly, Namjoon said, “I don’t like it. You should be under the careful gaze of a doctor.”

Seokjin arched an eyebrow. “You do realize you’re talking to a doctor. I’m no cardiologist, but I’ve lived with this condition longer than most doctors have been practicing. I’ll be okay, Namjoon have faith. I can’t sit here in this hospital with Jimin guarding the door forever. I need to go home and rest so I can get back to the clinic.”

He felt so guilty about the clinic as well. They’d just been struck two successive blows to their lively hood in the form of losing a doctor, and losing their funding. The last thing they’d needed was for Seokjin to be out of commission for so long. Even after getting out of the hospital and resting at home, it would be weeks more before he could go back to his regular routine.

“Jimin won’t be anywhere near you unless absolutely necessary. I already chewed Suga out over leaving Jimin here with you overnight.”

Seokjin almost missed the comment completely. “I’m sorry, what?”

“Jimin,” Namjoon said with unexpected frustration. “I don’t want him anywhere near you for a while. I don’t know if I can trust him with you.”

“I’m confused,” Seokjin said honestly. “Jimin, after Yoongi, is practically your right-hand man. He does everything for you, and you never had a problem with us being alone together before. He’s driven me around on that motorcycle of his plenty of times.”

Namjoon snapped, “He’s never almost gotten you killed before, either.”

“Wait.” Seokjin snagged the sleeve of Namjoon’s shirt. “You can’t be blaming him for what happened.”

“How can I not?” Namjoon asked seriously. “I gave him one task. I said to watch after you in case there was trouble. I said not to crowd you, not to bother you, but also not to let you out of his sight. That was all he had to do. And what happened? This.”

The door the room cracked open and a friendly looking nurse that Seokjin was getting quite familiar with poked her head in. “Doctor Kim?”

“Nurse Lee,” Seokjin returned, watching the way she glanced almost nervously at Namjoon.

He gestured to Namjoon and said, “Don’t worry about this one. My boyfriend isn’t as scary as he looks.”

The nurse gave a quick bow and a friendlier smile, and even Namjoon looked happier at the title he’d been given. It made Seokjin wonder if he didn’t say it often enough that Namjoon was his boyfriend.

The nurse told him, “Doctor Bang just arrived. She wanted me to check if you were awake, and let you know she’s arrived. She’ll be up in about half an hour to look you over, speak with you a bit, and then you have a round of physical therapy scheduled at noon.”

“Thank you” Seokjin called to her. When she firmly shut his door Seokjin told Namjoon, “It looks
like today is the day you get to meet Minah.”

Namjoon asked, “She’s your primary cardiologist, right? The person responsible for keeping you alive.”

Seokjin nodded. “She’s really good at it, too.”

Namjoon sat in the chair by the bed. “Okay. I’m ready to meet the person I need to thank, then.”

“Namjoon,” Seokjin said seriously, not having forgotten about that they’d been speaking about previous. “You can’t blame Jimin. He wasn’t to blame. I gave him the slip.”

Namjoon argued, “That wouldn’t have happened if he had eyes on you.”

“He’s not a professional bodyguard,” Seokjin laughed. “He’s not skilled in dealing with someone who is purposely trying to get away from him. I’m to blame, Namjoon, not him. It’s not his fault and I don’t want you blaming him. He already blames himself, and that’s an unnecessary punishment enough.

Namjoon huffed, “I just don’t understand why he looked away. Even for one second.”

Seokjin told him, “We had a fight. He went outside to cool down. He’s human, Namjoon. Humans make mistakes.”

With a sigh, Namjoon’s shoulders sagged and Seokjin had been around him long enough to know that he’d won the argument.

“I just,” Namjoon eased out, a look of disbelief on his face as he stared at Seokjin, “I just don’t get it.” He emphasized the words so heavily Seokjin’s interest was piqued.

“Don’t get what?” Seokjin asked curiously.

Namjoon shook his head. “I don’t get how he could have looked away from you for even a second. You’re … I don’t know how anyone could look away from you period. For any reason.”

Seokjin reached behind him to pull at one of the pillows he’d slept on. He raised it without warning and chucked it at Namjoon, saying, “You’re absolutely greasy.”

Namjoon caught the pillow almost comically easily and asked, “Didn’t you tell me once that you liked greasy?” He set the pillow back on the bed gently.

Astonished, Seokjin asked, “How can you remember that? You’d been shot and were nearly in shock.”

Putting his hands behind his head in a smug way, Namjoon said, “I remember everything you say. You’re not the kind of person who says things he doesn’t mean. And if you haven’t noticed, I’m kind of crushing on you pretty hard. Take it how you will.”

Maybe, Seokjin considered, Jimin was right. Maybe Namjoon was already in love with him. It was possible.

And by the way Namjoon was looking at him, with the size of his smile, it was probable.

Seokjin just didn’t know how he hadn’t seen it before.
COULD I PLEASE GET THE ATTENTION OF ALL READERS!!!!! WE'RE GONNA TALK POLITICS FOR A SECOND, AND I KNOW THAT'S BORING, BUT IT'S IMPORTANT FOR THE FOLLOWING REASONS:

Without going into too much detail, I want to let you all know that there's a very, very good chance that there will not be a new chapter next week. I'm a US government employee, and as such, I have a lot of mandatory in-service, and out-service training. As of right now, my supervisor is telling me my division will not be shutting down while Washington argues over a spending budget, so I'm still going to be attending my out-service training in a couple of days. Out-service training is training that is held outside of the office, and in this case, I'll be required to spend about half a week away from my office in San Francisco, and at the training facility in Sacramento. So I very, very much doubt I'll have the proper time to get a new chapter ready to go on Sunday. Miracles could happen, but it seems more likely next week there won't be a chapter. I just wanted to give everyone a head's up. Though one small thing to note here is that if the Republicans and Democrats can't get a budget extension going shortly, additional parts of the government will start to shut down, probably my division will as well, and I'll be sitting at home with nothing to do but write and edit. I'll keep you all updated on this, for those that care, and thank you for taking the time to read all this!
Chapter Nineteen

Technically speaking, he was leaving the hospital a day sooner than Minah wanted. She’d been the one to set his discharge date, and had very vocally expressed her dislike of him leaving sooner than that. But truthfully Seokjin felt like he could recover just as well at home now, and some things were more important than squeezing in a last bit of rest before he went back to the clinic at least part time.


In the last few moments that Seokjin would spend in the hospital room that had been his home for a little over two weeks, he turned to look at his brother emerging from the bathroom.

Jungkook looked utterly uncomfortable in the formal black suit he was wearing, and all the evidence was there in his awkward stance and how he tugged on his cuffs.

A huge smile blossomed on Seokjin’s face. “You look handsome.”

Jungkook blushed. “I wasn’t sure it would fit from last year.”

Seokjin crossed the room to stand directly in front of him. He inspected the way the suit fell across his brother’s body and fitted to him, and observed, “Well, it actually does look like you grew a little. Again.”

Seokjin did his best to keep his voice even. Jungkook was still sprouting up like a weed, and it wouldn’t be long before Jungkook looked like the big brother, and Seokjin the little.

It was the right thing to say in the tense moment, however, because Jungkook relaxed a little, holding up his arms. “I noticed with the cuffs. I guess it’s time to buy a new suit.”

Seokjin laughed, “And the next one you buy will probably last for a while. With any luck, you’ll stop growing. If you don’t, you’ll end up as tall as Namjoon, in danger of bumping your head everywhere.”

“That’s not what I really want to hear,” Jungkook joked, looking up at Seokjin who was taller, though not necessarily bigger. Seokjin had always been on the thin side, even if he wasn’t exceptionally so, and Jungkook was starting to fill out. He’d been going to the gym for frequently, doing more cardio, and he was building muscle mass, even if it didn’t look that way from most of the clothing he wore.

“At least you’re not as short as Jimin,” Seokjin pointed out.

Jungkook rocked back on his feet. “Okay. Fair point.” Jungkook laughed a little and advised, “But don’t let him hear you talking about his height. He’s a little touchy on the subject. Something about being underestimated because of it.”

Taking a step back, Seokjin held out his arms and asked, “How about me?”

Jungkook gnawed a little on his bottom lip.

“That bad?”

“No!” Jungkook reached for him right away, already tackling the tie that was hanging loosely around Seokjin’s neck. “It’s just …”
“I’ve lost weight,” Seokjin supplied for him. His suit had been loose already when he’d worn it with Victoria to the hospital gala. Now it was practically hanging off him.

His brother stated firmly, “You need to eat some seriously fatty food.”

Jungkook’s fingers were working the material of the tie deftly as Seokjin protested, “Fatty foods are not the way for me to gain back any weight.”

“But think about it,” Jungkook insisted. “We could have pizza and ice cream and all those fatty, super unhealthy American foods that are really bad for you but taste amazing.”

“We?” Seokjin scoffed, knocking him gently on the arm. “You don’t need to gain any weight.”

Jungkook froze, his hands stilling immediately from where he’d almost finished Seokjin’s tie. “Are you kidding? You’re my big brother. I would never make you eat all alone. That would be terrible. What kind of brother do you think I am?”

Dryly, Seokjin commented, “That’s so generous of you.”

Jungkook smiled brightly. “I’m just that kind of a brother.”

Seokjin laughed loudly and gestured at his tie. “Finish, please. Our ride will be here any second.”

Jungkook’s eyes narrowed in concentration as he turned back to the tie. With a careful hint to his voice, Jungkook asked, “Are you okay with him coming?”

“Namjoon?” Seokjin asked. “He offered to drive us.”

“But he’ll be there with us,” Jungkook pointed out. “Is that okay with you?”

Seokjin caught Jungkook’s hands and returned, “Is that okay with you?”

After only a second’s hesitation, Jungkook nodded. “It is. I mean, I know I talk a lot about how Bangtan is my family now, and you’ve been cool accepting that. I really appreciate that. And I mean it. I don’t mind sharing this with any of them. I trust them with the past—our past.”

“Have you stopped to consider that maybe I’ve started to feel that way as well?”

Jungkook cracked a smile. “You’re like the best big brother ever Jin. Even if you nag me too much.”

“I wouldn’t nag you if you didn’t do things that made it necessary.”

“Anyway,” Jungkook said, sounding amused, “the truth is, you’re my brother, and nothing will ever replace blood. But Bangtan is family too. We watch out for each other, we care about each other, and we do whatever it takes to protect each other. So, for me, letting Rap Mon come anywhere near the gravesite right now, isn’t a big deal. I don’t know if mom would have liked him, but I would like to think so.”

“She wouldn’t approve of him,” Seokjin said in a certain voice. “She would have thought for certain what I did, at least in the beginning. She would have been worried Namjoon was corrupting you, or getting you into trouble. You know she and dad were like night and day, but on this they would have been a united front. Still, she would have come around eventually, and yes, I think she would have liked him. And no, I don’t have a problem with him being there. I wouldn’t have accepted his offer to drive us out there if I didn’t want to bring him near the grave.”

“There,” Jungkook said just after that. “Your tie is finished.”
Seokjin snuck a look in the mirror. His suit ill fit him, but there was nothing he could do about that. So at least his tie looked good.

“You really like him, don’t you?”

“Hm?” Seokjin smoothed down the front of his suit, wondering if he could maybe just have the seams taken in, instead of buying a new suit completely.

“Jin. Seokjin.”

At his full name, Seokjin turned to Jungkook. “What? Do I like who?”


“Absolutely,” Seokjin told him. “I really like him, he really likes me, and it’s serious. Is that something you can deal with?”

“Are you asking for my blessing?” Jungkook asked with a grin.

“You’re the little brother,” Seokjin pointed out, “so no, I’m not asking for your blessing or permission. But as you like to hear me say so often, you are the most important person in the world to me. Your opinion matters greatly, and there’s nothing you could say that I wouldn’t consider carefully. I want you to be okay with Namjoon and I dating. Also, I want to know you won’t do your best to antagonize him, terrify him, and just plain be horrible to him, in some misguided attempt to test if he’s good enough for me. No, don’t make that face, I know you. And I know what you’ve done to the people I’ve dated before in the past.”

Jungkook reached forward to brush invisible lint off Seokjin’s shoulder. “I’m okay with it,” he told Seokjin. “I think it’s about time you got a decent boyfriend, and Rap Mon is a good person. Sometimes I worry that you’ll date assholes who don’t appreciate you, or take you for granted. But that won’t happen with Rap Mon. And I think you’re going to be good for each other. So, no, I won’t be a terror to him. Just this once.”

“Okay,” Seokjin said with finally. “Let’s get going, then.”

With Seokjin’s hospital bag already sent ahead to his apartment, he was free to stroll from the hospital room without having to carry anything with him.

The moment he was through the door, Jungkook pulling ahead to chat about wanting to go to the nearby amusement part that would only be open for another week or so, Seokjin felt a serious weight lift from him. He was out of the hospital finally, almost fully recovered, and he’d dodged a bullet. He’d beaten the odds and it felt great. Sure, his ribs would need time to heal completely, but he was breathing almost normally, and everything else was manageable.

“You two look good,” Namjoon commented when he met them in front of the hospital in the loading zone. He had the car idling behind him and was leaning against it causally. More importantly Seokjin could see that he was dressed nicely in a pair of dress black slacks that had been pressed recently, and a collared, deep maroon colored shirt that was very flattering.

“You look good too,” Seokjin said, and couldn’t help sneaking a kiss to Namjoon’s cheek as the man opened the passenger side door for him.

Jungkook climbed skillfully in the back, rumpling his suit in the process.
“You’re up for the long drive?” Namjoon asked when he was behind the driver’s seat, taking them away from the hospital at a steady pace. He reached across the center consul to take Seokjin’s hand in his own. “We can make a stop somewhere first if you want.”

“Jungkook and I are fine,” Seokjin assured.

“Okay, just tell me,” Namjoon added.

From the backseat, Jungkook said, “Oh my god, I feel like I’m in the car with mom and dad. Are you two going to get handsy up there? Tell me if you are, because I’ll throw myself from the car if need be.”

With his seatbelt strapping him in and his ribs keeping him from turning too much, Seokjin made his voice carry in the car as he reminded sharply, “You don’t remember what it’s like to ride in a car with mom and dad, so cut the theatrics.”

Jungkook leaned back in his seat sulking. “I mean it about throwing myself from this car. Jin, I told you I was okay with you two dating, that doesn’t mean I want to see you make out or anything.”

Namjoon’s fingers deftly hit the child lock switch on the car’s control panel, and the smile on Seokjin’s face deepened, along with the urge to kiss Namjoon once more.

As the car rolled to a stop at a red light, Namjoon turned to Seokjin to ask, “Is this what it’s going to be like when we have a child who can’t sit still in the car for more than five minutes?”

“No way,” Seokjin said promptly, his fingers twining with Namjoon’s. “Our child will be much better behaved than Jungkook.”

Jungkook huffed and Namjoon chuckled loudly.

It was a long two-hour drive to get to the cemetery, but Seokjin was pleasantly surprised to find that the three of them got along quite well. They could talk about all sorts of topics, keep each other easily entertained, and even when they had disagreements, they were friendly enough in nature.

“Here we are,” Namjoon said soon enough, parking the car near the front gates to the cemetery. He turned the car off and looked to Seokjin. “Tell me what you want me to do? Would you feel better if I walked you in there, or do you want me to stay in the car?”

Without warning Jungkook lunged up to hit the child safety lock in the front, and then threw open his door, nearly charging towards the front gate. Seokjin watched him go in silence, almost holding his breath until his brother disappeared from sight completely.

“He’s upset,” Namjoon stated.

Seokjin shook his head. “I don’t know. I can never tell when it comes to this. But I can’t have made the situation better by having him miss the actual date of the memorial.”

Namjoon reached across the car at once to tug Seokjin into a slightly uncomfortable, but completely authentic hug. “That wasn’t your fault. You were in the hospital and there was no way you could have gone. Jungkook could have gone without you.”

“No, he couldn’t have,” Seokjin said, and it was the absolutely truth. “I couldn’t have gone without him, either.” The bigger mystery was if their father had gone alone, or not at all.

“He’ll be okay,” Namjoon mumbled, then kissed Seokjin gently. “You both will be. I don’t know
any two stronger people, and trust me, I know a lot of strong people.”

It was cold in the car, and the weather was overcast, but kissing Namjoon helped.

“I wonder what goes through his mind every year when we come,” Seokjin mused out. “He doesn’t even remember our mother, and I don’t think he remembers our sister, either. He’s never said as much, but I’m certain.”

Seokjin often wondered if Jungkook came with him every year out of some kind of misguided obligation.

“You’ve never asked,” Namjoon started, and Seokjin could tell where the conversation was going immediately.

“I was so young when it happened,” Seokjin said quickly, cutting him off and looking instinctively for Jungkook again. “I was just a kid and I’d only recently been diagnosed. Jungkook was barely out of his toddler years, and our older sister was thirteen. I was having heart palpitations the night it happened. I had those once in a while when I was younger, nothing like it is now, but that night I knew something bad was going on. I told my mom and she insisted on taking me to the hospital. My dad didn’t want her to.”

Namjoon’s eyes blinked widely. “What? Why not?”

“It was late,” Seokjin said with a sad smile, still recalling the night as if it were only a day gone by. “There was a pretty bad thunder storm going on outside, it was raining, and Jungkook was pretty sick. It was just the flu, but he was taking it badly, he was a little, little kid, and he wanted mom with him around the clock.”

“But you said what you have is hereditary,” Namjoon interjected.

Seokjin nodded. “Mom knew what I was experiencing. She went through it herself. So, she said that she had to be there with me, in case they had to sedate me and try to shock my heart back into a proper rhythm. Dad wanted to be the one to take me, but mom was really firm. My sister wanted to come too. She’d been there with me for almost every medical procedure, she didn’t have school the next day, and my sister was really my dad’s princess. She got what she wanted, and he never said no to her. So, she went with us, with me and my mother, and Jungkook and dad stayed behind.”

Namjoon rubbed his back slowly. “Was it a car accident?”

“Sort of,” Seokjin said with a flinch even he hasn’t seen coming. Then he posed to Namjoon, “Do you know why I don’t like guns?”

Namjoon shook his head.

“There was a man,” Seokjin said, leaning his forehead against the cold window next to him. “He tried to force my mom out of the car at a red light. Maybe he saw the expensive car and thought a woman with two kids would be an easy target. All I know is, I was scared and in pain in the back seat, and my mom was a gentle, soft woman, but she wasn’t going to let that man take the car or endanger her children for anything. It didn’t matter to her that he was waving a gun at her, threatening to shoot her. She knew if she gave an inch, he could kill us all without a second thought.”

He remembered the look of defiance and courage on his mother’s face. But Seokjin remembered just as clearly his own terror at the gun, and the deep voice that had told his mother unequivocally that she would be shot if she didn’t comply—if she didn’t get out of the car.
He’d been young and impressionable when it happened, and all he’d been able to see was the gun. All he’d been able to picture was the death of his mother.

And it was the same gun he saw each and every time Jimin flashed his own. Or anyone else, for that matter.

Voice shaking, Seokjin said, “It was raining really bad that night. We stopped at a pretty deserted spot, and visibility was low. A car hit us from behind.”

“Damn,” Namjoon hissed out.

Seokjin squeezed his eyes shut. “My mom didn’t have her seat belt on, she’d taken it off in a panic when the man tried to carjack us, in case she had to fight him for the car, I think. And my sister … most of the blunt impact was towards her side of the car. I survived because I was small, because I ended up half in the footwell to the backseat, and probably mostly because of luck.”

Namjoon’s fingers stilled at the back of Seokjin’s neck, and were a presence of comfort. “I’m so sorry you had to go through that.”

“I blamed myself,” Seokjin said, turning to Namjoon with tears in his eyes. “How could I not?”

“You were a kid,” Namjoon said, shaking his head. He wiped at Seokjin’s tears with his thumbs as they spilled over and down his cheeks. “And your condition was never your fault to begin with. You can’t blame yourself for that night, and I bet you anything Jungkook doesn’t.”

“No,” Seokjin said, his mouth pulling up a little. “Your right. I’ve never seen it on his face that he blames me. I’ve never heard him say it, and we’ve both been to plenty of counseling. There’s never been a hint of it. But my father does. He did when it happened, and now, over ten years later, he still does.”

“I think,” Namjoon snorted out, “we’ve already established that your father is a bit of an asshole.”

“I wish I could say I blamed him.”

Once more Namjoon tugged Seokjin into a hug, though it was much firmer the second time around.

“No kid in that situation is responsible for their family member’s deaths,” Namjoon said sternly, kissing Seokjin’s temple. “And no parent should ever blame their child for something that is far beyond their control.”

Seokjin finished wiping at his own tears, sniffled a little, and then gave a brave face. “Thank you, Namjoon.” He put his hand on the door. “Thank you for listening.”

“I will always be here for you,” Namjoon said seriously. “I’ll always be someone who listens to you, or someone you can just vent to. Never doubt that.”

The ache in Seokjin’s chest at Namjoon’s words wasn’t anything bad, and it took him a second to realize what it was instead. The fondness and attraction he felt to Namjoon was quickly evolving into something more.

“Now,” Namjoon said, clearing his throat. “Do you want me to stay here, or go with you?”

Seokjin popped open his door and ignored the chill of the wind. “If you don’t mind, I know this is something Jungkook and I need to do for ourselves. Can we meet you back here in twenty minutes?”
Namjoon turned the key slightly in the ignition to click the radio on. He leaned back in his seat with a pleasant smile. “Don’t rush, Jin. You and Jungkook take all the time in the world.” A surprisingly stern look overtook Namjoon’s face. “But keep an eye on your brother, okay? At least until you get back to me.”

“Huh?” The wind pushed at the door but Seokjin kept it steady. “Why would you say that?”

Namjoon shook his head and gave a reassuring grin. “I’ll explain to you a little later. I promise.”

Seokjin pulled himself from the car with a frown.

But then there wasn’t much time to think on the subject and Seokjin was hurrying to catch up with Jungkook.

Their father’s position in the government, and his wealth, had bought their mother and sister a large memorial space in which to pay their respects. A groundskeeper kept the area well maintained, and though he’d sent the flowers off weeks ago, Seokjin could see the last bits of them hanging on despite the cold weather.

Jungkook was already inside the slightly exposed, but mostly protected area, kneeling in front of the plaque that was embossed with their family member’s names. He’d lit several small candles and the smell of lavender was flooding the space as his his head was bowed in either thought or prayer.

Seokjin lowered himself down next to his brother, bowing his own head.

He leaned forward a little, bracing his hands on the ground, and silently, as always, begged for forgiveness.

Warmth engulfed his hand and Seokjin looked over to see Jungkook’s hand resting on his own.

“I always feel so bad,” Jungkook said quietly, his voice echoing in the enclosed area. “Because I can’t feel the things that you do, when I come here.”

Seokjin let his shoulder bump against Jungkook’s and rest there. “I’m sorry,” he offered, “you lost our mom when you were so young. You deserved to have her longer than that.”

They’d deserved to grow up with a father who wasn’t broken by the death of his beloved wife. And they should have had a sister who’d been so pretty and petite that she was sure to have the ballet future she’d already been fast-tracked for. They deserved a full and complete family, and not the crumbs they barely had at the moment.

In a surprising way, Jungkook said, “I remember her smile.”

“It was a good smile,” Seokjin agreed. “But she had a better laugh.”

Jungkook looked away in thought, then asked, “Kind of like yours, right? But higher pitched? And kind of like the bubbles in cider?”

“Exactly,” Seokjin said in an excited way.

The quiet words they exchanged after that seemed to come easier, and Seokjin thought it was odd that after all the delay and trauma that had occurred before they could visit, it was clearly their most successful trip to date.

After about half an hour, most of which had passed much faster than expected, Jungkook took a
deep breath and said, “It’s better like this?”

“Like what?” Seokjin asked.

“Without dad,” Jungkook clarified. “Without the anxiety and pressure and unhappiness he brings.”

“I’m not any happier with him than you are,” Seokjin said, finally raising himself to his feet. He reached out to brush his fingers along the symbols of his mother and sister’s names. “But if we don’t come with him, it means he has to come alone. And I don’t think even we can be that cruel, no matter how mad we are.”

Jungkook made a disagreeing face, but Seokjin knew ultimately, he’d agree.

“Want to head back now?” Jungkook asked shortly after that, his own fingers joining Seokjin’s.

“Okay,” Seokjin said, nodding.

“That was quick,” Namjoon said the second they were back in the car. “I was going to take a nap, actually.”

Jungkook shrugged as Seokjin said, “It’s not how long we spend there that matters. It’s about what we feel we accomplished, and the respect we paid.”

Namjoon chuckled and said, “Jungkook, how about you call up V or Suga. I’m sure one of them would be happy to have a drink with you. But one, okay? We’ve got things to do tomorrow, and I need you sober and not hung over. Fair enough, Jin?”

Jungkook made a praying motion with his hands and Seokjin didn’t think he could properly say no.

They ended up dropping Jungkook off first, and then Namjoon was taking them back to his place instead of Seokjin’s home.

“I was thinking you could rest here tonight,” Namjoon said. He hesitated with his finger on the keypad to the building and turned back to Seokjin. “If I’m overstepping, tell me.”

Seokjin hugged him from the back. “Open the door, okay?”

Changing out of his suit was a slow-going thing, his body still achy even if there wasn’t any serious pain, but when he was finally able to step into the pair of sweatpants and oversized comfortable shirt Namjoon lent him, he felt endlessly better.

“I made coffee,” Namjoon called from the living room.

“Thank you,” Seokjin said, shuffling his socked feet across Namjoon’s well-kept hardwood floors. He accepted a warm mug from Namjoon, sugar but no cream already added, and Seokjin hadn’t known that Namjoon knew how he preferred his coffee.

On the sofa Seokjin, who could sometimes feel claustrophobic when pressed in close by others, enjoyed the motion of Namjoon wrapping around him, adding a woolen blanket to keep them extra
warm from the November weather managing to sneak its way into the apartment.

Namjoon’s fingers petted their way through Seokjin’s hair and the television played a news report quietly. With a sugary coffee drink in hand, sipping it and feeling the warmth all the way through his body, Seokjin could honestly say he was the happiest he’d been in a while.

“We’ll order in something for dinner later tonight,” Namjoon said quietly, tilting Seokjin’s head up for a kiss. The pads of his fingers brushed delicately across Seokjin’s cheekbones. “But I want to tell you something first. It’s something I’ve known since you were recovering in the hospital, but I held back because I didn’t want to risk your recovery in any way.”

 Seriously, Seokjin asked, “What kind of thing do you need to say?”

“It’s about the shooting,” Namjoon said, his lips soft and careful as he kissed Seokjin again. “I finally worked it all out. All the pieces of the puzzle.”

Seokjin’s own fingers clutched at the soft shirt Namjoon had swapped in for the stiff dress shirt he’d been wearing earlier.

“Then you know why? Why I was targeted?”

Namjoon sighed and put his forehead against Seokjin’s. “It wasn’t you.”

“Huh?”

“Do not get worked up about this,” Namjoon warned, “but it wasn’t you who was the target. I know we all thought it was, no one was willing to dispute that, and all the evidence pointed to this being a move against me through you. But it wasn’t. It wasn’t about me or you at all. It was about Jungkook.”

Seokjin reeled back a little, dislodging the blanket. “I don’t understand. Jungkook?”

Namjoon ran a frustrated hand through his hair. “You just have really bad timing, it seems. The shooting that occurred in that convenience store … Jungkook was the target, not you. You just happened to stroll in right before it happened, but the bastards who did this were gunning for your brother, and not you.”

Seokjin demanded right away, “But why? Jungkook is Bangtan. He’s one of you. Why would one of Bangtan attack another? That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Four weeks ago,” Namjoon explained calmly, even if the look on his face was anything but that, “Jungkook was officially welcomed into the fold. He’d been … a foot soldier for us, for lack of a better term. He’d been an associate, but not a full member. Four weeks ago, myself and Suga and Hoseok and the others who comprise Bangtan’s inner circle, we cast our votes. We not only made Jungkook a full member of Bangtan, but we promoted him all the way to the top.”

Seokjin gave a silent nod. He knew it wasn’t normal that his brother, who’d been working with Bangtan for such a short amount of time, would have so much of their trust and loyalty. But then Jungkook wasn’t very normal. Seokjin’s brother had always been extraordinary when he put his mind to it.

“What does that have to do with any of this?”

More of Namjoon’s weight pressed against Seokjin almost in a weary way.
“Jungkook was the target because some asshole who I thought I vetted, someone in my own organization that I thought could be trusted, went crazy with jealousy.”

Slowly, Seokjin asked, “Someone shot at my brother because they were … jealous of him?”

“Because,” Namjoon admitted slowly, “this person thought that Jungkook had been unfairly promoted. The shooting happened because he thought Jungkook was doing something to influence his promotion, and needed to be eliminated for the sake of Bangtan’s future.”

Seokjin closed his eyes. “Jungkook knows?”

“Yes,” Namjoon responded.

“Did this person work alone?” Seokjin, filled with fear. “I mean to ask, is it safe for Jungkook to be out there with you? Are there others who share this ridiculous sentiment?”

“I think,” Namjoon said evenly and with a careful tone, “that it was just the one person and his accomplice. I’ve been very dedicated in rooting out anyone else, and I’ve come up with nothing. I’m keeping an extra eye on Jungkook for a while now, just to be safe, but I think this was a one-time incident. And I handled it.”

Namjoon brought the blanket back up to cover Seokjin’s shoulders.

“I won’t,” he promised, kissing Seokjin’s cheek, then his jaw, and boldly dropping his mouth to the crook of Seokjin’s neck, “let anything happen to him again. Do you trust me?”

He could feel Namjoon’s body shaking slightly with shame, and guilt, and all the things that Namjoon shouldn’t have been filled with.

Seokjin hooked an arm around Namjoon’s neck and pulled him closer. “I trust you’ll do whatever you can.”

Namjoon, Seokjin reminded himself, was not god. He was a powerful person, with eyes and ears everywhere, but there were limits to what he could do and who he could save. But yes, Seokjin did trust him to watch after Jungkook as much as he could. Seokjin trusted Namjoon with Jungkook’s life, and there weren’t many people he could say that about.

“I swear it,” Namjoon breathed out, and tension began to slowly deflate from the space between them.

And Seokjin let that take as long as necessary. He let Namjoon take as long as he needed.

At the first tease of Namjoon’s teeth at the sensitive skin of his neck, Seokjin tapped him sharply on the back and laughed out, “You’re a bad boy.”

“Nah,” Namjoon protested, sucking a kiss into the spot he’d bitten at. “You just make me so weak with my self-control.”

An even bigger laugh was coming from Seokjin the moment he was carefully but powerfully maneuvered from his spot onto the sofa, to straddle Namjoon’s thighs.

Seokjin braced his hands on Namjoon’s broad shoulders, and breathing a bit more heavily asked in an excited way, “Just what do you think you’re doing?”

Their almost identical coffee mugs were on the coffee table atop coasters, growing cold, but they
“Do you,” Namjoon asked, flushed and wide eyed, “have any idea the kinds of things you do to me?”

Seokjin squeezed Namjoon’s shoulders as he rocked himself forward a bit. The sexual tension in the room had exploded in mere seconds, and Namjoon was looking better and better with each passing second.

“You’re so goddamn beautiful,” Namjoon sighed out. He pulled Seokjin closer to him, increasing the friction and heat between them. Namjoon’s hands held tight to Seokjin’s hips. “But it’s not just your face that’s beautiful. It’s everything. Your heart and your soul are … I don’t even know how to explain it, but you’re so pure and so kind. People like you don’t come around all that often, Jin. I … I love you.”

“You love me,” Seokjin breathed out.

Namjoon gave a scared nod.

“We haven’t known each other long,” Seokjin said, leaning more towards Namjoon in a less sexual way. “Are you sure it’s not just lust you’re confusing for love?”

With Seokjin’s move to Namjoon’s lap, the blanket had fallen to the side. That gave Namjoon ample opportunity to ogle Seokjin as he said, “Oh, trust me, I’m feeling lust just fine. I know the difference between that and the love I feel for you.”

Seokjin pulled at his oversized shirt. He loved that it was Namjoon’s, and had been on his body before and smelled like him despite the detergent it had been washed with. But it wasn’t exactly flattering. “Oh, yes, I’m so sexy like this.”

Namjoon’s hands slid up from Seokjin’s waist to his chest. “You are so sexy to me. Jin, sexy isn’t what you’re wearing. Sexy is how you carry yourself.”

“I just got out of the hospital. I’m carrying myself like an invalid.”

Namjoon’s hands moved even higher, to cradle the back of Seokjin’s head and angle him properly for a deep kiss. His tongue slipped against Seokjin’s, like the smallest of tastes, and it wasn’t something Seokjin had expected. It was nice, though.

And then he was telling Seokjin, “You carry yourself like a survivor. You’re sexy because you’re strong and resilient and even though you did just suffer heart failure, you’re still focused on helping others and protecting others, and there is nothing sexier in the world than that.”

“But love?” Seokjin questioned.

The next time Namjoon kissed him there was even more tongue, a little awkward at first, but proficient and sensual just after that. Namjoon’s tongue snuck its way into Seokjin’s mouth like a thief in the night, and stunned him briefly with its pressure and insistence.

Groaning with pleasure, Seokjin melted once more against Namjoon, his arms going back around the man’s neck for stability.

“I love you,” Namjoon snuck out, dragging up Seokjin’s shirt to get at more of his skin. “I love you so much it probably scares me more than it scares you.”
With a shudder, Seokjin felt Namjoon hard against him, and the message was clear.

“Namjoon,” Seokjin gasped out, flush with pleasure. “Namjoon … I…”

Namjoon’s mouth, working its way back to Seokjin’s neck again, was marring it with what would be an impressively embarrassing amount of marks for the next day.

“You don’t have to say it back,” Namjoon said against Seokjin’s skin. “I don’t expect you do.”

“Namjoon.”

Gathering up the last bit of sanity that he had left, Seokjin managed to pull away from Namjoon’s very, very talented mouth.

“Wait,” he said, trembling as Namjoon hitched him up against his hardness. “Wait.” He tapped Namjoon’s insistently on his shoulder.

Namjoon’s eyes locked on Seokjin’s. “Do you want to stop? I’m sorry. We can stop.” He looked upset with himself just after that. “What the hell was I thinking. You just got out of the hospital, and after that you went to see your family’s memorial site. I’m so damn inconsiderate.”

“Stop,” Seokjin commanded, kissing Namjoon’s mouth to quiet him. “I want to say this before I ask you something very important.”

Namjoon gave a quiet nod.

“Namjoon,” Seokjin said, needing to get the words out. “I don’t think I love you right now. I don’t think I can say the words back and be honest. What I feel for you is real and intense, and it goes way beyond like. I just don’t think it’s love yet. If you could be patient, if you were willing to wait, I think I’m going to get there sooner, rather than later. But I won’t lie to you right now and say it’s love. I won’t hurt you or this relationship by basing any part of it on a lie.”

“Did I mention,” Namjoon said with a cheesy kind of grin, “that I really love how honest and truthful you are. Jin, I don’t expect you to say it back. When you say it, I want you to mean it. So, don’t worry about saying it right now.”

Feeling much better, Seokjin sighed in relief. “Thanks.”

“Now,” Namjoon said, giving Seokjin a wink. “What was that important thing you needed to ask me?”

It was a little difficult for Seokjin to get his balance on the sofa, with Namjoon underneath him, but he managed to get a good amount of leverage and pressed his own firmness against Namjoon’s thigh.

He asked, “Do you have condoms and lube?”

Namjoon stiffened, his fingers that had been stroking the smooth skin of Seokjin’s back froze, and in a shaky voice, he asked, “Did your doctor clear you for sex? Is it safe for you?”

Seokjin smiled into a lazy kiss, his mouth working against Namjoon’s with great familiarity.

“Namjoon,” he mumbled, rotating his hips for the best contact possible. “I wouldn’t have asked you if you had condoms and lube if I didn’t plan on using them.”

Namjoon was strong. Seokjin knew that from watching the way he moved, and from seeing his
muscles first hand. But he certainly wasn’t expecting Namjoon to shoulder all over his weight in one swift move and lift him without any hesitation or issue.

“Namjoon!”

“Don’t worry,” Namjoon laughed, hugging Seokjin’s body tightly to his own. “I’ve got you, I won’t drop you.”

Seokjin, surprised solely by Namjoon’s strength, wrapped his arms and legs around the tall man and tucked in close. “I would have been more than happy to walk to the bedroom.”

Namjoon maneuvered them easily towards the bedroom, his long legs bringing them to the to the room in record time.

Seokjin gave a laugh as he bounced slightly on the bed he was set on.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Namjoon asked, crawling his way up the bed to hover over Seokjin. “Because I really want this.” He punctuated his words with a quick peck to Seokjin’s mouth. “But I only want it if you do, too. I won’t be mad if you tell me no right now. If you don’t want to, we’ll go right back out to the living room, curl up on that sofa and watch a drama or something. No pressure. Or we can go out for dinner, or call up Jungkook, or—”

Deliberately Seokjin pulled the drawstring to the sweatpants cinched around Namjoon’s waist. He arched an eyebrow as he revealed more than enough space for him to slip a hand into. “I said, get the condoms and lube.”

Namjoon gave a severe army salute and sat up completely. “Give me five seconds.”

Seokjin raised himself up to his elbows and flexed a content grin. ‘Get to it, then. You’re wasting precious time we could be having sex.”

Namjoon nearly tripped over himself on his way to the adjacent dresser, cutting the corner arc to the room a bit too sharply, and thudding against the wall.

“Sorry! Hurrying!” Namjoon called over his shoulder, smiling brighter than the sun.

Yes, Seokjin knew without hesitation, he was more than ready. But only because it was Namjoon. And that was a good feeling.
Chapter Twenty

Going back to work felt great. Seokjin had always taken pleasure in a full workday, squeezing in as much as humanly possible. And though he wasn’t able to return to his full sixteen hours work days, pulling a solid ten was a good enough start.

“You know,” Yunho said, leaning against the doorway to where Seokjin was rifling around a drawer in his office desk for something. “I think I’ve heard our patients gush about how happy they are to have you back at least a couple dozen times today. Even the ones that aren’t even being treated by you, have to pop in and say hi.”

Pleasure flushed through Seokjin. “I’m happy to see them, too.”

Most quietly, Yunho asked, “We’re very glad to have you back, we all know you’re the star attraction here.”

“That’s not true,” Seokjin said without missing a beat. “Everyone here pulls their weight fairly. And if anything, you and Jonghyun and Victoria have been pulling more than your own weight. I’m sorry about being out so long.”

Yunho scoffed. “You are not standing here, apologizing for what happened to you, right? You were in the wrong place at the wrong time, and your heart condition is manageable, but can still be unpredictable depending on the circumstances. No one here did anything but talk, that entire time you were gone, about how much we missed you and wanted you to come back.”

They’d come to see him in the hospital, too. Seokjin had expected a couple of get-well cards, and a phone call from time to time. He hadn’t expected the entire staff to come by at different times, bringing with them flowers and balloons and warm smiles. Everyone from the nurses, to the receptionists, to the other doctors had made multiple visits, and Seokjin had felt so cared for and loved it was almost overwhelming.

“But,” Yunho continued, “no matter how anxious you are to get back to work, you don’t have to push yourself.”

Seokjin paused. “I’m not pushing myself. Yunho. I promise you. I’m not pushing myself because I don’t want to have a relapse of any kind. I’m working less than what I usually do for the next couple of weeks, and when I need to take a break, I sit down. You don’t have to worry.”

Yunho made a soft sound.

“Really.”

“Okay,” Yunho finally accepted. “Do you have a minute for me right now?”

From his desk Seokjin nodded and retrieved a plain but labeled folder. “Sure. God, I can’t wait until we get a chance to go fully digital here and get rid of all these physical files.”

Casually Yunho crossed his arm and said, “I know you and Jonghyun are still sore at me for leaving.”

“Maybe Jonghyun is,” Seokjin said, “but I’m not going to waste my time being upset at you for taking the best chance you’ll ever get at fulfilling your dreams. I want you to be happy, you’re my friend. And the clinic will survive without you.”
They’d survive, it seemed, with their funding intact. Almost a full month ago Seokjin’s father had threatened to pull strings and have their government funding revoked. Seokjin had known he was more than capable of it, and more than willing. But since then there’d only been silence. Seokjin had received one phone call from his father while in the hospital, of which was short, to the point, and they didn’t talk about anything but Seokjin’s health.

There’d been no mention now for what seemed like an eternity, of his father going through with his threat. Jungkook wasn’t going to enroll in any college classes, neither of them were speaking to their father, and nothing had come in the mail warning the clinic about their funding.

The unease was uncomfortable, but with the change from October to November, the funding had still been there.

There was always the possibility that Seokjin’s father had been bluffing. Or maybe Jungkook blowing up on their father had gotten the point across. Though the most likely possibility was that Seokjin’s scare had changed his father’s mind. Seokjin needed less stress in his life now, and to avoid more complications, not have more. Removing the threat of the clinic losing its funding, certainly reduced some stress.

“And,” Yunho said, “I know you both balked at the idea of me finding my replacement.”

Seokjin sighed and admitted, “You’re leaving in seven weeks, and truthfully I don’t have any idea who we’re going to get to fill your position when that happens. Victoria won’t be around long after that either, and there’ll be a gap between the two of you leaving, and Hongbin coming in.”

He didn’t know how he and Jonghyun were going to handle things. They’d have to cut their hours for certain, place more responsibilities on the nurses, and stretch everyone as far as possible.

Seokjin was not looking forward to it at all.

“I know a couple of doctors,” Yunho said, holding up a hand before Seokjin could protest. “I know, I know, but hear me out. These doctors, they’re worth looking at, and they’re interested in the positions.”

Head tilting, Seokjin asked, “Two?”

Yunho looked a little nervous. “They’re a package deal--sisters. They go together or they don’t go at all.”

Seokjin rested his hip against his desk, set the folder aside and said, “Okay, tell me about them.”

Yunho smiled. “Jessica and Krystal. Krystal was in plastics before this, which, I know, makes her a weird fit for the clinic, but she’s an excellent doctor. And her sister, Jessica, used to run her ER with an iron fist. Jessica is the best trauma surgeon I know, able to work well under any condition, and thrives in environments where she’s able to try new, inventive things to save her patients.”

“And they’re interested in the clinic?”

Yunho admitted, “They’re both … a little hard headed. Independent. Neither of them takes well to authority, and some doctors have had issues working with them before in the past. I won’t lie about that. Word is that Krystal can be a little high maintenance, and Jessica can be stubborn. But in terms of their medical skills, I wouldn’t suggest them if I didn’t think they could work well here.”

Suspiciously, Seokjin’s eyes narrowed. “That still doesn’t tell me why two high profile doctors would be interested in the slightest in coming to work at a clinic that serves our community.”
“Ah …”

“Yunho?”

Yunho winced a little and said, “Remember when I told you they’re a package deal? One doesn’t go without the other?”

Seokjin nodded. “We can stand to take on two doctors right now. It’s in our budget for the new year. That won’t be a problem.”

“Well,” Yunho eased out, “it’s apparently Jessica who caused the both of them to up and leave the previous positions they had. Jessica wanted to be innovative like I said. She wanted to be creative and think on her feet and save patients however possible. She didn’t want to follow the rules if it meant losing someone. So, she resigned. And Krystal went with her. Though there seems to be some unease with Krystal as well. I don’t think she wants to be stuck in that box of plastics anymore. She wants to be taken a little more seriously by the medical community.”

Plainly, Seokjin asked, “And they want to come here? To this clinic? You’re absolutely sure?”

“I asked them,” Yunho said with a nod. “And I made sure that I was clear about the status of the clinic at the moment. I said the clinic is going to grow, it’s going to get better, and it’s going to be something magnificent, but right now, it’s a work in progress. If they’re agreeing to this, they’re going to spend the next year with limited resources.”

For someone who’d previously been in plastics, and an ER doctor, the clinic couldn’t be that appealing.

“Jessica said she wanted a challenge.”

“And Krystal?” Seokjin asked.

Yunho offered, “Krystal said she could take a year to figure out if she wants to stay in plastics or not. At the very least, she said she’d like to hone her general skills even further, and help out a good cause.”

Seokjin wondered, “They’ll come with decent recommendations?” The clinic was essentially his child. He couldn’t let just anyone in, and one wrong lawsuit would ruin them forever.

“Seokjin,” Yunho said, “they’re good. Other people might find it difficult to work with them at times, but they’re very, very good. And more importantly, they’d be good to our patients.”

And the clinic really, really needed supplementary doctors for when Yunho and Victoria left. The clinic needed doctors with experience, and wide ranges of skills, and who were anxious to help.

Uncertain, Yunho asked, “Should I arrange for an interview?”

“Do it,” Seokjin said, standing, and picking up his file. “I’ll run this by Jonghyun. You handle Victoria.”

“Divide and conquer,” Yunho agreed. “And you take Jonghyun who’s far more volatile than he lets people think.”

Yunho turned to leave and Seokjin called after him teasingly, “Coward!”

“I just don’t want to get punched by him again,” Yunho protested.
Seokjin was still laughing as he headed towards the records room to shelve the file.

Jonghyun, as expected, was resistant to the idea when he found out it came from Yunho.

“Stop being petty,” Seokjin told him as he waited for his next patient to get situated in the examination room. They were huddled together in the hallway, and upon further reflection, it wasn’t the best place in the world to discuss things. “And don’t be angry.”

“Don’t be angry,” Jonghyun scoffed. “I think you know exactly how much I’ve sacrificed for this clinic. I have given this clinic everything I can, and Key has given a lot, too. And you expect me not to be petty and angry about someone doing anything to endanger the longevity of this clinic?”

Seokjin sighed. “Then be angry, that’s okay, just don’t be petty. We need doctors. We need doctors quickly, too. And it doesn’t matter where these doctors come from, even if it’s from Yunho’s recommendation. It matters that they come skilled, willing, and able to see our vision. We can both interview them, okay? And we’ll only take them on if we’re both in agreement. Does that sound fair?”

Jonghyun gave him a long-suffering kind of look. “All right.”

“Good man,” Seokjin said, patting his arm as he passed by.

“Good doctor,” Jonghyun corrected. “Not such a good man.”

Seokjin waved him off.

The rest of the morning brought more well wishes and happy comments from patients, an easy flow of unrushed patients, and steady routine.

During lunch Seokjin holed up in his office and called Namjoon, eager to hear his voice and talk about even the most mundane things.

“I miss you,” Namjoon’s said, and before he realized what he was doing, Seokjin was whispering it back as fiercely as he could.

They’d seen each other earlier that morning, Seokjin waking up sore in the best way, and Namjoon wrapping around him like an octopus with a vow never to let ago. They’d changed the sheets on the bed together, enjoyed coffee, and kissed so much that Seokjin’s lips had gotten puffy and red.

It had been perfect, especially in a world that had so little perfection in it.

And Seokjin almost regretted telling Namjoon he wasn’t in love with him yet. Because there’d been nothing but love in his chest for Namjoon who’d stroked his hair back from his forehead gingerly, told him how precious he was, and all but looked at him with stars in his eyes.

“Want to meet up on Friday?” Namjoon asked across the phone line. “It’s Suga’s birthday and we’re having a party. You’re invited, of course.”

“Sure,” Seokjin replied right away. “Do you need me to bring anything?”

“Nah,” Namjoon insisted. “Granny’s shutting down the noodle shop for a couple of hours. Suga said all he wanted was to have some of her cooking for his birthday, so she’s taking care of the food. You just show up. I’ll have Jungkook come pick you up.”

“Doctor Kim?”
Seokjin looked up to see Lizzy’s face in his doorway.

“Yes?” he asked, eyes cutting to the clock to realize that he’d gone over his lunch break. “Sorry. I’m coming now.”

Lizzy gave a small smile and nod. “Your one-thirty is already in examination room three.” She flashed him a thumbs up and ducked out.

“Namjoon,” Seokjin said, standing quickly, and gathering his things up. “I have to go. A patient is waiting for me. I’ll call you later to talk more about the birthday party. I want to bring a gift.”

Namjoon offered his own goodbye, and then Seokjin was darting to meet his patient.

“Sorry I’m late,” Seokjin said with a smile as he entered the room and shut the door firmly behind him. “I usually try not to make my patients wait.”

There was a boy seated up on the examination table, his feet swinging easily, and an almost uninterested look on his face.

“Can you tell me exactly what’s bothering you?” Seokjin asked, flipping through the chart he’d slipped off the slot on the back of the door. “The nurse marked down … chronic pain in your head? Lingering headaches?”

As if prompted, the boy who couldn’t be more than eighteen or nineteen, lifted a hand to his head and said, “I get this pain all the time.” He had an airy, light voice, one that betrayed him and made him seem even younger.

“All over,” the boy said. “But you know, I think I wouldn’t have these constant headaches if I weren’t so irritated all the time.”

Seokjin frowned. “You think the causation of your headaches might be stress? An irritation?”

“Oh,” the boy said in his light voice, “I know it’s from being irritated all the time.”

“And why’s that?”

Seokjin felt the shift in the room as much as saw it the moment the boy reached behind him to withdraw an impressively sized handgun from the back of his pants.

“You …” Seokjin’s mouth went dry.

The boy insisted, “Everyone recognizes Hoya. Everyone knows who Dongwoo is. But what about me? What about Sungjong?” He turned the gun on Seokjin more squarely. “I do just as much as them. Sometimes I do more. I deserve to have people to know who I am, don’t I?”

Seokjin gave a silent nod.

Gun in his right hand, Sungjong, who was the youngest member of Infinite’s core group, raised his left hand back to his head. “The headaches are because of the constant irritation. They have to be. All day and all night, my head pounds.”

Clutching at his courage, Seokjin said, “If you have any kind of pain, as a doctor, it’s my job to try and help you. Can I examine you?”

“You,” Sungjong snapped, and suddenly the gun that had drifted was back being pointed at Seokjin. “You didn’t know who I was either. I had to tell you. You’re no better than anyone else.”

Seokjin didn’t know for a second what was going on. Had Infinite found out about his ties to Bangtan? Had they sent Sungjong to end him? Or just to scare him? Or something in-between?

Plus, Sungjong was acting increasingly agitated and irrational. The gun was a problem, but the bigger concern was the behavior of the person holding it. He didn’t seem the least bit stable. He honestly seemed as if there was something psychologically wrong with him.

All of Infinite seemed at least a little unhinged, but Sungjong was currently taking the cake.

“Focus,” Seokjin heard Sungjong tell himself in a hushed whisper. “You have to focus. You’re here for a reason.”

Unable to help himself, Seokjin stood slowly and asked, “Did Infinite send you here?”

It was his worst nightmare, Infinite discovering the relationship Seokjin had with Namjoon. They’d destroy him in a second, in order to get at Namjoon, and they wouldn’t hesitate, either.

The phone in Sungjong’s pocket ran shrilly and he wasted no time in setting the gun down to the side and taking up his phone instead. “Yeah?”

Seokjin eyed the handgun. He’d never touched one. He couldn’t ever be like Jungkook who carried one around for protection. And even in emergencies, he wasn’t sure he’d have the fortitude to fire off a single shot. Sungjong’s gun was in sight, but the idea of reaching for it was nauseating.

Especially in the clinic. How could he expose his patients to that kind of danger?

“I know!” Sungjong said to whoever he was talking to on the phone. “I’m getting it done now! You never trust me. Are you checking up on me? Did Woohyun tell you to? I can handle one doctor, okay? I’ll get this done and be back in less than half an hour.”

Seokjin wondered if he could knock the gun to the side, out of the way and out of harm, and then maybe physically get at Sungjong. Sungjong was relatively thin, though he was over average height, and Seokjin thought maybe he could take him. Though he did have to consider his ribs. Some of them were on their way to being healed, but the more severe breaks were still fragile and sensitive.


The phone call ended and Sungjong picked the gun back up.

“I need you to come with me,” he said to Seokjin. “We’re going on a little field trip.”

Seokjin wondered, to the Han river to dump his body?

“No,” Sungjong said, tone more severe. “There’s a car waiting out front. We’re expected in twenty minutes, and I’m not getting my ass kicked because we’re late.”

Sungjong shuffled towards the door and gestured at Seokjin to follow.

“I…” Seokjin stuttered. Going anywhere with Sungjong was probably a death sentence. It was, no matter what, a very bad idea. “I can’t just leave. I have patients to see all today, and things that need to be submitted for testing later on. I can’t just--”

“You can,” Sungjong interrupted, “start walking now, to that car that I said was waiting out front for
us. And if you don’t, I’ll call that pretty nurse of yours in here, and shoot her in the face.”

Lizzy.

Now Sungjong was threatening Lizzy. That wasn’t something he could allow to happen.

“And,” Sungjong continued, “if you make any attempt to signal to anyone that something is wrong, or fight me in any way, I’ll open fire in that waiting room. I saw lots of kids and elderly. Even a pregnant woman. It would be terrible if anything happened to them because you weren’t cooperative.”

Shakily Seokjin braced a hand on the nearby wall and asked, “How can you say that? How can you be so cruel to innocent people?”

Sungjong tucked the gun into the back waistband of his pants and covered it with his shirt. “I do what I have to, just like any other person on this planet. So start walking. And don’t for a second think that I won’t follow through with each and everything I’ve said to you.”

Desperation balled itself into a pit of acceptance in Seokjin’s stomach and he gave a faint nod. “Okay. I understand.”

Sungjong pulled open the door. “So like I said. Walk.”

Walking through the clinic felt like walking to the gallows. Nurses and patients stopped to wave and greet him, all of them with smiling faces, and Seokjin grinned back out of sheer willpower alone. But it felt fake and hollow and his balance was such that he worried he’d tip over, or his legs would give out.

But there was a show to put on as Sungjong bumped and prodded him along, and Seokjin understood the consequences for failing to be convincing.

He was almost to the front door, almost to the point of no return, when he saw Yunho coming through the door, the last bits of his lunch in a white bag hanging from his fingers.

“Seokjin?” Yunho asked, clearly not expecting to see him. “Where are you going?”

Seokjin felt Sungjong’s impossibly large presence behind him and redirected the conversation, asking, “A little late getting back from lunch?”

Yunho looked at him sheepishly. “Sorry. Traffic was bad. I’ll stay a little longer to make up for it.” Then he frowned and asked again, “You’re going out?”

“Yeah,” Seokjin said in his best joking way. “I’m running out for something. It’s important.”

“For what?” Yunho asked, suspicion creeping up on his face. His eyes flickered from Seokjin to Sungjong.

After a brief moment of panic, Seokjin offered to him, “This is my cousin, Sungjong. I’m going to see my father, actually, and he’s coming with me for moral support. I have to know once and for all if he’s going to play the will he/won’t he funding game with this clinic or not.”

Miraculously, Yunho seemed to buy the lie. “That would be good,” he offered, sliding past Seokjin. “I’ll see you later, okay? Good luck.”

“Keep walking,” Sungjong said as they emerged from the clinic into the whipping wind outside. It
had rained earlier that morning, which had cut down on the number of people who’d come to the clinic, and also left everything drenched outside.

Just as Sungjong had said, there was a dark blue sedan waiting for them outside, an indiscriminate looking man at the driver’s seat.

In desperation Seokjin gave one last look to the clinic, and then allowed himself to be herded into the back of the car.

Sungjong climbed in after him, slammed the door and commanded, “Get us back now.”

There was terrible, awkward silence in the car. Seokjin tried not to let his fear show for a second, and Sungjong rubbed almost fiercely at his forehead in a distracted way.

Seokjin wondered if he was suffering from something that psychiatric services might be better equipped to deal with.

Well, Seokjin realized a few minutes later, they weren’t taking him to the Han river to dump his body for having any sort of association with Bangtan. But they were going into the deepest part of Infinite’s territory, to the streets that Seokjin made a point to steer clear of, where every kid on the corner was a little punk who had eyes for Infinite.

And a few minutes after that, Seokjin saw the large, almost comically out of place home they were coming up on. Massive in size and impressive in how intimidating it looked from the outside, Seokjin understood that it was Infinite’s stronghold. He was going directly into the lion’s den for whatever reason.

They parked in an underground garage and Seokjin stepped slowly out of the car when he saw Hoya waiting, flanked by half a dozen darkly dressed men.

“I told you I could handle it,” Sungjong said snappishly at Hoya.

Seokjin flinched when Hoya hit him particularly hard over the back of the head, remarking, “You disrespectful punk.”

“Hey!” Sungjong hollered, going red in the face. Seokjin watched almost dumbfounded as Sungjong wasted no time launching himself at Hoya, taking them both off balance and staggering backwards. It was serious and not at all playful.

Before the situation could disintegrated into complete chaos another voice cut through the air, demanding roughly, “What the fuck do you think you’re doing?”

Seokjin’s head jerked over to the sound of the voice and felt his nerves double.

Woohyun.

Sungjong was … clearly unstable. And Hoya was the kind of muscle who wasn’t afraid to, or maybe even enjoyed, getting his hands dirty. But Woohyun? Woohyun, who was Sunggyu’s right-hand man, who issued more orders than anyone else next to Sunggyu, and who was masochistic and mean just for the sake of being so, was always the real threat.

“He--” Sungjong started.

“I don’t,” Woohyun hissed out, feet echoing on the cold floor of the large garage as he strolled forward, “give a fuck. Stop making fools of yourselves.” His eyes jerked to Seokjin and nodded.
“This is the doctor?”

Seokjin gave a shaky nod. “I don’t know why I’m here but—”

Woohyun turned around without a second look. “Hoya, bring him up.”

Flanked on either side by several men who could probably kill him within a second or two, Seokjin moved from the underground garage to the third floor of the huge home via an elevator. He probably should have been paying attention, trying to work out an escape plan that would be necessary if he wanted to live, but he was truthfully too scared to do anything but walk.

Though it was probably not the worst-case scenario he was imagining in his mind if they were taking him up in terms of the house, and not down to some torture chamber.

Woohyun stopped their group in front of an impressively sized set of double doors. They held for a minute, and then Woohyun turned to him, eyes raking over Seokjin’s form.

Hoya asked in a voice that said he was as confused as Seokjin felt, “What’s the hold up?”

Woohyun turned his full attention to Seokjin and brought a hand up to cup his face. It was nothing, absolutely nothing, like the way that Namjoon touched him. And as Woohyun’s fingers traced over his features, a calculating look on his face, Seokjin began to feel more and more ill.

“I want you to know,” Woohyun said finally, “that I think you’re very, very pretty. For a boy, you’re about as pretty as they come.”

Seokjin tried to hold his ground.

“And,” Woohyun continued, “I happen to appreciate pretty things.”

Sungjong made an irritated sound and ambled off down the hall.

“I don’t …” Seokjin tried.

“I’m going to let you in this room in a second,” Woohyun said, leaning forward toward him in a far too intimate way. He was so close to Seokjin they were nearly on top of each other, Woohyun’s mouth a ghost of a breath away from being on Seokjin’s. “And if you do anything wrong, I’m going to make you substantially less pretty.”

“Wrong?” Seokjin nearly gasped out.

“If you fuck up,” Woohyun warned, “I’m going to have my men hold you down, and I’ll peel the skin from your face off bit by bit, until you’re not so pretty.”

Woohyun was psychotic, Seokjin determined. Forget Sungjong, Woohyun was the craziest of the bunch.

Seokjin expected more threats … threats that were absolutely possible of being true and probably were. But instead Woohyun gestured behind him for Hoya to open the doors.

“That,” Woohyun added almost gleefully, “will be where I start with you. I’ll break your fingers afterwards, one by one, and destroy your dexterity. I’ll pop them out, rip them off, and shove them down your throat.”

Seokjin paled and place a hand against the nearby wall for stability.
“Okay,” Woohyun said in almost a cheerful way. “Now that we’re clear, here we go.”

The doors were attached to a lavish, warm bedroom, a fire burning in the corner strongly. It was the kind of bedroom that Seokjin had never thought people really needed, the kind that his own father had had, and that Seokjin had made a point not to have.

But the more pressing detail of the room was the figure sleeping in an almost unnaturally still way on the bed.

Kim Sunggyu.

For the first time, Seokjin was face to face with Sunggyu, the leader of Infinite.

Seokjin usually, when he had business with Infinite, and that was something he tried to minimize, dealt with Hoya or Dongwoo. They were the two upper level members of Infinite who were most prominent on the streets, and tended to handle those aspects.

Seokjin had certainly seen Kim Sunggyu before, but he hadn’t spoken directly to him. And he’d never seen him like this before, either.

The doctor in him, which made him more curious than he probably should have been in the situation, had him trailing forward to get a better look at Sunggyu.

“He’s sick,” Seokjin said right away, and he hadn’t needed to be a doctor to determine that.

Woohyun gave a sarcastic clap. “Hoya, you brought me a genius.”

Hoya snorted. “No, I just brought you the best. I brought you the one I said we should have gotten in the first place.”

With obvious perspiration on his forehead, and eyes clenched shut in something that looked to be discomfort, Seokjin reached a hand out to check Sunggyu’s temperature.

Woohyun’s hand whipped out to snatch Seokjin’s wrist away. “Remember,” he interjected with deadly intent, “what I said, pretty doctor. You hurt him in any way, and you’ll make my day a little more exciting.”

There was a hint of fear in Woohyun’s eyes and it took Seokjin a moment to recall that all the rumors said Woohyun and Sunggyu were lovers. It was completely possible that they were just best friends, or had a closer than normal working relationship. But from the way Woohyun was acting, and how he kept glancing worriedly at Sunggyu’s still form, Seokjin was willing to bet it was more than that.

“I need to examine him,” Seokjin said, pulling at his wrist in Woohyun’s grip with some boldness. He added, “And I’m a doctor. I’m morally forbidden from doing anything that would harm someone in need of medical assistance.”

“Fine,” Woohyun snapped out, and turned to clear out the room.

Seokjin took a careful seat on the edge of the bed and finally pressed the back of his hand against Sunggyu’s forehead.

It was immediately evident that he was running a high-grade fever, and his pulse was elevated too, when Seokjin checked it just after that.

“I can’t diagnose him,” Seokjin said, turning back to Woohyun, “without any kind of equipment or
tools.” When he spotted Woohyun speaking to Hoya at the far door, he realized the room was empty except for an additional guard standing at the other side of the bed. That man’s presence was insulting, as if Seokjin would ever harm a patient.

Woohyun nodded to Hoya, and from a nearby closet he retrieved a small, travel sized medical bag, and then a larger, more obtrusive looking case. Hoya set both down next to Seokjin and said, “Here.”

With a frown Seokjin examined the bag first. It was full of pristinely managed medical items, including a stethoscope and thermometer among other things. And in the larger cases there was everything from the items to start an IV, to syringes to draw blood. It was almost a miniature, portable doctor’s examination room.

“Where did this come from?” Seokjin asked, reaching to take Sunggyu’s temperature right away.

Hoya huffed you, “You weren’t the first doctor we brought here.”

Something uneasy settled in Seokjin as he heard Woohyun say, “We killed the first one.”

Seokjin startled. “What?”

“Nah,” Hoya denied, telling Woohyun, “I think he’s still alive. Technically. I can check later if you want.”

Seokjin stood, ignoring the beeping from the thermometer. “Why would you …”

Woohyun gave Seokjin a smile that made him only feel utterly terrified. Then he stated, “We brought a doctor here before you, five days ago. He said Sunggyu had a simple cold and that he’d get better in only a few days. That’s obviously not the case. So, we’re trying again on you now. And I have to say, Doctor Kim, I’m rooting for you. It’s such a pain in the ass to get a new doctor that we can all agree meets the qualifications. Do us all a favor and don’t get yourself killed.”

Slowly Seokjin turned back to Sunggyu who was breathing in a raspy way.

Woohyun’s words were absolutely clear.

Seokjin had to find out what was wrong with Sunggyu and treat him effectively. If he didn’t, it was almost certain they’d kill him. And they’d probably enjoy it, too.


Seokjin did his best to block out everyone else in the room, and took a second to clench his hands into fists, feeling the heavy thumps echoing in his chest, practically down to his feet.

Patience, he urged himself. And calm. He needed both, if he was going to survive. Any one of the other people in the room might kill him at a moment’s notice, but for the second, they needed him alive and in relative good health. He was safe for the moment, and if he played the situation right, he could stay that way for at least a little while longer.

And far be it for Seokjin to ever consider himself a damsel in distress, but he couldn’t help but feel in need of a desperate rescue.

Or any kind, for that matter, before he overstayed his welcome, or made a critical mistake.

“Get on with it,” Woohyun snapped. “Start.”
Still clinging to the idea that a rescue might come, despite how no one probably knew he was in danger, Seokjin started. There was nothing else he could do.
Chapter Twenty-One

Taking a strong, reassuring breath, Seokjin rallied himself to action, rolling up the sleeves on his shirt and turning to Woohyun to ask, “Who spends the most time with Sunggyu?”

Woohyun and Hoya looked between themselves, probably more surprised at his assertiveness than anything else.

But then Woohyun shrugged and asked, “Why? It’s probably me.”

Seokjin leaned back over Sunggyu to start his examination.

He could see immediately why the doctor who’d treated him previously had suspected a simple cold, or even the flu. Sunggyu had an elevated temperature, was clearly shivering despite his fever, and was much paler than any human looked when they were healthy.

“How long as he been like this?”

Woohyun crossed his arms and stepped nearer, thinking aloud, “He started complaining of a headache about three weeks ago. Then it was stiffness in his body about five or six days after that. At least that’s what he said.”

Carefully, Seokjin pulled open the collar of the pajama top Sunggyu wore and traced his fingers from Sunggyu’s collarbone up to the underside of his jaw. He felt for any abnormalities or swelling. If this were a simple cold it would have cleared up already, and at the very least if it were the flu, Sunggyu would be showing some signs of recovery.

“You didn’t think that was something to worry about?” Seokjin asked incredulously. Sunggyu was the head of Infinite. There was no way the gang could afford to risk his life.

Woohyun scoffed, but Seokjin could see a bit of fear in his eyes. “Sunggyu complains about a lot of things regarding his health. It’s practically a running joke with us, because he’s older than the rest of us. We didn’t think anything of it, until he started moving slower, and then he had a fever, and lost his appetite.”

Sitting on the edge of the bed, Seokjin leaned back with a frown. “I hate to tell you, but this looks like the flu.”

Woohyun stared at him.

Across the room, Hoya chuckled, then asked, “Should I go get Sungjong started on picking up another doctor?”

Woohyun leveled an accusing finger up at Seokjin. “They told me you were the best. They said you were better than Gyu’s personal doctor. And now you’re letting me down. I told you not to let me down.”

Before he could register what was happening, a blunt, impressively strong force slammed into Seokjin’s face. It sent him sprawling away from the bed and spinning out on the floor next to it. His hands caught the ground with a rough burn and his face was on fire.

He felt his heart clench up in his chest, and accompanying it was a stab of panic.
Not again. He couldn’t do it again.

He heard Woohyun say, “…nothing but let me down. It’s as if you don’t think I’m being serious. Hoya, does it seem like I’m not someone to be taken seriously?”

Miraculously, Seokjin felt his heart settle back into a normal pace and it seemed as if he’d caught a rare break.

Tasting the metallic tang of blood in his mouth, Seokjin brought a hand up to his bottom lip only to find it split and bleeding.

“--don’t fix him I will end you.”

A rough, harsh voice came from the bed and barked out, “Woohyun. What the hell are you doing?”

Woohyun spun back to the bed as Seokjin tried to make himself as small of a threat on the floor as possible. Woohyun sighed out, “Gyu.”

So Sunggyu was awake. Seokjin didn’t know if that was a good thing, or something very, very terrible.

In a childish way, Woohyun pointed an accusing finger at Seokjin and said, “This one is an idiot, just like the last.”

From the floor Seokjin could see just how disoriented Sunggyu was.

“I said,” Seokjin managed, sucking in an uneven breath, “that it looked like the flu. But I didn’t say that’s what I thought it was.”

Hoya gave a chuckle. “You should say what you mean.”

Sunggyu gave Woohyun a dark, watery look and said, “Stop fucking with the doctors you bring in here.”

His legs were wobbling a little, but Seokjin managed to get to his feet without any help or real weakness.

“I think a lot of serious illnesses disguise themselves as the flu,” Seokjin said, stepping cautiously towards the bed. “And just because it looks like the flu or a cold, doesn’t mean it is.”

“Get out,” Sunggyu said firmly and without any kind of warning to Woohyun.

Seokjin tried not to look pleased, reaching for his stethoscope in the nearby bag as Woohyun balked, “What? Sunggyu! I’m not leaving you here with him!”

Seokjin wiped at the last of the blood at his mouth and asked, “You brought me here to help him. Let me do that.”


Seokjin could see their fingers laced together, squeezing each other reassuringly. Seokjin supposed, for as ruthless and cruel as they could be, they did still love each other.

Woohyun spared only one scathing look to Seokjin before spinning and letting go of Sunggyu’s hand. He stopped to say something quiet to Hoya that Seokjin couldn’t hear, but it was likely a
Sunggyu said, “So you’re the doctor I hear so much about all the time.”

“And,” Seokjin offered back bravely, “you’re the gang leader who threatens my clinic from time to time.”

Sunggyu’s face was blank for a moment, making Seokjin fearful, but then he was laughing in a harsh way, something that turned into a deep cough.

It seemed, at least a little, like the tension in the room was broken, and for that Seokjin was thankful.

“Woohyun said you’ve had a headache for a while? And some stiffness?”

Sunggyu gave a dry swallow, shifting a little in the blankets that cocooned him, then clarified, “In my neck.”

Seokjin froze. “Did you say in your neck?”

Confused, Sunggyu nodded. “Sometimes my back, too.”

Seokjin felt a sliver of hope. “Can you tell me if you know of any recent rashes on your body? If not, can you give me permission to check?”

Sunggyu asked, “You want to take my clothes off?”

Hoya interjected, “Boss, don’t give Woohyun another reason to want to kill this guy.”

Seokjin ignored the both of them, his fingers already at the buttons to Sunggyu’s shirt. “I need to check for rashes or redness. I think we might be getting somewhere with your symptoms.” Seokjin looked to Hoya. “Help me sit him up and get his top off.”

With a little maneuvering, Seokjin had Sunggyu sitting up and leaning on Hoya. And Seokjin was looking at distinct and very discerning splotches of redness across Sunggyu’s back just second after that.

“I think,” Seokjin said bravely, “I know what this is.”

Hoya’s eyebrow raised in an impressed way. “Already?”

“Are you good,” Sunggyu commented in a wheezing way.

“Fever, aches, and headaches that could be associated with a cold, most importantly a stiffness and pain in the neck and back, and a visible rash on the body. I won’t know for certain until I administer a test, but this looks like meningitis.”

Hoya looked terrified. “Oh, fuck, that’s bad.”

Seokjin held out a hand urging caution. “It might not be as bad as you think. Some cases of meningitis will clear up on their own. Because it’s been so long since Sunggyu first started show symptoms, I doubt this will be a case of that. But it’s also something that Sunggyu hasn’t dissolved into fits of seizures. That means we have time to treat this, and Sunggyu can likely make a full recovery.”

Sunggyu gripped Seokjin’s hand with unexpected strength, demanding, “What is meningitis?”
Seokjin arranged the blankets back around Sunggyu and explained plainly, “It’s inflammation, which is never good, but it’s especially bad because meningitis is inflammation of the spinal cord membranes. Usually it’s caused by an infection, but it’s also pretty rare in general. That inflammation of the spinal cord is why you felt the stiffness from your neck all the way down your back—the span of your spinal cord. And as you might imagine, it’s a serious condition that often results in death if left untreated.”

Hoya broke in quickly, “But you can treat him? You can make him better.”

It was odd, truly, to see members of Infinite caring so openly for each other. Infinite felt radically different from Bangtan, who’s members were natural in the way they loved each other openly. But Seokjin could see that Infinite mattered to each other. At least in their own way.

“I need a hospital,” Seokjin said bluntly, and there was no getting around it. “The most definitive test to determine meningitis isn’t something that can be administered here. At the very least we can do it at my clinic, but not here. I’m serious.”

Sunggyu was quiet and still, maybe having fallen asleep.

But Hoya clearly spoke for the both of them by shaking his head and saying, “Absolutely not.”

Seokjin frowned. “Absolutely not?”

“It’s not safe,” Hoya pressed.

“Not safe?” Seokjin asked. “How was it not safe? We’re talking about his life here. Just because he isn’t having seizures and bleeding into his brain yet, doesn’t meant it won’t happen and soon. He’s three weeks in at this point, if you’re all to be believed. He’s fought it off on his own this long which says a lot about his chances of survival. But if it isn’t clearing up on its own, he needs antibiotics.”

Hoya huffed, “So just give him the antibiotics. You don’t need a hospital for that.”

Seokjin could have pulled at his hair. “I can’t even begin to give him antibiotics until I’m absolutely certain that this is meningitis. Meningitis is the most likely candidate here by a mile, but if I’m wrong, I could do more damage than good. I need Sunggyu moved to either a hospital or my clinic, so this test can be done.”

“And you can’t do it here?”

Seokjin shook his head. “No. I need--”

“What is it?”

Seokjin looked to Sunggyu, who was awake after all. “I’m sorry?”

“How will you test me?” Sunggyu asked with slit eyes.

Seokjin put his hands on his hips in a frustrated way. “It’s called a lumbar puncture and it isn’t going to be fun for you. Basically, I’ll take a long, thin needle and insert it into your spinal canal to collect a sample that I’ll check for bacteria.”

“Sounds shitty,” Hoya said quietly.

Seokjin nodded. “It’s not pleasant, and depending on how it goes, Sunggyu may need to remain in the hospital for treatment. I suggest, as the doctor you brought in here, to act immediately before this
progresses. He needs the test, he needs the treatment, and he needs a hospital. This is his life we’re
talking about. Don’t make a mistake with it.”

Seokjin wasn’t sure what he expected as a response. He reasoned there was a fair and equal chance
that they would go directly to the hospital, or that Hoya would continue to insist that the test be
administered in the bedroom and not take no for an answer.

He hadn’t anticipated being escorted out of the room almost immediately after that by a different
Infinite member, taken to a room a floor down, and locked inside.

It was ridiculous, he felt, standing at the center of the nicely furnished bedroom, that this had
happened. He was a doctor. He was supposed to be at his clinic, helping people. He wasn’t a damsel
in distress, ripe for a kidnapping. He shouldn’t have been taken against his will to Infinite’s
headquarters, and god only knew what would happen next.

When it became evident that they weren’t going to release him immediately, Seokjin made his way to
the attached door that led to the bathroom.

His face looked a mess.

His lower jaw was swollen, but more ridiculous was how fat his lip had gotten, with the skin split
and bits of dried blood still remaining. He definitely looked like he’d taken a shot to the face.

Seokjin washed his face slowly, cleaning his mouth and trying to make himself look a little more
presentable.

And then he went back into the bedroom to sit on the bed and wait.

Maybe he should have fought. Maybe he should have resisted. Maybe he’d walked right into his
own grave.

The worst part was, the absolute worst, was that no one would ever know what had happened to
him. It would be as if he’d gone out to meet his father and just disappeared along the way. Jungkook
wouldn’t know. Namjoon wouldn’t know. No one would have a clue it was Infinite.

Seokjin wasn’t the type to want revenge of any sort, but he didn’t want Infinite not to be held
accountable.

He mostly just wanted Namjoon and Jungkook not to have to worry and wonder and be scared
because of the unknown.

He never wanted people he loved to have to suffer.

People he loved.

He loved the both of them, and the suddenly crash of emotion that it wasn’t just Jungkook in his
heart anymore, made Seokjin churn with regret and longing. He wanted Namjoon so badly all of the
sudden it was embarrassing. He just wanted a chance to be able to honestly return the words that
Namjoon had said to him days before. In the end, he wanted Namjoon to know that Seokjin loved
him.

Seokjin waited for hours.

He paced the floor in an agitated way, tried to lift the far, opaque window that wouldn’t open several
times, and waited and waited.
It was starting to get dark when the door to the bedroom finally opened and Sungyeol, the same person who’d brought him to the room, gestured at him and said, “Come with me.”

They weren’t heading back to the bedroom. Seokjin noted instead of going up, they went down instead, and before long they were exiting into the underground garage where dozens of cars lined the walls.

“What are we doing here?”

Sungyeol ignored him, which Seokjin guessed was better than any kind of violent reaction, like Woohyun or Sungjong might have given.

There were tons of men cluttered around the garage, some of them talking to each other, but most of them standing tensely.

Something was happening.

“In,” Sungyeol gestured to a nearby car.

The backseat was empty when Seokjin climbed in, and Sungyeol came in after him, shutting the door firmly and gesturing for the driver to start the car.

“We’re going to Mercy West,” Sungyeol said finally when the car drove forward a bit, one more in front and one behind. “Sunggyu will meet us there. You’ll perform the test, administer the treatment, and you won’t say anything unnecessary to anyone.”

Seokjin looked at him a little flabbergasted, mouth hanging open. “Did you just … have you commandeered a hospital?”

Sungyeol snorted. “No. of course not.”

Probably even Infinite couldn’t take over a hospital. But they’d done something in order for everything to be happening, and it truly exposed how far their reach was.

A second later all three cars in their caravan were up on the road and moving at a steady pace.

“Sunggyu’s in one of the other cars?” Seokjin asked, turning to look at the car behind them. “You should have let me look him over once more before moving him.”

“Can you just be quiet?” Sungyeol asked, rubbing a hand across his forehead. “I have a headache.”

Seokjin looked at him for a moment, then stated, “I think your boss has meningitis. Meningitis, while relatively rare, is something that is spread between people who have extensive amounts of contract between them. And one of the first signs is a persistent headache.” The knowledge made Seokjin wonder if Sungjong was just crazy, or starting to show signs himself.

Sungyeol’s hand fell away and he looked frightened. “It’s contagious?”

“Easily transferable in close quarters,” Seokjin corrected. “You’ve spent a lot of time around Sunggyu, haven’t you?”

It was very unlikely Sungyeol had managed to contract meningitis from Sunggyu, if that was what he had, but after being forcefully taken from his clinic, hit, and locked in a room for hours, Seokjin was enjoying the conversation more than a bit.

“Maybe,” Sungyeol said nervously, “I should get tested.”
Seokjin smothered a laugh behind a hand, then asked, “Do you know what the standard test is?”

Sungyeol shook his head.

Holding his index fingers almost a foot and a half apart, Seokjin said, “I take a needle about this long, and insert it into your spinal cord to withdraw enough material for laboratory testing. It’s painful and incredibly uncomfortable, and there’s even a risk of paralyzing the patient with the procedure, though that happens very rarely.”

“Yeah,” Sungyeol eased out. “I think I can wai---”

He was cut off completely as the car in front of them was plowed into with a much larger, more devastating tow truck of some kind. Seokjin screamed instinctively, clutching at the seatbelt he wore even for simple trips in town, and felt their own car be clipped by the impact as well.

Glass shattered, something loud boomed, and then the car was spinning. Sungyeol was flung across the back seat, over Seokjin’s lap and then up into the front of the cab where he tumbled into the driver who had lost complete control of the car.

The car tipped precariously onto two wheels, Seokjin’s heart hammering in his chest, and then he heard the gunshots.

The car rocked over suddenly, sending them upsidedown, and Seokjin screamed again, terrified for his life.

The seatbelt kept him pinned to his seat, albeit roughly and in a way that cut a lot of oxygen off from his lungs, but he was alive. As he blinked in a hazy way around the inside of the crumpled car, he felt almost okay. He felt much better than anyone else in the car looked, even upside down and restrained into his seat.

“Get out,” he whispered fiercely to himself as he fumbled for the latch on the seatbelt. He jammed a foot up against he side of the car, reached down to the hood to brace himself for the fall, and said again, harshly, “Get out and run.”

If he wanted to live, he couldn’t waste time. He had to go, and he had to go right away.

Outside the pops, the gunshots, continued to grow like a crescendo of music, and Seokjin could see more clearly both the driver and Sungyeol still at the front of the car, a mess of tangled limbs and blood.

The moment his seatbelt was off, Seokjin tumbled down onto the hood of the car. His palms and knees hit harshly, but he couldn’t have cared less. He was alive. He was breathing. And he had a chance.

He threw himself towards the opposite door he’d been sitting next to, away from the street, and crashed out onto the sidewalk. It hadn’t been a hard thing to do, consider the window was smashed out and the door was practically torn off its hinges.

He whipped back around to see the first car had completely been smashed into a nearby wall. It was crumpled and there was no movement from it. The car that had been behind Seokjin’s own, bringing up the rear, was turned at an award angle and there were Infinite gang members braced against it in all sorts of ways, firing at both the tow truck and a black SUV that had arrived on the scene.

People on the street were screaming, running, and tripping over themselves, and Seokjin had never been in the middle of a war zone, but he felt like he was now.
There was an alleyway ahead of him, narrow and leading to who knew where, but Seokjin saw it at his way out.

He didn’t know what had happened to Sunggyu. And he didn’t care if running from Infinite was a bad idea. He just knew he had to get away from the guns, from the fighting, and from the people who were most certainly dead either in his car, or the one that had been hit.

Legs pumping furiously, and arms working to propel him, Seokjin ran. He ran like it was the last stretch in a marathon and the finish line was up ahead. He ran like he hadn’t in over a decade.

There as a buzzing behind him, getting louder, but his heartbeat was thundering in his ears and Seokjin ran on.

At the end of the alleyway he broke out onto the street one block over, huffing hard and certain that he wouldn’t be able to sprint again. But there wasn’t enough distance between himself and the chaos going on behind him. There wasn’t nearly enough distance to feel comfortable.

A motorbike screeched to a halt in front of Seokjin, forcing him to stop completely and gasp for air.

“Get on,” the driver said immediately.

The only motorcyclist that Seokjin knew, was Jimin, and this wasn’t Jimin.

“I’m not--”

“Get on!” the man snapped, revving his engine. “Unless you want Infinite to pick your ass up in about five seconds, and for all of that to be for nothing.”

Well, with that perspective, Seokjin didn’t think he had anything to lose.

“Get us out of here,” he requested, throwing a leg over the bike, and holding onto the male tightly.

They were zipping away without warning after that, cutting down narrow streets, taking corners too fast, and putting a real distance between themselves and Infinite.

Seokjin had no clue where they were by the time the driver of the motorcycle was pulling into an abandoned looking warehouse. But his heart had calmed significantly, and he was less scared even as the heavy door came down behind them in the well-lit area and several more boys were spotted standing around.

With weak legs Seokjin got off the bike and looked between the half dozen men in front of him.

The motorcyclist turned off his bike, popped off his helmet revealing a face Seokjin didn’t recognize, and asked one of the other men in the room, “Everything go okay? When I got the doctor out of there, things were getting pretty dicey.”

Seokjin looked immediately to him. “You know who I am?” Seokjin shook his head. “What’s going on?”

One of the men, looking a little friendlier than Seokjin would have expected, walked forward, and dipped his head in a sign of respect. “Doctor Kim? I’m Suho. These are my men.”

Seokjin frowned. Suho? He’d heard that name before. He just couldn’t place it.

Suho, sensing his confusion, supplied, “We’re Exo.”
"Exo," Seokjin echoed. Exo the gang.

Was every damn gang in South Korea being drawn to Seokjin?

"Okay," Seokjin breathed out deeply. "Not that I’m not extremely thankful for you getting me out of there, it was getting a little hard to tell if Infinite wanted to keep me or kill me, but I have no clue why a gang like Exo would want anything to do with me."

"Oh, we don’t," the motorcyclist said, sliding off his bike in a graceful way. "But your boyfriend runs a fair deal."

"Chanyeol," Suho snapped.

At the same time, Seokjin asked, "Nam–Rap Mon?" It always felt awkward using his Bangtan name. "He sent you?"

"We made a deal," Suho clarified. "And part of that deal was rescuing you."

The door to the warehouse slid open once more and all the members of Exo present tensed up visibly. Some of them even raised their guns.

Seokjin breathed out a huge sigh of relief.

"Jimin."

Jimin on his bike pulled in, the visor of his helmet up and a grin on his face that reached his eyes.

"There you are, princess," Jimin teased, already off his bike and making his way to Seokjin’s side. "And in one piece."

Suho looked a little affronted. "We told Rap Mon we’d get him, and without any significant injury. I think we fulfilled our part of the bargain. As expected."

With a great deal of respect on his face, Jimin gave a proper bow. "As anticipated. You’re right. Do you think your people were identified?"

Suho shook his head. "Unlikely. Plus, who would expect Exo to venture anywhere near Infinite?"

Exhaustedly, Seokjin said, "I’m really confused."

"Don’t worry," Jimin assured almost right away. "I’ll explain everything. All you need to know is Exo and Bangtan just got into business together, and it looks like we’re going to make a more than decent team."

Exo and Bangtan? Working together? Gangs teaming up wasn’t the most unheard of thing ever, but it was extremely unexpected.

One of the unnamed men belonging to Exo, asked loudly, "Who’s this guy to get to know these things? I thought he was just some doctor."

"No, Kyungsoo" Suho decided, eying Seokjin carefully. "He’s not just some doctor. Not to Bangtan."

"Come on," Jimin said, touching Seokjin on the arm gently. "We need to get out of here. Rap Mon wants me to get you to a safe house tonight, and we’ll take you back to the clinic tomorrow, if it’s safe."
Jimin accepted a spare helmet from Chanyeol for Seokjin and said, “We need to move fast. Infinite is going to be on high alert after this.”

Seokjin slid the helmet over his head and climbed on the bike behind Jimin. It was a little strange how comfortable the action had come to be, especially with how uncomfortable Seokjin had felt the first time, but it was a welcomed thing.

“Rap Mon will contact you soon,” Jimin offered Suho. “Once he’s verified this for himself.”

Seokjin had a feeling he was the ‘this’, but was too tired to take any offense.

“Of course,” Suho said casually. He gestured to another Exo member, and relayed, “Have him ask specifically for Kai for a direct line to me.”

“Will do,” Jimin said with a short nod. He lifted a hand to where Seokjin had wrapped his arms around him, and that seemed to be enough for him to kick up the stand on the bike and take off through the door that was opening for them.

“This is a safe house?” half an hour later when they pulled up to a quiet residence far outside of Bangtan and Infinite’s territory.

“Safe meaning it’s off the grid,” Jimin said, leading Seokjin inside. “It’s under an unrecognizable alias, and unless we were followed, no one will ever know to come here.”

With weariness, Seokjin sat heavily on the still plastic covered sofa in the living room. It looked as if the safe house had never been used, and the staleness in the air was unappealing.

“I should just go back to my apartment,” Seokjin said, sinking heavily against the sofa. “Back to the clinic. I don’t know how I’m going to explain any of this, but I should try.”

“Are you serious?” Jimin asked, going in and out of the rooms in a meticulous way that could only be his way of securing the premises. “Infinite snatches you right from your clinic and we’re supposed to just drop you off?” Jimin’s body locked up and he demanded almost harshly, “Did they want to know about Bangtan? Did you tell them anything?”

Seokjin reached down in sluggish way and pulled off his shoe. Then the chucked it at Jimin as hard as he could. “Jerk.”

“What!” Jimin demanded. He shuffled his way back to the sofa and sat next to Seokjin. Something much more kinder and understanding was on his face them. “I’m not thinking you’re weak or anything. I think you’ve proven yourself about a million times over that you’re not. But what Infinite wants … when they set out to make someone talk …”

“I know,” Seokjin said quietly.

Jemin added, “You could be the strongest person in the world, but torture is something very few people are prepared to withstand.”

“They didn’t torture me,” Seokjin said frankly.

Jimin’s hand rose, his fingers nearly brushing against Seokjin’s lip. He seemed to pull his hand back at the last second before contact occurred. “This doesn’t look like that.”

Seokjin’s mouth parted. “Oh. This.”
“Yeah,” Jimin said, concern on his face. “This. Someone hit you?”

Head cocking, Seokjin admitted, “Woohyun. He didn’t particularly like what I had to say. He made that known. Very physically."

Jimin continued to look the wound over, his gaze like fire on Seokjin’s skin.

“I should go back and put a bullet in his head for this.”

Seokjin had to laugh a little. “It’s not so bad. Trust me, I’ve had worse. Not a lot, but worse.”

Finally, Jimin’s fingers went down to his chest, tapping just as gently over his beating heart. “And this?”

“Just fine,” Seokjin assured. He toed off his other shoe. “And I don’t think you understand why they took me. It wasn’t about Bangtan at all.”

“No about Bangtan?” Jimin demanded.

“No.” Seokjin shook his head. “They took me because they needed a doctor and apparently my reputation is just a little too good.”

“A doctor for what?”

It felt like he knew confidential information. It felt like what he was going to tell Jimin was something that would change the game irrevocably.

At a near whisper, despite them being the only people in the room, Seokjin told him, “For Sunggyu. For Infinite’s leader.”

Jimin looked shell shocked. “He’s hurt?”

“Sick” Seokjin corrected. “I think he’s got meningitis. We were on the way to the hospital to perform the test, but I’m certain of it. And one of his direct subordinates might have it, too. Meningitis is something serious, Jimin, and you can’t just recover from it in a day or two. As far as I can tell, Woohyun’s been calling the shots with Sunggyu down, and Infinite is vulnerable because of that.”

“Holy shit,” Jimin remarked, a smile pulling at his mouth. “Everyone knows Woohyun is impulsive. He’s not stupid, but he also doesn’t think things through. Sunggyu’s the real brains of the operation. He’s got the long-term plans stored up in that head of his. But if he’s down …”

“They didn’t draw any conclusions about Bangtan and myself,” Seokjin said with absolute certainty. “I certainly think they would have said something if they had. No, I was there just as a doctor. But now I’m telling you, Infinite seems the weakest they’re going to be. And they might be this way for a while.”

Jimin scratched his fingers into his scalp, sighing as he admitted, “We thought they’d taken you. We thought they knew what you meant to us, and they’d gone after you to make a point. Rap Mon was losing his shit, Jungkook wanted to go right to Infinite’s front door, and the rest of us … it was bad.”

“I couldn’t warn anyone,” Seokjin said, almost as if it were an apology. “Sungjong was in my clinic. I thought he was a patient until he told me who he was and pointed his gun at me.”

“I hope,” Jimin snapped with an angry tone, “I get the chance to break his face for that.”

Seokjin waved him off. “I wasn’t scared for myself. Well, not completely. But I couldn’t tell anyone
or get help, because he threatened one of my nurses and the people in the waiting room. I couldn’t risk them, not to save myself.”

Jimin looked at him with wonderment.

Curious, Seokjin asked, “How did you know? How did you know that Infinite had made me leave the clinic and go with them?”

With a full smile, Jimin said, “You need to give that doctor of yours a raise.”

“How?”

“Some doctor you work with,” Jimin said, not completely sure. “I guess he saw you leave? He called your brother right away and said you were being personally escorted away by Infinite. He also said you have a horrible poker face and he knew you were lying to him right away.”

Yunho? It had to be him. He was the last person Seokjin had seen.

“Wait,” Seokjin eased out. “Yunho recognized Sungjong? As a member of infinite?”

Jimin nodded, and that was some kind of irony on a whole different scale, considering Sungjong had been practically unstable about his lack of recognition.

“He did,” Jimin confirmed. “And he was smart enough to call you brother.”

“But Yunho doesn’t know anything about Jungkook being in Bangtan.” Seokjin insisted. He didn’t think he needed to tell Jimin that he wouldn’t have told Yunho, no matter how much he trusted him.

Jimin shrugged. “In any case, he called Jungkook, and Rap Mon had to make a choice. We thought Infinite had you because of us. We thought they’d hurt you a lot before killing you, and we had to do something.”

“So, you teamed up with Exo?”

Shrugging off his coat, Jimin folded his legs underneath him and said, “Rap Mon says you have questions. You want to know things. I think the time for secrets is over. He’s going to come by tomorrow morning and I think he’ll tell you everything then. But what I can say is that Infinite and Bangtan are moving towards the point of no return, and we’re looking to build our numbers. Exo flies under the radar, they have a huge member base, and we need some extra strength. So, Rap Mon called up Suho and proposed an alliance.”

“Can we trust Exo?” Seokjin asked.

“More than you’d think,” Jimin answered. “And they really proved themselves, getting to you. We wouldn’t have been able to. You were deep inside Infinite’s home base, and there was no way a member of Bangtan was getting close enough to pull you out without getting killed, or getting you killed. But Exo? They’re practically unknown to Infinite. They waited until Infinite put you on the move, and then they saved you.”

Seokjin remembered the car crash and the fighting afterwards. “They nearly killed me,” Seokjin pointed out. “They hit the car in front of me. And then started a shootout on the streets.”

“Come on,” Jimin said, reaching a hand down for Seokjin. He pulled him up and tugged him towards a bedroom. “I talked to Suho personally the entire time. They knew you were in the second car, not the first. And while I don’t think Infinite was, Exo’s members were using blanks in their
guns, just in case one of them hit you on accident. Jin, this was the only way to get you back, and there wasn’t a lot of time for planning.”

Jimin took him to a bedroom and Seokjin realized how much he wanted to lay down and sleep for a while.

“Get some rest,” Jimin said, helping him onto the bed and covering him with a blanket. “I’ll stay here tonight. I’ll keep you safe just in case. And then Rap Mon, and I’m sure your brother, will come see you in the morning before we take you back to the clinic.”

Seokjin tucked an arm underneath his head as he watched Jimin walk to the door. “Jimin?”

“You need something?” Jimin asked, a hand on the door. “I’ll go turn the heater on. It’s cold in here.”

After a beat more, Seokjin offered, “Thank you. Even though Infinite wasn’t torturing me in the dungeon I’m sure they have somewhere, thank you for still coming for me.” It was something amazing and precious to know that if he was in trouble, he had people who’d stick their necks on the line for him.

“Always” Jimin said, swallowing visibly as he watched Seokjin. “Don’t ever doubt Bangtan won’t come for you. Don’t ever think I won’t.”

Seokjin gave a sleepy nod, and then feeling safe, was able to doze off.
Chapter Twenty-Two

By six in the morning, with the whole of Bantan’s most important members congregated in the safe house’s living room, things were already spectacularly chaotic.

“I’ve got coffee,” Taehyung announced, he and Hoseok being the last to arrive. “And Hopie has food.”

Seokjin wasn’t one to shy away from breakfast, but his stomach was still all twisted up from the previous day’s events, and mostly he was enjoying the comfortable sofa he was sitting on, Jungkook’s head in his lap in a sleepy way. Seokjin’s fingers drifted through his hair lazily as Namjoon paced in the background talking on his phone, and Jimin talked quietly but urgently to Yoongi.

“Coffee?” Jimin’s head popped up, veering away from Yoongi. He made grabby hands that made for an adorable sight. “I want coffee.”

Taehyung bypassed him completely with a devilish grin that was completely deliberate, and handed a tall cup to Seokjin, asking, “How do you like your coffee?”

Before he could reply, as Namjoon breezed by, he called out, “Sugar, no cream.”

Taehyung gave a satisfying wink to Seokjin as he handed over the sugar packets, and Hoseok was already pulling boxes of food from the plastic bags he’d been carrying.

Seokjin sipped his coffee appreciatively after the sugar was added, enjoying the strong sensation of the caffeine.

“Jin?” Hoseok asked, gesturing for him to take a box of food that did smell good, but he wasn’t particularly excited to eat. His stomach was too upset for food, he was sure.

Yoongi and Jimin’s conversation seemed to be over a moment later, and he headed directly for the sofa Seokjin was sitting on. When he was there, he reached over and slapped Jungkook on the thigh.

“Stop acting needy. Let your brother up so he can eat something.”

Jungkook gave a ferocious pout and didn’t move, if anything burrowing his way deeper into Seokjin’s lap. He wrapped his arms tightly around his brother and gave Yoongi a challenging look.

With a laugh, Seokjin patted his head. “Come on, Yoongi. Let him cling for a second.”

Because Seokjin understood the fear that Jungkook was likely still feeling. He knew what it was like to worry after a brother’s safety, and to not know what was going on or if everyone was okay.

Not to mention, no matter how old Jungkook got, he was always going to be Seokjin’s baby brother. And if Seokjin had a soft spot for anything, it was his brother.

Jimin turned towards him and asked, “Don’t you have to take your medication? You should probably take something with those pills.”

“Speaking of,” Hoseok cut in, pulling a small baggie from his pocket where a series of brightly colored pills were mixed together, “I hope I got everything you need. There was a lot more than I thought there’d be.”
Jungkook sat up at the mention so Seokjin could reach for both the baggie and carton of food.

He wasn’t supposed to take the pills on an empty stomach, so after swallowing them down he began to struggle his way through food that didn’t hold any sort of appeal to him.

“Okay,” Namjoon said when everyone was gathered together in the living room, and food was being consumed. He settled next to Seokjin, leaned forward to put his elbows on his knees, and added. “I think we’ve been presented with an unprecedented edge to this mess.”

“Wait, wait,” Seokjin cut in, unable to stand the secrets any longer. “Before this goes any further, I want answers. I want to know what’s going on with Infinite--what’s really going on--and I want to know why Bangtan is getting all mixed up with Exo.”

Namjoon’s eyes drifted from person to person before asking, “Are there any objections to telling Jin?”

Unexpectedly, it was Taehyung who was uncertain. “Maybe we shouldn’t?” He posed, but he looked so apologetic that Seokjin couldn’t be too upset. “I mean, we already consider Jin one of us, but there’s no going back if he gets in on the details.”

Seokjin cleared his throat. “I thought, yesterday, when Infinite had me forcibly removed from my clinic, that they’d linked me to Bangtan. I thought they were going to kill me, but not before torturing me for information. Now, not for a second do I think I’m a strong enough person to withstand something like that. But I was going to try. I was going to do everything in my power not to give Infinite anything about you all, so I think that means I deserve to know what’s really going on.”

“V?” Namjoon asked.


Namjoon requested, “Yoongi, get me your tablet. I’ve got to show him.”

While Seokjin ate slowly, Jungkook pressed into his side, Namjoon brought up a map of Seoul.

“This,” Namjoon said, sliding Seokjin a comforting smile, “is Bangtan’s territory. Roughly. There’s always a little give and pull on the lines.” He moved the map with his finger, making sure to point out various other gang areas that Seokjin knew about but rarely went to. Namjoon even showed him the areas further out from Seoul, where other gangs that Seokjin hadn’t known about operated.

“There’s the big six here,” Namjoon said, bringing the map back center. “And as you can see, there’s a significant space between Bangtan’s territory and Infinite’s.”

Seokjin nodded. There was a huge amount of space directly between them, acting as a buffer. “That’s the area that Big Bang has a grip on.” Everyone knew Big Bang, even if the gang was keeping a surprisingly low profile these days.

“Correct,” Yoongi interjected. “Unlike some of the other gangs, ours included, who make their presence known, Big Bang is almost absolute in how quiet they are. They’re one of the oldest gangs out there, and they’re past the point of inner fighting and nonsense. They’ve got a liaise-faire kind of attitude with their territory. People don’t make trouble there, and Big Bang don’t make trouble for others.”

Hoseok snorted. “People would have to be stupid beyond belief to make trouble with Big Bang.”

Taehyung gave a supportive nod, squeezing his hand, their fingers laced together.
“But,” Namjoon said, his knee bumping Seokjin’s, “things are changing.”


“Get ready for this,” Jungkook cautioned. “It’s about to blow your mind.”

Seokjin’s heart was nearly in his throat as Namjoon revealed, “Big Bang is … liquidating their grip on their territory.”

Liquidating? What the hell did that mean?

Yoongi gave him a pointed look. “Big Bang’s top five members, the guys who run that crew better than any gang has ever run an area, are calling it quits. Half of them are moving away, the other half are expected to just fade from the limelight, so to speak. The direct word from Big Bang’s top five is that they’re getting out of the game.”

Seokjin hadn’t thought that was possible. It was his understanding, and there was no evidence to the contrary, that once you were in, it was for life. You couldn’t simply change your mind and pull out. Gangs didn’t work that way, even the kind like Bangtan.

“And they can do that?”

“Maybe they think they have to,” Jimin threw in darkly. “Look at the older gangs that used to run Seoul. They started breaking apart in the worst way possible, and Shinhwa is the best example of this. When their gang collapsed in on themselves, it was very, very bad for all parties involved.”

Seokjin fought back any kind of indication that he knew what had happened to Jimin and his family —what Shinhwa had done to them.

Jimin pressed on definitively, “Gangs aren’t really meant to stand the test of time, and maybe it’s Big Bang’s time to go.”

Hoseok mumbled, “Maybe they just don’t want to do this anymore.”

Namjoon cleared his throat. “It doesn’t matter what Big Bang’s reason for dissolving their control on the area is. It matters that it’s happening.”

With a frown, Seokjin wondered, “Who gets all that territory?”

It dawned on him in a flash.

“Exactly,” Yoongi said at his expression. “That’s what Infinite and Bangtan have been fighting over. Big Bang’s territory is directly between us. That means one of us has to swallow the other. And Infinite has more reach. They’re stronger, with bigger numbers. When the timer reaches zero on the countdown, they’re going to make a move. There’s no doubt about it.”

“There’s a timer?” Seokjin questioned.

Jungkook told Seokjin, “December tenth. That’s the date Big Bang gave. They said by December tenth they’ll be pulling out completely, and they’ll wash their hands of this.”

“That’s four weeks away,” Yoongi said. “Four short weeks until unholy war essentially breaks out on the streets. And the police are crazy if they think they can contain this.”

“Is that why Bangtan is teaming up with Exo?” Seokjin wondered.
Namjoon nodded. “We need the extra power. We certainly need the extra manpower.”

Jimin reached for the tablet and moved the map over to the adjacent area from where Infinite bordered Big Bang. He explained, “This is Exo territory. Infinite has never really had a problem with Exo, to the best of our knowledge. They’re not friends, and they’re certainly not allies, but they don’t bother each other and rarely have conflicts. But Exo is just like any other gang in this city. They’re looking to expand, and they’re looking to gain power. We just offered them a great deal they couldn’t turn down.”

“That deal,” Namjoon said, “is simple. They align with us, and help us nose Infinite out on the tenth, and in return Bangtan gets Big Bang’s territory, and Exo gets all of Infinite’s previous holdings with one example.”

Seokjin let out a deep breath. “That’s…”

“ Ballsy,” Hoseok supplied. “We know. And potentially really, really catastrophic. But hey, it’s not like we have a lot of choices.”

“But wait,” Seokjin cut back in. “What’s the one example?”

Jungkook was smiling brightly as Namjoon said, “The exception being your clinic.”

“My clinic?” Seokjin asked, truly surprised.

“You’re on the edge here,” Jungkook said, tapping his finger on the tablet. “See? You’re right on the edge of Infinite’s hold on the area, and because you’re so close to Big Bang territory, that’s probably part of the reason Infinite didn’t give you so much shit in the beginning.”

Seokjin flicked him for his language.

Namjoon continued for Jungkook, “In a best-case scenario, with this working out how we’d like it to, we’d do a little geographical reorganizing to move your clinic into our territory.”

“Does Infinite have any idea any of this … backdooring is happening?” Seokjin inquired.

“Are you kidding?” Taehyung burst out. “They’re laying low right now, only getting into minor skirmishes with us because they think they have the advantage. They think they’ve got the upper hand and they’re just waiting to play it. If they knew we made a deal with Exo to nose them out, they’d be going to war with us right now. They’d risk Big Bang getting involved, especially with the Lovelyz to back them up.”

“Lovelyz?” Seokjin asked.

“They’re based out of Busan.” Yoongi took his tablet back. “They’re essentially Infinite’s sister gang. They’re also relatively young and inexperienced, but that hasn’t stopped them from building an impressive reputation.”

“Cute and sweet on the outside,” Hoseok said like he was letting the in on a huge secret, “and then they’ll take off their stilettos and stab you in the back with the heels. Seriously.”

Namjoon said sternly, “If Infinite catches wind of what Exo and Bangtan are attempting to do, they’ll call up the Lovelyz and the advantage will be gone in a second.”

Nursing the last bit of his coffee in his cup, and with the sun starting to inch further and further into the room, Seokjin had to ask the one thing that was on his mind.
Straightening up, he asked, “When you say that Exo and Bangtan plan to edge Infinite out … you mean you’re going to kill them, right?”

Seokjin watched the looks pass between Bangtan members and he had his answer before any of them could even say anything.

“All of them?”

“Are you sure,” Namjoon asked gently, turning more fully to him, “that you want to talk about this?”

Seokjin was not willfully ignorant or completely oblivious. It curdled his stomach to think of Namjoon ending someone’s life, but he knew a truth when it was presented to him. It was beyond likely that everyone in Bangtan had taken a life before, maybe even Jungkook, and before the end they’d do it countless more times.

It was something that Seokjin didn’t ask them about for a reason. Seokjin was a doctor. He felt his purpose in life was to save as many people as he could, and now he found himself associated with a group of people who took lives when the situation called for it. The whole matter seemed maddening at times, and frustrating at others.

But Seokjin loved Namjoon. He knew that now with all his heart. He loved Namjoon and he loved the boys of Bangtan. There was no cutting them from his life. There was no going back.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Seokjin said with sincerity, “but I know we have to. I have to understand what you’re going to do, so I can be on even ground with the rest of you.”

Namjoon reached for his hand and squeezed it supportively, saying, “Ideally, we’d let the lowest ranked men live. The likely don’t have much loyalty to Infinite outside of a paycheck, and they’re expendable fodder. But the higher ranked members of Infinite? There’s no question there.”

“And Sunggyu, right?” Seokjin pried. “You’ll kill him for certain?”

Softly, Namjoon told him, “Sunggyu would kill me in a second, if he had the opportunity. He would kill me, he would kill my grandparents, and he would kill you. No matter how much you despise the idea of knowing I’m going to take him out, you have to understand if I don’t, I’m putting you in danger. If I don’t take care of him, he’ll destroy everyone I love, before killing me.”

Seokjin gave a shaky nod.

“I don’t derive pleasure from killing,” Namjoon said, his deep voice rumbling. “But others do. Jin, Sunggyu would enjoy killing you as slowly as possible, and he’d probably make me watch.”

Quickly Jungkook said, “If he knew about Jin.”

“Please,” Jimin snorted out. “We all know it’s just a matter of time until someone sees something they’re not supposed to, or the wrong person opens their mouth. And when that happens there’s going to be just as big a target on Jin’s back as there is on all of ours. Maybe a bigger one.”

Reassuringly, Namjoon said, “That target gets significantly smaller if we deal with Infinite and have Exo as our allies.”

“Well,” Seokjin said, looking from Jimin to Namjoon, “You know I can’t agree with the actions that you take. You know I can’t condone the things you do. I just can’t.”

Namjoon gave a silent nod.
“But I trust you. I trust you to do only what you have to, and to not be cruel when you don’t have to be.”

Namjoon raised a hand to Seokjon’s face, and it wasn’t the first time he done it, his fingers trailing from Seokjon’s still swollen lip to his slightly discolored jaw. “Sometimes I think you have too much faith in me.”

Once more, Seokjin reminded, “Sunggyu didn’t do this to me. Woohyun did.”

Jimin piped up, “I already called dibs on that little bastard. Sorry.”

“But seriously,” Taehyung said to Seokjin with awe in his voice, “I can’t believe you got picked up by Infinite because you’re a really good doctor, and not because of us.”

“It’s true,” Seokjin insisted. “I’m confident he has meningitis, too. And while it’s impossible to determine at the moment if he’s given it to any of his subordinates, several of them were showing possible symptoms.”

Shaking his head in disbelief, Yoongi voiced, “This is the kind of lucky break that doesn’t come around all that often. We should act now. We should take advantage of this.”

Namjoon questioned, “You don’t want to wait until the tenth. You want to start an all-out war ahead of schedule.”

Yoongi shrugged. “Possibly. Think about it. The meeting on the tenth is just a formality. But what if we decide not to play by the rules? What if we make a move before the tenth, with the numbers on our side. Sure, we’ll get blacklisted by a lot of gangs, but those gangs already don’t like us, and they’d just as much see us go down in the first round of fighting. I saw screw them, because this kind of opportunity is just too good to squander.”

“What’s this meeting?” Seokjin asked.

“It is just a formality,” Namjoon agreed with Yoongi. “All of the gangs are expected to meet to … essentially pay their respect and have a good send off. It’s supposed to mark a shift in power, and it’s the starting line for the battle over who inherits Big Bang’s territory.”

Curiously, Seokjin wondered, “Couldn’t Big Bang just leave their territory to someone? There wouldn’t be a need to fight, or for people to kill each other, if they just gave all their power to someone.”

Yoongi hedged, “I suppose that is possible, but it would never happen. Big Bang, even though they’re throwing the towel in, would never let what they’d worked so hard for fall into the hands of someone unworthy—no matter how much they liked the gang in question. Only the strongest get to rule. Only the most deserving and those who’ve proven themselves, inherit.”

“Enough about that,” Hoseok said, leaning forward. “Tell us more about Sunggyu. He’s bad? Meningitis is going to put him down for a while, right?”

Seokjin nodded. “Several more weeks even with treatment. He’s very vulnerable, if that’s what you’re asking.” He assumed it was.

Jimin shifted up onto his knees from his position on the floor and questioned, “I think we’re overlooking the most important piece of information here. The kind of information that we never could have gotten on our own, and that all attempts to access before, have ended very poorly for.”
“What’s that?” Jungkook asked.

Jimin gave him a curt look, then said, “We actually got someone on the inside! We have someone loyal to us, who knows what the inside of Infinite’s home base, and what the floorplan looks like.”

With the last of his coffee gone, Seokjin put the cup down on the coffee table and offered, “I wasn’t exactly paying attention. I was busy being scared that I was going to be killed any second. I didn’t memorize the floorplan, if that’s what you want to hear.”

“But you got a look inside,” Jimin pressed. “How did they take you in?”

That part was easy for Seokjin to recall, telling them, “It’s hard to tell from the outside, but there’s a substantial underground garage. I think it runs the length of the house itself, and there were at least a dozen cars there when I arrived and left.”

“We figured that,” Taehyung said. “But it’s nice to know for sure.”

There was a thought in him that he hadn’t considered until just now, and was overwhelming to think about.

“Jin?” Namjoon asked.

“Sorry,” Seokjin said, shaking himself a little. “When I left,” he explained, “I was in the middle car.”

Quickly, Jimin anticipated the direction of the conversation and said, “I coordinated with Suho personally while Rap Mon and Suga watched our asses carefully. We knew you were in that car. We didn’t even consider acting until we had absolute one hundred percent confirmation that you weren’t in the car we planned to hit.”

“It’s not that,” Seokjin waved off. He trusted Bangtan with his life. He didn’t need to hear any kind of explanation. “I was supposed to be traveling with Sunggyu to the hospital for treatment. Sungyeol was in my car, but I don’t have a clue which Sunggyu was in.”

“Neither,” Namjoon said in a certain tone. “He wasn’t in the first or third. Trust me, we would have acted then if he was, with an opening like that. You left the residence ahead of him by our account, but by the time the accident was happening, Sunggyu hadn’t made his appearance. There’s a chance he slipped out ahead, but he wasn’t anywhere near you.”

“Sungyeol survived too,” Jungkook threw in. “We’ll just have to console ourselves with that broken arm he has.”

Seokjin gave a slow nod, but he couldn’t help saying, “Of all the people who I came into contact with, Sungyeol wasn’t cruel. He didn’t hurt me.”

Looking irritated, Jimin snapped, “How many times do we have to tell you how dangerous these people are?”

“Oh, please,” Seokjin returned immediately, rolling his eyes. “I’ve been dealing with Infinite for quite a while now. I know exactly how dangerous they are. Don’t infer that I’m a child who’s incapable of comprehending the very notion.”

“Then you should,” Jimin said, voice rising, “stop acting like we can give any kind of leeway or sympathy to these people.”

“Jimin,” Namjoon warned, looking prickly.
Jimin spun on him. “What? I’m supposed to just sit here and listen to this stupidity? Jin wants to make friends with Sungyeol, when we all know the truth of the matter is that if Sunggyu or Woohyun had given the order, Sungyeol would have leaned over in that car and shot Jin right in the face without a second’s hesitation.

Taking in a solid breath, Seokjin insisted, “I don’t want to be friends with people who hurt the people I love. But I’m talking about basic human decency. I can’t turn something like that off, Jimin, and I’m scared if you can.”

Jimin climbed to his feet. “I am not going to let you get killed because you think that anyone else cares about basic human decency. Newsflash, they don’t. You’re too soft, and you’re going to fuck us all over by being that soft.”

“Out!” Namjoon thundered, on his feet in the blink of the eye and wrenching Jimin by the arm towards the front door. “Get a walk. Get some air. And don’t come back until you’ve undergone a severe attitude adjustment. Or don’t come back at all. I’ve had just about enough of you talking to Jin like that.”

Jimin ripped his arm away from Namjoon and said darkly, “Do something about him, then. Or else the next person we put in the ground will be him, and I don’t know how any of us will deal with that.”

The door slammed loudly behind Jimin and Taehyung’s shoulders slumped. He got to his own feet and eased out, “I should go after him.”

Namjoon snorted. “He needs to get control of his mouth, not have you there to vent to.”

“Namjoon,” Yoongi said, and the use of his real name seemed to startle everyone. “Jimin needs to cool off, but it’s not safe for any of us to be alone right now. Not after yesterday, just in case. Don’t let your anger get the best of you.”

Seokjin could see so easily why Yoongi was Namjoon’s right-hand man. Namjoon was fairly decent with keeping his temper and thinking things out logically, but if anything, Yoongi was insurance on the matter. Yoongi, who could be quiet and almost forgettable, was always sizing up the situation, always playing out the possibilities, and offered his opinion only when it was most valuable. Yoongi was a counter balance that Namjoon needed.

“Fine,” Namjoon shot back. “V, J-Hope, go make sure he cools down and then bring him back when he’s ready to apologize.”

“I don’t need an apology,” Seokjin was quick to say. He was used to dealing with Jimin, used to his mood swings, and used to the words that came from Jimin meaning something completely different from what they seemed.

Namjoon argued, “But you deserve one. He can’t talk to you like that. You’re not … you’re not like us.”

Jungkook interjected, “Hard.”

“Not like us?” Seokjin asked.

“You’re not used to this lifestyle,” Yoongi explained, finishing his own coffee. “You didn’t willingly enter this way of living, you’re barely staying afloat in it, and you’re not the type of person to handle it well. None of those are lies, though none of them are insults, either.”
“He’s just scared, you know,” Jungkook said, knees pulled almost up to his chest on the sofa, his eyes moving warily from Seokjin to Namjoon.

“Scared?” Seokjin pressed. “That I’ll die?”

Jungkook gave a faint nod. “He doesn’t know how to be scared anymore, and the fact that he is now? He doesn’t know how to deal.”

Yoongi crossed his arms thoughtfully. “That would make sense.”

In a way, Seokjin supposed so as well.

Yoongi continued, “I wouldn’t put it past Jimin to be struggling with his feelings on the matter. He’s usually very closed off. He doesn’t allow himself to feel much, and what he does, is usually anger. Now he has someone to care about who’s difficult to protect, whom he’s unable to watch over constantly, and he must be feeling that.”

Jungkook insisted, “Jimin really likes you, Jin. He wouldn’t get so angry if he didn’t, I think.”

Jimin probably wouldn’t keep showing up to help him, either, Seokjin assumed. But Jimin bottling up his feelings until they exploded because he didn’t know how to deal with them, was extremely unhealthy.

“He does not get to act this way,” Namjoon said, sitting back next to Seokjin, “just because he’s scared. We’re all scared.”

“I agree,” Yoongi said, nodding his head, “but we could stand to be a little more understanding. Jimin is different than most of us. He takes more time and care to understand.”

Once more, Seokjin said, “He doesn’t have to apologize when he comes back. An apology would mean nothing because I wasn’t offended. But he should know that I am who I am. I can’t change how much I care about other people, even people you might think or know are bad.”

Regardless of the company in the room, Namjoon’s fingers brushed over Seokjin’s split lip, then he kissed the area tenderly. “I know. And that’s what I love about you. I don’t want you to change. I’m sorry if Jimin has a problem with how big your heart is, but I think it’s the most important and best thing about you.”

Jungkook’s voice floated over, “I swear to god, if you kiss again, I will flip the coffee table. Dad? Mom? I know you can hear me. Don’t pretend like you can’t!”

Yoongi added, “It’s pretty awkward, but we’re definitely not at the table flipping stage yet.”

Seokjin grinned a bit, and nudged his head gently against Namjoon’s. “Let’s get back to work here, okay? I don’t want to have to suffocate my brother for being a pest, and I do have to get back to the clinic. I’m certain Infinite will be looking for me.”

Yoongi tapped the coffee table to steal his attention. “About that. I’ve been thinking. As long as Exo’s cover hasn’t been blown, as long as Infinite has no idea it was them who sprung the trap, I see no reason why you can’t plausibly claim that you simply feared for your life and ran. No matter how they press you, if you stick to your story, that you escaped the car and took off worried for your safety, they won’t be able to prove you wrong. They likely won’t even question you. You should be okay.”

Seokjin nodded. “That’s the plan.”
Namjoon warned, “In order to keep your nose clean, none of Bangtan can be near you for a while—at least a couple of days. So, try not to get into trouble? As part of Exo’s formal agreement with Bangtan, they’ve got to look out for you like you’re one of their own. They can get closer than Bangtan, and if there’s a problem, they’ll intercept it. But blowing their cover right now would be very, very bad.”

“I’m not completely helpless,” Seokjin offered with a teasing laugh. “I’ll be okay. And while I very much appreciate the rescue, I probably would have been okay without it, too.” Maybe. After all, he was certain he’d called it with Sunggyu, and so his life was probably safe for the time being.

“It’s settled then,” Yoongi declared. “Now, Jin, what about Infinite’s security.”

“Infinite is pretty hands on,” Seokjin said immediately. “At least the core members are. They handle things personally and don’t dole out responsibilities all that frequently. I don’t know if that means they’re paranoid or just overly cautious, but they didn’t seem to have an overabundance of men in their inner circle.”

Seokjin had seen a couple dozen scattered around Infinite’s home base, but not as many as he’d expected. And there weren’t nearly as many as Bangtan had scattered around visibly their own territory. It had taken Seokjin a while to learn how to spot them. In the beginning they’d seemingly blended in with the other residents. But now Seokjin was getting better at picking them out. From little things like specifically placed white bandanas to the way the stood and talked and acted, Seokjin was slowly training himself to notice.

“But other than that,” Seokjin said, “I noticed everyone who had any kind of contact with Sunggyu had a keycard of sorts—most were clipped to their shirts. I didn’t see any doors for those keycards, but if I had to guess, I’d say they were for the elevator I wasn’t allowed in or an armory.”

Jungkook was almost beaming as he said, “You may not have the grit of Bangtan, Jin, but you’re starting to think like us!”

Seokjin added, “I didn’t see them rotate men, either. I think it’s safe to say that they recognize their own men—the ones they trust, and only those men are at the choke points. If Bangtan is trying to consider for a moment breaching Infinite’s headquarters, it’s suicide. Even with Sunggyu compromised, you’d never make it. It’s just not possible.”

“We’ll figure something out,” Namjoon said with a sigh, getting to his feet.

Seokjin asked, “Before the streets turn into a gang warfare explosion?”

“Before then,” Yoongi said for Namjoon, a serious expression on his face. “The police have no hope of controlling Infinite. They’re owned by Infinite at the moment and the money that Infinite makes from the drugs they run. But if any kind of open fighting breaks out between Infinite and Bangtan, or Exo or any other gang, the power shift will make things even worse. Innocent people will get hurt.”

Seokjin had faith that Bangtan would try to stop that from happening, and for the moment, it would have to be enough.

“Up,” Seokjin said, tapping Jungkook on the thigh. “Help me clean up everything so I can get back to my clinic.” Seokjin asked, Namjoon, “Did Hoseok remember to bring me a change of clothes when he picked up my medication?”

“Here,” Namjoon said, retrieving a bag that had been tucked behind the sofa and tossing it to him. “You shower and get dressed. We’ll take care of the breakfast stuff.”
“You sure?” Seokjin asked, worried about Jimin and when he’d be coming back.

Jungkook gave him a gentle push towards the bathroom. “I already checked,” he told Seokjin. “there are towels in there. We’ve got this.”

A hot shower sounded so amazing that Seokjin gave in quicker than he would have imagined.

When he was finished, still towel drying his hair but having changed into fresh clothes that felt great, he emerged into a fully clean-living room and all of Bangtan assembled once more.

Plus, another guest.

“This is Chen,” Namjoon introduced right away, gesturing to a man that stood and bowed to Seokjin. “He’s going to take you back to the clinic and check things out to make sure it’s okay before he leaves.”

Seokjin returned the bow, his dirty clothes tucked into the bag he’d taken the clean ones out of. “Okay,” he said easily enough. “I think I’m ready to go, then.”

“I don’t know the next time I’ll be able to see you,” Namjoon said when they were able to steal away for just a brief second to the bedroom as the rest of Bangtan and Chen conversed in the living room. His hands caught at Seokjin’s waist like they often did and he hugged him close.

“You can still call,” Seokjin laughed, kissing Namjoon’s mouth. “If I’m not busy, I’ll pick up. And when all of this is done, we’ll be stronger for it.”

“I know,” Namjoon said with a nod, then he tilted Seokjin’s head for a deeper, more proper and full kiss. “I’ll talk to you later. I love you.”

“Come on, lovebirds,” Taehyung called from near the door. “Time’s wasting!”

There was little for Seokjin and Chen to talk about once they were alone, speeding their way back to the clinic in a beige car Chen had arrived in. Chen had been among the men Seokjin had seen the previous night, but they certainly didn’t know each other. It was a bit awkward, truly, especially when they came to a red light and Chen turned to give Seokjin an appraising look.

“Is there something I can help you with?” Seokjin asked, trying not to frown.

“No,” Chen said easily. “I’m just interested is all.”

“Interested?”

Chen nodded. “Yeah. Interested in how one person can be so precious to another that they’ll make the kind of sacrifices Rap Mon has. You should know he’s giving up more than he has to, to have you covered. And he doesn’t seem to mind one bit. It’s interesting.”

Feeling a little ruffled, Seokjin asked, “Keep your eyes on the road, please.”

The clinic, by the time Seokjin reached it at half past seven, was already open and seeing the first trickle of patients.

Stepping through the front doors Seokjin took a deep breath, relished in the feeling of being home, and set out to get going right away.

“What happened yesterday?” Jonghyun asked when he arrived just shortly after Seokjin. “Yunho told everyone you went to war with your father. Did it go badly?”
“It was … unexpected,” Seokjin said, certainly not wanting to give any of the real truth away. “I’ll keep you updated.”

Jonghyun gave him a thumbs up and drifted away.

“Nice to see you in one piece,” Yunho commented, dropping by Seokjin’s office after he’d seen half a dozen patience and most importantly hadn’t seen hide nor hare of Infinite. “And looking healthy.”

Seokjin nearly jumped to his feet, rushing to shut the door behind him. “Yunho.” He leaned back against the door a little breathless. “You called my brother. You told him I was in trouble.”

“Well,” Yunho said easily, “I didn’t think you were choosing to leave with a member of Infinite. And I know what kind of persuasive tactics their kind uses. That kid, Sungjong, he threatened the clinic, right?”

Seokjin was astounded. “How did you know?”

Yunho told him, “You don’t possibly think that you’re the only one who knows the bad seeds around here, right?” Yunho arched an eyebrow. “Seokjin, you assume all these things about me, but the truth is, you don’t have a clue how open my eyes are. I know the important faces around here. I know which ones are the most dangerous, too.”

So that solved one part of the mystery, but Seokjin had to ask, “How did you know to call my brother? Why not just call the police? And exactly just how open are your eyes?”

Yunho scoffed. “The police. There’s a reason we call them incompetent and untrustworthy.”

Seokjin gave a reluctant but agreed nod, just in time for Yunho to speak again.

Yunho was telling him kindly, “I know the major players around here, Seokjin. I may not make that protection payment every month that you do to Infinite, but I make a point to understand where the power is around here.” Yunho pursed his lips for a moment, clearly debating something internally, before he offered up, “I almost got sucked in, you know.”

“Sucked in?” Seokjin asked with a frown.

“Sucked in,” Yunho repeated. “I had a couple of friends growing up—good guys, I swear to you, in the grand scheme of thing. Jaejoong … he was … he was something special to me. He could have been everything to me. He and Junsu and Yoochun …”

Seokjin saw the conflict on Yunho’s face, and he heard the waver in his voice.

But still Yunho managed to say, “I grew up with those guys, and we got pushed around a lot by gang members and thugs. They decided to do something about it. I decided to become a doctor. It drove a hard line between us that we never recovered from. It broke our friendship. But I guess what I’m trying to say here is that I still love those guys. They’re still the guys I grew up with, and they look out for me, even if we’re broken. So, I know a lot more than most people, because they make sure I know. And if you think for a second that they didn’t clue me in to who Infinite was the second that gang started making waves, you’re sorely mistaken.”

Huh. Okay. Seokjin could accept that. But not the bigger question in the room.

“But my brother? How did you know to call Jungkook specifically to deal with what happened to me?” Bangtan were not big players, not like Infinite was, or at least not yet. And whereas Infinite liked to make a splash, Bangtan flew under the radar as much as possible. Even if Yunho had gang
ties, Bangtan was defined by their anonymity.

Yunho nudged Seokjin to the side so he could open the door. “Seokjin,” he said, a smile pulling at his face, “I don’t presume to tell your little brother what he should be doing with his spare time, or what kinds of messes he should avoid. But both you and Jungkook need to understand that this clinic might look small, but there are lots of quiet places that someone can go unnoticed in, even if they’re not trying to be. You know, like a certain storage closet angled towards a certain back door, which would give anyone in said storage closet a perfect view of the comings and goings of that space, along with the ability to hear anything being talked about.”

Seokjin’s eyes widened. They’d been so careful. He’d been so careful. But it seemed none of them had been careful enough.

“Your brother can do whatever he wants,” Yunho repeated, “but don’t let him bring his associates, and their trouble, to this clinic. Maybe you and Jonghyun think I’m deserting you, or betraying you, but I love this place, too. I’ll fight for it as long as I’m here, and I’ll protect it even after that. Don’t bring gang warfare here, Seokjin. I gave up friends I loved in the past over that, and I’ll do it again in a heartbeat. Do you hear me? Don’t make me have to draw the line again.”


“And,” Yunho said pointedly, “be careful, will you? There are a lot of gangs better out there than Infinite, but there are also a lot worse, and sometimes it’s hard to tell the difference between them. Don’t let your heart get in the way of your head.”

Seokjin gave a heavy nod and swallowed past the lump in his throat. It was a tall order from Yunho, but Seokjin had always been one to use his head, and he wasn’t about to stop now, even if he was a fool in love. Of that and likely nothing else, he thought he could confidently assure Yunho.
Chapter Twenty-Three

With both Jessica and Krystal sitting in front of him, Seokjin was almost dumbfounded by how much alike they looked. He and Jungkook shared a great deal of similar facial features, but Jessica and Krystal even more so. They also seemed to share a lot of the same mannerisms, though Jessica was definitely more outspoken, and Krystal was far more reserved, watching him with an assessing gaze.

But Seokjin liked them. He liked them a lot and he thought they’d be a great addition to the clinic, especially in light of Victoria’s departure in the new year. The simple truth was that patients, especially younger ones, tended to be more candid, more honest, and more comfortable with female doctors. Not to mention more than once several of Seokjin’s female patients had requested a female doctor for more sensitive examinations, and Seokjin had felt like he was letting them down with being unable to provide.

Jessica and Krystal would be an easy way to remedy that, and seemed a good fit for the clinic itself.

Still, he had to remind the two of them, “If you say yes, if we get the paperwork started, you’re committing to a year. A full year. The people who come here, they don’t always trust easily, and a lot of them are fearful of hospitals and doctors. They need to see the same faces day in and day out. They need to build relationships with the nurses and doctors here, and be comfortable enough to tell you even the most embarrassing things that they might need treated. I can’t take you on unless I can trust that you’ll be here for the clinic and the patients.”

Jessica nodded and agreed, “That’s fair enough for you to be concerned over.”

“I want you to work here at this clinic, I think you’d be a good fit,” Seokjin made sure to say. “But only if you’re as invested in the clinic as it demands you be.”

It was Krystal who stated, “We wouldn’t be here if we weren’t prepared for that kind of commitment. Yunho was very clear when he talked to us about this initially.”

Jessica nudged her in the ribs. “We’re looking to try something new. We want to find out what’s next for us in our lives and our careers, and this is a good place or that. You’re asking us to commit to a full year, and that isn’t a problem. If you hire us, the people who come to this clinic are going to be in good hands. And so will your clinic.”

Biting back a huge grin, Seokjin reached his hand out to first Jessica and then Krystal. “Then I think that this going to work out great for all of us.”

They wouldn’t start for several more weeks, not until just before Yunho left the clinic. But before either of them could see a single patient, there was tons of paperwork to do, and things to square away with the legal side.

“We should go out for celebratory drinks!” Krystal decided, shaking Seokjin’s hand firmly. “Right?”

Seokjin chuckled, but had to shake his head. “Sorry, ladies. I’ve got plans tonight. Rain check?”

The clinic was still hours away from closing, but Seokjin had already worked his relatively normal early shift, and unless he wanted to take on a few, unscheduled appointments, he was under no obligation to hang around. He’d in fact already completed his ten-hour scheduled shift.

And while putting more time into the clinic was a tempting thought, especially since he’d been out so much recently, there were more pressing matters he had to get to.
With the staffing changes that were coming to the clinic, and the new months’ numbers indicating that the clinic had only continued to surpass its predicted patient forecast, Seokjin knew he couldn’t put things off with his father any longer. He had just essentially hired Jessica and Krystal. He needed to know that the clinic had the funding to pay for them.

“Rain check,” Jessica agreed.

Neither of the sisters seemed too upset at the idea of putting off celebratory drinks, and Seokjin was glad for it. Because then he had to call a taxi, and the whole idea of where he was going made him feel like a child once more. Anxiety was creeping up on him at the mere thought of confronting his father, and Seokjin could have used someone like Namjoon there to support him.

They phoned each other like they were teenagers now, sneaking around so their parents wouldn’t know. Namjoon sent Seokjin goofy selfies, and Seokjin sent Namjoon pictures of food and the other doctors and anything to try and let him know that he was being thought of—to make him feel as if he was with Seokjin.

But after a full week and a half apart, without having seen each other outside of video chat, Seokjin was missing Namjoon greatly. And Namjoon, not that Seokjin needed to be coddled or protected, had a way of making him feel less scared and less uncomfortable. There was something foreboding to Seokjin about going to the home he’d grown up in, especially since he hadn’t lived there in almost five years. Seeing Namjoon would have eased his fears and his anxiety.

It just wasn’t safe for either Seokjin or Namjoon at the moment to see each other in person, and Seokjin wasn’t willing to risk the person he loved just to feel less uncomfortable about his own father. Not to mention Namjoon was swamped with worry and business related to Bangtan. The last thing he needed was Seokjin’s troubles.

When Seokjin stepped out of the taxi an hour later to stare up at the high rise building that his family’s apartment was located inside, the sun was setting in the backdrop. Seokjin knew his father was home because it was Saturday night, and if anything, his father was predictable. Saturday nights meant his father’s single guilty pleasure television show, an additional hour dedicated to reading, and twice as much time given to caring for plants and flowers inside the apartment that Seokjin had always feared his father loved more than him.

The doorman, the same one who’d been there the last and final time Seokjin had left home, recognized him, which was unexpected, and sent him straight up.

Part of Seokjin had been hoping he’d be turned away.

“T’m certainly surprised,” his father said, the second he answered the door. His face was drawn and pale, worse than the last time Seokjin had seen him, and he even looked a little sick.

“We need to talk,” Seokjin said, squaring his shoulders in a way that he hoped would tell his father that he wasn’t backing down and he wasn’t leaving until they were done.

His father cracked the door open and turned back inside, not uttering a word.

Seokjin took a deep breath and followed him in.

Nothing had changed since the last time Seokjin had been home. The furniture was still in the same arrangement, the same cinnamon smell hung in the air, and his father still liked to keep all the curtains open, making for a spectacular and panoramic view of downtown Seoul.

“We should sit down together,” Seokjin said, and that was how he found himself seated on the floor
of the living room, across from his father who was sipping a cup of steaming hot tea. “We need to talk.”

It was clear within moments that his father wouldn’t be the first to speak. Seokjin shouldn’t have been surprised. His father could be blunt and harshly honest, but he wasn’t one to jump into an unexpected situation feet first. If anything, Seokjin had gotten his own cautious nature from his father.

In an effort to cut right to the root of the matter, Seokjin asked, “I need to know if you’re going to hold to your petty threat. Are you going to continue to threaten my clinic because of personal matters that you feel towards me? Or Jungkook?”

“Petty,” his father eased out, seemingly choking on his tea a little. He looked startled at the words, and it was something utterly unexpected.

“Petty,” Seokjin continued. “Of course what you threatened is petty. Blackmail and coercion is always petty.”

“Bah,” his father hissed out, “you’re still a child, Seokjin. When you’re older, you’ll understand. When you have children of your own, only then will you and I see matters the same way.”

“I’m old enough,” Seokjin returned, voice steely hard. “I’m not a child anymore, and I understand plenty. I understand that deep down, you want the best for your children, but your underhanded and deplorable tactics have done nothing but push them away. I understand that you feel some sort of desperation to see them live up to your personal standards of success. But rest assured, I’m more determined to be independent than you are desperate to make me conform.”

The words drew a small smile to his father’s lips then, and Seokjin had never felt more unbalanced. His father eased out, “Maybe you do understand then, at least a little.”

“Dad,” Seokjin said quietly. “Stop trying to force your children to do what you think is best for them.”

Across from him, his father had thin, pale fingers wrapped around his tea cup in an almost desperate way. And it was a lengthy pause before he told Seokjin, “This world is a cruel, hard place, Seokjin. The world outside these walls is unflinching and certainly unforgiving. Your brother is too easy in his nature, and you?”

“Me?” Seokjin prompted.

His father answered bluntly, “You’re too kind. If I don’t push the two of you, the world will eat you up.”

“That’s not fair,” Seokjin argued back, amazed at what kind of conversation they were having. They almost never talked candidly like they were now. “Jungkook and I are our own people, and we should be just the way we are, without you feeling like you have to fix something in us. I agree, the world is mean and tough and terrible at times, but being easy going or kind isn’t a deficit. Being the way I am doesn’t mean I’m going to get torn apart by the real world, like you seem to think. Let me define success and happiness the way I want to. Let Jungkook do it the way he wants. And just be happy for us. Support us. We … we’re never going to be what you want us to be, so just support us the way we are.”

His father met his gaze, heavy and weathered. “Your brother hasn’t enrolled yet in the upcoming semester.”
“No,” Seokjin confirmed, “and he won’t, because he doesn’t want to. He doesn’t like school. He doesn’t want to get a degree, and trying to force him to will only make him unhappy. That’s what I’m talking about. Let Jungkook find his own path, like I have, and don’t constantly look down on him like he could be doing better. For Jungkook, this is what he sees as best, and we have to support that. We’re his family. We have to be there for him.”

His father’s hands were shaking. Seokjin could see it, and it made him frown. His father had never had any type of tremors before. And shaking of any kind was often a precursor to a medical condition.

Trying to find his stride again, Seokjin caught his father’s gaze and offered, “I’m going to continue to do what I want to do, and be happy doing it. My clinic means everything to me, and I’m not going to let you take it away from me. So I need to know right now if you’re going to accept the path I’ve chosen in life, or if I should anticipate having to defend it.”

The things with Bangtan, and struggling with his clinic, they’d made him stronger. Namjoon had made him unafraid to fail, more likely to take chances, and helped fuel his desire to do what he wanted, and not what others wanted of him. So now Seokjin wasn’t afraid to speak up. He wasn’t afraid to plant his feet down on the ground and not give an inch. He wasn’t afraid of his father or what the man would say.

“Such disrespect for you father,” his father said in a cutting way. “To speak to me in such a way. Haven’t I done everything for you, Seokjin? Have I mistreated you? Have I seen you go without? No. But you sit across from me, disrespectful in the worst way a son can be, and you think it’s independence.”

Seokjin didn’t balk. “You can take jabs at me all you want. You can call me names and try to hurt me if that pleases you. But I’m not going to let you do that to Jungkook, who’s his own man and proud to not be what you wanted, and more than that, I won’t let my clinic suffer. You won’t threaten my clinic anymore, or I’ll go to war with you.”

“War,” his father laughed.

“It feels like war,” Seokjin replied.

After a few more minutes, his father asked, “Did you really come here to instigate the matter further?”

Seokjin shook his head. “No. I just want to know once and for all, will you pursue the matter you attempted to threaten me with? I’m not going to attempt to influence Jungkook in any way. I won’t force him, and I’ll defend his choices. But the bigger question here is if you will attempt to have my clinic’s funding revoked. Will you hurt hundreds of other people as a slight against me? Against my choices?”

It was odd then that his father just stared at him. It was an unnerving stare, like his father was looking for something in him, and Seokjin felt absolutely exposed.

Sounding a bit nervous, Seokjin added, “I can fight you for as long as necessary on this. I’ll fight you for six months or six years.”

His father finished his tea in silence, set the cup gently down on the table and said in an unflinching and deceitfully calm way, “I’ll be dead in six months.”

Seokjin felt his body lurch towards his father desperately, as if it was happening without his consent.
“What?”

Still looking unconcerned, his father said, “For the past year I’ve been receiving treatment for prostate cancer. I was diagnosed eighteen months ago. The treatments thus far have failed, I’m now in stage four, and my oncologist doesn’t believe I have more than three or four months. So, six months isn’t a realistic expectation for you to have, Seokjin.”

It felt to Seokjin like his world was falling out from under him. Because for all the conflict and constant issues that Seokjin had had with his father, the man was still his father. He was still the reason Seokjin existed. And no matter how cold he’d been after his wife had died, Seokjin’s father had still made sure that Seokjin had everything he could ever need or want. He’d paid for Seokjin’s school, and compensated him pocket money when he’d been studying so hard there was no time for a job. And he had come to Seokjin’s medical school graduation with a wreath of flowers and the first real smile Seokjin had seen in well over a decade. The man had told Seokjin he was proud of him on that day, proud and honored, and no matter what Seokjin thought of his father’s actions, he still loved him very much.

“Stage four?” Seokjin demanded. “How progressive is the cancer? There are still options even at the stage. Who is your medical—”

“Stop.” His father held up a firm hand. “There are no more treatments available that I’m willing to consider now. There are none where the outcome is worth the consequences of the treatment. This cancer is terminal as of now. It has been for weeks.”

“Why?” Seokjin asked, voice cracking as tears gathered in his eyes. “Why did you wait so long to say something? Why didn’t you say anything at all?”

Seokjin could have gone to his doctor appointments. Seokjin could have conferred with his father’s doctor, and researched their chosen treatment plans. Seokjin had initially studied to be an oncologist. He could have done something. He could have just been there, at the very least, to sit next to his father and support him and tell him he was loved.

“Why?” his father demanded. “So you could look at me with pity like you are now?”

“No,” Seokjin choked out, tears spilling over. “So I could be here for you.” And it wasn’t pity he felt. It wasn’t pity in the least bit. It was absolute sorrow. “And now you have only a few months. How can I …”

His father rolled himself up to his feet and took the tea cup to the kitchen where he placed it in the sink. “When I die,” his father called back, “I expected you to keep this family strong. Push your brother to excellence, maintain your own, and do not slack.”

Feeling horrified, Seokjin demanded, “Is this why you tried to get me to force Jungkook into going to school? Because you knew you were dying? Because…”

“Your brother lacks direction,” his father called back. “He needs constant structure and supervision. He has great potential, but squanders it. He’s smarter than he lets himself believe, too. If I can’t be here to push him, it needs to be you. You look at me like I’m a villain for wanting him to be educated, but let me remind you, Seokjin, there is very little opportunity, outside of crime, for a man who has no wealth of knowledge. You and Jungkook are privileged to have the opportunity to be as educated as possible, and until I’m dead, I’ll continue to fight for that.”

Now Seokjin’s own hands were shaking, and then his shoulders, and he could barely keep himself together.
His father continued, “And let me assure you, guaranteeing that your children are successful by any standard, does not allow you to be their friend as well. You value your brother’s friendship more than his future, and that is where you’re lacking. Maybe there is a balance that can be found, but I’m not meant to be his friend, Seokjin. I’m meant to be his father, and a father pushes. Feel free to disagree, however. I won’t fight you on the matter for much longer.”

Seokjin had truly believed that his father would outlive him. How could he not? His father was ornery and cantankerous and the strongest person Seokjin knew. Seokjin was the one with the heart condition and the constant medical needs. So how could it be his father who was so close to death’s door?

“But you judge success differently than myself and Jungkook,” Seokjin told him almost desperately. “Jungkook is going to find his way. He’ll be a man of significance, and just because that doesn’t match up with what you imagined for him, doesn’t mean he’s a failure.”

Seokjin’s father gave a grunt.

With a quiver still in his voice, Seokjin asked, “Jungkook doesn’t know, does he?”

When his father didn’t answer, Seokjin had to assume that no one knew. It was completely possible that his father had hidden his medical condition from everyone, friends, family and coworkers alike.

Seokjin quickly moved to join him in the kitchen, wondering, “You’re not really going to get the clinic’s funding revoked, are you?”

In a deep, commanding voice, his father told him, “You are my heir. After my death I’ve instructed my lawyer to come immediately to you with the appropriate paperwork. Your brother has a trust fund set up in his name, but everything else is yours. No doubt you’ll use my life’s savings to support that whim of a dream of yours.”

The clinic wasn’t a whim of a dream, but now wasn’t the time to start back in with that same old argument.

“You’re leaving me something?” Seokjin asked.

His father barked out a laugh. “Why do you look so surprised?”

For a number of reasons, Seokjin wanted to tell him. The least of which was going against his father’s plan for him to be the most celebrated oncologist in the nation. It didn’t make sense that his father would leave him any sort of windfall, especially knowing he’d invest it in his clinic.

“Because …”

“You’re my oldest surviving child,” the man said, making Seokjin flinch. “Everything I have, everything I’m worth, is yours after I’m dead.”

And his father, Seokjin knew, was notoriously stingy. He spent money when there was someone to impress, but otherwise he hoarded his money close. If Seokjin had to estimate, and he hated that he was at the moment, his father was worth a substantial amount. The apartment was paid for as well, and Seokjin’s father own two luxury cars aside from the government issued one that he drove to work every day. His father had properties in Incheon and Juju, and possibly one in Japan, though Seokjin wasn’t certain about that.

If his father was serious about leaving him his wealth, Seokjin was about to come into a significant amount.
And he would use it for his clinic. There was no doubt. He’d use it to expand and buy new equipment. He’d use it to hire new staff and give bonuses to the current employees.

But his father knew that, apparently, and he was still giving it all to Seokjin.

“I’ve spoken to Park Jiseok about your clinic’s funding,” Seokjin’s father told him, setting about to wash the other dishes in the sink. “He’s assured me that you’ll have it for at least the next three years. You’ll have to reapply after that, but he’ll see to it that your request goes through. He owes me.”

At a whisper, Seokjin said, “I know we’ve never gotten along. I know … we’ve had problems for a long time. But you can’t just say you’re dying and that you’re giving me a bunch of money and things, and think it’s okay. It’s not okay. You can’t …” He braced a hand against the countertop and felt lightheaded. His knees were wobbling and his chest was tight.

“Seokjin.” His father’s hand at his elbow was such an odd comfort that Seokjin misjudged it as something terrible at first. His stomach rolled over, his chest seized and he didn’t realize that his father was moving him to a nearby chair until he was practically lifted off his feet. “Take deep breaths.”

Seokjin stared at his father in amazement, at the normally cold man who was crouched in front of him, one hand taking his pulse at his wrist and the other cupping the side of his neck.

“You’re dying,’ Seokjin said, trembling.

“Everyone dies,” his father said, his voice steady and calming. “I’ve accepted that my time is over. Now you need to accept it.” There was a hint of kindness on his father’s face, or maybe even a bit more, and his father added quietly, “It’s not such a terrible thing, Seokjin, that I’ll be with your mother and my baby girl soon.”

He wasn’t sure why, he wasn’t sure of anything, but all of the sudden he was crying out, “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“For what?” his father asked with a huff, the kindness gone, standing to fill a glass with water. He handed it to Seokjin and encouraged him to drink some of it.

“For what?” Seokjin asked through his tears. “For you dying! We haven’t been good to each other for a very long time and I’m so sorry for that. I know you blame me for ruining this family and I just-”

“Don’t you dare,” his father warned, a hand on his shoulder wrenching so hard it was nearly painful.

“What?” Seokjin blinked through tear matted eyelashes.

“I have never blamed you,” the man said. “Don’t be selfish and think otherwise.”

Seokjin was dumbfounded. “But … it was me. I …”

“You got your medical condition from your mother,” his father challenged back, eyebrow raised. “And the night that your mother and sister died, that was out of your control as well. There is no blame to be placed anywhere on your shoulders. You were a child. You are not at fault, and I have never, not once, blamed you.”

Seokjin could hardly believe what he was hearing. He’d spent nearly his whole life feeling guilty, convinced that his father blamed him for it all.
Simply, his father said, “Terrible things happen all the time to innocent and undeserving people.”

“But you …”

Gently, his father slapped his cheek, startling him away from more tears. “--have never blamed you. I blamed myself, Seokjin. You were a child. I was an adult. I should have insisted we go together. You were my son. Your health was just as much my responsibility as your mother’s. And if I had been there, I could have stopped that man from trying to … I could have seen the car that hit you … I could have … there could have been something I could have made a difference with.”

Seokjin didn’t understand how his father could shoulder any of the blame. Seokjin remembered the night clearly. Jungkook had been sick. Someone had needed to stay behind with him. And Seokjin’s mother had been far more intimately aware of what the condition could do to a person. It made sense she had gone.

“You can’t blame yourself either,” Seokjin said, rubbing almost angrily at his tears.

Then, for the first time since he was a child, Seokjin leaned up, put his arms tentatively around his father’s neck, and hugged him tightly.

He’d thought his father would just stand there awkwardly, but Seokjin needed the hug so badly he didn’t even care.

Yet like a miracle unfolding, his father’s arms came around him a beat later, tighter and stronger than Seokjin had dared to imagine.

He heard his father say in his ear, “You’re my son, Seokjin, my first-born son. And I love you more than you will ever know. Don’t ever forget that.”

Coming from his father, Seokjin knew what the words meant.

“I don’t want you to die,” Seokjin said, clinging more tightly to him. “I can’t let you go.”

“You should be thankful,” his father said, releasing him with a stony expression slipping back into place. “Now you can take all my money and put it towards your clinic.”

It felt like dirty money all of the sudden.

When his father moved back to the sink, flicking the water on, Seokjin said, “You know you have to tell Jungkook. Or I do. You have so little time left. We need to be together for this.”

“Your brother doesn’t need this on his shoulders,” his father argued. “Jungkook is just like you. The both of you are just like your mother in this regard. He’ll wear it heavily on his shoulders. The longer he goes without knowing, the better. I only told you out of necessity.”

“No,” Seokjin insisted. “I have to tell him. Dad. I have to. He’ll never forgive either of us if we hold this back until the last possible second.”

“You want to?” his father asked, his eyes locked on the dishes.

“No,” Seokjin said quietly, “but I have to.”

Seokjin stayed with his father for another twenty minutes, helping him clean up and doing menial tasks. They talked a bit awkwardly about safe topics, steering their conversation away from anything too heavy, and Seokjin’s mind was made up when he went to use the bathroom and discovered
countless bottles of pills in the medicine cabinet.

Jungkook had to know, and he needed to know quickly. There wasn’t time to spare, and Seokjin couldn’t possibly hold something so important in.

“I’m going to go see Jungkook tonight,” Seokjin said to his father as he slipped on his shoes near the front door. “I’ll tell him, and then the three of us can get together sometime soon and talk.”

His father’s eyes narrowed a little. “You’re going to take a taxi to that part of town, this late?”

Seokjin looked down at his watch. “It’s seven, dad. I’ll be okay.”

“You need a car,” his father grunted out.

“My clinic needs an MRI machine,” Seokjin argued back. “They’re roughly the same price, so I think you know which I’m going to choose if I have that kind of spare money lying around.”

A key ring flew through the air without warning and Seokjin fumbled to catch it.

“Sell it if you want,” his father said, setting on the sofa with a book in his lap. “But take it tonight.”

Seokjin looked down at the keys in his hand. “This is your car—the Audi” he said, identifying the keys as belonging to the dark blue luxury sedan that his father rarely drove. “I can’t take your car.” Especially one that he and Jungkook were practically never allowed to so much as breathe on.

“It’s yours now. Or it will be eventually.”

Seokjin wanted to cry all over again. He’d dealt with his fair share of terminal patients. He knew that at some point, once the acceptance settled in, it was typical for them to begin to give away their worldly possessions. So when his father claimed to have found acceptance with his condition, Seokjin could see the proof of it.

Unable to muster a proper response, Seokjin cleared his throat and pocketed the keys, telling his father, “I’ll call you soon so that the three of us can meet and speak.”

His father didn’t look up from his book and Seokjin slipped from the apartment.

“I’m coming over,” Seokjin said into his phone as he slid into the car his father had given him. He felt uncomfortable sitting in the pristine car, sheltered in the private garage located under the apartment building. He was just glad Jungkook had picked up on the first ring. “Where are you?”

“Why are you coming over?” Jungkook asked in a petulant voice. “Jimin and I are eating pizza and watching movies at home. If you come over here you’ll just lecture us about poor eating habits and bad movies.”

The last remnants of tears were still lingering in Seokjin’s eyes as he pulled the car out onto the street and said, “I have to talk to you about dad. I just left home and I’ll be there shortly.”

In a joking way, Jungkook told him, “You sure ditch out on that clinic you seem to love so much.”

“Not the clinic,” Seokjin said.

He heard a significant pause, then Jungkook asked, “You went home? Home home? To where we used to live?”

“Yes, and it’s important that I say to you what I just found out. Jungkook, this is serious. It’s about
dad and he ... I’ll be there soon.”

Seokjin could hear Jimin saying something undeterminable in the background as Jungkook asked, “Do you need me to come get you? Or Jimin offered.”

“No,” Seokjin said, merging deeper into traffic. “Dad gave me his car. The Audi. The really expensive one.”

“Wait--what!”

“I’ll explain later,” Seokjin said, ending the call. He just didn’t know how he was going to tell his brother that their father was dying, and he was less certain how Jungkook was going to react.

As it turned out, Jungkook looked at him like he’d sprouted a second head when the news was delivered.

“You’re lying,” Jungook accused.

Slowly, Seokjin shook his head, standing face to face with Jungkook in his living room. Jimin had disappeared into one of the bedrooms, but could still probably hear their conversation.

True to Jungkook’s word, there were half eaten pizzas scattered around in their boxes on the coffee table, but Seokjin knew he must have ruined his brother’s appetite.

“He told me himself,” Seokjin said, reaching for Jungkook. “He was diagnosed eighteen months ago, but prostate cancer is very aggressive and he said his treatments ended up being ineffective. There are still options, but frankly, it’s true that they’d probably end up doing more harm than good at this point. He’s in stage four, and he’s been officially classified as terminal.”

Jungkook jerked away from him almost exaggeratedly, shouting, “Don’t touch me!”

“I’m sorry,” Seokjin, in pain himself to see his brother hurting so badly. “It’s the truth and I’m sorry.”

“How long?” Jungkook asked, chin trembling. “How long does he have? If it’s terminal, if the treatment isn’t working, it can’t be long.”

Seokjin wanted to soften the blow, but there was simply no way to do it. “Dad told me three to four months. At best. I haven’t seen his scans, but that sound about right, for this type of cancer.”

Without warning Jungkook crumpled to the ground, shoulders hitching as he sobbed loudly.

Seokjin knelt down next to him, putting his arms around Jungkook and rubbing his back. “It’s okay,” he said, even though it wasn’t. “It’s okay.”

“I don’t understand,” Jungkook hiccupped out, clutching tightly to Seokjin’s shirt. “Why is this happening?”

“I know.” Seokjin palmed the back of his head and held him firmly. “This is bad. This is really bad. But I’m here. I’m right here and I’m going to get us through this.”

Jungkook gave another loud wail and Seokjin rocked them gently.

It seemed like an eternity before Jungkook stopped shaking, and even longer before he stopped crying. Words fell the wayside and Seokjin simply held Jungkook, waiting patiently even as his legs fell asleep and cramped up.
“I think he’s asleep,” Jimin said quietly, startling Seokjin. He hadn’t seen Jimin enter the living room.

“I know,” Seokjin replied at a whisper, his fingers stroking through Jungkook’s short hair. “But he’s not a baby anymore. It used to be I could just pick him up and carry him to bed, and he once had an unfortunate habit of falling asleep on me. That’s not the case anymore. And I don’t want to wake him.”

Jimin dropped to a crouch in front of them and offered, “Then let me help you. We’ll go slow and won’t wake him.”

Seokjin suspected an earthquake could have hit in that moment and Jungkook wouldn’t have woken. His brother was deep asleep, with swollen eyes from crying and he was snoring a bit. The snoring was the biggest sign that Jungkook would sleep for a while. All the same, Seokjin wanted to be as delicate with him as possible.

Together they lifted him and settled Jungkook into his bed.

Seokjin smoothed the blankets over his form and kissed Jungkook’s forehead. “We’re going to be okay,” he promised Jungkook quietly. “We’re strong, you and me. We’re going to get through this.” It was hard to tear himself from Jungkook’s side after that, but he managed it eventually, and closed the door to the bedroom silently behind him.

“I get it, you know,” Jimin said when Seokjin was sitting in the living room, accepting a cup of coffee from him. “About your dad. He acts like a real asshole, but he’s still your dad.” He added a second later. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Seokjin said, the warmth of the coffee seeping through the porcelain of the mug in a comforting way. “I thought, these couple of years especially, that he was hard on Jungkook and I just for the sake of it. I thought he was being mean and cruel because … because of a lot of different reasons.”

“You think different now?”

“I think,” Seokjin sighed out, “that he’s known for a long time about his health, longer than he admitted, and he’s been pushing us to his version of excellence because of it.” In a lot of ways, Seokjin truly understood his father now. He understood the man’s drive to make sure his children were successful by any respectable standard. He understood why his father wanted him to be the greatest oncologist of his generation, and why he wanted Jungkook to have a career that provided for him the kind of lifestyle that he’d been raised with.

“Jin?” Jimin said softly.

“He’s going to die,” Seokjin said in a shaky way, “and I think he’s terrified that his kids aren’t going to be okay without him there to make sure. I’m not saying I agree with him, or the things he’s done, or his methods, but I get it. I understand.”

Jimin wondered, “Maybe you can do something to help? You’re a doctor. You’re a great doctor. You were supposed to be a cancer doctor, right? So you know all about it, and you’re brilliant, so maybe …”

“I … there’s nothing anyone can do. Not anymore. It’s a hard truth to accept, a heartbreaking one, but it’s still the truth.” Seokjin let his fingers grip into the material at his pants. “Stage four … when a diagnosis enters sage four, it’s the point of no return in almost all cases. Even if I had my father’s latest scans and test results, I’m fairly confident there’s nothing to be done. I just have to accept this.
My father has.”

“Yeah,” Jimin agreed, “but it’s still a shitty thing for a person like you to have to go through.”

Seokjin asked, “A person like me?”

“A good person,” Jimin elaborated. “The most decent person I know. You shouldn’t have to bury your dad. Not after losing other members of your family.”

Seokjin sipped at his coffee, surprised that Jimin remembered how he liked it, and confessed, “I’m honestly … in a really guilty way, glad that it’s this way. Him, and not me.”

Jimin asked, “That’s … not what I expected you to say.”

Seokjin felt the first bit of real smile pull at his mouth. “I mean to say is, I always carried around this horrible guilt about my mother and sister. My father had to bury them and I always felt like it was my fault. I always worried what would happen when my father had to bury me. I was convinced that I’d go before him and that would be something else he’d have to do. In way, a horrible way, I’m less burdened knowing he won’t have to bury me.”

“Oh,” Jimin remarked.

Seokjin chuckled. “That sounds so bad. I’m sorry.” He rubbed a hand across his face.

“You’re tired,” Jimin pointed out.

“Exhausted,” Seokjin corrected. “But I have to go home soon. I have a ton of things I need to do for tomorrow, and if my father only has a couple of months to live, I don’t want to squander them with him.”

Jimin, who was sitting near him on the sofa, scooted closer, remarking, “You’re a really good son. Seriously, your dad is really lucky to have you. He’s put you through a lot of shit and you’re still thinking of ways to make the last bit of his time easier.”

This time Seokjin had a fuller smile for Jimin. “You’re a nice person, Jimin. Sometimes I think you don’t know how to accept that.”

“Me?” Jimin snorted loudly, throwing his arms out. “I’m as far from nice as you get, and you’re kidding yourself if you think otherwise.”

“You’re not,” Seokjin pressed. He laid his head back on the sofa and sighed wearily. “You turn people off when you’re hot and cold all the time, but I get that it’s your defense mechanism. You’re afraid of being hurt, or of someone you care about being hurt, but all you do is push people away when things get too tough. You think you’re helping yourself right now, but you’re only making things worse. You can’t push away the people who are the most important to you. That doesn’t save them. It only hurts them.”

Jimin scoffed, but there was a nervous tick in his voice as he said, “I thought you were a medical doctor, not a head one.”

Seokjin nudged his shoulder. “When I was a kid I thought I was the reason my mother and sister died. I grew up with some pretty heavy emotional issues, and I’ve been seeing a psychologist since my father realized it wasn’t normal for a ten-year-old to wet the bed or have night terrors. Trust me, I know how people operate. And you, here? You’re a classic case.”
Jimin pursed his lips together and didn’t say anything, which meant to Seokjin, that he’d hit a nerve.

“The thing is,” Seokjin said, leaning further towards him, “you don’t have to be like this. I know why you are, but you don’t have to be. It really hurts to lose people you care about. I don’t think I have to tell you it’s like having your heart ripped out of your chest and squeezed to death. But in the end, it’s still better to have let people close and to have loved them with every bit of your heart. Because loving people? That’s the only thing that really makes life worth living, and it’s always going to be a risk, but it’s the only one worth taking.”

“Jin,” Jimin breathed out.

“Think about it,” Seokjin advised, and then he stood, stretching his arms above his head and yawning. “I think I’m going to go lay down with Jungkook for just a little. I want to be close to him.”

He didn’t know if Jungkook would have bad dreams, or if he’d sleep like a log. And Seokjin certainly didn’t plan on spending the entire night at the apartment that Jungkook shared with Jimin. But he wanted to be there just in case. He wanted to feel the warmth of his brother’s body and know that even if they were losing their father, they would always have each other.

Seokjin was almost to the bedroom door when a heavy weight slammed into him, pushing his back up against the nearby wall and forcing him still.

“Jimin?” Seokjin choked out, confused.

Almost immediately the pressure Jimin had been putting on his body lightened, but Seokjin was still eclipsed by Jimin’s arms on either side of his head, the shorter male looking at him with an unreadable expression.

But finally, Jimin said in a low voice, “You drive me crazy.”

Seokjin wondered if his words had pissed Jimin off that much. He wanted to apologize. Before he could, Jimin continued, “You make me …”

“Jimin,” Seokjin eased out.

“I hate what you make me feel,” Jimin bit out furiously. “I hate that you just waltzed into our lives like you belonged from the start, and fit right in. I hate that you’re genuinely kind and you even make me want to be a better person. I hate that you make me feel … everything. I was just fine before you, you know. I was just fine the way I was. And now I feel everything and I hate it.”

Seokjin tried again, “Jimin, I--”

“I hate,” Jimin broke through, voice raised, “that you are the most beautiful person I’ve ever seen, and when I look at you your face makes my stomach turn inside out. I hate that you see the best in people all the time, and give second and third chances, and that you never once gave up on me, no matter how many times I pushed you away. I hate that you see exactly who I am, without even trying, and I hate that I want you to.”

Seokjin could feel Jimin’s trembling, though whether it was from fear or anything else, seemed impossible to determine.

His voice wavering in and out, Jimin culminated his damning words with, “But mostly, mostly of all, I hate that I try so hard not to love you, and fail spectacularly. I hate that, Jin. I hate how much I love
you. But I do. I love you.”

The world was shaking, wavering all around them, and Seokjin felt blind sighted by the declaration. And then he felt crushed that somehow he’d put the frustration into Jimin’s voice, and the tears into his eyes, and the desperate gasp of hope on his features.

“I love you,” Jimin gasped out, looking moments away from crumpling with fear.

And then Seokjin was pressed back against the wall fully once more, and Jimin was pushing forward.

Because Jimin was kissing him then. With Jimin’s fingers holding tight to his shirt, and his body weight holding Seokjin firmly against the wall, Jimin was kissing him with every inch of courage that he could probably muster, and not without passion.

I love you, Seokjin wanted to tell him as Jimin tore back with a sob, clenching his hands into his hair and gasping out an apology.

I love you, Seokjin desperately wanted to get out.

You’re worthy of love, he would have given anything to say.

He just didn’t know how to, not when he would have to add, I just don’t love you in the way you love me. I don’t love you like I love Namjoon.

So instead he was silent, frozen in place, and for the second time that day, shocked into inaction. All the while Jungkook slept on obliviously in the next room, and Jimin sobbed quietly to himself in front of Seokjin.
“Are you feeling okay?”

Seokjin, who had been stirring the ice in his water with a lazy swirl of spoon, looked up suddenly at the sound of his brother’s voice. “I’m sorry?”

A concerned expression was laced across Jungkook’s face. “I asked if you were feeling okay. You look … I don’t know, off.”

Seokjin gave a glance across Namjoon’s grandmother’s noodle house. His and Jungkook’s father was set to come through the main doors at any second, their first official meeting as a family after learning of the man’s terminal illness. In fact, it was the first time they were all going to be together since Jungkook’s high school graduation.

“Jin.”

“It’s nothing,” Seokjin replied automatically.

“It’s not nothing,” Jungkook pushed. “I’ve known you for eighteen years. I think I know when it’s something.”

Seokjin blew out a long breath. It wasn’t as if he could really tell Jungkook what had happened between himself and Jimin. It still seemed like a dream to Seokjin—the feeling of Jimin’s lips on his own, his body warm and firm against Seokjin as he pressed him up against the wall.

How did one tell their brother that his roommate had confessed deep seeded feelings of love, then kissed him, and not have that ruin their relationship?

If any relationship was going to be ruined, it was the one Seokjin had with Jimin. The look on Jimin’s face when Seokjin had gently destroyed all hope in the shorter male, saying, “I’m so sorry, Jimin, but I’m in love with Namjoon,” had been all the evidence needed. Jimin’s face had crumpled, even more tears welling up in his eyes immediately, and it was the barest, the most honest, and the most hurt Seokjin had ever seen him look.

Still, Seokjin was determined not to blame himself, even if he felt terrible. He was in love with Namjoon, and Jimin had known that. Jimin, who was impulsive at times, but so very brave, had to have known that Seokjin’s heart was with Namjoon and only Namjoon.

Jimin probably ultimately hadn’t expected Seokjin to return his feelings, not with the way he’d scoffed and said, “It’s always him. It’s always Rap Mon. He’s the leader. He’s the strongest. He’s the bravest. He’s the smartest. And he gets you. It’s always him.”

“There is nothing wrong with you,” Seokjin had argued back, being careful not to touch him. His lips still tingled and there was still a rush of endorphins pounding through his body in a spectacular manner. “And I care for you very much as a friend. But I love Namjoon, and I can’t make myself return your feelings.”

Jimin had left. He’d turned on heel without another word, palming roughly at his eyes, and left the apartment.

Seokjin had wanted to go after him. Jimin, from the very start, had been complicated, and a little terrible to deal with, and a lot confusing. But he was a good person. He had a kind soul underneath
all the scaring and trauma, and Jimin deserved better. Even if Seokjin couldn’t be the one to give him better, Jimin still deserved it.

So Seokjin had wanted to go after him, to shake him and insist again that there was nothing wrong with Jimin, and that he was worthy of being loved, and that one day, everything would line up perfectly for him. Especially since it wasn’t safe for Bangtan members to be out by themselves, even in their own territory, and Seokjin didn’t think he could ever forgive himself if something happened to Jimin.

But he hadn’t. Because he’d known any more words between them could turn hostile. Any more interaction could turn hateful. And they could break their friendship even more than it already was.

“You look,” Jungkook said, an elbow on the table, his chin in his palm, “upset. Or kind of constipated. That why I asked you if you were feeling okay.”

It seemed unlikely that Jimin would tell anyone at his failed confession. He was probably filled with embarrassment and wouldn’t want to share that. So it was up to Seokjin to keep it under wraps.

Jungkook, who was his younger brother by many years, could be ridiculously over protective. Seokjin blamed himself, for indulging his brother’s greedy need for constant affection and attention, which eventually manifested itself in over protectiveness. And if Jungkook found out that Jimin had kissed him—had said he loved him, Jungkook would almost certainly start something with his roommate. Jungkook would feel the need to jump to Seokjin’s defense, and would be angry to the point of causing a major problem.

And then there was Namjoon to consider.

Seokjin would never tell Namjoon. Or at least not until they were older, and the matter was long since in the past. Because if Namjoon knew that one of his most trusted men had kissed the person he was in love with …

Seokjin couldn’t be responsible for ruining Bangtan. He couldn’t be the reason that Bangtan imploded and went the way of groups like Shinhwa and AOA. Those groups had been torn apart from the inside, and dissolved into interpersonal conflicts that were more destructive than any outside threat.

That couldn’t happen. Not right now, not with Bangtan in conflict with Infinite. That sort of thing could get someone Seokjin loved, killed.

“It’s nothing,” Seokjin insisted. “I’m just nervous. Maybe dad won’t show.”

“Please,” Jungkook scoffed, tapping his fingers on the low table. “He only has three or four months to live. That’s three to four months to nag us to death and tell us how much of a disappointment we are. He wouldn’t give that up for anything.”

Seokjin watched the twisting of Jungkook’s face carefully. It was clear he wasn’t okay with their father’s illness, though how could he be? And he wasn’t accepting it either as evidenced by his joking tone. But he also didn’t seem to be in the more common denial stage. All in all, Jungkook’s reaction to the whole matter was just creating tension and anxiety in Seokjin, who fully expected everything to go badly at any second.

Seokjin knew for sure they were in uncharted territory and he hated it. He couldn’t properly gauge what came next, or how he or Jungkook would react.

Jungkook interrupted, pointing out, “There he is now. Set your worries aside.”
Seokjin perked, raising a hand towards his father who was scanning the packed noodle house with a crucial eye.

It was maybe a little unfair that Seokjin had chosen the noodle house that Namjoon’s grandparents ran. It was his territory now in a way, and from the smell in the air to the regular customers, it all made him a bit more relaxed. And if anything went wrong with the meeting, Seokjin knew Namjoon’s grandmother would console him with amazing food.

“Nice restaurant,” his father said critically, in a way that Seokjin knew wasn’t a compliment.

“They have the best noodles in Seoul,” Seokjin pointed out and Jungkook nodded in agreement.

“Noodles,” Seokjin’s father said almost snappishly.

Filled with a sudden and overwhelming desire to defend the restaurant, Seokjin leaned forward to confront him, almost happy that their father had choose to sit next to Jungkook.

But Jungkook beat him to speaking, interjecting in a cold way, “You don’t look sick.”

That wasn’t entirely true. Seokjin’s eye caught the subtler differences that any trained physician would be able to see. From the weight loss, to the thinned hair, to the wrinkles and sunken eyes that hadn’t been there so much as six months ago, to the shaking hands, the signs all added up quickly enough.

Seokjin got up, stating, “I’m going to go order for us.” He needed to get away for a second, more shaken than expected by the mortality of his father staring him in the face.

He heard his father said, “Give it another few weeks. You’ll be helping me to the bathroom by then.”

Seokjin walked faster.

“My Jin,” Namjoon’s grandmother greeted when he stuck his head back through the door that led to the kitchen. She kissed is cheeks wetly and stated, “Namjoon should come by soon. Do you want to wait upstairs for him?”

“No, thank you,” he said, giving her and the cook a proper and respectful bow. “I’m here with my brother and father.”

The older woman arched an eyebrow and stated, “Your brother.”

Seokjin winced. “Did he do something bad?” Jungkook wasn’t a bad kid, but he knew how to get into trouble, and he could be mischievous at times.

“Nah,” the cook called out, a hearty laugh following. “But he can eat more than a grown man. When he comes in the door, we mark the meal down as a loss in profits, not a gain.”

Seokjin grinned and bowed once more. “I promise, I’ll make sure he only eats a respectable amount this time. But this is my father’s first time coming here, so I want show him the best noodle house in Seoul.”

“Korea,” Namjoon’s grandmother corrected.

“In Korea,” Seokjin agreed, grin not falling away. He offered a few more words of polite conversation and then ducked away, order placed and Namjoon’s grandmother promising the best noodles his father had ever eaten.
“Sorry it took so long,” Seokjin apologized as he returned to the table. His father and Jungkook didn’t look to be the middle of a fight, which was good, but there was no hiding the awkwardness on Jungkook’s face, either.

Unexpectedly, and with the worst timing possible, their father stated, “I want to be cremated and have my ashes placed next to your mother and sister’s.”

Jungkook started visibly.

Seokjin asked, “You want to talk about that right now?”

Their father gave Seokjin a plain look. “Isn’t that the point of this meeting?”

“No,” Seokjin said right away, Jungkook going pale. “We wanted to meet with you so we could decide how we’re going to handle the next few months as a family. We want to be together. We want to use the time wisely. We don’t want to sit around talking about your burial plans.”

Seokjin’s father shrugged. “It’s in my will, in any case. Follow the instructions I left.”

Seokjin felt his shoulders fall. He could have guessed his father’s plans even without being told. If Seokjin could admit to being a little greedy, he probably would have preferred to keep his father’s ashes in an urn in his apartment, but he would absolutely make sure that his father’s ashes ended up with his mother’s and sister’s. Seokjin expected his own ashes to go in there as well eventually.

“We can talk about that later,” Seokjin insisted, wanting to get rid of the topic right away. “Right now we should focus on working on us. I mean, working on the relationship that the three of us have with each other, and how we can make it better.”

“This isn’t a fairy tale, Seokjin,” his father said roughly.

“No,” Seokjin agreed. “And we can’t fix the major problems with us in a few months. We let them get too out of hand and too complicated for there to be any kind of quick fix. But we can put everything aside and make this time count. We can be honest and caring and loving with each other. We can be a family.”

His father’s silence was something, as was the odd expression on his face.

“Well,” Jungkook said, clearing his throat and looking at Seokjin a bit nervously, “I’ve been thinking about college.”

“Oh?” their father asked, even more surprised than Seokjin.

“Yeah,” Jungkook confirmed, rubbing a hand across the back of his head. “I was thinking, maybe I could take some music classes?”

“Music?” Seokjin asked.

“And dance,” Jungkook snuck in.

Seokjin remembered Jungkook being a small child, always singing and dancing around, even to music only he could hear. Like most young boys, he’d wanted to be a police officer and a fire fighter, and then an astronaut. But Jungkook had also wanted to be a singer, and a dancer, and he’d always shown an affinity for the arts.

“You’re interested in that professionally?” Seokjin asked.
“Suga,” Jungkook hastened to say, “is really good at making up lyrics. He can do it free style and jot them down and he does it just for fun. Then Jimin will start humming a melody, and V will match it up with a hook, and Hobi likes to make up dances to go with what they came up with—and I sing. I started to realize, I like that. Even if it’s just for fun, I like it. I like to sing, I like to dance, and even if I don’t make a career out of it, it’s the kind of hobby I’d like to put some real time and effort towards.”

Seokjin shot their father a warning glance as a look is disbelief passed over his face and the man said, “Music and dance? That’s nothing but a waste of money.”

“No,” Seokjin shot in gently, trying to cushion the blow. “It’s not a waste of money if it’s something Jungkook likes. I think, if he has the spare time and can still balance all his other responsibilities, he should get to do what he wants.”

Jungkook gave a quick nod. “I want to learn how to read and write music. I want to learn an instrument.”

Seokjin looked back to his father, some kind of pleading urge on his face for the man not to ruin things.

After a second more, their father asked Jungkook, “I expect you’d want me to pay for this?”

A stunned expression crossed Jungkook’s face. “I … I have some money. I …”

Seokjin told him firmly. “I’ll help you pay. Tuition fees are manageable for a few classes. The both of us will be able to afford it.”

“You can’t,” their father broke in to Seokjin, “even afford all the things your clinic needs. How would you pay for his classes?”

Seokjin breathed out sharply through his nose.

And Jungkook, eyes falling away, said quietly, “It was stupid anyway. I need to focus on the things I have now.”

“No,” Seokjin snapped, voice raising in anger. “It’s not stupid. And Jungkook, if you want to go to college to study music, even if it’s just a hobby, I’ll make sure you get to.” His eyes cut to his father who had an almost amused expression on his face. “In fact, I have a new car that I can sell, apparently, and that should pay for the first semester at least.”

Gigantic bowls of noodles arrived at their table before anyone could say anything else, followed by trays full of side dishes and tall glasses of water, soda, and a cup of tea for Seokjin’s father.

“I can’t ask you to do that,” Jungkook told Seokjin, his foot bumping his brother’s under the table.

“You’re not asking,” Seokjin said, snapping his chopsticks apart. “I’m offering.”

Seokjin watched his father stir around the contents of his bowl for a few moments, then the man said, “You’ll take one mathematics class, and either one science, or one foreign language—preferably English, Japanese or Mandarin.”

“Huh?” Jungkook asked, head cocking in surprise.

Seokjin was equally as unsure, asking, “What does any of that mean?”
Their father turned to give Jungkook a serious look. “Your brother doesn’t seem to think that forcing you to take certain classes can be beneficial to you in any way, but I beg to differ. Whether music is a hobby or not, mathematics, science, language, these are all skills and tools that you’ll need no matter what you decide to do with your life. So you’ll take one math class a semester, and either one foreign language, or one science class. You’ll also pass both those classes well above an average score. In exchange, I’ll pay for the rest of the classes you want to take as well, any additional classes or supplemental lessons towards your goals, and give you additional money for living expenses so you can focus on your education. This is non-negotiable, and my death does not end our agreement in any way.”

“Are you serious?” Jungkook demanded.

Seokjin could have cried, and Jungkook looked like he might. It was beyond generous for their father to offer something like that, especially knowing how he felt about the arts in general.

“If you fail to make substantial grades, or if your attendance drops,” their father warned, “this agreement becomes void. I will have someone checking, after I’m gone, to make sure the requirements are met. But otherwise… take the classes you want. Study what you want. Do what you want.”

Seokjin hid his smile behind his hands as Jungkook launched himself at their father, wrangling him up into a fierce hug. Jungkook thanked him loudly and profusely and Seokjin thought that maybe, if their luck held, they were going to be okay.

“Eat,” their father said, pushing at Jungkook like he was a bother. “Eat and don’t waste perfectly good food.”

Seokjin scooped noodles into his own mouth, meeting his father’s eyes for just a second. His father looked a little too genuinely happy for Seokjin to really believe what had just transpired, but on the off chance they weren’t all having a good dream, he wasn’t about to spoil anything.

It was towards the end of the meal when Namjoon’s familiar and welcome face appeared in the noodle house.

Seokjin hadn’t warned Namjoon that he was coming anywhere near Bangtan territory, though his underlings had probably reported his presence ages ago. Still, he could understand the look of surprise on Namjoon’s face when he spied Seokjin’s father at the table, an unknown elder man to him.

Seokjin waved him over before he could give it a second thought.

It wasn’t until Namjoon was nearly at the table when Seokjin realized it counted as a first official meeting between Namjoon and someone in Seokjin’s family other than Jungkook. He didn’t know if Namjoon was ready for that, but there was no turning back.

“Kim Namjoon,” Seokjin introduced, getting to his feet to do the introduction properly. “This is my father, Kim Soohee.”

Namjoon bowed low, lower than Seokjin had ever seen him, and he breathed out some relief. At least Namjoon was taking the meeting seriously.

“Father,” Seokjin said, pointedly, “this is the man I’ve been seeing. Romantically. Kim Namjoon. I’ve been—we’ve been dating.” He was stumbling over his words like he was sixteen and in a relationship for the first time, but his nerves were threatening to get the best of him suddenly.
Namjoon held out his hand, still bent slightly at the waist, and then dropped down when he realized his stance placed him above Seokjin’s father. He managed to get out clearly, though Seokjin could tell he was nervous, “It’s very nice to meet you. I’m honored.”

“Sit,” Seokjin’s father commanded, authoritative in his tone that offered no resistance for argument. “I need to speak with the man who has my son’s attention.”

Seokjin quickly slid over so make room for Namjoon, and when he was seated, he squeezed his hand out of view.

“Kim Namjoon, was it?” Seokjin’s father asked, and Seokjin’s stomach dropped. “What do you do for a living? I assume you have started down a significant career path at your age.”

Seokjin shared a worried look with Jungkook who’s eyes were wide.

It wasn’t like they could mention that Namjoon was the head of Bangtan.

Seokjin saw the identical look of uncertainly on Namjoon’s face and stepped in to tell his father, “Namjoon helps keep the streets safe.”

“Police?” Seokjin’s father asked with raised eyebrows.

Namjoon shook his head and said, “Private security.”

The way the older man’s eyes narrowed meant that Seokjin’s father didn’t approve one bit. It would have been different if he was police, but private security? Help for hire? Seokjin knew what his father was thinking.

Before Seokjin could say more, his father was commenting, “The last person Seokjin dated was an orthodontist. The one before him? Career military.”

“Yes,” Seokjin huffed out, “And before that was a museum curator. I don’t think the previous occupations of my former romantic interests have anything to do with Namjoon. Dad, please.”

“Private security,” he heard his father mumble out.

Jungkook volunteered, “Ra--Namjoon’s grandparents own this restaurant. Best noodles in Seoul.”

With a chuckle, Seokjin said, “Best noodles in Korea.”

A pleased look finally replaced the critical one on Seokjin’s father’s face. “They just might be,” he admitted.

“Sir,” Namjoon started, “I want you to know that my feelings for Jin are serious. They’re real and I’m treating them as such. I will always respect him, I will never hurt him, and you don’t have to worry. I’m going to take great care of him.”

Jungkook was digging back into his noodles when Seokjin told his father, “Namjoon and I are serious.” He gave Namjoon’s hand a firm squeeze and declared, “I love him.”

He felt Namjoon’s fingers go loose in his grip and hated that the words had just slipped out. He’d wanted to make the moment more special. Namjoon deserved special. But Seokjin was feeling defensive all of the sudden, and he needed his father to understand what Namjoon meant to him. He loved Namjoon, and nothing, not even his father’s feelings on the matter, would change anything. It was just also true that even after so many years, and the strain on their relationship, he still wanted his
father’s approval. Whether it mattered in the end or not was unimportant. He just wanted his father to think Namjoon was good for him. He needed it, too.

Namjoon turned big, almost afraid eyes on Seokjin, and asked in a murmur, barely above a whisper, “You love me?”

Seokjin squeezed his hand hard and repeated, “I love you, Namjoon.”

Finally, Namjoon squeezed back.

“That is serious then,” his father said, taking a drink from his tea while eyeing the both of them. “But you’ve been serious before.”

He really hadn’t. Well. There’d been one. There’d been one person before Namjoon that Seokjin had thought he might end up spending the rest of his life with. He’d loved someone deeply and wholly, and almost given everything to make the relationship work. But then it had come down to a choice. It had been the person Seokjin loved, or the clinic, and it was an ultimatum.

Seokjin had never been one for being backed into a corner, so he’d chosen himself, and his own future, and honestly, the clinic.

“Namjoon supports me, dad,” Seokjin stated, feeling Namjoon’s fingers clench at his supportively. “He trusts me, is kind to me, and most importantly, he understands that I’m a workaholic. He knows there are going to be days when I have to work the entire time. He knows sometimes I’ll have to put the clinic first, I’ll have to put my patients first, and I can’t compromise on that.”

“And he will,” Seokjin’s father chuckled in Namjoon’s direction. “He’ll pay more attention to that clinic than you most days. Can you accept that?”

Namjoon didn’t hesitate to say, “Jin is a doctor. His life is dedicated to helping others and there is nothing more important than that. I will always support that. I’m not saying it won’t be hard, or that we won’t fight sometimes, but I’m not going anywhere unless Jin wants me to.”

Seokjin turned to him, not knowing until that moment how badly he needed to hear the words. He’d known Namjoon loved him, known for a while, but to hear more was …

“I really love you,” Seokjin breathed out, wanting so desperately to lean over and kiss him.

He heard Jungkook say, presumably to his father, “They do this all the time, although it was never this bad before. It must be serious. Please tell me it kind of makes you sick, too.”

Namjoon gave him a sweet smile. “I’ll help you hide your brother’s body later on.”

Seokjin laughed, feeling himself become less tense as the seconds ticked by. “Deal.”

“Private security,” Seokjin heard his father say one last time, shaking his head to emphasize his feelings on the matter. “Kim Namjoon.”

Namjoon straightened up at his name. “Sir?”

Seokjin could tell that his father’s appetite was severely impacted by either his illness, his previous treatments, or a combination of both. But he’d managed at least half his bowl of food, and almost a full third of the side dishes. So it was of no surprise that his father told Namjoon, “My son is right about one thing. This is the best meal I’ve had in Korea in years, maybe more. But the real question is this: do you serve alcohol? I could do with a drink.”
Seokjin rounded on him. “You shouldn’t be drinking right now.”

Jungkook advised the table, “Doctor Kim is now with us. Everyone, eat your vegetables, no alcohol, and keep the candy to a minimum.”

“You’re so funny,” Seokjin told him blandly. “But judging by the weight you’ve put on since you started living on your own, you could do to lay off the candy.”

Jungkook’s eyes were shiny in second and he wailed, “It’s not my fault! V eats candy all the time and he’s nice, so he shares. He literally has it all the time. Jin, come on, you know my willpower is weak. It’s not my fault. I’m not getting fat, right? I’m not. Say I’m not.”

Seokjin rolled his eyes. “Stop being overdramatic. You could put on a hundred pounds and though you’d be very unhealthy, you’d still be too cute and adorable for your own good.”

At the sound of a low chuckle from his father, Seokjin turned to find an amused smile on his face. It was the kind of smile Seokjin hadn’t seen in a long time.

Namjoon put a thoughtful hand to his chin and said, “We don’t serve alcohol here, Granny says there’s too many high school kids during the day and she doesn’t want them to get any ideas. But there’s a bar about a block from here. If you want some soju, that’s the place to go.”

Once more, Seokjin repeated, not caring at all if he sounded like a doctor, “You should not be drinking alcohol right now.”

His father palmed a hand down on the table and said decisively, “I think, Seokjin, for the next three or four months, I can do whatever I want.”

That was how, against all likelihood, Seokjin ended up in a bar with Namjoon, his father, and Jungkook, watching the father he’d never felt he pleased, become seriously inebriated.

“This is weird,” Jungkook said quietly, his shoulder brushing Seokjin’s as he leaned in closer to keep his voice low. Seokjin, who wasn’t a big drinker because of the medication he took, had managed one bottle of soju himself, and Jungkook had had almost less than that. Namjoon was the only one enjoying his second bottle. And then there was Seokjin and Jungkook’s father.

“I know,” Seokjin said, eyes ghosting over the rows of green bottles. “But he can’t keep going like this forever.”

“Have you ever seen him drink like this before?” Jungkook sighed. “Have you even ever seen him drunk at all?”

Softly, Seokjin said, “Once.”

He’d been ten, getting up after wetting the bed because of a particularly horrible night terror. Back then it had been an issue, his anxiety, his nervousness, his inability to sleep the night through. And despite how his father had begun pulling away, and the embarrassment he felt from wetting the bed, Seokjin had gone to find him.

His father hadn’t been in his bedroom, or the kitchen, or the living room. Instead he’d been on the floor of the master bathroom, weeping like a small child, reeking of alcohol and probably unable to see straight or speak correctly.

At such a young age, Seokjin hadn’t known what to make of the pathetic sight.
Now an adult, he still didn’t.

“Your father,” Namjoon said, moving closer to Seokjin, the smell of soju on his breath not appealing in the least bit, “is crazy good at drinking.”

Seokjin pursed his lips. Then he asked, “The people around here, they know who you are, right?”

Namjoon gave a serious nod. “Why?”

“Go ask the bartender to cut my father off.” Seokjin couldn’t stand to see the man waste away to what he’d seen before. “I think he’s had enough to drink.” Seokjin pinched Namjoon sharply. “And stop encouraging him.”

Namjoon leaned so close his forehead nearly bumped Seokjin’s. “The father of the man I love is telling me to drink with him. I can’t exactly say no, can I?”

Seokjin pointed towards the bartender. “Go, please.”

“Oh, okay.” Namjoon let his forehead rest against Seokjin’s for a half second. “But honestly the guy doesn’t seem like such a jerk with a few bottles of soju in him. I thought you might prefer him this way.”

Namjoon ambled off towards the bartender and Seokjin mumbled, “It’s the reason why he’s drinking that I’m most worried about.”

“I think,” Jungkook said seconds later, their father starting to tip in his seat, “that he’s at his limit.”

Seokjin made a noise of agreement. “Can you get his coat on him, please? I’ll drive him back to the apartment.”

Jungkook leaned over and plucked their father’s keys from his hanging jacket. “How about you go home with your boyfriend, and I take dad home in his car?”

Giving pause, Seokjin asked, “Why the generous offer?”

Jungkook made a face. “I know I give you and Rap Mon crap, but honesty, Jin, you’re the happiest with him. Things are about to get bad. Really bad. You deserve to have a couple more nice nights with him.”

Seokjin caught Jungkook’s wrist and held it firmly. “Promise me, Jungkook. Promise me you won’t be on ground zero for whatever fight is about the break out. I don’t want you getting hurt. I don’t want you anywhere near the violence.”

Careful of their father’s presence, Jungkook replied, “I know what I signed up for. And you do too. Bad stuff is going to happen no matter what. I’ll try to steer clear, but I’m fighting against Infinite for you, too.”

“Don’t be stupid,” Seokjin bit out harshly. “Don’t talk about hurting others in my name. We’ve been down that road before, Jungkook.”

Jungkook let out a deep breath. “What I mean is, if Bangtan beats Infinite, if Bangtan takes Infinite out and takes their territory, it means we acquire your clinic, too. That would mean getting community help and funding. And you wouldn’t have to pay that bullshit protection money every month.”
“Jungkook,” Seokjin asked, watching Namjoon at the bar, “this is going happen no matter what, right? The fighting over Big Bang’s territory?”

“Yeah,” Jungkook said. “And just because there’s an understanding that all the gangs are supposed to be civil to each other until the tenth, doesn’t mean there’s anything in this world keeping anyone from starting things early. Infinite could go to war with Bangtan tomorrow, or Rap Mon could decide we need to strike first. There’s just no way to tell. But it’s going to happen. No matter what.”

From the bar Namjoon looked back at him and winked.

“Sunggyu is going to try to kill Namjoon, isn’t he? All of Infinite will be gunning directly for Namjoon?”

“Probably,” Jungkook guessed. “It’s about the numbers and the power right now. But everyone knows, the fastest way to kill something is to cut the head off. If Sunggyu is killed, Woohyun might hold things together for a shot while, but eventually they’d fold. And if Namjoon died, Suga might manage for a while, too. But even Suga wouldn’t be able to hold Bangtan together forever.”

It killed him to say it, and the words were like a heavy lump in his throat, but Seokjin said, “Don’t put yourself in front of him.” It felt like a betrayal of the love he felt for Namjoon, but he had to say what was on his mind.

Jungkook’s eyebrows pulled together. “What?”

“If Infinite if gunning for Namjoon,” Seokjin said shakily, “and if it comes down to you or him, I want you to make the right call. I’m asking you to put yourself first. Protect yourself. Do not sacrifice your life for his.”

“But…” Lines were creasing deep on Jungkook’s face. “But you love him.”

“I love him,” Seokjin agreed. “I love him very much and I want a future with him more than you can possibly understand. But understand this, Jungkook. You are my brother. You are the first person I loved after mom, and the most important person in the world to me now. I would be heartbroken if I lost Namjoon. But I would die if I lost you.”

“Aish,” Jungkook said sharply, looking away. “That’s not right. I’m only your brother. Rap Mon is the guy you’re going to marry. I know he is.”

“Hey.” Seokjin caught Jungkook’s face with both his hands. “I remember the second you came home from the hospital, with your scrunched-up face, splotchy skin and bad temperament. Everyone said you were just the ugliest baby they’d ever seen, and your head had gotten a little squished on the way out, so it was cone shaped.”

Jungkook pouted openly.

“But I,” Seokjin continued, “I saw you and I loved you immediately. I wanted to hold you and play with you and make you my world. You smiled first at me. You said my name before anyone else’s. And when mom died, I made sure I did everything for you that she would have. In a way, you’re like my child, Jungkook. And no matter what I feel for Namjoon, even as it’s a different kind of love, you can’t be replaced in my heart. Do you understand?”

Jungkook gave the barest hint of a nod.

Seokjin released his face. “You’re brave and loyal, so asking you to stay out of this completely is ridiculous, and would never happen. But I’m telling you to not throw yourself in front of anyone.
Don’t be reckless. God, please, Jungkook, don’t think you have to protect anyone or sacrifice yourself. If only for me.”

Jungkook dangled their father’s keys in front of Seokjin as he cleared his throat and said awkwardly with too much emotion written on his face, “Stop worrying. Jin, Please, okay? Go home with Rap Mon … touch each other only with platonic and family friendly hands … and I’ll get dad home and to bed without any fuss.”

“Okay,” Namjoon announced, coming back to the table. “The tab is officially closed and paid for. No more alcohol will be served, and we can go whenever you’re ready.”

“Good,” Seokjin said, forcing a smile. He let Namjoon pull him up to his feet and said, “Jungkook has graciously offered to take dad home so that we can go back to your apartment and place our family friend hands on each other in the most platonic way possible.”

Namjoon peered at Jungkook to say, “I can tell you right now, if I take your brother back to my apartment, I’m going to put my explicit hands on his amazing hips, and kiss him in the most sexual way possible, with tongue, before I drag him to my bed and--”

“OKAY!” Jungkook shouted, shooting up several feet and pulling at his and Seokjin’s father who was lazily sprawled against the tabletop. “It’s time to go dad. Say bye to Seokjin and his pervert boyfriend.”

His father gave Seokjin a drunk wave and let Jungkook heave him out of his seat.

“Dive safe,” Seokjin called after them, watching with a concerned expression as the whole of his family disappeared from sight.

“That,” Namjoon said, his arm coming around Seokjin’s waist, “wasn’t as bad as I was picturing.”

It was odd, to have Namjoon touching him so openly in public, but also nice. If it was the alcohol loosing Namjoon’s rigorous fears about them being tied romantically, Soekjin vowed to ply him with alcohol more frequently.

“How did you imagine it going?” Seokjin tugged Namjoon towards the door and onto the street. He wondered where Namjoon had parked, and couldn’t see it from the front of the bar.

Namjoon shrugged. “I don’t know. I mean, I know your father works for the government, and you’re super, super smart. I mean, you’re a doctor. And Jungkook doesn’t know how to apply himself, but he’s no louse either. I guess I imagined your dad being this rocket scientist who practically spoke in a different language and thought I had rocks for brains.”

“Well,” Seokjin laughed. “I can’t imagine my dad thinks your very smart, working in ‘private security’, but that’s good for you, because you can knock his socks off when you do open your mouth, and the both of you are completely sober, and he realizes that you’re one of the smartest people I know.”

“Thanks,” Namjoon said, their cheeks brushing for a second as they started walking, Seokjin feeling the graze of lips. “Your dad is a tough nut to crack. Maybe I’ll get him to like me one day.”

His breath puffing out in front of him, Seokjin said thoughtfully, “I think it’s something noteworthy that a police team didn’t swarm the bar fifteen minutes in, escort you outside, and then have you disappear from sight for the next twenty-four hours, only to have you reappear halfway across town, confused, lost, and in your underwear.”
Namjoon jerked to a stop. “What?”

Head cocking, Seokjin asked, “ Didn’t I tell you what department of the government my dad works in?”

Going a little pale, Namjoon shook his head silently.

“He’s the head director,” Seokjin stated, getting Namjoon walking again, “of our homeland security department. Basically, he’s in charge of keeping Korea safe from the inside out. And trust me, if he didn’t like you, or if he thought you were a threat in any way, you’d be across town already, being interrogated, lost for a day or so, ending up in your underwear, and so and so forth.”

“Holy shit,” Namjoon barked out in a laugh. “I’ve got to make sure I stay on his good side. Six months from now I don’t want to be at the bottom of the Han River because we had our first huge blowup.”

Namjoon pulled ahead, commenting more about Seokjin’s father, some of his voice getting lost in the wind.

And all Seokjin could think about was how much he wanted his father to be around in six months, and how it would never happen.

“Seokjin?” Namjoon paused ahead of him, a gentle frown on his face. “You okay? I parked just up here. I think I’m okay to drive, but you’d better do it just to be safe. You had way less to drink than me.”

Seokjin forced a smile on his face. “I’m fine,” he insisted, hurrying to catch up to Namjoon. He let out a breath of relief when he was securely tucked under Namjoon’s arm and partially hidden from the cold surrounding them.

Namjoon hedged, “You sure you’re okay?”

Seokjin’s head tilted up for a chaste kiss and he responded, “I’m sure.”

He was less sure that he was okay than he was willing to admit. But it was late at night, and cold outside, and he loved Namjoon. So for the time being, that was enough. In the morning, he was certain, he would let his unease get the best of him. Tonight, however, he was going home with someone he loved, and his family felt like it was mending a little.

That felt like a win. And after what felt like a string of losses, Seokjin would take it without hesitation.

“Let’s go back to your place,” Seokjin prompted.

Namjoon hummed happily, pulled him in a little closer, and off they went.
Chapter Twenty-Five

Seokjin was jarred awake by the shrill ringing of Namjoon’s cell phone.

Blinking against the darkness of the bedroom, Seokjin groaned and tried to burrow his face further against Namjoon’s chest. He felt Namjoon’s arms tighten around him and held out hope for just a second, that whoever was inconsiderate enough to call at a time when the sun wasn’t up, would stop soon.

The ringing didn’t stop.

“Your phone,” Seokjin huffed out, desperate to get back to sleep, comforted by Namjoon’s presence and the warmth of the heater blowing across them.

“Ignore,” Namjoon grunted.

The blanket slipped down Seokjin’s naked back as he leaned over Namjoon’s body to glare at the clock. It was three in the morning. They’d only been asleep for a few hours and Seokjin was going to murder whoever was calling.

Heavy, frantic thumps echoed through the apartment and Namjoon sat up so fast he dislodged Seokjin.

“Is that the door?” Seokjin asked, the banging continuing and only getting louder.

Namjoon, as if he hadn’t just been asleep, threw his legs to the side of the bed and stood easily. He reached into the bedside drawer and withdrew a dark object. Even without light in the room, Seokjin knew it was the gun Namjoon always slept near.

“Stay here,” Namjoon said, the gun held low but in front of him, his feet taking him to the bedroom door.

Seokjin rolled his eyes and wasted no time following him.

He could hear the huff of annoyance from Namjoon who, as they entered the hallway, ordered, “At least stay behind me.”

Distantly Seokjin heard his own cell phone ringing in the bedroom.

Seokjin placed a hand against Namjoon’s bare back and followed suit, inching towards the front door.

Namjoon took a quick but cautious look through the peep hole and then snapped out, “For godsakes, Suga.” He threw open the latches on the front door, lowered the gun and revealed the man in question on the other side.

Seokjin peeked over Namjoon’s shoulder to take in the panicked expression on Suga’s face. “Don’t you have a key to this apartment for emergencies?”

“What the fuck are you doing here this early in the morning,” Namjoon ground out just after Seokjin’s words, tucking his gun behind him in the waistband of his pants.

Suga demanded loudly. “Don’t you answer your phone! There’s a fucking emergency!” He spared a brief glance to Seokjin to say, “Excuse me if I didn’t have time to stop and look for the key,
considering the shit show going on outside.”

Behind Suga, Seokjin could see an anxious Taehyung nearly bouncing off his feet. And there were a dozen, unrecognizable men just beyond that.

“What’s going on?” Namjoon asked immediately.

“Get dressed!” Suga shouted, spinning on his feet. “Get down to the car! And leave your boyfriend here!”

Suga dashed off and Taehyung, with a white face, said, “Everything three blocks into the West end is on fire.”

Namjoon was already running back towards the bedroom, and Seokjin stood there a bit stupidly, stunned.

“On fire?” Seokjin asked, dumbfounded and unable to process the information.

Taehyung gave a jerky nod. “From Yoonguk’s corner store, down to Nayoung’s bakery, and that was just the last time I checked. It was spreading fast. We need to go.”

The shock passed as Namjoon came charging back to the front door, dressed in a heavy sweater on top of his pajama bottoms, tugging on running shoes and hopping a bit as he fought to get them on without untying the laces first.

Namjoon squeezed his shoulder as he passed by Seokjin, calling back to him, “Stay with Taehyung.” Then Namjoon was gripping Taehyung in what looked like a painful way by the front of his shirt, saying, “You watch him like your life depends on it.”

It was like observing a drill sergeant, Seokjin realized, with the way Taehyung snapped into action, and how Namjoon began issuing orders to the other men, almost at a full run towards Suga and the car.

Seokjin watched Namjoon until he was out of sight, and then simply stood there, half inside the apartment, half out, his breath puffing in front of him as the cold weather seeped in all around.

“Taehyung,” Seokjin said, looking finally to the other man.

“It’ll be okay,” Taehyung said, but he didn’t sound confident. “How about we go inside? I don’t want you to catch a cold out here.”

Seokjin shook his head sharply, his toes curling in chill, his arms crossed against his own bare chest. “Wait,” he ordered, holding his ground. “You said the fire is three blocks into the West end?”

Nodding, Taehyung pushed gently at Seokjin, making him step back. “I’m serious about you catching a cold. Rap Mon would kill me.”

The door was firmly closed behind them before Seokjin dared to voice the fear that was bubbling in his chest. “Taehyung … that’s where the noodle house is, isn’t it?” The noodle house. The restaurant that Namjoon’s grandparents owned. It was in the west end. “Was it … on fire too.”

Taehyung pursed his lips.

“It is, isn’t it?” Seokjin asked, worriedly gnawing at his bottom lip. “That’s why Namjoon ran out of here like that, right? That’s why he …” The look on his face had been one of utmost fear.
“I’m sure--” Taehyung started.

“Stay here,” Seokjin demanded, then he was running back to the bedroom, tripping over his shoes on the way, and almost slamming painfully into the door Namjoon had left ajar. He roughly yanked his cardigan from the night before over his head and was nearly dressed when Taehyung slid into view.

“What are you doing?” Taehyung asked.

“There’s a fire,” Seokjin reiterated, as if Taehyung needed to be told. And he was terrified that Namjoon’s family might be right in the center of it. But he was equally as worried about everyone else in the area. “Has the fire department arrived yet?”

“I don’t know,” Taehyung said, shrugging. “Why? Seriously, Jin, what are you doing?”

Seokjin retrieved his keys from his side of the bed’s table, and it occurred to him in that moment that he had a side. Namjoon always slept on the right, the side closest to the door, and Seokjin had the left. Namjoon’s bedside table held his gun, his reading glasses, and packs of gum he chewed like crazy because he’d once smoked. Seokjin’s side had a book, a spare seven day allowance of his medication, and a glass of water that he needed because the pills he took always made him thirsty.

Namjoon had never broached the idea of him moving in, never even hinted at it. But when the time did come, and it would eventually, Seokjin knew they’d have a good deal of things already figured out, including their sleeping arrangements.

“I’m a doctor,” Seokjin told him, and he made a mental note in the future to pack a medical bag to store at Namjoon’s apartment. “And there’s a fire. What do you think I’m doing?”

“No,” Taehyung said right away, squaring his feet shoulder length apart like he was settling in for a fight. “Absolutely not.”

Head cocking, Seokjin asked, “You’re assuming that you get to have any say in this.” Then he shouldered his way past Taehyung who he knew would be afraid to grab him in any way. Taehyung was probably the only member of Bangtan still convinced he was fragile like glass. Seokjin had all the faith in the world that Taehyung would wise up to how durable he was eventually, but for the moment, Taehyung worried and fretted, and was the source of endless amusement on Seokjin’s part.

“The hell I don’t,” Taehyung said, following closely behind him as Seokjin went straight for his shoes. “You can’t go out there. You can’t go near that fire.”

“You can’t stop me,” Seokjin shot back. “If it’s a serious fire, several blocks already, there are bound to be people in need of help.”

Taehyung put a hand on the wall in front of Seokjin, stopping him from moving forward. A little hoarse, he demanded, “Then let the professionals handle this. The fire department wasn’t there yet when Suga and I came here, but they probably are by now. Firefighters are trained in basic first aid. You do not need to be there.”

Seokjin grabbed the fabric of Taehyung’s sleeve. “Namjoon’s grandparent’s noodle house is there. They could be hurt. They could be--”

“They could be perfectly fine,” Taehyung argued back. “We don’t know. That’s my point. We don’t know anything. But professionals who are trained to handle these kinds of crisis situations, should handle them. And you … you know I can’t let you go near that kind of danger. Rap Mon would--”

Seokjin dangled his keys in front of Taehyung’s face like a taunt. “For argument’s sake, let’s say that
the fire department is already on the scene. That’s fantastic. But there might be more injured people
than they’re capable of handling. I have well above average medical training. I know how to keep a
cool head. And if I can help even one person, I’m going. You are not going to pull that protection
crap with me, Taehyung.”

“Jin,” Taehyung groaned.

“Are you coming with me?” Seokjin asked, sidestepping him to head back towards the front door.
“Or are you going to stand here and whine?”

“I’m going to get killed,” Taehyung corrected, but he was already following Seokjin. “And it’s going
to be all your fault.”

Braving once more out into the cold of the very early morning, Seokjin called back to him, “I’ll say
nice things at your funeral.”

Taehyung gave a sarcastic laugh.

They saw the orange blaze against the dark sky long before they saw the fire. And Seokjin even
smelled it, before seeing it, too.

The fire, which must have grown, not shrunk by the time they got there, was hard to see properly
because of the jammed-up streets. There were cars everywhere, most of them parked and abandoned
in the streets, and as Seokjin tried to push forward, there were people everywhere trying to get away.

“This is so stupid,” Taehyung said from the passenger seat of the car, texting furiously. Namjoon had
taken off with Suga, and so Taehyung and Seokjin had taken Namjoon’s car, one more thing that
Taehyung was sure was going to get him killed.

“What are you doing?” Seokjin asked, trying to peer ahead to see if they could go further at all, or if
it was time to walk the rest of the distance. “Tattling on me to Namjoon?”

Taehyung shot him a dark look. “I should be. But no, Jin, despite what you clearly think, I’m texting
Hobi. I told him to swing by the nearby hospital, which for your information is completely out of the
way and swipe us some stuff for you. You’re welcome.”

Seokjin was impressed. “I--”

The sound of Taehyung’s phone receiving a series of text messages interrupted anything else that
might have been said.

“What?” Taehyung demanded, glaring at his phone.

“What is it?” Seokjin asked, taking off his seat belt. The road was a giant parking lot. They were
going to have to walk the rest of the way.

“The fire department isn’t here,” Taehyung snapped out. “Why the hell is there no one here to help?”

Determinedly, Seokjin said, “I’m here to help. Let’s go.” He threw open his door and got out of the
car.

When the fire finally did come into sight, orange and red and menacing in every way possible,
Seokjin was floored by the intensity of it. He’d treated his fair share of fire victims before, and seen
the aftermath of an inferno. But he’d never witnessed a fire burning at its peak before. He’d never
seen its power and ferocity as it leveled buildings and did worse to people.
He skidded to a stop as he was blasted by heat, eyes jerking everywhere, unsure if he could even get close enough to help anyone.

“Oh, shit,” Taehyung said, coming up behind him. “We should not be here. Seriously, Jin, we really should not be here.”

Worse was the wind blowing through Seokjin’s hair, brushing up against his body like a threat. The wind would carry the fire, stoke it, and be the biggest issue for any firefighters who managed to show up on the scene.

“There!” Seokjin shouted. He pointed ahead. A girl, her skin marred by soot and her face showing signs of burns, stumbled her way out onto the street, and then collapsed completely. “Help me,” Seokjin ordered, and then he went after her.

They couldn’t stay so close to the fire, that much was clear at the first shift of wind that nearly brought the flames down on them.

“Help me carry her,” Seokjin said, the girl having passed out and was currently breathing raggedly. “We need to move.”

They moved two streets over, dragging the girl at times, growing weary and worried with every step. Taehyung held onto her with a vice grip and Seokjin kept an eye on the fire behind them carefully.

“V!”

A couple of streets over and it felt like a whole new world. Bangtan’s members were streaming everywhere, had set up some kind of triage center, and were doing their best to fight the blaze on their own while evacuating the area.

But where were the fire fighters? Where were the paramedics and police? Why were the only people on the street Bangtan members and civilians?

Suga, his hair matted and dirty with smoke and soot, waved at them and jogged over.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Suga asked when he stopped to catch his breath.

Taehyung and Seokjin moved towards the triage area, depositing the girl with other, unconscious people who couldn’t be moved at the moment.

Seokjin dropped immediately to examine the girl, noting her strained breathing.

“He said he was coming,” Taehyung defended, out of breath from running with the girl. “He said he was coming no matter what, so I had no choice but to come with him.”

“It’s too dangerous here,” Suga said, having to shout to be overhead as a building nearby crumbled, going up in flames.

“Where’s Rap Mon?” Taehyung asked.

Seokjin did his best to listen to their conversation while tracking the pulse of the girl in front of him.

“Out there,” Suga breathed out sharply. “We can’t contain this fire, but we have to try. There are people trapped in their homes. We have to get them out. We have to--”

“Why aren’t the fire fighters here?” Seokjin interrupted snappier than he’d wanted to come across. He was simply scared for Namjoon, and for all the other people.
“We don’t know,” Suga answered, shoulders falling. “We don’t know why no one is here.”

In the distance, Seokjin heard screams.

“What about Namjoon’s grandparents?” Seokjin asked, gesturing to a member of Bangtan who was arriving, dragging a burned young man with him.

“I don’t know anything,” Suga said, sounding defeated. “But I have to get back to the frontlines.”

Taehyung reached out for him before he could go, asking, “Do you know where Hobi is? If Jin’s here, he can help these people, at least until the paramedics get here. I sent him to get some medical supplies.”

Suga was already pulling free of the grip and jogging away when he called back, “I don’t know where he is, but if I see him, I’ll send him your way!”

“Taehyung?” Seokjin called out.

Taehyung turned to him, looking forlorn. “What can I do to help you?”

The fire seemed to be moving away from them, which was something, and the homes directly around them were only slightly damaged.

“Okay,” Seokjin said, getting to his feet, and telling Taehyung, “I need you to get some guys, whoever you can spare, and kick down some doors.”

Taehyung’s eyes went wide. “Kick down some doors?”

Seokjin nodded. “I need water--get me all the bottled you can find, and clean fabric. I’ll take anything: sheets, towels, clothes, whatever. Then start checking the bathrooms of these homes. The average household has peroxide, rubbing alcohol, and basic supplies that I can use.”

Taehyung hesitated only for a moment, holding a hand out to Seokjin, nearly warning, “Stay here,” then he was off running, following orders.

Within minutes Seokjin had half a dozen helpers dumping an endless stream of medical supplies within arm’s reach.

“Hobi is on his way,” Taehyung stated, a little out of breath as he handed Seokjin a box of surgical gloves. “Here. Found these in a diabetic’s medicine cabinet. Right next to his medication. You can use them, right?”

Seokjin offered Taehyung a supportive smile. “Thank you.”

He got the gloves on and turned immediately back to his patients, ordering to Namjoon’s men, “Move that person over here. And start cleaning that wound there with this cloth here. None of you touch anything that is an open wound without putting these gloves on first, and we have a little bit of burn cream to go around, use it sparingly. Do not use the peroxide sparingly.”

It was almost amazingly beautiful how chaotic the scene was, but how fluidly and flawlessly the members of Bangtan followed his direction. It was as if they’d been drafted into his service as Seokjin’s most attentive nurses, and were taking their jobs extremely serious. None of them hesitated, none of them second guessed him, and there were even looks of awe on a couple of their faces as he issued commands. It was something he appreciated more than he thought they’d ever know.
When Hoeseok came upon them, which had to be less than twenty minutes later, he had several bags
worth of even better medical supplies, and better than that, word from the heart of the fire.

“Sorry I’m so late,” he apologized. “It was a pain in the ass getting here.”

“It’s fine,” Seokjin said. But Hoseok was barely paying attention to him at that point. He’d already
cought Taehyung by the wrist by then, and was tugging him into a relieved, sweet kiss.

“We’re okay,” Taehyung said softly, catching Hoseok around the waist. “Right? Okay?”

“Of course,” Hoseok said with a forced smile, sneaking a second kiss to the corner of Taehyung’s
mouth. “We’ll be okay.”

Seokjin hated to break the quiet moment of peace between the two of them, but he had to ask, “What
about Namjoon, Hoseok? Have you heard from him? Does anyone know where he is?”

“Rap Mon is fine,” Hoseok told Seokjin as he handed over the bags of supplies. “He and Jungkook
are at the front and they’re doing everything they can.”

Seokjin felt nauseous. “Jungkook’s in there?” That was ridiculous. Of course he was. Seokjin knew
his brother well, and Jungkook was always where the trouble was.

Hoseok nodded quickly. “They’re helping to evacuate people who can’t get out on their own.”

Angrily, Taehyung demanded, “Where the hell is the fire department?”

“On the way!” Hoeseok shouted loudly as a house collapsed at the end of the street, the wooden
beams falling in on themselves as the sound crashed down the street like a tidal wave.

“What’s taking so long?” Taehyung called back.

Hoseok shrugged.

“It doesn’t matter,” Seokjin said from where he was wrapping a badly burned arm in surgical gauze.
“Most of these people here are burned and in need of transportation to the nearest hospital. We need
ambulances in here. I suspect at least half of them are suffering from smoke inhalation, and that’s my
biggest fear.”

Seokjin himself felt a tightness to his chest, and breathing deep was a problem. There was too much
smoke in the air, and prolonged exposure was going to be a serious health hazard to everyone.

When the first fire truck came into view just after that, lights flashing and horn sounding, Seokjin
could have wept with relief. And soon after came a wave of ambulances, followed by police who
were able to help with securing the area and the evacuation still in progress.

As the minutes ticked by, fire trucks streaming water on the flames and paramedics loading up waves
of victims, Seokjin felt himself start to breathe easier. Things were less scary with every bit of extra
help that arrived, as the situation grew more and more in control.

“Jin,” Taehyung said, putting an arm at Seokjin’s elbow and pulling him closer. “We need to go.”

“Go?” Seokjin asked, startled.

“Yes,” Taehyung nodded. “The police are about to move from helpful to curious, and then to
accusatory. We need to get out of here before they draw any conclusions to us.”
Seokjin refused to move, digging in not matter how Taehyung pulled at him. “What about Namjoon? I can’t leave without knowing for sure that he’s okay. And what about his grandparents? Their noodle house is down there. They could be hurt … or …”

“Listen,” Taehyung said, leaning in close so their noses were almost brushing. “I will pick you up and throw you over my shoulder. Don’t think I won’t or that I can’t, just because you’re slightly taller. I’m way stronger than you, and far more determined. We need to go. Suga is having the high ranked members of Bangtan, that’s me and him and Hobi and now Jungkook, meet at one of our safe spots. Rap Mon will be there. You’ll see that he’s fine, and we’ll talk about what just happened. But no matter what, we can’t stay here. Neither of us can afford to be tied to this. Do you understand?”

Seokjin turned once more to look down the street. Most of the homes and buildings he could see were alight with dying embers. There was nothing more he wanted than to run down the street looking for Namjoon, checking to make sure his grandparents were okay.

But he also wanted to see Jungkook. And he didn’t want to expose Bangtan to the police that truly were minutes from starting to snoop around.

“Namjoon will be there?” Seokjin asked once more for clarification.

Taehyung nodded. “And so will your brother. So come with me without a fight, okay? The last of your temporary patients are off to the hospital and the fire is mostly gone. There’s nothing keeping us here, and we will draw attention to ourselves if we go looking for Rap Mon or anyone else.”

A little shakily, Seokjin gave a definitive nod. “Okay. Let’s go.”

Patience, he urged in himself. He just needed to be patient.

By the time he and Taehyung got back to the car the street had thinned out enough that Seokjin could get the car turned around and headed in the direction that Taehyung pointed him in.

A quick look in the mirror revealed to Seokjin that he was as dirty looking as Taehyung, skin and clothes covered with dark splotches of soot and dirt. And they both smelled horrible, too. Chances were they were tracking the smell into the car, and getting rid of it would be difficult, but that certainly wasn’t at the forefront of his mind.

The so called safe location, the rendezvous point, was towards the eastern portion of Bangtan’s territory, and the second floor of a mostly empty office building that was in desperate need of renovations.

It was, in retrospect, a good meeting place. No one from the outside was going to think anything was going on in the inside.

“Jin!”

Seokjin was only a few feet through the door when Jungkook smashed into him, his arms tugging tightly around Seokjin’s waist.

“Hey,” Seokjin said, pushing at him casually. “I’m fine. It’s fine. Everything is fine.”

Across the room Hoseok called out, “Kookie, let him breathe, okay?”

Seokjin startled as Jimin came up behind them, pushing into the room forcefully, looking as bad as the rest of them.
“What the fuck was that?” He demanded, wiping a dirty hand across his forehead, smearing soot everywhere.

Seokjin felt his stomach drop at the sight of him. They hadn’t run into each other at the fire, and they hadn’t been near each other before that, either. The last memory Seokjin had of him was the desperate kiss Jimin had pressed against his mouth. And the sound of his own voice rejecting Jimin.

Seokjin wasn’t the type, no matter how awkward things were, to leave anything unresolved with a person he cared for. And while he most certainly was not in love with Jimin, he absolutely cared for him. So he had to try and fix what was happening with them.

In a perfect world he would be able to sit down with Jimin and talk their differences through, resolving matters and fixing things.

Of course in a perfect world, Jimin wouldn’t have fallen in love with him, knowing full well that Seokjin’s heart belonged to Namjoon.

“Jimin,” Taehyung said, moving after him right away. “Where’s Suga and Rap Mon?”

Seokjin gave a look around. They were the only ones not present, and with Jungkook accounted for, Namjoon was the only one Seokjin was desperate to see now.

Jimin slammed a hand down on a nearby desktop. “He got pinched by the cops.”

“Fuck,” Taehyung hissed. His head whipped to Hoseok, who gave a sharp nod, and then he was gone through the door, descending the steps to the first floor, and out onto the street.

“Where’s he going?” Seokjin asked.

Jimin turned sharply to him, as if he was seeing Seokjin for the first time. With irritation, Jimin asked, “Why are you here?”

The anger, Seokjin had expected. There was no way he’d expected civility from the person that he had turned down. Feelings were hurt far too much for anything else.

As calmly as he could, Seokjin replied, managing to pry Jungkook off him, “There was a fire and I was worried about help getting to the effected people quickly enough. I went to help.”

“Well,” Jimin said, looking away, “that was stupid. And dangerous.”

“Enough,” Hoseok cut in, looking the most serious Seokjin had ever see him. “Jin, Taehyung’s going to look into Suga getting picked up by the cops. He’s got contacts in the police, and maybe they can tell us something, maybe even help. And Jimin, don’t get mad at Jin for actually helping. He was. I saw him. He saved a lot of people who needed him—the people we always swore to protect.”

Eyes narrowing, Jimin kept his mouth shut and turned away.

“What’s going to happen with Yoongi?” Seokjin asked, worried. With things building to a crescendo with Infinite, Bangtan couldn’t afford to be down a person, especially an important person.

Jimin’s dirty fingers dragged through his hair once more. “It depends,” Jimin told him, leaning back against the bare desk. “If they pinched him because he’s a person of interest, or if they’re suspicious of why he was there at all, then we can have him out in a day or two, and just watch our asses afterwards.”
Nervously, Seokjin wondered, “Why do you sound like there could be a worse option?”

“Because there is,” Jimin said, meeting Seokjin’s gaze for the first time. It was crushing, the pain Seokjin still saw so plainly on his face.

“They could think it was him,” Hoseok said knowingly. “Suga might be more than a person of interest. He could be a suspect. And if they think it’s him, while they’re compiling their evidence, we’re not getting him out of lockup any time soon. Because arson is . . .”

Seokjin gave a silent nod.

Unexpectedly, Jimin gave a rough cough, something that lingered and rattled and had Seokjin at his side in a second.

“Don’t touch me,” Jimin hissed, trying to pull away from Seokjin’s hands.

Lowly, so he could barely be heard, Seokjin said, “Stop it. Just . . .” He took a deep breath and stated, “The most fatalities, statistically, that result from a fire are not from the fire itself. Most fatalities occur from smoke inhalation, and it’s no joke. So let me look at you. Deal with me just for a few seconds, unless you want to go to bed later and not wake up.”

With Jungkook and Hoseok chatting the background, Seokjin heard Jimin mumble, “Do you have any idea how hard it is for me to be around you right now?”

Seokjin did his best to be as professional as possible. He measured Jimin’s breathing and pulse, with minimal touching, finally stating, “I think you’re okay, nothing out of the ordinary from being exposed to the smoke that you were. But if you have any trouble breathing, or if that cough persists more than a few hours, please, either call me or go to a hospital. I’m serious, Jimin. This is your life we’re talking about.”

“Jimin,” Hoseok called to him. “What’s the deal with it taking so long for the police to show up? What about the fire department? It was almost forty minutes after the first call came in about the fire that they showed up. That’s ridiculous. And that shouldn’t be possible.”

Jimin pulled away from Seokjin without a second look and ground out, “It’s possible when someone is fucking with the help we need.”

Jungkook stiffened. “It was deliberate? The delay?”

Jimin counted off on his fingers, “The police, they got a very particularly well-timed call that had them leaving only a skeleton crew at nearly every station in the vicinity. Their people headed off to make the biggest drug bust in the history of Seoul, all the way on the other side of the city.”

Voice wavering, Jungkook asked, “What about the fire fighters?”

“Mechanical issues,” Jimin said, and ticked a second finger off on his hand. “I just double checked with a guy I know who works at one of the nearby stations. He said half the engines had their tires punctures, the other half wouldn’t even turn on, and other guys are reporting similar issues. That help we got? It came from other prefectures, which is why it took so long to get there.”

Seokjin wondered, “Should I even ask about the paramedics?”

Jimin held up a third finger. “They didn’t even get the calls. They just didn’t come in.”

Frowning, Seokjin asked, “How is that possible?”
“I don’t know,” Jimin sighed out. “But the calls for help—for paramedics, didn’t come in. Like emergency lines got cut or something, and that’s help that wasn’t coming for more than just us, if you’re paying attention. And if you think any of this is coincidental, you just go ahead and think again.”

Legs going weak, Seokjin lowed himself into a nearby discarded chair. He leaned forward, sucking in deep breaths of air.

“Jin.” He felt Jungkook’s hand on his back as his brother came to stand next to him.

“People got hurt,” Seokjin said, looking up at the others watching him. “They were burned and choked by smoke and those are only the ones I could start to help. What about the people trapped in their homes? What about the people who …”

Jungkook folded over him, offering comfort and warmth, but it felt more like his brother was suffocating him, rather than hugging him.

Quietly, almost at a whisper, Hoseok asked, “It was Infinite, wasn’t it?”

Seokjin tensed as Jimin offered, “There’s no way to say for sure right now. But my guess? Yeah, I think it was those bastards.”

What did that mean, Seokjin wondered. Was Infinite declaring war? Were they just trying to provoke Bangtan? Or was this some form of pettiness that had been done just for fun? Infinite was certainly the kind of gang that would both burn people alive to make a point, or just to pass the time.

“So why?” Hoseok demanded. “And how did they get past our watch? How could they do something of this magnitude and not be spotted?”

Seokjin pushed his hands down on his thighs and managed to sit up properly. He asked in an even tone, “Where is Namjoon?”

Jimin hesitated.

“Jimin?” Jungkook asked. “Where’s our leader?”

Sounding exhausted, Jimin looked back to Seokjin again, appearing a different kind of fearful. “I don’t know,” he finally, head hanging in shame. “I can’t find him, he isn’t answer his phone, and …”

“And?” Hoseok demanded, stalking completely to Jimin’s side.

“Was this what Bangtan was now, Seokjin pondered. Without Namjoon and Yoongi, were they just aimless pieces on a chessboard drifting around? Was it so easy to break Bangtan and Seokjin had just never realized it? Bangtan had always seemed so strong to him, but maybe it was because Namjoon was a great leader, and Yoongi was the kind of support that a group couldn’t go without. Hoseok seemed to be doing his best to hold everything together in their absence, but the cracks were moments away from shattering, from Seokjin’s point of view.

“Jimin,” Hoseok warned.

Jimin snapped out, “Right before the cops picked Suga up, I was with him. And the both of us were with Rap Mon.”

“Okay,” Jungkook said, eyebrows furrowed.
Jimin clarified, “We were, all three of us, at the heart of the fire. It was dying down a little with the firefighters on the scene, and there weren’t many people left to save. But Rap Mon … he only had it in his mind to go one place.”

Seokjin knew the answer before it could be said. “The noodle house.”

“Oh, damn,” Jungkook said softly.

Looking helpless with his expression, Jimin held his hands out. “It was … it wasn’t there anymore. It was gone.”

Seokjin squeezed his eyes shut. No. It couldn’t be.

“What about Rap Mon’s grandparents?” Hoseok asked, voice cracking. “Did they get out? Are they okay? If Rap Mon is with them, that’s a good reason for him not picking up his phone. You know he wouldn’t let his grandparents avoid going to the hospital to get checked over, even if granny hates hospitals. Have you checked that--”

“I don’t know any more,” Jimin rushed to say, throwing his hands up. “The cops started to focus on us, calling for us to stop and not move, and it all went to hell. Rap Mon went into what was left of the noodle house—the whole thing practically coming down on him right away, and Suga tried to stop him. I ran, like a coward, and Suga got punched in the face by Rap Mon for trying to stop him from going into a structurally unsafe building that we didn’t even know Rap Mon’s grandparents were in.”

“You’re not a coward,” Seokjin said, finally feeling strong enough to stand. “If you hadn’t gone, and there was nothing you could do there, the rest of us would be here without a clue as to what’s going on. And you’d be in jail, too. You’d be in some holding cell, with Yoongi, and that’s not where Bangtan needs you. You did the right thing. Don’t doubt yourself.”

“Maybe,” Jimin said. Shoulders folding in on himself.

Jungkook asked, “So we don’t know anything about Rap Mon? About his family? Or about Infinite—if this was them? We don’t know how to help Suga, we don’t know how to put ourselves back together, and we don’t know how to get control of the situation again. Is that what’s going on?”

Hoseok was quiet and Seokjin didn’t know how to respond to any of that. He wasn’t a member of Bangtan, no matter his association, and it wasn’t his call to make.

Jimin rubbed at his temples.

“So what are we going to do?” Jungkook pressed. “Seriously. What are we going to do?”

“Let me think,” Hoseok said shortly, muscles tense. “Just let me think for a second.”

On his feet, with sturdy legs beneath him, Seokjin took a deep breath and announced, “I don’t know what Bantan’s plans are. But right now, I’m going to find my boyfriend.”

He was tired and achy, exhausted and still fighting back coughs from the smoke he’d breathed in. He smelled and looked terrible, and still had a full shift at the clinic to look towards in less than eight hours—a shift and a half because he’d promised to cover for Yunho’s second half.

But Namjoon was out there. Namjoon was out there and no one knew if his grandparents were okay. That wasn’t something Seokjin could let just sit. Not while he had strength left in him.
“Are you serious?” Jimin asked, eyeing him in disbelief. “We can’t--”

“You do what you need to do,” Seokjin said firmly, squeezing Jungkook’s hand in reassurance. “And believe that I’m going to do what I need to do, too.”


“I can’t,” he said back, resolved. “And I think you know that. I know you know why.”

Then he turned and started down the stairs, Namjoon’s car keys in his pocket, and determination in his chest. He’d find Namjoon, and he wouldn’t stop until he did.
They had been laying there for hours, taking up a minimal amount of space on a bed that they usually sprawled across in a languid sort of way. Namjoon was curled in on him, indicative of everything he was feeling, and Seokjin was playing the part of the big spoon as he cuddled him close, tucking around him. Their feet tangled and their bodies were so close they were nearly fused.

Seokjin was very much aware of Yoongi’s presence in the doorway. He’d been there various times since Seokjin’s had begun speaking softly to Namjoon in a steady, comforting voice, about nonsensical things that were just meant to be distractions.

Yoongi always came, stood there for a few minutes, and then left. Then he’d come back at some point and repeat the process.

Seokjin hadn’t seen any other members of Bangtan, and he hoped that wasn’t by chance. If any of them had any sense, they’d keep far away. At least for the moment.

“Oh,” Seokjin said quietly. His fingers brushed along the soft skin at Namjoon’s side, rubbing out soothing patterns. “Did I ever tell you how Jungkook and I were both supposed to be named completely different things?”

Namjoon, as expected, made not a single sound and remained completely still. Seokjin couldn’t even safely assume that Namjoon was awake, other than the fact that he had a sinking suspicion sleep was the last place Namjoon wanted to be.

“It’s true,” Seokjin urged.

Across the room Yoongi gave a soft sigh and left.

Clearing his voice, Seokjin said, “My parents, when they first started trying for kids, wanted a girl first. I know that’s a little odd. Most parents just want a healthy baby, or, let’s face it, a boy. But my parents wanted a girl. They had a name picked out that they agreed on long before she was ever conceived, and there was never any doubt in their minds that they’d be having a girl first and foremost.”

Seokjin marked the steady rise and fall of Namjoon’s chest. It was a nice change from the stuttering that had come for so long hours ago.

“I have a sinking suspicion,” Seokjin told him, “that my parents only wanted one child. As you know, my father has a very intense, stressful, and time-consuming job. And my mother, like me, never let her health condition get in the way of having a career. Did I mention she was an editor at a local publishing house? When she was young and single, she’d spend fifteen hours there in a day sometimes, and loved every second of it.”

Seokjin had seen pictures of his mother when she’d been twenty, just a few years before she’d met and subsequently quickly married Seokjin’s father. She’d been youthful and beautiful, and in nearly every shot taken, at her job. His mother’s name was in countless books as an editor, and if anything, it was a legacy of sorts.

Honestly, Seokjin said, “I think they planned to just have my sister, because they both took real time off from their jobs, something they never did again, and concentrated wholly on her upbringing. Then, when she was old enough for nursery school, they threw themselves back into their careers, and never looked back. At least,” Seokjin chuckled, “until one night when they were celebrating a
bit too heartily and well … accidents happen. People are forgetful when there’s alcohol involved.”

Namjoon, Seokjin knew, was an only child. And that was a shame. Because Seokjin fully understood that he was half the person he was because of Jungkook. He was better because of his brother, and owed a lot to him.

At a whisper, Seokjin’s fingers stopped moving and he asked, “Namjoon, are you still awake?”

There was nothing for a few, brief second, and Seokjin truly thought he had gone to dreamland. But then Namjoon gave a low grunt.

Namjoon hadn’t said a word to him since he’d come through the door to his apartment two days after the fire, face splotchy and red from crying, his feet dragging.

Seokjin had looked for him. They all had. As the sun had come up the morning after the fire, they’d all searched the streets to try and find Bangtan’s leader. Seokjin had tried going back to the point of the fire, only to have the streets blocked off from public access. So instead, with time dwindling, he’d searched the surrounding area, the places that he and Namjoon had visited over the weeks, only coming up empty.

In a desperate bid, he’d called the hospitals, he’d called the morgue, and he’d called any place that the injured or deceased would be taken.

Nothing.

Seokjin, forced to show up for his shift at the clinic, had come up with nothing.

And nothing had followed the next day, with Jungkook sounding lost on the phone as he kept Seokjin up to date.

It was, his brother urged, like Namjoon had disappeared off the face of the planet. And that had made Seokjin panic and think that the police had picked up Namjoon, or any of Infinite’s core members had taken a successful shot at him.

But Yoongi had been released from police custody and confirmed he wasn’t there, and the unfortunate truth was that if Infinite was responsible for Namjoon’s disappearance, they would have said something already. The would have gloated over their victory.

They had already, much to Seokjin’s horror and disgust, claimed responsibility for the fire.

Infinite was going to war, and they weren’t waiting for the proper send off on the tenth.

It was more of a fluke than anything else that Seokjin was at Namjoon’s apartment, gathering up the things he’d left behind the last time he’d been there, when Namjoon came unexpectedly through the door.

“I was,” Seokjin admitted with a chuckle, “an oopsie baby. I came along unexpectedly and threw their whole lives into chaos, and unfortunately confirmed the possibility that my mom had always feared, about genetically passing along her condition. My sister had escaped that fate, luckily, and I’m so thankful every day that Jungkook did, too.”

Seokjin probably should have called the others immediately. He should have let Yoongi or Jungkook or anyone else know that their leader was safe, and not in danger or worse. But the look on Namjoon’s face had stalled him. And the way Namjoon had collapsed into his arms was the deciding factor.
Seokjin had already known.

He’d know the truth before Namjoon had managed to wail out the single sentence that he’d said so far, “They’re dead.”

Pushing on with the story, Seokjin said, “I was supposed to be named after my mother’s brother. Her elder brother. He basically raised her when their parents died unexpectedly in their youth. She loved him, and he passed a few years before they got pregnant with me. My dad wasn’t really keen on the idea, he had his own opinion on what his son should be named, and they fought relentlessly about it. It probably would have been better if they didn’t know they were having a boy. Imagine, us fighting about our baby’s name for months. We would never do that.”

He just felt so frustrated.

If Namjoon had physically been injured in any way, if he’d needed medical assistance, Seokjin could have provided that in a second. But Namjoon was emotionally damaged. He was psychologically falling apart, and there was only so much Seokjin could do for him.

“The thing is,” Seokjin said, forcing himself to sound cheerful, “my uncle had a rather unfortunate name. Roughly it means doughy meatball, or something like that. Can you imagine how badly I would have been teased in school? Doughy meatball.”

For a second all the guilt and all the pain and the hurt caught up with Seokjin. It built up in his throat and choked him into silence.

It wasn’t fair. It wasn’t right. How did Namjoon’s grandparents deserve to be burned alive as they slept? They’d been so kind and nice, and Namjoon’s grandmother had truly made him feel wanted and accepted. She’d promised to teach him her best recipes, and never let him pay a cent for the food he ate at her noodle house. She had raised Namjoon after his parents had died. She’d loved and cared for him, and she was dead now by simple association.

A second later and Seokjin just felt selfish. The sorrow he was feeling was nothing compared to what Namjoon was feeling.

His voice was rough as he fought through the urge to cry. Seokjin managed, “My mom was determined to name me after her brother. She didn’t care if my dad said it wasn’t going to happen. But my dad, he was beyond clever. Because my mom’s heart condition made her delivery risky, he wasn’t allowed in with her. Instead, while she was delivering me, he went and filled out my birth certificate, making it a point to officially name me Seokjin.”

Seokjin hoped he was getting the story right, at least the important details. His mother had told him the story only once before she’d died, and he’d been young at the time. But the story had stuck with him in an odd sort of way, and he liked telling it to people who would listen.

“She almost killed him over the name change,” Seokjin laughed out. “But rightfully so, don’t you think? Wouldn’t you be upset if you’d been in labor for several hours, had major surgery, and then come through it all only to discover that your beloved brother’s namesake, wasn’t really his namesake after all.”

Once more, slowly though, Seokjin’s fingers began rubbing gently again.

“So that’s how I got my name,” Seokjin told him, “and how my mother didn’t speak to my father for a week. That’s saying something, because with how much they loved each other, you’d think they couldn’t go thirty seconds without each other.”
Fully Seokjin dropped his head against Namjoon’s back and breathed evenly. He just needed a minute to catch his breath. He didn’t know why he was suddenly so breathless, but he needed a minute.

“What about Jungkook?”

Seokjin completely startled at the sound of Namjoon’s voice.

He nearly threw himself away from Namjoon, demanding, “Huh?”

He focused a second later, when it became obvious that Namjoon wasn’t going to repeat himself.

Seokjin ran a hand through his hair and sucked in a deep breath. “Jungkook,” he eased out, trying to steady himself. “Jungkook’s name was supposed to be something completely different too—a scholarly name that would have been perfect for an accountant. You know, the accountant son my father always wanted. My father will never admit to being superstitious or thinking for one second that your name can impact your success in life, but the truth is he wanted a name for Jungkook that would suit a son who did nothing but study all day, and very sternly at that. My mother, I guess you could say, wanted a less severe name for her second son.”

Namjoon leaned back against him, taking the initiative to press them together.

It only made Seokjin cling more tightly to him.

“So ah,” Seokjin started again, “everything was going to go as planned. The baby was going to be named what my father wanted. That was what my father thought, at least. But you know, for as smart as my father is, my mother was always ten times smarter. She let him pick out the name he thought was possible. She let him get comfortable and go celebrate with his friends while she was delivering. And then, here’s the kicker, when he came back to see his brand new baby son in the nursery, there he was, with the name Jungkook.”

It was hard to hear, and lasted for only a second, but Seokjin was certain Namjoon was chuckled.

“She didn’t do it be malicious,” Seokjin insisted, a smile on his own face. “Because if she wanted to be, Jungkook could have ended up being named after our uncle. But she wanted to make a point. She wanted to show my dad that it stings, being tricked, especially when there’s a lot of hard work and pain that goes into the thing you’re being tricked over.”

Seokjin smiled more firmly at the memory of his mother imparting that life less on him. She was a woman who hardly ever looked smug. But she’d been exceptionally pleased with herself when she told the story, and Seokjin couldn’t help agreeing.

“Jin.”

The smile fled from Seokjin’s face and he turned to once more see Yoongi in the doorway. He was back sooner than any previous time. But the same stern look was on his face.

Seokjin felt Namjoon tense up.

“I’m going to go get you a glass of water,” Seokjin whispered to him. He bent more fully over Namjoon to kiss his head, and then slipped from the bed.

At least he tried to. He was jerked to a stop halfway off the bed by Namjoon’s fingers curling around his wrist, preventing him from getting up completely.
“Namjoon,” Seokjin said, kissing his forehead this time. “I’m really just going for a moment.”

“For godsakes, Namjoon,” Yoongi snapped. “Stop this.”

Seokjin sent him a scathing look and snapped, “You’re not helping. You stop talking right now.” Then he balanced a knee up on the mattress, met Namjoon’s watery gaze and gave a comforting grin. “I’m going to get the water. You need to keep hydrated, doctor’s orders. I won’t leave the apartment, and I’m pretty sure Jungkook and Jimin are both here. Nothing is going to happen. Don’t worry.”

He saw the fear on Namjoon’s face for what it was, and understood it all too well.

“Okay?”

Mutely, Namjoon gave a hint of a nod and let go of his wrist.

“Be back soon,” Seokjin promised, his lips brushing against Namjoon’s. Then he lifted himself from the bed and followed Yoongi out.

He went directly to the kitchen, ignoring the dark look Yoongi was giving him, and the confused one that Jungkook had from the living room sofa. Jimin wasn’t in sight, but he also probably wasn’t far away. Seokjin could hear Yoongi shuffling after him.

Feeling defensive, and utterly protective, as Seokjin poured a glass of water for Namjoon, he asked Yoongi, “What’s your problem?”

“My problem?” Yoongi said with dull, forced laugh. “Are you serious?”

“Of course I’m serious,” Seokjin snapped back angrily. “Look at him. Look at Namjoon. He’s … he’s in pieces right now. He’s broken. And I’m doing my best to put him back together, but you’re always there, floating around like it’s taking too long, looking like I’m--”

Yoongi cut in, “You’re doing more harm than good in there. Honestly, you shouldn’t even be here right now. Not now that playing nice is officially done and this is technically a war zone.”

Jungkook’s head peeked around the corner into the kitchen. “Is everything okay in here?”

Seokjin turned to him, and from the new angle he could see the nearby balcony. Jimin was bundled in a coat standing on it, talking rapidly into a phone.

“I don’t know,” Seokjin said a bit childishly. “Yoongi seems to think me helping Namjoon is … hurting him somehow.”

Yoongi told Jungkook, “Go. This is a conversation for myself and your brother.”

It was something to be said, for the chain of command that Bangtan still had, that after only the slightest bit of hesitation, Jungkook slid out of view.

Seokjin wasted no time defending, “He’s hurting. He just lost his entire family, the few members he had left. He’s hurting and I’m trying to help him keep it together before he really goes off the deep end.”

Yoongi let out a long breath. “Look, I know that. I know you’re just trying to help, and that’s the kind of person you are. I get that. And at any other time, I’d be the first person pushing you into that room to coddle him.”
“Coddle?” Seokjin asked in a shocked way.

“Yes,” Yoongi returned. “You’re coddling him and I can’t have it any more.”

The sudden urge to wrap his fingers around the water glass and throw it at Yoongi’s face was nearly overwhelming. It wasn’t like him at all, but he couldn’t deny the urge was there.

“You’re crazy,” Seokjin said flatly.

“Hear me out,” Yoongi said, moving more fully into the kitchen. “I’m not disputing what happened was … disgusting and dirty. It was a low blow. It was the kind of blow that Infinite will hit us with time and time again. It’s what you’re about to know them for, and that’s if they don’t make you a victim as well.”

Wincing, Seokjin told him, “You have to have a heart. You have to be patient. The people who raised him, the people who loved and cared for him and were Namjoon’s world, just died. I can promise you from personal experience it feels like a piece of him just got ripped out and there’s nothing but a gaping hole left behind. Do you even understand that?”

Seokjin wondered if Yoongi really did. Yoongi, from what Seokjin could tell, and compared to Namjoon, was relatively untouched. His parents and sister were perfectly fine, minimally exposed to danger, and they probably even had someone around the clock watching their residence. Yoongi hadn’t lost what Namjoon had. There was no way he could possibly understand that kind of loss.

“And I’m telling you,” Yoongi said, face set, “that Namjoon is the leader of Bangtan. He is the face and the support of Bangtan. He is what keep Bangtan going. And now, more than ever, he needs to be out there, visible and strong. Bangtan is wholly depending on Namjoon showing his face to Infinite and making it look like this loss means nothing to him.”

“God,” Seokjin huffed out, turning away.

“I’m not saying this to be a bastard,” Yoongi replied. “I loved his grandparents too, you know.”

Seokjin said, “But you sound like one.”

There was a lengthy and uncomfortable pause between them.

Then, Yoongi said, “You need to get him up. Even if it’s rude and horrible and I’m a bastard for it. I’m telling you, stop coddling him. Stop rubbing his back and telling him childhood anecdotes. I need you to understand, Jin, because you have the most sway over him, that if Bangtan doesn’t look strong right now, this is over. All of this. We have such a small window right now, we can’t make mistakes. If we are perceived weak for a second, Infinite will roll move on it. And do you think Exo is going to want to be our allies if we can’t even hold ourselves together? No. The answer is no, in case you were wondering.”

“He doesn’t even get to mourn?” Seokjin asked, feeling devastated.

Slowly, Yoongi shook his head. “I know it’s not fair. And I would give anything in the world to let him lay in that bed for as long as he needs to come to terms with the horrible loss he’s just suffered. But this is what being the leader of Bangtan is. This is what he has to do, and you have to help him do it.”

Seokjin gripped the glass tightly in his hand and asked, “Can’t you get out there and show your face? You’re his second in command, aren’t you? Have I misinterpreted the way Bangtan works? Aren’t you supposed to fill in for Namjoon when he can’t? I think it’s safe to say he can’t right now.”
Quickly, Yoongi reached out and snatched the glass of water from Seokjin. He arched an eyebrow and said, “I’m always going to do what I can to support him. I’m always going to have his back and do for him what he can’t do for himself. But Jin, our boys out there need to see him. They need to know he’s unshakable. And Infinite has to know who they’re going to war with. Or things are going to get very, very bad out there. I don’t think you understand how bad.”

Bracing his hands on the countertop, Seokjin argued weakly, “I don’t even know if I can get him up.”

“Just try.” Yoongi slid the water back to him. “I can make the hard decisions right now. I can distribute our men effectively, I can pull our resources, I can have the meetings with Suho, and I can do a hundred other things. But my face and his face out there don’t mean the same thing. I can’t inspire like he can. I can’t make Sunggyu shake in his fucking boots, like he does.”

“He’s scared,” Seokjin whispered. “Did you see the way he grabbed me? The way he’s been clinging to me? He’s scared, and no matter what I say to him, I don’t think I can make him not be scared. That’s something impossible while he’s still so fractured.”

Yoongi’s lips pursed in thought, his eyes raking over Seokjin’s form. Then he decided, “I think you should go in that room and do whatever it takes to get him on his feet. Say whatever comes naturally. Make sure he understands all the people who are counting on him, and how important it is that he puts on a show for not only Infinite who’s going to be watching, but all the other gangs as well.”

“And if that doesn’t work?”

At the very least, Yoongi did look regretful as he told Seokjin, “If that doesn’t work, I want you let him know that if he doesn’t get his ass up, and get himself together, if he doesn’t show Infinite that he’s still strong and ready to deal with whatever they throw at him no matter the severity, that it’s probably going to be you, Jin, who gets burned alive next.”

Seokjin felt weak. “I can’t …”

“You can,” Yoongi snapped. “Because it’s the truth.”

Seokjin felt like folding in on himself. “I don’t …”

In a curious tone, Yoongi asked, “Do you know why no one has ratted you out to Infinite yet? I know you and Namjoon have been careful in public, but you’ve gotten a lot more physical with each other—or to be blunt careless, and he looks at you with proverbial stars in his eyes. Plenty of people have figured you two out, and they’ve certainly figured out that Namjoon would let the world end for you. But none of them have gone to Infinite with this information. Hazard a guess why.”

Seokjin noticed his hands shaking and clamped down on them. He didn’t, however, offer Yoongi any sort of answer.

The lack of response didn’t seem to perturb Yoongi for a second. And he told Seokjin, “The reason no one has said anything to Infinite yet is because the people here understand the relationship they have with Namjoon. It’s symbiotic.”

Frowning, Seokjin questioned, “It’s symbiotic?”

Yoongi nodded. “Namjoon keeps them safe. He keeps their streets and family safe from gangs like Infinite who run drugs and prostitution rings. So in return, they protect the more sensitive information about Bangtan’s leader that could be used against him. It’s not a perfect system, and god knows there are always going to be people who try to buck the system or ruin it for everyone else, but it’s the
only thing keeping you safe right now.”

“And those people?” Seokjin questioned, “they can’t give him five seconds to mourn the loss of his family?”

Roughly, Yoongi bit out, “We’re his family. That’s the only way all of this works.”

Softly, Seokjin agreed, “You are. But these were his grandparents, Yoongi.”

Ignoring the statement, Yoongi insisted, “The only reason the people here are protecting you, and Namjoon for that matter, is because they have faith in him. They look at him and they see someone strong, someone who can protect them, and even if it’s only an illusion, he does a lot to be convincing about it. What I’m telling you is that if Rap Mon—not Namjoon, doesn’t get out there, doesn’t make his presence known, and doesn’t start doing something about Infinite, there’s going to be a line around the block to sell you out. And if that happens, leaving Seoul is probably going to be your only option, unless, like I said, you want to end up burned alive while you sleep.”

Seokjin leaned forward to rest his arms on the countertop, and buried his face in them.

At first, he’d thought he could handle Namjoon, his lifestyle, and what Bangtan was. For the longest amount of time, he’d been certain that he could keep what he had with Namjoon separate from what Namjoon had with Bangtan. But now everything was folding in on itself. Everything was getting mixed up, stirred together, and overwhelming didn’t begin to cover what it all was now.

Part of Seokjin, a small but rational part, wanted to walk away. That part of him wanted to go back to the clinic, live his life simply, and not get involved with any gangs any more than absolutely necessary.

But then he thought about how much he loved Namjoon, and how much his heart ached for him on a daily basis. When Namjoon hurt, so did Seokjin, and that level of empathy wasn’t something he could ignore.

Jimin stepped back into the apartment, brushing off droplets of morning condensation that had accumulated on him from the muggy, wet weather outside.

“Hey,” Jimin called, jogging to Yoongi’s side. “We’ve got movement down by the docks. You know we’re weak there. I’m going to take V and check it out.”

Yoongi gave a nod. “If it looks like trouble, use your brain.” He gripped Jimin’s arm in a concerned way. “Don’t engaging unless you know for sure you can handle it. And take some other guys with you as insurance. Call me if there’s a problem.”

Briefly Jimin’s eyes slid to Seokjin, unreadable in their nature like they almost always were now. Seokjin wondered, if everyone survived, would the rest of their lives be awkward? And how long before others noticed the awkwardness?

“Okay, mom,” Jimin teased out, then he was striding towards the front door.

Yoongi turned back to Seokjin with a weary sigh. “I know you don’t want to do this. I don’t want to push you to do this. But we all have to do things we don’t want to right now.”

“So,” Seokjin asked, picking up the glass of water. “Just for clarification, you want me to go in there and emotionally manipulate an already emotionally unstable person?”

Yoongi stared at him.
“You’re an ass,” Seokjin said, and walked past him with the water.

Softly, behind him, he heard Yoongi said, “Sorry, Jin.”

When Seokjin returned to the bedroom it was exactly the way he’d left it; quiet, dark, and dominated by the presence of Namjoon’s sadness. Seokjin announced quietly, “I’m back.” Then he moved to Namjoon’s side of the bed and set the water down.

Namjoon looked up at him with red rimmed eyes, face pale and almost gaunt.

Seokjin brushed Namjoon’s bangs away from his forehead and smiled faintly. “I was kind of hoping that I’d come in here and you’d be sleeping. I know you need it.” Not to mention if Namjoon had been sleeping, Seokjin wouldn’t have to do what he knew was coming.

Roughly, in an unused voice, Namjoon ground out, “Can’t sleep. Nightmares.”

“It speaks,” Seokjin teased. Then he bent forward to kiss Namjoon’s cheek. “I’m so sorry. You don’t … you don’t deserve any of this. You are the most amazing person I know, and if I could stop you from hurting like this, I would.”

He felt Namjoon’s hand grasp at his wrist, holding on like a life line.

“Come on,” Seokjin said, giving him a little tug. “Sit up for a second and drink some of this water. You can’t drink it laying down.” He managed to get Namjoon upright a few seconds later and placed a white pill in his hand as well, stating, “For the headache I know you have, but you haven’t said anything about.” Seokjin had most certainly seen the way Namjoon was wincing, and the pinched look on his face.

Namjoon looked down at the pill, and then back up at Seokjin. “Yours?”

Seokjin directed him to the pill holder on his side of the bed. “I already took mine this morning, thank you very much. Also, good call on getting me to keep extra doses here. It saves me a lot of time, at least now that I’m with you so often.”

Slowly, as if on autopilot, Namjoon placed the pill on his tongue and then swallowed down some water. Seokjin resisted the urge to check and see if he’d really done it.

“Look,” Seokjin said, scooting closer and helping him move the water back to the bedside table, “I …” He stop, hanging his head and feeling guilty. How did one tell the person they loved that they couldn’t have the time necessary to process such a huge loss? Seokjin felt like a villain.

“What?”

Seokjin gave a pitiful smile. “If I could let you stay here forever, encased in this protective bubble of me and this room and our love, I would. At the very least, if I could let you mourn in peace, and have the time you need, I would do anything to make that happen. But Namjoon, I’m so sorry, you don’t have that time. None of us do.”

Worry etching his face, Namjoon asked, “Did something happen?”

“Not yet, I don’t think,” Seokjin said, leaning his head on Namjoon’s shoulder. “But something will, soon. So you have to get up. You have to … pretend like you’re not hurting, and leave this apartment.”

Namjoon gave a soft snort of indifference.
“It sucks, I know,” Seokjin insisted. “It sucks so much it’s unfair and ridiculous to ask you. But you, Namjoon, you’re the leader of Bangtan. You don’t just have a couple hundred guys looking to you for direction right now. You have everyone in this neighborhood watching. And Infinite. You can’t—”

“I don’t,” Namjoon said, surprising Seokjin with his ferocity, “give a single fuck about Infinite. Let them do whatever they want. I’m done. I’m … I’m just …”

“You can’t be serious,” Seokjin questioned.

“As serious as the fire they set.”

Slowly Seokjin stood, smoothing out his clothing and readying himself. “I talked to Yoongi,” he said.

“Let him lead Bangtan,” Namjoon dismissed.

Seokjin continued, “He said you are the only one capable of holding Bangtan together at the moment. He said you’re the only one who can keep this neighborhood from falling directly into Infinite’s hands. And if you don’t …”

Namjoon barked out, voice rising, “Then let them have it! Tell Sunggyu congratulations for me--for being willing to make the ultimate power play when I wasn’t.”

Fighting past the tension in his chest, Seokjin asked, “What are you talking about?”

Fingers balling into fists, Namjoon revealed, “Sunggyu’s got a little sister. She’s thirteen and really cute. She takes ballet lessons on Tuesdays, and is academically fast tracked, and wants to go to college to become a vet. She’s also Sunggyu’s only weak spot, and I know where she is. I’ve known where she is for weeks, and if I were stronger, if I were more willing to make these kinds of moves, I could have prevented my grandparents from dying. I could have hit Sunggyu first, but I chose not to.”

Seokjin dropped to his knees in front of Namjoon, catching his hands in a grip and demanding, “Don’t you dare for guilty for not hurting an innocent little girl.”

Namjoon looked away. “If I had, if I’d just sacrificed one life that meant nothing to me, I could have saved my grandparents, and the twenty-six-other people who died. You tell me, which lives are more important? The twenty-eight total, or the one? And what about the property damage? And everyone who’s scared now? Don’t you tell me that I didn’t make the wrong call by backing away from the most important information I’ll ever have on Sunggyu.”

Palms sweating, Seokjin said, “I could never love a person who is capable of ordering the death of an innocent child, regardless of the circumstances, consequences, or context.”

Namjoon’s shoulders slumped even further, and he admitted, “I’m done, Jin. I’m just done.”

Standing once more, Seokjin took a deep breath. Then he told Namjoon, “If you give up, if you don’t go out there and be the leader that Bangtan needs, and if you give Infinite these streets, then I need to go and be prepared.”

Frowning, Namjoon asked, “Prepared for what?”

Seokjin took a physical step back, then one more. “Don’t you realize how much my safety is depending on you being Bangtan’s leader? If you give up, there are going to be dozens and dozens
of people willing to tell Infinite just what I mean to you. And I think that means they’ll kill me. They might even kill Jungkook, because he’s my brother and he’s had a part to play in this. So if this is it, if this is you throwing in the towel, I need to get back to the clinic and prepare for that.”

“Jin.” Namjoon reached out for him immediately, a panicked expression on his face.

Seokjin shook his head and moved for the door to the bedroom. He paused to say, “I was scared to trust you with my heart, Namjoon. It’s not the strongest, you know. It can’t take a lot of heartache. But I never once thought not to trust you with my life. And now you may have just gotten me killed as sure as pulling the trigger yourself. So stay in bed if you have to, Namjoon, just know that if you do, I’m dead.”

Yoongi was waiting for him in the living room, looking stoic and worried.

“It’s done,” Seokjin said, upset and frustrated and tired. “I think he’ll get up. I think…” No, he was certain. Namjoon loved him enough to pull himself together. But putting a band aid on his emotional scarring wasn’t going to fix it, and when it came off, there was going to be an even bigger mess than before.

Looking grateful, Yoongi sighed out, “Thank you. I know that wasn’t fair to ask you, and I know--”

“I’m going home,” Seokjin announced, shrugging on his jacket. It was true that he was needed at the clinic. He didn’t have any appointments, but there was plenty of paperwork waiting for him, and he liked to help out with the walk-ins whenever he could.

Not to mention, as angry as Seokjin was for having to say the things to Namjoon that he did, he was confident that Namjoon would be able to get up and do what was necessary now. And the last thing he needed was Seokjin around, getting in the way or distracting him.

In fact, it was probably better if they took a short break from each other.

“Do you want me to get someone to--”

“I’m fine,” Seokjin interrupted. “Really, Yoongi. I’ll see you around.”

“Jin,” Jungkook called after him. “I can come with you. Give me a second to grab my shoes.”

Seokjin gave him an exhausted look and offered, “Not right now, okay? I just … I need to be on my own for a little. I’ll call you later, okay?”

Jungkook looked completely devastated, and Seokjin blocked the expression out as he left.

There were too many emotions churning inside him as Seokjin drove back to the clinic. He felt so dirty for having said what he did, and it wasn’t the kind of dirt that he thought he could get off easily. And worse than the dirt was the guilt. Because he had taken low shots at someone he loved, and forced Namjoon’s hand, and he’d done the things that he knew he didn’t find acceptable under any circumstances. Or at least he’d thought so.

He didn’t know what to think anymore, especially of himself.

His phone in his pocket vibrated when he was nearly to the clinic, but he ignored it. There wasn’t anyone he wanted to talk to at the moment, and if it was Namjoon or Jungkook, he wasn’t certain he could hold it together.

With a weary sigh, Seokjin parked the car his father had given him twenty minutes later and climbed
out, face scrunching up at the even more gloomy weather that had developed over the past half hour.
The sky was full of angry, dark blue, gray, and black clouds, and they looked like they might dump
gallons of water at any second.

Winter, of all the seasons, was not Seokjin’s favorite.

And just for one, fleeting second, he wondered if he and Namjoon would see summer together. It
was a horribly depressing thought, but one that he was so uncertain about it churned his stomach.

When the weather was warm enough to wear shorts and regular tee shirts, would Namjoon still be
alive? Would any of them?

Would Seokjin’s life be completely different?

“Doctor Kim?”

At the sound of his name Seokjin hit the lock button on the car’s remote and turned towards the
person calling for him. “That’s me,” he said.

A second later his eyes settled on a dark haired, devastatingly handsome man.

Myungsoo.

Seokjin recognized him a heartbeat later. It was Myungsoo, one of Sunggyu’s most trusted men. And
standing just to his left was a much larger, even more intimidating but unknown man.

“Can I … help you?”

Seokjin hadn’t seen a single member of Infinite since Hoya had come around after the car accident
and subsequential shootout to question him. For the most part, Seokjin had thought Infinite had
bought the excuse that he’d just run from the accident out of fear, and it seemed like he was in the
clear. But Infinite always made him nervous, and always made him second guess himself.

“Doctor Kim,” Myungsoo said again, rocking back on his feet a little. “You’re either the cleverest
person I’ve ever seen in my life, or the most stupid. I’m just not sure which. But I guess we’re about
to find out, right?”

Seokjin frowned in confusion as the man next to Myungsoo chuckled.

“I’m not sure what you mean,” Seokjin tried, forcing himself not to step backwards.

“Time’s up,” Myungsoo whistled out, looking like a dark knight. “And this is where you bow out.”

Before Seokjin could begin to question the statement, the man next to Myungsoo lunged forward,
driving his fist into Seokjin’s jaw. The force of the impact had him spinning away to collapse
roughly on the pavement, and then he was blacking out.
Chapter Twenty-Seven

Seokjin came awake with a gasp and a flush of pain. He jerked instinctively, sucking in a deep lungful of air, and then several more, eyes darting around the room.

Oh, god.

He was somewhere very bad.

From across the room Woohyun looked towards him, breaking off the conversation he’d been having with Hoya. He said a few, soundless words to his companion, then began making his way to towards Seokjin.

Panic, in the meanwhile, was an overwhelming dagger to the gut, stabbing Seokjin over and over as he looked from the dried blood on the floor of the room he was in, to the plain, gray cement walls and the flickering light above him.

This was the torture chamber that Bangtan always joked about, knowing it existed in some form, but never having any hard proof.

Because people who came into this room—this room that was cold like an ice house and probably several stories underground, didn’t come out. At least not breathing.

“Doctor Jin,” Woohyun said gleefully enough, dragging a nearby chair to where Seokjin himself was tied to a cold, metal seat. His wrists were bound behind him, and by the ache in them across his skin and the tingling numbness in his fingers, he’d been that way for a while. And the plastic biting into his skin wasn’t forgiving in the least bit. They hadn’t been delicate with him, when they’d placed him where he was, and that spoke volumes to the kind of guest he expected to be.

“I … I don’t …”

“Shhh,” Woohyun hushed him, spinning the chair to sit on it backwards. He leaned his arms on the back of the chair and gave a loose grin. “You know,” he remarked, “that bruise on your face makes you look even more pretty. I like bruises on people. It reminds me. I didn’t tell anyone to hit you, but I’m glad they did. Was it Myungsoo?” A quick look of dismissal crossed Woohyun’s face. “Nah. He never gets his hands dirty. Just like that face of his.”

Breathe evenly, Seokjing coached himself. Breathe evenly and as deeply as possible. Don’t panic. Don’t hyperventilate. Don’t show fear.

Trying not to shake, either from the fear or the cold, Seokjin stuttered out, “Reminds you? Bruises remind you of what?”

Some distance away Hoya rolled his eyes and crossed his arms.

Woohyun informed him, “They remind me I can hurt people so easily. Especially you. You’re so soft and squishy. Skin’s like that, and I like the kind that you have best—pretty and smooth, unblemished, the kind of skin people have in dramas.”

“Why am I here?” Seokjin asked, putting on a brave front. “I think there’s been a severe matter of confusion here. Is this about the car accident? I explained already, I was scared and I ran. I didn’t--”

Woohyun reached a hand out, his fingers tracing the bruise that had to be on Seokjin’s face from
where he’d been cold-cocked. “You should stop talking,” Woohyun advised. Then he was pushing hard on the skin, making a flare of pain jet across Seokjin’s face. “At least until I start asking you the important questions.”

He jerked away instinctive and Woohyun responded by striking him harshly with his hand on the same spot.

Seokjin clenched his eyes closed, sucking in air through his teeth. His chin fell down to his chest and the barest hint of a gasp of pain escaped him.

“Woohyun,” Hoya snapped.

“What?” Woohyun snapped back. “I’m just getting a good look at him, okay? You know I like pretty things. I want to remember him like this. Pretty. He won’t be like this for long, you know.”

They were going to kill him. The knowledge vibrated through Seokjin like the death sentence it was. But before they killed him, and probably dumped his body in the Han River or at Namjoon’s doorstep, they were going to ruin him. They were going to torture him for information, disfigure him, likely remove body parts, and only then let him go into the great void.

“Hey. Hey.”

The sensation of someone lifting his chin jarred him, and he was forced to look at Woohyun’s own handsome features. The man cautioned, “Can you try not to hyperventilate yourself? We’ve got a long way to go and if you pass out now, you’re just going to prolong it all. I don’t know about you, but I don’t want to be here for the next five or six hours if I don’t have to. I’ve got a super-hot boyfriend to get back to.”

“Get started,” Hoya ordered.

“Suck my dick,” Woohyun threw back at him almost reflexively, then he was patting Seokjin’s knee in deceptive way that was meant to look comforting, but most certainly was not.

Hoya strode over to them, catching Seokjin’s attention and asking, “Did you think that we’re completely stupid?”

“Doctor Jin,” Woohyun cut in with a tisk. “Do you know what you are?” His fingers were back on Seokjin’s skin as he spoke, digits sliding up Seokjin’s neck to tug into his hair.

The whole gesture made Seokjin sick to his stomach. But he didn’t think it would go over well if he ended up vomiting all over Woohyun. It might get him killed on the spot.

That was something he stopped to consider. They weren’t hurting him yet, not seriously, but they would soon. They’d hurt him to make him talk, and they’d draw out the pain as much as possible.

But if he forced their hand … dead men couldn’t tell secrets.

And Seokjin knew a lot of Bangtan’s secrets.

Woohyun tugged sharply at his hair, making him wince and gasp out for him to stop.

“You,” Woohyun said in an insistent kind of way, “are Infinite’s property. Just like every other poor, pathetic sack of shit in this neighborhood. You’re our bitch. That means we own you. We own
everything about you, including that stupid little clinic of yours. So why, and imagine our surprise when we figured it out, would you have any sort of association with Bangtan?”

Roughly, Hoya asked, a fist rising, “Are you a plant?”

A spy. They thought he was a spy.

And the sheer lunacy of the idea, that Seokjin could be someone who appeared to be innocuous but was really a double-crossing agent of any kind, was laughable.

So, he did laugh. He couldn’t help it.

Hoya struck him so hard in the mouth that the chair tipped. Seokjin groaned heavily in pain and then he was falling, slamming back onto the concrete floor, barely managing to hold his head up to avoid striking it. The wind was knocked out of him and his heart rate accelerated immediately.

Seokjin tasted blood in his mouth, but a quick check of his teeth with his tongue revealed none of them were loose. He’d gotten lucky. He’d only split his lip open with his teeth.

It was Woohyun who was laughing then, pitchy and scary in how crazy it sounded.

“I’m not,” Seokjin managed, coughing harshly at how sick the taste of blood was making him. He wanted to spit blood at the both of them, no matter how childish or disgusting the thought was. “I’m not a member of Bangtan.”

Hoya hauled him up to his feet, pulling him off the over turned chair, only to slam him into the nearby wall.

It was like being hit by a train, Hoya’s muscles bulging at he repeated the process, knocking Seokjin’s head into the surface again, making him dizzy and disoriented. The world slid around in front of him, his eyes refusing to focus.

“You go into their territory often,” Hoya shouted at him. “You’ve been seen with them! Do you deny it?”

Seokjin collapsed down into a heap on the cold floor, sliding sideways a bit as he gasped out, “It’s my brother.” His hands were still bound together tightly, but now his fingers felt like they were being pricked by needles, and it was a worrying sensation.

He could hear the confusion Woohyun’s voice as he asked, “What did he say?”

Trying to twist his bound hands a little, Seokjin repeated, “I go to see my brother. He lives over there. That’s all.”

Hoya knelt down in front of him. “Ah, yes, your brother. Jungkook is his name, right?”

Seokjin was scared for himself. He was scared that this was how his life ended, unfairly and without the kind of closure he thought he deserved. But compared to hearing his brother’s name come out of Hoya’s mouth? It was nothing compared to the new fear that Jungkook would be hurt by Infinite in any way.

If they were willing to do this to him, how much worse would they do to Jungkook?

They’d do more than just destroy his little brother. Because with Jungkook, who was a member of Bangtan, it would be personal.
Woohyun joined Hoya in front of him, head tilting as he asked, “You want us to believe that you
don’t know your brother’s friends are Bangtan’s core members? You want us to believe that you
haven’t been hanging out with Rap Mon obliviously, like you’re some naïve little kid?”

Seokjin’s eyes widened, hopefully in a believable way. “No! I would never let Jungkook associate
with Bangtan! And I’d never knowingly do it myself!”

Hoya socked him hard in the ribs, surely busting something by the odd snapping sensation Seokjin
had felt in him. Seokjin’s world went white at the pain, and from his chest burst the same sensation
he’d felt when he’d woken up in the hospital after Jungkook had broken his ribs doing CPR on him.

Something was definitely broken again.

Hoya demanded, “Didn’t I tell you a long time ago I don’t like liars?”

“I’m not lying,” Seokjin gasped out, tearing up at the new, stronger pain. He could feel the strain on
his breathing almost right away. “Jungkook is an adult. He doesn’t live at home with our father, or
me for that matter. He lives on his own. He’s transitioning into having his own life right now, and
that means making new friends. I’ve met some of them, but none of them ever said anything about
Bangtan. I swear!”

He tried to move and something felt even worse in him, like sandpaper rubbing together.

Woohyun whistled. “Well, for augment’s sake, say we believe you. It’s incredibly bad luck for you,
then, that your brother’s gone and made friends with the most important members of Bangtan. Better
than that, he’s gone and joined their ranks.”

Seokjin shook his head right away. “He wouldn’t. He knows how I feel about that sort of thing. He
wouldn’t go against my wishes. I’m more of his father than his brother. I’m the one who raised him.
He wouldn’t disrespect me in that way.”

He’d say anything—give any lie, to put distance between himself and Jungkook. Because the only
was to save Jungkook now, was to convince Infinite of what he was saying, and hopefully loosen
the leash enough to get a message out.

Without warning Woohyun leaned forward, his mouth covering Seokjin’s in a heavy, hot kiss.

Seokjin tried to twist away without hesitation, but his chest seized, and he nearly blacked out.

Woohyun’s tongue slipped against his mouth, licking at something, and Seokjin felt tears splash
down from his eyes.

“You’re a sick fuck,” Hoya said to Woohyun when he finally pulled back, lips red with Seokjin’s
blood. “And I’m going to tell Sunggyu.”

“Come on,” Woohyun pouted out. “It’s not my fault he’s so pretty when he cries. And really, I just
wanted a taste. Don’t be a bastard, Hoya.”

“Please,” Seokjin whispered out, “please let me go. I’m not a member of Bangtan. I had no idea
what my brother was getting involved in. I have always been loyal to Infinite, and I always will be.
I’ve only ever gone near Bangtan to visit my brother. I don’t know any of them personally, we’re not
friends, I’m not spying for them, and they mean nothing to me!”

Hoya braced a hand on the wall, then put a deliberate boot on Seokjin’s stomach. His ribs protested
immediately, the pain nearly overwhelming him. “Here’s the thing,” he said, reaching into his back
pocket for his phone. A couple quick swipes of his thumb on the screen and he was turning the phone to show Seokjin several photos of the night of the fire. And all of them were of him with Taehyung. “I only tell people not to lie to me so many times. And then I show them why they shouldn’t.”

When Hoya’s boot came down in a crushing way, and Seokjin started screaming, he’d thought he’d never stop. And as the minutes dragged on, his throat going raw from his screams, he barely recognized the sound as coming from himself. Then he lost feeling in his body, lost his vision, and fainted.

When he woke back up, however much longer after that, he remembered immediately where he was. There was no mistaking the frigid gray room that he knew he’d die in.

He couldn’t move, however. His arms were still tied behind him, prickling with a mixture of numbness and pain, and the rest of his body was on fire. He couldn’t catch his breath either, which meant for certain that Hoya had broken several of his ribs, or worse.

A new, unexpected voice said, “Get him up, already. Sunggyu wants to speak to him.”

It wasn’t Hoya’s voice or Woohyun’s.

But he lost all focus and interest in the train of thought the moment he was lifted up by his arms, jostling his abdomen and causing him to start yelling again. The pain that hadn’t seemed like it could get worse, like it was the absolute most excruciating pain that could possibly be, doubled at the movement.

“Stop,” he begged, voice threading in and out, his throat nearly paralyzed from the drama of literally screaming himself hoarse.

Woohyun’s voice offered, “I don’t think--”

“It doesn’t matter what you think, Woohyun,” the unknown voice said again. “Sunggyu asked for him. And you better not have broken him. Sunggyu will fuck you up. You know he likes this one.”

“This one is a traitor,” Woohyun argued back. “And putting him in a room with Sunggyu, who’s still recovering from his illness, is a shit idea. Don’t pretend you think any differently, Myungsoo.”

Oh. That was the voice.

The room was rolling as Seokjin cracked open his teary eyes. It was Myungsoo. The person who’d probably helped drag his limp body to a car less than a hundred feet from the clinic.

And it seemed extremely unlikely that anyone would be tipped off this time. There wasn’t going to be any big rescue coming his way. And it would be days more before he was missed. He’d likely be dead and gone by the time anyone came looking for him.

“Doesn’t matter,” Myungsoo said, and then he huffed out a laugh when he caught Seokjin looking at him. “Sunggyu wants him. Get him cleaned up and put him in front of the boss.”

They dragged him towards the only door to the room and down a long hallway. And then into an elevator that took them up for several long seconds, proving they had been at least a story or two underground.

It seemed an unexpected and almost ridiculous reprieve from the torture, having to be wedged uncomfortable on a toilet while a cold, impersonal and blank faced man cleaned the blood from his
face and exposed skin. They jostled him into a shirt that had come from somewhere, and then all but dumped him in a comfortable chair near a fireplace in an otherwise empty room. There was one other chair opposite his own and two men standing guard at the door, but Seokjin could barely breathe, let alone contemplate making a run for the door.

In fact, his sight kept narrowing like it was going to go completely, blacking around the edges and wobbling in a way that made Seokjin quickly blink to try and regain his senses.

And he’d seen his skin when they’d changed his shirt. He’s seen the discoloration on his skin and the slight swelling.

It could be nothing. It could be a basic, physical reaction to blunt trauma. The swelling might go down on its own in a day or two and he could be no worse for wear—aside from broken ribs. If he was still breathing at that point.

But there was also the chance that there was some internal bleeding, and he couldn’t properly judge how bad it was at the moment, if it existed at all. He worried mostly what would happen when he got to the point that he could, with no way to help himself. Internal bleeding, if there was any, would be a death sentence as much as anyone in Infinite was.

He was starting to doze, or maybe just pass out, by the time the door to the room open and Sunggyu came in.

Sunggyu was moving slowly. That was the first thing Seokjin noted. He was shuffling, more than walking, and looked a little wobbly on his feet, dressed in a heavy jacket despite the warmth of the room. And he was still pale. All the indicators to his condition showed that he was recovering, but still not healthy yet.

“I see Hoya and Woohyun gave you a proper greeting,” Sunggyu grunted out, sitting a bit heavily, as if his legs wouldn’t hold him for much longer.

Trying to take small gasps of air, rather than the bigger gulps that he felt he needed, Seokjin tried again, “I told them. I swear, I told them, there’s been a misunderstanding.”

Sunggyu seemed to lean subconsciously towards the fire, stating, “You claim that you have no association to Bangtan, outside of your brother who is a member—albeit a recent development.”

“It’s true,” Seokjin stated, fighting down the sudden urge to vomit. “It is.”

“Then,” Sunggyu implored, “I’d like you to explain to me why I have photographic proof of you, deep inside Bangtan territory, several nights ago. And you certainly weren’t just hanging out with your brother.”

Seokjin grit out, “I was helping try to contain a fire. A fire you started.”

Sunggyu’s eyes narrowed. “I think you should keep in mind how graceful and generous I am being at the moment, allowing you to explain yourself. If you were anyone else, you’d be dragging the bottom of the Han right now.”

Twenty-eight people. The fire had killed twenty-eight people, including Namjoon’s grandparents.

Sunggyu was evil. He was evil and even if he ended up killing Seokjin, he held out desperate hope that Namjoon would ultimately have the final laugh. Namjoon had to be the victor. There wasn’t any alternative situation that Seokjin could take to his grave.
“I went to see my brother that night,” Seokjin said slowly, Sunggyu’s form going blurry in front of him. “I went to see Jungkook. But he wasn’t there. I went to his apartment. I wanted to talk to him about his father.” Shaking his head a little, Seokjin added, “I called the number of his roommate.”

Sunggyu supplied, “Park Jimin. Rap Monster’s iron fist.”

Seokjin had never been so desperate to have someone believe a lie in his life.

“He said my brother had gone out to eat with others to a restaurant that was becoming his favorite. I went to meet with him and ran almost directly into the fire. I wasn’t going towards it on purpose. But I saw it, and I’m a doctor. The urge to help others is in me before anything you could being to describe as self-preservation instincts. I helped to save people because that’s what I do, not because I thought it was helping Bangtan in any way. Being a doctor is who I am.”

Sunggyu gave a rough cough, turning away.

It had been stupid, he realized now, to think that it was just people willing to rat him out, that he and Namjoon had had to worry about. Bangtan had infiltrated Infinite’s territory plenty of times. They’d come to see Seokjin at his clinic, they’d followed him for a short while, and they were familiar with the streets and the faces of key players. Maybe someone had gone to Infinite. Maybe someone had given his name to Sunggyu. But maybe he and Namjoon had just been too lax in their behavior.

Maybe they’d given themselves away.

Seokjin had stupidly accompanied Namjoon and other members of Bangtan all over. Infinite had had so many opportunities to spot him. It was probably sheer dumb luck that they hadn’t seen him until the night of the fire.

“And your connection to V?”

Seokjin tried to give the most helpless, hapless shrug he’d ever managed in his life. “I know he’s one of my brother’s friends. I guess you’re telling me he’s a member of Bangtan right now, but I really didn’t know. I just thought he was some punk kid who thought his stupid nickname was clever. I put up with him for the sake of my brother. No other reason.”

Without warning Sunggyu scooted forward to the front of his seat to peer at Seokjin. “What if I think you’re bullshitting me?”

Seokjin felt his heart give a stutter, but after that it was back on track, so he was able to breathe some kind of relief and answer, feeling faint, “Then I assume you’ll have your dogs drag me back to where I was before. And you’ll hurt me until I tell you a different story.”

With a shrug, Sunggyu asked, “Don’t you think this is a good option for me? I let Woohyun flex his more … eccentric interests, and I learn the truth. I shouldn’t have to tell you people are natural born liars.”

Shakily, Seokjin agreed, “You could, I guess.” He put a hand gingerly against his side, eyes nearly rolling up as he lost himself for a moment. “But I’d tell you I was the queen of England if it made you stop. I’d lie to make you stop.”

Sunggyu turned to stare into the recently stoked fire.

Seokjin wanted to pass out. He wanted to either die, or get to a hospital for help. It didn’t matter which to him at the moment, with all calm and rational thoughts stolen from him.
He was starting to float away from everything when he heard Sunggyu say, “They say you saved my life.”

Seokjin opened his eyes blearily, trying to focus on Sunggyu. “I’m sorry?”

“With your diagnosis.”

If Seokjin had been a colder person, angrier, or less of a doctor, he would have regretted it. If he hadn’t figured out that it was meningitis, Sunggyu might be dead. He probably would be, and then Namjoon’s grandparents would still be alive.

“I’m a doctor,” Seokjin repeated, not for the first time, but more numbly now.

Fingers steeped together, Sunggyu watched him carefully, then posed, “You must think me a monster.”

Seokjin tried to clamp down on the pain, and offered, “You set a fire that killed a lot of people. All of them innocent.”

Fingers tapping absently against each other, Sunggyu asked him, “Do you know what organized chaos is?”

Seokjin felt a bit stupid, blinking slowly at Sunggyu.

Organized chaos?

“How me ask you this instead,” Sunggyu said, easily bypassing his confusion. “Do you know what it is to see people you love ripped from you? Torn from you by needless violence?”

Yes, Seokjin wanted to tell him. He wanted to say yes, probably more than Sunggyu, Seokjin knew what it was to lose family to a horrific, unnecessary account of violence.

“No,” Sunggyu snapped, almost angrily at him. “You don’t. Because you, you pretty little rich boy, grew up in that castle of yours, downtown, protected from the real world. You have no idea what it is to suffer, and to suffer without need. You have no idea what it is to see your neighborhood become a battle ground, to see your family go hungry, to see lives being snatched away in an instant, and without meaning. You know nothing.”

Seokjin couldn’t follow. He just couldn’t get his brain to work. Not against the pain he was feeling.

Sunggyu said, “You look around, and you see a monster that terrorizes his neighborhood. You see a monster that extorts, and kills, and sets fires that kill people. But what you’re seeing is organized chaos, Doctor Kim. Look a little closer, will you? Take a harder look and see that my rule is law, and it’s a hard law, but it’s order within law. I keep these streets from being a battle ground. I keep order. I keep everyone in their place. Without me, there’d be chaos. With me, there’s organized chaos. And it’s beautiful.”

“That’s a sad justification,” Seokjin gasped out, “for what you do to people.”

“I do what I have to,” Sunggyu said harshly. “I do what’s necessary. Good and necessary are not mutually exclusive. They’re not even relevant to each other. I keep the streets safe to walk down.”

“If you pay the toll.”

Seokjin didn’t think there was anything Sunggyu could say to make the things he did, okay.
“Sure,” Sunggyu agreed. He curled his hands into his lap in a comfortable way. “But isn’t that what people truly want in the end? Won’t most people give up freedom for security? Won’t most people sacrifice free will for the knowledge that they’ll go to sleep at night and wake up in the morning? That’s what I’m offering.”

Seokjin shook his head slowly. “You killed those people. Burned them.” Namjoon’s parents had been burned. His grandfather who always had a wink and a dirty joke for Seokjin, and Namjoon’s kind but fierce grandmother who’d been the pinnacle of strength.

“I made a play for dominance,” Sunggyu defended lazily. “And when I’ve run down every last member of Bangtan, and I have control over everything I’ve got my eye on, there’ll be peace again. It may not look like it, but that’s why it’s a matter of perspective. Organized chaos.”

He was mad, absolutely mad, and Seokjin didn’t know how to fight madness. At least not a madman who thought he was truly the hero.

“Think on it,” Sunggyu advised, sounding absolute in his command.

With a small grunt, Sunggyu heaved himself up from the chair and left Seokjin behind, exiting through nearby doors.

Seokjin slumped down in his seat.

They didn’t take him back underground. That was a small favor, Seokjin supposed. Instead the same men who’d escorted him to see Sunggyu, took him up several flights of stairs to a room nearly identical to the last time he’d been a forced guest at Infinite’s home base.

At least Seokjin now knew where he’d die.

He collapsed down on the bed in the room they locked him in, muffling a cry of pain into the pillow as he shifted too much, inflaming his wounds again. The tears started after that, surprising him. He’d thought for certain that he had nothing left to cry.

But eventually, keeping as still as he could, he managed to fall asleep. All of his worries, his fears, and everything in between, disappeared as his eyes closed.

“What?” Seokjin questioned when they woke him much later. The sun was down and the room would have been pitch black if Sungyeol, who’d delivered the news to him personally, hadn’t flipped on the switch near the door.

“But the boss wants you at dinner,” he said with a shrug. Seokjin noted that the sling he’d been rumored to be wearing was gone, but there was a heavy plaster cast on one arm. “So get up and try not to look like shit.” It was probably a miracle he’d even survived that car crash they’d been involved in.

Body trembling from the effort it took to sit up, Seokjin pointed out, “Two of your friends tried to beat me within an inch of my life.”

“Nah,” Sungyeol said in a certain way. “They were just playing with you.”

“Playing?” Seokjin asked incredulously.

Sungyeol posed, “They didn’t mess up your face too badly, so that’s something. I mean, the only thing Woohyun likes more than pretty faces, is messing them up. But Sunggyu wouldn’t let him.” He pulled open the door and stated, “I’ll be back in five minutes. Be ready.”
It took almost the whole of the five minutes for Seokjin to get to the bathroom attached to the bedroom. And when he looked at himself in the mirror, he certainly looked like he’d been on the losing end of a fight. Most of his face was swollen in patches that were discolored from burst blood vessels. And when he lifted his shirt to check his ribs, he was more concerned than he’d been before.

Fighting through the pain, and biting down so hard on his tongue he nearly cleaved it in half, he probed his ribs, feeling for breaks or issues that could be felt with the bare hand. Putting any pressure on his ribs nearly made his legs bow out, and he’d nearly given up by the time Sungyeol was back.

“I said try not to look like shit,” he said as he observed Seokjin from the doorway.

Straightening up as best he could, Seokjin asked, “Why is Sunggyu doing this? Why this farce?” Why hadn’t Sunggyu made up his mind already and had him killed?

Sungyeol snorted out, “Don’t look a gift horse in the mouth. And be thankful Sunggyu understands the notion of a life for a life. That’s the only thing keeping you alive.”

Dinner, in the main dining hall, was so traditionally western that Seokjin spent most of his time being completely baffled. And fighting not to pass out. They sat on high backed, elegant looking chairs, with massive amounts of food spread out in front of them, a chandler above, and actual silverware to use.

But idea of eating anything made Seokjin even more nauseous, even if the food did smell amazing, and was the kind that Seokjin rarely got the chance to enjoy.

Of Infinite’s top seven members, six, including Sunggyu, were present. Seokjin noted only Dongwoo was missing.

The members of Infinite chatted lightly about things like television shows, sports teams, and Seokjin wanted to rip his hair out from the ridiculousness of it. Or scream.

Instead he settled for pushing food around on his plate, trying to keep any of the members of Infinite from paying him any attention.

He’d thought he was succeeding until Sungjong narrowed his eyes at him and asked, “Is the food not good enough for you? I thought you liked fancy food, rich boy.”

Seokjin took a calming breath. “It’s very good.”

“Look at him,” Sungyeol offered up, pointing his fork at Seokjin. “It doesn’t look like he eats much at all.”

Sunggyu looked on amused as Woohyun whined out, “Gyu, I don’t know why you wouldn’t let me pull his teeth out with my plies. He doesn’t need his teeth to eat. He doesn’t even need his teeth to look pretty.”

Seokjin choked a little. Was that what Woohyun had wanted to do? Hold him down and pull each tooth out of his mouth? For fun?

“It’s just as well,” Sunggyu announced, smiling into his glass of wine. He looked like a kingpin, like a king in general, seated at the head of the table with a smug look on his face. “The meal is nearly over. Now for the entertainment.”

“Oh my god,” Sungjong said, pulling on Myungsoo’s sleeve. “I’ve been waiting for this for the whole night.”
Myungsoo pulled away and snapped, “Try not to act like a twelve-year-old.”

They were all crazy, Seokjin decided. They were all insane and cruel and weird and terrifying.

From his pocket Sunggyu pulled out a slim, disposable phone and handed it to Hoya who passed it to Seokjin with a smug look.

“What is this for?” Seokjin asked.

“Call your brother.”

Seokjin startled. “Call my brother?”

“Call him,” Woohyun urged. “Call him and tell him where you are.”

Sunggyu rolled his eyes. “Call your brother,” he reiterated. “Let him know that you’re staying as a guest of mine right now, and not to worry. Doctor Kim, I take very good care of my guests, especially those who I’ve found myself indebted to.”

They were keeping him?

They were keeping him.

That was a scarier thought than them just killing him outright.

“I …” Seokjin looked from face to face, most of them beaming with some kind of malicious intent. “I can’t stay here. I have the clinic. I have--”

“You have,” Sunggyu interrupted, “a gift. You’re incredibly intuitive as a doctor. You’re intuitive and gifted. You’re the best I’ve come across in a long time. And don’t I deserve the best?”

Gripping his fork tightly, Woohyun stated, “If Sunggyu says you’re staying on as his personal physician, you are. Now make the call.”

This wasn’t just about that, Seokjin realized. It was also about openly taunting Bangtan. If, and it was a big if, Sunggyu believed his story, it meant that keeping Seokjin was a slight against Bangtan. And if he didn’t, if Sunggyu thought Seokjin was attempting to play him, he now had a perceived member of Bangtan under his complete control.

In either case, it was another move on the chessboard in Infinite’s favor.

Shakily, Seokjin’s fingers dialed Jungkook’s number, warning Sunggyu, “He probably won’t even pick up the phone. He rarely does even when he knows it’s me calling. I don’t know if an unknown number will even register for him.”

Seated directly across from him, Myungsoo raised an eyebrow and stated, “You’d better hope he answers.”

The phone rang, the call being broadcast on speaker for everyone to hear. But Jungkook didn’t pick up. It continued to ring and Seokjin’s hopes sunk with each passing moment.

Then finally, just before it clicked over to voice mail, Jungkook answered roughly, “Who the hell is this?” His brother sounded panicked, short tempered, and maybe even angry.

“Jungkook. It’s me.”
Jungkook’s end of the line was silent save for a large exhale of breath. Then he exploded. “Jin! Where the hell are you? We’ve all been frantic with worry. I went by the clinic and you weren’t there, and no one had seen you! I even tried with dad! And you wouldn’t believe how bad Ra--”

“Jungkook!”

Maybe that was the bigger plan at work. Maybe, Seokjin theorized, Sunggyu was hoping that calling Jungkook was going to expose him in some way. And it was entirely possible if Seokjin didn’t get a handle on the conversation right away.

“Jin?”

Swallowing hard, Seokjin kept his eyes on the table in front of him and said, “Jungkook, it’s very important that you listen to what I’m about to tell you. Don’t talk. Just listen. Do you understand?”

It took a moment for Jungkook to reply, “You’re scaring me.”

Good, Seokjin thought, the more scared the better. It would prompt him into acting quicker.

“I’m okay,” Seokjin said. “I’ve currently been … invited by Kim Sunggyu to stay with him.”

Jungkook made a choking kind of noise, and there was the sound of something or someone shuffling in the background, but thankfully the line remained quiet on his end.

“I’m all right,” he was quick to add, even though he certainly didn’t feel it. “And I don’t think you should worry. Sunggyu assures me that he takes very good care of his guests. And I suppose you could say we have a … previous working experience. My point is, for the time being, I’m his guest. At his home—his personal residence. And I think I will be, for a while.”

Unable to help himself, Seokjin looked quickly to Sunggyu who had a preposterous looking smile on his face.

“Jungkook,” Seokjin said, and now he knew he had to hedge all his bets. “Please tell Namjoon not to worry.” If Sunggyu knew Namjoon’s real name, everything was already over. But Seokjin knew that Bangtan buried their real names, and most of their families, down so deep they rarely saw the verbal light of day. Seokjin was willing to bet everything on Sunggyu not knowing Namjoon’s real name, even if Namjoon’s grandparents had gotten linked to Bangtan. “I know the last time we spoke he was feeling a little down, but--”

Now Jungkook did speak, stating, “He’s fine, Jin. He’s better than fine. In fact, I’d say he’s back to normal and on the move.”

Seokjin could have started crying again with relief.

And he wasn’t expected Jungkook to say. “Jin, I’m really glad you’re okay. I’m sure everyone will be, too.” Seokjin desperately hoped Namjoon and the others were listening.

“Good, good,” Seokjin said, stuttering out a breath.

“And Jin?”

Seokjin held the phone up a bit higher, asking, “Yes?”

In a deep, forceful tone, Jungkook told him, “Be sure to let Kim Sunggyu know how much we appreciate him and what he’s doing. It’s an honor to be a guest of his, and I only hope I can repay
him tenfold. I’m sure our friends feel the same.”

Seokjin, for the first time, felt like smiling. Everything hurt a little less, and for the moment, the situation wasn’t completely hopeless.

“I’ll be seeing you when I can,” Seokjin told him, risking a glance back to Sunggyu who now had an unreadable expression on his face. “Soon, I hope.”

His brother replied, “You have no idea.”

The click of the phone call ending was a little disheartening, but it was enough to know that Bangtan understood the situation right away.

It would all be for nothing if Sunggyu decided to have him killed soon, but if he didn’t, Bangtan would be attempting to launch some kind of rescue attempt. Of that Seokjin was sure. They were just stupid enough to think he was important enough to rescue.

But more importantly, Seokjin now knew that Namjoon was back on his feet. Seokjin had left him a broken, dejected man, and now he was strong and powerful again. That alone was worth the stress of the conversation.

“Done,” Seokjin said, setting the phone on the table. “My brother knows where I am now.”

From the end of the table, next to Sunggyu, Woohyun gave a huge laugh and banged his fist down on the table demanding, “We need desert. Gyu, we’ve gotta get some cake and ice cream to celebrate this.”

There was horror and dread filling up Seokjin’s chest, tightening it further. Something was wrong. He could sense it immediately. Something was very wrong.

“What …” He broke off, almost terrified to know.

Sunggyu raised his glass of wine to Seokjin in salute and stated, “I’m glad he knows. I’m glad he knows exactly where you are.”

The rest of Infinite raised their own glasses in a toast and Seokjin froze up.

He’d been stupid. He’d been so stupid.

Seokjin had thought for one glorious moment that he was giving Bangtan the upper hand. He’d thought he was opening the door for Bangtan to swoop in, with an advantage, and take control of the situation.

But really he’d been giving everything to Infinite, who not only had him, but also home field advantage.

Seokjin was the bait. The mansion was the row boat. And Sunggyu, playing the part of the fisherman, was about the reel him in.

As Woohyun continued to laugh, Seokjin let his head thump back against the chair. He closed his eyes and truly, for the first time since he’d been taken by Myungsoo, wished they’d just killed him outright.

Because now Namjoon and Jungkook and all the rest of Bangtan were waltzing right into Sunggyu’s trap.
And if Seokjin ended up being the one who got them killed …

“Cheer up,” Hoya called out, grinning a smile full of perfect teeth. “Everyone loves a reunion. Especially one as ironic at this promises to be.”

Seokjin took in the deepest breath he could, feeling the burn almost like penance. And then he prayed that Yoongi, or Namjoon, or any other member of Bangtan was smarter than he was, or at the very least, that they were truly prepared for what came next.

“Cheers,” Sunggyu said, tipping his glass at Seokjin and then taking a long drink of his wine. He seemed to enjoy the taste on his tongue as he soaked in Seokjin’s expression. And then he said simply, “Organized chaos.”
The was a beat, a pause, a moment of silence.

There was deafening silence.

There was so much of it, eating up the room after the phone call ended, squeezing the life out of all of them, that Namjoon could hear his own breathing raging like a storm in him. He could hear the ticking of the clock across the room in a thunderous way, and the hitching of barely contained sobs resonating from Jungkook.

Then came the explosion.

“Goddamnit!”

Namjoon let out a long exhale as Jungkook turned on heel and flung his phone across the apartment. The plastic on the phone shattered as it impacted with the far wall, sending shards in dozens of directions, scattering them across the hardwood floor.

A wince of kindness on his face, Taehyung turned to reach for Jungkook, easing out softly, “Jungkook, it's going to be okay.”

Namjoon knew it was the wrong thing to say the moment the words came from Taehyung, but they’d been expected all the same. Taehyung was sweeter than someone really deserved to be, underneath all the layers. He was far too empathetic, too. Taehyung had a way of feeling the emotions of others down to his core, in radical ways that went past simply being able to express sympathy. Sure, Namjoon had known him long enough to know that Taehyung could be abrasive and loud and prone to fits of impulsiveness.

But like the rest of them, Taehyung had a good soul underneath it all.

Taehyung was also probably the only one who’d be willing to admit something like that.

Just as predictably, Jungkook wheeled back on Taehyung, features twisted up into something made up of fear and anger and frustration. “Don’t you dare,” he shouted back, tone ringing in Namjoon’s ears, “tell me that everything is going to be okay. Don’t you fucking dare.”

“Hey,” Hoseok broke in, taking a step towards Jungkook.

And there, Namjoon mused quietly to himself, came the protective nature in Hoseok that always ran a little rampant when it came to Taehyung. The need to protect and defend, emotions so deeply engrained in Hoseok that they really defined him in a way, could always be stoked from a tiny flame to a raging inferno when Taehyung was involved.

Maybe that was what made it true love?

Namjoon knew he … he’d …he’d raze everything to the ground for Seokjin.

“My brother,” Jungkook snapped out angrily, “is being dangled in front of us like bait, and you want me to calm down?”

“I want you to calm down,” Hoseok replied calmly, but not backing down. Namjoon could spy Taehyung’s fingers wrapped around the thinness of Hoseok’s wrist. “Because you’re not the only
one scared here. You’re not the only one angry.”

“Jin is my brother!”

“He means something to all of us,” Jimin broke in, head bowed down so that his bangs obscured a great deal of his face. “Not just you.”

Hoseok’s shoulders squared. “We are not going to fall apart here, okay? What will that get Jin? Huh? What will that get him, Jungkook?”

Namjoon’s eyes slid across the room to where Yoongi was standing, arms crossed over his chest, feet braced apart. Their gaze met, and the smallest of impossible smiles graced Yoongi’s face. It wasn’t even a smile, not really, but compared to the scowl Yoongi usually had on his face, it meant everything.

Yoongi’s head dipped toward Hoseok in obvious approval.

There’s our boy, Yoongi seemed to be telling him with the one gesture, and Namjoon agreed. There was Hoseok, rising up to take control of the more panicked members of Bangtan. There was Hoseok, being the leader Namjoon had always seen him as, even from the start when Hoseok had been too willing and eager to follow orders.

“It’ll get him killed, that’s what,” Yoongi said, breaking in to the conversation.

Jungkook’s body tensed terribly at that, going rigid and listing to the side.

“Am I wrong?” Yoongi demanded, eying each of them. “If we act without thinking, and make even the smallest wrong move, we’re going to have a dead body on our hands. Think about that for a second, while you get your anger under control, Jungkook.”

That wasn’t something Namjoon could bring himself to consider. He couldn’t even entertain the idea of such a thing happening, not to the person that consumed him every waking moment, and made Namjoon want to be a better person, and drove him to get up each morning and do more than the day before.

Namjoon was not willing to consider waking up in an empty bed again, not after having grown used to the warmth that was Seokjin pressed up against his back. He wasn’t going back to spending his nights alone, watching television or prowling the streets looking for trouble out of sheer boredom. He didn’t want to be the kind of person who drifted in solitude, and had no one he loved to share holidays with.

He loved Jin. He loved him more than he’d thought it was physically possible to love someone, and Namjoon was not going to lose another person he loved. He was not.

“Then what are we going to do?” Jimin asked, echoing the question that was obviously on Jungkook’s face. There was such rage brewing beneath the surface that was Jimin, and Namjoon wondered when it was going to explode. “What are we going to do to get him back? Alive and unharmed.”

Hoseok gave Taehyung a gentle pull, pressing them close before saying, “Whatever we do, we have to be smart about it. We can’t do anything carelessly that gets Jin hurt, and we can’t do anything stupid that endangers any of us.”

Jimin scowled at Hoseok. “I don’t care what we do, but we need to be doing something. We need to get it together. The enemy has Jin. Infinite has him. Is the full impact of that getting through to you?
Don’t be an idiot. You know what Infinite do to people. You and I both know how they chew people up and spit them out. And it’s not like the good doctor is actually built to withstand much.”

Jungkook brought a hand up to massage his forehead, saying almost forlornly, “He hasn’t had his medication. Jin hasn’t had his pills. He needs his pills. He needs to have them at a set time. It’s important. He … he …”

Jungkook’s shoulders hitched, his breathing stuttered, and Namjoon felt a crash of guilt.

He’d done this. This was his fault. It was on his shoulders as he watched Jungkook fall to pieces in front of him. He was the only one to blame, while Taehyung tugged tightly on Hoseok until they were hugging, and Yoongi deflated, and Jimin gave a shout of frustration before darting from the apartment.

There could never be anyone to blame, except Namjoon himself.

He felt like he was floating, in a way. His feet didn’t feel solid underneath him, but in an instance they were carrying him anyway. With the air thinning around him, Namjoon found his feet taking him to the balcony attached to the apartment. His bloated feeling fingers pressed on the glass door until he got it open, and then he stumbled out, catching himself on the balcony.

He put his head down on the railing and tried to even out his breathing.

He could not fall apart again. He could not, not when he’d just managed to pick himself up again. He couldn’t fall apart even once more, because he wasn’t sure there’d be anything to put back together if he did.

But it was his fault.

Maybe Infinite would have always been there. No, Namjoon knew they would have. Infinite had been building for the better part of a decade. Namjoon knew enough about Sunggyu to know he’d been in the game a long time. Like Namjoon, Sunggyu had grown up in a rough part of town, barely scraping by, getting bullied and hassled and downright terrorized by the gangs in power. And then Sunggyu had pulled himself up, like Namjoon had. Sunggyu’s rise to power hadn’t been so different from Namjoon’s at all. In fact, there wasn’t much different about them at all, except for their modes of operation.

So it was stupid to think that removing Jin from the equation, would have removed Infinite as well. Infinite had been on the cusp of true power before Seokjin had even opened his clinic. Sunggyu had been making power moves ages before Namjoon had met Seokjin.

And inevitably, Namjoon had always know, right from the start, that leading a gang meant one thing and only one thing. He’d always know, from the very first day, that gangs inevitably fought each other. Gangs grappled for power. And when one gang faded, another rose up.

From the day Namjoon had taken Yoongi’s hand, and shaken it, and promised to make the streets just a little better, he’d known that anyone who got in line behind him, was also signing up for a fight to the death eventually.

Jin, though. Seokjin was different.

“He should have never been involved,” Namjoon rasped out, in a quiet, whispering kind of way. “You’re an idiot, Namjoon.”

He should have left Seokjin where he found him, at his clinic, in the process of being a shining
beacon of light for the community. He should have admired from afar, and let himself dream, but he should have kept his distance. It was the biggest mistake of his life, giving into temptation, and letting himself be pulled into Seokjin’s orbit by the gravity of attraction between them.

It was just … Seokjin was so mesmerizing as a person. People were, in general, pretty spectacular to Namjoon, but Seokjin was in a class all his own. Seokjin was grace and dignity, melded with intelligence and perseverance and beauty, and Namjoon had been lost the moment he’d seen him. Namjoon had maybe loved Seokjin the moment they’d met, and Namjoon knew he’d been selfish. Namjoon knew he’d endangered the one he loved because of the weakness of his own heart.

“You,” he told himself once more, feeling the bite of the cold air around him, “are an idiot, Namjoon.”

Seokjin wasn’t the kind of person to go and get himself into trouble. Seokjin was altruistic and brave and humble and courageous, but he kept his nose clean. It was Namjoon who’d pulled Seokjin into the trouble he was in now. And without Namjoon, Seokjin wouldn’t have been in Infinite’s stronghold, likely to …

“He’s not going to die.”

“You’re a bigger idiot than me if you think that,” Namjoon laughed out, when he heard Yoongi behind him.

He also heard the soft click of the door closing behind them, and then Yoongi came to stand next to him. The shorter male put his arms up on the railing and said, “You’re not the person I agreed to put my faith in, if you don’t think he can be saved.” Yoongi’s head cocked towards him. “Don’t you get that? Haven’t you ever wondered why I agreed to work with you when you had no idea what you were doing in the beginning?”

“Lapse of judgement?” Namjoon guessed. He pulled himself up slightly, breathing so deeply the cold air burned in him.

Yoongi looked out over the landscape. “One might think so now. But no, Namjoon. I agreed to fight with you to take the streets back because I saw something in you. I saw something in you worth following, and worth defending, and worth believing in. And even now, when you’re out here having a pity party, I see it in you.”

“Pity party?” Namjoon demanded rudely. “I’m sorry, do you not understand the situation?” Did Yoongi truly not comprehend that Namjoon felt like he was nothing without Seokjin? “Seokjin is with those animals, and they’re going to kill him to get at us.”

“True,” Yoongi agreed. “But they’re not going to do it right away. We know how they operate. We know their tendencies and habits. We’ve seen them use people as leverage before. So yes, they’re probably planning to kill him as a slight against us eventually, but they want to relish in their victory for the moment. And it only feels like a victory while the prize is breathing. So get that through your thick head right now. Seokjin is alive, and if we handle this properly, he stays that way.”

Namjoon watching his breath puff out in front of him. “I did this to him, you know. I’m surprised Jungkook didn’t deck me in there. My …infatuation with Jin, and my readiness to bring him into this world, landed him where he is right now. I fell in love with him, and he’s in danger now because of that.”

“Namjoon,” Yoongi said softly. He looked up at Namjoon with open curiosity. “Do you regret it? Loving him?”
Of that, Namjoon knew the answer emphatically.

“No.”

“Good.” Yoongi looked pleased. “So get it together, while we have time. Because we have an advantage here, if we don’t fuck it up.”

Advantage? Namjoon’s eyes narrowed. “They … they’re going to expect us to be in pieces.”

“Or at least not thinking clearly,” Yoongi agreed. “Sunggyu will expect that he’s played a masterful hand, snatching someone we value. So we need to capitalize on that. We need to strategize with clear heads, and we need to make our own power moves here.” Yoongi told him firmly, “It’s time to take risks, Namjoon, and play dirty.”

Namjoon brought his hand down solidly on the guard rail that ran the length of the balcony. He told Yoongi, unequivocally, and without room for argument, “Absolutely not.”

“Yes,” Yoongi insisted. “We can pick her up in less than an hour.”

“And trade her?” Namjoon argued back. “You want to be that person? You want to be the monster under the bed that snatches up children and devours them?”

Yoongi challenged back, “Do you want Seokjin back or not? Sunggyu will trade him for his sister.”

“No.”

Namjoon squashed down the temptation in him that had been building for ages. No. He wasn’t that person. Seokjin wouldn’t love someone like that—couldn’t, and Namjoon wasn’t that person with or without Seokjin. Children were off limits, under any circumstances. Any.

That wasn’t an easy conclusion to have come to, either. He’d thought, many times now, that his grandparents, and countless other people would be alive if he could be that person. But a person who could use a child as leverage, and possible hurt or kill a child in the process, was someone who had no soul. It was someone who couldn’t love purely, not like Namjoon loved Seokjin, and it was certainly someone who couldn’t look at themselves in the mirror.

Namjoon needed to be able to look at himself in the mirror, to make everything he’d done ever, worth it. Because if it wasn’t worth it, then everyone who’d died along the way, had meant nothing, too.

“We don’t go near her,” Namjoon said, standing tall, looking Yoongi dead in the eyes. “That kid is off limits, and I don’t care what you have to think on the subject. That’s my decision, and you’re going to adhere to it.”

Yoongi was the only other person, save for Namjoon, who even knew about her existing, and Yoongi was the only person Namjoon trusted to keep it that way.

Yoongi leveled out heavily, “If Bangtan had my sister, Namjoon, and I could get her back by playing dirty, I think I’d do it.”

Namjoon crossed his arms over his chest. “The only way we win this, Yoongi, and keep our souls intact, is to be better than them. Do you want to be better than them, or not?”

Silence lapsed between them, and Namjoon half wondered what was happening in the apartment. Jimin had left in a huff like he usually did when he was overwhelmed, but the others were likely still
in there. But there weren’t any sounds coming from the apartment, and Namjoon didn’t know what to make of it.

“Well,” Yoongi said finally, reaching to put a hand on Namjoon’s shoulder, “if we’re going to be better than them, we have to be smarter, too. Much, much smarter, and let me tell you, Sunggyu is pretty smart.”

Hope seemed to threaten to split Namjoon open in that moment, as he rose to put his hand on Yoongi’s opposite shoulder. “Hey, don’t forget to give credit where credit is due. We’re pretty smart, too.”

“We’re not alone, either,” Yoongi replied. “It’s time to call up Suho, Namjoon.”

Namjoon gave a firm nod. “Do it. Arrange a meeting. ASAP.”

Yoongi’s hand fell away from Namjoon’s shoulder, and he turned to the glass door that led into the apartment. Yoongi’s hand paused on the door handle, and he offered over his shoulder, “I want to think I’d be like you, Namjoon. I want to think I wouldn’t play dirty in the end. I want to be you, like that.”

“You would be,” Namjoon offered back confidently. “I know you, Yoongi. I know who you are. You’d leave the kid alone, too. You wouldn’t risk some kid’s life, even for your sister, because unlike Infinite, we’re better than that.”

Yoongi didn’t look convinced, but he flashed Namjoon a quick victory sign, and slipped back into the apartment.

Namjoon kept his back to the apartment for just a minute longer, soaking in the peace that was soon to be ripped away. He breathed in more of the cold air, and repeated Yoongi’s words from earlier, “He’s not going to die.”

And not just because Infinite needed him to maximize on their gloating. Seokjin wasn’t going to die because he was smart. He wasn’t just smart, either. He was clever and resourceful, and perceptive. If anyone could keep themselves alive long enough for a rescue, it was Seokjin.

“I’m coming,” he promised to the silence around him. “And I’ll make them pay, Seokjin.”

Then he turned and went back inside.

As he expected, Jungkook, Taehyung, and Hoseok were still there when he got in. They were scattered about in the living room, watching him with equal parts trepidation and curiosity.

“Suga left,” Taehyung said, the statement more of a question than anything else.

“He’s gone to contact Suho,” Namjoon said evenly, calmly, steadily. “We’re going to war, and we need our allies for that.”

“Then …” Jungkook’s voice was weaker than Namjoon had ever heard, but there was such a sense of determination radiating from him, that Namjoon knew better than to count him down or out.

Namjoon looked them over and said, “We’re getting Jin back. And that’s not all, either. We’re going for the throat with Infinite. We’re going to show them what happens when they back us into a corner. They want us to fight back? They want us to get involved? Okay. That’s what we’re going to do.”
Jungkook stood from where he’d been sitting on the sofa. He asked simply, “How?”

Feeling more and more like he’d found his stride, Namjoon ordered, “Jungkook, go find Jimin. Get his ass back here. We need some serious reconnaissance, the kind that we delayed doing up until now. We wanted to keep out of Infinite’s territory before this, to avoid triggering anything.”

Jungkook cut in, “I think it’s triggered.”

“Right,” Namjook said quickly. “So I need you and Jimin out scouting. We need to know where the bulk of Infinite’s men are. We need to know their typical patterns, and their hangouts, and if there’s a gap anywhere we can exploit. We need eyes on that house, too. If Jin’s in there, we need to know everything about it that we can, if we’re going to get in and pull him out.”

It was like he’d put a spark of life back into Jungkook. Namjoon could see it trigger before his eyes, and it was a wonder to behold.

“Got it!” Jungkook gave a salute and dashed for the door.

“Don’t you dare get caught out there!” Namjoon yelled after him. “I mean it, Jungkook!” The last thing he needed was either Jungkook or Jimin getting careless because feelings were involved. Namjoon had been doing enough of that for all of them.

“What about us?” Hoseok asked.

Namjoon said bluntly, “I need you out on our streets, J-Hope.” Hoseok made to protest, but gave pause when Namjoon said, “I need everything to look normal, J-Hope. Or as normal as possible. It needs to look like we’re rebuilding and trying to hold it together. We need for all of Infinite’s spies out there to report back that we’re devastated by what’s happened, and you can do that.”

Hoseok looked uncertain, but hedged, “While I …”

“While,” Namjoon relayed with a grin, “weed through the ranks out there. I want to know who those eyes for Infinite are before we push into their territory. I want to know who isn’t as loyal as they look. And I want to know which of our men are prepared to make a final strike at Infinite. I don’t think I need to tell you that not all of Bangtan’s members are created equally, and some are better suited for some things rather than others. I need to know, J-Hope. Find out who’s who with what time you have.”

Hoseok seemed to accept what he was saying, but also told Namjoon, in a nonnegotiable way, “But when it goes down, I want to be there. I need to be there. After Yoongi, I’ve been with you the longest. And Jin means a lot to me, too. If this is how it all goes down, I want to be there, standing next to you. Deal?”

Namjoon reached a hand out to Hoseok, shaking it firmly. “Deal.”

“And me?” Taehyung offered up.

Hoseok darted a kiss to Taehyung’s cheek, and then left the apartment quickly.

“You,” Namjoon said, putting an arm around Taehyung’s shoulders, “I need you to coordinate with Suho’s men and ours. The ones on the ground at least. Look, let’s be honest, we’re on the same side here. We’re all gunning for Infinite, but we’re not all going to get along with each other. We’re predisposed to … be in conflict.”

If anything, that had been Namjoon’s main hesitation in partnering up with Suho, even if Suho came
highly regarded as someone dependable and trustworthy. Gangs were never quite meant to be besties, and loyalty, even the advantageous kind, was often a stretch.

Not that Namjoon had a choice now. He had to trust Suho with the lives of his men. It just made him anxious, to say the least. And Taehyung could ease that anxiety. Having Taehyung there, with an eye on things, would make what came next a little less worrisome. If that was possible.

“So,” Taehyung said flatly, “you want me to schmooze Exo?”

“That’s not exactly how I was planning on saying it,” Namjoon laughed a little. “But essentially? Yes. Make them feel more comfortable working with us. You’re friendly and personable. You’re likable. Make them like you. And then make sure they’re doing what they’re supposed to be.”

They were nearly to the door when Taehyung stopped them.

“V?” Namjoon wondered.

Taehyung swallowed hard and said, “If something happens to Jin …”

“Nothing is going to happen to him.”

Taehyung shook his head. “If something happens to Jin, we’re not just going to lose him, you know. We’re going to lose Jungkook, too. And maybe even Jimin.”

That gave Namjoon pause, and he frowned deeply. “Jimin?”

Taehyung gave an exasperated sigh and offered up, “I swear, it’s crazy what people don’t see when it’s right in front of them.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Namjoon pried.

“Never mind,” Taehyung insisted. “Let’s just say Jin means more to Jimin than he probably wants to admit. And I’m not blind, like the rest of you are, apparently.”

Taehyung pulled ahead, and Namjoon couldn’t rid his face of the frown that now seemed permanently etched on it.

Had he … had he really underestimated how attached Jimin had become to Jin? Theirs had always been a tumultuous relationship, full of quips and baiting, and cutting remarks on Jimin’s part. Jin had weathered it all like a pro, only endearing himself to Namjoon even more. But then Namjoon had also always suspected that perceptive Jin knew more about Jimin’s past than Jimin probably wanted anyone to know.

The idea of Jimin coming around to Jin was a good one, however. Jimin wasn’t someone who cared easily, at least when people were involved. He’d seemingly forgotten how to wear his heart on his sleeve, and emotions, to Jimin, were nothing but an unnecessary weakness. It had taken Namjoon what felt like forever to just be able to call Jimin a friend. Now he wanted to hope that Jin was in the same position.

“Are you coming?” Taehyung shouted back at him.

Namjoon got his feet moving once more.

Suho’s response time was impressive, to say the least.

“Sorry for the circumstances,” Suho offered when they shook hands. There was real sympathy in
Suho’s words, but also a critical, assessing look on his face. “But life doesn’t play fair, does it?”

No, he wanted to tell Suho. He wasn’t about to fall to pieces in front of the man. There was too much to be done.

“It doesn’t,” Namjoon replied.

Behind him, Suho had several of his men standing at the ready, and one of them had a long, cylindrical tube in his hands. “But,” Suho continued, “if it’s going to happen, let’s at least be prepared, right?”

Suho turned and gestured for the man with the tube, and Namjoon took the opportunity to eye the rest of Exo present. Not all of the core members were there, and Namjoon hadn’t personally met all of them—there were a lot, to say the least. But he’d always thought it was a poor idea to have so many men in his inner circle. Suho seemed to trust them all, as indicated by how often he turned his back on all of them, but still, Namjoon thought it was a large number of people to trust implicitly.

“What’s that?” Namjoon asked.

They were holed up in a textile factory on the fringe of Bangtan’s territory, closer to Infinite than Namjoon really wanted to be, but it was out of necessity more than anything else. The second floor of the building was completely vacant now, and it was the perfect spot to gather a large amount of suspicious looking people, and keep them in a precision spot for striking.

“I like to call it homework,” Suho said easily enough.

Chanyeol, one of Suho’s men that Namjoon had had the most contact with, rocked back on his heels and said easily, “You don’t storm the castle to save the princess unless you’ve got a good idea of how to get across the drawbridge, right?”

To Namjoon’s right, Yoongi gave a low chuckle. “I really don’t think Seokjin would like being referred to as a princess. He’s more than proven on several different occasions that he’s not helpless.”

Chanyeol shrugged. He nudged the shorter male standing next to him and insisted, “Come on, Baekhyun, admit it, it was a good analogy.”

Baekhyun rolled his eyes and offered up, “I’m surprised you even know what that word means.”

Chanyeol was openly pouting as Suho popped the top on the tube and pulled out rolled up sheets of paper that he slowly unfurled on the table in front of him.

Blueprints.

“We’re going in, aren’t we?” Suho asked. He turned the big sheets towards Namjoon. “How about we don’t do it blindly?”

Yoongi stepped closer and tapped the edge of the paper. “Some of our people are reporting about what they’ve seen visually in just the past few hours. This is the only entrance they’ve seen being used.”

From further behind Namjoon, Jimin asked abruptly, “How do you have these?” He was openly suspiciously, and a part of Namjoon was thankful for that. Namjoon needed to be as friendly and open with Suho as possible. But Jimin? Jimin could be critical without it being the same slight as if Namjoon was.
“What are you trying to say?” One of Suho’s men, Kyungsoo, asked.

“What does it sound like?” Jimin returned sharply.

A softer, kinder voice offered up, “I have a friend down at the Public Zoning Department.”

Suho introduced to Namjoon with a slightly overdramatic flourish that reeked of affection, “This is Luhan. He has many friends. Invaluable friends.”

Luhan continued, “I made a couple of inquiries of my friend, and he was able to produce the blueprints from when Kim Sunggyu submitted the housing proposal that was required of him before construction could begin on his current residence.” Luhan looked unbothered by Jimin’s critical air as he added, “Any new residences within the last seven years are required to have their proposals submitted, inspected, and logged. Sunggyu had his home build from scratch, essentially. That’s why these blueprints exist.”

“Convenient,” Yoongi said, sounding a little impressed.

“Lucky,” Suho corrected. “Now, if we’re going to breech the perimeter, I suggest we do so here.”

Namjoon shook his head in disagreement, not liking the spot at all, and then he made to defend the action with words.

It took what felt like forever for Namjoon to find common ground with Suho. They seemed to have vastly different views on how to tackle the problem of getting inside, and had an even greater divide of what to do once that happened.

Suho, it was clear to see from the start, wanted to be bolder. It was honestly a confounding thing, considering the hesitant, careful vibes the man gave off. But he seemed determined to make big, sweeping moves on the chessboard they were currently a part of, and Namjoon felt more reserved. He had to be. If they were too aggressive, or struck in the wrong spot, Seokjin’s life would be gone in an instant. Suho was playing as if Seokjin’s life wasn’t in play, and Namjoon disliked he hadn’t accounted for that.

After several hours, and with frustration running rampant in the room, Yoongi proposed, “Let’s take a break. Get something to drink. Breathe.”

Suho offered him a thankful look. “Sounds good.”

Taking a break was the last thing Namjoon wanted to do, but he was afraid he’d end up reaching across the table to try and strangle Suho if they didn’t. But any dawdling, any hesitation, felt like a moment more that Seokjin was being hurt by Infinite. Seokjin hadn’t sounded hurt in the phone call from what seemed like ages ago, but there was no telling with Infinite.

“Oh, Yoongi said, handing Namjoon a bottle of water when they’d commenced the break. Suho’s men were bunched up in small groups across the large room, but Suho himself was lingering nearby.

And it wasn’t a surprise when Suho drifted over, and wanted to know, “Are you thinking clearly, Rap Mon?”

“Am I …” Namjoon trailed off to laugh thinly. “Are you serious?”

Suho didn’t look irritated by the response he’d gotten. And he continued, gently even, “Someone you love very much is at the heart of Infinite’s strong hold. You haven’t said anything, but I’m going to assume Infinite has already reached out to taunt you with this in some way. That’s their calling
card, if they have one. So I think it’s valid for me to ask if you think you’re compromised in any way.”

Gritting his teeth, Namjoon ground out, “I’m more than capable of approaching this situation level headed.”

Surprisingly then, Suho’s gaze slid from Namjoon, to Yoongi. “With as many lives on the lines as there are, mine and yours, do you believe him when he says that?”

There was a blank look on Yoongi’s face for a moment, and Namjoon found himself holding his breath. Then, in a calculated way, Yoongi said loud enough for everyone to hear, “Rap Mon is fully aware of what he’s saying and doing. He’s not emotionally compromised. He’s not acting rashly or inconsistent with everyone’s best interest at heart. He’s Bangtan’s leader, and we stand behind him. That’s with our lives on the line, and yours.”

Yoongi certainly wasn’t looking in his direction, but Namjoon was filled with nothing but pride.

“Okay,” Suho said simply, glancing back to Namjoon. “Let’s give this another go. We can find a middle ground here I’m confident. We’re after the same thing, after all.”

True. Namjoon didn’t think there was any disputing that they both wanted Infinite taken care of. But if it came down to it, Namjoon wanted Seokjin more than he wanted Sunggyu. He didn’t think Suho would say the same.

But miraculously, there was a middle ground to be found. It took hours more, with frustrations running high, but Namjoon was just thankful they found it.

“Let’s get some sleep,” Suho offered, after yawns were beginning to go around, and the adrenaline high they’d all been riding was far, far gone. “Or at least some power naps. We can’t do anything until the bulk of our men get into position anyway.”

“Sounds good,” Namjoon said, reaching out to shake Suho’s hand once more.

“We should get going,” Yoongi said quietly to Namjoon, at his elbow, and that was the only push Namjoon needed.

But sleep was the furthest thing from his mind, no matter how much he felt he needed it. The idea of sleeping while Seokjin was with Infinite made him sick, and that seemed to be the case for the others as well. So Namjoon did very little to fight the trail of warm bodies that followed him back to his apartment, and commandeered his living room with soft conversation and warm coffee.

Frankly, Namjoon was glad to have them. He needed them. They were his family now—the only family he had left, and more than that, they were his trusted, loyal friends. They were people he knew he could count on to hold him up, and hold him together, and not judge him for any of it.

“So here’s the deal,” Yoongi said, having barely waited for Taehyung to sit down between Hoseok and Jungkook before speaking. “We’ve got our plan, but let’s not kid ourselves here. Infinite is only going to hold onto Jin for as long as it’s advantageous, and they’ll kill him in a moment’s notice if they realize how hard we’re hitting them.”

Jimin had his elbows on his knees, legs crossed, as he volunteered, “I had the same thought. So you know what we gotta do, right?”

“Divide and conquer,” Namjoon said, fingers curling into fists. “Suho is going to hit them hard from the outside, and make it look like just another gang has come knocking to make a play for Big
Bang’s territory. And that’s our opportunity to get inside.”

“A smaller group inside,” Yoongi insisted, “will be less of a threat to someone who’s going to be trigger happy, versus the whole of Bangtan and Exo coming through the front door.”

Namjoon nodded to Jimin. “You and I and are going in first. That’s the last thing Infinite will expect. Yoongi and Hoseok are just after that, and that’s when Jungkook and Taehyung are going to do their best to slip in that alternate route that they seem to use exclusively for deliveries.”

“For Jin, right?” Jungkook asked, staring hard at Namjoon. “We’re going in for Jin, right?”

And not for Sunggyu. The second half of the question was left off, but implied all the same.

Jimin said hotly, “If I come across that bastard, I’m going to take a shot.”

“You’re not alone,” Taehyung interjected.

“Of course,” Namjoon said, voice going rough. “If any of us has the chance to end this by cutting the head off the snake, take the shot. But this is about getting Jin out. Leave Suho and his men to gun for Sunggyu. If we get Jin out, then we can hit Sunggyu later, on our own terms, and without him dangling someone we love over our heads.”

Hoseok leaned back, unease on his face, and said, “There’s one thing I’m really worried about.” He looked to Yoongi. “The cops.”

“They could be a problem,” Yoongi agreed.

“They will be a problem,” Hoseok corrected. “They’re not just in Infinite’s pocket. They’re owned by Infinite. There isn’t a cop on this prefecture’s force that isn’t dirty in some way, and if all hell breaks loose on the streets and they get the call, they’re going to take us out in a half second. We can’t fight Infinite and the cops at the same time.”

Taehyung wondered, “Can we do to Infinite what they did to us? Can we get the cops distracted some way? Can we get them out of the area while this is all going down?”

Namjoon sighed. “Could be tricky. Infinite’s probably got them on high alert right now. They’re expecting something from us, surely. And Infinite always uses all their resources.”

“Guys?”

Jungkook’s voice was so soft and uncertain that Namjoon almost didn’t hear him. But then Jungkook repeated himself, catching Namjoon’s attention fully, and Namjoon gave a short whistle to end the rampant discussion that had risen up in a matter of seconds.

“What is it, Jungkook?” Namjoon was still half expecting Jungkook to fly at him without a moment’s notice. Namjoon couldn’t imagine how Jungkook saw him as anything but a villain now. Namjoon was the only person Jungkook could blame for getting Jin into the mess he was.

Jungkook looked around to each of them, words lingering on his tongue until he finally said, “About the police. I may have an idea. But you’re not going to like it.”

“Okay,” Namjoon said slowly. “An idea I dislike is better than no alternative.”

“What kind of idea?” Yoongi inquired.

Jungkook gave a heavy sigh. “You’re really not going to like it, but it’s the only thing I can think of
to give us a fighting chance. Literally.”

Jungkook had been right. Namjoon didn’t like it, but beggars couldn’t be choosers when Jin’s life was on the line.

With no small amount of trepidation, Namjoon gave him an approving nod and said, “Make it happen.”

Jungkook was on his feet right away and out the door just after that.

“This seems really stupid,” Jimin said harshly when Jungkook was minutes gone. He’d followed Namjoon into the kitchen after he’d gone to rinse out his mug of coffee. “Really, really stupid.”

Namjoon put his coffee mug down in the sink and leaned heavily on the basin. He offered to Jimin, “I did ask, not less than three minutes ago, if anyone else had any substitute ideas. You, go ahead and correct me if I’m wrong, kept your mouth shut.”

Jimin looked irritated but didn’t fight the accusation of inaction. Instead, he replied, “I just don’t think getting anyone from outside involved is a good idea. Especially this kind of outside. Tell me it sits well with you and I’ll never say another word about it.”

“It doesn’t,” Namjoon said honestly. “But I don’t need someone to sit well with me, for it to help us save Jin.”

Firmly, almost aggressively, Jimin snapped out, “We’re going to do that. We’re going to bust in there tomorrow, take out anyone in our way, and save Jin. We’re going to save him, Rap Mon.”

“I know,” Namjoon replied, but that response felt automatic, and more like he was trying to reassure himself than anything else. “But Jimin?”

“Hmm?”

“It means something to me,” Namjoon said, turning more fully to face Jimin. “It means a lot to me that you care about Jin now—that you consider him one of us. It matters to me that he’s someone you’re willing to put your life on the line for, and that you let yourself care for him.”

There was something incredulous on Jimin’s face, which was unexplainable, and only served to confuse Namjoon further.

“Care?” Jimin balked out. He scrubbed his hands over his eyes. “I’d give anything not to care about him.”

Gently, softly, Namjoon told him, “Caring about people, even if it makes you vulnerable, is not a bad thing.”

“Oh, trust me,” Jimin nearly wheezed out, “it is here.”

“Well …” Namjoon cleared his throat. “Thank you all the same. I need you to care about Jin. I need you guys to care about each other. That’s the only way this works. That’s the only way Bangtan works, and Jin is Bangtan now.”

Now Jimin just looked nauseas, especially when he said, “We need to not be talking about this, okay? We need to really not be talking about my feelings for your boyfriend.”

The frown from earlier settled in deeper on Namjoon’s face, but he was willing to let the matter go.
All that he cared about was getting Jin back, and who was willing to help him do it.

“We’re going to get through this,” Namjoon said, starting to feel more confident in his own words. “We have hope now, and a plan, and a lot of people willing to go the distance. I’d say those are the best odds we could hope to have.”

“You don’t need odds,” Jimin said brusquely, looking more dangerous to Namjoon than he ever had before. “You just need me. Because I’m going in that house tomorrow, Rap Mon—Namjoon. I’m going in there for one reason and one reason only, and I’m bringing Jin out. He’s going to be alive and healthy and I’m bringing him back to us.”

“Jimin,” Namjoon tried to say.

There was something dark and menacing radiating from Jimin, and it honestly terrified Namjoon a bit. He’d seen Jimin in a fury before. He’d seen Jimin lose control and lose himself in his actions. But this? This seemed something completely different, and utterly chilling.

“I’m going to bring Jin back,” Jimin said, grinding the words out, “or I’ll die trying.”

Namjoon utterly believed him, and that was more frightening than anything else.
Interlude 2

Sunggyu was just pulling back the top duvet on the bed, fingers catching at the silken sheets underneath, when Woohyun said from across the room, “So I was thinking Hawaii.”

Hawaii?

Sunggyu paused, half bent over the bed, and put a hand down firmly on it to steady himself. He was far from the shaking, sickly mess that he’d been even a short while ago, but he was by no means back to his usual self. In fact he’d been half worried for what seemed like forever that he’d never get back to feeling normal.

And he needed normal.

He needed to feel in control again. He needed to be strong, and healthy, and capable. At the very least he needed to look well enough that Woohyun would stop hovering over him, anxiously twittering around like Sunggyu was going to croak at any second.

Patience. He just needed to have patience and give himself time. Time was a luxury, of course, but time was what he needed.

“Well?”

Across the room Woohyung was pulling his shirt over his head. Sunggyu saw the speckles of blood at the cuff of the shirt, red against a pale blue. He could have said something. He should have said something. They had a rule. Business never showed itself in the bedroom, under any circumstances, and anything that caused blood was business. But if Woohyun had gotten blood on himself, he was probably in the most amicable mood he was going to be in, and that was the mood Sunggyu liked best.

Standing next to the tall wardrobe that housed their mixed clothes, Woohyun gave a little shrug as he glanced over his shoulder to Sunggyu. “Yeah, Hawaii. You know, one of the American states. It’s this island out in the Pacific, full of white, perfect beaches. Hawaii.”

Sunggyu let himself sit on the edge of the bed. “I know what and where Hawaii is,” he said frankly. “What about it?”

Woohyun angled more fully towards him. “Think about it, Gyu. Me and you, laid out on the beach, with really good drinks. It’ll be peaceful and warm, and I’ll wear that tiny little speedo that you know I have.” He gave a cock of his hips for emphasis.

Sunggyu hated the effect of such a small move had on him immediately. Just the slightest movement of Woohyung’s lithe body, all lean muscle and full of energy, reminded Sunggyu of everything he was capable of. They hadn’t had sex since he’d been ill, mostly due to Sunggyu lack of stamina to do more than simply stay awake, but the need and desire was staring to catch up with him.

And Woohyun was just as insanely attractive to Sunggyu as the first day he’d met him.

The worst part was, Woohyun knew it.

“Don’t be stupid,” Sunggyu said snappishly. “We’re in the middle of seeing our plans come to fruition. We’re about to dismantle Bangtan completely, and when we do that, we’re going to set a standard.”
What they were going to do, as far as Sunggyu was concerned, was make it abundantly clear to any other upstart gangs out there, that Infinite was done fucking around. Sunggyu was done biding his time, and taking losses when necessary, and standing back. He was done letting other people get their way, and he expected every gang out there from Red Velvet to Seventeen, to fall in line.

He had no doubt they would. Because Sunggyu wasn’t just going to defeat Bangtan, and take everything from them. He was going to annihilate them, and he was doing it to make a point.

“I know, I know,” Woohyun whined out, wiggling out of his jeans almost too seductively for it to be anything but deliberate, and then he was scaling their high bed, prowling towards Sunggyu on his hands and knees. “Afterwards.”

Woohyun’s warm hand caught Sunggyu’s cheeks easily, the grip so gentle it was almost impossible to believe it had come from someone like Woohyun. Then their lips were meeting in a soft, but full kiss, and Sunggyu let Woohyun push him down onto the pillows.

“Later,” Woohyun said, breath against Sunggyu’s lips. “After we kill Rap Mon and those stupid little sidekicks of his. We’ll make it a present to us for all our hard work.” Woohyun’s voice dropped seductively to whisper, “Think of all the creative ways I could wake you up in Hawaii. I’d definitely want to show my appreciation to you every day. Maybe a couple times a day.”

Sunggyu, who prided himself on composure, and forethought, and deliberate actions, had always been a lost cause for Woohyun. And that was why he let himself get lost in the idea for just a moment, hooking an arm around the back of Woohyun’s neck and dragging him down for a more passionate kiss.

That would be something. Just him and Woohyun, on a beach, without a care in the world. It was a ridiculous, unrealistic thought, but it was a nice one all the same. It was a good fantasy to entertain for a moment or two.

“You’re happy,” Sunggyu commented, feeling a little light headed as Woohyun dragged a leg between Sunggyu’s thighs. “Too happy.” Sunggyu let him worry for a second, and demanded, “You didn’t touch the doctor again, did you? I told you not to.”

Woohyun gave a groan of annoyance and flipped onto his side of the bed, dragging his warmth away from Sunggyu. “Come on! Way to ruin the mood.”

Hefting himself up on an arm, Sunggyu said flatly, “You don’t touch him, Woohyun. I’m fucking serious. You’ve already done enough damage, and we need him breathing.”

“For the time being!” Woohyun pouted.

“This is the time!” Sunggyu snapped back. He stared up at the ceiling as his fingers brushed Woohyun’s.

Kim Seokjin was not a member of Bangtan. Sunggyu didn’t think it took a genius to figure that out, and even Woohyun, who desperately wanted him to be, had already admitted he thought the same way. Even Hoya had agreed, and Hoya was almost never wrong. He had a nose like a bloodhound for those sorts of things.

But Seokjin was connected to Bangtan. And his brother, Jungkook, certainly was a member of Bangtan. Too many reports, from separate sources, had confirmed such a thing. So Sunggyu had absolutely believed Seokjin earlier when he’d pleaded to be believed that he wasn’t a member of Bangtan.
But not being a member of Bangtan didn’t make him clean.

“There’s no way to say for certain,” Myungsoo had said earlier, after dinner, when Sunggyu’s inner circle had met behind closed doors to discuss the coming storm. Myungsoo clarified, “Whether Kim Seokjin has a romantic relationship with Rap Mon or not.”

“Seriously?” Sungyeol had snorted in disbelief. “Have we been looking at the same photos our boys have snapped up over the past few weeks?”

Myungsoo shrugged, and Dongwoo had said plainly enough, “Could be just good friends.” He looped an arm around Hoya’s shoulders then and kissed his cheek with a loud smack.

“Get off, you idiot!” Hoya had snapped, trying to dislodge Dongwoo who held on tightly, but Sunggyu had seen the gesture for what it was. Hoya could have taken Dongwoo’s arm off at any moment, literally even, but he’d allowed it. Though maybe that was more in part to how easily Dongwoo endeared himself to everyone without even trying. He was a fool most of the time, but he was loyal, and good company, and held secrets well. He was a good friend to have, and friends were hard to come by. Especially the kind that could be trusted.

“Doesn’t matter if they’re lovers or not,” Sunggyu had declared. And it didn’t. “The point is, we know what a simpleton Rap Mon is. We know how easily he picks up strays and cares for them. He sees the good doctor as one of his own, and he won’t let this stand.”

If anyone thought he didn’t have respect for Rap Mon, no matter their situation, they’d be dead wrong. Sunggyu respected Rap Mon more than most. And he respected that Rap Mon entertained the philosophy of leaving no one behind. It was a foolish philosophy, and not one Sunggyu would admit to sharing, but it was an admirable one.

If Rap Mon had been a little smarter, a little bolder, or a lot more desperate, Sunggyu knew he could have found himself in the same situation. If Rap Mon had taken Woohyun, Sunggyu would have done whatever it took to get him back. Hell or High water.

Sunggyu and Infinite spent the better part of the night, into the wee hours of the morning, discussing the matter. And now Sunggyu was just tired. He’d played his hand. He’d set his trap. He’d dangled the doctor out on a wire. Now all that was left was to anticipate the retribution headed in their direction.

“Call in the girls,” Sunggyu had ordered, just before he and Woohyun went to bed.

“The girls? Lovelyz?” Sungjong had asked, eyes a little wide.

Tired and on edge, Sunggyu had meant to snap at him, maybe even hit him. But then smoothly Hoya had edged his way in, asking, “Do you think they’re necessary?”

That was the thing, Sunggyu had stopped to let himself ponder. Everyone in Infinite was a little crazy. They’d all been … damaged by their upbringing. They’d all been tormented, and twisted, and had their innocence stripped away so long ago that none of them even knew what it was supposed to look like. And because of that, they all fought with each other incessantly. They took shots at each other, drew blood, and consistently berated each other.

But they were a family. They were a dysfunctional family, but family was family. And as easily as they tore into each other, they protected each other, too. Hoya had seen the rage in Sunggyu. He’d seen the exhaustion about to manifest itself on Sungjong, and he’d swooped in so easily to direct his attention elsewhere, Sunggyu wasn’t even sure if Sungjong knew what had happened.
“I don’t think we need them,” Sunggyu told them all honestly, feeling Woohyun’s fingers sneak around his waist to give added support. “But I’m not taking any chances. Bangtan are reactionary. They’re careless. They’re coming for the doctor, and this is our chance to wipe them out.”

Sunggyu knew Infinite’s strength was mightier than Bangtan’s. Infinite had the edge in every category, and they were at least double the size of Bangtan easily.

But there was something nagging at the back of his mind. Rap Mon had proven before, on occasion, that he could think ahead of his means. Once in a while, Rap Mon could surprise, and if there was a chance that Rap Mon was doing so now, Sunggyu needed to be ready to stay steps ahead of him.

“Bring them in,” he ordered Hoya. “Some of the other gangs have been too quiet, lately.”

Dongwoo added cheerfully, “They’re waiting for the dust to settle, Gyu. They want to see which way the blood flows.”

Excluding Woohyun, Dongwoo was the only other people who got to call him Gyu. But Sunggyu thought he’d more than earned that right. Before there’d been Hoya, before there’d been Myungsoo, or Sungyeol, or Sungjong, or even Woohyun, there’d been Dongwoo. When Sunggyu had been starving himself to feed his sister, and had been willing to degrade himself to ensure her safety, Dongwoo had been the one holding him up, keeping him sane, and keeping the promise of better days ahead alive in his mind.

Dongwoo was as much his brother as it went. So Dongwoo, who had had never spoken a word to anyone about Sunggyu’s past, and the things he’d done to survive, could call him whatever he wanted.

“Just in case,” Sunggyu said once more, relaying the importance of his order to Hoya once more.

Hoya reminded, “It’ll take days to call up the girls from Busan.”

Woohyun had sounded overly confident when he’d declared, “We’ve got days. I highly doubt those idiots in Bangtan are doing more than crying over the situation. They’re not ready to hit back at us yet. They won’t be for some time.”

Sunggyu was inclined to agree.

“Just do it,” Sunggyu had ordered, and then he’d let Woohyun guide him towards their bedroom.

“I didn’t touch him,” Woohyun insisted now, burrowing into Sunggyu’s side. “I know you said not to.”

“Be patient,” Sunggyu told him, wrapping an arm around Woohyun’s body. “We need him alive for now, but it won’t always be that way. And you’ll get to have your fun when that time comes.”

Woohyun didn’t look convinced, as he pointed out, “You said he’s got a life debt.”

“He does,” Sunggyu said emphatically, and without hesitation. “He saved my life. And when you’re busy thinking about wanting to cut parts of him off just to see how long it takes for him to pass out from the blood loss, you might want to remember that.”

Suddenly Woohyun was clutching at him a little tighter, and Sunggyu understood.

Woohyun, maybe more than any of Infinite’s core members, was the most unstable. He’d already been broken when Sunggyu had come across him. He’d already had his innocence cut out of him.
Maybe that was why Sunggyu had loved him so quickly. Woohyun’s moods ebbed and flowed like the tide. He could be overly childish one moment and terribly serious the next. He sometimes heard voices, and could burst into tears occasionally when they were alone and there was no need to maintain even a bare semblance of control. Woohyun took real pleasure in inflicting pain on others, and then went to church on Sundays and repented like a good catholic boy.

Maybe Sunggyu just liked the complexity of Woohyun, rather than the sheer inanity of him.

“I don’t like rats,” Woohyun offered up. “Gyu, he’s a rat. He’s been playing us for so long, pretending to be loyal and honest, and all the while scurrying back to his little friends to tell them everything he knows. You know what we do with rats that pick the wrong side.”

Sunggyu pushed his fingers up in to the short strands of Woohyun’s hair, his nails raking soothingly against Woohyun’s scalp. He promised, “Life debts aren’t unbreakable.”

“I’m going to kill him,” Woohyun vowed. “I’m going to kill that little rat.”

Sunggyu only hummed in response, nails scratching along Woohyun’s scalp.

For a little, Sunggyu thought Woohyun had drifted off, but then Woohyun said quietly, “It doesn’t have to just be the two of us in Hawaii.”

Sunggyu laughed a little, trying to bring himself to get up and turn off the bedroom lights. “You want to bring someone like Dongwoo with us to Hawaii? Or Hoya?”

Woohyun’s fingers found his way under the simple shirt Sunggyu wore, and then to the warm skin underneath. “No. I was thinking me, you, and Mikyung?” Sunggyu couldn’t help clenching his eyes shut at the thought of his sister. His precious baby sister.

“I …”

Woohyun continued, “She complains all the time, you know, that you don’t spend enough time with her. She misses you. Auntie Hyoyeon is nice enough, but you’re her brother, Sunggyu. Hell, you might as well be her father. So wouldn’t it be nice to go on vacation with her when this is done? When it’s safer?”

It was never going to be safer, and Sunggyu knew Woohyun understood that. But Woohyun also wasn’t wrong when he insinuated that there’d be less of a target on Sunggyu when Bangtan was gone. At least for a little. And a smaller target meant Sunggyu could go around her again. He could go to her ballet recitals, and treat her to ice cream, and just feel her love for him when they hugged.

He hadn’t seen her in nine months, and he was starting to forget the sound of her voice. He wanted to make her laugh again, more than anything.

“Maybe,” Sunggyu mused.

Woohyun breathed deep, then let the breath out, and sat up. He crossed his legs, mucking up the sheets, and said firmly, “We’re going to kill them, Sunggyu. We’re going to kill them all, and then things will be better.”

“I imagine they feel the same,” Sunggyu laughed out.

“They’re idiots,” Woohyun stated, rolling his eyes. “Rap Mon is an idiot, prancing around, thinking that friendly smiles and manners are going to keep the streets clean and safe. People aren’t like that. People can’t police themselves. They need rules. They need to be controlled. They need what we do.
We keep everyone in their place. We keep the kids from getting exploited. We make sure everyone understands where the line is, and what happens if they even think of putting a toe over it. That is what people need to maintain order. Not courteous platitudes. And we’ll plow our way through Bangtan to get control of the area, if need be. We’ll rip them apart, if we have to.”

Sunggyu was okay with being a monster. He knew what Kim Seokjin thought of him, and countless others. He was fine being the villain who ruled with an iron fist. He could be that person. He’d do whatever it took, to make sure no big brother ever had to do what he had needed to, when he was growing up. He’d be any villain to make sure no little sister ever knew what it meant to barter with something other than money, like Sunggyu’s did. Sunggyu could be the worst person on the planet, gladly so, if it meant people behaved properly and no one else needed to be hurt the way Sunggyu had seen people hurt.

The way Sunggyu had been hurt.

“I’ll do whatever it takes,” Sunggyu stated. “And I’ll go through whoever I have to.”

“Agreed.” Woohyun lunged over Sunggyu, toppling him with his weight, pressing a kiss down on his mouth. “And then Hawaii?”

Sunggyu pushed at him. “Go turn the light off. I want to sleep.”

“Wanna do more than sleep?” Woohyun wiggled his eyebrows at Sunggyu.

“Do you think you’ve been a good boy?” Sunggyu fired back.

Woohyun looked shocked. “I’m always a good boy.”

That was the biggest lie Sunggyu had ever heard from him. “Oh? So Hoya was lying when he said you kissed Seokjin?”

Woohyun looked scandalized. “Sunggyu!”

Sunggyu wasn’t, as he knew Woohyun was aware, upset. Not really. There was nothing sexual in the way Woohyun behaved with others. Woohyun was, without question, dedicated and loyal to Sunggyu. If there were plenty of things to worry about with Woohyun, infidelity was not one of them. If Sunggyu had to guess, Woohyun had simply been lost in the moment, or it had been a display of power in the situation at hand. Nothing more. Sunggyu wasn’t worried.

“You know you’re the only one I care about,” Woohyun insisted dramatically, peppering kisses onto Sunggyu’s mouth. “You’re the only one I love.” Woohyun bent further even more, to whisper in Sunggyu’s ear, “I’d burn the world for you, just like I burned all those people.”

Sunggyu nudged at Woohyun. “Get the lights.”

Woohyun snuck another kiss, then vaulted off Sunggyu for the lights.

The room plunged into darkness, and Sunggyu lost himself.

He felt air catch in his throat, just like it always did when the darkness came, and he clenched his fingers into fists, trying to focus on the sound of Woohyun trekking back to the bed.

But he was lost, he was lost, he was lost.

No, he wasn’t lost. He was there. In that room. He was huddled on the ground, naked, cold, and in
pain. It was so dark, he was so scared, and he—

He was okay. He was safe. He was in his home, with Woohyun, and not anyone else. He was safe. He was safe. He was safe. He was—

“Gyu,” Woohyun said softly, climbing into bed and helping the both of them slip under the sheets. “It’s me. It’s okay. You’re safe.”

The weight on top of him was the blanket. It was the sheets. It was Woohyun’s arm. It was nothing else.

“I’m fine,” Sunggyu grit out, but he let himself sink into Woohyun’s embrace like he was a child.

“Of course you are,” Woohyun said back, like there was no other appropriate answer to be had. Then Woohyun tugged the blanket up to their chests and added, “But if you aren’t, that’s okay too. Because I’m never fine.”

What a pair they were.

Sunggyu could feel the tension leave Woohyun’s body as the both of them sunk closer to sleep. And in the safety of the room, shrouded in darkness that was now starting to feel more like protection than suffocation, Sunggyu tried out, “Hawaii?”

Maybe.

Maybe.

Sunggyu could do with a maybe.

And all he had to do was kill a few rodents, and make his streets a little better in the process.
When they locked him back in his room that night after the phone call, instead of taking him downstairs, it was absolutely clear to Seokjin that they planned to use him as bait. They were going to dangle him out in front of Bangtan in the coming days and reduce him to mere fodder.

Seokjin, who cared more about Jungkook and Namjoon, and the rest of Bangtan, than anyone else in the world, was not willing to let that stand.

He wasn’t just going to roll over and let things happen. Infinite had the advantage now, but Seokjin was creative. He was creative, and above all else, he was desperate.

So that night, using a pair of grooming sheers he found in the bathroom, he tore up the sheets on his bed. They were thick and of an extremely high quality, the kind of thread count that Seokjin had grown up sleeping on. The best money could buy. But most importantly, it meant the material didn’t have much give. And he could wrap his ribs tightly and effectively with the strips.

The trick, however, was wrapping his ribs tight enough to immobilize the area, while not passing out in the process.

Making a go of it without painkillers, and trying to do it without anyone there to help stabilize him, gave Seokjin a new respect for people who treated their own injuries.

But with time and patience, and some sobbing, he managed it. Collapsing down onto the ruined bed when he was finished, gasping for air, a headache pounding between his eyes, and a cough building in his chest, he could claim success. He hacked out something that felt like phlegm, but felt a rush of panic at the red tint to it.

“Oh, damn,” he gasped out, wiping his hand across his mouth.

Broken ribs with significant swelling and discoloration, coupled with coughing up blood only meant one thing.

His time was running short.

As a slight positive, Seokjin managed to sleep through the night well enough. But that probably had more to do with him passing out from the building pain in him, than anything else.

All potential positivity was ruined when he woke hours later to a low grade fever, blurry vision, and a constant metallic taste in his mouth.

“It’s okay,” he coached himself lowly, even if it wasn’t. “You’re okay.”

He was getting to his feet when his heart gave a sudden lurch. Or it felt like a lurch. Seokjin truly wasn’t sure how to describe the feeling of his heart nearly leaping out of his chest with a painful jerking motion. It was mostly a terrible reminder that for as much strain as his body had been through recently, his heart was feeling it as well, maybe tenfold, and he certainly didn’t have access to the medication he took daily, or the emergency pills that could help if he took them fast enough in the middle of an attack.

And the reminder of his heart’s fragility kept him in place for some time, anxiety chewing away at his mind. He half expected his heart to go at any moment, at least until he finally got himself up and to the bathroom.
A quick look in the mirror proved he looked even worse than he felt, but a clean change of clothes roughly in his size helped with the dirty feeling that was nearly seeping into his bones.

A heavy fist banged on his bedroom door just after that, and then he was off to see Sunggyu.

Unexpectedly Seokjin found himself back in Sunggyu’s bedroom, with the leader of Infinite laid up in his bed despite it being well after ten in the morning.

Dongwoo, who’d been absent the night before at dinner, was now present, a joker’s grin on his face as he ordered, “The boss isn’t feeling good. Give him a checkup.”

The same as the previous time Seokjin had been in the bedroom to examine Sunggyu, there was a full set of medical tools and instruments at his disposal.

“You don’t feel well?” Seokjin asked, feeling faint himself. The room was already starting to sway, and keeping on his feet was a challenge.

Sunggyu’s eyes raked over him and he rumbled out, “I have a headache.”

“A headache?” Seokjin questioned, opening a nearby bag to take stock of the contents. He paused at the sight of several glass jars full of morphine and sedatives. He glanced back to Sunggyu who was watching him carefully.

Trying to keep his movements normal, Seokjin set the bag slightly to the side and reached for the nearby stethoscope. He wrapped it around the back of his neck and asked, “Which antibiotics did the doctors at the hospital prescribe you for your meningitis?”

As Sunggyu rattled off several, coughing into his hand, Seokjin snuck a look to Dongwoo. He was the only other person in the room and seemed to be wholly concentrated on his phone. Dongwoo, who was supposed to be the guard on duty, wasn’t paying any attention.

That told Seokjin importantly that they didn’t perceive him as a threat.

Seokjin leaned forward to take Sunggyu’s pulse and slipped a sedative out of the bag. He led it drop almost completely soundlessly to the floor and did his best to cover it from Dongwoo’s line of sight with his foot.

“A headache?” Seokjin questioned once more.

“It’s more than that,” Sunggyu protested, bringing his hands up to his head weakly. “It’s more like this pressure. It’s this horrible pressure.”

Seokjin did his very best to drag the assessment out. He moved slowly on purpose, asked Sunggyu questions that required thought and careful responses, and piled the time up as much as he could.

And during this, as he took and retook Sunggyu’s pulse, fretted over numbers that were completely within normal guidelines, and kept Sunggyu distracted, Seokjin did his best to slip item after item from the bag to the ground.

Then, when he had everything he thought he could take, he called to Dongwoo, “Hey, you, I need your help.”

Dongwoo arched an eyebrow and looked to Sunggyu for orders.

Sighing, Seokjin told Sunggyu, “I need his help to turn you over. I need to check your spine.”
“Spine?” Sunggyu barked out, and then he was coughing again.

There was nothing fake or false about the cough Sunggyu had, or the mild but higher than normal temperature he was running, but even the doctor in Seokjin was squashed down for the moment. He couldn’t be an attentive doctor and still keep his life. No, he needed to be proactive, do something, and for the first time in his adult life, not act on his medical knowledge.

Frankly, it didn’t matter that Sunggyu had been well enough the night before and now was sick. It didn’t matter that Sunggyu was a patient and Seokjin was a doctor.

It mattered that Sunggyu was going to use him to hurt his friends and brother, and that he’d no doubt ordered Seokjin roughed up initially, if only to prove a point and scare him.

Dongwoo drifted over, directed to the other side of the massive bed and away from the clutter at Seokjin’s feet.

“Yes, your spine,” Seokjin explained. “You were recently diagnosed with meningitis. It effected the fluid in your spine. If you’ve had a relapse of any kind, I need to check. I’ll be able to feel it with my bare fingers.”

Carefully, holding his own breath against the pain, Seokjin knelt carefully on his side of Sunggyu’s bed. He waited for Dongwoo to turn Sunggyu away and lift up his shirt to start slipping the items into the pockets on his oversized pants. It absolutely seemed like the oversized clothing was going to be his saving grace.

“Watch yourself,” Dongwoo warned, then hiked Sunggyu’s shirt up further to expose the visible ridges of Sunggyu’s spine.

Sunggyu was under weight. He was lacking muscle definition and obviously not getting the necessary nutrients for someone his size and age. Seokjin had thought the same about Namjoon, who didn’t always eat when he was supposed to, spent a great deal of time stressed out, and suffered from it.

Seokjin ran his fingers along the bumps of Sunggyu’s spine as if he was searching for something.

“Well?” Dongwoo asked anxiously.

 Pretending to be startled, Seokjin knocked over the nearby medical bag. It smashed to the floor and some of its contents spilled out.

“Can you please remain quiet for me?” Seokjin asked in an exacerbated way. He made a show of putting everything back in save, for one item that he slid into his sock.

After a few more minutes of feeling along Sunggyu’s spine, Seokjin helped roll him onto his back, and covered him once more with heavy blankets.

“You’re lucky,” he told Sunggyu, heaving himself up onto the edge of the bed. “I don’t think you’ve relapsed.”

“Then what is this?” Sunggyu asked, voice hoarse.

Karma?

Seokjin didn’t dare say it out loud, but he was certainly thinking it. Maybe this was karma showing up to bite him in the ass. If there was any kind of justice in the world, it was.
But more than likely, Seokjin suspected it was merely additional complications to Sunggyu’s condition. The meningitis had attacked his body forcefully and worked his immune system into overdrive. That had certainly made him susceptible to other strains of viruses and bacteria. Not to mention Sunggyu probably came into contact with a good number of people who were outside interacting with a significant number of others.

Seokjin didn’t know how many times people had to be told to wash their hands. But they never did, and it was how most illnesses spread.

In a few days Seokjin was certain the cough would be gone.

But Sunggyu didn’t need to know that.

And if he was going to make any kind of progress with the plan he’d spent some time thinking about the night before and that morning, he needed to get Infinite’s home base out of the lockdown it currently was in. He had to get the doors to open some how, and he was trusting that Bangtan somehow had eyes on the place, maybe through Exo.

“But I’m worried about the rattle in your chest,” he said, hoping Hippocrates would forgive him. To a doctor, there was nothing more horrible and insulting to the practice of medicine than misdiagnosing something. And it was incomprehensible to do it on purpose.

But that was what Seokjin was about to do.

“What?” Dongwoo demanded as Sunggyu closed his eyes wearily.

Seokjin pressed, “You feel it in your chest, right? The tightness? The pull? I’m concerned about how … wet it sounds. If your lungs have been compromised in any way, it could be very serious.”

“Meningitis can do that?” Sunggyu asked.

It couldn’t, not to the best of Seokjin’s knowledge, but he lied anyway, insisting, “I think we should take you to the hospital immediately. I want a full workup on you done, and that can’t happen here.”

“No.” Immediately Dongwoo shot up to his feet. “Sunggyu can’t leave right now. That’s not possible. It’s not going to happen.”

Seokjin had anticipated that response. He’d have been astounded if they were willing to leave. But Seokjin had a feeling that however Sunggyu wanted to play things out, didn’t involve any of them leaving a fortified home base.

“He needs an x-ray,” Seokjin argued. Then he turned to Sunggyu and said, “I need to get an inside look at your chest, and see if there’s any liquid building in there. This isn’t negotiable. Either we go to the hospital, or the hospital comes to us.”

Cracking his eyes open, Sunggyu asked, “What?”

Dongwoo added, “How?”

“I need an x-ray machine,” Seokjin said plainly. “And Sunggyu, you need an MRI if you’re complaining about pressure in your head outside of a normal headache.”

“That’s not possible,” Dongwoo scoffed. “We can’t just bring those machines here. That’s not …”

“Then,” Seokjin ground out, hyper aware of the things he’d stolen that were now hidden on his
body, “I hope Woohyun is prepared to handle things.” He left the implication hanging there.

“Sunggyu,” Dongwoo said quietly, looking at Seokjin and then back to his leader. “How would we even go about getting that kind of machinery here?”

“We could just go to the hospital,” Seokjin pointed out, making a show of cleaning up everything he’d used. “Or, if my clinic had more funding, I’d have the machines there. But obviously if we go, I’d need to accompany you. I’d need to leave.”

There was no way Sunggyu was letting him go. There was no way he was risking Bangtan being able to get at him, or Seokjin being able to slip away. Not like before.

As the final kicker, Seokjin warned, “If you have fluid in your lungs, it won’t resolve itself. It won’t simply go away. And you’ll end up drowning in your own lungs, which honestly would be an ironic death.”

And didn’t Infinite like ironic things? Or maybe only when the irony wasn’t directed towards them.

“Get Woohyun,” Sunggyu rasped out. “And get Hoya.”

With things in motion, they took Seokjin back to his room and locked him in. Sitting heavily on the bed, Seokjin coughed out several mouthfuls of blood, smeared the substance on the ruined bed sheets, and listened for the sound of anyone near his door.

When it seemed he was completely alone, Seokjin slowly and deliberately began pulling the items he placed into his clothing free, spreading them out on the bedside table and taking stock of everything he had.

In total, he’d managed to steal both the bottle of morphine and the sedative, two unused and individually packaged syringes, medical tape, and the crowning glory, one extremely sharp and potentially lethal scalpel.

Hands shaking, Seokjin burst open one of the wrappers on a syringe and carefully measured out a dosage of morphine.

He had no doubt now, with how much more frequently he was spitting out blood, that he’d ruptured something. There was some kind of internal bleeding, and internal bleeding was always serious. How fast he got medical attention would determine whether he lived or died.

But for now he had to fight the effects of the internal bleeding. He needed his wits about him. He needed to keep as much of his strength as he could, be able to focus, and act when necessary.

The morphine was for himself. And the moment he injected it into himself, feeling the buzz of the drug kick in, chasing away the pain, he sighed in relief. It made him a little loopy, relaxing back against the bed in a useless kind of way, but he was so thankful to be free of the pain he’d felt constantly for a day, that it was worth it.

And it was hard, so terribly hard, with how exhausted he was, and lonely and scared, but after that Seokin forced himself to sit up and keep going.

In the other syringe he loaded a likely lethal dose of sedative. It was hard to tell though, even for a doctor, as Infinite employed various sized people. The dose he’d filled would kill someone like Sungjong, put someone like Woohyun into a coma, and likely only knock out someone Hoya’s size.

He wasn’t looking to kill anyone, but if they sent Hoya after him, Seokjin couldn’t take the chance
that a smaller dose would barely have any effect. Hoya was strong, incredibly well built, and likely ran a high metabolism.

Seokjin knew he’d only have one shot, and he couldn’t risk it.

Next came the medical tape. He drew up his pant leg and broke off pieces of the tape with his teeth. He took the scalpel and taped it on the inside of his ankle, in reach if he needed it, but out of sight. And if anyone grabbed him, they’d never feel it down there. They’d have no reason to touch him anywhere near his ankle.

Waiting followed.

Waiting for hours.

There was no breakfast, not that Seokjin was hungry in the least bit, but there was a late lunch.

Sungyeol brought him the tray with his lunch on it, and when Seokjin asked him about what was going on with Sunggyu, the other man replied, “We’ll tell you when you need to know.” He had a pinched expression on his face, and was clearly unhappy. Was it just that Sunggyu’s health was in question, or was it something else?

“I’m just--”

Before he could finish his sentence and offer another question, Sungyeol was closing the door behind him.

Seokjin wasn’t sure, but it felt like things might be turning in his favor. Infinite was worked up about something, and that was something in Seokjin’s favor.

The sun had just started to dip in the horizon when the door to his bedroom opened once more.

And it was the last person Seokjin had wanted it to be.

Hoya.

If there was any member that Seokjin liked the least, it was Hoya. Hoya was a brute and a thug and so physical he churned Seokjin stomach. He was the one who kicked in ribs, who broke wrists, who smashed faces. And he looked like he enjoyed his job, and not in the psychotic way that Woohyun did. Woohyun, Seokjin suspected, like Sungjong, was truly in need of psychiatric care. But Hoya? Hoya was a calm and collected and fully in control of everything he did.

It could have been anyone who set the fire in Bangtan’s territory. It could have been any single member of Infinite, or a group of them—and honestly it had probably been Woohyun, but Seokjin could see Hoya doing it in his mind like it was fact. Hoya wouldn’t have cared that two elderly people were sleeping above the noodle house, or that there were children tucked in their beds nearby. Hoya was the type to do it without a second thought, without a single care in the world, and Seokjin hated him for it.

“Get up,” Hoya grunted out.

Hoya was alone, Seokjin realized, as he moved towards the door and peered out.

Tucked carefully up his sleeve was the filled syringe.

“Where are we going?”
Hoya gripped him harshly on his upper arm, tighter than he needed to, and didn’t seem to care at all that he was causing Seokjin significant pain.

At least there would have been a lot of pain. The morphine was still in his system, even if it was slowly being metabolized. A hint of pain was starting to creep back into his senses, but for the moment, the morphine was enough to keep him level headed and going.

“Where do you think?” Hoya asked, head cocked as he dragged them down the long hall. “You said to bring the hospital here. Isn’t that what you told Dongwoo? It’s coming, so now you’re going to get Sunggyu ready for it.”

Seokjin felt a spark of hope. They’d done it. Infinite had really been gullible to bring all of that huge, expensive, terribly difficult to handle equipment here. And in order to get it all installed and working, they’d need trucks. They’d need to make themselves vulnerable and open their doors, and that was Bangtan’s opportunity.

If Bangtan didn’t move on it, if they weren’t thinking what Seokjin was, then he was about to die, and very badly. But if all of them were coordinated, even with their lack of communication, then Seokjin thought he had a very decent shot at living.

Seokjin stumbled a little, trying to portray himself as weak and vulnerable. “You’re really bringing that all here?”

Hoya jerked him to a stop, then pressed him back against the wall and crowded in. His voice dropped to sound even more menacing and he bit out, “I don’t think I need to remind you how much I dislike you. I think you’re a liar. I think you know exactly how to manipulate the people around you, and I don’t think you’re half as helpless as you want people to think you are.”

“I don’t--”

“But,” Hoya ground out, “you’re a damn good doctor, and you might be the reason Sunggyu is still alive right now. That’s the only reason I haven’t wrapped my fingers around your throat and squeezed the life out of you.”

Seokjin sucked in a sharp breath.

“So now we’re going to exercise the skills that you have, which are currently keeping you alive at the moment.” Hoya started off down the hallway again. “You’ll treat Sunggyu, with the equipment you demanded, and if there’s even a hint of suspicion surrounding anything you do, I want you to know that I--”

Seokjin stumbled.

Then the world shifted to the right, he was careening into the wall.

Only it wasn’t Hoya pushing him. In fact, Hoya was up against the wall too, looking dazed and completely unsure what was going on.

Then Seokjin registered the ringing in his ears, the plaster from the walls and ceiling raining down around them, and how the floor under them was shifting dramatically like all stability was gone.

It looked and sounded like a bomb had exploded.

Seokjin was pretty convinced something along those lines had.
He had his verification just after that, when there was second detonation and this one blew glass from
the high windows in on them, and the walls nearly came down. Seokjin crashed to the floor with the
force of it.

Hoya gave a shout, but it was muffled, and Seokjin tried to right himself. His fingers gripped at the
ground as best they could, and his shoulders shook.

As Seokjin’s hearing slowly came back to him, more booms thundered in the background. Then
came the shouts registering from outside, followed by gunfire.

When the gunfire sounded from somewhere inside the house, Seokjin realized this was it. This was
the opening he’d given Bangtan and hopefully their allies. He’d gotten the doors open for massive
deliveries that would leave the home base vulnerable. And it looked like Bangtan was taking
advantage.

Next to him Hoya groaned and got himself up to his knees, looking shaken but recovering faster than
Seokjin would have liked,

“Sorry,” Seokjin called out, then slipped the syringe with the sedative down his sleeve and jammed
the needle into the side of Hoya’s neck.

Hoya swung out instinctively, catching a fist into Seokjin’s side and lighting his world on fire. Not
even the morphine was enough to block out that pain, and as Hoya collapsed down, so did Seokjin.

Seokjin wasn’t unconscious. He knew that because he was fully aware of the thoughts running
through his mind, the walls physically still shaking, and the fine coat of plaster and debris settling
around him.

Feet dashed by him from time to time but didn’t stop to check on him or Hoya. That meant either
they weren’t feet belonging anyone from Bangtan, or they were Infinite’s people who must have
thought one or both of them were already dead.

And then finally, finally he got his body working.

But each and every movement, even breathing, was something that had his vision blinded by white
hot pain, and his muscles nearly vibrating in protest.

It was the worst he’d ever felt in his life, and he didn’t know how his heart was hanging on, but he
was still going, he was still moving, and he was still alive.

Once on his feet, Seokjin gave a deliberate look down to Hoya’s crumpled body and noted the rise
and fall of his chest. He hadn’t thought that the dosage he’d pumped into Hoya would kill him, not
with his size, but it was good to be assured.

Seokjin was not a killer. He understood, even if he didn’t accept, why members of Bangtan often
had to make impossible, terrible choices, and follow through with nauseating actions. He just
couldn’t consciously kill someone, even to save his own life.

Maybe that made him weak. Maybe that made him a fool. But it was who he was.

As he braced a hand against the wall, taking a few tentative steps forward to try and test out the
strength of his legs, he gave Hoya a second more of consideration. He decided, “Sorry, not sorry.”
And then reached down to steal his keycard badge that had been pinned to Hoya’s shirt, and stepped
over him.
He moved as quickly as he could, trying to recall the floor plan of the entire house—at least the parts he’d seen, and reached down to arm himself with the scalpel he’d taped to his ankle. If his predictions held, most of Infinite’s men would be rushing down to wherever those explosions had come from, which left him almost free reign to get exactly where he wanted to be.

And that, of course, was one of the safe rooms.

Seokjin had seen one the first time he’d been to the house, but this most recent visit gave him the most detailed look at the two separate rooms that were located on both the first floor and the third. Seokjin, on the second, was headed to the one on the third. He needed to stay away from the ground floor, away from where more of Infinite would be.

The door in question was a reinforced, off color door located around the last corner of the hallway. And inside he knew would be at least one highly trusted member of Infinite. But more importantly, there’d be access to all sorts of things that would benefit Bangtan.

Another explosion shook the house and the gunfire was only intensifying in the distance, growing ever nearer. How soon would the police be on the scene? What would happen when they got there? Seokjin couldn’t be sure of anything, only that he needed to keep moving and fight through his body starting to betray him.

Panting hard and nearly collapsing against the wall next to the door, he wasn’t sure how close he was to giving in. He coughed a splatter of blood on the security panel and fought to bring his arm up with the keycard. He swiped it through with a large exhale and listened to the locking mechanism click over.

For once he wasn’t ungrateful that Hoya had come to get him. If it had been anyone of a lower level, their keycard probably wouldn’t have opened the door.

“Hey!”

Seokjin blinked blurry eyes at the inside of the room where a man in a pressed suit was sitting in front of several rows of security monitors and equipment. He sprung up to his feet and charged towards Seokjin.

There wasn’t much left in Seokjin, and he was absolutely running on fumes. But he had just enough left to pivot to the side as the man nearly plowed into him. He brought his wrist up in an arc, the scalpel slashing through the man’s white shirt and sprouting out several lines of blood. It wasn’t a lethal wound, not even close, but it served as a proper distraction so Seokjin could smash his elbow into the man’s nose and knock him out.

“I’m not sorry about you, either,” Seokjin said, and closed the door behind him.

The screens in front of him showed that Sunggyu had nearly every inch of the home covered, and all of the surrounding streets. The amount of cameras almost seemed a little paranoid.

That was what afforded Seokjin a bigger picture of what was going on. Or at least a clear one.

He could see that there was a literal war zone outside the walls, with cars parked haphazardly, people shooting at each other, explosions of some kind ricocheting everywhere, and too many men everywhere to belong to just Bangtan and Infinite.

Then finally, after what felt like an eternity of looking, Seokjin spotted familiar faces. He could just see Jungkook peeking around a tipped SUV, popping off shots expertly from his gun and then ducking back out of view. And then there was Hoseok, advancing into the house with a half dozen
of Bangtan’s men on his heels, face set with hard determination.

“Focus,” Seokjin snapped at himself, and forced himself to look away from the cameras.

Instead he went directly for the security systems and overrides. Most of them were labeled as different sources of power, controlling different locks, and almost all of them were lit by a red light. For the most part, the house was still in lock down.

Seokjin planned to change that.

Using Hoya’s keycard, something that seemed to have endless authorization, he opened everything. All the doors, all the elevators, all the garage entrances and exits, and everything in between. Even some of the windows appeared to be locked shut electronically, and he flipped those switches as well. Everything and anything that could be a way in for Bangtan, was opening.

And the armory underground, the one that Infinite were likely getting most of their weapons from, was now locked.

Dizzily, Seokjin nearly lost his balance in the chair he was sitting on, the world actually going dark for several seconds, and then coming back blurrier than before.

Help, he decided. Medical help was the next line of business.

He stumbled his way to the door and stopped to lift the fire extinguisher on the side panel. Then he exited, after making sure the coast was clear, and let the door click shut behind him.

The fire extinguisher felt like it weighed a hundred pounds, and not likely the five it did. But Seokjin’s feet also seemed like they were heavy cement blocks. And never more certain was Seokjin that he was at the end of his rope. This was it. He couldn’t do much more, and he could only hope it was enough.

With the last of his strength he smashed the fire extinguisher down on the security panel outside the room. It took several, gut wrenching tries to bust the interface off. He couldn’t do anything about the security room on the first floor, but no one was getting into the one on the third. And with any luck, by the time someone realized what was happening, why the armory was locked down, why the doors were opening, and why Bangtan was advancing, it would be too late.

And that was when, the fire extinguisher clattering to the floor, Seokjin stopped fighting. The morphine was gone from him, he was dazed and delirious with pain, he could feel the blood welling up at the back of his throat, and he was done.

He felt his knees unlock, his legs turn jelly, and then he was falling.

But he didn’t smash into the debris covered floor like he expected to.

Against all odds, he was tugged into warm, safe arms, and lowered gently.

“Oh, god,” a voice gasped out, fingers dragging through Seokjin’s hair. “What did they do to you?”

For one delirious, hallucinogenic second, he’d thought it was Namjoon.

And then he realized no, it wasn’t him. The hands were too small, the fingers a little too rough, and the person cradling him didn’t smell right.

“Jin. Jin, can you hear me? Jin!”
He must have had a wickedly terrible smile, with his teeth probably coated red by the blood in his
mouth, and his lips white like paper. But he grinned all the same, a little stupidly, and managed,
“Jimin. It’s you.”

It was Jimin, looking a little battered, his hair all pushed up and dirt streaked across his face. His
clothes were torn, and he was sporting a gash across his forehead that had already stopped bleeding,
but he was still Jimin. He was still the person that Seokjin cared for and loved as a friend and … and
Seokjin didn’t want him to see him like this.

“Jimin,” he tried again, thinking his voice sounded weird, and not at all like his own.

“Oh, god.” Jimin said again, eyes going damp as they widened. “I’m so sorry they did this to you.”

“You came,” Seokjin wheezed out, grinning wider. “I thought you were so mad at me, but you
came.”

Jimin wrangled him up further, supporting his head properly. He rushed out, “I was mad at myself. It
was never you, Jin. It was never you. I swear it. I was angry and upset and none of it was your
fault.”

His heart gave an extra painful thump, and Seokjin told him, “I’m so sorry, Jimin. I … I never
wanted to hurt you. You’re my friend.”

Even when Jimin was difficult, even when he was being defensive and mean and hard to handle,
even then, Seokjin had considered him a friend. He’d seen the hurt and the pain that made Jimin how
he was, and he’d seen real progress towards fixing it. Jimin deserved better than what Seokjin had
been able to give him.

Jimin deserved someone who would love him back.

“It’s not your fault,” Jimin insisted, his voice cracking.

“You love me,” Seokjin shuddered out. “You love me and I can’t love you back. That’s … that’s not
fair. That’s cruel. That’s …” He cut off, choking out blood.

Jimin shook his head furiously. “You’re already in love with someone. You love Rap Mon. You
should never think you have to be sorry for loving someone. You should feel like you had to in any
way, and you let me down as kindly as humanly possible. You were nicer to me than I deserved.
And you didn’t even tell Rap Mon. You could have. You know he would have started a fight with
me over it, but you didn’t. And I know you didn’t say anything to protect me. Because that’s the
kind of person you are.”

For a moment, Seokjin couldn’t tell who was shaking harder, himself or Jimin.

“Where is he?” Seokjin asked. If he was going to die, he didn’t want Jungkook to see him like this.
He didn’t want his brother to have the mental picture in his mind every time he thought of him. But
Namjoon? Seokjin wanted to see Namjoon.

“Out there,” Jimin replied right away. “He got his shit together. You did that, Jin. You made him
believe that sometimes you have to push aside the pain, even when it seems unbearable, for
something more important. And when he found out you were missing? Taken by Kim Sunggyu? He
got ready to tear this place apart. Now he’s there, fighting side by side with Suho, and with some
unexpected allies, and he’s going to kill Sunggyu. He’ll kill Sunggyu and Woohyun and everyone
who hurt you.”
“Oh,” Seokjin eased out. “Oh.”

Jimin begged, “How can I help you? What can I do? I can’t … fuck! I can’t lift you. I don’t think I can lift you. I can drag you, but I’m afraid to. I don’t want to hurt you anymore. But there’s blood everywhere. Is it your heart, too?”

Seokjin let out a faint laugh, because to him, it was the most ironic, most ridiculous thing in the world. He told Jimin, “No. For once, my heart isn’t letting me down.”

It was just everything else.

“I think,” he gasped out, and it was suddenly much harder to breathe, “I’m bleeding inside. I’ve got broken ribs. The signs, they’re all there. And there’s nothing you can do about that.”

Jimin’s phone vibrated suddenly and Seokjin, who was freezing so badly his teeth were nearly chattering, practically felt it against his own skin.

“What?” Seokjin asked, watching Jimin’s face as the other man read the message on the phone.

“Holy fuck,” Jimin said, jaw falling open. His eyes jetted to Seokjin’s face. “The fucking military just showed up.” Seokjin was frowning in confusion as Jimin added, “Jungkook said he was going to your dad for help, but I thought he was just kidding. I didn’t think for a second he’d actually get your dad, who works for the government, involved. Damn, Jin, who is your dad that he can call up the army at will? Not the police. The army.”

Seokjin wanted to smile. Jungkook had called their dad for help. Their father, who Seokjin thought was the last person in the world to be dragged into this kind of mess, was coming to rescue him.

“Jimin.” Seokjin dug his fingers into the material of Jimin’s shirt. “I want you to do me a favor. Please, tell Namjoon—”

“Fuck that,” Jimin declared, pocketing his phone and pulling Seokjin up into a seated position. It caused him to cry out in pain, but Jimin didn’t pause. “I’m going to personally drag you to the hospital. I don’t fucking care. You are not dying here today. I’m not dying here. The only people dying here today are those Infinite bastards.”

“I seriously,” Woohyun said from several feet away from them, “doubt that.”

Seokjin opened his mouth to scream a warning, his eyes jerking from Woohyun’s gleeful expression, to the raised gun in his hand.

Before a single sound could escape his mouth, warm blood splattered across his face.

And then Jimin was falling, his body going limp, his eyes wide open, unblinking, and lifeless.
Seokjin screamed. He screamed his throat raw until it was painful to even breathe, and then he kept screaming, eyes locked on Jimin’s body.

“Shut the fuck up!” Woohyun demanded, stalking towards him, the gun still raised.

No. Not Jimin. There was no way Jimin was dead. He couldn’t be.

“I said shut the fuck up!”

Seokjin couldn’t. He couldn’t stop screaming. He wasn’t in control of his body anymore.

Woohyun fired off a second shot, inches from Seokjin. The bullet imbedded into the ground and Seokjin fell quiet maybe out of an inability to do anything else, more than the fear.

“Christ! Finally.” Woohyun let out a long breath.

Seokjin gasped out a sob, and then he was crying openly, reaching out trembling fingers for Jimin.

Blood was seeping out around Jimin’s body at a slow crawl, but from the way he’d fallen Seokjin couldn’t tell where the bullet had gone in. He couldn’t even properly address the injury. He couldn’t do anything but collapse down next to Jimin, desperately wanting to look away from the wide, lifeless eyes that started back.

He heard Woohyun saying, “—than you’re worth. I told Gyu. I told him, but—”

Jmin blinked.

Seokjin startled terribly, but Woohyun didn’t seem to notice, still speaking as he waved his gun around, ranting more than anything else.

Seokjin was sure he’d imagined it until Jimin did it again, and his eyes were narrowing in a grunt of pain.

Seokjin dragged himself forward to drape himself over Jimin’s body. He hoped it merely looked like he was mourning his friend. But it gave him enough cover to lean down and whisper in Jimin’s ear, “Don’t move. He thinks you’re dead.”

Woohyun wouldn’t hurt Jimin again if he thought he was gone. If Seokjin could do just one last thing, it would be to guard Jimin’s life for as long as he could.

Of course realistically Seokjin knew the bullet had entered somewhere in Jimin’s chest, and though it hadn’t killed him outright, that meant something terrible for how soon he needed treatment.

“—did you do to Hoya!”

Seokjin turned back to Woohyun who looked crazed and was openly sweating.

“I will shoot you in the face,” Woohyun warned.

The sound of something heavy slamming downstairs rang all the way up several flights of stairs.

Again, Woohyun shouted, “What the fuck did you do to Hoya!”
A smile slid onto Seokjin’s face as he ignored the gun completely. He pointed out, “You’re not the first person to point a gun at me. That doesn’t scare me anymore.”

“I don’t…” Woohyun broke off with an incredulous laugh, “I don’t scare you?”

“I didn’t say that,” Seokjin corrected, curling his fingers around Jimin’s wrist. Jimin hadn’t moved an inch, playing dead and hopefully not too close to the truth. And when Seokjin found his pulse it was thready, but there, and that was something. “I said,” Seokjin corrected, “guns being pointed at me don’t scare me anymore. Crazy people holding them still do. But I think that’s natural.”

A tick cut across Woohyun’s face and he seemed to grip the gun even tighter. “I think you should know, I’m really going to enjoy unloading the rest of this clip into you. Then I’m going to drag your body to Gyu and show him what we should have done from the start.”

There were more heavy thuds from downstairs, almost like feet on stairs, and either the cavalry was coming up, or Woohyun reinforcements. Seokjin couldn’t say either way, or if it was that at all.

“Don’t you have bigger issues to deal with?” Seokjin questioned. He let himself go slack against Jimin, suddenly unable to feel his fingers where they were at his wrist. “I think you should know, since we’re sharing things, “I did my absolute best to fuck all your shit up.” His language was crude, and almost felt out of place. But then it felt good to say. So good.

The look on Woohyun’s face was hilarious, his eyes jetting behind Seokjin to the security room behind them. And then his brain was making the connection between the two of them.

“You…”

“Do you know how easy it was to take out Hoya?” Seokjin laughed out, droplets of red splashing against the blue shirt Jimin wore. “He turned his back on me a million times, and I only needed once to shove the needle full of a powerful sedative into his neck. He dropped like a load of bricks.”

Woohyun’s hand shook so badly with anger that it was drifting back and forth significantly.

“And I got the sedative right out from Sunggyu and Dongwoo’s noses,” Seokjin added, unable to help his gloating. “You all turned your back on me constantly, dismissing me as a non-threat. You’re all idiots. All of you.”

Woohyun took another deliberate step forward, seething out, “This is about to become the best moment of my life.”

Coming up the stairs and into view with his own gun, Namjoon stated, “Bastard, you stole my line.”

Sensing the coming shoot out, Seokjin hurled himself further over Jimin, who gave a surprised grunt of pain, and then he ducked the both of their heads down.

Gunfire up close was deafening. Seokjin had been pretty closed to it when members of Exo had deliberately caused the car crash that allowed Seokjin to previously escape Infinite’s custody. In that case, the gunfire had been fifty feet away, and enough to make his ears ring for almost an hour afterwards.

But Namjoon and Woohyun turning their guns one each other five to ten feet from him?

Seokjin trusted Namjoon not to hit either himself nor Jimin, but the sound was like a million firecrackers going off in his ears. It felt like they might start bleeding, or already were. And there was certainly some kind of yelling going on, but he couldn’t hear any of it.
When Seokjin dared to peek, he could see Woohyun ducked down low too near him for comfort, firing off calculated shots at Namjoon who was braced against the stairs, returning fire.

It was a poor position for Namjoon to be in, the low ground forcing him to poke his head up in order to shoot at Woohyun. It was the kind of position that was going to get him killed, and Seokjin hadn’t survived for so long to see him die now.

And there was one last thing Seokjin could do.

His foot raised, and channeling all his strength into his lower body, Seokjin delivered a devastating kick to Woohyun’s knee, popping it out of the socket and likely breaking something.

Woohyun screamed in agony, the pain muffled to Seokjin by the unfamiliar sound of the gunfire, and then Woohyun was losing his grip on his gun, writhing on the ground.

Namjoon seemed to sense his opportunity without having to be told, dashing forward and up the stairs to kick the gun away from Woohyun.

Seokjin’s blurry, terrible sight picked out Hoseok behind Namjoon, dropping down at Seokjin’s side to talk to him in a hurried way that Seokjin couldn’t even hear.

Like he was stuck in a silent movie, Seokjin looked to where Namjoon was couched over Woohyun, battering him with his fists, driving into him with anger and brute force and likely killing him.

Something hard tapped his face and Seokjin’s attention swung back to Hoseok’s silent demands, the younger man gesturing between Seokjin and Jimin.

Seokjin did his best, in an incredibly uncoordinated way, to push Hoseok towards Jimin. It was Jimin who needed the help. It was Jimin who could still be saved.

Hoseok seemed to understand what he meant eventually, abandoning the mess that Seokjin must have been, to turn Jimin over gingerly and start applying pressure to the wound on Jimin’s chest.

A roar of sound invaded Seokjin’s ears, and then he could hear again.

He could hear Namjoon screaming, “—ever touch him again I’ll—”

“Namjoon!”

Seokjin closed his eyes, breathing in as much sweet, cold oxygen as he could. Then he opened then, tried to lift his head, and called for Namjoon again.

Namjoon was off Woohyun in a second, and turning to look at Seokjin with a lost, almost frantic look across his face. And blood. There was so much blood on him. Woohyun’s blood.

Namjoon crawled across the floor to his side, nearly crashing into Seokjin as his face scrunched up in what must have been an attempt to delay tears. Seokjin did not want Namjoon to cry for him.

“Oh, shit,” Namjoon gasped out, trying to look over his injuries. “I don’t know what they did to you. I thought they …”

“Rap Mon,” Hoseok said sharply, his fingers smeared with blood from where he was trying to hold Jimin together. “We need to get out of here now. We need to get them to a hospital.”

Delicately Namjoon stroked Seokjin’s face, and then despite the blood, he leaned down to kiss him tenderly. “I love you,” he whispered out. “And I never would have let them having you.”
Weakly, Seokjin nodded. He’d always known. He’d always had faith.

But this was it. He could feel it.

“Namjoon—”

With an impressive burst of strength, Namjoon slipped his arms under Seokjin and lifted, declaring, “I’m getting you help now.”

“Jimin can’t be moved,” Hoseok stated from where he was still kneeling on the ground.

Jimin’s eyes were silted, which was good, because it meant he was still conscious, but Seokjin didn’t think he would be for long.

Namjoon held his gaze for a moment, then stated, “I’ll send help back for Jimin. Immediately. But J-Hope, Jin isn’t going to last if I don’t move him now.”

“Go,” Hoseok urged a second later. “And watch your back. Sunggyu is still out there, and I don’t think he’s going to be pleased when he finds out how many of his men you’ve killed.”

Namjoon’s grip tightened on Seokjin. “Let him come.”

Then they were running.

Rather, Namjoon was running and Seokjin was crying from the pain of being jostled, weak and dying, bloody and broken.

Seokjin wasn’t sure what happened next. He lost his grip on reality at almost the exact moment they emerged outside to more chaos, more fighting, and more death.

“Jin,” he heard Namjoon gasp out as he jogged, presumably towards medical assistance of some kind. “Just hold on.”

If he’d had the strength, he would have, but everything Seokjin had left to give was gone. Truly, there was nothing left, and Seokjin regretted that gratefully. He felt like he was letting Namjoon down. He should have been able to hold on for just a little longer. He should have been stronger.

He simply wasn’t.

And that was his last thought.

He truly thought he was dead.

But the next time he opened his eyes, to the sterile white of a hospital room, he was more scared than ever that he’d bypassed judgment completely and gone straight down to hell. Or purgatory. Seokjin’s kind of purgatory would be an endless stay at any hospital.

“You are the luckiest son of a bitch I have ever met in my life.”

Sleepily, Seokjin turned towards the source of the voice, eyes widening at the sight of Jimin in the bed next to his own.

“I…” He winced terribly at the fire racing through his throat at the attempt to speak.

“How about we get a hot nurse in here to help you?” Jimin said, reaching over to tap the nurse call button.
Confused, Seokjin watched him silently, trying to piece together the puzzle of what had happened. But his memory was spotty, he couldn’t recall anything with clarity, and honestly he just wanted to go back to bed.

If this wasn’t hell or purgatory, if he wasn’t dead, then he wanted to rest. Because it meant impossibly, he’d survived.

The so-called hot nurse that Jimin had summoned was an older, heavy set, almost gruffly looking man who appeared more like an orderly than a nurse.

Jimin looked terribly pleased with himself as he tapped a message out on his phone, and had Seokjin had the strength to do it, he would have leaned over to smack him across the back of the head.

Instead Seokjin went back to sleep.

And when he woke up he was cuddled carefully against Namjoon who was surfing the web on his phone, looking at pictures of … what looked like resort properties at some tropical paradise.

It still hurt to speak but Seokjin chuckled out, “Going on a vacation?”

Namjoon startled, but quickly snapped into action, helping Seokjin take small sips of water from a nearby cup, asking softly, “Are you okay? I mean …”

Seokjin offered him a smile.

Sighing, Namjoon dropped his head, his chin smashing against his chest, and he seemed the curl in on himself.

Moving sluggishly, and attached to a half dozen different machines, Seokjin reached slowly for him, brushing his fingers against Namjoon’s arm. “You came for me. You got me.”

Namjoon lifted his head to reveal tears in his eyes. “When we realized they had you—when I found out Infinite had stolen you right off the street again … I ….”

Unsure, Seokjin asked, “I’m alive?”

A sad kind of smile graced Namjoon’s face. “You’re kind of a medical mystery, from what I hear.”

Seokjin shrugged. What was that supposed to mean?

Carefully, Namjoon probed, “They beat you up. They hurt you on purpose, right?”

Seokjin traced his fingers along Namjoon’s skin. “We … knew they would.”

They’d tried to make him confess to being a part of Bangtan. And that was in the beginning. Before the end they would have made him spill everything he knew.

Seokjin could feel Namjoon tensing as he said, “You had several cracked ribs, bone fractures, and internal bleeding due to the trauma of receiving those injuries.”

“I thought so,” Seokjin said, but really he’d been certain. Even before he’d started coughing up blood, he’d known. And by the time he’d seen the speckles of red, he’d thought it was too late. Few people managed to reach that stage, continued to endure physical trauma, and managed to recover. “I tried to help myself. I tried my best.”

“Are you kidding?” Namjoon demanded. “You wrapped your own ribs. You kept yourself on your
feet. You ... from what we’ve been able to figure out, you’re the one who managed to make that fortress a little less strong. You gave us the opening we needed to get in. You did it, and without you ...

Looking down at himself, Seokjin wondered how bad off he truly was under the blankets. He asked, “I’m going to be okay?”

Namjoon gave a terse nod. “The doctors worked on your forever. You were in surgery for almost seven hours. I thought I’d go crazy waiting.”

Seokjin tried not to imagine Namjoon in the waiting room, not when the feud between Bangtan and Infinite was going to hell on the streets.

He mumbled to Namjoon, “You should have stayed there. With the others. You’re Bangtan’s leader.”

Namjoon raised himself to his feet, his big hands tilting Seokjin’s head just slightly so they could kiss properly. He promised, “By the time I got to you, by the time J-Hope and I got inside the building, we already had the upper hand. Exo brought a few friends with them and they were holding down the fort. I only left because I knew Suga could handle it, and because I knew you were dying. But Seokjin, I would have left even if we were losing. I would have left because I love you and there is nothing more important to me in the world than you. I’m sorry if that’s not what you think is right, but it’s the truth.”

It was a scary thought, but oddly enough, also kind of lovely.

“I thought,” Seokjin said with some effort, still struggling to find any kind of stamina, “I was going to die. I thought I was hurt too badly.”

Namjoon reiterated, “There was seven hours of surgery, Jin, because the bleeding was so bad. They didn’t even think they’d be able to stop it. That’s what they told me. They wanted me to be prepared for either you dying of blood loss, or your heart giving out. One or the other.”

Seokjin brought a hand to his heart, where it was thumping steadily. “I’m surprised,” he said honestly. “It held out the whole time. It was strong the entire way. I never would have expected that.”

Clearing his throat, Namjoon said, “They’re calling it an honest to god miracle that they got the bleeding stopped. You’re probably going to end up on some really bad fake medical drama show, or in a textbook or something. But yeah, Jin. It’s going to take a long time for you to get back on your feet, but you’re going to make it. You’ll be okay.”

Yawning loudly, Seokjin had a hundred more questions. He wanted to know so much, and was so curious. But his eyelids were dropping again his will, his body was sagging, and he knew he didn’t have much more time before he was asleep.

“It’s okay,” Namjoon said, stroking fingers through his hair as if he could predict what Seokjin was thinking. “If you’re tired, sleep. I’m not going anywhere. And the doctors are only letting one of us in at a time to see you, so if you go to sleep now, when you wake up, you can see Jungkook.”

It was all Seokjin needed to wiggled a little deeper under the warm, comforting blankets across his bed, and then fall into a much more natural sleep than he’d had in a long while.

It wasn’t, however, Jungkook who was actually in the room when he woke.
Terrifyingly enough, it was Seokjin’s father.

Seokjin wondered, blinking through his hazy vision, if he hadn’t already suffered enough.

His father gave a gruff laugh and said, “Considering you’re my son, I doubt that.”

Seokjin blushed deeply in embarrassment when he realized he’d mumbled the question out loud. In his defense, he thought it was more than a little difficult to discern inside and outside voices, with how much pain medication was being pumped into him.

His father, seated in the chair next to his bed, already looking more frail than the last time Seokjin had seen him, leaned forward with his arms on his thighs.

“I can’t say I’m pleased,” he ground out, gaze raking over Seokjin. “To have my sons involved in one of the most nefarious gang wars in Seoul’s history.”

Once more Seokjin took stock of his body. He could hardly move, everything was numbed almost to the point of paralysis, but it was better than the pain he’d endured for so long. Of course the sweet, blissful reprieve from the pain meant he couldn’t run away from his father who was likely about to deliver an epic verbal beat down.

Coughing a little, something that lit pain through him despite the medication, Seokjin pointed out, “I wasn’t directly involved. At last not on purpose.”

“No,” his father agreed almost too knowingly. “But you are just the sort to involve yourself in your brother’s bad choices.”

Falling more heavily against the pillows behind him, Seokjin hated how he was already tired again. He felt like he could sleep for a million years more, and still wake up tired.

“Jungkook …” Seokjin wasn’t sure how to justify his brother’s questionable choices.

“Let me hear you defend him.”

Seokjin cut his eyes a little. “He’s my little brother. It’s inherent in me to defend him.”

Angrily, his father demanded, “Do you know how serious this all was?”

“I think so,” Seokjin told him, “I did nearly die.”

“Exactly!” his father snapped. “When your brother called me, to tell me that he knew you were in trouble, I—”

Seokjin interrupted. “I still can’t believe he called you.” Or maybe Seokjin couldn’t believe that his father had essentially mobilized the army for him. Coupled with Bangtan and Exo, so many people had come to save him, and he wasn’t sure if he should feel like a burden or special.

Quietly, wiggling just slightly under his blankets, Seokjin said, “When I found out that Jungkook was associating with Bangtan, when I knew he was running with them and doing things for them, I tried to be a good brother and talk him out of it. He’s practically an adult now, so I can’t control him, but he knew I didn’t like it. He knew I thought it was wrong, and that I didn’t want him to have anything to do with any gang.”

Seokjin’s father gave a serious nod.

For as long as Seokjin could remember, his father had complained about the growing gang issue in
Seoul and the outlying cities. Up until recently most gangs had been almost wholly underground, existing separately from the general public and the police force. But now everything was going more public, nothing was quite so separated, and if anything, this all had proved that gang power was rising, not falling.

“Because Jungkook and I are so close,” Seokjin told him, “I ended up being associated with Bangtan more frequently than I wanted in the beginning. But here’s the thing, dad. They’re not bad people.”

His father snorted. “They nearly got you killed.”

“No,” Seokjin shook his head. “From the start, Bangtan did everything they could to keep me out of their world, and then when I was in it, they tried really hard to protect me. Bangtan are the good guys. They do what they do to keep their homes and community safe. They’re not running drugs, or prostitution rings. That isn’t likely to change any time soon, either. And whenever I’ve been in real trouble, from Infinite, the gang that is doing those things, they’ve come for me.”

“Do you understand the gravity of all this?” his father bit out. “It’s ridiculous for you to say these things. These are gang members! Some of them are not good.”

“I don’t believe that.”

“Stop being naïve and stupid.”

Taking in fuller gasps of breath than he’d been able to manage for what felt like forever, Seokjin eased out, “I think there’s a difference between people who want to do bad things, who enjoy those things simply for the sake of them, and others who do bad things because they have to, but don’t enjoy them. For me, that’s the only distinction that matters.”

His father huffed in some kind of annoyance, then pointed out, “When you introduced me to the person you’re in love with, you neglected to tell me that he was capable of smashing someone’s face in with his fists.”

Seokjin startled. Was that what Namjoon had done to Woohyun? Seokjin had been so utterly out of it he wasn’t sure at the time. “He …”

“Private security,” his father reiterated, laughing a little.

Carefully, Seokjin warned, “Please, Namjoon’s safety depends on no one knowing who he is. He … he already lost his grandparents because someone traced them to him. Bangtan’s strongest weapon is their anonymity. I understand that Jungkook felt he had no choice but to tell you, but—”

“Please,” his father said in an overt kind of way, “I’ve already lied to more than a handful of my superiors. If I was going to do expose anyone, it would have already happened.”

Seokjin wasn’t certain as he pried, “You lied? To your superiors?”

For the first time in a while, Seokjin saw some kind of amusement in his father’s eyes. The kind of emotion that Seokjin thought had been carefully cut out over the years.

“I’ve lied a lot over the past week and a half,” his father said, looking Seokjin in the eyes. “I lied about where my information about Infinite came from. I lied about Bangtan’s association with what happened. I lied about Bangtan’s identities. I lied about you being there at all, other than coincidentally, and I falsified information to make certain people disappear from the records. Not only that, I’ve … provided certain incentives to other individuals to make sure no important names ever come up or can be tied to this.”
“Oh, dad,” Seokjin sighed out, tears in his eyes.

“Considering I deployed the national guard,” his father continued, “to offer back up to one gang over another in a conflict that spilled out onto the streets and ended up injuring several civilians, I would not only lose my job if this came out, but I’d be serving a good deal of time in jail for it.”

His father certainly wasn’t one for shows of physical affection, but Seokjin reached for him gingerly all the same. His arm stretched out and he was just able to brush the material of his father’s suit jacket. “Thank you,” he said, hoping his father understood the weight of the words. “Thank you so much.”

Chortling, his father pointed out, “I’ll be dead in a few month’s time anyway. What’s the risk?”

The risk was still huge, Seokjin knew, and what he had done probably personally went against everything he believed in.

“Namjoon,” Seokjin told his father, “he saved me. He and other members of Bangtan. They came for me, when they could have cut their losses, and they saved me from Infinite who would have killed me. Namjoon … he …”

“He’s more than just a boyfriend,” Seokjin’s father guessed.

“I told you, I love him,” Seokjin said softly. “It’s serious. I risked my life to protect him and Bangtan’s secrets, and he risked his life to come for me when Infinite took me.”

His father fell silent, and Seokjin wasn’t sure if they’d have much more to say to each other.

But then his father stood slowly, smoothing out the creases on his suit. And he said, “Do you understand now why I pushed you and your brother? I pushed you away from this world, away from these people, and towards the part of society that wouldn’t have you end up in the custody of a ruthless gang lord.”

Seokjin cracked a smile. “I understand. That’s what I think you don’t get. I’ve always understood. And trust me, this isn’t exactly where I saw my life ending up. But I’m really happy. This life isn’t easy, and there’s so much stress, but I am happy, and that’s all I really care about. Helping people, loving Namjoon, that’s all I need. That’s all I want.”

“Happy,” his father sighed out, resigned. Then he gave a departing look, one filled with barely concealed affection, and slipped from the room.

Because his blood pressure was a little low, and he had a rising temperature that could mark the possibility of infection, the nursing staff refused to let him have any more visitors that day. And as much as Seokjin wanted to see Namjoon and Jungkook, his exhaustion was endless and he was much happier just to sleep.

But it was worth it in the end, because after nearly another full day of sleeping, he was finally able to sit up a little more properly, talk without an endless burn in his throat, and take more than one visitor at a time.

“Rap Mon is coming by later,” Jungkook announced, clambering up on the bet to sit near Seokjin’s feet. He toed off his shoes and crossed his legs, adding, “He’s got a meeting with Suho about … you know … cleanup.”

Yoongi, the other visitor, and not really who Seokjin had expected, sat easily in the chair by the bed and gave him an appraising look.
Seokjin shot his brother a happy smile, finding it almost impossible to believe that they’d all come through in one piece. “You realize you’re going to have to fill me in on what happened. I’m missing a lot of the small details.”

Jungkook bounced a little on the bed.

Yoongi interjected, “Can you calm down? Your brother had major surgery recently. If you jar him in any way they’ll kick us out, and they probably won’t let us back in. Don’t be that person who spoils it for everyone.”

Jungkook threw him a glare.

Seokjin moved to break the uneasy moment by asking, “You guys took the opening I was trying to make for you?”

Jungkook put his chin in his palm and said, “We knew you were in that huge house—more like mansion. And we knew we’d have to get in to get to you. But it’s built like a fortress and we had no idea how to do it. Time was running out and we were freaking. But then there were all these huge trucks going in and out, and all the garage doors were open, and all the side entrances, and it was the best shot we were ever going to have.”

In an impressed way, Yoongi said, “We thought it might be you. In any case, that was very insightful.”

Seokjin gave a nod. “I knew I had to give you an opening. I figured you were watching, for one. And if I didn’t do anything, I knew Infinite was going to kill me.”

Like a dark thundercloud, Jungkook said grumpily, “You almost died anyway.”

Tenderly, Seokjin put a hand to his side. “Hoya and Woohyun were a little too enthusiastic in their welcoming party. And I’m not exactly as durable as other people.”

“They say you’re kind of a miracle,” Yoongi observed with his own grin, mirroring Namjoon’s words from before.

Looking between the two of them, Seokjin mentioned, “I saw Jimin earlier.” Days ago, he meant, and just for a second that could have almost been a delirious hallucination of some sort. “He’s okay? He was shot.”

“He’s fine,” Yoongi assured.

Jungkook mentioned, “Honestly, the doctors say that he’s really lucky, too. The bullet missed his heart by only a couple of inches, and it stayed lodged in him, but didn’t break apart and cause more damage. He’s got to rest a lot, do some physical therapy to get his strength back, and he’ll be in a wheel chair for a while, but he gets to leave the hospital any day now. He’s going to be just fine.”

“He tried to save me,” Seokjin replied. “He was prepared to drag me to safety if necessary. Woohyun just caught him off guard.”

“Woohyun,” Yoongi said carefully, meeting Seokjin’s eyes in a bold way, “isn’t going to be a problem for anyone anymore.”

His lips barely forming the words, Seokjin asked, “He’s dead then?”

“Can you blame Rap Mon?” Jungkook demanded. “I would have done the same!”
More level headed, Yoongi continued, “Of the seven core members of Infinite, Sungyeol, Sungjong, and Woohyun are dead. Hoya is currently in police custody.”

Jungkook snuck in, “That was you with that sedative, right? The medical examiner said there was enough in him to take down a small elephant. Good move.”

Seokjin disregarded the compliment and asked instead, “What about the last three? Sunggyu and Myungsoo and Dongwoo?”

Yoongi made an irritated sound. “Gone. They up and vanished. And we’ve been looking, trust me. None of this is truly over until Sunggyu is dead. His empire might be in shambles, most of his men dead, but Sunggyu has to be dead for this to be completely done.”

“Where do you think he went?” Seokjin asked. And what was going through his mind knowing that everything he’d coveted, including Woohyun, was gone.

He caught the tail end of Jungkook saying, “—pretty awesome that everyone showed up to help. I never would have expected the helping hand.”

“Oh,” Seokjin said curiously, “you’re talking about the extra support that was there? Who were they?”

Jungkook snuck his own legs under the blankets at his end of the bed and tangled his feet with Seokjin’s in a comforting, familiar way.

Jungkook rattled off, like he wasn’t completely sure, “Suho knows this guy, Onew. They’re friends through some other guy. Honestly, it’s kind of hard trying to figure out who knows who and through who. But the point is, Onew knows this guy named Joon who used to be a part of this gang called MBLAQ, and back in the day, before they went the way of Big Bang, they had a lot of pull. Turns out, they still have a lot of people loyal to them. I don’t know how it all worked out, and who promised who what, but we were an overwhelming force that Infinite couldn’t being to stand up to. They tried, and well, look what happened.”

Carefully Seokjin was just able to reach far enough to pinch Jungkook’s thigh. “You called dad. And you got the Korean national guard involved. Do you have any idea how dangerous that was?”

“Extremely,” Yoongi offered up, and it didn’t look like it was anything he’d supported.

“I know.” Jungkook rubbed the back of his head a little guiltily. “But I was really scared. I was scared that we’d be stuck fighting on the streets, gang against gang, and you’d be inside dying. I thought Infinite might try to kill you before they’d let us rescue you, and maybe if they saw the military coming, they’d think twice.”

Seokjin turned to Yoongi to assure, “I already spoke to my father. He managed to cover up Bangtan’s involvement completely. There’s no trace of Bangtan at all. He wasn’t happy about it, but he did it. I didn’t even have to ask him to.”

Jungkook offered up, “He’s really the most confusing person I’ve ever met in my life. Seriously.”

Allowing Yoongi to hand him a glass of water, Seokjin let out a long exhale. “So this is it? It’s over.”

“Hardly,” Yoongi mumbled.

Jungkook reminded, “We still have to find where Sunggyu and Myungsoo are hiding. Dongwoo,
too. They won’t let this go. They’re not fleeing the country. They’re laying low until they think we’re not paying attention, and then they’re coming back for some revenge. We need to deal with them before that.”

“But other than that,” Seokjin tried, “this whole mess is done, right? Infinite is broken, Exo and Bangtan are going to take over the area as previously agreed, and the fighting will stop.”

Yoongi looked at him flatly.

“What?” Seokjin asked with some dread.

“This sort of lifestyle,” Yoongi told him, as if he were speaking to a child, “is never over. Exo and Bangtan worked towards a mutual goal in this instance, but a year from now we could be enemies. And don’t think for a second that if that happens, they won’t hesitate to target you just like Infinite did. But this time there’s no hiding you. You’re out there now. And that’s the reality of this. You get into bed with Rap Mon and Bangtan and this is your life from now on. Hell, get out now and it’s still your life, because no one is ever going to forget that you’re the guy Rap Mon went to war for.”

“Jin,” Jungkook said quickly, catching his brother’s hand. “It’s okay. Seriously. Rap Mon is never going to let things get like this again. You know that. He wouldn’t.”

Of all the things Seokjin had considered about his future, it wasn’t that he’d have to continue living in fear.

“Jin?” Yoongi asked in a concerned way.

Could he live the rest of his days knowing that he’d always have a target on his back? How could he and Namjoon ever have a family knowing that there’d be a line around the block to hurt their child to get at them? What kind of life was that?

“You’ve gone pale,” Jungkook said, his fingers already reaching for the call nurse button.

“I’m just thinking,” Seokjin choked out, stopping Jungkook. “Just … thinking.”

In an even voice, Yoongi said, “This will be your life from now on. There’s no changing it or getting away from it, save for leaving the country. People are going to hear about this for a long time. You will always have to face this kind of danger. You’ll always be Rap Mon’s weakness. That’s shit, I know, and it’s also fact. But you have to keep one thing in mind.”

As if the air had gone thin around them, Seokjin drew in a shaky voice and asked, “What’s that?”

“No matter what happens,” Yoongi pointed out, “or what comes your way, you’ll always have Bangtan at your back. We will always look out for you. Because you’re family, and Bangtan takes care of family.”
Chapter Thirty-Two

Chapter Notes

I just wanted to quickly say thank you to everyone who was very understanding about there being no update last week, and me missing responding to all of your lovely comments from the chapter before that. Those of you who know me, know I love talking to you, chatting in the comments, and just interacting. But lately I've had some health issues going on that definitely had to take priority, and last week I only had two options. Either I cold put up a chapter that hadn't been edited or picked over, or I could wait. Considering these are the final chapters, I decided to wait. So again, thank you to everyone for your patience and understanding.

There was something to be said for persevering through adversity.

Because for the first time in a very long time, Seokjin managed to have an amazing Christmas.

Christmas time for Seokjin was typically not a huge event. He knew a fairly large number of people who celebrated the holiday, both religiously and in the secular sense, but with Seokjin’s reduced family size, there weren’t a lot of people to celebrate with. He might go to a party or two, and see Jungkook for a few hours, but that was it. Most years he bought Christmas presents for the people he knew—almost in a compulsive way, and received a few only from the people he tended to be closest with.

When he’d been a child, it had been the house keepers and nannies buying both himself and Jungkook presents with a prescribed budget from their father. Seokjin couldn’t remember the last time his father had handed him a present, one that he’d picked out and put thought into. Really, Seokjin couldn’t remember the last time all three of them had been together for the holiday.

This year was different.

Maybe it was because Seokjin’s father was dying. Maybe it was because Jungkook and their father were making strides to repair the expectations in their relationship. Or maybe it was because Seokjin himself had nearly died and was only just now out of the hospital.

In any case, on the twenty-fifth of December Seokjin was back at his child home, a small but adorable Christmas tree was decorated in the corner, and a sizable mound of presents were scattered around.

It was all a little surreal.

And then Namjoon had kissed the side of his head, handed him a small cup full of pills and asked, “Are you going to conk out halfway before we even get to the presents?”

Seokjin had smacked his arm playfully.

But it couldn’t be understated, the importance of having Namjoon there too.

At first it had simply been about Namjoon not having to spend the holiday alone. Namjoon wasn’t religious, so he wouldn’t be going to church, and while Seokjin had no doubt he could easily stay
with one of the Bangtan members he was closest with, he also had a sinking suspicion that Namjoon would shut himself away in his apartment if given the choice. Seokjin was not going to allow Namjoon to be sad and lonely on Christmas.

And sure, getting Namjoon and Seokjin’s father together in the same space, especially a space that was a little sacred to Seokjin’s father, was difficult. Seokjin was very much aware that this was his father’s last Christmas. And as Seokjin had struggled to recover fast enough in the hospital to be released in time for Christmas, his father had continued to wither away. But it had all worked out in the end.

Seokjin cooked them all a massive Christmas dinner that none of them could even begin to finish. They watched a couple of holiday related television programs, Jungkook ripped through his presents like he was two, and Seokjin tucked in close to Namjoon who looked on the very of tears due to happiness.

“You okay?” Seokjin had asked him softly, watching Jungkook hold up brand new musical composition books as if they the holy grail. “Namjoon?”

Namjoon’s arms had come more fully around him, and it was nice that Namjoon hadn’t shied away from physical contact with him even with Seokjin’s father in the room.

“I’m fine,” Namjoon assured, but Seokjin had a feeling he was thinking of the Christmases he had spent with his grandparents over the years. There hadn’t been much in the way of bodies to retrieve from a fire that had burned hot enough to turn bones to ashes. But there was a small urn on Namjoon’s dresser in his bedroom with what little had been recovered, and he treated it almost reverently. Seokjin saw it as a preview to what his own future would hold.

Because as Christmas passed in a quiet, pleasant way, Seokjin watched his father’s hands shake, his body curl in on itself, and his face remain permanently pale. Days later his father was completely bedridden, and Seokjin could barely hold a full conversation with him before the man drifted or became confused.

Seokjin almost thought it was better that his mother had died quickly, because it was breaking his heart to watch his strong, impassive father wilt into nothingness in a painfully slow way.

Just before the new year, as Namjoon and Suho began to finalize the agreement they’d reached so long ago for their alliance, Seokjin closed the clinic for the first time because of something not an emergency. Instead, on the Wednesday before New Year’s Eve, Seokjin kept the doors locked, and set into plans the farewell party for Yunho that Jonghyun had thankfully helped plan while Seokjin had been in the hospital.

“Key did most of the work,” Jonghyun admitted when Seokjin saw the decorated room that would hold around a hundred people, likely more before the night was done.

Seokjin swallowed down a smile as a couple of caterers walked past, carrying several of the last items needing to be set up. “I thought this was a little too magnanimous of you.”

Next to him, Jonghyun took a deep breath and said, “I don’t hate him. I think you think I do, but I don’t.”

“No,” Seokjin said, shaking his head. “I never thought you did. You wouldn’t be this upset if you hated him. I think it’s the opposite of that.”

Across the room Seokjin could see Key fussing with the decorations, acting more like a party planner
than the fashion powerhouse he was.

“I want the best for Yunho,” Jonghyun said, sounding firm and resolute. “This is the best for him, and his career. So that’s why I’ll put on a smile tonight and be happy for him.”

Seokjin couldn’t help telling Jonghyun honestly, “You’re a good friend.”

“But you,” Jonghyun replied, “have to make the speech.”

Letting Yunho go, hours later with the party in full swing and everyone offering their congratulations, was more than a little bitter sweet.

Yunho and Jonghyun had been the first doctors to believe in his vision and commit to him, regardless of how little he could promise them in the beginning. In fact, they’d been the only ones, really, to see what he saw when he brought them by the sad looking building that was now their clinic. They’d given their time, their energy, and taken major pay cuts from what they were used to.

When things had been ridiculously difficult in the beginning, they’d supported each other. They’d all worked sixteen hours shifts, sacrificed personal lives, and slowly but surely worked to turn their tiny little clinic into what it was today.

Going forward without Yunho, towards a future that was better and brighter than Seokjin had dared to hope for, seemed wrong.

But more than anyone else he knew about following your dreams and going after the things that were life goals. He couldn’t begrudge Yunho. He could only support him and be a good friend.

“I think,” he said, telling a crowd of almost a hundred and fifty that night, a glass of champagne raised in a toast, “that each and every one of us here has nothing but well wishes and the highest hopes for Jung Yunho. He’s been a friend to all of us, a great pillar of support, and more than anyone, deserves this chance to make his dreams come true.”

Jonghyun, his arm linked through Key’s, raised his own glass and called out, “To capturing future dreams!”

“And finally getting what you deserve after working long and hard for the benefit of others,” Victoria spoke up, Changmin standing tall and handsome next to her.

Hongbin, who wouldn’t start at the clinic for a while longer, was present, and so were Jessica and Krystal. Seokjin saw Yunho’s closest friends, colleagues and even a patient or two who’d become exceptionally close to him over the years. They were all faces that were truly happy for Yunho, and it helped to reassure Seokjin that they were all doing the right thing letting Yunho go and explore his dreams.

“To the future and to Yunho,” Seokjin announced, and then there was applause and everyone was drinking down their own champagne.

Seokjin caught Yunho and Jonghyun hugging tightly from the corner of his vision and he smiled so widely he wondered if he’d split his face.

“Can you not smile in such a ridiculous way?” Jimin asked.

A decent distance from the bulk of the crowd, Seokjin’s eyes roamed over to him, taking note of the water in his hand. “One of my greatest friends is getting to fulfill his dreams. Why wouldn’t I be happy?”
“It’s not that,” Jimin said, looking away. “You just look really pretty when you smile like that.”

Seokjin gave a somber nod and resolved to not smile like that around Jimin, at least not for a while. Instead he cleared his throat and asked, “Where’s Jungkook?”

Jimin and Jungkook were more than a little out of place at the party, barely dressed in clothes a grade above casual, slinking around the room as if Key was suddenly going to turn out to be a master assassin and stab Seokjin with a salad fork.

Seokjin fully understood the paranoia, though. He understood Bangtan gravitating to him against his wishes and rotating as if he was the sun and they were unable to help themselves. He endured because Namjoon and Yoongi were especially stressed, because things were still tentative with Suho, and mostly because Sunggyu, Dongwoo, and Myungsoo were still unaccounted for.

But he thought time would temper paranoia, so he was resolved to be patient.

“Stuffing his face at the buffet,” Jimin said, gesturing to the long tables across the far wall.

Seokjin tracked the distance to the area and then sighed out, “He’s going to make himself sick.” Jungkook was clearly stuffing food into his face as quickly as he could, probably already contemplating what he’d eat after that.

“He thinks with his stomach most of the time,” Jimin pointed out. “What do you expect?”

Seokjin couldn’t help cracking a smile. “Don’t you feed him? You should feed him. You’re the older boy. You should make sure he eats. Make him some bibimbab. Even you must know how to make that.”

Jimin gave him an incredulous look. “Jungkook and I aren’t allowed to cook for ourselves anymore.”

“Do I even want to know why?”

Jimin challenged, “Didn’t you see those scorch marks the last time you were over? Your brother’s eyebrows look that way for a reason.”

Seokjin couldn’t help the huge laugh that burst out. He’d been meaning to ask why Jungkook’s eyebrows seemed like they’d been singed, but he hadn’t had the chance.

“I take it back,” Jimin said softly.

“Take what back?” Seokjin asked, still laughing.

“I like it when you smile like that. I like how pretty you look.”

Hearing those words felt like something had leeched the color from the room and Seokjin hated how his stomach churned. “Jimin …”

“It’s whatever,” Jimin shot out quickly. “I mean, do I wish you had any sort of feelings for me? Of the nice kind, I should specify. Yeah. That would be nice. Being loved in return would be great.”

“I’m sorry,” Seokjin exhaled quietly. “I’m really, really—”

Jimin took another deep drink of his water and asked, “Can you stop saying you’re sorry? It’s not your fault. It’s not mine, either. This kind of shit just happens to me. I always want the things I can’t have. I just …” He broke off, refusing to look at Seokjin. “All that matters is that you’re happy. I know I’m shit with saying my real feelings and not being an ass about things, but that’s how I really
feel. I just want you to be happy. And I’ll take any way I can have you around me. Even if you are
naïve and stupid sometimes, and you think too highly of people, and you couldn’t see danger if it
was smacking you in the face.”

Seokjin would have given anything for Jimin not to have those kinds of feelings for him. Unrequited
love was the most painful kind, worse than having loved and lost.

“I’m in love with Namjoon,” Seokjin told him. “I really love him in my heart. He’s the person I want
to grow old with and have a family with. He’s the one for me. But I care for you too. I care for all of
Bangtan. I hope one day that can be enough, but don’t ever for a second thing that just because I
love Namjoon, that you aren’t important to me. You are. You will always be. How could you not
be?”

Jimin cracked out a smile. “We didn’t exactly get off on the best foot. Honestly, did that ruin any
chance I might have had?”

“I don’t think so,” Seokjin said genuinely. “I think some things are just meant to be. From the
moment I met Namjoon, there was something there. And even though you made me angry by
pointing a gun at me, I understood you were desperate to save someone you cared a lot about.”

After a few moments of silence, Jimin said, “Rap Mon told me a little, and so did Jungkook, about
why you don’t like guns. That was shit of me. Sorry.”

Seokjin offered him a forgiving smile. “I appreciate your apology.”

“Jin!”

Seokjin was jarred away from his conversation with Jimin as Jungkook nearly barreled into his side,
exclaiming, “This party is awesome!”

“You just like it because of the food,” Seokjin accused, but he gave Jungkook a playful nudge to the
shoulder. “Go ahead and eat as much as you want. I hear that the person who’s supposed to be
looking after your eating habits hasn’t been doing a good job.”

Jungkook made a surprised squeak, damaged eyebrows going high. Jimin scoffed.

With the speeches over the floor was quickly becoming a small dancing area, music playing softly. It
was a sure sign that the night was starting to conclude.

Jungkook dashed back to the food table and Seokjin turned to Jimin, asking, “Do you want to
dance?” He would have loved if Namjoon had been able to come. Truthfully, Seokjin was a bit
desperate to finally be able to show off the person who held his heart. But Namjoon had been extra
busy with Suho lately, and Seokjin was trying to be as understanding as possible.

“Dance,” Jimin coughed out in a surprised way.

“Can you dance?” Seokjin pried. “If you can’t, I’m very familiar with a simple two step shuffle. No
one will be paying attention enough to notice.”

Almost holding onto his glass like a lifeline, Jimin shook his head quickly. “I can dance. I just don’t
want to. I mean, I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

“Okay,” Seokjin said easily enough. He certainly didn’t want to push Jimin into feeling
uncomfortable. “Suit yourself.” He eyed the water. “You could get a glass of champagne and try to
loosen up a little, though. Key already asked me, completely confused, if you were staff or a guest.”
“I’ll stick to water,” Jimin said. “Especially since I’m on protection detail tonight.”

From across the room Seokjin caught Victoria’s eye. She was waving him over and he remembered that he’d promised her a dance. “Jimin,” he said, waving to her and gesturing for just a second. “I seriously doubt that Sunggyu is going to make his grand appearance tonight, at Yunho’s party. Relax a little.”

Seokjin was turning to leave for Victoria when he heard Jimin tell him, “I almost lost you once. You’re crazy if you think I’m letting things ever get near that bad again.”

“Jimin,” Seokjin said softly.

Raising his glass in kind of toast, Jimin said, “Go dance with the pretty lady, Jin. I’m more than happy to watch from here.”

Seokjin expected things with the gangs to quiet down eventually. Namjoon and Yoongi were certainly on the hunt for Sunggyu, and were rooting through Seoul with determination. Namjoon swore it was only a matter of time before they flushed him out, especially considering they were certain he hadn’t left the city yet, and Yoongi claimed he wasn’t an especially patient person, either. Sunggyu would make a move, and then everything would finally be over.

Seokjin called back to Jimin, “Eat something!” and then his focus was turning to Victoria who looked gorgeous in her twilight blue dress with the plunging neckline that had Changmin looking more than a little sour at the attention she was getting.

Seokjin danced with her, then with Yunho and Jonghyun and others for at least another hour. If he was honest, there was still a twinge in his chest from his injuries. He was much better than he’d been weeks ago, but his ribs weren’t completely healed, his chest was still sore from doctors cracking it open to save his life, and his stamina felt like it would never get back to normal. While his heart had continued to remain blissfully fine, Seokjin had his doubts about how much longer it would take to feel completely normal again. The doctors were estimating another three to four weeks. Seokjin was thinking it would be longer.

Regardless, Seokjin stayed on his feet the entire time, dancing and talking and mingling with people until the very end. And it felt good. It felt normal. It felt like so much upheaval and loss and stress hadn’t just occurred.

“Thank you for doing this,” Yunho told him as the last of the party guests shuffled out. Seokjin could see Jimin and Jungkook waiting for him near the exit. With the clinic not set to open until almost noon the next day, Seokjin planned to go home to Namjoon and stay with him for the night, if only to have some time to themselves finally.

In a perfect world, in a few months when things were quiet again, Seokjin imagined himself and Namjoon talking over the idea of moving in together. It was never more clear in his mind that he wanted to go to bed next to Namjoon every night, and wake up every morning next to him. He wanted them to get dressed together before work, cook meals together, and not have to negotiate who was going to be where on what night.

And, with Bangtan acquiring pieces of Infinite’s territory, those they weren’t giving up to Exo for their cooperation, he and Namjoon could think about getting an apartment closer to the clinic. Seokjin wouldn’t mind having to commute every morning if it meant living with Namjoon, and if they were close enough that Namjoon could get to the heart of Bangtan territory in a couple of minutes due to an emergency, it seemed like a win-win.
“I really and truly am happy for you,” Seokjin told Yunho, leaning up to squeeze him tightly into a hug. “You deserve this. You’re an amazing doctor and you’re going to go on to do even more amazing things.”

“You’ve been good to me,” Yunho said, shaking his hand next.

“You’ve been good to the clinic,” Seokjin corrected. “So go out there and get your dreams. Just don’t forget to come visit once in a while.”

Yunho chuckled, “I would never.”

In the rough month or so since things had exploded with Infinite, things had changed in Bangtan’s territory. Seokjin had noticed a lighter, easier atmosphere to the streets, and certainly less fear. Everyone in general seemed to be a lot happier, and Seokjin was glad to see it.

When he reached Namjoon’s apartment, Jimin keeping the car at an idle as he waited for Seokjin to exit into the harsh end of December weather, Jungkook snored loudly in the backseat.

“Make sure he gets to bed properly please,” Seokjin requested, reaching back to put a hand gently on Jungkook’s thigh. “I’m taking him to see our father tomorrow at the hospice. It’s going to be … difficult.”

It was a very scary reality that Seokjin lived with now, the knowledge that he could wake up any morning to call from the hospice telling him his father had passed away. And while he made every attempt to see his father frequently, the man was only half aware of his presence now on good days. Still, because Seokjin tried to be a good son, he went. And he took Jungkook with him. And he tried to forever remember what his father looked and sounded like, so one day he could describe it to his children.

“I’ve got it,” Jimin said, flashing a thumbs up. “Now go, before I turn off the heater and coerce you out.”

Seokjin cut a smile. “Cruel.” But he pulled on the door and braved the cold.

Before, when Seokjin had visited Namjoon’s apartment, members of Bangtan had mostly been out of the way. He’d spotted them only when he looked for them, but they kept a respectable amount of distance away. It had been a huge difference from the way Infinite kept a heavy presence everywhere.

Things were a little different now. Seokjin was hardly at the foot of the stairs that led up to Namjoon’s apartment when he was flanked by two young men who gave him a nod and personally escorted him up. There was another waiting for him at the top of the stairs, and one more standing watch at Namjoon’s door. Seeing them made Seokjin more than a little uneasy.

That unease, however, was overtaken by affection and warmth when Namjoon folded Seokjin up in his arms and hugged him firmly. From the mess of papers spread about in the living room, the open laptop, and the muted TV in the background, Seokjin was sure Namjoon had been working.

“You’re cold,” Namjoon said, his face nosing into Seokjin’s neck, his hands rubbing up Seokjin’s arms.

“It’s cold outside.” Seokjin kiss the side of his mouth and then smothered down a yawn. “It’s late. Want to go to bed?”

With a chuckle, Namjoon stated, “We’re old and boring, you realize? Old and boring and I don’t
even know when that happened.”

Rolling his eyes, Seokjin tugged him in the direction of the bedroom. In his opinion, if he had the time and the opportunity to grow old and become boring with Namjoon, he’d end up being very thankful. He had a suspicion that Namjoon probably felt the same way.

“Was the party good?” Namjoon asked when they were both under the blankets.

Seokjin, practically draped over him to suck up Namjoon’s body heat, gave a soft nod and wrapped an arm around Namjoon’s waist. “It was nice. I think it was really important to give Yunho a good send-off. He deserved it. And at least Jungkook made sure I got my money’s worth with the food.”

Namjoon chuckled. He slowly dragged his fingers across Seokjin’s bare shoulder, his touch like a feather light whisper. “I wouldn’t be talking about his ability to eat if I were you. You fooled me, Kim Seokjin. I thought you were this rare breed of great cook who ate like a bird and not like a water buffalo. Turns out, you can eat more than several grown men, and that is not something I expected from someone as slim as you.”

“That’ll teach you not to judge something only with your eyes.” Seokjin let his gaze slip closed, ready to sleep. “But I eat a lot because I’m hungry a lot. I don’t know what else to tell you. And my medication plays a part. If I’m not full with it in my system, I’ll feel nauseous.”

Shifting just a little on the bed to draw Seokjin closer, Namjoon mumbled sleepily, “I kind of love how much you can eat, honestly.”

It probably would have seemed an odd thing for someone to say, Seokjin considered, if he hadn’t already understood the importance that food played to Namjoon. To Namjoon, because of his grandparents, food was associated with comfort and love, and only good things.

Seokjin wondered if Namjoon would simply let the noodle house go. The cook who’d assisted Namjoon’s grandmother with almost all the dishes, and knew the recipes by heart including the secret ingredients, hadn’t lived near the noodle house. He hadn’t been anywhere near the fire. And the last Seokjin had heard, he was committed to whatever decision Namjoon made. So maybe Namjoon would rebuild and get the place going again, as a tribute to his family, even if it wouldn’t be the same. Or maybe it would be gone forever.

Personally, Seokjin really wanted the restaurant to be rebuilt. He’d adored Namjoon’s grandmother, and she’d served him some of the best food he’d ever eaten in his life. That noodle house was where Seokjin had become the most familiar with Bangtan’s members, and slowly started to trust them. Namjoon had met Seokjin’s father for the first time there, and there were so many good memories associated with the place that Seokjin didn’t want to let it go.

With a soft exhale, Seokjin could feel the moment Namjoon fell asleep. His fingers stilled on Seokjin’s skin, his breathing evened out, and Seokjin clung just a little more tightly to him.

In these moments, he was never so aware of what he could have lost, and how lucky he was to have what did.

Seokjin tried to follow Namjoon’s example into dreamland as quickly as he could, hoping for good dreams, and not nightmares, the kind that he’d been having lately.

Because he’d known that there’d be alcohol at the party, and because mixing his medication and alcohol was a very bad idea, Seokjin had held off on taking his medication. So when he woke several hours after going to bed with Namjoon with a tightness in his chest, it felt like a mistake.
It was hard slipping from bed and Namjoon’s strong hold without waking him, but with some finagling he was out and standing next to the bed. He gathered up several pills from the box on his nightstand, and then picked up the empty glass that he usually kept water in.

His feet were silent as he padded into the kitchen, navigating the dark hallways and floor plan of the apartment with ease. It was a clue that he’d spent well above a good deal of time there, that he didn’t need a light.

He did, however, flip the light on in the kitchen when he reached it, opening the refrigerator for the plastic pitcher of water inside. He set his pills on the countertop next to the water and nudged the refrigerator door closed with his knee. He was turning to fill his glass with water to take his pills when he spotted Sunggyu standing adjacent to him in the dining room. There was a lost look on his face and a dark gun in his hand.

Seokjin dropped the pitcher, the plastic thudding on the ground heavily, spilling out frigid water all over his feet and the floor.

Sunggyu.

Sunggyu was in the apartment.

Sunggyu was in a personal, private space that was supposed to be safe. And if he’d gotten past the men standing guard outside …

Wiggling his toes a little against the water, Seokjin asked quietly, “What are you doing here?”

He didn’t want to wake Namjoon. He couldn’t. If Namjoon came out here to where Sunggyu was with a gun, it would only put him in danger. Seokjin couldn’t risk that. He wouldn’t.

“It’s all gone,” Sunggyu eased out, moving forward fully into the light, gun raised to Seokjin’s chest level. “It’s gone and it’s your fault.”

“My fault?” Seokjin questioned. He shook his head a little. “No. I …”

“Woohyun,” Sunggyu said morosely, more like a sad wail than anything else. “Woohyun. He’s gone.”

Seokjin took that as confirmation that Woohyun was likely dead.

“I didn’t kill him,” Seokjin said evenly.

Sunggyu looked … worrisome. From where Seokjin was standing he could see that Sungyu’s eyes were unfocused, drifting from time to time, and the sheen of sweat on his skin was indicative of his mood. He didn’t look in his right mind, and the doctor in Seokjin couldn’t help trying to assess him physically.

“The men outside …” Seokjin bridged. The wouldn’t have let Sunggyu get past them. They would have … have died trying to stop him.

“I have lost everything,” Sunggyu said, sounding angry now. His gun steadied and his eyes locked on Seokjin. “I’ve lost everything because of you.”

Heart beating wildly in a panic, Seokjin offered, “You … you still have people you care about. Hoya. You have Hoya.” Seokjin remembered he was in police custody and very much alive. “And Myungsoo.”
“Myungsoo,” Sunggyu repeated. “He’s gone too.”

What did that mean?

“Sunggyu.” Seokjin tried to sound as quiet and unthreatening as possible as he took a step through the water towards Sunggyu. “I didn’t--”

Sunggyu jabbed the gun at him. “None of this happened before you came along. None of it!” Sunggyu’s voice rose and Seokjin was terrified he’d wake Namjoon.

“No.” Seokjin shook his head venomously. “I’ve only ever done what I can to help people. I helped you, right? I’m a doctor. I never would endanger someone, or hurt them, or do anything but help. Please.”

Dragging his free hand up to his hair, his fingers cutting through sweaty strands, Sunggyu laughed out, “How did I not see it? I bought your bullshit. I bought it and look where it got me.”

“I don’t--”


Sunggyu was probably going to kill him. The possibility was turning into a reality with each passing second, and Seokjin honestly thought that was crap. To have survived everything, and fought so hard, to be killed in the kitchen of the person he loved?

“Hoya said not to underestimate you,” Sunggyu continued. “I thought you were this weak little man, too pretty for his own good, with the kind of heart that would get him killed some day.”

Ah, Seokjin wanted to laugh at the play on words.

“Hoya is still alive,” Seokjin reiterated. “You keep saying you lost everything, but you haven’t.”

Sunggyu blinked wet eyes rapidly. “I lost Woohyun. I lost everything.”

Seokjin wasn’t exactly up in arms himself about the loss. Almost all of Infinite had been … psychologically unstable, with a little too much interest and enjoyment when it came to hurting people. But Woohyun had really been crazy. Woohyun had been certifiably crazy and Seokjin wasn’t sad to see him go. Not when he could guess the amount of people Woohyun had hurt in his lifetime. The number being quite large.

Once more, with firmness, Seokjin stated, “I didn’t kill Woohyun. I did not kill him.”

“You lover did,” Sunggyu pointed out. “And that’s why I’m here. I think it’s only fair, don’t you? Your lover takes mine, so I take his. An eye for an eye.”

Seokjin felt the chill of the water on the kitchen floor travel up him. “You truly believe in that? The Christian proverb?”

Sunggyu gave him an irritated look.

“Because,” Seokjin continued, “I saved your life. I don’t think it matters that I was simply doing my job as a doctor. You needed care, I provided a diagnosis, and I helped save your life.”

As if it was a monumental reprieve, something shifted on Sunggyu’s face and he admitted, “That is true.”
Seokjin didn’t dare feel hopeful. He didn’t dare think that one small fact could save his life. Sunggyu was too unstable to be swayed with logic.

“But,” Sunggyu said, meeting his gaze with a heavy look. “You also gave me a bullshit diagnosis the last time we were in the same room, so I think we’re even.”

Shakily, more consumed with shivers of cold than fear, Seokjin said, “You don’t have to do this. You don’t, even if you feel like you do.”

If Sunggyu shot him, and with a normal looking gun that didn’t appear to have a silencer on it of any kind, Namjoon would most certainly wake. He’d know what had woken him, too, and he’d go straight for the gun he kept in his bedside table. Chances were, Namjoon had guns hidden all over the apartment, and Seokjin had made a point never to look for them. There was almost certainly one in the kitchen, stashed away in a drawer. Maybe even in the one nearest Seokjin and within arm’s reach.

Sunggyu shooting him would alert Namjoon and he wouldn’t be caught off guard. If only one good thing could come from what was about to happen, at least it would be that.

“I do,” Sunggyu insisted, and he was crying, tears slowly leaking their way down his pale face. “I have to do this. For Woohyun.”

Softly, Seokjin told him, “Once my brother intended to kill someone that he perceived as a threat to me. He made it about me when it was really about him—about his fears and worries. Sunggyu, killing someone for someone else is never really about that. If you kill me, you’re killing me for you, because you’ve talked yourself into it, because you think it’s the right thing to do, or because you feel like you have no other choice. No matter what that justification is, it is really about you. It’s not about Woohyun, and maybe it’s not even really about me. Don’t lie, okay? Don’t make this something it isn’t. If you’re going to do it, admit that you’re doing it for you.”

Sunggyu gave the smallest of sniffles. “If I don’t do this, I’ll have lost everything for nothing.”

“You keep saying that,” Seokjin prodded, “but you haven’t lost everything. You haven’t lost your sister, have you?”

Sunggyu froze up. He looked absolutely terrified at the mention and Seokjin almost regretted it.

“You …”

“She still has you,” Seokjin insisted. “That’s more than some people can claim—that they have a sibling who loves and depends on them. But you do, and that’s something to be so fiercely protective of, and it’s certainly something worth making good choices for.”

In a wavering voice, one so edgy and full of anxiousness, Sunggyu demanded, “Rap Monster, he knows about her? He knows about my sister?”

Seokjin gave a silent nod. He couldn’t lie, and not only because he was a poor liar in general, the tells always coming across his face too easily.

Slowly, drawing out his words, Sunggyu inferred, “If I kill you here and now, to avenge Woohyun’s death, he’ll kill my sister. He’ll retaliate and kill her.”

Seokjin made to shake his head in denial. Because Namjoon had had that information for a while now. He knew everything from her name, to where she lived, and what school she attended. When Sunggyu had taken Seokjin, Namjoon could have taken her, too. He could have used her if he was
that kind of person. But he wasn’t, and Seokjin was forever glad that was the kind of line, hurting children to hurt adults, Namjoon wouldn’t cross.

“I can’t let that happen,” Sunggyu choked out tearfully. “I can’t let her get hurt. I can’t let it be because of me. Oh, god, no.”

“Sunggyu.”

Seokjin reached out for him. He didn’t know why, didn’t understand the urge to comfort the now sobbing man who was a wreck of his former self, but Seokjin couldn’t help himself.

“I love her,” Sunggyu said, pitiful and oddly absolute in a way Seokjin had never seen from him before. “I love her and I can’t ever give Rap Monster a reason to hurt her. I would do anything for her. Anything.”

“Just calm down,” Seokjin urged. He felt control of the situation, if he’d ever had it, slipping away from him.

With a stutter to his breathing, Sunggyu straightened himself up. He looked at Seokjin with such overwhelming sorrow it was like a punch to Seokjin’s gut. And then Sunggyu asked, “Do you think Hawaii is nice this time of year?” He steadied the gun at Seokjin in a final way.

“Hawaii?” Seokjin contemplated that in confusion and fear.

The world shifted on its axis, then.

Sunggyu was lightening quick, moving in a way Seokjin could never have predicted, turning the gun on himself in a flash.

Sunggyu splattered his brains out across Namjoon’s kitchen in a red spray of blood and matter, dropping like a stone in the ocean as the life faded from him.

From deeper in the apartment Seokjin heard a heavy thud.

Namjoon.

Seokjin looked back to Sunggyu, the ice water Seokjin had dropped mingling poorly with the blood seeping out from Sunggyu’s head. And on his face was the same terrified look that had been there before, only moments ago when Sunggyu had been breathing. It was a haunting picture, something Seokjin would never forget.

Then Seokjin’s legs were giving out and he was sinking slowly down, his pajama bottoms going wet and his hands bracing on the ground. A silent sob worked its way up his throat.

Namjoon found him like that moments later, demanding to know if he was okay, wrangling him up in a fierce hug as he kept his own gun on Sunggyu’s body.

“Jin?” Namjoon pressed. “Jin!”

Seokjin only clutched him tighter, gasping lowly, dazed, shocked, and never more unsure what to do.
“This is so cool!”

As if he were a small child, Jungkook took off down the first floor’s long, major hallway, his feet slapping against the shiny, polished floor. He ducked into a nearby room and Seokjin couldn’t help feeling how infectious his brother’s excitement was.

Huffing a little under the weight of the box he was carrying, Jonghyun commented, “I thought we brought your brother along so he could help us with the last of the lifting.”

“Oh my god!” Jungkook shouted. “There’s another bathroom!”

Seokjin laughed out, “I think maybe he’s here more for moral support. That’s okay too. We’re mostly done anyway.”

Waltzing in behind them, Kibum commented, “I’m here just to look pretty. All purposes should be acceptable.”

Jonghyun grumbled a little and started off in the direction of his new office.

“Jin,” Jungkook said, flying back to his side in an excited way. “When you said this new place was bigger than the old, you didn’t mention it was this huge!”

“What?!” Seokjin exclaimed. “Come on,” Seokjin said, pulling him by the hand. “Let me show you how we decided to lay everything out.”

If six months ago, when Seokjin had been worried that this father would pull funding for the clinic, and that they’d have to close their doors to an ailing public who needed them, anyone had told Seokjin that not only would his clinic be surviving, but also thriving and expanding, he would have laughed and then likely wept.

But with the summer heat beating down outside, Yunho sending post cards regularly, Hongbin a fulltime practitioner at the clinic, and full community support, the clinic was now officially relocated to a building that was three times its original size.

It was a surreal moment for Seokjin, walking through the front doors of the new clinic that was set to open in less than two days, looking around at what his hard work and dedication had finally landed him.

“There are six examination rooms here,” Seokjin said, pointing them out to Jungkook. “Almost twice what we had before.”

Infinite being flushed out of the area, regardless of how it had happened and the part Seokjin felt he played in it, was the best thing that could have happened. Because both Bangtan and Exo who’d inherited the territory were fair. There was no extortion in the form of protection money, and instead more than ever Seokjin found support for the clinic.

Government funding, coupled with several independent organizations, helped push the clinic away from the red and towards the black. The clinic was not a profit intended institution, so all the extra...
money the clinic brought in, Seokjin pushed back into the community and his patients. It hadn’t
taken long for the business model to take off, and not only had they been able to expand, but Seokjin
also had two new doctors coming in within a few months.

It was surreal mostly, and sometimes Seokjin cried happy tears.

“What’s down here?” Jungkook asked, pointing to where Kibum and Jonghyun were disappearing
around a corner.

“Offices,” Seokjin said easily. “Everyone gets their own, this time, and we’re going to have a shared
office for the nurses, and one for the receptionists, and even for the interns that we expect to take on
later this year.”

Since the clinic had begun, Seokjin had shared an office. There’d been two little desks shoved into a
small room and he’d had to fight for his privacy during the day. Everyone had been crammed
together, living on top of each other, and it hadn’t been fair especially to Jonghyun and Yunho, who
Seokjin knew came from previously prestigious positions at other hospitals.

At the new clinic all the doctors would have their own offices, with two distinct ways to access them
so they could hold consultations with ailing patients and not mix in those patients with those waiting
for examinations.

The rest of the first floor comprised the much-needed dinning area for the staff of the clinic, and then
a good deal amount of storage space. There was also a heavily locked and monitored room that was
fully stocked with any medication or drugs that might be needed at a moment’s notice. The clinic
certainly didn’t have a pharmacy, and they couldn’t issue prescription-based medication to their
patients, but anything from insulin shots, to doses of morphine were accounted for.

The biggest draw of the clinic, three stories high and more impressive than Seokjin dared to hope for,
was that now they could perform basic surgical procedures and not constantly have to refer their
patients to larger hospitals. The second floor would serve as the surgical area, and the third as the
recovery ward.

Seokjin took himself and Jungkook up to the second floor to show him personally the huge and
incredibly expensive machinery that ranged from the smaller units, to the mammoth CT and PET
scan machines.

“This is because of dad,” Seokjin said softly, eyes raking over the equipment that would allow him to
check for cancer in his patients, better and more easily assess their broken bones, correctly diagnose
neurological issues, and so much more.

Jungkook gave a heavy sigh.

Their father hadn’t lasted very long into the new year. Only two weeks into January Seokjin, who’d
been on a business lunch with Danny, Changmin’s friend who’d ended up investing in the clinic,
had gotten the call that his father had passed. It hadn’t been unexpected at all, though. By then his
father had been struggling to stay awake and aware for more than a few hours a day. But Seokjin’s
heart had been broken anyway.

His father’s will had left everything to Seokjin, aside from a sizable amount of money meant to
directly support any of the college courses that Jungkook was now currently planning on starting in
the fall. And that money, not to mention the liquidation of his father’s assets including cars and
properties, meant that the clinic could afford to get the things that were truly necessary to expand.
“Impressive,” Jungkook whistled out.

There were still limitations to the clinic. They still opened in the morning and closed at night, and Seokjin didn’t know if it would ever be a plausible reality to offer late night services or anything around the clock. And they couldn’t take trauma patients. Accidents, yes, but they still had to send the more major issues to the bigger hospitals that had trauma units.

But if they’d come so far in only a few years of being open, Seokjin could only begin to think of where they’d be in five years, or ten. They could have another location, maybe a specifically set aside maternity ward, or even bring in vision and hearing services that Seokjin knew a lot of the community needed. The possibilities were endless, and Seokjin was excited to achieve at least some of them.

Leaning up against a window that afforded Jungkook an impressive view of the outside area, he remarked, “How long is it going to take you to get here? I mean, it’s not like you’re living in the same building anymore.”

“Twenty minutes with traffic,” Seokjin replied easily. He’d already timed it. From the apartment that he and Namjoon shared closer to the heart of Bangtan territory, it was twenty on a heavy traffic day, which was more than acceptable.

He and Namjoon, in the end, hadn’t even talked about moving in together. The subject hadn’t been broached in the least bit. It seemed as if they simply had an understanding that after Sunggyu’s suicide in Namjoon’s apartment, neither of them could stay there any longer. And truthfully, they’d both wanted to be closer to each other. By the time they moved in together they’d only been together for a little over half a year, but to Seokjin it felt like forever.

Now they shared a nice sized apartment that was starting to feel more and more like home to Seokjin every day. Eventually Seokjin wanted a house. He wanted an actual house, and children, and all the things that he hadn’t dared to hope for before. They’d get there eventually, Seokjin thought. They had plenty of time.

A beeping cut into Seokjin’s thoughts, emanating from his phone.

“Hey, that’s the alarm,” Jungkook said. “We’ll be late if we don’t go.”

Seokjin gave a nod. “Let me tell Jonghyun we’re heading out.”

Seokjin found Jonghyun and Kibum in Jonghyun’s office, arms twined together as they kissed enthusiastically.

Cracking a grin Seokjin knocked a knuckle on the open door and startled them apart. “Sorry,” Seokjin chuckled. “But we’re trying to keep this place sterile and clean for as long as possible.”

Kibum blushed prettily and Jonghyun shot back expertly, “Listen, Jin, I don’t think I need to tell you what I caught you and your boyfriend doing in that storage closet that one time. I was simply looking for a box of gauze, and my poor, fragile, delicate eyes were assaulted by the sight of--”

“Oh, okay,” Seokjin cut in. “Thanks, Jonghyun.” He rubbed a hand over his face and thought he was never going to live down the impulsive urge that had gotten himself and Namjoon caught a few months ago at the old clinic.

“You can stay and watch if you want,” Kibum said cheekily.

Jonghyun rolled his eyes as Seokjin laughed out, “No thanks. I just wanted to let you guys know that
Jungkook and I are leaving. We’ve got dinner plans. Lock up, will you? Do you need me to write down the new security code for you? Remember, you have to enter two separate codes if--"

“Don’t worry and don’t fuss,” Jonghyun chided. “I’ve got this. Trust me, we didn’t work this long and this hard for me to leave the front door open or anything.”


Fifteen minutes later Seokjin and Jungkook were in the car and driving away from the clinic.

While Seokjin focused on the road, Jungkook told him, “It’s been a real pain in the ass you know, even all these months later, getting the streets clean. I feel like all we do is run the pimps out and beat up drug dealers. Seriously, Jin, no one told me getting this powerful would be such hard work.”

Seokjin scoffed a little. “You, my little brother, say the most ridiculous things.”

Jungkook beamed brightly. “But it is nice, you know. And this is what I wanted when I decided to join Bangtan.”

Seokjin guessed, “You wanted to beat up drug dealers?”

“No,” Jungkook huffed out. “I wanted to be a part of something that cleans up the streets. I mean, nothing’s perfect, and the police are even more of a pain in the ass than they were before, but I think the quality of life is getting better for a lot of people. That’s because of Rap Monster, and because of the rest of Bangtan. I feel better about you having your clinic out here, now, and I don’t worry so much. Plus, Suho is a pretty good guy after all.”

Seokjin questioned, “He’s stuck to his word, hasn’t he?”

Jungkook gave a visible nod. “He said he’d work with us, not betray us, and be our allies. So far, six months in, he’s stuck to that. Exo and Bangtan work together a lot of the time, we both have the same goals and principles, and I think this could be the start of a really loyal, long friendship.” Jungkook snuck in, “Hopefully.”

Seokjin agreed, “Suho does seem very honorable.” And he couldn’t say enough how thankful he was to have an extra pair of eyes on Namjoon. Never before had Seokjin been so aware of the dangers associated with being a leader of any sort in the kind of world that ate them up so easily and without discrimination.

That wasn’t to say that eventually Suho and Exo wouldn’t turn on Namjoon and Bangtan. But for right now, everything seemed to be in a good place, and Seokjin was thankful.

Giving Jungkook another assessing look, Seokjin decided, “You look happier.” He felt a little awkward saying it. “Since the worst of it passed, you’ve looked much better.”

Jungkook gave a full smile. “I think we’re all happier. Right?”

“Right,” Seokjin agreed.

Seokjin was lucky enough to snag a parking space close enough to their destination that it was only a short walk in the humid and steamy heat before he and Jungkook were ducking into the shade of a protectively covered, half constructed building.

“Finally!” Taehyung called out the second he spotted them. “Hobi! They’re here!”
Jungkook dashed ahead to jump into some kind of boy pile with several members of Bangatan.

Seokjin gave them all a hopeless laugh as he felt Namjoon wrap around him from the back.

“You’re later than you said you’d be,” Namjoon mumbled into his neck.

Seokjin tugged his arms closer and told him, “Not really. And I wanted to show Jungkook the clinic now that it’s all set up and ready to launch in a few days. It’s a big upgrade from where we were before, and I’m really proud of it.”

He’d showed the nearly finished building to Namjoon a few weeks ago, before the last of the big machinery had been moved in, but long after the construction issues had been remedied. The building had needed all new paint and flooring, but it was a small price to pay in the way of touchups. Namjoon had been thoroughly impressed at the time, and Seokjin figured he was responsible for at least half of the extra work that had gone into making the clinic even more special.

Namjoon had most certainly funneled a good deal of Infinite’s liquidated assets the clinic’s way, taken almost nothing for himself, and placated Suho with the rest.

If it hadn’t been for Namjoon’s financial support of the clinic coupled with his father’s, Seokjin knew they’d still be in the old location, struggling to handle their patient load. But now they had a new building, a bigger staff, and enough padding to get them through the year before they had to start watching their numbers.

“It’s finished?” Namjoon asked, rocking them a little where they stood as Jimin took aim at the pile of boys in front of Seokjin and added his weight to the top.

Seokjin gave a silent nod.

“Hey!” Yoongi snapped out from across the room. “You’re going to knock something over! You screw anything up here and I’ll hang you out to dry.”

Taehyung stuck his tongue out at Yoongi who rolled his eyes in response.

“Things seem to be coming along here just fine,” Seokjin asked, craning his head back to look at the strong wooden support beams and the basic framing that had already gone up.

“Slowly,” Namjoon allowed, “but yeah, it’s happening. We should be open before the end of next month. Honestly, I just don’t know if I’m ready for it.”

Seokjin made an understanding noise.

He’d wondered once what would happen to the ash that remained of the noodle house. He had half convinced himself that Namjoon would let it rest and never rebuild. After all, most of what had made the noodle house important was the presence of Namjoon’s grandparents. Rebuilding would stir up all kinds of emotions and pain.

But in spite of expectations, six weeks earlier Namjoon had brought him down to where the noodle house had been to witness the first of the construction start. Namjoon had looked like he needed Seokjin there for support, and so Seokjin had done his absolute best to be that rock for Namjoon during the process.

“It’s okay to be uneasy about this,” Seokjin told Namjoon, turning to brush his lips against Namjoon’s stubble rough jaw. “Even a little scared.”
“It’s just not going to be the same,” Namjoon said. “Even with the same cook and staff, it won’t be the same.”

“It shouldn’t be,” Seokjin advised. “You can’t replace your grandparents. Trying would be ridiculous. But I also think rebuilding and reopening is very important.”

Yoongi was still yelling at the others who were pushing playfully at each other dangerously close to a ladder and several stacked boards, when Namjoon inquired, “Important?”

Giving a soft nod, Seokjin explained, “The noodle house was important to a lot of people. People met their partners here. They brought their children. They had the best moments of their lives with their friends. Namjoon, this is where I knew I wanted something with you, this is probably where I fell in love with you, and this is where my father met you for the first time. The noodle house represents something to a lot of people, myself included. It won’t ever be the same without your grandparents, but rebuilding is a nice eulogy to them and their presence in the community.”

Namjoon held him a bit tighter, as if he was hanging on for sheer life.

“It’s going to be okay,” Seokjin assured.

The construction was still rough, with exposed walls and a barely there ceiling that was still half covered by a tarp, but Seokjin could see how things were shaping up. The design was going to be a little different than before, but a little different was good.

“How much longer?” Hoseok asked. Seokjin ignored the question, turning in Namjoon’s arms to wrap his arms around the tall man’s neck. He admitted, “I want to have children some day. And I very much like the idea of being able to bring them here, telling them about your grandmother, and treating them to her famous recipes.”

Namjoon’s eyes softened and a smile pulled at his lips. “That does sound really nice.”

Seokjin was a little afraid to tell Namjoon exactly how nice the idea of them having children was in his mind. The time was still far off, much later down the line in their lives, but the dream was there. And Seokjin had always been one to go after his dreams.

“Okay,” Namjoon eased out, his forehead pressing against Seokjin’s. “I hear you.” You’re right, Namjoon meant, and Seokjin could hear it in his voice.

“Food!” Jungkook wailed dramatically, throwing himself down to his knees and bring his hands up into a praying position. “Please, I need food or I’m going to die.”

Seokjin raised an eyebrow at him and said, “Get off the floor, please. You’re getting your pants dirty and making our four-year-old cousin look more mature than you.”

“Sure, mom,” Jungkook chortled out.

“We should feed them,” Seokjin said, turning back to Namjoon. “Or they may start eating each other.”

Yoongi snorted out, “I wouldn’t doubt that.”

“All right,” Namjoon announced, giving Seokjin’s hand a little tug. “How about we go get pizza?”

A cheer went up among the younger members and Seokjin laughed in response.
Almost a year ago when Bangtan had stumbled their way into his clinic in the dead of night, bringing with them nothing but trouble and one bleeding leader, Seokjin could never have imagined his life turning out the way it had. In fact, he’d have laughed himself sick if anyone had told him that he would come close to the happiness he now had.

And he had so much to show for what his life had become now, from Jungkook’s development into a man, to the peace Seokjin had made with his father.

His clinic, his dream, had come to fruition in the grandest way possible, and was only going to get bigger and better as time passed.

His heart was steady, and his condition was balanced and maintained by his medication. He was never going to be cured, never get better, but he could hold steady for decades more and that was more time than he often dared to hope for.

And most importantly, he had Namjoon. He had someone he was deeply and truly in love with, who he went to bed with each night and woke up to every morning. Namjoon supported him, looked after him, kept him strong, and loved him back with every bit ferocity that Seokjin had dared to hope for some day.

A year ago Seokjin would have considered himself greedy to possibly think for one second that he could have it all.

Now he was simply thankful, and more than willing to live indulgently in the life he had, appreciative and not wasting a precious second of it.

“Pizza! Pizza!” Jungkook chanted. He was leading the way out of what would be the new noodle house with Taehyung and Hoseok right behind him.

Jimin gave Seokjin a look. “Pizza, right?”

Yoongi hooked an arm through Jimin’s and answered for Seokjin, “You try talking those three out of getting pizza at this point? You’ll lose an arm and you know it.”

“Ready?” Namjoon asked, tugging a little on Seokjin’s hand.

Seokjin didn’t know if he was ready, and he certainly didn’t mean for pizza. There were unanswered questions he had about the members of Infinite that had gotten away, and about the stability of the area once the other gangs realized just how powerful Bangtan and Exo were together. He wasn’t sure he was ready for a new dynamic at the clinic with new doctors, and how he was probably going to have to hold Jungkook up as his brother tried to balance Bangtan and school for the first time.

The biggest thing he didn’t think he was ready for was the future of his relationship with Namjoon. They were good together. So good. And Seokjin loved him. He knew Namjoon was the one. But was the matter concerning Jimin’s feelings for him going to be exposed? And how were they going to handle things now that Namjoon was bound to have even more demands and responsibilities placed upon him?

Life wasn’t going to be the same now as it had been before, and Seokjin didn’t know how to brace for that.

So ready? He definitely wasn’t ready.

But he’d spent his life trying to be ready for things, planning and anticipating and meticulously bracing.
Maybe he was ready to wing it for once.

Squeezing Namjoon’s hand, Seokjin said, “You can have pizza, but you’re getting a salad on the side, too.”

Namjoon balked, “A salad!”

Seokjin insisted, “I’ve seen your recent numbers, Namjoon. I know what your cholesterol and blood sugar levels are at. Don’t fight me on this. You won’t win.”

Together they navigated their way out of the construction site, with Namjoon bargaining, “Okay, a salad, but a little one. And I everyone else has to have one, too!”

Seokjin was definitely ready to wing it now, and it was the most exciting prospect he’d had in a long time. He figured it was time for some spontaneity in his life.

It was time to actually start living.

Chapter End Notes

First and foremost, I want to express my absolute appreciation and gratitude that so many readers have dedicated their time, and invested their emotions, into this story. Like all my stories, I just wrote what I wanted to read, but the reception to this story has been far more than I could have ever anticipated, and I'm humbled. So many of you read, and left kudos, and dropped comments, and supported me. You supported this story, and that means everything. This story started as just a scene in my head, as just one little scene with some dialogue, and it blew up into something that others enjoyed, and that is all I could have ever asked for.

I wanted to hold off until now to say something, but I've been spending the past three weeks or so working on a sequel. I held back saying anything because of my writing style, and I know how easily I can become distracted in other projects, or lose inspiration. I didn't want to bait a sequel, and then have all of the creativity for it disappear. But I think I can be confident now in saying it's on his way. I am 90k in at this point. It won't be the story that I post next, however. I still have to finish writing it, and there's a of a lot of editing work after that, which takes time, time, time. The next story up is a redemption story for my boys in Infinite because I have to make up for the fact that I turned them into the baddies here. But anticipate a sequel following that.

But truly, truly, I just wanted to take this time to say thank you to everyone who read and commented, or just read, or dropped kudos, or any combination. Thank you so much for your support. And as usual, this is the only time I will ever ask for comments. Now that the story is complete, and you have the full picture, I'm asking people to drop comments and let me know what they thought. What did you like the best? What was your least favorite? What got you in the feels? Do you have any lingering questions? Just leave me feedback. This is the last chapter, and even if you've been lurking before, this is when it counts.

I look forward to hearing your reactions, and hopefully seeing you come back around for the sequel!
Hello everyone!

I wanted to pop in with a quick update on this series … should anyone still be interested in it, and let you all know what's been going on with the sequel and why it has mysteriously been MIA.

But before that, I want to say quickly that I'm so humbled and appreciative to everyone who read this story as it was going up, and all of you who commented on the final chapter. Anyone who's been with me for at least a full story, or more, knows that I thrive on comments and the replies I give, and the conversations we have in those threads. I missed a couple of updates in this story because of some health issues I've been having. By the end of the story, I really thought I had them all cleared up. But that wasn't the case, and as you all were posting your lovely comments, I wasn't able to respond to them because I was busy trying to get myself together. I'm 100% confident now that's taken care of, and won't be an issue in the foreseeable future. So thank you, thank you to those of you who commented and didn't get mad that there was just silence from me. I would have replied if I could, and I value the time you all spent leaving those comments so much.

And YES, the sequel is coming. It's about 2/3 of the way done now, and is sitting at 272k at the moment. The whole first story was less than 200k, so that tells you how big this sequel is set to be. But it's going along smoothly, I like the progress I'm making, and I'm confident I'll be done in August for either a same month release date, or an early September date. I know that's a while to ask you guys to hang on for, but I want to make sure I get the sequel right. I really feel like the first story in the series was only a part one, and this second part really rounds everything out.

So to tempt you all into hanging onto this series a little longer, let me give you a little insight into what's up ahead. In the second part of this series you'll get to know very quickly that just because Kim Sunggyu is gone, that doesn't mean Infinite is, and they're deadlier than ever in their pursuit of revenge and power. Myungsoo, Hoya, and Dongwoo aren't the only threat to Bangtan, however, as the partnership Bangtan has with Exo wavers on the verge of collapse, and so does Seokjin's heart. And that's all on top of each member of Bangtan trying to figure out what their future looks like both as a group, and individually. There are new romances in this second part, unexpected betrayals, and it's all going to culminate in an explosive ending that will absolutely be the definition of all out war between Bangtan, Exo, Infinite, and several new gangs that are about to show up on the scene.

If this is something that sounds interesting to any of you readers, start checking back sometime in the middle of August, and get ready for a wild ride.

My thanks and appreciation to all of you who supported this story, and generously supported me!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!